

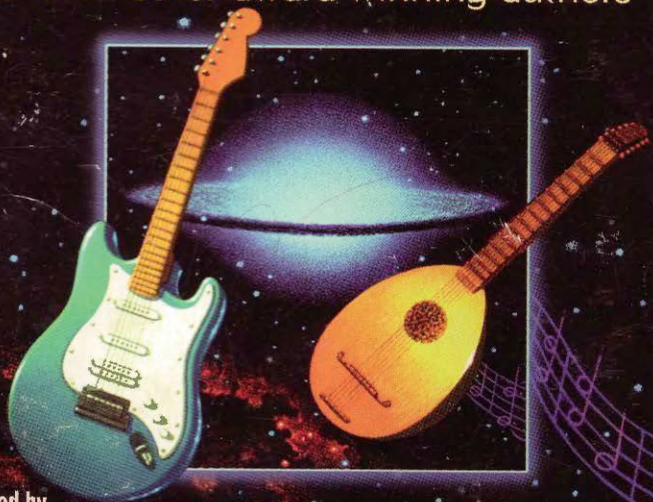
THE HORNS OF ELFSTAND



Original tales of music and magic from

John Brunner
Terri Windling
Gene Wolfe

and 12 other award-winning authors



Edited by

Ellen Kushner, host of the national radio show *Sound & Spirit*,

Delia Sherman, and **Donald G. Keller**



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THE HORNS OF ELFLAND

EDITED BY

Ellen Kushner,
Donald G. Keller
and Delia Sherman



*O hark, O hear! how thin and clear,
And thinner, clearer, farther going!
O sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!*
—Alfred, Lord Tennyson



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**To my first mentors and producers at WGBH Radio,
friends who ushered me in and guided me through
the intricacies of bringing music to the people:**

**Michael Manning
Robert Lyons
Brian Bell
Jon Solins**

**Any mistakes in pronunciation, facts,
or grammar are my own, and probably due,
as usual, to trying to write a script at the last minute.**

—EK

To my father—a scholar and a gentleman.

—DGK

**To Terri Windling,
Renaissance woman**

—DS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

by Ellen Kushner

My introductions to the short stories in this collection may look more like album liner notes than like traditional anthology openers. There is a reason for this.

I have been so grateful to this project for making it possible for me to wed my two careers: fiction and radio. It's been a while since my last novel—when people ask after my written output, all I have to point to are a short stack of short stories and a tall one of scripts for public radio programs about music.

In 1987 I left a publishing career in New York City and moved to Boston. Armed with little but a general love of music, a nice speaking voice, and the ability to pronounce lots of foreign languages, I became the host of an all-night classical radio program on WGBH-FM. Over the course of the next nine years, my first two novels were published. The first had no music at all in it (except a tasteless joke about portative organs); the second was about a minstrel. I was also acquiring an eclectic musical education, as I created public radio shows of world music, early music, folk music, classical music, new music. . . . From 1989 to 1991, I was writer and host for a program of concert performances called "The International Music Series." It was produced by some insane WGBH people who thought that classical music need not be presented in a stuffy manner, and it aired on over 125 stations in the U.S. on American Public Radio. Now, finally, I've gotten the chance to combine my love of folklore, myth, world and classical music in a weekly series called "Sound &

Spirit," which premiered across the country in April 1996 on Public Radio International (formerly APR).

I've tried to pace the tempos and moods of the short stories in this collection as if they were pieces of music. And as a result, each introduction reads remarkably like the sort of thing I might say when presenting a piece of music on the air.

I am very grateful to my co-editors, Don Keller and Delia Sherman, and to the writers of these stories, for giving me the chance to make myself whole just this once, bringing my two worlds together in one volume. (I've been unable to resist recommending recordings, as well—a trait I also exhibit at parties.)

Thanks also to Louisa Hufstader, Jeff Nelson, and Brian O'Donovan for their help with facts and research.

Donald G. Keller thanks Micole Sudberg, Shira Daemon, Jenna Felice, Rob Killheffer and Ellen Datlow for their help and support.

Delia Sherman thanks her co-editors for bringing her into this project, and Terri Windling, Christopher Schelling, and Ellen Datlow (*The Usual Suspects*) for advice, encouragement, and lively dinners.

All of the editors of this volume express deep gratitude to our editors at Roc (Viking Penguin) for their enthusiasm and their patience: Christopher Schelling, Amy Stout, Laura Anne Gilman, and Jenni Smith.

INTRODUCTION

by Donald G. Keller

Music as Magic, Magic as Music

Magic, in a sense, has been a part of my life as long as I can remember: my father is a sleight-of-hand artist who does card tricks and closeup magic of the highest order. I grew up watching him wander about the house incessantly shuffling cards and leaving part-decks everywhere he passed.

He was fond of telling my siblings and me that he'd started doing magic when he was ten years old, and had never stopped practicing; if we wanted to do magic we'd have to start early and keep practicing, too.

The first lesson I learned about magic, then, was: *magic is the product of hard work.*

Like everyone else who ever saw him do a trick, I would ask my father, "How do you *do* that?" ("Talent," he would inevitably and frustratingly reply.) If I persisted, he would answer me by first reminding me that magicians never told the audience how they did a trick; but then, treating me as a younger colleague, he would say, "Here, let me show you . . ."

But when I saw him do the trick again, knowing precisely how it was done . . . I *still* couldn't see him do it.

The second lesson I learned about magic is: *the more you know about how it is done, the more magical it seems.* (This contradicts most people's experience; the consensus reaction, if one is actually told how a magician did a trick, is disappointment: "Oh, is that all?" as though analysis somehow ruined the magic.)

My own personal magic, however, was music. My parents took me to see *Fantasia* when I was seven. Besides scaring me to death on Bald Mountain, the film made clear to me the link between music and fantasy. Even at a young age I knew that the music had preceded the movie, and the film itself made clear, in its more didactic portions, just how much work it had taken to create those Worlds That Might Be. That was the magic: through hard work and attention to detail, the music had *called forth* the images that I saw on the screen.

When my own budding musical taste led me to the Beatles, it was my father who bought their records for the whole family to listen to. Being twelve years old and watching the Beatles on Ed Sullivan with the family was a different kind of magic: cultural magic. Not only did the success of the Beatles change the way the music industry operated (making rock 'n' roll the dominant music of the culture), their attitude and lifestyle was a harbinger of a different way of living, a *different reality*; those of us who grew up at that time came to believe that music—which gave us a common ground, a sense of community—could actually change the World That Is into the World That Might Be.

At about age nineteen I got a guitar for Christmas, and I became—not a magician like my father—but a musician. I discovered, as I started playing first Beatles songs, then other music (including writing things of my own), that the more I learned about music and the harder I worked to make music myself, the more truly magical it became. When I see a guitarist produce a certain sound and cannot duplicate it myself, it remains merely mysterious; if I can reproduce it, it's really magic.

Music is a magic spell: beyond either the physical impact of the sound (the heartbeat rhythms of rock 'n' roll, for example) or the intellectual pleasures of its patterns (so many musicians have been mathematicians as well), it has the ability to evoke peak human experience, that moment, however brief, where we lose our

self-consciousness (in all senses) and suffer ecstasy. If we are religious, we regard that moment—that “still point” that T. S. Eliot speaks of in *Four Quartets* (“you are the music while the music lasts”)—as contact with the divine, a beatific vision. Musicians from Bach and Beethoven to Robert Fripp and Tori Amos have spoken of writing and playing music as a spiritual experience, that the music seems to come from *somewhere else*—outside of them, beyond the World That Is—and uses them, the musicians, as a conduit to their listeners. But to become that conduit they have to work hard for many years, paying close attention to the precise pattern of the notes, the exact order of the parts, to become those magicians we call musicians.

Something else that was able to take me to that different reality was fantasy literature. When I was about ten, my father (again) introduced me to *The Hobbit*. Immersed in the passage about Mirkwood while traveling a forest road on a family vacation reinforced my feeling (already gotten from reading Dr. Doolittle and Narnia) that the World That Might Be was more exciting, more fulfilling, than the World That Is. And—for the space of the reading—no less real; that was the magic.

Later I began to read *about* Tolkien, the years and years he worked on *The Lord of the Rings*, and it was impressed on me that not only was fiction the product of hard work, but that fantasy—dismissed by litterateurs of the World That Is as facile idleness—demanded even harder, more thorough work to properly accomplish its magic. Mainstream literature can rely on the reader’s knowledge of the World That Is for many of its details; in fantasy *every* detail must be invented, and made consistent with every other detail, to convince the reader that this *is* a different reality, a World That Might Be.

As I read further in fantasy, I found how closely linked with music it was, and how often one led to the other: from the legend of Orpheus and the supernatural power of his music, through Homer and *Beowulf* that

were originally presented to music, to the Celtic and Finnish legends of magical singing; hearing contemporary bands like Fairport Convention doing medieval ballads led me to literature like Ellen Kushner's *Thomas the Rhymers*; Tolkien's work itself showed up in Led Zeppelin songs. The link is even more explicit in the Bordertown series created by Terri Windling, where music is the magic that can change one's life, one's consciousness, the reality one lives in.

Many people who are tied to (maybe even satisfied with) the World That Is see fantasy as escapism, as a childish rejection of adult responsibility. But those who treasure transcendence know that it is as dangerous as it is attractive; we are as likely to lose our precious selves, or find ourselves changed utterly (as our world was changed—for a time—by music)—and not necessarily for the better. But we long for it nonetheless.

The stories in this book are about the World That Is, and the World That Might Be, and the music that can take us from one to the other. We hope that you enjoy them.

THE HORNS
OF ELFLAND



SOLSTICE

by Jennifer Stevenson

Why music and magic?

Weil, besides the fact that all of us love them both a lot, around the world and through the ages people have believed that music is full of power, and that magic needs music.

Musical instruments can be sacred, and make sacred sounds. Spells and prayers are sung to augment their strength.

Music is magical. There are things you can do for hours while singing that would otherwise be almost beyond human endurance: haul on a bowline, pick cotton, ride a school bus. . . . Dancing to live music is an exercise in ecstasy; and to certain musicians, playing for dancers is one of life's greatest joys, as each feeds off the other's passion.

For some people, just a one-hour symphony may be a test of endurance. But the Sufi Qawwali of Pakistan, the Gnawa of Morocco, the Indian raga players, often will play from dusk to dawn, single pieces that can last for hours, bringing the audience to ecstasy: music that heals, music that charms, music that inspires.

And on the longest night of the year, people around the world believe it's particularly important to make music while the darkness lasts, to be sure the sun will rise again.

This story is about a small-time rocker full of ambition and careful big plans. She lives for the day when she can come up like thunder on the rest of the herd, so she's a little stunned to find herself fighting

with her boyfriend on the night of the big gig, slamming out of his van and marching across a frosty prairie outside Madison, Wisconsin, her guitar in her hand and her hot, angry breath making her scarf all scummy with ice crumbs as she curses him and her stupidity at coming so far in his company. Why should she have to dump him tonight? Only a doofus breaks up with her boyfriend in a moving vehicle. She vows here and now to make a new start, while she is alone, nowhere, tramping across the empty fields, suspended between her humble origins and her destiny. Under the colorless starlight she looks to herself like a stick-drawing person, white parka, gray jeans, black stubble, drawn but not yet painted. The better to reinvent myself, she thinks fiercely. The ground is parched for moisture, the loam frost-heaved, last summer's daisies and black-eyed Susans and sweet grass killed by frost and just now crisp with it, though tomorrow under a pale sun they will warm up enough to make her slip with every step, especially if she stays mad enough to stomp all night long the way she is doing now. That would mean spending the night in the fields, however, not, as she would prefer, finding a road to follow to a roadside bar, not, as she expects she must, sleeping in a barn next to some smelly cow. She swears and stomps and swings her ax in the frozen air, scattering sibilants (his name is Stassen, which is a good name for hissing angrily) and gouting steam without regard to the threat of the cold. Her name is Dawn.

Slip she does. She lands on her bottom, her wind knocked out, and lies back in her parka feeling the heat bleed out of her into the throbbing ground. What a world of stars is up there, she thinks, fields and fields of them, sheep for days. She remembers sheep pouring over the Nebraska plains in galaxies, white on black. The land back home is much flatter than this boggy, lumpy prairie, yet the sheep eat these same stale grasses with their backs to the same stars. These stars. A wave of vertigo swamps her. She sees the heavens turn. This is how stars must feel, she imagines, opening

her eyes deliberately as they spin. So big, so slow. Only we frenetic particles can't see how they run hump-rumped over the vast prairie. We're moving much too fast.

Her fingers tingle. Way too pissed off for my own good, she thinks, and calms instantly. She has that sensible streak that lets her suddenly take command of her emotions, letting go once they've done their work. She smiles. That bum Stassen will stay mad for a week. She is at peace. Still the ground throbs. She feels it through her whole body. Good grief, what have I done to my ass?

It's slippery stone under her, and she crawls cautiously to her hands and knees.

A mitten appears before her face. She takes it without thinking and is hoisted upright.

"Hello?" A hearty fat farmwife complete with red mittens and stocking cap looks her up and down. Dawn looks around for the sensible car that goes with such biddies, or, hopeful thought, a farmhouse with yellow light. Ah. There's the yellow light. She warms up again. "Lost?" says the farmwife.

"Half," says Dawn ruefully. She picks up her instrument. No damage to the case, good sign.

"On a night like this!" says the other, and waits. Jolly potato-faced type. Dawn likes her immediately. The stars light her with a strange clarity. It is the sort of night when chance-met faces look dear and familiar, and time plays tricks with memory. It's a nice face, full of generosity. This dame is simply panting to do her a kindness.

Dawn looks at the sky again. The Pleiades totter and shiver like new lambs. She remembers the gig she is supposed to play, oh, miles away by now with the unforgivable Stassen, and is suddenly sad. "Darkest night of the year," she says, checking her watch. "The longest, too." Cold soaks into her again, chilling her bones.

The older woman beams. "Righty-rooty! Hey? Can you play that? Tune for your supper?" She beckons at

the yellow light, as if it must come to Dawn and not she to it.

Dawn picks up her feet willingly. Her behind complains. "Well, if you don't mind. I'm sort of stranded." Snatches of many voices distract her. There's a party going on in there, and how warm and wonderful the smells coming out! She shrugs apologetically. "I don't have my amp with me."

"Don't fret. I'm sure we can scrape something together," the old biddy says, and stumps to the doorway. The walls are thick limestone, one of those old hillside dairy barns, deep as a mine, done over inside with the maximum of modern luxury. She pauses, blocking the opening, her round face ashimmer now with candlelight, lamplight. "If it's not imposing." She means it. "I'm not dragging you into this."

Dawn can now hear music ramping and stamping somewhere deeper, rockabilly with a coarse metal twang. She brightens.

"No prob. I should—I'm up for playing tonight anyway—"

All at once she cannot get out any words to tell. She holds up the guitar as if the story of her fight with Stassen is written on it. Down inside the house somewhere a bass player is making the walls throb. She smiles.

Her hostess nods, again delighted. With a broad red hand, she yanks the door shut. It swings ponderously, made of stone as thick as the unhewn walls and floor. The foyer closes up like an egg. She leads the way toward the golden center.

Dawn walks into the party. She accepts a drink without thinking: glogg, hot and spicy, that stings her mouth and fills her head. Her parka sheds cool air like a chunk of dry ice. It's the host's birthday. Everyone is dressed for winter, layers and layers of velvet and padded stain and furs as for an Elizabethan snowball fight, although this chintzy Midwestern winter has offered no snow yet, Dawn thinks, remembering Decembers in Nebraska. She is introduced a few times,

handed off, kissed, introduced again, and brought at arm's length like a bride (*Horrors child you are cold!* with a giggle) to the great table loaded and pouring forth welcoming smells.

The table stretches the dim length of the room. What amazing bounty. Ribs, roast beef, roast piglet, roast lamb, an astounding goose with a chicken in her cavity, and a grouse inside of her, and a quail inside of her, and far in the fragrant center a hard-boiled egg with a gem in the middle like a pomegranate seed, perfectly divided just this minute by a grinning chef waving a whacking great cleaver. Glazed fish, their scales picked out in jelly. Fish in cream, fish in wine, red-fleshed fish shaved thin, smothered in capers and heaped with grainy caviar. Hot vats of noodles Swedish style, noodles with sauerbraten, noodles layered between pork chops, noodles tossed in sesame paste and ginger and red hot peppers. Fruits in and out of season: musk melon, honeydew, pears and alligator pears, mangos, pineapple, a dozen kinds of apples: golden green orange crimson scarlet blue-black and white and their piebald miscegenations. Breads shaped like suns, breads studded with raisins. Doubled buns steaming indecently, with butter running in their crevices. Dawn isn't hungry yet, but she clutches her mug of glogg, grinning mistily.

She's looking for the music. She can hear it, but she can't find it. There are candles everywhere. Some parts of the room are low-ceilinged and high-cushioned, just right for kissing and gossip and splitting a bottle. Some parts are ballroom-size. The stone floor slopes down, away from the stone ceiling. Dawn trips a little, blames the drink. The bass gongs through her blood, a fiddle skirls, the faraway downbeat (alone of a tinny fusillade) cracks two glasses touching, a false blow, ting! Not in this room. Nor the next.

Finally it occurs to her that the sound is in the floor, and she takes her hiking boots off and stands on the cold body of the stone, feeling the beat. She bounces. "Yep." One step at a time she feels her way to it—

someone whirls by, pauses with a steaming pitcher, and she says "Yep" again, holding out her mug. She cocks her head to the faint lure. She is still zipped into her parka and warm all through by now, but it feels delicious to drink hot glogg, smell the icy breath of the night on her shoulders, take a pheasanty kiss on the fly from a stranger in spandex, and walk barefoot on the cold, cold stone floor letting the music lead her by feel, one step at a time. She laughs, giddy.

The room where the dancing is going on is completely packed. She can barely see past the backs of standees at the door. This song ends and the mill wheel of bodies turns, but there's no room for them to let her pass, even if they were to notice her. Anxiety grips her. It's not my party, she thinks, daunted, but . . . The drummer whacks into a noisy backbeat, the fiddler lays a guttural double-stopped drone over it, oh, so he's electrified, no wonder it's so darn loud, and the bass lifts her clean off her feet like a church bell. Dawn can't help herself. She touches the shoulder in front of her.

"Here." She smiles, handing over her mug as if awarding a prize, and then motions him aside, holding up her holstered guitar in the other hand. Magic musician's password. It works. She thinks, Gotta play for my supper, my hostess wishes, and is jostled and squeezed (slower than a melon seed but with as much force) and finally carried the last twelve feet, barefoot and laughing, over plumed heads and winking jewels, to the stage.

The fiddler and bassist put their equipment down, and the drummer flails with renewed frenzy, alone at last with three hundred merrymakers and a lot of things to pound on. Her hostess appears. Over the battle noise she shouts introductions, Dawn, fiddler, Dawn, bass player, Dawn, host, which last is an incredibly thin man in yellow velvet, with butter-colored hair and an eyeglass that catches every candle in the room at once, so that Dawn can hardly stand to look at it.

He smiles at her as they shake hands, such a frail

hand. She is reminded of her first pet rooster, just so chinless and gay, and awards him the chicken-love at once. He is a vigorous dancer, however, and with his lady puts up a hell of a fight, pursued foxhound-wise by the remorseless drummer with a flying beat through false casts, back-doublings, and sudden disappearances which Dawn finds hysterically funny. Meanwhile the fiddler has rounded up some cable and the bass player shows her how to jack into the floor; good grief the whole stage is the sound system. Then they turn their faces to the crowd and take up the cry.

Dawn touches her strings. They are warmer than she is, much warmer than the wooden stage floor. She bends her ear, trying to get a pitch, but it's no use in this racket, may as well get a bang on. And she does.

They play oldies, things they can count on everybody knowing. The fiddler seems to be from another planet, all he can do is jam, but he's got the gift, and nobody is more surprised than she when the bass signals the opening for "Proud Mary" and suddenly that fiddle boy is *there*. Dawn falls back and lets him do the lead guitar part. Different, goofier, like it could turn any moment into something weird. Two minutes later it does. She shrieks to the bass player:

"What the hell *is* that he's doing?"

"Corelli chains," he shrieks back, and signals a break. Soon the two of them step down and reluctantly the drummer follows. The fiddler stands alone, crooning out a swooning slow dance to the swaying crowd.

Over white lightning on ice, the bass player tells Dawn, "Really, really glad you're here. I love this party. Never have to worry what to do with my New Year's Eve," he says. He puts his tongue into her ear and then withdraws it with a thoughtful expression. "But, God, you need new tunes now and then. We get stuck." His accent is funny, like a Welshman who's been to Australia on a slow boat from Texas.

She puts one finger on his wrist, as if taking his

pulse. It feels silky. "Don't you guys play other gigs together?"

"Nope," he says. His eyes are a light-speckled brown, like a wren's egg. Stassen's are blue. The jerk, she thinks, and forgets him again. The bass player says, "It's just me and the fiddle, really, and you know what his tunes are like."

"Wherever did you find him?"

"The missus finds," he shrugs. "It's staying power that counts. Shouldn't you put some shoes on? This floor is freezing."

"I like to feel the beat."

He kisses her, slips a piece of ice between her lips. "You're all right."

Their host and hostess appear. She looks if anything fatter and jollier. The host has shrunk. Dawn can barely see him sideways. Curved at his wife's ample side he is an old moon to her fullness, a sliver of yellow velvet and butter-colored hair. She thinks with pain of her rooster in his dotage, gone too old to mount hens and too scrawny to eat.

The bass player shakes his hand cheerfully.

"Ready, sir?"

"Ready!" her host says gaily. The candles wink, dimmed, in his eyeglass. When he puts his hand in Dawn's, she is afraid to squeeze. What bones, like a bird's. This close she can now appreciate his wistfully sweet, pointy smile.

"I'm very glad you're here. My wife tells me you're going to play for me tonight," the host says to her.

Moved she cannot say by what, Dawn covers his hand in both of hers. "Staying power," she says, as for a toast.

He smiles tremulously, repeating, "Staying power." Dawn's heart fills, heated. The hostess leads him away.

The drummer whacks out a marching summons. The party, sunk in place as if the air is falling out of it, reinflates, bouncing. Dawn exchanges her grain alcohol for water and puts away a quart, quick.

"Got a feeling this one's going to be the marathon,"

she smiles at the bass player, and he nods agreement, though he's still drinking booze. He seems down.

Then they're back onstage. For a ragged minute the four of them tussle over the next number: it is to be one of the fiddler's embroidered jigs, or something noisy and fast by the Spudboys voted in by the bass player, or will Dawn and the drummer have their way with "I'm So Glad"? They compromise, and in a few bars Dawn realizes she's in that lucky lucky place a musician rarely finds, where four strangers are making it up as they go along and it works. Her leg bones began to tremble. Can we keep it up?

Confidently they turn from one another as if hinged. They face the dancers. She feels their agreement at her back, one organism making a wave of sound. Floating in it, she concentrates on staying in that good place where she knows what each of them will do for the next sixteen bars. She finds that she has been watching the dance, which gradually loses its air of a beehive at rush hour and shapes into a beehive with something on its mind, look, there are the little circles, now a line dance, ooh don't they look like they're fucking, no, now she's going to kiss the next one, and around they go! Together she and the fiddler sweep the circles into the lap of the tireless drummer, who chops up the patterns so they can make new. The bass player signs for a key change, one thumb jerking up.

Their host and hostess sort themselves out in the center, close to the bandstand. A little clearing opens around them. They whirl and step, stamp and skank, she bouncing rounder and rounder, her nostrils snorting like a comic steam engine in the cold air, he a mere sketch of himself, a dancing, flickering stick puppet. Dawn remembers his frail cheery voice saying, "Staying power," and an iron rod forms in her backbone. All night, she vows, all night. She can. She feels a change in the band, the others drop back, and she lets the voice of her guitar slide free and soar, clawing its way to the highest point of the ceiling, then juddering

and hacking its way down again, a jacob's ladder of bright sound fracturing into splinters of one true thing.

On the dance floor at her feet, her host falters. He stops, turns, as if the music has disappeared suddenly and he cannot hear it. His eyeglass darkens. It springs from his face and falls. A look of great tenderness comes into his face. He topples into his wife's arms.

Dawn feels her own heart falter, but her hands cannot stop. The iron rod in her backbone will not dissolve. The dancers likewise cannot stop. They clear the area round the motionless pair, but the mass of spangled velvet and feathers still shivers. They stamp, and all begin to clap, clap, clap. The drummer pounds on. The bass player and the fiddler have let their instruments down for Dawn's solo. Everyone looks at her. Clap, clap, clap, clap, stamp, stamp, stamp, stamp. Her ax wails of its own accord.

She looks at the couple in the clearing. His face is half sunk in his wife's great cloven bosom. The old lady turns her face up, grief and pleading in her eyes. Dawn panics. Her hands still. The drummer slows. His foot twitches, thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Each beat sounds like the last. Thump.

The revelers clap and stamp. They know what they want.

Dawn can't move.

The other musicians exchange glances. The bass player hoists his Fender sorrowfully and, stony-faced, hauls a slow minor chord out of it, one note at a time. The drummer picks up behind him, brushing silver rain out of his cymbals as if he is unconvinced that this tune has a pulse.

It has, barely. The clapping does not slow, but the bass can only seem to make half speed. His severe little tune telegraphs its ending almost as soon as it has begun. He plunks his way across it like a mammoth one-finger harpsichord all weepy with vibrato and an occasional angry fuzz on the lowest notes, a drunk coming apart in the middle of a sad song. On the last lugubrious drone the summer comes awake again,

thump, pause, thump, while the fiddler looks at Dawn and she looks back blindly over the clap, clap, clap, stamp, stamp, stamp of the crowd swaying before them, all the eager faces lit with anticipation. Her host lies wilted over his wife's huge body. Clap, clap, stamp, stamp. Dawn feels she has fallen among horrifying aliens. The fiddler nods and tucks his chin.

His music is formless, a whirling darkness full of flashing wings and sharp things you might cut your hand on. For a while it sounds Arabic, a repetitive ululating cry like widow prayer or a harlot calling for a deeper thrust. The drummer makes up his own mind about that one. Definitely sex. They have it at bump and grind, screwing the downbeat with the single-minded smack of a headboard against the wall. The fiddle double-stops, braids in threes, tangles, rejoins itself. "Turkey in the Straw" pokes its head through. Dawn takes a deep breath, her first in hours it seems. Stamp, stamp, stamp, stamp, clap, clap, clap, clap.

She thinks she knows what she must do now. She leans over to the bass player and bellows, "Zarathustra!"

The fiddler overhears, loses his course in that moment. His fiddle skids, ki-yi-yi-ing like a stepped-on dog. Startled, the drummer halts.

And the bass player, at a glance from Dawn, lays down the bottom of the world's biggest chord. It goes on and on, never louder, never fading. Dawn breathes a prayer of thanks. She realizes now that the dancers dare not stop. They clap and stomp over the bass drone, keeping their part of the faith. She's pretty sure she remembers hers.

The fiddler sends his bow skittering over the strings, a flight of bats. Ah, he does know this. But the drum's the important part. She gathers the eyes of the band, drummer, fiddler, bass. The bass note steps up suddenly, a loud warning drone.

Dawn breaks in, one clear trumpety crow call rising tonic to dominant to octave. Gathers their eyes. Crash! a crack of stringed lightning falls off to a boding minor chord that fades, then swells hugely. The drummer

rolls over the skins of his biggest toms and whacks the thunder out of them, boom-boom, boom-boom, boom, boom, boom, drawls it to an impressive halt, a pause only. Her heart flies, oh, thank god. The bass player steps up the volume a notch and the floor seems to rise under them, bearing them upward to the distant ceiling. Dawn's guitar sings out again, and the answering lightning splits the other way, into a major chord. Again the drummer carries them across the bass drone, boom-boom, boom-boom, boom! Dawn can feel the hairs parting from the back of her neck, lifting off her forearms. The bass player doubles his string into octaves of solid power. The floor rises again. Dawn repeats her summons, this time as loud as the guitar will shout, and when the fiddle screams in at last, they jam that chord straight into the ceiling, through the floor, straight out the walls on every side. The drummer goes nuts on his cymbals, his set, the stage floor, his toms, the cymbals again, and when Dawn lifts her chin and points her guitar neck at the ceiling, the three of them roar out the last of that huge noise, and stop.

But the bass is hanging on, still giving them the whole chord. Dawn turns with a dirty look. He's grinning. She sees movement on the dance floor below. The revelers set up a cheer, and she looks down.

Her host is standing. His wife is holding his hands. He beams at her. The revelers close in around them, shouting and laughing, all their hands stretched to touch him, and the thin man with butter-colored hair turns with chicken steps, nodding to them all. Jauntily he puts his glass in his eye, and it catches a thousand candles, throwing yellow light everywhere at once.

Dawn blinks. The drummer smacks into a backbeat, and the bass player keeps pretending he's an organist for two bars, and Dawn's hands move over the strings of their own accord into a Santana number. The dance floor seethes. She can't stop laughing, or crying.

She doesn't remember the end of the party. They play at least two more sets, rest, play again. Out of the muzzy night she remembers how the bass player helps

find her hiking boots, remembers eating—god, eating everything, and the way the fiddler tries to tell her in some language, certainly not English but not possibly anything else, how wonderful she is and how they must do this again next year, and drinking eggnog “for the protein” the bass player says seriously, how he laces her boots on for her wrong-foot-about and makes her dance with him, and then a turn each with her host and hostess, how the drummer puts her guitar into its case for her and they all squeeze out the door together giggling and shoving to stand on the bare prairie looking east at a pale, overcast sky.

“Surely you want to see the results of your handiwork,” the bass player murmurs in her ear, his arms wrapped round her from behind. They watch the horizon redden, a thin line of color between the black earth and the leaden sky.

Dawn notices they are alone on the hillside. “Where’d everybody get to?”

The bass player nibbles her ear. “When, not where. Speaking of which, have you a watch?” She puts up her wrist, her eyes on the sunrise, clutching his arm to her waist, feeling absurdly pleased. He says, “Ah, digital, very good. The year and everything.” This is obviously the answer to a question that’s been eating him all night. He’s very happy about it.

She giggles. “What *are* you talking about?” She twists to look into his face.

He kisses her sideways. “What I’m talking about is, not only can you come back again next year, but”—another kiss—“*and, I can take you home.*”

She glances back at the barn door and finds instead an enormous boulder half-buried in the hillside. No door, no windows. No barn. She shakes her head. “God, am I drunk?”

The boulder reddens while she watches. Gooseflesh ripples over her. The whole prairie reddens. She shudders once, and looks back at the sunrise. “How do I find it again?” she says, wondering.

“The missus finds us.”

The sun flashes across the curve of the planet like a thousand candles, shooting yellow light everywhere at once. Then it disappears into the cloud ceiling.

She turns around in the bass player's arms and kisses him properly. "Are you real?" she says, tangling her hands in the back of his coat.

"Of course I'm real," he says indignantly. "What's your name, anyway?"

She tells him.

THE NEW TIRESIAS

by Jane Emerson

Until recently, we could only imagine the nutty splendors of baroque and classical opera: the giant sets of ocean waves, the gods entering by winged chariot from the flies . . .

Now, thanks to Hollywood's interest in doomed musicians, you can see a pretty good reconstruction of early opera in scenes from the movie *Amadeus*, as Mozart conducts his own work ("Too many notes," complains the emperor) . . . There's even a 1995 European film about the famous 18th-century Italian castrato Farinelli—although in the opera scenes he seems to be trapped in perpetual solo performances, alone onstage with lots of scenery and really huge head-dresses—I guess their costume budget ran out. What's really interesting is the way they produced the voice of Farinelli for the movie soundtrack. Castrati were boy sopranos, highly trained musicians whose voices were made permanently soprano through surgery. When these singers grew up, they kept the high register while acquiring the terrific range and tremendous vocal power of a grown man. You can't get an authentic castrato singer today, for love nor money. So the film producers morphed the voices of a female soprano and a male alto to create the exquisite sound.

It's even possible these days to attend live productions of early opera, especially when director William Christie tours with his ensemble, Les Arts Florissants. They've reconstructed opera of the French baroque by Charpentier and Lully, and have even gotten English

with Henry Purcell. You can hear these operas recorded on original instruments (except for the castrati, of course).

The keystone, or perhaps the secret decoder ring to Jane Emerson's "The New Tiresias" is an 18th-century opera, *Old Tiresias*, that the heroine's family goes to see. I had been hoping that this was another of Christie's rediscovered gems—it certainly has the ring of authenticity—but it turns out Jane made it up, the clever minx!

This is the second of two stories Jane Emerson has written dealing with Lieutenant Stephen Price and the city of Herse. The other, "We Met Upon the Road," appears in the anthology *Highwaymen: Rogues and Robbers*. She points out that Herse "does not technically exist," either.

(While the story's heroine isn't quite clear on what it is that Hera and Zeus are arguing about in Act 2, a classics scholar will tell you that the question was: "Who enjoys sex more, a man or a woman?")

It happened in Herse, that devil-ridden town, in January of the year 1800.

Winter, in Herse, was a mild enough thing; and though just last week they had been pouring chunks of ice from pitcher to washbowl, this morning the wind off the Adriatic blew in with all friendliness, ruffling the flags and ensigns on the ships in Herse Harbor.

Up beyond the long hill that led to the harbor, beyond the red-roofed stone houses that turned molten under the morning sun, lay a section of the city devoted to the British colony there. In a neat house of gold-gray stone that lay beyond an iron gate and up a flight of gold-gray steps lined with flowerpots and sleeping cats, lived the Godfrey family.

Maria Godfrey was fifteen. She was a late riser.

The family was already sitting down to breakfast when she hurried into the dining room. Indeed, her father, mother, Sophia, and Annise were more than half through, and her father had already procured his cherished cup of Turkish coffee from the urn.

"I wish you could make a greater effort, Maria," said Mrs. Godfrey. "You know we have a great deal to do if I'm to spare you and Sophia this afternoon."

Maria paused in the midst of reaching for a hot roll from the plate warmer beside the fender. "Mama! Do you mean that we can go?"

Her mother smiled. "I'm sure any party of Mrs. Arkadim's will be perfectly proper."

Sophia, typically, seemed unimpressed. Why should she be otherwise? thought Maria, with a touch of resentment at their inequality of engagements. Sophia hadn't spent an evening at home in weeks.

"And as Annise will be with you, and our Mr. Price will be of the party—"

At *that*, Sophia looked up. Maria rolled her eyes. As she was turned to the plate warmer, spooning out eggs, no one saw her.

"I thought that dreadful captain of Engineers had work for him today." Sophia spoke in the tone of dramatic languidness she had been practicing on the balcony lately.

"Apparently not," said her mother; "it is a great mystery. He claims he's quite at our disposal. He's longing to see the statue—says he's made a study of the Greek gods."

"He's made a study of everything," muttered Maria under her breath, and then felt guilty, for she liked Lieutenant Price.

"What does that mean?" asked Sophia, frowning.

"Only that he has a strange way about him. He looks at you as though he were about to sit for examinations. One day he knows nothing about a subject, when next you meet, he's become an expert."

"I doubt you've spoken with him sufficiently to form an estimate of his character," said her father. "I find him a pleasant young man." He stood up. "My dear. Girls, enjoy yourselves today; give my regards to Apollo."

After her father had left, to do whatever it was one did in the Turkey carpet trade, Sophia rose. She circled

the table and bent to kiss her mother. "We're still going to the Caldescotts tonight?"

Maria looked up from her tea. "The Caldescotts?"

"Not you, little sister," said Sophia. "You're not yet out."

Maria lifted her cup with feigned coolness. "I doubt any of us will be presented at St. James anytime soon."

"*Maria!*" cried her mother.

"But, Mother, you've said yourself that being out here is not the same as it is in England. And you said that I might go to the opera tomorrow—"

"You'll be with the whole family tomorrow. Papa will be there. The Caldescotts is quite another thing; I doubt but that there will be dancing before the night is over."

Maria sighed. She picked up the copy of *La Nouvelle Heloise* that she had carried into the room, and began flipping through it.

"*Maria.*"

She closed the book with a snap. A cool laugh tinkled in the morning air. *Annise.*

She sat there, pale red hair pinned up neatly, her gray eyes fixed on Maria. No matter how many years she'd lived with the Godfreys, her proper-young-lady face remained irretrievably foreign; some indefinable combination of those cool gray eyes and slender nose spoke of breeding that must be good, but never British. "Our young general seeks to balance the armies," *Annise* said. "She feels ignored, so she will ignore."

After a moment Mrs. Godfrey tittered nervously. *Annise* always made her nervous. "You must grant Sophia her time," Maria's mother told her. "She'll be gone to England soon enough, and then you'll miss each other beyond what you can guess."

The girls looked at each other with identical expressions of doubt. Mrs. Godfrey laughed more honestly now, and said, "I assure you, it's true." She reached out and grasped Maria's hand. She shook her head, still smiling. "The great mystery is how you can be so bold

at home and so painfully shy in company." She squeezed Maria's fingers.

"Maria is not shy." It was Aunt Wallace, latest to the breakfast table, but no one would ever say so. "Maria is a perfect young heroine." Elaine Wallace wore a muslin gown with a stain at the neckline; her dark hair a long, messy tangle down her back. No one would say that, either.

Aunt Wallace was odd. It was why she was in Herse, with her sister's family, rather than in Sussex with her own. She was thirty-three years old and clearly doomed to spinsterhood, but they had given up all hope of her ever keeping her hair neat or wearing a proper lace cap.

"Where is my tea?" she asked, glancing around as though she had just set down the cup and someone had crept in and stolen it.

"I'll get it for you, Aunt Wallace," said Maria. She leaped up and retrieved the silver pot from the sideboard.

"Thank you, my dear."

Sophia and Mrs. Godfrey had already begun to murmur about dresses. Aunt Wallace smiled at Maria. "You'll keep me company tonight, then, won't you?"

The two odd shoes would be home, as usual. But Maria smiled as she handed over the cup. "Of course, dear Aunt Wallace."

"It is a city on fire," said Annise. "A city of burning hearts, a devil-ridden town."

"The last I would agree with," said Stephen Price. "But then, everyone says so."

They made a strange procession; old, fat Mrs. Arkadim leading the way on her white mule; the three hill-men she had to accompany them, looking strange in livery and servants' white powder; Sophia and her two friends, Louisa and Jane, walking with parasols and shawls; and treading in the rear, Maria and Annise.

The road from town stretched ahead dustily, lined with plane trees and olives. Mr. Price had dropped back, with his usual politeness, to speak with them,

commenting on the beauty of the day. His sandy hair was gold in the sunlight; his stiff Engineers uniform blazed gold and crimson.

"How came the devil to bring you here?" inquired Stephen Price of Annise. She smiled in appreciation for his choice of language. Annise did not choose to be a lady.

"My people are from the mountains," she said. "I was orphaned, and needed to make my way in the world. Mrs. Godfrey offered me a place."

"As . . . ?" said Mr. Price, allowing the word to trail off delicately, as though it were a question that might be ignored.

"What am I?" she asked, smiling. "What indeed? What a piece of work is woman!—I am not quite a governess, though I venture to say that I taught Maria, here, to speak French with a tolerable mountain accent, and Varingine, with what I trust is a pure one. We are only six years apart in age; I suppose I am a companion."

"Have you no resentment for the English?" he asked.

"Why should I?" she said, with mocking innocence.

"Indeed I wonder," he said, "for we are here to protect your country."

"And who will protect us from you, I wonder? Really, Mr. Price, we were in no danger before the king invited you in."

"There are the Turks," said Maria, who could no longer bear to be left out of the conversation.

"The Turks know enough to leave us be; as does everyone but you, it seems."

"You are unfair, Annise," she said. "With British ships in the harbor, and British soldiers quartered in town, Herse is the safest place on earth. None would dare to attack now but the French, I suppose; and since Admiral Nelson has just sunk all their ships, I'm sure they have learned their lesson."

Price's eyes widened slightly at that, but he said nothing. Maria looked from one to the other; and into the silence, she said, "Why is it a devil-ridden town?"

"Pray do not tell your parents you heard me say so," said Price.

"But why?" She looked to her companion. "Annise?"

At last Price spoke. "Because no one is here of his own free will, Miss Maria."

"That can't be true, sir. There must be many people—" She stopped, thinking. Her parents, who never ceased speaking of England? Their neighbor, Monsieur Herneau, whose enthusiasm to return home had only been dampened by news of his brother's guillotining? "You yourself, Mr. Price—" Again she stopped. The lieutenant had been sent by the Royal Engineers. But how foolish, she only considered the expatriate community. Of course the natives . . . Annise, the orphan of the mountains? She had made her opinion of Herse clear.

Maria wet her lips. "Mrs. Arkadim," she said finally.

Annise's eyes lit with contempt. "Herse is a city of lies," she proclaimed, and spat freely.

Maria quite admired her for it. "Mrs. Arkadim pretends to be happy here?" she asked.

"Mrs. Arkadim seeks to enhance her prestige with her fashionable Roman temple, her dedication to the gods. She thinks this will make life in Herse bearable."

Maria walked on, thinking. At last she said, "I like the city."

Stephen Price and Annise looked at her, then at each other. They tactfully said nothing.

The temple was less than three miles from town, nestled between two shallow hills in a grove of acacias. Half the roof was missing. The building, or what remained of it, was small and round, encircled by broken pillars, the entire southern wall open to the elements.

The statue was another story.

"My god," said Stephen Price, under his breath. Mrs. Arkadim hung back, forgotten, a sly, pleased look on her face, allowing them to take in the full effect; she watched her guests, not the statue. Sophia stepped forward, letting go of her shawl, which she had been in the midst of unpinning; it slipped to the stone floor,

unnoticed. Her blond hair was undone by the wind, but she seemed unaware of that as well. Even Annise, whose hair was never disobedient, stared blankly.

There was reason to stare, Maria thought. The height of a tall man, well over six foot, the statue was as out of place in this tiny ruin as a cannonball at a tea party. The marble glowed, polished by time and loving hands so that the features were very slightly blurred; but the deep cut of the eyes was unmistakable. In one hand, slender stone fingers held a lyre. In the other . . . it was impossible to tell what had been in the other hand, for that arm was missing below the elbow. The upper arm was outstretched, and the god's balance was poised on his forward foot, as though he were, perhaps, offering or bestowing something. A curse, a blessing, a gift.

He was quite the most beautiful man Maria had ever seen. His short tunic disguised nothing of the muscles of his legs, and the smooth expanse of his chest was exposed and inviting. Maria swallowed.

"Pity the nose is gone," commented Price, finally.

"What?" she bleated. A second later she saw what he meant; the nose was indeed quite broken off, the marble a rough triangle beneath. She hadn't even noticed.

Mrs. Arkadim made a crowing sound. They turned to her. The fringe of her turban quivered with excitement, its ostrich feather bowing as she nodded. "You are as impressed as I was, I perceive! Will it do? For my concert, Mr. Price, Miss Godfrey! Will it do? Will they be pleased?"

"I'm sure everyone will be as delighted as we are," Sophia assured her. She had stepped away from her two friends and made her way, almost unconsciously, to Stephen Price's side, as though staring at a six-foot man of marble had brought the lieutenant suddenly to her mind.

"I will have violinists sitting over there," said Mrs. Arkadim, pointing. "And a pianoforte carried from town—"

"Mrs. Arkadim," said the lieutenant, a strange look

on his face, "forgive me. But aren't you worried about the safety of this great treasure you've acquired? It may please you to display it in an old temple, but surely any goatherd could slip in and steal it away from you."

"Dear Mr. Price! Your concern does you credit. But see my three strong friends here?" She gestured to the burly hill-men, who smiled at Mr. Price, though not pleasantly. "One of them will always be on guard, armed with a pistol—at least, until after my concert, when I shall consider moving the statue back to Herse. I believe I may have the temple itself transported, stone by stone, and—"

Maria circled the temple, glancing back at the Apollo from time to time, letting Mrs. Arkadim's voice fade. Really, the figure was amazing, like a frozen bolt of lightning.

She was quiet all through the picnic lunch. Sophia's redoubled flirting with Mr. Price had no power to make her cringe. Afterward, Price suggested a walk about the grove, a suggestion that met with immediate approval.

Not from Sophia, though. "I am sorry," she said, "but suddenly I'm all done in. I think I'll sit and wait for you here, if you don't mind."

"We need not go and leave you here—" he began, but Mrs. Arkadim interrupted airily.

"My servant will stay, and perhaps one of the other girls will keep her company."

"I will," said Maria, rather surprising herself, for she had had a strong desire to join in the walk.

One of the hill-men stayed behind, sitting on the broken stones beside the open wall, facing out toward the horizon as though guarding them from enemy hordes. The countryside was empty and quiet, but for the sound of birds.

Sophia took out *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and began reading. After five minutes she sighed. Maria looked up from *La Nouvelle Heloïse*.

"I can't seem to concentrate my mind, either," she admitted.

"Perhaps we should exchange," Sophia suggested.

Maria held up her book so her sister could read the cover.

"Oh, dear," said Sophia. "Is it all in French?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, never mind; it can't be any worse than what I'm reading."

They handed each other their books. In another five minutes, Maria looked up and saw Sophia's eyes upon her. Without a word, she offered back the book, and Sophia did the same.

"That did us little good," said Sophia, her voice full of drowsiness.

"It's the fault of the weather, and all that fine food. Look, our escort is already asleep. How will he guard us from the gangs of bandits?"

Sophia giggled. Whatever one might say of Herse, there had been no bandits this close to the city for half a century.

Talking suddenly seemed far too much trouble. Maria laid her head down on her shawl. The last thing she heard was the song of the larks outside in the acacias.

A confusion of images, dark and light; music and silence, like the squares of a chessboard; and a sense that she was wrapped in a heavy, warm blanket, her arms fastened against her sides so that she was unable to move. Abruptly she became alarmed, fighting her way back to consciousness.

She scattered sleep like drops of water, like notes of music. She rushed into the light.

And she heard a voice.

Be well, beloved, and happy.

The words were not made of English or French; they were made of music.

Then came heavy footsteps.

She opened her eyes, frightened, and turned toward her sister.

Sophia was fine, but . . . it was strange. For a

moment, Maria thought she saw someone leaving her sister's side, moving away. No, it was a shadow.

Moving away, having given his blessing. Moving back to his pedestal, back to Olympus . . .

What an imagination you have, Maria. I'm not sure Monsieur Rousseau would approve of this lack of rationalism.

She curled her fingers around *La Nouvelle Heloïse*, which she had stuffed under her shawl as a pillow, and sat up. "Sophia?" she called.

Sophia slept deeply, her breasts rising and falling as though she floated on the dark ocean. A sigh escaped her lips.

"Sophia!"

Eyelashes fluttered. Chestnut eyes opened, disorientedly.

"Sophia, are you all right?"

"What?" Sophia glanced around, blinking, as though she had forgotten where she was. After a moment she said, "Yes. Yes, of course I'm all right. Why, what's the matter, Maria?"

"Nothing," said Maria, just as confused.

"Well," said a voice, "what a painting this would make. 'Two Fair Sleepers in an Ancient Temple.'" Stephen Price entered, Mrs. Arkadim close behind with Jane and Louisa. He bowed with some melodrama to Sophia, an amused, half-shy smile quirking his face. "We were gone longer than we thought. We should be starting back to town, but perhaps you would like to rest a while?"

Sophia's face was flushed with sleep, and her hair had come completely down. She looked at Mr. Price with the faintest trace of startlement, as though she had forgotten who he was. Then she smiled, a polite smile, with none of the warmth she had poured on him all day. "Oh, no, we would not like to worry our parents, would we, Maria?"

"No," said Maria, uncertainly.

They gathered up their things and stood outside, as Mrs. Arkadim mounted her mule. Sophia stood apart

from Price, beside her two friends, although she made no effort to join in their conversation. She seemed deeply thoughtful, and a trifle . . . embarrassed? Maria could not be sure.

As they began the walk, Maria said, "The larks and the crickets seem to have gone to sleep as well. Remember how loudly they sang when we came in?"

Price looked at her strangely. "Why, they are as loud as ever. Can't you hear them?"

Maria did not know what to make of the matter of the birds. She stood over the japanned cabinet in the drawing room, pulling out thread for her needlework. Her hearing seemed unaffected, for she had understood her mother quite plainly instructing the maid before she and Sophia went out to the Caldecotts, and that had been from another room.

And she could hear, floating into the room with the night air, the sounds of her father, Mr. Price, and Monsieur Herneau playing cards out on the balcony.

"Are you feeling lonesome, my dear?" Aunt Wallace looked over at her from the sofa, where she was perusing Sophia's abandoned novel.

"No, of course not," said Maria, slightly startled. It was a blow to her pride to be thought of so.

"Your mother is half hoping to marry your sister to one of the Engineers or Navy men, I think, for then she could stay in Herse a while longer, and need not go off to England after all."

"I know," Maria admitted.

"But still it causes some pain, to be so ignored?"

Maria closed the door of the cabinet with a thud. "Do you wish to borrow some of my threads, dear Aunt Wallace?"

"Thank you, my dear, no. You know how poorly I ply the needle."

Maria clasped her bundle of threads tightly. "I am surprised to be so much better than you, considering your years of practice."

Her aunt rose, a crooked smile on her face. "If I did

well," she said softly, "then people would expect me to make myself useful continually. I am a spinster aunt, you know."

She took her leave, gliding away toward her bedroom like a ghost, her hair in its usual tangle down her back. Maria stared after her.

She shivered. But she was only fifteen; she did not have to worry about being someone's spinster aunt. Yet.

Her thoughts in a tumble, Maria moved quietly to the balcony, where she could look out through the shutters at her father's guests. There was Stephen Price, his clear features glowing in the candlelight. Monsieur Herneau, whom she had known all her life, with his gray side whiskers and dusty cravat. Drinks were set down beside them on the faded green baize table.

"It quite exceeded your expectations, then, did it?" asked Monsieur Herneau in his hoarse voice. He stopped to cough into a handkerchief. Monsieur Herneau had not been well lately; rumor had it, in fact, that he was worse off than he appeared, and would have welcomed the opportunity to die at home in Paris, if he did not fear a premature separation of head from body.

"The statue is magnificent," said Mr. Price, playing a card. "But I wonder how you came to hear of our excursion so quickly."

Maria's father laughed. "Do you think Mrs. Arkadim would let any opportunity to score a social point pass by?"

Price smiled wryly. Monsieur Herneau said, "She has no fear of robbers, then?"

"Robbers . . ." said Price, thoughtfully.

"She'll lose that treasure," Herneau went on, "if she's not careful. Mark my words. The statue would be better off away from here entirely. Under the protection of an appreciative government."

"In Paris?" inquired Price, raising an eyebrow.

"It would be well treated, at least, in Paris. The first consul approves of the ancient classics, and of scholarship, too. He's left a commission in Egypt to study the ruins, the tombs, the natural fauna . . ."

Mr. Godfrey stubbed out a cheroot. "We will not speak of Egypt, I think."

There was an awkward silence.

"Quite," said Mr. Price. "Let me tell you instead a story I heard. The new British ambassador to Constantinople, one Lord Elgin, stopped in Athens with his bride on the way to take up his new duties. He fell in love with the artworks the ancients left so carelessly lying about, and he bought one."

Monsieur Herneau looked up sharply, his eyes alight.

"A magnificent statue of Apollo," said Price, innocently.

Monsieur Herneau let out a breath. "But you're not—"

"Holding a lyre," Price went on inexorably, "and with his other forearm broken off. The statue was sent back to England as a gesture of thanks to the king for his appointment. But it never arrived. I believe the ship it sailed on was the *Hermione*." He glanced at his two companions, judging the effect, and then laid down his hand.

"Isn't the captain of the *Hermione* a friend of Mrs. Arkadim's?" he added, as though it were an afterthought.

This time the silence was an appreciative one. Mr. Godfrey leaned back. "Where *do* you hear these things, Price?"

Maria moved away from the balcony. There was an entire hidden world going on around her, she thought sometimes, and the only way to catch a glimpse of it was through shutters.

She passed through the darkened, empty kitchen, and out into the passage that led to the storeroom. There she opened the window and sat by herself, on a sack of what she hoped was flour and not coal, looking out at the starlight. Why did she always have this feeling she was *missing* so many things? Did people ever tell you the truth, as you got older, or could she only expect to touch the surface of life?

At last she stood up, closed the window sensibly, for there would be flies by morning, and began to make

her way to her bedroom. As she entered the kitchen, she could hear someone closing the cabinet in the next room, returning the chamber pot to its place. There were footsteps, and beyond the doorway she saw Mr. Price appear, buttoning his breeches. He looked up suddenly, but not at her, for she was quite hidden in the depths of the kitchen.

"Forgive me," he said at once in his soft voice.

Two delicate, pale hands touched his, where they had frozen on the final button. "There is nothing to forgive," said her Aunt Wallace calmly.

Mr. Price did not repulse Aunt Wallace's hands; but then, Mr. Price had never repulsed anybody, that Maria knew of, in any way. He was always the soul of accommodation. This, however, seemed . . . very odd, and discomfiting.

Aunt Wallace leaned toward him, kissing him lightly on the lips. "I hope I may return your kindness to my nieces, sir."

"I beg your pardon?" His voice had become strangely low.

"Allow me to mend your pen, Mr. Price," said Aunt Wallace. Her fingers unbuttoned him deftly. She came fully into view then, sinking to her knees, her back to Maria.

"Surely, Miss Wallace, surely this is not the place . . ."

Maria could not make out precisely what her aunt was doing, but Mr. Price's attention had become fully engaged. "Miss Wallace . . ." he said, but left the sentence uncompleted. Abruptly his fingers thrust deeply into her rich dark hair, holding her head as though he were afraid she might pull away.

Maria stared, unable to breathe. The world seemed to be tilting alarmingly.

A few moments later, her aunt stood up. Mr. Price held her for a moment, not passionately, but compassionately; almost as though she were dizzy or weak and might fall. "You are very kind, Miss Wallace."

"Mr. Price . . ." she said, her voice disoriented. "I

must bid you good night. And Maria, I came out to say good night to her, too . . .”

“Never mind,” he said firmly, “I will tell her for you. Show me the way to your room, and I will escort you to the door.”

They disappeared from Maria’s view. She stood there, in the dark, for some time. As her thoughts became no clearer, she passed out into the drawing room, where the familiar sofa and cabinet and half-moon table seemed thoroughly unreal.

She felt suddenly like a bottle brought up from the wine cellar before its time, wincing in the light that glared through the dusty green glass. Anything might happen now.

She walked out to the balcony, where Papa sat playing cards with Monsieur Herneau. Mr. Price joined them. He seemed quite unaffected. Unlike her.

Her father glanced up from his hand. “Maria, what are you doing here? You should be keeping your Aunt Wallace company.”

“I believe she’s looking for this lady.” Stephen Price, offering a smile of apology to her father—followed by his usual shy, enchanting smile to her—lifted Euterpe from beneath the table. Price set the cat in his lap for a moment, soothing her, then handed her dutifully to Maria.

“Thank you, Mr. Price,” she said. In the distance, someone was playing a mandolin. It cut off abruptly, and there was only silence.

Sophia continued distracted through the next day, not at all her confident, conversible self. She stared out the window, made no references to Mr. Price or to any other young officer, and spent much of her time picking things up and putting them down again, as though she’d forgotten their use.

“There is no chance, is there,” Mr. Godfrey murmured to his wife over the breakfast table, “that her affections have been engaged? Was there someone at the Caldescotts . . . ?”

“Nonsense,” his wife assured him. “I would have

noticed. She's simply in a mope; a cold, perhaps—it's the season for taking a chill. I'll see that she has a good hot soup to settle herself, with a sprinkling of Composition Powder. Do leave these things to me, Mr. Godfrey; you have no notion what goes through a young girl's mind."

By the afternoon, however, she had become irritated enough to lecture her daughter on strength of character. "And Maria is just as bad," she proclaimed. "The two of you are no fit companions at all. I would almost welcome a quarrel, if it would get you talking again."

"Have no fear," said Annise, looking up from the watercolors she had spread out on the half-moon table. "I will keep you company."

She smiled coolly. Mrs. Godfrey retreated. "I believe I'll lie down," she said. "I prefer to save my strength for the opera tonight."

Annise watched her go, glanced at the two sisters, and shrugged.

Herse Opera House was at its best at night, lit by torches, with the bustle of arriving patrons and a gilt carriage with a ducal seal pulled up to the front. The Godfreys, though perfectly respectable folk, could not compete with that; they walked. Maria wore white muslin, long gloves, and a silk bonnet; there was one fan between them, so of course Sophia had it.

Inside lay a country of red-velvet seats, floral moldings, and hangings with tassels of gold, all picked out by a battalion of flickering lamps.

The Godfreys had done the necessary thing and paid for a box. There was room for just six tiny chairs there, pushed very close together in two rows; a seventh chair had been placed in the back, for Annise, who would at least have the felicity of listening to what she could not see. Her seat lay half out the doorway, and she smiled grimly as she took it.

Mrs. Godfrey and Sophia headed for the front seats. Monsieur Herneau was already there, discreetly to one

side, poring over the program. He stood when they entered.

Maria sat beside him in the second row, and he handed her the program. "Mrs. Fazzi sings tonight," he said. "At last I have the reward of hearing her myself. They love her in Paris."

Maria glanced toward the stage, with its curtain of heavy scarlet and gold. The orchestra was already in place, tuning their instruments. She loved the jangle at such moments; already her pulse was beating faster.

The last time she had been to the theater was a year and a half ago, to see *King Lear*. Although it was not at all like the play she had read in Papa's library, for the king had not been mad. She had asked, afterward, why Lear had been so strangely sane, but no one would tell her, except Monsieur Herneau, who said only, "I doubt your Lear will run mad again until we see a new George on the throne."

Sometimes, Maria suspected, those around her chose to leave her in obscurity on purpose. If only one could discern the truth.

And then the curtain rose. A chorus of nymphs danced across the stage. Maria peered down at her program in the uncertain light; "Prologue," she read, "Showing Tiresias As a Youth."

Evidently, although the opera was called *Old Tiresias—Le Vieux Tirésias*—they were taking their time bringing him to maturity.

And evidently, although the opera was in French, it was sung chiefly by Italians. The proud Mediterranean accents were less obvious during the songs than the recitatives, of which there were many.

Tiresias, the young Theban boy—played by the redoubtable Mrs. Fazzi, in a cunningly draped Greek toga that earned a round of applause from below—came upon the goddess Athena bathing in a Hippocrene fountain. To punish him for seeing that which he had no right to, the goddess lost no time in striking him blind. Athena's contralto and the Fazzi's mezzo warred for several minutes, and it occurred to Maria

that Tiresias did not seem at all as suppliant and cringing as his lyrics implied.

There were footsteps behind her. Stephen Price entered the box.

"My apologies," he said, in a low voice. "I was detained by duty. Have I missed much?"

Monsieur Herneau replied, "Not at all; it is merely the prologue. My brother saw this opera in Paris five years ago and praised it to the skies. He told me that the finest parts are after the first act."

Maria saw her father start to turn his head, and stop. There was always a moment of awkwardness when Monsieur Herneau mentioned his brother—as though human decency required an act of comfort, and the human heart had none to offer. Monsieur Herneau had lived for the day he would be reunited with his brother.

Onstage, Tiresias's mother begged for mercy from the goddess.

"I understand," said Mr. Price to Herneau, "that you have finally seen the great statue for yourself."

"Yes, this morning. Your praise was not at all extravagant; it's a beautiful thing."

"More suited to Paris than Herse," suggested Mr. Price.

Monsieur Herneau inclined his head. "I cannot deny that those are my feelings."

"Well, I bring news. Lord Elgin is searching for his own statue, wherever it may be. I suppose he regrets losing the opportunity to curry favor with the king. Hard to do, you know, when you're a thousand miles away from London."

"Curry favor . . ." said Monsieur Herneau thoughtfully.

Maria listened with half an ear, her attention on the stage. Moved by the entreaty, Athena forgave Tiresias his trespass, but informed the boy and his mother that the curses of the gods cannot be undone. To compensate his loss, she gave him the ability to foretell the future and to understand the language of birds, and then she handed him a magic staff of gold to take the place of his eyes. The prologue was over.

"You put an unfortunate interpretation on his lordship's motives," said Monsieur Herneau.

Price shrugged. "Things of beauty are often put to such uses. Look how providently Mrs. Arkadim treats her own Apollo. It makes me wonder what the original artist bought with it."

The chorus of nymphs had disappeared. Maria let out a breath of pleasure. "Indeed, sir, it is enough to make one lose faith in the perfectibility of man."

They both started, as though surprised she had been listening; though why that should be was a mystery, since they were speaking directly above her head.

Monsieur Herneau chuckled. It turned into a cough, which he gained control of after a moment. "The perfectibility of man! We have a little radical in the box, Price." He beamed at Maria. "And what *philosophes* are you reading now?"

"Only a novel, sir. *La Nouvelle Heloïse*."

"An old friend; I read it as a boy. Perhaps you are not a radical, but an old-fashioned romantic. Do you see yourself as a new Heloïse, Maria?" His voice was affectionate but thick with condescension.

"No, for her concerns were all of love." She sat straight, jutting out her chin with dignity. "I have not yet decided what mine are."

Mr. Price laughed. It was delight, not patronization. "Your mother believes you to be shy in company."

"I am, sir, with those I don't know."

"Do you believe you know us, then? I am flattered." Her face fell. "People are so hard to know."

He looked as though he would say something, but the curtain rose on the first act, stealing her attention.

Tiresias, now in middle age and played by a tenor, wandered the hills of Greece. It was soon clear why he needed no guide, for whenever something new came into his path, his staff sang to him. It sang of the dangers of the road, the majesty of the cliffs, the clouds overhead, the expressions on people's faces. There was a ripple of reaction through the audience when the staff first made itself known. Where was the singer? Down-

stage, behind the scenery; no, in a hidden box just before the orchestra; no, behind the curtain. But the reaction went beyond that.

The voice was ethereal; clear, unearthly, and terribly wise, yet innocent. It surged in strange modulations, rippling as though it emerged through the rings of the wood. There was a faintly East European accent. And . . .

"*Castrato*," said Monsieur Herneau, turning to Price.

Price nodded.

The second the staff's song ended, Maria turned to them excitedly. "What's a *castrato*?"

They looked at each other.

"*Tell me!*" she said. "Is it a kind of voice? I've never heard of it!"

"Maria, behave yourself," said her father. "Stop badgering the gentlemen. I allow you on these outings because I trust you to be a young lady. If that is beyond you, I will have to rethink my decision."

She subsided, sensitive to the injustice of it. *No one ever told her anything*. It was like living in a dark room, where people came and brought food and talked to you and then went out into the light and left you behind.

Onstage, Tiresias approached the fated pair of coupling snakes. At least Maria had some suspicion of what *they* were doing, and knew better than to inquire. The staff warned Tiresias to walk around the snakes. He ignored the advice, causing Maria to peer stiff-necked over Sophia's shoulder and making her ball her fists up inside her long gloves.

He raised his staff—it arced through the air—"Beware!" it cried, in a voice that sent a shiver down Maria's spine. The staff struck the snake. There was a puff of smoke.

Then there was applause, as Tiresias emerged from the smoke played again by Mrs. Fazzi, now resplendent in a Greek shepherdess gown trimmed with purple.

Maria relaxed in her seat.

Things were uneventful then, until the quarrel

between Hera and Zeus. Tiresias, having experienced life as both a man and woman, was summoned to decide the dispute. But before he/she could get a word in edgewise, the argument broke out again, accusations and insults flying between the Olympians, supported by swift sawings of violins, violas, violoncellos, and—as Zeus dealt with one particular insult—a double bass. It was delightful.

And suddenly it stopped. Maria frowned, sitting up in her seat. Hera and Zeus were singing without musical accompaniment, and well though they sang, it sounded very odd. What's more, she had never heard instruments just stop like that, between one note and the next, before the end of a song—before the end of a bar! She raised herself up on her arms an inch, peering past Sophia for a better glimpse of the orchestra.

They were still playing.

Maria stared.

The musicians bowed away, violins and violas tucked under chins, expressions of intensity on their faces. There was just no sound.

She looked around at the others in the box. No one else seemed puzzled. She peered down at the audience, which appeared pleased as ever.

As the opera continued, there were flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, trumpets, and timpani. But there were no strings. Or rather, strings were assiduously employed, but to no effect but silence.

She turned to Mr. Price. "Is it some kind of ... comedy?"

"What, Miss Maria?"

"The violins, the . . ." She shook her head. "When they play, there's no sound!"

"You think them too soft? They make a loud enough racket to satisfy me, but I confess to being unmusical."

She stared at him, trying to gain control over her feelings of disturbance. They misunderstood each other, somehow. She turned back to the opera uneasily.

Price spoke to Monsieur Herneau in a low tone. "Lord Elgin has sent an Italian, Lusieri, to seek out the

statue. He sketched it in Athens, and will be able to recognize it when he sees it."

"His lordship seems to have no faith in the rumors that it washed overboard, then."

"It would seem not."

"Our friend Mrs. Arkadim had better be careful."

Maria heard a smile in Price's voice. "Why, what has Mrs. Arkadim to do with this? But I understand that she has called off her concert, until the statue may be safely brought to her house in town, and placed a second guard on watch at the temple."

After a moment, Monsieur Herneau said, "It is all foolishness. The statue should have remained in Greece. I am glad to be uninvolved in the whole matter."

Maria continued to watch the story of Tiresias unfold, her mind in a whirl. What on earth had happened to the strings? How could she just *lose* them, as though they were a reticule she had set down on a chair and walked away from?

Tiresias had seen a goddess and been struck blind. She had heard the voice of a god, and—

No. She was a rational young lady living in an enlightened age.

It was not until the final act that she lost the woodwinds.

Tiresias, now a man once again, sang a delicate song of the serenity of old age; a song well suited to the flutes being puffed upon so energetically by the musicians standing in the middle of the orchestra. Except that no sound at all came from the flutes, no matter how nimbly fingers moved over the stops, or how much effort appeared on the face of the player.

"A man or a woman, sighted or blind,
I no longer fear the curses of the gods.
There is sweet mixed with sour in every cup of wine,
And the victory is always mine,
Old Tiresias."

The chorus moved to join him, the orchestra

wielding its instruments as a whole. But to Maria the voices seemed a cappella, breaking on her ears without any resonance of accompaniment.

“Man or woman, sighted or blind,
We ought not fear the curses of the gods.
Sweet or sour? The orange or the rind?
Destiny makes no odds.
The victor is old Tiresias . . .”

Like blowing out a candle, the voices were snuffed. The chorus still stood onstage, their mouths opening and closing, their chests puffed out, emoting for all their worth. But the song was gone.

A moment later the lamps were lit, and the sound of people moving about came from below. Mr. Price turned to her. “Miss Maria? You look pale.”

She gripped his hand, and he helped her to her feet. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “Are you unwell? Shall I call your mother?”

What was wrong . . . whatever it was, it was beyond her scope to explain or deal with. “I don’t . . .” she began.

Monsieur Herneau’s hearty voice rang out. “Mrs. Godfrey! Do come, I believe Maria’s nerves are overexcited.”

Her pride was stung. “They are *not* overexcited, sir.” She looked to her mother, though, and felt her courage collapse. “May I not go home to bed now? Oh, please—I’m so very tired.”

For a terrible moment she thought she might cry. But Mrs. Godfrey came at once and took her by the hand. “Come, my dear,” she said, in her usual tone of reasonableness. “It will all be better in the morning.”

She woke late next morning with a muffled feeling in her head, as though she were stuffed with a cold, but that was pure imagination. She heard the maid moving about with perfect, though dull, clarity, and when she

joined the others, after a lonely breakfast, their words were quite plain.

"You didn't wake me," she said. Her mother and Sophia were oblivious to her, paging through a fabric book for the tiresome ideal of all gowns that Sophia would wear to England. True, she would wear the gown only long enough to replace it with whatever was most fashionable in London, but that was not the point. It was Sophia's mission to marry well, and she would not be sent ill-uniformed to the battle.

"It was my idea," said Annise. She sat at the fortepiano, picking out an Irish air. "You seemed so tired, and not at all well. I thought you should rest."

Annise played as she did everything else, with a light, cold touch. The facts of this began to penetrate Maria's cotton-wool brain.

She could hear the music.

She moved to stand beside the instrument, her eyes fixed on Annise. "Play something else, Annise. Play 'Drops of Brandy.'"

Her mother made a disapproving sound from the sofa. "Where on earth did you hear that, Maria? A sailor song!"

"You can hardly avoid it, Mama," Sophia said, "and the melody is sweet. Play it, Annise."

Annise smiled her delicate, impersonal smile, and the music under her hands altered, becoming more gentle. Mrs. Godfrey's face relaxed with pleasure. She turned back to her fabric book, whispering to Sophia.

"Do you like this song?" Annise asked Maria, who still stood beside her.

"Beyond anything!"

"With different words it would be lovely, I think. Still, your enthusiasm is . . . quite bracing."

Not that the words were shameful, thought Maria, only simple. In her head, she heard them ring alongside the notes of the fortepiano, reassuring as a mother's hand: ". . . and Johnny shall have a blue ribbon, to tie up his bonny brown hair. And why should I not love Johnny, and why should—"

The song ended abruptly. Maria's gaze had drifted to the window; turning back, she said, "Why did you st—"

She stared down at Annise's fine-boned hands as they moved with precision over the keys. No sound came out.

She looked quickly to her mother and Sophia, who went on chatting, comfortably and low-voiced.

The sound of her own breathing seemed to fill the world. After a moment she heard her mother saying, "But that was delightful, Annise. Do play another—why, Maria, what's wrong?"

The world had gone quite gray. She leaned against the piano. Suddenly her mother and Annise were beside her, helping her to the sofa.

"I thought she still looked ill," said Annise.

"Hartshorn," said her mother. "Smelling salts. Tea. Sophia, fetch Doctor Lacour."

"No!" cried Maria in alarm.

"Shh, now, dearest. It's clear you're more than tired. We'll take good care of you. Sophia!"

"Yes, Mama." Sophia hurried from the room.

"What is it, dear? Where does it hurt?" Mrs. Godfrey, a beneficent tyrant of the sickroom, kissed her daughter gently, placing a hand against her forehead, her cheeks, her neck, and her wrists.

"I'm not ill!" The thought of honesty frightened her, and with reason.

"You must tell us, Maria," said Annise reasonably. "It's all very well not to want to be a burden, but you're only making things more difficult."

Her mother's hands were eloquent with love and worry. Even Annise's invulnerable gray eyes betrayed concern. All this gentle treatment was more than she could withstand, and Maria burst out, "I can't hear things anymore."

They were taken aback. "My dear?" said her mother hesitantly, stroking her cheek.

"It's . . . a kind of deafness, I think."

Mrs. Godfrey and Annise looked at each other. Annise said, "But you hear us now, don't you?"

She nodded miserably.

Annise rose with her usual grace, turned, and strode across the room. Her back to them, she said in a low voice, "Can you hear this?"

"Yes," said Maria, in a tone better suited to a confession of murder.

Annise returned and knelt beside her. She turned to Mrs. Godfrey. "Perhaps it's a fever."

Delirium, thought Maria. They suspect I've taken leave of my senses.

Annise caught her eyes. "Why do you think you may be going deaf?"

Maria hesitated. Her vague fears crystallized as she imagined their reactions. *I've been cursed*, she thought, *by the loss of all music.*

I eavesdropped on a god.

The horror of becoming the new Aunt Wallace of the family was enough to stop her speech.

What on earth could she say to them? Her strung-out nerves came to her rescue by snapping, and she began to sob.

At once they halted the inquisition. Her mother held her in her arms, and the maid brought tea, and by the time she was released to lie on the sofa, no one wanted to question her further.

She sipped the tea, hiccuping slightly. Was all music gone now, she wondered miserably, or would other sounds disappear as well, voices and footsteps and the creak of cartwheels? What did the gods consider music? And what could she do to save herself?

Tiresias's mother had pleaded for mercy from the responsible Olympian, but her own mother seemed unlikely to do so.

She would have to ask for mercy herself.

The momentary breakdown had taken its toll, and she felt sleepy suddenly. She fought it. She needed to go to the temple, as quickly as possible, before more of her life disappeared.

It would be breaking a Commandment, though, wouldn't it? To pray to a pagan god?

Perhaps it didn't count as praying, she thought drowsily. Perhaps if she only *asked*, respectfully . . .

"Mama, I want to take a walk."

"What nonsense, Maria. You're ill. Here, let me help you." She felt her mother lift her legs, straightening them on the sofa, and tuck a pillow behind her head. And she heard her mother's voice . . . for how much longer?

"It must be a fever, Annise, although I felt no great heat when I touched her. But to speak of taking a walk, when she can hardly stand . . ." There was a pause. "What if she tries to wander away?"

"I'll stay with her, Mrs. Godfrey," said Annise, with firmness. "Between us, we'll keep her in the house."

No you won't, thought Maria, with some desperation. And promptly fell asleep.

She said nothing to Doctor Lacour when he came. When she woke for the second time, an hour after her interview with him, she felt both refreshed and light-headed. But there was nothing to be done; nothing, until late evening, when the cook and maid had retired. She could hear her parents, Sophia, and Annise in the drawing room. Perhaps she should wait longer, until they had gone to bed, but she couldn't bear to, and she had begged them not to disturb her rest.

She slipped out through the kitchen, the back hallway, down the stairs, and out the servants' entrance.

The night was full of moonlight and stars. She grasped her shawl around herself and hurried through the streets. She had never been out alone before at night.

It was wonderful. There were few people about. The breeze was like a cool bath, bringing her back to life. She crossed a long street that ran straight down the hill toward the harbor, looked to its end, and saw the ships in prideful sleep under the moon, their flags and ensigns bleached in the silver air.

She saw all this as one might who was condemned to death. She very well could have feared the night and

her lack of protection, she thought, in different circumstances; but there were so many other things to fear.

She did expect to grow frightened once she left the limits of Herse itself, but there were no people about, none at all, on the road leading north through the hills. And what did peasant girls do when they came out of their cottages into the darkness, to answer nature? Did their hearts knock about in their breasts each time a leaf rustled? It didn't seem likely. Branches of plane trees and olives swayed gently as she passed. Played by the night wind, they murmured a deep, soothing chant of indefatigable life.

They did for a while. Then they stopped.

She looked up and saw the leaves ripple soundlessly, and hurried on.

The temple lay solemn under the moon, its broken columns dignified and far too beautiful.

For the first time she remembered Mrs. Arkadim's hill-men. Dismayed, she realized that one of them would be standing guard here right now.

But she saw no one. She stepped through the open wall of the temple and walked—slowly, suddenly shy—toward the Apollo.

The moonlight made him both alive and inhuman. Seeing the sharp planes of his face, she could well believe that he would hear what she said—but not that he contained any pity.

How did one address a god? Especially without being blasphemous . . .

My lord? Your Grace? He wasn't a duke or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

"Sir," she said finally, hearing the thinness in her own voice. Oh, that would never do. She sounded as if he were a schoolmaster.

Nothing else came to mind.

"Sir," she said, more firmly. "Great Apollo, Lord of Mu—" She stopped. "Lord of Healing. I'm Maria Godfrey. You might not remember me." She swallowed. "People forget me all the time. But I think I offended

you, and I wish to apologize. I meant no disrespect, sir, it was purely an accident."

She waited, but there was no response.

"You would probably remember my sister Sophia. She was the pretty girl with blond hair. She was sleeping over here, and I was sleeping there." Maria pointed, as though the statue could follow her gesture.

"Sir, please help me. I can't hear music anymore. I can't hear violins or basses or jigs or love songs. I can't dance at balls. Well, I can't dance properly anyway, and my mother won't let me yet, but now I never will. And it gets worse every day. I don't think I would hear the waves anymore, if I walked down to the harbor, but I'm afraid to go and see.

"I don't mean this as a complaint, and I quite see you have a position to maintain, but please . . . at least, don't let it get any worse."

The statue stood there in the silence of the night. She was talking to a piece of marble.

What a ridiculous idea it had been to come here. And what benefit could it be, if the stories were right and the curses of the gods could not be undone? Tiresias had gotten the ability to prophesy as a compensation . . . fat lot of good that ever did Cassandra. Sooth-saying would go over as well in Herse as it did in Troy.

Hopelessness was some relief. At least there was nothing more she was obliged to do.

She started to cry. "Sir, your voice was so beautiful. I'm sorry I listened, but it was so beautiful. If it were the last thing I heard, I almost wouldn't mind."

It was the truth, a truth she had forgotten in her panic but which comforted her now.

She fell to her knees on the stone, incredibly tired, and crawled behind a broken pillar, where she was asleep in seconds.

She woke hours later to the sound of voices.

"Are you sure he's dead?"

"Of course I'm sure, unless a man can live with a cut

throat. His body's over beyond the rubble there, if you want to stumble around looking for it."

"He's dead, monsieur," said a third voice somewhat grumpily. "We've been waiting on the hill for hours for you to bring the damned cart."

Maria moved carefully in the darkness, her disorientation evaporating quickly. She rather suspected the disputed corpse was that of Mrs. Arkadim's missing guard, but whether it was or not, she had no desire to be seen by these people.

Although that first voice had been terribly familiar.

Very, very slowly, she knelt and peeped beyond the top of the column.

Monsieur Herneau had brought a wheelbarrow into the temple. The edge of a thick blanket could be seen, hanging from the inside.

Her first thought was not, Monsieur Herneau is stealing the Apollo. It was, A *wheelbarrow*! What can they be thinking! Dumping the Lord of Music and Healing headfirst into such a thing. No wonder the poor statue was missing its nose, if this was how it was treated! No doubt they had a donkey cart outside, but even so . . .

Monsieur Herneau stepped toward the Apollo, and hesitated. "I was told that Mrs. Arkadim had placed a second guard on duty."

His men looked at each other and shrugged. "We only saw one."

Monsieur Herneau hesitated again, licked his lips, and said, "Well, come along, then! Help me move this thing!"

"Oh, no, monsieur! Allow me to do it!" Stephen Price entered the temple, followed by one, two, three . . . *four* men. They had the air of sailors, Maria thought, but wore plain breeches and shirts, nondescript, without any sort of topcoats. Mr. Price was not in his uniform; he looked strange in civilian dress. The four men fanned out around him, silently, competently, threateningly.

Monsieur Herneau's men looked to their master. He said, uncertainly, "Price?"

Mr. Price grinned and made a polite gesture of a bow. "Lieutenant Price, Royal Engineers, at your service."

Maria gasped. Everything he had said was an utter lie! It pulsed through every word he spoke, every gesture he made. He was *not* a lieutenant, he was *not* in the Engineers, and his name wasn't even Price.

How would Monsieur Herneau take this news?

Monsieur Herneau said, "Price, listen to me. If you want to sell the statue, I can help you. I have a buyer."

Maria stared at him. He seemed totally oblivious to Mr. Price's deceit. Was the man blind and deaf?

"I know you have a buyer," said Price. "In France."

Monsieur Herneau shook his head. "An Italian nobleman—"

Another blatant falsehood. How did people expect to get away with such obvious lies?

"If you count Corsica as Italian," said Mr. Price agreeably.

She wouldn't have thought Monsieur Herneau could look any paler, in this light. He took a step away from the statue, toward his rival. "Price, listen to me. I've always liked you." Maria frowned. It was the truth. "And I can pay you myself for any profit you think you could make on this."

Price's face lost its expression. "Are you getting paid, Herneau?"

"You know I'm not!" The voice was one of despair. "Not in money!"

"I didn't think so," said Mr. Price, "but I do get things muddled sometimes."

Monsieur Herneau took out his ubiquitous handkerchief, not to cough into, but to wipe his face. He sat down on the Apollo's pedestal and looked at Price quite helplessly.

"They'll let me come home," he said. "I can die in my old bedroom. I can see Paris again. It's just a gesture to them, you see? All I have to do to seal the bargain is offer this gift to the first consul."

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Price. It was the truth. "You can't."

Monsieur Herneau put his handkerchief away. His face took on a defiant cast. "I won't let you take it from me. It's been fifteen years since I was home. I've learned of my old friends passing, one by one. I won't die alone, in this devil-ridden town."

"Do you want to fight me?" asked Mr. Price quietly. "Will that get you to Paris, do you think?" He stepped closer to Monsieur Herneau, and laid a hand on his shoulder, not unkindly. "Didn't your first consul write that the way to win a battle is to be at a time of your own choosing, with the most troops?" He gestured to his four men, who eyed Monsieur Herneau's two with a certain air of readiness that was causing the enemy to move nervously from one foot to the other.

Monsieur Herneau spoke wryly. "I'm sure he said it more gracefully than that."

Mr. Price helped him to his feet. He turned to Monsieur Herneau's men. "I think you should leave here."

They hurried out, practically running.

To his own men, Price said, "Take it to the boat." Without further word, the four of them lifted the glorious Apollo from its pedestal as easily as though it were a particularly long sack of flour, and hefted it on their shoulders. One of them stopped and looked to Price, as though there might be more to do here. Mr. Price shrugged and glanced to the open wall. They carried the statue out into the night. After a moment there came a soft confusion of hooves.

Monsieur Herneau said, "If you won't take my honest bribe, you aren't doing this for money. If you refuse my plea for mercy, you aren't doing it for the sake of nobility."

"No."

"They *why*?"

A soft, regretful smile formed itself on Stephen Price's face. "Because it is a devil-ridden town, sir, and I seem far more acquainted with his spurs than you. Go home—home to your house beside the Godfreys', with green shutters and flowerpots and sheets airing on the

balcony. Your friends in Paris are dead, your friends here are alive. Better to die among the living."

When Monsieur Herneau stared at him, uncomprehending, he added, "I'm sorry about your brother."

Monsieur Herneau made a horrid choking sound, like a man about to cry. He moved blindly across the floor toward the broken wall. Mr. Price said, coolly, "You must know that Mrs. Arkadim has many friends among the natives."

Herneau turned back, startled. "I have no intention of talking about this."

"No. I judged you for a man of sense."

And then he was gone, and only Price remained. He looked at the empty spot where the Apollo once stood. He sighed.

Maria crept out from the broken pillar.

"Poor statue," he said, "no one loves you for yourself alone."

"I love him for himself alone," she said.

He jerked with startlement. Calm, soft-spoken Mr. Price was thoroughly taken aback. Despite the madness of the night, and the last two strange days, Maria almost laughed.

Then the impulse died. His eyes in that unguarded moment looked not at all welcoming, and for the first time it occurred to her to wonder whose men had slit the throat of Mrs. Arkadim's second hill-man.

"Mr. Price . . . ?" she said hesitantly, hearing to her embarrassment all the forlornness of the past day in her voice.

An answering sympathy leaped to his face, but he said, "Miss Godfrey, I hope you have a good explanation for your presence here."

"I came to ask the god for mercy," she said.

He was reduced to silence for a second time. Then he said, "And did you obtain it?"

She searched his face for some clue to her safety. "I don't know yet." They regarded each other in the moonlight. She said, "You are a clever man, Mr. Price. If you would be my friend, you would think of some

reason why I have been away from home for so long. I do not want my family to know that I slipped away to offer prayers to a heathen god. May this not be our secret?"

She waited, hearing her own breath, feeling her heart beat wildly but not hearing it, for even were it to grow as loud as thunder, it made a rhythm, and all music was closed to her forever.

Finally he held out his arm and said softly, "Pray give me your hand, Miss Godfrey; these stones are treacherous; you might slip and fall."

She did, reaching out as though she were blind, and he helped her navigate across the ancient floor and down the steps. Outside, the breeze was cool. She took her hand from his and lifted her face to the stars. The trees here made a murmuring sound . . . not quite a music.

"Are there nightingales in this grove tonight, Mr. Price?"

She heard the surprise in his voice. "There's one bird singing; I don't know what it is."

The ring of truth, she thought, was almost a music in itself. As it was the only melody she would ever hear, she would apply herself. Perhaps in time she would learn to compose something with it.

He was silent again, his face thoughtful in the moonlight.

"Why does the king want the statue?"

He looked down at her, damping his surprise. "For his pride, I suppose."

"And Mrs. Arkadim the same. And Monsieur Herneau?"

"For his salvation."

"And you?"

"Why, my wants are simple, Miss Maria. The avoidance of more pain."

He meant it to be cryptic, and it was; but it was also the truth. And the truth was like a thread in the Minotaur's maze, that if she picked up and followed might eventually take her to the heart of things.

Herse itself was a maze she longed to unravel.

They walked toward the road with a strange companionability. She was feeling bolder by the minute.

"And is your Christian name really Stephen?"

He nearly stumbled. "You know it is."

She did now. For the first time in her life she felt the taste of power when dealing with adults. No longer did she have to fear to dwindle into the forgotten sister, the supplicant aunt.

She took a deep breath. "Thank you, Apollo." She turned to her companion, her eyes alight. "What a *beautiful* night it is, Mr. Price!"

He laughed and offered her his lying arm, an arm that did not lie, just now, in its friendship, and they began the dusty walk back to the town of secrets. She could sense all those burning hearts, like smoke from a ruined supper, like a concert of anarchist flute players, like the taste of earth, all metal and loamy and poisonous. But productive of grain, she thought.

She took his arm and went hopefully, to see what her curse might be.

JOSH AND THE FAIRY MELODEON PLAYER

by Gus Smith

—What's that over there, Grimbling?

—That's Morris Dancing, sir.

—Ah, yes . . . I've been a little worried about Morris, lately.

Yes, well, it's a joke that only works if you if you already know that Morris Dancing is an English ritual that goes all the way back to pre-Christian times. It's pretty athletic, traditionally danced by teams of costumed men accompanied by ancient ritual figures like the Fool or the HobbyHorse.

To learn more about Morris and other English ritual Dancing, you might check out the albums "The Dancing Master" by Ashley Hutchings, "Rise Up Like the Sun" from the Albion Country Band, or "Plain Capers" by John Kirkpatrick.

Note: Many people conflate all folk music and traditions of the British Isles into "that Irish stuff." All honor to the great Irish musical tradition! but it does it no service to confuse it with others. I hear it all the time: the hard-rocking members of the Oyster Band have nearly given up explaining that their music is rooted in *English* country dance. . . . I even heard my novel, *Thomas the Rhymer*, which is set in the Scottish Border country, read aloud by a public radio personality (bless him!) in an Irish accent.

So you should be aware that Josh and his fairies and the rapper coal miners are all English.

And that the melodeon, in the British Isles, is a button accordion very much favored for dance music. You can hear great melodeon playing, much of it Irish, from Jackie Daly, either on his recent solo albums, or

on recordings with him as a member of such illustrious bands as De Danann, Patrick Street, Buttons and Bows, and Arcady.

Another pint? Thank you. I'm ready for it. And I'll give my fingers a rest, if you don't mind. We'll have some more music when the crowd's gone, eh?

I like playing after hours—door shut, lights down—just for the regulars. That's the best time for listening, that's when you hear the tunes you never forget. When I was young, there's times I've sat listening all night to the likes of old Josh Fothergill, and wished it would never end.

You'll have heard me mention Josh a time or two. What a player he was, and no mistake. There was no one to touch him hereabouts, or in the whole of England, I daresay. Everywhere he went, they'd flock to hear him. And not just people. When he played outdoors, birds and beasts gathered around like a bunch of children: fox and rabbit, hawk and dove. Charmed, they were. Even worms would come to the surface and listen. It's true! I've seen their casts littering the ground after he'd played for the Morris.

But how did he come to play like that? There's many claim to know the answer, and there's no shortage of folk eager to tell you, some of them too young to have ever heard Josh play a note. Every story's different. But I had it from the man himself, I know what really happened. Do you want to hear it? Now's as good a time as any, if you've a mind to listen.

Josh wasn't always a melodeon player. He used to play the fiddle when he was young, but he was never very good at it, not what you would call a natural. He had such big hands, more suited to drystone walling than to skipping around on the fiddle strings. But he loved it, oh yes, there was nothing he liked better than to sit in the barroom of a Saturday night playing the old tunes.

One midsummer day, Josh decides to go to Smithy-

bridge market to sell a lurcher. So he sets off in the afternoon—it's an evening market, is Smithybridge—with the dog on a rope and his fiddle bag slung over his shoulder. It was a good fast dog, and the hare-coursing men were eager to buy, so he was soon making his way to the Dog and Gun with thirty-five shillings in his pocket. His fiddle bag didn't go unnoticed, with its bow sticking out the top, you may be sure, and, as the evening wore on and the company grew merry, they were urging him to unfasten the drawstring and play for them.

So he gets out his fiddle, and the first tune he plays is "The Fire Burning Bright," a waltz tune, and he soon has them humming along.

"D'ye know 'The Wild Colonial Boy'?" says an Irish voice, so he plays it and she's singing along till the tears run down her face. He plays a few more popular songs, slow sweet airs, and some are singing, some are listening, and some are doing neither, and that's the way he likes it, that's the way it should be in a pub. He'd have been happy to play like that all night, nothing too demanding on the fingers, but there's a group of young fellows in the corner starting to get restless.

"Come on," shouts one, "pick it up a bit. Let's have summat a bit more lively."

"Aye," says another, "summat we can dance to."

Josh can't ignore them because they're getting louder, so he thinks he'll have a go at a polka or two. He reckoned he could just about manage a polka if he didn't get carried away and play too fast. He gives them "Jenny Lind," and up they get and start dancing in pairs, not touching, except for the occasional elbow swing. Back, forth, around; solemn-faced, holding themselves erect, they move with an almost stately bearing, rolling their shoulders a bit, and picking up their feet cleanly in that spring-heeled way, a fraction ahead of the beat. He changes to "Oh, Joe, the Boat is Going Over," and the singers join in and it's developing into a good night, one to remember.

Now, Josh wasn't the only stranger at the pub that night. It was market day, and people had come from far and wide, and not all of them had gone home. There were a couple of men in particular who'd been trading horses, and one of them comes up to Josh, has a word with him.

"Can ye play us a jig?" he says. "We're from up north, and me marra's a step dancer, dances wi' the rapper lads, ye knaa."

You know what rapper dancing's like, fast and wild, with those flexible two-handled swords, making knots and stars and never letting go. If Josh had had any sense he would have said no, but, you know how it is with musicians, they get carried along by the enjoyment of the playing and think they're up to anything, especially after a pint or three. So, of course, Josh says he'll give it a go.

"That's champion," says the stranger. "D'ye knaa 'The Connaught Man's Rambles'?"

"No," says Josh, "but I can give you 'Saddle the Pony.'"

"That'll do, that'll do," says the other, and sets about clearing a space on the floor.

Now, Josh had hardly ever played an Irish double jig before—that's what they were wanting—but he could hear the tune in his head, clear as a bell, and he knew he could play the notes. But it was the speed that was bothering him. He's flexing his fingers nervously, bringing them down on the fingerboard, hammering out the tune, listening to the faint plinking of the strings, trying to feel easy about it.

"Right then," says the dancer's mate. "Give him a chord and we're away."

Josh draws the bow across the strings, waits a beat, then launches into "Saddle the Pony." The dancer's a short stocky fellow with bandy legs and powerful arms, and one who'd spent time in the coal mines judging by the blue scars on his forehead. His feet begin to clatter, rapping out the rhythm—nothing too fancy yet, just getting the feel of it—and Josh manages to keep up for

the first part of the tune, and the repeat, but, at the beginning of the second part, he can feel it starting to slip away. He can't cope with the swooping triplets. He tries to hang on to the rhythm by missing notes out, simplifying the melody, but it's falling apart. The dancer looks up and stops. "Sorry," says Josh, and starts again. By now there are people knocking out the rhythm on the tables and diddling the tune to help him along, but it's no good, he doesn't even manage the first part this time, and the table tapping and mouth music take over: DA-de-da YA-de-da YO-del-de YUM-pa-ta DA-de-da YA-de-da DIDDLY-o-da YUM-pa-ta . . . And the dancing goes on.

Nobody seems to mind too much about Josh not being able to play the tune—they are too busy watching the dancing—but he does, and, while everyone's attention is distracted, he puts his fiddle back in its bag and quietly leaves.

He had scarcely walked out of the door when he heard someone else coming out of the pub. It was one of the company in the barroom, and he fell in beside Josh as he went along, head down, hands thrust in his pockets. He was small, this fellow, and he walked with a light, stealthy tread, striding out to match Josh step for step. It wasn't cold, but he was wearing a long coat with the collar turned up and a soft cap crammed on his head.

"What would you give to be able to play that tune as fast as you wanted and never to make a mistake?" he says to Josh.

"What couldn't I give!" says Josh, and he gives a rueful laugh.

The man turns on him then, and stamps his foot. "No, I mean it," he says, "I asked you a question, and I want an answer. What would you give? Ten pound? A hundred pound? Your favorite horse? Your sweetheart?"

Josh was about to walk away, thinking he'd been stopped by a drunken fool, when something in the fellow's look and manner stopped him. There was an intensity in his gaze, almost a glow about his skin, and

a quick deftness of movement which told Josh he was dealing with no ordinary man and that his question was no idle one. He was asking because he had that gift to give. A thrill went through Josh. He knew he was talking to one of the fairy folk—or to the devil. He wasn't scared, he knew how to conduct himself, but it occurred to him that you could well hide a tail under that coat and a pair of horns under that cap.

"Who are you?" he says.

"Not the devil, if that's what you're thinking," says the other, "and it's not your soul I'm after; though there have been those willing to sell it for what I have to offer."

Josh knew he had nothing to fear from fairies so long as he kept his wits about him, and he remembered what his father had told him:

"Most o' the fairy kind don't wish you any harm, but they don't wish you any good, either. If they want to make a bargain with you, think on, because they're like to get more out of it than you do. They can enchant you, but they can't make you do nothing sore agin your will. Never lie to 'em, but don't tell more o' the truth than you have to. I'm not saying never have dealings wi' 'em, I'm just saying be careful, that's all."

Josh wasn't going to be rushed into a hasty reply. "I'd be a fool," he says, "to name my price before the seller does. How much do you want?"

"Ha! You're a cautious man," says the fairy, "but, if I judge you aright, there's a longing in your heart to play those tunes like you hear them in your head, and you'd pay a high price to be able to do it."

He was right, but Josh wasn't prepared to let him know it; there was a bit more arguing left in him yet. "That's as may be," he says, "but I'd also be a fool if I didn't ask why. There's many a fine horse going cheap turns out to be stolen or broken-winded."

The fairy laughs at this. "You haven't said me nay, Josh Fothergill, so I'll tell you what I'll do. If you're still interested, come with me, follow me now. If you don't, I'll find another and you'll never see me again."

Josh went with him, of course, and he led him out of town, through the woods, up onto the moor tops, then down again into another valley. There was a bit of light in the sky, late as it was, but not enough to see your way by, so Josh had no idea where he was, and time and distance are strange at night, so he found it difficult to reckon how far they'd gone. Four or five miles? It might have been more.

The valley is narrow and steep-sided, and the light cuts out entirely when they get into the trees, but the fairy goes straight down without a pause. Josh is alarmed, but has to follow, pushing away branches that start up in front of his face, checking his balance when his footfall gives way beneath him, until they reach the bank of the fast-flowing stream at the bottom. There is scarcely room to walk beside it, and the fairy is jumping from rock to rock in the shallows at the edge. Josh can't trust himself to do the same—end up with a broken ankle, like as not—so he splashes through the water, thankful it's not the middle of winter.

A little way ahead they can leave the stream, because there's a bend, and a flat place pushing the hillside farther back. Before they turn the bend and see what's around it, the fairy stops and speaks to Josh in a low voice. "We're nearly there. Around the bend there's an overhanging rock. Creep under there and you won't be seen, but you'll have a good view of what's going on. I'll talk to you afterward. Wait till then." Then off he goes, leaving Josh on his own.

Josh can hear something now; talking, laughter, the sounds of merriment, but no music. He can see a glow, too. Keeping as far back as he can, he slowly rounds the bend. There is an outcrop in front of him, jutting from the hillside, but, like the fairy said, there is space beneath it. He crouches down with his back to the rock wall, and what he sees takes his breath away. There's a whole company of fairy folk.

It's a feast, a celebration. There are tables full of food, lanterns hanging from bushes, and the lower

branches of trees surrounding the open space leading down to the water's edge, and everyone is drinking. But what surprises Josh most of all are the fairies themselves. Like most of us, I suppose, he had a head full of stories of fairy aristocracy, elf queens and such like, with all their retinue decked out in silks and satins, feeding off the choicest meats and drinking the finest wines. I'm sorry if that's what you want, but that's not how it was, not how Josh told it to me. We're dealing with ordinary fairy folk here. No, what Josh saw was more like a factory party than a royal banquet.

The bare trestle tables—no damask tablecloths—are bowed under the weight of stand pies, black pudding, brawn, sausage-duck and honeycomb tripe, with vast cauldrons of potatoes and mushy peas, all washed down with tankards of good honest ale. The host—or chief guest, Josh wasn't sure which—is dressed in a well-cut worsted suit and is sporting a heavy gold watch chain and fob, while his lady wears a plain mauve ankle-length woolen dress with a fine white knitted stole about her shoulders, with her hair scraped up at the back and sides and arranged in lavish curls on top.

Josh looks around at the rest of the gathering. They all have that quickness of movement and lightness of bearing he had noticed in the one who had led him here. They seem spun from air, not made of clay, which Josh still finds at odds with the way they dress. Certainly more fustian and corduroy than silk and satin. But why not? This is a homely gathering, fairy folk at ease with each other. Some are sitting at small tables, either finishing off their meals or chatting over empty plates. Others stand in knots, some deep in conversation, some laughing and joking. Only the "Mayor and Mayoress," as Josh decides to call them, seem a little apart.

There is one fellow, though, who seems to have a special role. He is wearing a corduroy cap and a paisley patterned waistcoat and moves around from group to group, talking to everyone, nodding a lot, and making

sure that tankards are full. It wouldn't take a clever man to see that he's in charge, making sure everything runs smoothly. When he sees Josh's companion, he is delighted.

"Ah, Sam," he says, "here at last. Fetch your instrument and we'll start the entertainment." He signals, and the small tables are cleared, folded up, and taken away, and the chairs arranged in a semicircle in front of the trestle tables and facing the curving arc of the stream. He steps into the space between—when everyone is seated, with the Mayor and Mayoress in the middle—and claps for silence.

"And now it's time for the entertainment," he says. "We've dancing," he says, "and singing, one or two monologues, and a special surprise; but it wouldn't be a surprise if I told you what it was, would it? So you'll have to wait. First off, as always, here's Sam Heythornthwaite with his melodeon to lead us in the dancing. Give him a big hand!"

And Sam came on, stood atop a rock in the middle of the stream, and started to play, and the rest of that fairy crowd got up and danced like you've never seen before.

The first tune is one that Josh knows; it's a jig that we call "The Mucking o' Mally's Mistal" and Scotch folk call "The Mucking o' Geordie's Byre." But what makes Josh forget how uncomfortable he is and ignore the water trickling down his face and his cold, wet feet, is the sound. It gives him goose bumps and makes the hair prickle at the back of his neck. It's a magical moment, and he doesn't want it to end. The next tune is one he has never heard before, but as soon as he hears it he knows it. It's there, fixed in his head forever. And the dancing! It's so easy to dance to that music with its driving rhythm; not too fast, but with a lift and a pulse that lightens the step and quickens the whole body. And how the fairies dance! so quick and nimble their feet scarcely seem to touch the ground, and the figures they perform so intricate, twisting and turning and never a foot wrong, never a beat behind or a step ahead

and all to the rhythm of Sam's playing: why, thinks Josh, it's enough to make the trees themselves forsake their roots, and he fancies he feels the very earth tremble and shake.

The rock that Sam is standing on is at the side of the clearing near to Josh, and is lit by a lantern directly above, hanging from a branch thrown across the stream by a tree at the other side, so Josh can see every detail. His eyes are riveted on the melodeon; its fretwork pattern cut into the wooden ends, the pokerwork tooled around the edge and the bright metal protecting the corners and catching the light as Sam moves the bellows in and out. He notices how Sam plays it, with his left hand through a wide strap playing the bass notes, and his right thumb anchored in a leather thong at the right-hand side, leaving his fingers free to play the melody on the button keys, while he seems to punch out the tune with the action of the bellows. He is smitten with the melodeon, no doubt about it. Spell-bound. Still, those who follow fairies must expect to be enchanted. Josh had made the decision to come, he wasn't tricked into it.

After the second dance, Sam steps down, the dancers return to their seats, and a singer is introduced, a young woman whose voice, clear and bright, with a wistful edge, charms Josh more than any voice he's ever heard. She's human. What price did she have to pay? What bargain did she make with the fairies to be able to sing like that? She sings "Four Loom Weaver."

"I'm a four loom weaver, as many a one knows,
I've nowt to eat and I've wore out me clothes,
Me clogs are both brokken, and stockings I've none,
Ye'd scarce give me tuppence for all I've gotten on."

The girl is clearly affected by what she is singing, and the audience listens in rapt attention as she sings with a controlled intensity, broken occasionally when the emotion of the song brings a catch to her voice and a lump to Josh's throat. By contrast, the second song is

lighthearted and has a rousing chorus, and all the company join in, banging their tankards till the ale jumps out of them.

“Threedywell, threedywell, dan dum dil do,
Threedywell, threedywell, dan dum dil do.”

After more dancing the Master of Ceremonies claps again for order. “This is the surprise I promised you,” he says, and Sam begins to play a polka, quite slowly, and into the clearing comes a line of fairy dancers covered in ribbons, flowers, and patches of all kinds, with clogs on their feet and their legs covered in bells. Male and female, to Josh’s surprise, for all the Morris dancers he had seen were men. They’re doing a slow run and hop, and they go twice around the arena, line up in front of the audience, and bow to the Mayor and Mayoress, with their hands cupped around their ears. Everyone is shouting and clapping. This will be high entertainment indeed. Silence falls, and the dancers form two lines facing each other, and Sam starts playing again, but faster, with a rising lilt. The speed and energy of these dancers amazes Josh. Their leaps and twists are performed with such grace and precision that Josh can only stare in wonderment. But what delights the crowd and intrigues Josh most of all are the rhythmic clacking noises they make with their hands. The dancers have a wooden disk in each palm, one on each elbow, one on each hip, and one on each knee. While dancing the figures, they strike their elbows, hips, knees, and hands in a bewildering pattern of sound which they send rattling out into the night like small arms fire, while the drumming of their clogs on the hard earth is like the rumble of heavy artillery, as they jump and swirl, their ribbons flying, their bells jingling. And Sam’s melodeon playing, never faltering, drives them on till, with a mighty bound and a shout, they are finished. Josh has seen such a dance before—or a pale imitation of it—danced by a group of men at a holiday fair. One of the team had told him it was a fairy

dance, but he'd payed no heed to him. It's the kind of claim you hear all the time. But this time, it seems, it was true. They hadn't dressed like the fairies, they were clad mainly in black, with their faces blackened, too. "We're hiding, you see," said the man. "We're in disguise, for fear the fairies are annoyed at us for copying their dance."

He needn't have bothered, thinks Josh. No humans could copy what he had just seen.

And so the night passes in dance and song until the first fingers of light begin to creep from the east. In the valley it is still night, but, aware of the approach of dawn, the fairies have finished their merrymaking. There is an opening, a cleft in the hillside, and everything—tables, chairs, fairies—begin to disappear into it. But Sam is still on his stone, and he calls Josh over to him. Josh is as stiff as a board and shivering now, and almost tumbles out of his hiding place and staggers across to the stream and climbs onto the rock.

"Well, Josh Fothergill, and what do you think of our fairy revels?" says Sam, but Josh is dumbstruck and can't answer, so Sam goes on. "I know you've been watching me, I know what the music's done to you, I know you want to play like that more than anything in the world."

Josh has found his voice now, and his sense has not deserted him. He asks the one question that's been burning in his mind. "But why? . . . Why do you want to give me this gift?"

Sam laughs. "So that you can play for our dances, of course!"

"But you play for the dances," says Josh. "Why do you need me?"

"Ah," says Sam, "this is where we find out if the horse is stolen or broken-winded, is it? Here you are being offered a gift the like of which few men have ever known, and you're still asking questions. I suppose I have to admire your persistence," he says, "though it's time I had this deal sewn up and was on

my way. Don't worry, there's no catch. I want you to play because I want to dance."

Josh sees a strange look come over Sam. He's been playing all night, making wonderful music, bringing happiness to all the rest of the fairies, but he's dissatisfied, Josh can see it, because that's not what he really wants to do.

"You see," says Sam, "I play and I play and I look at the dancers, I look at their faces. They're taken over by the rhythm, by the movement, by the closeness of one to the other, while I stand there on my rock, alone. I don't think about the music, it just happens, my fingers do the playing, but I think about the dancers. I watch them and envy them. When the dance is finished, they clap the player, sometimes they cheer, but it's the end, isn't it? The dance is over."

Then he goes up close to Josh, and it's as if he's pleading with him. "If you play for the dancing, then I can be with them, I can be part of the dance. That's what us fairies do best," he says. "No one can dance like us. We can sing, and we can play, right enough, but not like humans. That lass you heard earlier on, she wanted a fairy voice, so we gave her one. But did you hear what she did with it? Enough to make you weep. That was all her own. That's what'll happen when you play. There's a passion in you, Josh Fothergill. You'll put that passion in your playing and make our dancing even better."

Josh didn't know what to say. He'd never had the urge to dance, though he could understand those who did. All he had ever wanted to do was to play, to play the tunes he could hear in his head, and to play them just as he heard them, without the hesitations, the mistakes, the bum notes, the awkward fudging. To play them easy, to play them well. He knew why some would sell their souls for that gift.

It seemed so simple, but his father's words keep haunting him: "If they want to make a bargain with you, think on, because they're like to get more out of it than you do." To Josh the bargain seemed equal; Sam

can dance and he can play, but he had to ask again, just to be sure.

"But is that the real price?" he says. "Is there nothing more?"

"Just that," says Sam. "You play for us whenever we want you to, and in return you become the best melodeon player in the county, or the country, for that matter, for as long as you want. But, if you miss, the gift will go and you'll never be able to play the melodeon again."

Josh has just one nagging doubt now. He's a bit sad about the fiddle. He still has his fiddle bag slung over his shoulder, and he pulls it off, takes out his fiddle, and begins to play. He tries to play "The Mucking o' Mally's Mistal," but it's awful.

"You see," says Sam, "I could never, even with my magic, make you into a decent fiddle player. Look at those fingers. You were a melodeon player from the moment you first picked up a muck fork." And he takes Josh's fiddle and breaks it across his knee and hurls the pieces into the stream, where the current whisks them away before Josh knows what's happening.

"You've the arms to drive the bellows," says Sam, "and the notes just play themselves when you plant your great fat fingers on the buttons. Just get hold of it, try it, you'll see." And he hands Josh the melodeon.

Josh takes it, and immediately it feels right, like trying on a shoe that fits perfectly. He puts his fingers down on the keys like he had seen Sam do, and he starts to play. And it's easy. His fingers fall to the notes as if he'd been playing it all his life, and "The Mucking o' Mally's Mistal" goes floating across the valley in the early morning, and Sam feels a thrill he has never felt before. He knows that what the fairy says is true. "Yes," he says. "Yes, it's a deal."

At that, Sam gives a cry of triumph, jumps off the rock, and disappears into the hillside, leaving his melodeon in Josh's hands. Josh looks around him and now he knows where he is; not a mile from his own door. He's walked past this place a hundred times.

So Josh became the best melodeon player you could ever hope to hear in those days, and he played for the fairies at all their dances. And that's the truth of it.

Now, that may seem like the end of the story, and I'll not deny it's a good place to stop. But there's more, there's another ending, though you may think it isn't an ending at all.

At first Josh was well suited. He'd be called out once or twice a week—occasionally more—and, though he'd be tired the next day, that was nothing compared to what he got out of it. He could play all the tunes he knew, and some that just came into his head unbidden, with such skill that people from miles around would flock to hear him. And step dancers, he could play any tune they liked, at any tempo, and it became known that there never was a man could play for the stepping like Josh Fothergill—though they used to wonder why, on some nights, just as the dancing and singing were in full swing, Josh would suddenly stop and say, "Well, that's it. I'll have to be going now."

But, as the years went by, Josh found his duties more irksome. He could never travel above half a day's journey from home, because he had to be there or in the pub when the fairies wanted him, and they only let him know on the night itself, and he knew that if he missed just one dance, then the gift would go. He longed to go farther afield, to see new places and meet new people, but it was not to be. The fairy revels seemed to become more frequent, too, sometimes three or four nights together, and always there was some excuse—a birthday, a betrothal, an anniversary—and Josh wasn't getting any younger. But he couldn't face the thought of going back to being a bad fiddle player again. He was caught, you see, not by the bargain itself, but by the conditions attached to it, and now he recognized the truth of what his father had said.

Early one morning, after a night of hard playing for the fairy dancing, Josh is sitting exhausted on the playing rock and Sam comes over to him. "You're

tired," he says, "you don't play with the passion you used to. Are you wanting to give up?"

"If I gave up, I'd lose the gift," says Sam, "and I couldn't bear that, I couldn't bear not to be able to play the melodeon."

"I can understand that," says Sam, "but there's a compromise. You've served us well, but there comes a time when change is due. If you can find somebody else to take over, you can pass on the gift. You'll lose the magic, you'll never again play like you have done, but, so long as you pass the gift on fairly, and not by trickery, you won't be punished by losing the ability to play altogether. You'll play like the man you are, with all your limitations, but also with those human qualities we couldn't give you. Think about it."

Now, you've heard my story through, and you'll know why I've told it. I've been fair with you, just as Josh was fair with me. I could never complain that I'd been misled, that I didn't know what I was taking on. But, knowing that I'd be able to play like Josh, all those tunes in my head—and more. Why, the very thought of it, the anticipation, had the blood racing through my temples and gave me a hollow in the pit of my stomach.

I couldn't resist it. Can you?

AUDIENCE

by Jack Womack

Frank Zappa said, "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture."

Honey, I got news for you. Writing about *anything* (except words themselves) is like dancing about architecture.

OK, maybe we were nuts to ask a bunch of writers to write about music. But fantasists, unbounded by the merely probable, can always tell better truths; and Jack Womack's Hall of Lost Sounds rings very true indeed.

For Jane Johnson and Mike Harrison

Small museums in large cities inevitably attract me whenever I travel. Their haphazard assemblages—randomly displayed in no evident pattern, fitfully identified by yellowing cards—on occasion contain items so memorably unsettling as to thereafter blot from the mind the holdings of the Smithsonian, or Hermitage, or Louvre. I happened upon such a place one afternoon while strolling in the Low City, near the Margarethe-strasse, down an alley branching off St. Jermyn's Close. The surrounding rows of soot-shrouded houses leaned into their dank passageway; their roofs caressed rather than touched, and their shadows shut away their inhabitants from notions of time or season. Overlooking all was the Close's six-spired cathedral, which itself served, until the recent political upheavals, as the Museum of Atheistic Belief. The cathedral's carillons proclaimed the fifteenth hour as I knocked at the door

of the Hall of Lost Sounds, and for a moment I feared that, in their din, my own would go unheard.

"Thank you for seeing me," the curator said as I entered. I would have guessed him to be no older than seventy. His voice held the measured resonance of a cello, and he declaimed his notes almost in the manner of a *Sprechstimmer*.

"How much?" I asked. He shook his head. "You don't charge admission?"

"Who would come?"

A wholly unrecognizable accent misted his words. Much about his place appeared medieval, but then, so did its district—while wandering its byways, I'd thought I could as well have come armed with halberd rather than backpack, ducking the splash of chamber pots and not the offers of touts. The curator lingered in his museum's antechamber as if awaiting some necessary cue before our tour could begin, and we listened to the cathedral bells clanging out their last.

"It must hearten," I offered, "hearing them again after so long."

"No other noise assaults my walls," he said. "Lost sounds are sometimes better left lost. I keep only those which tickle your ear like a lover's tongue."

The curator gestured that we should begin, and we entered the museum proper. Wooden planks attached at floor and ceiling, aligned along the left wall, partitioned half of the first room into alcoves. "Each space possesses its own eigentone," he said.

"Pardon?" I said.

"Excuse me. The reflections within are accurate, and in accordance with acoustic principles. If the audience can be satisfied, it will be."

An iron bouquet was affixed to the door frame. The curator tugged at one of its sprigs, and fire leapt hissing from the cardinal blossom. The creamy light revealed a coiled, valveless horn resembling a golden snake. Retrieving it from its cubicle, he cradled the instrument in his arms as if it were his sister's baby.

"A posthorn," he said. "The mail came four times

daily, the nature of each delivery denoted by unvarying leitmotifs." Pressing its mouthpiece against his lips, the curator blew three clear, ascending notes, each possessing an oddly pitched, yet not unattractive tone. "Such music, heard across miles, foretold of letters from your lover." Lifting the horn again, he played another short series, in a sharper key. "That prepared you to receive unforeseen gifts." He coughed until his lungs rattled; then replaced the horn within its enclosure. "Every signal, continually heard from childhood into age, was as familiar as a mother's voice. Once the deliveries ended, it was decreed that the posthorn should never again be played by anyone."

"You just played it," I said.

He nodded. "In a different country. Let us go on." The next cubicle held a black telephone, its sleek skin unblemished by touchpads, screen, or dial. Two short, tintinnabulate bursts shattered the moment's stillness as unexpectedly as a mandrake's cry. "It's for you," the curator said.

When I lifted the receiver to my ear I heard a woman, speaking with a voice infused with a semblance of life. "Rhineland Exchange," she said, pronouncing each syllable with equal emphasis. "Number, please."

"Cities were divided into Exchanges," the curator said as I hung up. "While the operator made your connection, you'd hear a musical passage chosen to best represent the Exchange dialed. My wife lived in Endicott before we married, and whenever I'd call, I'd hear passages from Messiaen, awaiting her hello."

"That's remarkable."

He smiled. "After we married we lived in Hansa, and friends listened to Webern until we answered. I should now make a point concerning historical accuracy. Your immediate experience notwithstanding, the telephone would of course have rung only if someone called you. My exhibits merely approximate a sound's original context."

"The operator's accent was the same as yours," I said. "What is your native language?"

"Lost," he said. "I should say, it's been years since I've had need to speak it."

"I've never heard such an accent before."

"And now you have," said the curator, passing through a doorway into another dim room. I followed. Though I didn't see precisely where tile supplanted the flooring's wood, I felt, before I heard, the transformation underfoot. In the center of the room was a small round table; on the table's marble top, an antique coffee grinder and porcelain candelabra holding a single, slender candle. He pulled one of two wrought-iron chairs away from the table, scraping the legs across the tile with the sound of many fingernails drawn along a blackboard.

"Sit," he said, lighting the candle; its wax crackled and snapped as the wick caught fire. As I sat, raking the other chair's iron over that ceramic floor, the curator shut his eyes, sealing himself against all distractions, and listened as if to a wombed heartbeat, his look assuring that, by dint of concentration, he would suck the sound dry of vibration before it could decay.

"Before they closed them all, my wife and I went to the cafés every evening, along with everyone else. We were quite social, once," he said, spinning the grinder's crank. "The waiter ground the beans at your table before preparing your coffee. We sat for hours, eating and talking and listening to music. Most establishments employed musicians, that their harmonics might lend melody to the crowd's drone. None of the songs were ever recorded. Transcriptions were on occasion made, but afterward, all were effaced."

"Why?"

"Because we loved them," he said. "As the evening drew on, the older patrons went along their way, leaving behind only younger couples still uncertain whether each best suited the other. At midnight, at the hour conversation settles into the whispers of those making love with words, the oublovium player came forward to take her solo."

From a bag hidden beneath the table, the curator withdrew a wooden cylinder, turned with the symmetries of an hourglass. Leaning the blunt upper end of the instrument against his collarbone, crooking one arm around its midsection, he placed the lower, open end in his lap. Then he lifted from his bag the oublovium's apparent bow, a thin rod no longer than the oublovium itself, its form reminiscent of a dandelion, tipped not with seeds but with a ball of fine wire. Inserting its tuft into the opening, the curator slid the pole along unseen strings within the instrument, rolling the rod's length between his fingers as he drew it in and out. The notes produced bore the closest affinity to those of a harp, played at impossible tempo with a multitude of hands.

"I could as well sit at a piano and strike at the keyboard with my elbows," he said. "Anyone could make such trifling motions as these, but there were few virtuosi. Women, solely, mastered the oublovium. No one plays it today. I doubt that anyone would recognize it if they saw one."

"But who closed the cafés?"

If the curator knew, perhaps he no longer had reason to tell. He shook his head, and returned his instrument to his bag. "One day they were there, and the next, they weren't."

He redirected his attentions, undoubtedly anticipating that he would be aware of the subsequent attraction before I would. The room in which we sat seemed smaller than it was, and felt ever more so the longer we sat there, but before my vague discomfort hardened into claustrophobia, I took notice of a bright, pellucid sound overhead; a faint tinkling, a clatter of miniature cymbals. Staring up I saw a mobile attached to the ceiling, made up of shiny glass shards hanging by threads, clinking together as they twirled in the candle-warmed air.

"Trams ran throughout the cities," he continued. "A staff protruded from the prow of each car, above the engine driver's window. Chimes such as those were

tied to the end of each staff, and as the cars raced down the tracks, the wind signaled to those waiting at the next stop ahead, promising that their patience would be shortly rewarded. On maps, the tramlines were identified by the spectral colors, and each car's hue matched its line.

"Upon boarding, you dropped your gold token into a black fare box. When it issued your receipt, the box thanked you, not in words but with a sound truly lost. All I can offer is a description, bearing less relation to its actuality than a dead lover's lock of hair bears to the head from which it grew." The curator stood, motioning that I should do the same. "The mechanism's three notes comprised an ascending diatonic triad, impressing itself into the ear as a chirp rather than a chord, in intonation closer to a cricket's than to a bird's, yet louder, as if the insect nestled unseen within your clothing while it sang." He paused. "Can you hear it?" Before I might answer, he went on. "I've saved what could be saved, but so much was lost. If no one knows a tree falls in the forest, the question shouldn't be did it fall? but, was it there before it fell?"

We moved into another room as he spoke. There were three tiny windows on our right, admitting no purer light than might have eked through at sunset, in winter, on a cloudy day. Once more my shoes slid across a surface of altered texture; the clack of my heels reverberated against the walls with hollow echoes, and when I glanced down I saw what appeared, in the gloom, as bleached cobblestones, or the small skulls of babies.

"We rode the Blue Line, going to the seashore. At the beachfront was the spa, which was built of plum-colored bricks and had nine hundred rooms. People came from all around to enjoy the waters. A promenade encircled the spa, and ran as well down to the dockside. Seashells were used to pave their walkways, and those of the quays. Travelers inevitably remarked on our city's soundless sea, thinking the breakers pounded silently against the sand. Throughout the day

and into the night the surf went unheard beneath the footsteps of thousands strolling over the shells. It's curious to realize that the only one of our sounds visitors recalled, afterward, was one they never heard.

"Every summer night when the Guildhall's clock struck ten, the Ensemble Pyrotechnique undertook their most elaborate works on the strand. We'd sit on the public terraces overlooking the ocean and watch them fire their flowers into heaven. It was on one such night I proposed to my wife. Each year, on our anniversary, we'd ride the Blue Line to the seashore, each time remembering where we'd been, each time giving thanks for where we had come, blessing that moment from that time on until there was no time left."

I'd only imagined the cry of the fare box; now, enveloping myself within the curator's descriptions, feeling seashells beneath my feet, allowing his recollections to mingle with my own, I heard the fireworks bursting with the wet pop of flashbulbs exploding in the lamps of old cameras. That a memory of sound could so intrude into the physical world wasn't surprising in itself; who hasn't heard a fragment of a hated song and, hours later, still found it there, as impacted as a bean in the ear of a child? What was not so much unexpected as unnatural was the perceived immediacy of fireworks; of the bitter tang of gunpowder, of peripheral flashes glimpsed between my horizon and the beamed ceiling's azimuth. Shutting my eyes, I heard an unseen sea's unheard heartbeat.

"The shells were removed concurrently with the tram-lines," the curator said, tapping the floor with the toe of his shoe. "The Guildhall was demolished. The spa was burned to the ground."

"Why?" I asked. "What happened?" As my words bounced from the walls back into my ears, I discerned an unaccountable lowering of the timbre of my voice, and a seeming dislocation of the direction from which it came. Some acoustic anomaly, or eigentonic flaw—perhaps accidental, perhaps not—was likely responsible; yet the unsettling impression that my voice no

longer came from within me, but from somewhere without, heightened my awareness of how it might feel to have my own sound taken away. I hadn't experience enough then, nor do I now, to estimate how much I would thereafter miss it. "I don't understand."

"Nor did we," he said. "Unfortunately, but unavoidably, the remainder of the museum is quite dark. Take care, hereout."

"Where is your country?" I asked; receiving no reply, I rephrased my question. "Where was it?"

He answered only by guiding me toward another room. Stepping into its twilight, I heard our shoes crunching against the floor as if, having drifted without warning into another world's stronger gravity, our bodies increased in mass, compressing all underfoot. The resulting sound was identical to one included in my own collection, but I knew of no method by which the curator could have carpeted this chamber with snow.

"In this country, the image of winter bears faint relation to its verity," he said. "In the country I knew, each season was distinguished as much by its sounds as by its climate. Most of those were not so much lost as misplaced, and so I leave their acquisition to others. In my country, the seasons so differed from one to the next that, in some years, we might have been living successively on four dissimilar planets."

The curator stopped, and together we stood in the dark. At first I thought the continuing sound of our footsteps to be nothing more than sustained echoes. "Our weather changed before we did. One year snow fell in September. We foresaw a hard winter ahead. It was, but not because of the weather, for it never snowed again."

The rhythm of the ongoing footsteps quickened, increasing in volume as well as number until it seemed we were encroached upon by multitudes. If their stamp was but a recorded beat, as I thought it must be, its verisimilitude was nonetheless so perfect that only a single taping could have separated sound from source. The curator's face was obscured by shadow, and I was

unable to gather from his reaction how I should respond to the perfection of his masters.

"Our national bird flocked in such numbers as to block out the afternoon sun."

An abrupt fluttering rose and roared around us. I instinctively braced myself, to keep from being blown over by that avian hurricane, but then realized that this room's sonic properties misled me once again; even my hair remained unruffled in the feathery gale. The swift bombardment from above served as an appropriate counterpoint to the unremitting ground attack.

"Their popular name was the pococurante," said the curator. "The populace favored Voltaire. The birds nested in our birch forests every spring, arriving in clouds, snapping off tree limbs beneath their cumulative weight. Pococurantes were grayish-blue, and the males had yellow heads and scarlet bellies. Their mottled eggs had a fishy flavor, though the birds themselves tasted something like chicken. The call of the pococurante was inoffensive, and familiar to all."

He mimed its song, whistling two notes; the first higher, and allegro, the second lower, and largo, an onomatopoeic *uh-oh* in the key of E flat.

"Pococurantes coupled for life. If one died, the survivor mourned its mate, refusing to fly away until it, too, was killed. Their numbers declined rapidly after the trees were chopped down. When the remaining birds set off upon their last migration, they were blasted from the sky until their blood fell like rain. The last time I heard a pococurante, I was half the age I am now." Though his face remained cloaked, through the darkness I perceived his smile, and its ambiguity. "That was also the first time I heard one."

"Would you repeat their call for me?" I asked.

"Certainly."

Attuning my ear to the chords of extinction, I knew an illuminatory moment. An unlikely admixture of sorrow, fear, and nostalgia for another's memories irrupted through my spirit, and as I considered the criteria by which donations might be judged worthy of a

Hall of Lost Sounds, I pictured seventeenth-century explorers lying sleepless during their first night on Mauritius, kept awake by the squawk of dodos; imagined Manhattanites, in the Thirties, grabbing instinctively for their glassware as the El rumbled up Sixth Avenue; tried to recall the intonation of my prepubescent voice. Some sounds one surely expected always to hear, and so never listened at the time they were made; perhaps inevitably those noises thought most unendurable when initially heard only later proved the most precious, and most irrecoverable.

"You like that one?" Before I could state my affirmation, his thoughts wandered elsewhere; I doubt that he cared. "I hear it now as you hear me."

The curator led me to the far side of the room. Cries of pococurante and drum of quickstep waned, overwhelmed by a thunderous fusillade, so loud that I guessed the rest of the tour would be delivered with gestures. Still, over sharp reports of creaking wood, against an unceasing advance of caissons bumping across stone, I heard him plainly, as if he stood in a lecture hall, addressing an audience of one.

"Long before the disruptions began, delivery carts were used in our cities to conserve fuel," the curator said. "They were pressed into general service to speed our own migration. Much of what a house contained that was important could be hauled by the largest carriages. Whatever their size, the wagons never held enough. When I left, I carried my belongings with me."

However chimerical its nature, the crash of a thousand inessential wagons hurtling toward us so unnerved me that with each pass I flinched, attempting to avoid an onslaught I knew was evanescent. Without benefit of imagination, I heard horses neighing when whips cracked against their withers; drivers shouting out curses over the groan of their loads. I pretend no understanding of sonology, but I thought it impossible that any phonographic agency could so truly reproduce such pandemonium; I felt that through some subtle technique, I heard those sounds exactly as he did when they

ricocheted off the walls of his skull. Possibly that was his trick, or what he wished me to believe was his trick, that he drew from his mind at command recollections so assiduously cherished as to have developed an alternate existence, nearly independent of his own. A suitable audience could be therefore gratified, assured that not only had there been a tree which fell, but that the sound it made upon falling would echo through its forest unto eternity.

"Why did you have to leave your country?" I asked.

"She left me," he said. "I should have preferred to stay. Come along, now."

Grateful to be removed from the earsplitting tumult, I followed the curator and we entered a brighter, quieter hall. In the ceiling's elliptical dome was an oculus, threaded with a strand of light. Two doors faced us, one open, one closed. Gazing into the visible threshold's abyss, I saw neither exhibits nor even room beyond. The curator stopped, and we went no farther.

"My wife and I were awakened one night by sirens," he said. "We opened our windows and watched the spa burn down. In keeping with the season we tried to reimagine what we saw as a Halloween spectacle, and shuddered at the vision of black skeletons silhouetted against an orange field. But sorrow overwhelmed our disregard of what we knew to be real, and we returned to bed, unsuccessful in our attempts to transform a funeral into a holiday. It was only the week before that we'd sat on the beachfront terraces, enjoying the fireworks, leaving before we'd intended with every expectation of returning when we wished.

"The next morning we rode our bicycles to the beach, anxious to look at ruins other than our own. On the way we passed the avenue's empty shops, where haberdashers and tobacconists, watchmakers and smiths, joiners and cobblers and ostlers plied their trades long before our grandparents were born. The cafés were shuttered. Gilt and neon signs were covered over by billboards telling of unfamiliar people and places. So crowded with those departing was the Central Station

that the passengers' clamor muted that of their trains. We reached the seashore. The ashes had mixed with the sand, and as we walked over them we listened to the ocean, hearing it anew, if not for the first time. Its swell terrified my wife, and we walked our cycles home, bereft of emotion, feeling too drained to race back uphill. That morning, all anyone knew was rumors and lies, and what wasn't said didn't matter as much as what wasn't done. My country was taken from us, though if not with our wishes, then undoubtedly with dutiful acquiescence.

"Couples living in such circumstances so often find their challenges insurmountable. We talked of what we might do. All we could do was talk, and try to make the other listen. We drifted apart, all the while wanting to stay together. One day, sooner than expected, I came home to find her gone."

His expression remained unchanged as he weaved his words around me. A softer sound, its origin as enigmatic as the rest, insinuated itself into my ears, a steady uninflected jingling, heard as if it came from far beneath the floor.

"You can always speak to one who isn't there, of course, as long as you don't expect answers," the curator said. "We planted pinwheels in our gardens in memory of the dead. Miniature sleigh bells were attached to their vanes, so that when the wind spun the wheels around, the souls they honored would ascend with a soothing accompaniment."

Though his face evinced no untoward emotion—nor, in fact, any emotion at all—I perceived that he felt he should cry, even if he no longer could. The sound of his sorrow was evidently one he had been unable, or unwilling, to preserve. "Though the past survives only through its artifacts," he said, "every museum must limit its acquisitions."

"Your country," I said. "Your wife. Where are they?" Taking my arm, he walked the short distance across the hall with me, and pointed to the open door.

"Listen."

Craning my head toward its darkness, I heard not silence, but the absence of sound. Staring into that void, straining to catch noises that simply weren't there, I better comprehended the true worth of his collection and how irreplaceable it would be, once it was lost. He'd deliberately left vague the magnitude of his tragedy; what else of his world was he unable to save? Did he miss what he had retained all the more? Could any public loss be greater than any private one, or did one inescapably serve as no more than grace note to the other, if they happened to coincide?

The curator began singing a tune of unsettling pitch, his notes wobbling in and out of key. The words were, I suppose, in his original tongue, a speech engorged with glottal phrasings, surprising syllabic leaps and discordant cadences, bearing no relation to any language I've heard before, or since. After a single verse and chorus, he stopped. "Our song," he told me. "The last exhibit of my museum."

As he concluded his sentence, the cathedral bells rang out the sixteenth hour, shaking the walls with sonorous peals. The curator grimaced, showing even less appreciation of their auditory terrorism. Once the toll concluded he directed me to the other door. "Now I hear my wife's voice," he said, unlatching the lock, easing me forward. "Thank you for hearing mine."

Before I could reply, he closed the door behind me. I found myself in afternoon sunlight, some distance from the alley, deafened by Gaon Prospect's cacophony—the roars of its buses and taxis and trucks, the chants of its hawkers. Children screamed at one another, police blew whistles, car alarms blared, and a thousand radios bleated across the encompassing dissonance of Montrouge.

There were numerous cafés on the Prospect and, selecting one of more subdued ambience than the rest, I took a seat and ordered currant genever. Late into the evening I rifled the accessions of my own museum, replaying sounds as I came upon them. Too many of its holdings were unavailable, however diligent the search, but the sole surprise was that they'd been stolen

with such ease; if I hadn't looked, I'd have never missed them. A friend of mine, a composer, once spoke to me of Webern: how in his music the rests contribute as much, if not more, as the notes; that having a sense of what was missing made all the clearer what remained. Until that afternoon I'd preferred tunes more easily mastered. The curator's songs stuck closer to me than I thought desirable, and only with some effort did I erase them from my mind.

THE BELLCASTER'S APPRENTICE

by Elizabeth E. Wein

Maybe you've heard the sound of a carillon: a high chorus of church bells pealing out "O Come All Ye Faithful," or a Bach Prelude, played by one person slamming feet and fists onto pedals connected to chiming hammers that strike stationary bells.

English bell ringing is quite another proposition. (*At this point, I turn things over to Elizabeth Wein, who explains:*) These bells are mounted on wheels so that they can turn in full circles of 360 degrees, each controlled by a single person manning a rope; it takes a team of ringers, all working to a precise, ordered pattern, to create the music of "change ringing." The bells are so heavy and the turn of the wheels so slow that these musicians cannot alter the speed of their ringing quickly enough to play tunes on the bells, so they use instead a pattern of notes or "changes." The written form of these patterns looks almost like woven threads, each line showing how the voice of a single bell interacts with the others. The resultant sound is unique: more rhythmic, repetitive changing scales than melody.

Although this arcane art has been practiced for nearly four hundred years, it has not inspired much fiction; but try *The Nine Tailors* by Dorothy Sayers, or *The Printer's Devil* by Chico Kidd. If you want to see ringers in action, contact the North American Guild of Change Ringers in care of the National Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul in Washington, DC. Their journal, *The*

Clapper, is registered in the Library of Congress and contains addresses of current Guild officers.

A wonderfully eccentric little English label called Saydisc, whose address is: Chipping Manor, The Chipping, Wotton-Under-Edge, Gloucestershire, has produced numerous recordings of change ringing at various churches throughout England.

The foundry and the river were two different worlds. The foundry was all fire and constant bell tones; the river was animal smell and color, and light and sky and water reflecting. Until he was old enough to be apprenticed, Will Parker had lived in a lockkeeper's cottage along the Isis, where mules labored on the soiled towpath and students in shoddy black gowns smoked and argued as they watched the traffic. Poling his flat punt beneath the willows, winding open the heavy lock gates, and minding the furious water of the weirs, Will felt at home on the river. But the foundry owned him in body, and he owed it his living in his soul.

Will's separate worlds of foundry and river were bound by the bronze clamor of Oxford's new bells as they swung changes across the city. You could hear them from foundry or river, clear, sweet, and complex in their varying courses. Mistress Lib Mayfield's foundry cast the bells, and the river carried them out into the world in its boats and barges. And everyone wanted new bells now that the solemn reign of the Puritans was over. The day was described by the names of the patterns that directed the bells' voices: "The Morning Exercise." "April Day." "The Evening Delight." Will himself was a ringer at St. Cross by Holywell on Sunday mornings; he would punt up the Isis and then the Cherwell with Gentry Garland, Lib Mayfield's spendthrift and unmarried younger brother, and they would both join the call-to-service ringing. Afterward Will would sing in the choir at St. Cross, and Gentry would be off to ring at Merton College.

Gentry was obsessed with the sound of bells and the

ordering of their changes. He spent his days dawdling in the city and his evenings in an assortment of taverns and bell towers. He lived solely to employ his expertise in ringing changes; it brought him great pleasure and little wealth. Lib Mayfield paid and paid his way, as though he were her own wayward and prodigal child, and she begrudged him every penny and second of lost time and work. But Will secretly thought that Gentry was an artist or scientist of rare talent for numbers and patterns.

"It comes so easily to you," Will had once ventured to tell Gentry in admiration. Swinging the St. Cross bells full circle took skill and a brute deal of muscle, as well as every whit of concentration that Will had in him.

"I've the head for the numbers," Gentry had admitted modestly. "But no one has an ear like yours."

Will had been taken in at the foundry because of his ear. His grasp of tone was so true that no one of Mayfield's, up to grudging Bob Pusey, who was the chief foreman on the foundry floor, would argue against Will's judgment of a note. Even after a delicate tuning job had been taken from him physically, the masters would always beg Will's ear on the final sound of a fresh-tuned bell. And if Will said, "It's still a third flat," they would nake the bell by deeply scoring the new bronze to try to raise the tone a third, though failure meant recasting.

"There'll be no market for any caster else in Oxfordshire," said Mistress Mayfield, "if we can teach Will Parker to flute and barb a bell as well as he sings."

"Aye, maybe he can hear it," said Bob Pusey. "But I'll not have him hewing at bright new bronze as though it were a hedge."

Will lived in awe of Lib Mayfield. She was core and cope to the foundry, the inner shape and outer shell that held it all together. She had connections in half the university colleges, and knew all the merchants of the city. She was a full head shorter than Will, a little woman whose brown hair was streaked with white; and she had lines of laughter around her frank blue eyes and a

beaming, direct smile. But in Lib's small, queenly presence Will was always stricken shy. She had caught him singing, once, as he swept up the liquid-looking golden shavings that had been skirted from the edge of a newly tuned bell; she had passed a wry remark on his choice of ballad, and complimented his voice. After that he made sure never to sing within the foundry walls, not because anyone minded, but because he was so fiercely embarrassed of the attention it drew him.

Lib Mayfield tried to encourage his confidence by setting him simple and enjoyable tasks in the city or on the river. Just now there were two new bells being cast for the old tower at Iffley, to make a ring of five, and Will had been sent to discuss the bells' impending journey downstream with the lockkeeper there. He made a trip to the church as well, since the men of the parish planned to hang the bells themselves. And on his way back to Osney Island, where the foundry lay, Will diverted from his path to cut willow in the water meadows of Hinksey Mead, where he could sing by himself without interruption.

The willow was for a pointed purpose in Mayfield's bellcasting. Willow is a flux. When slag scums the shining liquid metal soon to be a bell, a pole of willow stirred in the mess will send the dross fleeing to the side of the cauldron like chaff. Before Will began to hack at the branches, he muttered a superstitious request for permission: "Old lass, give of thy wood . . ." For willow trees are treacherous. Fallen branches block the towpath and must be hacked apart before your mule can pass. Roots suck at your tackle and your punt pole. A boatman knows how rotten the heart of a willow can be; you do not climb high in those branches for a better view when you know the roots are river fed and that new shoots obscure the decay.

Will climbed carefully down the bank of Hinksey Stream, clinging cautiously to the net of willow roots, and began to work. He did not lag, but he sang as he worked, a new ringers' song that he had learned from Gentry Garland:

Welcome to the belfry,
Thou man of dignity!
Though I a cobbler be,
I'll pull a rope with thee,
Brave Sir John.

The land around Hinksey Mead stretched green and quiet up to the knoll of Boar's Hill in the west. But for the occasional magnified shout from the river, there was no noise but the larks and the cows. Will sang, and cut, and the cows paid him no mind.

He was barefoot because his only shoes must be saved for the foundry floor, and he gripped at the willow roots with his toes. But when he tried to reach up with his hatchet, one foot slipped a little, and caught between the bank and one of the willow roots.

Will had wedged his foot into a gap that seemed too narrow to allow the passage of more than a hand's breadth. He was not hurt at all, and so squatted and reached with his hatchet to cut the root away. Absently, he sang still:

Let preachers talk of popes
And scholars of their tropes,
We'll stick unto our ropes,
For thereby hang our hopes,
Brave Sir John.

"Sing again," said a voice from the bank above him.

Will raised his head and looked up through tall willow canes to the track. He knelt with one knee balanced on a root, trapped. He thought that Lib had caught him again.

"Sing again!" the figure above him repeated, and knelt also, peering through the leaves at him in an attempt to see him better. "Is it a ringers' ballad? Who is it?"

Will could see now that indeed it was a woman of Lib Mayfield's age with Lib's small, stout build, and with her selfsame queenly presence and bearing. Her

generous smock was brown as rich river soil, and her mantle was golden as Cotswold stone. Will thought perhaps he had seen her on the towpath, holding her skirts high above the muck and not disdaining to plant her feet firmly on the riverbank.

"It's Will Parker," he said to the woman through the screen of willow tendrils, "of Mayfield's. And I've stopped singing, because I've slipped among the roots and my foot's stuck."

"Sing."

The voice was imperious and commanding, also like Lib's, and loud and full. Risking rudeness, he said shortly, "I'm sorry. I'm not a singer, not to command."

"The boy is bound to Mayfield's," said the woman, and began to pick her way soundlessly, easily, through the willow leaves toward him. "And when Mistress Mayfield commands it, he dances to her tune: runs to Iffley, runs to Cowley, crawls at snail's pace with mule and cart loaded to Wolvercote. He obeys because he's bound. Well, now, Will Parker of Mayfield's: seems to me the boy's bound well where he is, just now. So if I command him, where's room to object?"

She even spoke as Lib did.

But she was not Lib. She was not anyone Will had ever seen before. She was on the matted bank beside him now, squatting on a willow root and pushing the fronds that hung between them back out of the way. Her eyes were the same soft brown of her hair and dress, and she seemed as naturally a part of the land around Hinksey Stream as did the willow tree, or the green knoll of Boar's Hill. Will said, "Mistress, I'm in no state to sing for you, trapped here as I am."

She leaned her forearms against her thighs, still squatting, her brown skirts held together away from the water and out of the way of the clutching willow. She lifted a warning forefinger and waved it at him.

"Well, Will Parker," she said, "then we'll have to drive another bargain before we set thee free."

He grinned at her. "But see:" he said. "I've an ax all ready to hand. I'm set to free myself."

She put out a foot in a brown leather boot, sudden and swift. She gave a firm jog to the root that Will balanced on, and instinctively he reached with his right hand to snatch at the bank to steady himself. The hatchet fell heavy from his grip and splashed head down into the shallow water below him. He exclaimed in irritation, for his balance had never been in any danger, and the means to his release was now beyond his reach.

"Another suggestion," said the woman. "We'd like a set of bells."

Will laughed at the absurdity of the proposition. "You've to speak with my mistress, if it's bells you want."

"No," she said, "I've to speak with Will Parker. That's who's trapped in the tree and needs our aid."

Will laughed again, and took hold of the root around his foot to try to pull it away from the bank and free himself. When his hand closed around the willow root, he had the sudden odd and evil sensation that it pulled away from him, hugging his foot tighter, as a girl might pull away when you caught her unaware and tried to take her arm.

The peculiar feeling made him loath to touch the root again. It hugged his ankle, firmly snug but not tight, as if it had grown fond of him. He began to scrape at the riverbank on the other side of his trapped shin, trying to gain some space there. The root hugged him closer to the bank; Will gave a little yelp of shock and dread and snatched his hand away from the unnatural thing barely in time to prevent the hand, too, from being caught.

"You're—" Will gasped. "You're not—"

She smiled, still warm and friendly, still commanding. "We're not from the city," she said, "or one of thy neighboring villages. We're here, and at Boar's Hill. We want bells there just as all the others do."

"No one lives on Boar's Hill," Will said. He put a tentative hand to the clinging willow root for assurance about the wild guess that was growing in his mind. The

root pulsed in his hand, cool and alive in the shade of the willow leaves.

Again he snatched the hand back, repulsed by the sensation. The woman reached out to take his fluttering hand, and then he thought he knew how it must feel to be a trapped and hunted creature at bay. Her own hand was cool and dry as Cotswold stone in shadow, not quite as cold as river water, but colder than any living human hand. He wondered if, like stone or wood or bell metal, her hands grew warmer if she stood in the sun.

"Of course we had to rid thee of the hatchet," she said.

Will shook his head, frowning at her. "It's a tool, not a weapon. I'm not a highwayman, and you accosted me, not I you."

Her hand around his wrist was dry and cool as the willow root, and as full of earthen strength. It was as if he were being held still, by hand and foot, by a single creature. But she spoke as if she and the willow were two separate, sentient beings, allies. She said, "Cold iron, boy. We thought you watermen were superstitious somebodies."

Will shrank from her, and from the tree, and was caught by both. "What are you?"

"I'm known to thee, surely?" she said kindly. "Most of thy kind know who we are."

He said, "You're not—you're not what I expected."

"Not virgin green and young and alluring? Not a seductive girl a year or two younger than thyself? Not fair enough for Titania?" She laughed, and it was the laugh of a woman in her middle years, full and free and loud. "We're never what any of you expect."

Will shivered. "You're not Titania."

"It's not my name," she said. "Neither is Mab. Call me Mab, if it suits thee. We don't give out our names as freely as you. And we're not as easy to catch."

Will said miserably, "What do you want of me?"

"I've told thee." She shifted her weight where she crouched easily on her haunches, balanced on the roots

of the river bank. Her grip was sure and strong. "Don't make me tell thee again."

He dreaded to say the wrong thing, to give the wrong answer. His waterman's superstition was ritual only; this went against everything he knew to be real. He was unequal to it.

"Sing," she said.

And he could not. To obey her whim, so bound against his will, would have violated him, made barren his soul.

"Then get us bells."

Will moaned, "I can't. I mean, you've to pay. They're worth more than—than my—" He almost said, "than my life."

He gathered himself. "They're worth more than my freedom. My mistress will never make a peal of bells without a dickered price."

"Well, lad," she said, "we'll dicker."

Then followed, swiftly, the most nightmare-filled minutes of Will's life, as the fay laid out her terms.

"A light peal of six," she said, "as featherweight as you can cast them, for we've no tower of stone and steel to hang them in. No iron to be used in the casting, not in the furnace, nor in the molds themselves, nor in the stirring of your molten copper and tin. To be delivered when they're done to the foot of the Boar's Hill knoll, where the copse begins.

"And thy Mistress Mayfield can ask what payment she likes, but she'll not be paid in gold, or coin of the realm. And if she can think of no other acceptable offer, we'll take thee in our service, Will Parker. We could make use of a mortal courier, and I've a taste for thy voice.

"But we'll let thee go tonight," she said, "to come back tomorrow at this time. Now hold to one of these branches, for we're going to bind thee, to warrant thy return. It'll hurt, a little; but I don't mean for thee to start, or fall, or damage thyself, and this will be easier to bear than a binding of cords or linked metal."

Then the willow root twisted full around his shin,

dragging sharp and tiny splinters into the skin at his ankle. But uglier than that was the way she turned her hard hand around his wrist and exacted the same sensation there, as though she, too, were made of splintering wood. His arm and ankle suddenly tingled with many small, stinging wounds, as though filings of bell metal had suddenly worked their way beneath his skin. Will closed his eyes and clung to the bank with one hand, as she had instructed, and waited with gathering panic while the fairy splinters wove their way into his body.

She let go then, and so did the tree. Will clutched at his burning wrist. It was marked with a patterned bracelet in tiny slivers of something that looked like wood, deep beneath the skin. He glanced down at his foot and saw a matching chain of gray splinters around his ankle.

“. . . And then we'll see." She had been talking while she bound him, and he had heard none of it. So now he must make her repeat her list of instructions. He bent his head in humility and said miserably, "I beg your pardon, Lady. I heard nothing you said during"—he gulped back a sob—"during the binding."

"Lad," she said, and touched the top of his bowed head with her cold fingertips. "Thou'rt too much afraid of us. We'll do thee no harm. Do the chains bite thee? We don't feel pain in the same way you folk do. Climb down the bank and lave them in the stream." She chucked him under the chin, raising his face to look at hers, round and wide as a stone and broad as a willow bole. "Don't weep, lad. There's no need, and it annoys me. Dip thy hands and feet in the stream."

He did, and it did feel better, not paining him so much but becoming numb and wooden where the peculiar markings patterned his wrist and foot. He made the mistake of trying to retrieve his hatchet, though, and had only come close to its steel blade when the splinters began to blaze like lightning at his wrist. He yelped and pulled away, and stared up at the thing perched on the roots above him.

"There's a little of our folk in thee now," she said

calmly, and stroked the trunk of the willow with affection. "Think how it feels to this love to be struck at with thy little ax! The chains will shy away from iron, just as we do. Then they'll call thee back here on the morrow, at this time."

"What would happen," Will asked, not meaning to be impertinent but curious with a horrible fascination, "if I didn't come?"

"We'll call thee. I'll call thee now, to show thee. Climb here to me." Her muddy eyes narrowed, and she looked suddenly sly and challenging. "Decide for thyself what to do."

Will hesitated, unsure what she meant.

"Climb up. Obey me," she said, "or not."

I won't, Will thought.

The instant he made up his mind to go against her, the bracelet about his wrist began to bite at him, sharp and insistent. Huh, he thought, a little thing like that isn't going to make me come this way again. The shards of willow at his ankle pricked a little, tentative, as though the tree had suddenly decided to call him as well.

Mab gazed at him, demanding.

He bit his lip. No.

He fared very badly in the brief battle of will that followed. The splinters gnawed and stabbed and burned until his leg gave way beneath him and his kneecap slammed numbingly against a stone in the stream. He snatched at a root to steady himself and discovered that the intense lightning around his wrist lessened when he raised it toward the tree. Bewildered, he pulled himself up the bank, thinking of nothing but reaching the spot where his wrist and ankle would become wooden once again.

And when he came to his senses he was crouching, dripping and miserable, clinging to the willow roots at the fay's feet, as she had predicted.

"On the morrow," she said.

Then she clambered back up through the branches. By the time Will had collected himself to climb to the

path after her, she had gone. Through the fog of clammy fear that lined his stomach and the horror of the branding that lined his limbs, he wondered that Boar's Hill looked no different to him than it ever had, rising green and sunlit on the serene horizon.

Lib Mayfield was furious. She was so angry that there was no room in her for fear or wonder. Will Parker was *her* apprentice, hers to command, hers to punish, hers to bind. She would have been no less angry if it had been the next village's blacksmith trying to rob her of her charge. That her foe appeared to be, according to Will, the queen of Faerie, did not threaten her in the least.

He had come directly to her office, and told her his stuttered story while clutching at his wrist and rubbing one ankle against the other, so that he appeared to be hopping from foot to foot. Another time Lib would have laughed at him, or at least laughed after him when the interview was over. She had for three years battled to set Will Parker at ease in her presence; she was aware how tongue-tied she made him. But his story was coherent now, and the stuttering was because he could not keep his teeth from chattering whenever he glanced at the evil tattoo around his wrist.

The markings convinced her that he had not suddenly lost his wits, that his fantastic story must be true. The pattern was too complex, the splinters set too deep. No human would have set them there. No one would have needed or wanted to do such a thing. No one who wanted to could have done it in an afternoon.

"She'll pay me for a boy if she wants a boy," Lib said to her apprentice. "She'll not pluck a likely bell-caster from my charge as a gratuity, unasked. She'll pay a higher price than a set of bells will cost her, too. No apprentice of mine is leaving Mayfield's under any witch's spell."

"She wasn't a witch," Will said. "Don't they flee running water? She was at home by the river. She was

something *else*. She didn't snare me with words or saps or scents. I'm not tricked, I'm chained."

"Well," Lib said thoughtfully, "somehow we'll rid you of the chains. Let's have your hand."

She turned his wrist about, examining the gray pattern, pinching and probing. The shards looked like splinters, or metal filings. "Hold tight, Will." Lib pulled a pin from the pocket under her apron, and deftly pricked and flicked at a splinter.

The boy screamed, and tore away from her, though he only managed a few blind steps before he pulled up short at the metal box Lib used as a safe. He stood there quivering.

Could they not then be taken out, like any splinters? Lib wondered. They did not appear to be so deep a pin or needle could not reach them. She knew Will was neither complainer nor shrinking ninny, and she had obviously hurt him. She glanced down at the pin in her hand. It was a simple steel straight pin.

Cold iron. "Stupid of me, lad," she said. "Let me think again." It fired her fury further, a bellows to a furnace: I'll not have this quick, bright, obedient boy reduced to a puling pawn like this. I'll not have it. "Pull yourself together, now; don't weep. There's no need, and it annoys me."

Will gulped, and ventured, "Silver might work."

"Good lad," said Lib. "I've silver needles that were in my hope chest. If you soak that hand and foot for a few hours, I'll get the splinters out. Goodness, don't let it fright you so. She wants you for a messenger, not a lover."

Will blushed. Lib guessed that it was not actually something that had occurred to him in his generalized horror. He said, "It does fright me. I don't want to be a prisoner. I can't live in another world."

"Seems to me you already are, and you do," said Lib. "Aren't you bond to Mayfield's, don't you answer to me? Isn't this world another again from the waterways where you grew up? And you do well in both, and move easily between them."

"You'll go back to meet this Mab," she continued, "but you'll go of your own free will. I won't have it said an apprentice of mine doesn't hold to a set tryst. And I think I'll go, too, so she can see what she's up against. After all . . . we may get a good price out of it. A customer is a customer."

"Now, lad, you'd better be well soused before we start," said Lib. "Gentry can give over a bottle of that French sack. Huh. I paid for it, anyway." Lib had brought Will back to her own house outside the foundry walls, on the Hinksey Stream side of Osney Island; for hours he had been soaking his wrist and ankle in copper kettles full of water. "Gentry!" Lib bawled, and stumped up the stairs to pound her balled fist repeatedly on his chamber door. "Young Gentry, you tosspot, you cock-a-hoop! Show some life! Snap!" She continued the hail of blows and vitriol until Will grew embarrassed; late as it was, it was so quiet behind the chamber door that Will began to think Lib Mayfield's younger brother was probably not at home.

Then Gentry's voice grumbled, "For God's sake, Lib, you polecat, I'm trying to prick out a new method." It did not sound like the voice of a drunkard, but of someone who has been so deep in critical thought that he has blocked out all other doings of the world. He handed Lib a bottle and slammed the door in her face.

Lib worked at the splinters for more than half the night. Will suffered the pinpricks in silence, breaking into an occasional grimacing grin as Lib tried to distract him.

"It's the exact opening of a fairy tale," she said. "Someone climbs over the fence into the witch's garden and steals her lettuce, and ends up dealing away his firstborn child. Or he steals the beast's rose and gives up his youngest daughter. It always works that way. Didn't you guess, Will? Pinch the greens and sell your soul."

"But I've always cut withies there," Will said,

wincing at the pinpricks. "Everyone does. And by our grace, I didn't steal them. I even *asked* first. It isn't fair."

"What's fair?" countered Lib. "There's me widowed before my daughter's old enough to marry, managing my father's business by myself, and having to keep my child-brother in ale and paper at the same time. That's hard to swallow, work all day then dance attendance on Gentry, and him bursting with pride over his latest commissioned change ringers' composition."

"There's not another ringer in Oxford who can compose changes," Will said, in staunch and unwarranted defense of Gentry Garland, whose careless self-confidence Will greatly envied.

"There's not another ringer in Oxford who's free to spend the day gadding," Lib retorted testily. "La, but that must be an onerous task, pricking out cross-changes and thinking of whimsical names for them. 'None-Such Bob.' 'Topsy-Turvy.' 'My Honey.'"

"'The Fairy Queen's Delight' is his latest," said Will. "They were taunting him down at the Perch about it. He wants a band of angels ringing around him; those mortals at Merton College can't learn his new methods quick enough to please him, and they're ready to throw him out because he spurs them so hard."

Lib stopped her work on Will's ankle, and looked up at him in the taper light. "'The Fairy Queen's Delight'?" she repeated.

"I guess that's what he's at work on now," Will said.

"But this is a *commission*."

Lib set down her silver needle. Will drew a breath in temporary respite. His wrist and ankle burned, red and angry raw, half the splinters gone but a long way to go yet.

"You've been hard done by, lad," Lib said. "I've a feeling it was no chance meeting you had today. What was it I said, pinch the greens and sell your soul? But that's not what the knaves in the tales do. They offer up some other poor soul in order to save their own sorry skins. We'll take that scoundrel Gentry along with us

tomorrow to meet Queen Mab, and then see what he has to say for himself."

Mab was waiting beneath the willow by Hinksey Stream, sitting cross-legged on a mat of woven rush, as though she were picnicking. She smiled in beaming welcome at the sight of Mayfield's approaching, and petted the rug beside her, inviting Lib to join her beneath the tree. "Mistress Mayfield."

"Hell's bells," said Gentry Garland, and looked about him as though seeking an avenue for escape. "It's not ready."

"Don't try my wit, jackanapes," said Lib. "I'm wise to you. You'll answer to all three of us in a trice."

She returned the fay's beaming smile. "We'll pass by the introductions," Lib said, "as I believe you've met my brother already; and it's clear who I am, and you've already taken the boy's name, and you won't give out your own. I know the rules and wiles of you people, so never mind cozening me with charmed refreshment." But she took the offered seat beneath the willow, leaving Will to stand by the side of nervous, hangdog Gentry.

"I wouldn't consider insulting thee," said Mab to Lib.

Something unspoken passed between the two. Each recognized the other in herself, two small, erect women, eye to eye, and bristling beneath their perfect composure.

Mab said, in dry surprise, "Someone's broken our chains."

"Someone had no right to bind the boy as she did," Lib said straight. "But I'll contract with her all the same, if she'll agree to my price. How much has my brother offered you already?"

"His services as composer," Mab said coolly, "in exchange for appropriate inspiration."

"And the boy? Why did you come at the boy? Why not strike your bargain with my brother in the first place, why not get twice as much use out of him?" She

glanced pointedly up at Gentry, as much as to say, It's more than I've ever got.

Mab's wide, frank face was purely ingenuous. "Why, we'd already struck a bargain with him. No need to make a transaction more complex than it need be. And the boy's a better courier, is he not?"

Now Gentry ventured, "I recommended him."

Lib jerked a thumb at Will and flared at her brother, "You look at the boy's wrist!"

Gentry appeared bewildered.

"Look at those marks! He was snared, he's been scarred! He's not yours to offer and not hers to take!"

"I only said he could carry her request to you better than I could!"

"He doesn't dissemble," said Mab. "I took the boy on my own."

"Both of you, tangling plots behind my turned back!" Lib slapped the woven mat she sat on. "Well, but it's no matter. I've thought of payment that will benefit us both. Have you considered how your folk are going to learn to ring the changes once your bells are hung?"

"We're quick and apt," Mab said.

"That's true," said Gentry. "They've a mind for pattern and an ear for music that I've never seen else—"

"Oh, don't talk nonsense," Lib said impatiently. "What good will that do her if she knows nothing of the changes herself? You show her," she directed Gentry, "what you've pricked."

"It's not ready," he repeated nervously. "I've only the scraps, it's not true yet—"

"Then bring out what paltry scraps you have. And you tell me," she said to Mab, "what you think it means."

The pattern of woven lines and numbers was as complex as the pattern that had been traced around Will's limbs. Will had no head for cross peals that must be learned by heart; his ringing was limited to the plain changes that were called at each forestroke by the leader of the band. The scribblings that noted "The

Fairy Queen's Delight" were nigh incomprehensible to Will, and clearly meant nothing to the Fairy Queen herself.

Mab laughed. "What's the offer, then?"

"Well, I'm offering you an instructor."

Then Gentry worked out what Lib's idea was, and bent at one knee in a gentleman's bow, and offered himself.

Mab shook her head. "He'll make no courier, and he can't sing. I'll have the bells or I'll have the boy."

Mistress Mayfield smiled. "You'll have the bells if you'll *take* the instructor."

This was clearly a consideration that had not occurred to Mistress Mab. She sat for a moment thinking, baffled.

But it was Gentry Garland's dream come true, and he recognized it. He gabbled into the moment of silence, "I'll go. I'll do it. Hang me, I'll help you hang them, you'll need help hanging them. You'll need to learn to handle forestroke and back, to turn the bells over, and oh, I'll give you such fantastic compositions—"

"You won't need to bind *him*, you see," said Lib. "Now tell me again the requirements you gave to the lad, and whether or not you want a written contract."

Then there was nothing to be done but flatiron the details.

Will overheard Lib's battle with Bob Pusey over where and how to cast the bells. Pusey had no time for fairy tales, and Lib saw no reason to treat the job as anything but the whim of an eccentric client. "It's a lunatic's consideration," said Pusey. "No iron implements to be used in the casting. What crook are we to shape the core with? What to smelt the blasted things in? Your customer won't know the difference. You can't tell by looking at a bell what kind of vat's been used for the pouring."

"Doesn't matter whether the client knows or not," Lib said firmly. "It'll happen as I say. I run an honest

business. If we tell the buyer no iron, then we'll use no iron."

Pusey scratched his head. "And how do you propose to do it, Mistress Mayfield?"

"There's ways," said Lib. "Lost wax should work. Go up to Boar's Hill and build a temporary furnace, like my grandfather did, before there were so many waterways, when you had to take your tools with you and do your casting in the churchyard, where the bells were wanted."

"A temporary furnace at Boar's Hill," Pusey said. "It's pure tomfoolery. No tower, no access to the river, not even a wagon road there. What'll we do, leave the new bells corroding on the knoll? It'll be a long, hard haul, and it'll cost."

"You're paid for your labor," Lib said, short spoken as she could be.

Unwitting of the nature of the client, Pusey anyway jested of sprites ringing bluebells and harebells. "I'd say we were making this peal for the wee green people," he said, "only bell ringing's supposed to drive away demons."

"Casting in a field's no trouble," said Lib. "My grandfather managed."

"Aye, and your grandfather would have consulted an astrologer before he set about the casting," Pusey growled. "And would have rung the new bells for the first time only if the moon was full."

"And the bells were better tuned," she answered back.

"We do the best we can. Where's your head, Mistress? You're not moon-mad, even if your client is. What'll it be next? Do we baptize these?"

Will spluttered with nervous laughter and bit his lip. How could bells drive away any soul that loved noise and music? He thought of devout young mothers sprinkling their babies with holy water and tying silver bells to their bonnets to ward off the fairies. He wondered if the fairies ever noticed.

"I don't think that's necessary," Lib said, her voice gone gentle of a sudden, mindful of Will listening.

"It'll be a private ring, not anything to do with the church."

A fairy ring, Will thought, and managed to turn the next guffaw that escaped him into a cough. I wonder what they say of us, Will thought, Mab's folk, do they have as many mismatched ideas of us as we do of them? Do they say we're afraid of the dark, that we dislike dancing, that we kidnap the flower of their youth and threaten to throttle them if they refuse to hand over hidden gold? We don't know anything about each other.

"It pains me," Pusey pronounced, "to waste fine bronze."

"If they'll pay my price," said Lib, "what's the expense to me? As for the job itself, you can let Will Parker manage it. Nothing could give him a fairer start. Never you worry, Bob Pusey."

The work went well, but Will's nerves jangled all through it. His time was split between Boar's Hill and Osney Island. Back at Mayfield's with Bob Pusey breathing hard over his shoulder, Will took in his own hands the modeling and shaping of the molds, melting the soft paraffin over the six loam cores in smooth and perfect bell shape. At Boar's Hill he set two lads at digging the pits they would need to bury molds for six bells, and constructing the earthen furnace in which they would melt the metal. Gutters in the ground would carry the metal from the furnace into the molds in the casting pits, so that there would be no need for iron ladle or cauldron. The furnace stood in the field below the knoll like an enormous hive of dried reed and clay, stone and turf.

The work progressed for several weeks until an afternoon when Will walked out to Boar's Hill to meet the boys who were digging the bell pits and working at the furnace. The madness of the whole project came home to him now: make a mold without a crook, a furnace without an iron grillage to support it, cast bells

that will hang in a hill without a tower, to be paid for without the exchange of a coin—

He began to sing:

“Oh, will you make me a cambric shirt
Without a seam or fine needlework,
And will you wash it in yonder well
Where neither spring water nor rain ever fell . . .”

“Singing out loud’s landed thee in crossed fortune before,” said Mab.

Will startled, and cringed, and braced himself. She had joined him on the path, and now swung along beside him. “Why sing only when there’s none to hear thy voice? It’s a rare voice, lad, even to my ears, true and strong, and past breaking.”

Tongue-tied again, Will stammered, “What—why—”

“I’ve come to attend thy work,” she said. “Is it allowed?”

He stared at her. “Why, Boar’s Hill is yours, isn’t it?”

“But the work’s thine, and I’ll not interrupt if it’s not thy wish.”

“Come see what we’re doing,” said Will, “and welcome.”

Her beaming smile was no more threatening than the narrow-eyed queenly gaze of a contented cat. You could tell nothing about her by looking at her, and Will wondered again at how much she seemed to be part of the country itself, an extension of the hill or the mead or the stream. He wondered also that he had not been more wary of her when he had first met her, for her very presence made the other lads from the foundry uneasy. It might have been that he felt so at home by the river, when they did not.

The boys from Mayfield’s stopped their work and stood up as Will approached the casting site, but they hung their heads and shuffled their feet exactly as Will always felt inclined to do in Lib’s presence. Sure now how safe Lib was, and remembering the pointlessness

of his own embarrassment, Will tried to set his companions at ease. "This is our client," he said, "who calls herself Mistress Mab."

Ned and Peter muttered greetings, but would not look Mab in the eye.

"And your names?" she asked.

Will kicked over a wooden bucket of clay that stood by for the furnace. It clattered into one of the bell pits, raucous, and landed upside down in muddy disarray.

"Mayfield's lads are never so careless," she commented, "when at work, Will Parker?"

"I'm not so careless," Will said, "but Lady, a bargain's a bargain. The price is already set, and it'll have to be enough."

"Well, Will Parker," she said mildly, "one does one's best to have the upper hand in any bargain. And so hast thou." And she touched his wrist, where only a few tiny scabs and a pale scarring that would soon fade were all that was left of her attempt to make him her servant.

"This is the simple part of the task," Will said. "If you want to keep an eye on us, it's no use pixie-leading pit-diggers. The real work's going on back at the foundry, where we're shaping the molds."

"Well, but I'd have to be invited there," she said, holding his eyes with her wide, frank gaze. "Wouldn't I?"

"So you would," Will said, remembering her aversion to iron, remembering that some of the whispered rules about her kind as he knew them seemed to hold. Maybe all, now that he thought about it; it was the contradictory ones that collapsed when you tried to apply them. Bells and water.

"It's not my place to invite you," he added, as graciously as he could. He was the only one of them who could look her in the face, and this little thing of itself gave him courage before her. "But the casting will happen here, and you could come when we're ready for that. There's always a crowd attending anyway."

"I'd like that, Will Parker," she said, and gave him her warm smile.

Will saw the molds through the nerve-wracking process of carting them to Boar's Hill. If one broke in transit, there was no repairing it; it would have to be remade. Even when the molds were safely buried in the bell pits, Will still doubted whether the six new bells would really ring together, sing together. You could not know that until the casting was finished. Will had never invested so much of himself in any project before at Mayfield's, and sometimes this project seemed so pointless. The old lost wax molding was obsolete: a lost method to make the bells, a lost space to shape them in. Where would they be hung after they disappeared into the knoll of Boar's Hill, and who would hear them?

Gentry Garland and Lib Mayfield turned out with others from the foundry to watch the casting, which Pusey supervised, though Will himself did the work. Their fey client joined them without their having to warn her of the occasion ahead. "How goes the job, brave boys?" she asked.

"It's been no trouble at all," said Peter, politely, still too awed of her to meet her eye to eye.

But, "Too blessedly easy," said Ned. "I'd swear that someone was working at these pits at night. There was no rock to move, no roots to cut, no struggle."

"It wouldn't have been Mistress Mayfield's brother, trying to hurry the game along?" Mab asked, and laughed in her merry, appealing way. Gentry glared, but Lib and the rest could not help but laugh along, to think of Gentry Garland applying himself to a spade under cover of darkness.

"We've helped in little ways," Mab said. "It pleases us to have a hand in the making. It'll bring us more joy in the ringing, to know this, even if the purity of the sound itself is Mayfield's doing."

"We can only guess at how close in tone they'll be," said Pusey gruffly. "A new peal is never completely true to itself, never virgin. You keep hoping, but it never happens. They're sure to need tuning."

"But Will Parker has an ear for it, eh?"

Will blushed, tongue-tied.

"He hasn't the hand for it yet, though."

"These bells won't need tuning," Mab said, her smile quirking, "if Will Parker rules thee in the casting. Let him do it. The bells are smelten together, poured together, six from one, out of the same furnace. Six made at once to Will Parker's tune: they'll ring together when they're done. I've brought willow of our cutting for driving off the chaff; then let's all hear Will Parker's own true voice put into the making of the bells at the same time."

Pusey looked bewildered. Nervous Will said, "Put my voice into the making?"

"Sing, Will Parker. Sing in thy work. Never mind about thy listeners; sing for thy work, to aid thy work. Sing while these bells are cast, and I warrant it'll be worth thy while. See what thy ear tells you then, when the new bells are broken out of the molds."

He remembered her power, the willow root wrapped over his ankle, the screen of green leaves when all this game started for him. He remembered his fear of being taken, his fear of leaving what he knew. And her command for him to sing, and the dry dread then in the back of his throat, silencing him.

"It's thy gift, Will Parker," she said. "Thy gift, not my curse. Use it."

Will remembered, and knew that there was no more room in him for fear, no need for it. He glanced at Gentry Garland as they began to stoke the furnace, to prepare for the casting; there was no fear there at all as Gentry waited his new life, his new changes. Lib Mayfield stood watching also, amused and pleased at her strange commission and the happy fortune it was bringing her. She enjoyed her work; why fear a thing you enjoy? There was no reason for Will's hands to tremble, for his voice to quaver, whether or not anyone was watching or listening. He took the fairy withy rod in his hand to stir the liquid bronze, and sang for himself and the new bells, for a prayer and for thanks, an anthem that he knew from the choir at St. Cross:

"On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors
required of us song, saying,
Sing us one of the songs of Zion!
How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a strange land?"

But he knew there was no reason for him not to sing.

In later years, when Will grew older and took old Bob Pusey's place, Mayfield's Foundry became known for the pure tones of their bells. Proud folk who lived nearby and thought of the foundry as their own, boasted that Mayfield's had once done the unheard of and cast a virgin ring, six true tones at the first casting. No one was sure, however, which tower this perfect peal hung in. It might have been at one of the villages at Hinksey. Over the rolling country around Boar's Hill, down the green meadows of Hinksey Mead, you can hear bells where there is no tower. Perhaps the sound comes up the river, perhaps it is a trick; but none of the bells around sound so high, nor so pure, when you are hard by them.

Folk from Iffley to Wolvercote will spin any number of fairy stories about the sound of these bells, but the bells do not drive away thunder. They do not protect against demons or enchantment. Their telling joins the worlds of foundry and river. Their voice is a reminder, an invitation, but not a command. The loud, proud, sweetened bronze is a statement, a comment, a protest, a song.

It is Will Parker's song.

SACRED HARP

by Delia Sherman

It seems to me that one of the greatest catastrophes of the twentieth century was the loss of homemade music.

In the "olden days" before stereos or even radio, the only music you had access to was music you made yourself. This meant that if you wanted to hear a Mozart sonata, say, you had to learn to play piano well enough to get some idea of what it sounded like, or find someone else who could. If you wanted to dance, you had to hire someone to play.

And if you wanted to sing for the sheer joy of it, no one looked at you funny.

As soon as it became possible to hear perfect music at the touch of a button, we relinquished our right to make music. Nobody wants to be compared to experts. To me this is like refusing to bake a cake from scratch because it won't look like one from the bakery.

Fortunately, little knots of Resistance singers refuse to knuckle under: the family singing rounds on long car trips, working people who take the time to rehearse for gospel choirs, kids ganging up to bluff their way through Renaissance madrigal books, and lots more, including those Americans, ranging from rural Southern believers to urban Northern enthusiasts, who gather together to read and sing from *The Sacred Harp*. It's a thick book, originally compiled in 1844, and subtitled "The Best Collection of Sacred Songs, Hymns, Odes and Anthems Ever Offered the Singing Public for General Use." This is the music of early America, written by fiercely independent musicians like

Boston shoemaker William Billings, who declared, "I don't think myself confined to any rules of composition laid down by any who went before me." The songs are in three- or four-part harmony. Nineteenth-century singing masters traveled from town to town, teaching a simplified reading of music with notes written out on the staff in different shapes—triangle, square, circle. People could read the shapes more quickly than the notes: hence, it's called "Shape Note singing."

There are lots of recordings of Sacred Harp music, ranging from the gutsy "Rivers of Delight" by Word of Mouth Chorus, to the exquisite "The American Vocalist: Spirituals and Folk Hymns" by Boston Camerata . . . but not a single one is as satisfying as getting together and trying it out yourself.

The first time I heard shape-note singing, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. It was in an old church in Cambridge, Presbyterian, I think, during a rain-storm. In a moment of weakness, I'd promised a friend I'd go hold her hand—she was trying to get out more—and didn't feel I could let her stick. But I was feeling pretty crabby about sloshing my car through Harvard Square and finding a place to park and listening to a bunch of old folkies pretending they were New England Psalmodists. I was not being a lady about it, and Harriet had just told me she wished she'd never asked me to come. Then the singing started. I didn't understand quite what I was hearing, but when the music started to rise, I rose with it, and stayed there for two solid hours.

Harriet decided she liked Cajun dancing better, but I went back to that church every week until I was leading hymns regularly. When I moved away from Boston, I sat in on every choir I could find, all types, all styles. And when I fetched up here, I finally did what I'd wanted to do since the first time I'd led a hymn. I started a choir of my own.

A choir of my own. Listen to me. You'd think it was the Robert Shaw Chorale instead of a bunch of enthusi-

astic amateurs barely able to tell fa from sol. Still, it's mine. I founded it, and I'm the chairman. Our weekly singing is Monday night at seven sharp. People with kids complain that it's a little late for them, but I can't get here from work any earlier, not and get set up, so I just tell them that they'll have to come early. This isn't a social club; it's a Sacred Harp choir, and all I really want out of life is for it to be a decent one. A better job and a steady relationship would be nice, too, but I'll settle for a decent choir.

This Monday night is typical. I show up at 6:45, wishing that I'd had more time to work out my list of hymns. I like singings to have a shape to them, to build musically and even thematically. Since it's traditional to let other people lead hymns of their choosing, I don't have complete control, but I do what I can.

So I've hardly gotten my coat off and taken out the Xeroxed hymns I've found in a nineteenth-century hymnal when Morton comes up to me, looking sheepish. Morton's a sweet guy, if not very interesting—fortyish, scraggly, given to red plaid flannel shirts and playing with his beard.

"Um," he says. "I brought a friend. Hope you don't mind. Jess, this is Gretchen, who started all this. She's our, um, chairman."

What an idiot. He knows he's supposed to call me the night before if he wants to bring someone along so I can tell him no. Now there's a woman I've never seen before standing in front of me with her hand held out, expecting me to smile and welcome her to our happy little family. I ostentatiously juggle my hymnal and my Xeroxes and she lets her hand drop.

Whoever she is, she isn't Morton's girlfriend. She's short and chunky and plain—not homely, plain, like whole-wheat bread. She's wearing denim overalls and a cracked brown leather bomber jacket and her hair is cut really, really short. It's a bad haircut—well, mine is, too; you can't get a good haircut around here—but this is a particular kind of bad haircut I haven't seen since I left Cambridge. There aren't many wommy

living in this neck of the woods, if you know what I mean.

"What do you sing?" I ask, praying she won't say alto. We're overburdened with altos.

"Morton tells me I'm a treble."

It's not a voice you'd expect to come out of a face like hers: a real girl's voice, light and sweet. She grins at me.

"Yeah. I've always wanted to sound like Tallulah Bankhead, but I hate the taste of scotch, and cigarettes make me sick."

I'm replaying her last comment. "Morton tells you? Haven't you done this before?"

"Nope," she says cheerfully. "Sacred Harp Virgin, that's me. Ignorant but willing, all the way up to high 'C.'"

"Great," I say. Morton winces—he's a sensitive soul. "Listen. I'm not in the business of teaching shape-note singing. It's taken me years to get these people marginally up to scratch, and I don't want them thrown off by someone who doesn't know the music." I turn to Morton, who is looking more and more like a Suffering Christ in plaid flannel. "You know the rules, Morton. Since she's here, she can sit and follow in the hymnal, but she can't sing."

"She reads music," Morton says.

"I've taken solfeggio classes," the woman says helpfully.

The clock on the wall tells me it's 6:55. Out of the corner of my eye, I see April and Ben and the Barnabys waiting to get my attention. "I don't have time for this," I say. "Get Melissa to explain shape notes to you—she's in the back now, braids, Fair Isle sweater. First sour note I hear, you shut up for the rest of the evening. *Capisce?*"

For some reason, this makes her grin like a five-year-old. Her teeth are very even. "*Capisco*," she says, and heads off toward Melissa, Morton gloomily in tow.

April and Ben hand me a wad of hymn slips. It's a system I've invented. Everyone who wants to lead a

hymn writes its number and their name on a piece of paper for me to call out. It cuts down on arguments and bad programming.

"OK, people, listen up." Everybody pipes down. "Last call for slips. I've got two left over from last week. Rebecca, the third hymn's yours. When you're all in your places, we'll warm up."

In two-three minutes, they're all seated with their hymnals in their laps and their eyes on me; all except Morton's friend, who's whispering with Melissa.

"Jess," I say sweetly, pulling her name from random access memory. "We're going to do a couple of scales, and then 'The Young Convert' on page 24. The way this works, we sing the notes together first—fa, sol, la, mi, and so forth—and then the words to the verses. Until you learn the names of the shapes, sing la la la." Melissa rolls her eyes, but Jess just looks extra interested. Bitch, I think, and raise the pitch pipe to my lips.

"From fa," I say, and we're off, ragged on the first two notes, melding into a solid unison by the end of the scale. They rise with me from fa to sol to la to fa, climbing steps of shape and sound, seeing the notes as we sing them, just as B. F. White and E. J. King intended, triangle to oval to square to triangle. The sound doesn't stink for cold voices in a cold church hall. I lead them through a few simple exercises. I've got a good voice for leading, if I say so myself. It's got a pretty limited range—sometimes the alto line gets too high for me, and I have to double whatever part is below it for a note or two. But it's strong and clear and well supported. We finish up *The Young Convert's* "wonder, wonder, wonder" exactly on key.

"Not bad," I say. "Albion, 52. 'Come, ye that love the Lord.'"

I always start with a simple, quiet piece, not too high in the treble, not too low in the bass. Five minutes of scales isn't really adequate warm-up for any kind of singing, but we've only got the damn hall for two and a half hours, a half hour of which is wasted on juice and

cookies and sweeping up afterward. It's astonishing how much mess forty people can make in two hours.

Anyway. The purpose of the first piece is to tell me what color the chorus is going to be tonight. I have this theory, see, that voices are like colors. You know how a single color can have a bunch of hues or tints. Yellow, for instance, can be pale and acid, or soft and buttery, or bright and clear, or rich and golden. So can voices. That's why a chorus is like a painting. As every discrete voice blends with the voices around it, note by note, brush stroke by brush stroke, they build up layers of color into a coherent picture, a recognizable melody. Some choruses I've heard paint Rembrandts; some paint Titians or Turners or Monets. Mine paints Warhols. On bad nights, it's more like finger painting, and even on good nights, they tend towards acid greens and neon yellows, Pepto-Bismol pinks and electric blues. I'm trying to bring us up to Grandma Moses.

Tonight, we're almost there. They drag the tempo, of course: all choruses drag slow pieces. But the sound I'm part of is deeper and wider than I've heard before, as if someone's added burnt umber to everything. When we come to the end, everyone looks at each other and smiles.

"196," I say and lead them through the notes. "Alabama" is a simple fusing tune, with one lonely staggered entrance. The singers start out fine and strong on "Angels in shining order stand," and then things fall apart. The basses muff "Those happy spirits," and the trebles straggle after, throwing off the tenors and completely flummoxing the altos, who come in strong and pure at entirely the wrong moment. Everybody flounders on for a measure or so, then falls apart into nervous giggles.

"You," I say. "Jess. That's it."

Melissa frowns. "That's not fair, Gretchen. It wasn't her fault. We all miscounted it. She's holding up the pitch."

The treble section nods vigorously. "Please let her sing, Gretchen," says Alice. "She's really good."

"Listen," says Jess, "I don't want to make trouble. Gretchen's the chairman. She says I shut up, I shut up. No problem." Closing her hymnal, she folds her hands on top of it. Superior bitch. I'm damned if I'm going to let her take the moral high ground on me.

"That's right," I say. "When I say shut up, you shut up. Did anyone hear me say shut up?"

Melissa glares at me; April and Betsy, embarrassed, stare at the floor; Mary and Gwen exchange looks; Jess simply opens her book. I ignore them all and call the next hymn.

"Gretchen? Gretchen." Rebecca's waving over in the altos. "You said the third hymn was mine. I didn't get to lead last week."

She's pouting—she's got that kind of face—and the pout deepens as I explain that we need to do one that works before I let anyone else lead. "Before break, I promise, Rebecca. But you want it to sound good, don't you, not like the hash we just made of 'Alabama'?" She nods unhappily, and during "Mission," single-voicedly pulls the altos down a quarter note. The next two hymns aren't much better. The singers manage to stay pretty much on pitch, but the sound remains muddy and off focus. I finally let Rebecca lead "New Lebanon" just before break, by which time she's so twitchy she can hardly keep the parts together, and brings in the tenors a full measure early on a perfectly straightforward fugue. At this point, she bursts into tears and runs off toward the bathroom, leaving everyone a choice between stopping and limping through the rest of the hymn the best they can. They choose to limp, which shows guts if not good judgment, and then it's over at least and they all make a grand rush for the stage, where April and Morton have set out cartons of o.j. and packages of Oreos, with hard candy and Fisherman's Friends for those whose throats need soothing. The usual break-time buzz of conversation is muted tonight, and nobody hangs around to ask me if I'm going to any concerts this weekend or whether I've heard the new

Hilliard CD. I can't really blame them. I'm not exactly Miss Congeniality, even when I'm in a good mood.

I'm busy axing all the complicated hymns from my program when someone taps me on the shoulder. It's Melissa, looking as determined and grim as a middle-aged woman with pink plastic rabbits on her braids is capable of looking.

"Listen, Gretchen. Rebecca's in the bathroom crying her eyes out and saying she's going to quit. Joshua's beside himself, and Zach says the stress is beginning to get to him. We're amateurs, Gretchen—we're in this because we want to get together and have fun once a week, not because we want a recording contract."

She delivers this speech all in one breath, as if she's afraid she'll forget a point if she slows down. When she's done, she glares at me, daring me to lose my temper. Which I can't do, no matter how much I want to, because a bad choir is better than no choir, and no choir is what I'll have if my singers all decide to take up a less demanding hobby. So I swallow all the things that come to my mind about amateurs in general and oversensitive crybabies and New Age wimps in particular, and I say, "You want me to talk to Rebecca?"

"No," says Melissa. "I think I've got her calmed down. Just lighten up, will you? And try to remember that I'm on your side."

"Yeah," I say. "Thanks."

Melissa sighs; the pink plastic rabbits bob and disappear. A moment later, I catch sight of her in a knot of trebles: April, Gwen, and Morton's friend. Jess. Troublemaker. The straw that breaks the camel's back. The feather that unbalances the scale. She isn't really doing anything wrong, but I can feel her in every piece we sing, coloring it with her uncertainty. I frown at her through the straggle of bodies returning to their seats. Catching my eye, she smiles back. I want to kill her.

Henry leads the first hymn after break, and April and Ben the two after that. I'm not stupid. I know they're all out there hating me right now, like a bunch of

teenagers who've been told that they're not working up to their potential in school.

They work really hard to show me that it's all my fault, and they make a pretty good job of it. I mean, they're almost on pitch, and their entrances are reasonably solid, and since break, they seem to have learned how to count. Maybe it's the o.j. or the hard candy. Or maybe they're right, and I'm a bad musician and a worse leader. Maybe they'd be better off if I just walked out of here and never came back, took up clog dancing or something, where I could make a fool only of myself. They seem to like that Jess woman; maybe they'll elect her chairman, once she's learned the names of the notes.

I wish they'd all go to hell.

I've set "The Weary Pilgrim" as the next hymn, but I change my mind and call "Melancholy Day."

The words to shape-note hymns come in four main flavors: praise, resignation, entreaty, and admonition. By secular humanist standards, they're pretty unenlightened, and "Melancholy Day" is one of the most unenlightened of the lot: "Death, 'tis a melancholy day to those who have no God, When the poor soul is forced away to seek her last abode. In vain to heav'n she lifts her eyes, for guilt, a heavy chain, Still drags her downward from the skies, to darkness, fire, and pain." It has a good, rousing melody, too, and a bitch of a running fugue.

Nobody's cutting anybody any slack. I beat out a brisk pace, and they leap after my hand like hungry dogs. They're mad and on their mettle and all warmed up, and by God, they're singing the hell out of "Melancholy Day." The basses roar deep in the shadows; the trebles, brightened by a clear, full-throated voice that has to be Jess, highlight each curve of the fugue with high Gs and B flats. Everyone's looking more cheerful. As I release the final note, I catch sight of Jess. Her cheeks are red, her eyes are unnaturally bright, her bad haircut is standing straight up in front, and she's grinning like the village idiot. I feel the corners of my

mouth twitch. What the hell, I think, and say, "Want to try one, Jess?"

Melissa, who had gone back to her usual cow-like placidity, bristles up again. Behind me, in the tenor section, I hear Morton go, "Oh, shit." I get mad again.

"I don't know what you guys want from me," I say. "I'm making an offer here, in good faith, and you act like I've come out for shooting baby ducks. If Jess wants to lead the next hymn, she can. If Morton wants to lead it, or Melissa, or Fred or Ben or April, they can. They'll have to. Because that was my last hymn. You guys give me a swift pain. You don't care about the music or how hard I've worked or anything but your Tuesday night get-togethers. Well, now you can get together all you want and talk about what a bitch I am. Have fun. I'm quitting."

I close my hymnal and snatch up my coat and my boots and my scarf and my clipboard and my Xeroxed sheets and stalk out of the hall to the church porch, where I dump everything on a bench. I can hear the wind herding sleet around the corner of the building. I may be mad enough to cut my own social throat, but I'm not mad enough to walk out into a winter storm without a coat. It's cold in the porch, and I'm shivering as I pull on my boots and cram my watch cap down over my eyebrows, and wrap my muffler up over my mouth and button myself into my gray down coat that makes me look like the Michelin Tire man. I tamp my papers even and go to put them in my backpack.

No backpack. Not on the bench, not on the floor. I've left it in the church hall, and if I don't want to trudge out to my car in blowing snow with my arms full of loose papers and risk the cover of my hymnal bleeding all over my gray down coat, I'm going to have to go inside and get it.

I wish I was dead.

And I go on wishing it as I open the door and stalk back into the hall I left so melodramatically five minutes ago. Nobody's moved except Melissa, who is

standing in the middle of the square with her hymnal in her hand. On my side, my ass.

I step into the square. My backpack is under my chair, grinning a gap-zippered and mocking grin. "Gretchen," says Melissa slowly. "We were about to sing 'Rose of Sharon.' Will you lead it?"

"Nope," I say. "I just quit."

"It's your favorite hymn," she says.

"I know it's my favorite hymn. That's why I don't want to hear it tortured to death."

"If you're quitting, what do you care?"

I can't read her tone, and I can't read the choir. They look solemn, almost grim, but I'm damned if I can tell what they're thinking. Probably that I look like an idiot standing there sweating in my Michelin Man coat and my watch cap and my muffler, and that I'll look like an idiot whether I take Melissa at her word or walk out again. A lose-lose situation. I'm used to those. The trick is to do the thing they really don't want you to do, which, in this case, is to stay.

"OK," I say. "'Rose of Sharon' it is. 'I am the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley.'"

Silence. Silence while I shed my winterproofing; silence while I find my place and my pitchpipe; silence while I raise my hand. On the downbeat the trebles come in on sol, round and clear as a Raphael madonna. Five measures later, we join them on the upbeat, sol and fa. Our voices blend, tone on tone, layer on layer, shivering with overtones like heat lightning in the desert. We're one big instrument, an organ piped through forty throats, sending our hymn to heaven. The music swells to bursting, and then it does burst, and the air trembles and explodes into an angel.

Although I've never seen an angel before and I'm not what you'd call a religious person, it never crosses my mind to question what I'm seeing. It's more beautiful than I could have imagined, with eyes like suns and hair like glory, and wings like a thousand rainbows flickering all around it. Still singing, I gawk up at it;

our eyes meet, the world inverts, and suddenly I'm suspended between heaven and earth, floating in music.

The first thing I notice is that I'm happy. Happy? Ecstatic. Blissful. Joy runs through me like blood, burning in my cheeks and pulsing in the soft feathers of my wings. Joy informs my vision, sharpens it so that I can see every scratch in the heavy beams upholding the church tower, every tiny insect living in its cracks and corners, every prayer that has been prayed here. I can see the choir, mouths and throats working, a fourfold unity every bit as mysterious as Divinity. I see each pore of their skin, each hair of their heads, each nail, each eyelash in all their fleshly presence. And beyond and behind that, I can see their souls, their complex, eternal selves. I could understand them in a myriad ways, but the clearest to me is paintings and music. Melissa is a mastiff painted by Freida Kahlo and scored by Aaron Copeland. Morton is a Monet garden set to Wagner. Jess is a Dürer engraving of a hare twitching its nose to Philip Glass. Each holds one shape for a moment and then drifts as I watch into another form, another mode, another composition of line and spirits different from the one preceding it, but allied. Secure in eternity, I contemplate the multiplicity of the souls and the singleness of the purpose that have called and embodied me.

In the center of the choral square a single figure stands islanded. She's the horse from Picasso's *Guernica*, angular and agonized, and the horse from *Guernica* she remains, petrified in terrified fury. The music that defines her is a shape-note hymn, repeated endlessly. As I focus on her, the melody drops away and leaves only the words, chanted in a voiceless howl: "And must I be to judgment brought and answer in that day For every vain and idle thought and every word I say?"

That's not right, I think. She's got it all wrong. And I reach down and brush her cheek with one of my thousand wings. "Rejoice," I sing. "Rise, my soul, and

stretch thy wings, thy better portion trace. Rise from all terrestrial things towards heaven, thy native place."

Below me, Rose of Sharon paces slowly to its end. We end up in a perfect chord, la, sol, fa, fa, so absolutely on pitch that harmonics sound the octaves above and below it, as if the whole heavenly choir were singing with us. The figure in the square—a woman atomized, a Picasso or a Bracque—closes her mouth, brings down her hand, and the tower is empty, the singers silent, and I'm standing among them, my cheeks tingling.

"Wow," says someone, breaking the mood of exaltation, or at least making it bearable. People start to breathe and move again, fold their chairs, clean up the stage, put on their coats, and drift slowly toward the door. Nobody's talking a lot, but everybody's smiling, and there's a lot of spontaneous hugging. They're like that around here, even without angels.

The hall is almost empty when I finally pull myself together. Melissa's still there, and Morton and Jess, putting on their coats. As I collect my belongings from the middle of the empty floor, Melissa comes up to me. Her plastic rabbits are tucked away under a huge purple knitted tam with a bright green bobble. She shakes my hand.

"A great singing, Gretchen," she says. "I look forward to next week."

"Yeah," I say. "Me, too. You want to warm us up?"

Melissa smiles, and I think I hear an echo of *Appalachian Spring*. "Sure," she says. "Bye."

Jess gives my arm a punch in passing. "Thanks," I say, and she nods.

"Nice music. I'll be back."

"Good," I say.

Morton holds out his arms, offering an embrace. I intercept his right hand and shake it firmly, vaguely relieved that seeing an angel hasn't turned me into an indiscriminate hugger.

Outside, the wind has let up and the sleet has softened into snow. Everything's white-feathered—the

gray stone church, the parking lot, the markers in the old graveyard. The ground is cold and slick and treacherous underfoot. But as I pick my way carefully toward my car, I'm humming "Rose of Sharon," and my face is warm with the touch of an angel's wing.

DONE BY THE FORCES OF NATURE

by *Ray Davis*

For years now, people have been demanding truly *American* fantasy. But nobody's sure where it's supposed to come from. Native American mythology? Elvis? L. Frank Baum tried a little girl from Kansas. . . .

Still, most American fantasists cling to traditional settings. After all, most of us were raised on European history and fairy tales. Does that, then, doom us to endless retellings of Arthurian sagas and wizards with unpronounceable names?

Let's look at music for a second. For a long time, the classical music world believed that there would never be a great indigenous American music—even though, as early as the 1890s, Europeans started borrowing madly from us. A wandering composer named Dvořák took a train across the U.S. and went back to Czechoslovakia with a suitcase packed with themes for his "New World" Symphony. In the 1920s Jazz and Blues hit Europe like the Second Coming—heavy hitters like Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Milhaud and Ravel all worked these American art forms into their music. American jazz musicians still make better money in Holland than they do at home. Nowadays, of course, pop music is our major export: I was bummed on a recent trip to France to hear nothing in the charming little bistros but the latest hit from "Mi-kell Zhak-son!"

There's a power to our own music; and the newest, most exciting sounds come often from African-Americans—these days, especially from urban streets.

Since slavery times, African-Americans have raised "signifying" or "doing the dozens" to a fine art of quick-witted, quick-tongued insult back and forth. Now it's set to music and called Rap or Hip-Hop—with driving rhythms, and words that lash and sting. (This is not unique to that culture: Irish bards were actually supposed to have killed each other in contests of poetry called *flytings*.)

Ray Davis says:

" 'Rap music' could be said to happen when the occasional rapping over a musical background (which always existed) became a genre, with all that implies: specialists, virtuosi, communities, lines of influence and argument, special marketing slots. . . . 'Hip-hop' was a name for the cultural renaissance in urban areas in the early eighties: massive innovations in graffiti, music, and dance. All but the musical aspect proved difficult to commercialize, so now we just hear about 'hip-hop' as music. Inasmuch as 'hip-hop' gets contrasted to 'rap,' it's in an 'sf' vs. 'sci-fi' way: people that talk about 'rap' are not cool; people that talk about 'hip-hop' are. But I don't have much patience for that kind of thing. . . .

"I love words, dancing, and canny use of resources, so I started following 'old school' hip-hop culture when it became visible to me in Philadelphia back in 1981. . . . The usual history starts it in New York, springing from the same youthful 'let's put on a show, I've got a turntable' low-cost urges that birthed reggae's similar MC and DJ combination. . . . Clubs and cassettes were the fastest means of distribution and the main prods to competition. . . .

"This story starts in a fantasy version of the industry circa 1983, pre-jazz-fusion and pre-gangsta-superstar. Since then, of course, the pressures on its musicians have gotten even weirder.

"I would like to acknowledge the Jungle Brothers for the title of 'Done by the Forces of Nature' and for imagery taken from their song 'Kool Accordin 2 a Jungle Brother.' inspiration may also be found in the works of Roxanne Shanté, the career of The Real Roxanne, the history of Boogie Down Productions, L. L.

Cool J's 'Cheesy Rat Blues,' and the intellectual and musical acumen of Def Jef, the Coup, and the Poetess, among many many others. The last line of Chi-Z's section was adapted from the sole recording of Eddie 'One-String' Jones, an itinerant musician."

There must have been a street called South Street once, laid out as part of the human city. Perhaps the Fay were in retreat at that time, or their jungle hadn't grown so far north. But now South Street is a transitional neighborhood with shifting boundaries, where shards of human and inhuman life overlap, scrape, and fracture. A place of exchange, it seems exhausted with exchange, littered with tatters of ancient song and skittering keen hungers.

Most inhabitants find themselves carried to South Street by a natural drift too subtle to be quantized into decisions. But even those who come seeking some particular security or excess eventually find themselves, at their most successful, at a loss to go on, or to go back, or to do more than cling to that very pain of loss. This is the state called glamour: a befogging ache that flares into stabs of drunken fire; the gift of the Fay and a passage to their jungle.

The gift of humans? Small sacrifices: of artifact and labor, of immediacy and impermanence.

City dwellers picture the Fay as delicate twists of things dredged in milk and sequins, but they can come big as people and sharp as tomcat piss. Oddly furred and furrowed, the Fay seem most at ease when most transparent, most powerful when most distant. They move slowly and jerkily, as if they know their time's almost up but they're too wound down to use it.

Still, they can dazzle a person, if a person bothers to look.

I. Karen

Karen got caught looking late one night.

She and Demmi had filled a cassette side with

diminishing retakes of Chi-Z's new song over familiar instrumentals, and, needing some peace from Chi-Z's nattering, Kareen had begged off the usual post-playback autopsy. Demmi'd left with her, passing by Chi-Z's glare with a bland "Later, doll." Not that Chi-Z'd stoop to asking Demmi to stay. He'd just complain about it a week later is all: Chi-Z thought whines gained dignity with age.

Chi-Z's shaggy gray two-story was uphill from a long-ago burnt-down block, and the two girls strolled its inward declivities, comparing family hassles and personal enemies, till Kareen cooled enough to broach the evening's practice session: "You know, Chi-Z's collected himself a fat stack of records to jump off from, but someone better tip him off soon *we* got the words."

"One of us has, anyway," said Demmi.

"Shit," Kareen offered as embarrassed disproof.

"No, I know both you well enough to know what's what. Chi-Z was feeling a little raggeder than usual just 'cause of harvest time coming in."

"Back up in the city, we're probably in winter already," said Kareen, looking at the backyard arbor gone wild around them, the stunted fruit trees a patch of fall between edgy spring greens and a summery patch of high pale brittlewheat.

"Not that king of harvest," Demmi said in her amused aren't-you-a-babe-in-the-woods tone. "Didn't you hear about Preach coming out for a tour?"

"Not really my kind of music," Kareen said.

"The music's not what's got Chi-Z jumpy. It's what Preach brings out the jungle with him and what he takes back. You heard of Dox anyway, right?"

Fuck if Kareen really felt like answering, but she knew Demmi meant no offense. "Preach's producer, I expect."

"And manager and agent and more-than-half-Fay talent scout. What's got Chi-Z fleabit is he's got a connection to Dox and Preach while they're here. It'll be a good opportunity for us. And for you."

Apparently, Kareen was meant to express anticipatory gratitude. Without comment or hurry, she struck off into the sharp dip at the end of the lot, where everything went to common seed. Demmi trailed behind her.

Down the slope, blackberries brambled through ash-colored crown-of-thorn. "Hey, now," Kareen said facetiously as she snagged her sleeve on a vine, "you stay in your place, I'll go back to mine."

"What you expect it to do, you steal its babies?" said Demmi.

The berries in the shade at the bottom were sweetest, and easy to get at. Strange the rats and birds hadn't raided them. In the low midnight light, Kareen's red sweatshirt looked black, and she couldn't tell if she'd stained it. Demmi, who seemed graceful enough to dance around raindrops, probably didn't worry much about trivial dangers like berry juice.

As they gathered and ate, a companionable silence drew over them, comfortable as a quilt. Which Demmi, with typical South Street impatience, kicked away first. "I reckon I'm filled for the night."

"You go on, then. I'll digest some here." Besides, Kareen felt like working out rhymes.

They embraced and bragged on each other a last time. Kareen closed her eyes to listen to Demmi brushing the weeds away. Like having a bowl of quiet cupped over you. Not like city quiet; here there was always the jungle noise ready to step in.

Try it slow and chanty, wet in the throat. "Capsule'll capture you . . . catch you like a cat will . . . kitty-corner . . . coroner . . ." Corona?

She felt self-conscious without an audience, kept hushing down, but helped along by the occasional rattle of night birds, she worked out an oddly abstract chorus and first and last verses. She shut her eyes again for a run-through.

When she opened them, everything had outlines. Even the mist drew itself in, clenched. Kareen felt more exhausted than she would've thought possible just seconds before. Wanted to prop against a trunk for

a spell, or trample a dogsbed in the brittlewheat. Or, more sensibly, to walk home quick and have done with the night.

She guided herself out of the lot by a street lamp's glow. When she emerged, she stopped, a little staggered by the relief of free air, and looked at the street to steady herself. And stayed looking.

She looked into the reflection of the halogen light, looked till the asphalt wore thin over white heat. Then she looked on till it was melted through. The hole was spreading. And then she barely broke off.

Her legs were trembling; she'd been there a long while.

What was it?

A craving for something. She didn't know what, but the reflection was the closest thing she could think of, and where would she go when it went out?

Her gaze stole back. The illusion had already been submerged some by the morning sun. Watch out little god 'cause the big god's moving in. She watched the contrast continue to fade, and she felt she traveled with it a ways. She heard the bass of her pulse quicken and dampen into a wavering tone with the timbre of woodwinds. Her lips formed words.

Something was in her way, clucking like a cold motor. Kareen's eyes stuttered as they focused: round bestubbled middle-aged baby face: that friend her father had had, the one who had trouble talking: Cottonmouth. "Oh, my, Kareen," he said. "You're so quiet a party hardly knows you're around, and then you land in something like this."

He seemed necessary but not entirely welcome, an intrusion; his words, meaningless, harmless, might've as well been birdsong. Sunlight flared around him and through the sky, and Kareen realized that she'd gotten distracted and lost her place in the road.

"Come on," Cottonmouth told her, "we'll get you away from here." Kareen flinched. "Just for a bit, Kareen. Bad neighborhood for you right now. Come on, I'll put you up. Too early in the day for a fight."

Though she shied away from the gin smell, she let him guide her by her arm.

After a few blocks, Cottonmouth grumbled, "Hope you break out of this soon. Last thing I need is changeling bait." He smacked his dry lips, and Kareen looked over at him.

Not taking his eyes off South Street, he fumbled a knife and a bit of aromatic branch one-handed from his side pouch, lifted them to his lips, and trimmed the soft tip of the branch into his mouth. He chewed slowly while he fumbled knife and branch back, then spat and continued, his lisp punctuating his speech like a beetle's thrum: "People say you're smart. So maybe you got some slack to work with. I don't know; you always quiet when I see you. Or dreamy, I bet folks called you. 'Tis how you got in this fix. Look at those big eyes. Oh, you're in a fix, all right. Don't feel so bad yet, do you? You will."

Sure enough, the first layer of dream broke around three a.m., with the whoops, gunshots, and shattered glass attendant on a nearby bar's closing. After an hour of feverish cramping, in desperate surmise Kareen pulled down the dishcloth Cottonmouth had draped over the rod angled into the window. Her burning eyes cooled against the half-moon's light, and, convinced that she was herself somehow halved as well, she sent up a moan, and finding that this keening dulled her fright, she slowly softened it, alternating breath and hum. And so to sleep. And to light.

Next morning, Kareen woke up groggy but angry. She stomped around lost on the way to the bathroom; in the cold gritty shower, she slapped her hands against the tile; when she opened the bathroom door and found Cottonmouth waiting there, she actually hissed at him, and he jumped back to let her pass.

Dressed, she waited at the warped and splintery sideboard, which seemed to demarcate the kitchen. When he showed, she asked him, "I'm in glamour, right? I can't think straight."

"Mm," Cottonmouth agreed, looking tired, and sat out new brown bread, a knife, a pitcher of dusty-looking milk, and two mugs.

"What the fuck do I do now?"

"Work," said Cottonmouth.

"With you, right? Just like Chi-Z, except you know I got no choice now. I bet you got connections with this Dox freak, too, right?"

"That I do," he said. He filled a rusty kettle with rusty water and set it on a burner. "We aren't going to talk to Dox yet, though. Got too much to do round here first."

A new wave of loss and pain bullied her under the surface. Kareen didn't know much about glamour, but she knew enough to know she had to get to the jungle. Where Preach was coming from and going back to. She clutched the bread knife hard to hold back from screaming or moaning or whatever.

Cottonmouth dashed a jot of dark rum into his mug, poured milk into both mugs, and went on as if nothing was happening. "Preach got his own costs to defray. He gets caught up short, you get tossed like scraps to a dog." He sipped his laced milk as if he didn't want to rush the experience. "You need the Fay now, so we got to be more careful than this Krayzee whoever, get over the border on our own. Get fixed here first. This week and next studio rates are cheap, everyone else dangling off Dox and his boys."

She needed to follow through on this. That thought, ambiguous though it was, was very clear.

("They notice the club play," Cottonmouth was saying.)

The anaesthetic didn't cover everything, then. Just where she'd been, as if her nerves had been remolded. Aiming at new appetites. When she thought about "following through"—on her songs, to the Fay—she felt as giddy with fear and pleasure as when she'd first acted on a crush on a boy.

And it made sense that she'd have to be just as god-damned careful. Go slow on the outside, double time

on the inside. "If only I wasn't so knotted up," she said aloud. She set down the knife, and pulled some bread from the belly of the loaf.

"Good morning," said Cottonmouth gravely, sliding her mug forward. "Thing you got to remember through this shit, we know the Fay want you."

Kareen felt moisture cooling on her face. "It's nice to be wanted, I guess."

"Mm," said Cottonmouth. "That's one charm going to wear off in a hurry. You're clearing up real good. Get a bucket of black tea in you and we might even start work tonight."

Kareen forced herself to drink the milk, her mind racing at the thought of getting into a professional studio. Every couple of swallows, she looked up to see Cottonmouth watching her with mopish eyes; he didn't drop his gaze.

Noises came down the hall, Kareen's name among them.

"Word traveled," muttered Cottonmouth. He opened the door a bit and called softly, "Over here, children."

"Where you got her?" Demmi asked Cottonmouth through the door, while Chi-Z waved a thwacking big piece of vine wood behind and said, "Start talking, granny." Then they saw Kareen.

Kareen looked back into the apartment. "Water's boiling," she said.

"You want tea?" Cottonmouth asked, opening the door wide. "Plenty to go 'round."

"Fuck the tea!" said Chi-Z while Demmi shook her head and glared.

"That's the trouble with this neighborhood," Cottonmouth said. "Kids got no respect."

Demmi shoved past him and pointed her index finger toward the floor as if training a puppy. "Kareen, why didn't you call us? Chi-Z's just about set up a meeting with Preach at the Meriodional."

"Don't be whoring around on us now, Kareen," said Chi-Z. "You drop out now, you lost your last chance."

"What d'you mean, 'whoring'?" asked Kareen.

"Chi-Z damn it!" shouted Demmi, and then held her

palms up imploringly. "Kareen, remember, we're all in this together."

"Maybe," Kareen said, a bit softer. "But we got to get out of it one at a time. Cottonmouth, you talk to them, OK?" And she retreated to another room.

She came back when she heard the door slam.

"First pot's about ready." Cottonmouth looked at her and laughed. "Kareen, you got a hell of a jaw when you stick it out! Make that mood rhyme, you'll be just fine. All you need's a good flyting to get the poison out."

"Flithing?" Kareen said, misled by Cottonmouth's lisp.

"Flyting. Kind of smushes together 'fly' and 'fighting' and 'flay.' It means playing the dozens. Battle of the MCs."

Which led Kareen to write "Flyte of the Killer B," and to salt the word through her freestyle. She worried about overkill, but Cottonmouth pointed out that expansion of the common vocabulary is a poet's greatest honor.

II. Chi-Z

The Meridional was a towering slab of black volcanic rock, hollowed out and honeycombed into rooms and gardens. Thick ivy covered one side, and painfully crooked Chinese pines pressed Spanish-moss-gloved knuckles against the other. The idea was to make Fay visitors feel at home and humans feel like they were away someplace.

As children, Chi-Z and his friends had played beneath it and dared each other to dart into the lobby to touch its blood-moss carpet. Much later, Chi-Z and Demmi would sometimes break into an expensive suite, where few guests ever came, and use it as a make-out spot. Once, it'd been raked clean, meaning a VIP must be on the way, but Demmi'd said, what the hell, they might appreciate the show. As it turned out, Chi-Z finished in plenty of time.

The night they were to meet Preach was the first

time either had come to the hotel intending to attract attention to themselves: bribing, namedropping, bluffing their way through to the eighth floor Vine Room. It felt uncomfortable, but exciting, like they were starting real life.

Inside the party, discomfort and excitement intensified, and Chi-Z felt instantly exhausted. First you'd be stuck like a fly in incomprehensibly dense crowds, then get dropped into space so free you'd want to jump back for safety. The dips and rises of the floor were unpredictable. The mint underfoot was dizzying. The Meridional had high ceilings, but Chi-Z couldn't see anything up past eight feet or so, since the beeswax candles were too dim and the hanging vines were only luminescent in scattered spots. Most disconcerting was the noise: not the roar with beats that you get in a human crowd, but a headache-inducing high buzz shattered by even higher shrieks, bass courtesy of the room's reverb: they must've sealed the pores of the rock with acrylic or something.

Steering Demmi at random, Chi-Z brushed against something dry and cold. He looked and saw a Fay, roiling around inside a suit of black leather. Moving but solid. At least as solid as a person. "Sorry," Chi-Z yelled, wondering if he'd touched the leather sleeve or the tufted hand. The Fay's hum got choppiest. Chi-Z spotted a bar table carved out of the rough rock. God help you, you get knocked into that when you're drunk.

Demmi yelled, "Maybe they're over there. Where it's kind of darker."

Chi-Z grabbed a vodka and ice for the road, and they pushed through.

Their connection was Fawn, a fairly well-off young man who hoped to become an impresario. Body-built, hesitant in his voice, usually shiny pale in shiny clean short sleeves and baggies, tonight his muscles were strangled in full-length jacket and pants, and he was bright pink. He made a little wiping motion in the air to hold them back when he saw them.

Chi-Z said to Demmi, "That's Dox with him. The

tall one, see? Shit, looking up close, you still can't tell what he is." Dressed well in gray; opaque, but too light somehow: tethered down, not weighed down.

The clump around Dox thinned at one side, and Fawn motioned to them. Chi-Z took Demmi's arm and squeezed into the magic circle. The noise shut off with a little click, like Chi-Z's ears had popped.

"Dox, Dox," said Fawn. "This is Demmi I was telling you about, and this is her producer, Cheesy, right?"

"No, man, it's 'Kie-Z.' It's Greek, you hear what I'm saying?"

Dox barely glanced at them. "Yeah, good, we need a new around-the-way girl."

"What happened to the old one?" asked Demmi.

"She broke a leg," said Dox. Nobody laughed. The brief silence brought Preach over, looking exactly like he always has, year after year, hard cheekbones and soft beard and eyes like a cynical doe. This was it, Chi-Z thought, thrilled.

Keeping their attention while it was available, good girl Demmi said, "Yeah, I guess you get those reckless types all right. I always wonder if any of us real steady ones ever even make the crossover."

Preach said, "Of course you can cross. No bordercheck but right here," and he pressed on her forehead with what looked like very soft fingertips. "Really, there's no difference once you get high enough up."

Chi-Z nodded.

Dox said, "That's where South Street has it over other places. Some places the Fay get sour dispositions, and there's no getting over at all."

Demmi said, "Yeah but—now I'm not saying it's on purpose, but some people seem to give up something when they cross. Like they get leached away after a while."

Chi-Z shook his head with a worried look.

Preach said, "There's a lot of leeches in this business."

Dox said, "Some people say they'd sell their soul to make it. Now, I don't say that, but say it cost your soul. Well, I say eventually it gets lost no matter what. Why not rent the nag out for rides and then sell it for meat instead of leaving it out back doing nobody good? That's how I see it."

Demmi said, "I hear that."

"Well, good," said Dox. "Now, the portable studio's set up in the Players Suite, and we'll be having a sort of private audition party around about midnight. You come over there and we'll try you out."

Demmi said, "I'll do that. And Chi-Z can bring some of his tapes."

Dox paused, then smiled expansively and said, "Yeah, hell, let them all in."

"We might have a spot for another girl if you know one," Preach told Demmi. "Right, Dox? Doesn't have to be a beauty queen, long as she can flow."

Dox said, "Someone real human. But smart."

"Can't get better than Demmi," Chi-Z said.

"You don't know anyone else?" Dox asked. "Well." Chi-Z couldn't read his expression, but it was aimed at Preach, so it must've been important. "Well, if one comes up, you bring her here."

Demmi told Chi-Z, "You get the tapes and I'll meet you at the audition." Then she winked at him.

Why hadn't Demmi reminded him about the demo tapes before? Irritating to make the extra trip, but by the time he was headed back to the Meridional, Chi-Z felt good again, poised. It was a chilly night, bulking up for the rains. Good excuse for him to keep his hands in his pockets, guarding the cassettes.

He was ready. This was the culmination of years of honing his skills, training his protégées. Hard dues-paying, but worth nothing without talent. Have to have both the talent and the discipline. And Kareen didn't have either, you get right down to it. With or without the glamour saddle slapped on, no way she would hack it in the jungle.

Sharp? Book sharp, yeah, but Street stupid, and spoiled as jungle fish. Kareen and Fluffy Peter Cottonballs, now there's two of a kind. I never liked that greasy old fuck. Standing right at the edge of the dancers like, "Oh, I like to watch." Always jerking off over all these people no one ever heard of, and you know what? They never heard of him, either. Biggest do-nothing lump of fake elephant shit. . . .

Someone jostled into him hard and muttered, "Watch it, faggot."

"What?" said Chi-Z, surprised.

The guy had two other guys on his left. They all wore red and black shirts, black slacks—with a black stripe? "Don't you touch me, fag. I don't like fags touching me."

Some other people walking from the same direction stopped. In the dark, Chi-Z couldn't tell if they were with the first group or not. "Yo, I didn't touch you," he said.

"I'm loaded," the guy said, getting real close face-to-face with Chi-Z. His eyes looked absolutely cracked. "You hear what I'm saying? I'm loaded, and your faggot ass is on ice." He stepped forward.

Chi-Z stepped back. "Look, I got no time for this."

The other people not saying a word. Looking from a distance. Like the shrunken attendants of a pharaoh. Or naturalists at a mating ritual.

"You a tough little suck, huh? Like a flea. So jump."

Chi-Z grabbed the invitation, walked fast around the guy and through the biggest gap he could see in the others.

He heard from behind him, "Yeah, you better run." Then he heard laughter.

The walls, floors, and ceilings of the Players Suite were smoothed with clay, painted with clouds of black and silver. For tonight they'd somehow replaced one of the walls with a slab of plexi, and installed thick soundproofing doors all over. Or, who knows, maybe the Players Suite was always like that; depends what

kind of playing they did. Through the plexi, Chi-Z saw Demmi chanting into a microphone. When she saw him she waved him back, her flow unbroken.

A well-balanced herbal stink drifted from the picture window, where a couple of young blades were getting blunted, conversing from hoarse whisper to howl and back. Chi-Z tried to mingle but was feeling edgy after the confrontation outside. Wild boys always seemed to get wilder when the Fay showed up in force. Cycles of nature tended to sync up that way.

When Demmi came out, he asked her what they'd had her sing. She said, "Just whatever," and excused herself: she needed something to drink, she was dying. Someone else went in.

Who was he supposed to talk to? "Fuck this," Chi-Z said softly, and let himself into the production room.

Inside, Preach, Dox, some girls, and a bunch of Fay were talking in broken whispers. The loudest thing there was that high mechanical noise which followed the Fay around like B.O.

Not wanting to intrude, Chi-Z waved out one of his cassettes as a signal. Dox nodded at him. Chi-Z started forward, but Dox shook his head sharply and said, "When this one's done."

It hit Chi-Z that no speaker was on and no one wore headphones. No one could possibly be hearing the boy at the microphone behind the plexiglass.

After the boy went away, one of the prettiest girls surprised Chi-Z by taking his tape. "Hey," he started to protest, but it looked like she knew what to do with it. She bent over some controls, and a hiss filled the room, and then the demo. Chi-Z suddenly realized that one of the other songs would have been a better choice, but his strongest work put Kareen way up front, and she hadn't given him time to figure out how to take her out. He smiled and nodded to the music.

A minute into it, just when the toy piano cut in, someone said "Christ." It was one of a couple of Fay; he didn't even know they used the word.

"Yeah," said Chi-Z, "it's—"

"It's a mess, man," said a young man in a toneless voice, "it's fucking embarrassing."

Chi-Z knew what was wrong, he'd been through this before with other people. "No, no, it's just the equipment, you got to listen close."

"Close?" the young man said. "You already got it so close it's spraying me."

"Then you got to listen farther away," said Chi-Z, grinning at the controls and about to ask about the knobs to the left of the last bass calibrator.

Dox said, "Get rid of him." The realization clunked into Chi-Z all assembled: He'd blown one chance; you get no more. With the pointless detached fascination you might derive from a twitch, he heard his own voice start to protest.

Dox wasn't fascinated: "Get rid of him, get the motherfucker out of here. I got work to do." Then he turned his back. Might as well paint a target on it and hand out party-favor bullets, thought Chi-Z, blinking fast and hard as a man and woman approached.

"OK, OK," said Chi-Z. "Just tell me where Demmi is, I got to get her first, don't I?"

"Demmi?" asked the woman. "Think that's the friend of that girl," said the girl who'd taken the tape. "Don't worry about her; she ain't worried about you," said the young man.

Ripped off again. Fuck if she'd get far without him, though. He'd have to make it all by himself, that's all, make it easier without the extra weight; he'd grind past Dox, too, keep that twenty percent for himself. Yeah, it hurt, but he'd make it, he knew that. He was alive, wasn't he?

III. Cottonmouth

A knock, persistent, regular, woke Cottonmouth. Without bothering to put on his robe, he opened the door.

Two Fay were there, one draped in gray silk, and one in brown.

At least they'd waited outside instead of just showing up over his sofa.

"Hell," Cottonmouth said. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Winter?" guessed the gray Fay in a voice that burbled as if it was under slush.

Cottonmouth reminded himself not to invite them in. Because if he did, he was sure he would forget and offer them something to eat, and then they would offer something in exchange, and then where would he be? "What can I do you for?" he asked, straddling the doorway in his breezy boxers.

"We would be interested in recordings," said the talkative Fay, while the other one continued to simmer.

"Your friend's just along to help carry those hundreds of recordings, huh?" Cottonmouth said.

"There are that many?" asked the Fay.

Cottonmouth snorted and coughed. His tongue was painfully dry. "Excuse me," he said. "A joke. No recordings yet. You have to wait. Won't be long, though. Hope you like them. Excuse me now. Got to make those recordings. I'll call you." He shut the door.

He leaned against the closed door and stroked his jumping belly, trying to soothe himself down. Well, that's basically good, he thought, that's real good. Actual real-life expressed desire. Don't see that every day. Wonder if it's too early for a beer.

"Who you talking to?" yelled Kareen from the bedroom. Cottonmouth had hoped she was exhausted enough from last night's session to sleep through the noise.

"Two little Fay come a-calling," he yelled back. "They're getting into position, honey."

"Tell 'em to hurry it up."

Guess it wasn't that early after all.

The Low-End Studio, like Cottonmouth's apartment building, was on the mostly-city side of South Street. That twilight, they took a long swing oceanside to check out one of Cottonmouth's publicity moves.

Right past the Doggy Diner, as they entered a cradle of massive black maple, Kareen opened her mouth as if to say something. Then her expression abruptly changed. She hugged herself, bending over deep.

Cottonmouth held her around the shoulders, not too tight, waiting for her shaking to stop.

"Shit," Kareen groaned.

"Not the first time the Diner seen someone doubled over," Cottonmouth said. "You want something for the pain?"

Kareen shook her tucked-in head, panting. "No, I can't. I get started on any shit, what happens if I run out? It'll be—shit!—a permanent problem. Instead of just a temporary."

"Temporary? Kareen, girl, didn't any of those children tell you anything? The pain'll get easier, but it won't go away. My old friend Art Rackim, he called the jungle 'honey with the stings left in.' Can't ever get far enough over to stop it; specially not stubborn types like him and you. You'd have to be more Fay than the Fay. Even if that was possible, they wouldn't allow it; they want you human." He added, "You want yourself human, too."

"What's so great about human?" she complained. But she sounded clearer, and under Cottonmouth's hands seemed less clenched, so he moved off her.

"Oh, you're all right," he said. He scrounged around at the side of an ancient maple and pulled some elf dock. "Here. It's nothing strong, just helps your body clean up the poison." He plumped down beside her.

She took the leaves, sat back, looked at them with weary reddened eyes, folded them up into a neat square, tried to swallow it, and choked.

Cottonmouth said, "Mostly people just chaw it a little, or make tea."

Kareen spat the lump out. After a bit, Cottonmouth looked at the sky, checking the light. "You feeling better?"

Kareen nodded, and stood up. And reached a hand to help him stand up, which tickled him.

Just another block on was what Cottonmouth wanted to show off: a twenty-foot hunk of soft orange rock spraypainted with a ten-foot cartoon of Kareen, tough and bulky in bloodred sweats. Above and behind her, "NO SUGAR" was written in midnight-blue amulet script outlined with silver. The muralist had worked with the granite lines scarring the surface of the stone so that they might form a web which Kareen had strung, or might be a mirror that Kareen had broken.

"Have to be gaudy to compete with the Doggy Diner," Cottonmouth explained, since Kareen looked worried.

"No, it's nice, Cottonmouth. But this is going to be some kind of embarrassing if the records don't get made."

"We're making them," Cottonmouth said, turning to start on the long walk to the studio. "I know it seems like we're going slow. The Fay probably think so, too. But you have to get established here. Means less isolation in the jungle. Just remember, they wouldn't hit you this hard unless they really wanted you. So that keeps you safe. Not like they're that careful once they have you. I had cooperative friends. Pretty well-known, too—Ephusia? Splash?"

Kareen shook her head.

Kids these days. "Well, trust me. Plenty of good talent stomped down without them noticing what's under their feet. But they *still* want to pluck you green. Probably worried if they let you get ripe, they'll miss you when you drop."

Kareen said, "You make them sound like the devil."

Cottonmouth turned politely, spat white every which way, and shook his head. "Whether they're the devil or not, I don't know, but I know either way, anyone calling them the devil hasn't got to call for long."

That night, Kareen was feeling her oats. They polished "No Damn Mercy" (a ballad whose chorus Kareen literally sang, revealing a creditable city-bred alto); laid down "Green Baggies" and "Bug Juice" (a scabrous answer song to "Flytrap," still peaking in the

clubs); Kareen even talked Cottonmouth over to the mike to mumble gangsterisms behind "Mack J-Davey." They already had at least a CD's worth of songs, and next Kareen wanted to help with the remixes. During a beer break, Cottonmouth allowed as she was the hardest worker he'd seen since the old days when everyone had to play their own instruments.

Kareen shook her head. "It's not like I have a choice. No matter how long we go or how tired I get, I can't get a taste for anything else. Whenever I take a break, just sitting here talking with you—it's like cystitis, it feels all the time I got to pee even if I just went."

"Cystitis," Cottonmouth lisped, and laughed. "Now, I know the Fay would appreciate that."

The first pressing was to be a twelve-inch of "Bug Juice," and Cottonmouth invited a few friends from the music and dance scenes to a back room of The Broadway Tunnel for a preview. The Broadway Tunnel was a pit and underground maze on the jungle side of South Street, covered by a mesh of bamboo, palms, and rushes. In the rainy season or on particularly crowded nights, the soil fall prompted quick turnaround, perfect for broad exposure.

Cottonmouth started off trying to handle introductions and to track reactions, but before long the party opened up too wide to keep track of. No Fay, though, which surprised him a bit. Not that they needed to manifest themselves to know what was up, any more than to make mischief. It was more a matter of courtesy, not to mention convenience. Maybe he'd rubbed them rawer than he'd intended to. But he and Kareen had been too busy to fuss with the Fay protocols, and they sure couldn't argue with the results.

At any rate, the nearest thing to Fay were some candy-ass wannabe fluff who floated in on the current, got told a couple times what was up, and sacrificed a green velvet bag's worth of E—on top of the very special old cognac, the very earthy oily bhang, and, must have a few other old-timers around, the very traditional

lines on the very traditional mirror. Hardly even remember what to do with those, but it's like falling off a bike.

Only invited guest who didn't make it was the NO SUGAR muralist; he'd gotten himself mauled by a jaguar, according to the muralist's ex-boyfriend. Better tell Kareen be careful, Cottonmouth thought; might be bad cess was getting stirred up. But the next time he was pushed close to her, he only had time to yell, "You meeting people?" before he was pushed on, watching her smile and nod.

Nice people all around, but hard to really judge the record when there was no room for dancers. He earnestly tried to explain this to a sweet queen in black Lycra shorts, who kept yelling back, "But we like it fine!"

While he swayed, rephrasing, a skinny high-cheekboned guy grabbed Cottonmouth's arm and yelled, "Where's this girl of yours been hiding?"

Cottonmouth yelled back Kareen's lyric, "She's a holler-point bullet, lets you know when it hits," and saw Kareen beaming a couple of layers away, holding tight to her tumbler of ginger beer. Ginger beer, I swan. Even on a night like this, you can't get her to relax and try anything stronger, poor girl.

He felt his eyes start to tear up with tenderness. He felt his foot step on something which crunched. At least two people he didn't know if he knew started talking to him.

A lot of the night got lost between then and when Cottonmouth found himself out on the street staring at an albino macaw asleep behind some elephant-foot vines. He didn't remember how he got there, but he felt pretty sure that Kareen had gone home long ago and that he wasn't feeling sorry for her anymore.

The chill air snapped him together, made him feel clearheaded even while wrapped in the high like flannel. He walked slow, treasuring the experience. Been a while since he'd gotten fucked up so well; he was getting on.

This year he'd be, well, way past forty anyway. But a high-caliber forty-five. May look forty-five, but I feel like a colt. All that time wasted. The trade papers would want an explanation. He pictured the interviewer, skeptical in a friendly way, listing the impressive list of artists Cottonmouth had known before he'd brought himself to the forefront, and asking, why not then, why now.

It's true he'd stayed on the fringes of the business. Lend a hand, fetch the smokes, run the tapes, but basically a connoisseur. It was simply time to stop watching because he'd learned enough from watching to know the right person when he saw her. He was the good land that the seed fell on; it'd be a sin against the seed not to do something with it.

Because there was no point to hooking up with someone already involved with the Fay. Even if the talent was determined and flaky enough to break free for a bit, you'd have to watch them like a cobra to make sure they didn't end up like poor Art Rackim or Splash had. On the other hand, you could waste your life on independent mediocrities and then get your first real star snatched away without hardly noticing.

So you had to find the talent right in between, catch her right on the road, and show her a shortcut. Well, sort of a shortcut. The longest way there but the smoothest way back. And then you had to know how to negotiate with the Fay, get 'em to understand that compromise is good for everyone in the long run. That they got to give up a little control to get anything worthwhile back. It takes real experience and real spine; not like those blowhard punks Karen had been hanging with.

Time to get his real spine back onto his couch and sleep it off. Must be around dawn: the gray lights of sun and street balanced perfectly. Pampas grass like thicker tufts of fog.

Down a ways, a group of kids were making a racket. Cottonmouth started to cross the street to avoid them but then figured, fuck it, you only live once. This was

his and Karen's audience, after all. Good to make new youth connections every couple of years.

They were in sort of a circle, moving around funny and yelling; gambling, or trying out moves. Dressed all alike in red and black, like an old-fashioned harmonizing group.

"Now, what are you all doing up so late at night," Cottonmouth said expansively, joining the circle.

Inside curled up on the ground was a kid who looked to be dead.

"We're taking a piss, bitch," said one of the boys. "Why, you want some?"

There were shouts of laughter. "Ooh, look how big his eyes got!" "I got some for you, bitch!"

"Smoke him," said one of the boys.

"No, now," said Cottonmouth knowing they didn't understand he was no threat and wishing his music was here or someone who could explain to them, but he realized focusing first on one's gun and then on another's eyes that it would've done no good, they can always not listen. It was easy to forget that.

IV. Demmi

Demmi wasn't sure why she'd been called on to join Jubal Lee's Roots Tour—with his elaborate pomade and plucked brows and pseudo-religious hokum, Jubal was not really her kind of music—but it would be nice to catch up on what was happening outside the jungle. And the job was a good career move: Dox had asked her to help prep the smaller venues, even to try to pick up another opening act during the early South Street stops, which made her halfway an impresario herself. To reach that level of trust without ever falling into glamour was an impressive achievement. Maybe the Fay preferred things businesslike after all, same as she did.

When she got free of Jubal's entourage, first thing she checked was the date.

It was seven years since she'd left.

Second thing she checked was news on Karen,

since, providing further proof that glamour didn't always beat hard work, Kareen had never managed a single concert in the jungle, had in fact retreated back up to the city. Word was that her live show was pumping, but, without even a video available, one couldn't be certain.

As best she could from another world, Demmi had followed Kareen's career. "Bug Juice," her self-financed debut, had been overpowered by the commercial muscle Dox put behind the official answer to "Flytrap": "Venus Replies" (already in the can when Demmi had been brought over; Demmi'd just recut the vocals). Kareen's later releases were on a variety of badly distributed fly-by-night labels; it didn't help that her best work also seemed to be her most venomous and most eccentric. In fact, Demmi'd heard one callow jungle transplant claim that Kareen only did all that weird shit because she couldn't handle normal songs.

Even so, Kareen's lack of success was surprising. It wasn't like the Fay to give up on someone before bringing them in. And there was no doubting Kareen's talent, or that stubborn streak which used to come along like Jones. Anyway, given how things had worked out, Demmi didn't hold a grudge against Kareen for her betrayal back at Cottonmouth's: there was that jealousy between Kareen and Chi-Z to consider, and she mostly blamed Chi-Z for mishandling the situation. Hell, thinking back on it, she even felt like she might owe Kareen, a little.

Curiously enough, when she asked at the hotel, it turned out that Kareen was making one of her rare South Street appearances that week. These first few shows there wasn't an awful lot of prep work to do: Jubal was playing the same hall as on his last trip a decade before, though the old owner was dead and his daughter ran it now. It seemed an opportune time to check Kareen out, maybe even give her that break she'd been needing.

Demmi wandered far from the Meridional that afternoon, dropping easily into the old South Street

rhythms, scrounging around for new tapes and murals, half expecting to get an old home welcome every place she walked into. But all she met were new kids or old strangers. Somehow the whole neighborhood had been turned over, like soil. Still growing the same old shit, though.

Just as the sharp empty smell of the place was beginning to give her a headache—how had she managed to live here so long?—with real jungle luck, Demmi saw Kareen heading toward her. A middle-age-not-going-to-make-old-age version of Kareen, looked like she'd gotten blown up and deflated a few times, but she was sure enough Kareen, with the same scary distant expression she'd had the last time Demmi'd seen her. Like she'd been through such bad times, they just meant more time.

Although she showed no sign of surprise, Kareen seemed to recognize Demmi as Demmi hurried forward. Of course, Demmi wouldn't have aged much. "Kareen! Damn, it's good to see you."

"Thank you," said Kareen guardedly. Was she on something?

"I, uh, hear you're playing tonight," Demmi tried.

"Yeah, at the Slippery Elm," Kareen said. "You coming?"

"Yeah, I figured—I hoped," said Demmi.

Kareen's smile wasn't exactly broad, but she said, "I'd like you to."

Demmi immediately warmed up. "Good! And I'd like to talk to you, too—listen, Kareen, would it be all right for me to invite you over to Stilts for a drink?" Stilts had a greenhouse atmosphere, and she could relax there.

"If you wouldn't mind paying for tea instead," Kareen said.

After a few blocks of silence, Kareen said, "I wondered what you were up to, but I didn't know what name you went under."

"'Andalusia,'" Demmi told her, a bit worried that Kareen would say something about their competing

debuts, or the couple of lines she'd adapted from Karen's notebooks.

Instead, Karen said, "That's pretty."

Demmi laughed. "That's because you never heard anyone say 'And a loser' when you walked in. Better than 'Demmi,' anyway."

Karen looked confused.

"From 'cause I had a small cup. One of those awful South Street nicknames. . . ."

As they neared the bar, Karen stared down and to the side with more intense attention than she'd given Demmi so far. Curious, Demmi looked over, but all she saw was a typewriter ribbon unwinding down the gutter stream. Karen's eyes followed its spool rafting around the downhill corner at Marks Place, pink and white petals dotting its path.

Demmi shook her head and fondly laughed; god, she was out there.

At Stilts, Demmi took a couple of sips of her stale daiquiri, shucked its plastic mermaid, and offered Karen an opening slot for Jubal. "Depending on tonight's show, you understand, but if it goes as well as I expect, maybe we can finally get you out of the city and where you belong."

Instead of thanking her, Karen looked grim. "I'll play the other spots, but I'm not going into the Fay's country. Not after Cottonmouth."

It took Demmi a moment to process. "You don't think the *Fay* killed Cottonmouth?" she asked incredulously. "That's one of those things that just happen, Karen!"

"They didn't do it directly, no. But he wouldn't have died if it wasn't for them."

"He wouldn't have died if it wasn't for being drunk all the goddamn time, either. Really, girl"—it felt weird calling this haggard woman a "girl"—"you have to be realistic. No point blaming every bit of bad luck on the Fay. They're not that busy!"

Karen shook her head, eyes shut in childish denial—then seemed to shake herself out of it, opening

her eyes and smiling and looking almost as freed up as the old Kareen. "You know, sometimes it seems like I disagree with *everything*."

"Well, I know it's been no easy road for you," Demmi offered. "In your condition . . . without even a visit. . . ." She stalled.

"Oh, it's no worse than what other people deal with. If they go blind or lose a finger, they just work through it. It's probably even easier when you start out that way instead of getting used to it good first."

Demmi reached for some axiom that would fit, but before she found it Kareen spoke again.

"It's not even the worst I felt myself. The worst pain I was ever in was an earache when I was fourteen. Worse than when I broke my wrist playing ball. That earache had me screaming, and no one could see a thing. They sent me to a nurse, and she told everyone I was faking it. When my father died, I remember thinking it wasn't as bad as that earache and feeling guilty about it."

"It wasn't your fault," said Demmi.

"We don't have any choice about how much something hurts," Kareen agreed. "All we can do is add to it or leave it alone."

"Well, I reckon I left it alone all right," Demmi said. "All alone. At least you stayed in your own land. There's some comfort in that."

The silence lasted so long, Demmi worried she'd riled her again. Then Kareen said, "My land. I've never even seen my land. I've been in exile for seven years, and I'll be in exile when I die. They have my land."

"Your land?" asked Demmi, and suddenly felt coolly superior. Demmi knew what the Fay's country was like. It wasn't worth much, but even so, Kareen could only imagine it, and Demmi knew.

Demmi pressed Kareen's arm for good luck, then walked around front to watch her performance. The crowd, pushing in to position themselves for the next act, forced Demmi farther and farther to the side, and

finally she gave up and went back to the wings, a little behind one of the massive P.A. speakers.

Even from that vantage point she could see some of Kareen's tricks: using body language and comic mugging to magnify lyrical subtleties; making melodrama of a cycle between ever-more-uncontrolled transport and ever-more-desperate wrenchings back to earth. She should use a live DJ, though, instead of those cheap tapes which sounded so muddy and piercing. She also needed to work on the finish, which slumped into one of her recent, least distinctive singles.

Demmi could figure out a way to follow that act and still do right by Kareen. And maybe Kareen would change her mind by the time the tour headed south again, finally get a bit more practical; Demmi'd be a good influence that way. On the other hand, what would Dox say if a gap had to be filled last minute? Well, at the very least, Kareen might be able to help Demmi find someone younger and more cooperative.

When Kareen came offstage, Demmi hugged her, and then held her at arm's length, slightly repulsed by the unfamiliar feel of a sweating human being.

"That was just fine, honey," Demmi told her, one professional to another. "I tell you true, those Fay don't know what they're missing."

"Oh, I don't know," said Kareen with a curious smile. "I sort of think they might."

ACOLYTES

by Michael Kandel

In the world of musical pedagogy, it's Not Done to let a kid hear a recording of the piece they are so laboriously trying to learn to play. But hell, kids learn by imitation. No amount of squawking from my piano teacher about "singing tone" conveyed to me what I later learned when I heard Mischa Dichter play that simple Mozart minuet.

Michael Kandel's take on piano lessons may be found in the Author Bios at the back of this volume.

I am sorry to see that he—or, at any rate, his narrator—despises Mozart's "Rondo Alla Turca", the Turkish *rondo* from his Piano Sonata #11 in A. When I was a kid, stumbling through a ponderous "Marche Slav" at my first piano recital, I thought, when the older students played it, that the Turkish *rondo* was about the coolest thing I'd ever heard. I very nearly did not quit piano lessons on the hope that if I hung on I'd get to learn it. Very nearly.

If you have the chance, listen to a recording of the late Tatiana Nikolaeva playing Bach. She looked like your Russian grandmother, complete with thick shoes and bun . . . then her fingers hit the keyboard! When she was young, Shostakovich heard her play at an international Bach competition. That night he sat down and wrote her a series of *Preludes and Fugues*. Listen to those, too.

Those trolls are forever getting anthracite dust under their fingernails, and that's the reason Aunt Roxalina's piano keys are so dingy all the time, full of gray lines that look like wood grain or fingerprint whorls but

aren't, and when you wipe the keys with a damp rag, the rag turns a disgusting dark brown in seconds. Aunt Roxalina goes through dozens of rags that way weekly, to keep the ivory looking like ivory, but it's hopeless, the next day the whorls are back, because our piano is the only working grand within a radius of thirty kilometers, and because the spinets in town are all garbage, in too bad shape even for trolls, who come to practice as they're supposed to, an hour a day, each and every troll an hour a day, starting with scales and arpeggios and ending with a Clementi sonatina or Beethoven sonata or maybe something by Haydn. They actually wait on line to practice. For their turn, for their hour.

You have to give trolls this: they're not lazy. They apply themselves. But it's proverbial, isn't it: the industrious troll.

My father says it's ridiculous trying to make musicians out of trolls and kobolds because as everyone knows they're all work and no soul. But Aunt Roxalina doesn't buy that, she says everybody should have a chance, and you never know what lies within your innermost breast waiting to be tapped. Look how the ogre on the hill became a symbolist performance artist after that visiting professor visited, and now he wears foulard hankies in jacket pockets, gives seminars at the Sorbonne, and hyphenates his name.

Aunt Roxalina is a very positive and staunch person. Not even the principal of our school or Major Pliscou with the muttonchops and hundred medals is more positive and staunch. She did the crewelwork over my headboard, the picture of the castle and pennants with the words NEVER SAY DIE square and solid like a foundation. She brought up four children, three living, and ran a kennel once without any help from anyone. She survived the Blitz with Granny Fanny. The Kraut bombs kept falling, but Aunt Roxalina just gritted her teeth and refused even to give them the satisfaction of seeing her flinch. "Never say die" is her motto. I bet the bombs swerved clear of her, because although they were made only of steel and explosives and had no

computer brains (back then), they took the measure of her anyway, on the way down, and were intimidated.

I don't care for trolls myself. They're not good to look at, and not exactly the world's best conversationalists. And they bang, bang, bang, even when Aunt Roxalina patiently repeats for the *n*th time, "No, pianissimo, Edgar, pianissimo." There could be two, three, even four *p*'s in the measure, it makes absolutely no difference, it comes out forte. And forget about staccato or sostenuto, it's all the same clunky hammer blows, with a little puff of anthracite dust each time a splay troll finger comes down on the poor ivory.

But they do keep time, you have to give them that. No troll needs a metronome. They must have some kind of clockwork inside their acorn-squash-shaped heads. They even talk like clocks: not in sentences but in separate words. I'll give you an example.

ME: Hi, Edgar, how are you today?

EDGAR: Hello-Louis-I-am-fine. We-opened-a-new-gallery-in-our-cave. Egbert-found-a-diamond.

ME: A diamond? No kidding. Was it big? Did he get to keep it?

EDGAR: Nice-talking-to-you-Louis. But-I-have-to-practice-now. The-recital-is-next-Thursday.

They never get to keep the diamonds and emeralds. Their parents make them put whatever they find into mutual funds for college. That's trolls for you. I sure as hell wouldn't bury a diamond in a mutual fund, I'd buy myself a car, a convertible coupe with fins, bucket seats, and redder even than Bad Lizzy Cartwright's lipstick. And if any money was left over after that, I'd buy myself a controlling interest in Baxter's Pharmacy by the train station and have all the fizzes and sundaes I liked forever, or as our Uncle Dave the unscrupulous lawyer might put it, in perpetuity.

I don't hide it, I love to eat and I'm especially fond of dessert. The downside of which is my pudginess, or embonpoint as Aunt Eulalia puts it, and I guess my complexion, too. By the time I hit twenty, however, all that will be water under the bridge, because I have

good genes after all. I've seen photographs of my grandparents on both sides, when they were married. They could have all been movie stars, with the possible exception of my paternal grandfather, Hugh, who in the photograph has a disfiguring squint unless he was just constipated that day. So the pimples in my mirror are a passing thing. But pimples or no pimples, I can still play better than any troll.

When my clean, pink, dimpled fingers touch the keys, sweet sound emerges from our old battered black Steinway. I don't practice enough, true, and that's the reason I make mistakes, particularly in the fast passages, and occasionally forget places, but Aunt Roxalina always tells me what a wonderful tone I have. Sometimes she asks me to come and play for a troll who's having his lesson, so he'll see how the music is supposed to sound, but it never does any good. The troll listens, nods—and goes right back to his tick-tocking and hammering.

"Louis," Aunt Roxalina sometimes says to me in private, "if only you practiced like Egbert, you could be a concert pianist, and I'm not kidding."

Except that Louis, I'm sorry, is not interested in becoming a concert pianist. The life of a concert pianist may have glamour, but is boring. You go from city to city and play the same concertos all the time because there aren't that many of them and who wants to do quintets. I'm thinking instead of going into medicine so I can save lives. There's something really grand about having people's eternal gratitude after you've operated on them. The only fly in the ointment is, my father says we can't afford medical school. The world is a profoundly unfair place, it seems to me, when a person can't do something for no other reason than lack of funds. If I went to medical school, I'd have to work my way through on my own, waiting tables probably, and that could take decades even with big tips, which I wouldn't get anyway because I don't have a subservient personality. My motto, frankly, is *not* never say die. Not in a million years could I apply

myself like a troll or like some Chinese or Korean graduate student. My theory is that any person who just can never have enough chocolate icing, and that's me, is constitutionally unable to put his nose anywhere near a grindstone.

Trolls, by the way, don't eat chocolate. Ever. That says it all, I think, about trolls.

But let me describe for you our last Thursday recital, because nothing could paint a better picture of what Aunt Roxalina is up against and how determined she is and how you really have to admire the power of positive thinking. The Thursday recitals (second Thursday of every month) are a regular zoo, what with all the different fairy creatures coming together in one room, and the house is an unbelievable shambles afterward. A lot of them don't know how to balance canapés on their knees yet, and some of them never will. I help with the vacuuming, Sis with the rug shampooing, and we use extra-strength shampoo with mint because the goblins vomit, they can't control it. Pathetic: having your hair all combed, your bow tie all tied, and you lean over and spit up this revolting green phlegm with pink flecks in it. Aunt Roxalina pretends not to notice, but it smells so bad. How can you concentrate on Chopin or Debussy when you're smelling sour goblin upchuck? We use baking soda, too, whole boxes of it, to get the foulness out, but on damp days it's still there, as persistent as cat urine. My father doesn't say anything, he looks in his newspaper, rustling it, but I can see even through the newspaper what he's thinking about the stink.

At the last Thursday recital, I started off with a Rachmaninoff prelude, very dramatic and moody, flubbing some notes in the bass, but it doesn't matter because you can't tell a flub in the bass amid all the rumble-rumble, not unless you're one of those world-class maestros who can pick a mosquito hum out of a hurricane and tell you in addition that it's a little flat. I played the piece with intense smoldering fire, imagining I was Rachmaninoff himself, his handsome head

inclined as if in meditation: the great gaunt composer just out of psychotherapy and taking the world by storm even though he doesn't care about the world. Everyone applauded a long time, and I bowed slowly, giving them a proud Rachmaninoff wince and thinking that I really should have been put last in the program because now the recital would be downhill from here. But you have to be polite and sit and listen to the bitter end. Aunt Roxalina says manners is nine tenths of a piano recital, and in our case that's probably true, because there certainly isn't much of what you could call music here on the second Thursday of every month.

A pixie was next, doing predictably one of those skipping English country roundelay dance pieces. He was limp-wristed and so tentative and anemic you couldn't hear him even when you leaned forward and cupped your ear, and forget about the beat. I'm not sure who teaches the pixies. Mr. Heim the homo? Not that he's really a homosexual, I don't want to start gossip, but he's unmarried and middle-aged and his hands are always clammy. At the piano he wipes them every two minutes with a large monogrammed handkerchief that has a purple border. He also talks funny, as if he had marbles in his mouth and was afraid that any minute one might drop out and roll across the floor in front of everyone.

I know it's not to my credit, but honestly whenever I see a pixie, I have this strong impulse to haul off and punch him one in the face. Not that I have ever struck anyone since kindergarten, I am not the physical type. When I lose my temper, I tend to get a headache or a stomachache, or, if I really blow my top, hives. In spite of my girth, I am unmuscular and repressed, not what you'd call one of the guys. I hate locker rooms. I don't even watch football on television, except when it's the Super Bowl, and that's just to keep my father and uncle company.

A polite sprinkling of claps for the pixie, who seemed relieved to have got over his ordeal in one

piece. He recovered some color, was not half as pale as before. Before, you could actually see through the little twit, that's how scared he was, you could see the suspenders making an X on the other side of his narrow body. He bowed a quick little bow and left the piano with such haste, you would have thought there was a bomb in it.

Everyone consulted the mimeographed program to see who the next victim was.

A troll by the name of Edna was doing the "Alla Turca," which I hate. The "Alla Turca" is like a sewing machine going berserk in your brain but never all-the-way berserk, if you know what I mean, just right on the edge. I've heard the damned thing practiced so much, I feel like screaming when it starts, no, no, please, I'll give you the CIA secrets, just don't play that again for God's sake, boo-hoo.

Edna went at it like a steam engine, Aunt Roxalina nodding in time with a pained smile, but then one of the gnomes started hooting—they can't control that when they get excited—and Edna was rattled and went too fast. It was breakneck playing now, and she knew—we all knew—she wouldn't be able to keep the speed up when she came to the part where it's all octaves, which Mozart goes in for but is murder to do, believe me, without tripping over yourself: fingers getting in the way of fingers, thumb and pinkie struggling to keep the same distance apart while you're jumping all over the keyboard. So everyone sat forward in sickening suspense to see poor Edna fall apart and humiliate herself forever. But Aunt Roxalina got her pupil back in tempo in the nick of time by smacking *allegretto-not-presto*, *allegretto-not-presto*, palm to palm, and disaster was averted, although two goblins threw up at the same time, in tandem, on the coffee table.

Then Gus, a hobgoblin originally from overseas (France? it's hard to tell, his lisp covers the accent), played a Schubert impromptu, which was awful, much too advanced for him and he so spastic it was practically a joke, like Victor Borge playing or Robin

Williams if Robin Williams played the piano, but no one laughed or even cracked a smile. Manners aside, it's a big mistake to offend a hobgoblin. They'll go for your throat then and there, forget the canapés, crumpets, and pass the finger bowl. It's an honor thing with them, as if they were samurai or baseball managers. In this respect hobgoblins are a lot like poltergeists.

A vampire played one of those melodic old-chestnut Grieg pieces, and it wasn't half bad, a little stiff is all. Miss Biller is a good teacher. She went to a conservatory in Vienna, in a previous century. Her hair is so white now, it's gone past white into yellowish, and her eyes are watery and dull, and she has bad arthritis in her hands, and yet whenever she sits down at the piano and plays, which isn't often, you close your eyes and swear you're listening to a recording. Her fingers may be wrinkled and crooked and white as flour, but they are so sure, that when they descend on a note, you don't have a doubt in the world about the sound that comes out. Miss Biller gets right into that sound, too, into the sweet spot of every key. It's amazing. Aunt Roxalina studied with her before the war and never calls her by her first name, which gives you some idea.

Miss Biller seemed to doze off while her vampire student played. I could see the hairs on her upper lip moving as she breathed through her nose, and I hoped she wouldn't start to snore. That happened at one recital and was mortifying, because when she gets into her snores, even if she is a sweet old lady, they build and build until they're as loud as Moussorgski's *Night on Bald Mountain*.

Clapping, followed by another relieved student smile, this smile having two timid fangs, a fang at either corner of a little mouth, but no less relieved for that.

Then Sebastian was at the keyboard, starting a showy Chopin étude. I can't stand Sebastian. I don't like his name, I don't like his color, and I don't like his face. He thinks he's some kind of prodigy. He's all grin and flash, and the hair flopping over his eyes like Glen Gould or Oscar Levant, but people eat that up and

always applaud like crazy, though the only thing he has done is go fast and get all the notes right, which is not what real music is about. I am also put off by the pride Sebastian takes in his part-dragon ancestry and tail, which he swishes back and forth behind him on purpose, to the music. It's low-class grandstanding and obnoxious.

The tail was what set off the pandemonium this time, because it knocked over a lamp as he was doing one of the *étude's* big concluding chords, the way Artur Rubinstein used to bounce up from his seat when both his little arms came down and all ten fingers pounced furiously as if they were angry with the piano, which I guess is what people mean when they talk about a player's attack. The lamp was not that expensive, and I don't think Aunt Roxalina cared a lot about it—she is too educated to be materialistic about a lousy lamp—but one of the imp mothers was horrified and leaped to catch it, and that compound-fractured the trouble so to speak, because the next thing you knew the lamp shattered like a busted lightbulb and at the same time the imp mother cracked her misshapen head on the corner of an end table with a hoarse gasp, and there was imp blood.

Wilma, who's a banshee, let out a howl that broke some Lalique stemware in the credenza, she couldn't help it, it's in her nature, and someone who really lost it—I don't know who but I have my suspicions—actually bit an elf. I mean, it was like a scene out of a Chaplin movie or Laurel and Hardy, where there's a chain reaction of pie throwing and pratfalls that keeps going until no one is left clean or standing, not even the dowager with the bosom and opera glasses.

You have to understand, there's so much tension at a recital. Everyone's strung up, and strung up much worse than for a graduation or a play. If you muff a line in a play, you can always ad-lib your way out of it and the scene goes on, besides you're not yourself, you're some character, in costume, but a mistake in music is a disaster that can't be repaired because it stays in the

listener's ear and mind for the whole evening if not indeed in perpetuity. And of course it's you and nobody else who did it. So the atmosphere at a recital is like a packed doctor's waiting room after people hear a bloodcurdling scream and the doctor angrily calling for a nurse or parent to please hold the damn kid down.

Aunt Roxalina stood up and commenced restoring us to civilization, but even with her large voice she had her hands full, because everybody was so strung up, as I said. Mr. Kadar, for example, had his gloves off and fingers out, and his eyebrows were beetling up like gathering clouds. I was ready to duck, expecting a bolt of something evil and glowing from the wizard—it's scary, the power he has, although you would never think it seeing him at the counter in the post office canceling stamps on packages. But Aunt Roxalina defused him and everyone else, too, by announcing that Miss Biller would now play.

Miss Biller smiled her sweetest old lady smile, took forever to sit down at the piano because of her joints, and suddenly, without waiting but not hurrying, either, she started in, bent over and steady as a rock.

It was Bach, one of the toccatas, I think, a quiet and slow part, but not quiet and slow in the way of old dusty things forgotten in attics or nursing homes. It was a proud, stately, magnificent slowness, like a tall handsome soldier walking, one hand on his hip and putting boot in front of boot, taking his time, across a completely empty ballroom, with a breathtaking starry night sky in every window he passes. There's this long row of high windows, and he's heading toward the portrait of a beautiful lady on a wall flooded with moonlight.

The room couldn't have been more silent, apart from the Bach. Not so much as a burp from the goblins or a hitched breath from the bitten elf. No one fidgeting, no one moving, except for Sis putting Mercurochrome on the imp mother's head and then a careful Band-Aid on the elf. The elf's name, incidentally, is Futhork, which

I think is a terrible burden and am mentioning only to show how some parents have not a grain of sense. But Futhork didn't even look at his Band-Aid, such is the power of music played by a genuine musician.

Brownies were served after that, by Charlotte, who's a brownie, which I don't find particularly funny, but Charlotte's main affectation is her sense of humor, which she's constantly displaying the way a society woman wears a boa. I also don't appreciate how she keeps pretending I'm her boyfriend, as if that was such a hilarious joke. What's hilarious about it? Why couldn't I be, theoretically, her boyfriend, or anyone else's? I'm not an eyesore. I'm intelligent and well-read. You could do a lot worse in your choice of boyfriend.

When we were all sipping Darjeeling tea and picking brownie crumbs off the cushions and putting them inconspicuously into our mouths, Aunt Roxalina stood again and spoke. She congratulated everyone on another successful recital, as if nothing bad had happened and there wasn't a patch of dark imp blood on the rug by the divan or a pile of goblin puke taking the finish off the mahogany top of the coffee table. She said we were all faithful acolytes of music, humble keepers of the flame, and loyal worshipers at the Altar of Art, and other such Sunday-morning sentiments, with almost every other word beginning with a capital letter or sounding like Latin, yet the funny thing is, even when Aunt Roxalina talks in capital letters, it always comes out down-to-earth and brass tacks, like one street cleaner telling another to get all the chewing gum off the pavement this time because Mr. G., Esquire, was displeased about the chewing gum.

"You are young and unschooled," said Aunt Roxalina, "and it must seem to you that an Immense Gulf separates you from what a Firkusny can do in a sound studio or on the stage. Ah, but do not lose Heart, my dears. It all begins, believe me, with train-under-tunnel, Every Good Boy Does Fine, and putting one stumbling finger after another.

“Even our marvelous Miss Biller, yes even she, was once a little girl in pigtails who would have much rather ridden her shiny red tricycle in the sun than sit at the family piano inside and do her tonic-subdominant-dominant, her diminished fifths and augmented sevenths, and of course her Czerny.

“Learn from your mistakes, my dears. Learn and persevere. Set your sights High. You have chosen, remember this, a Very Special Road, which sets you apart. Let other children waste their time watching television, combing their hair, or playing video games. You will work instead on your Schumann, your Scarlatti, your Scriabin, and practice at least an hour a day, every day, not forgetting to begin with your scales to Warm Up the Fingers.”

That’s my Aunt Roxalina. Never say die.

Edgar came up to me afterward with a compliment on my wonderful tone and shook my hand. He compliments everyone in the recital, going down the list in order, a compliment and a handshake. When I was crossed off his list, he continued on to the pixie, who meanwhile was shaking the undine’s hand limply. Wilma showed all her teeth in a smile that took up nine tenths of her face, if not more. Congratulations and hands pumped all around. Dwarf congratulating dryad, peri congratulating pooka, salamander congratulating sylph. All brothers and sisters, as it were, in music. All acolytes.

I saw that I had anthracite dust on my thumb and under my nails, it had to be from politely shaking hands with the trolls, so I began edging in the direction of the bathroom, where I could scrub my hands with soap and hot water, because there is not much I detest more than those crescents of black impacted under fingernails.

I passed Miss Biller, whose head was back and mouth open, and saw that her hair was so thin, you could see the outline of her skull through it, as if she were already in her coffin and the flesh abandoning her bones. She was snoring, sawing away, building with

each rhythmic two-four sweep of the saw to one of those awful rubato snorts—you knew it was coming—that make everyone stop in mid-sentence and turn and stare.

But Miss Biller snored on, unaware of her dignity and oblivious to the world.

FLASH COMPANY

by Gene Wolfe

According to my *1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, *flash* was thieves' slang for knowing, understanding another's meaning; the example given: "The swell was flash, so I could not draw his fogle," translated as, "The gentleman saw what I was about, and therefore I could not pick his pocket of his silk handkerchief."

A flash ken is a house that harbors thieves.

You can imagine, then, what *flash company* might be.

It had been nearly a month since the old bawdy-house piano had begun to repair him. It had found him in the barn in which it had lived in retirement for eighty years; and it had cottoned to him from the beginning, seeing in him a man in ruins, to be sure, yet a salvageable man and one well worth saving. I will make you whole, it had promised. Nor had that solemn promise been a falsification or an exaggeration, though the old piano was capable of both and not unaccustomed to either—had not been unaccustomed to them, that is to say, many years ago when it had pursued an active career.

It had climbed piece by piece onto the rancher's stake-bed truck with alacrity, asking only for shelter from the broiling sun and the open air, having been accustomed to neither at any time during a long and thoroughly disreputable existence. The rancher had pushed back his hat and wiped his brow with a red neck-rag, saying, "Wasn't as heavy as I 'spected," and grinned, and added, "If I'd a known we could do it, me and the boy'd a got it out a there and throwed it in the

crick." He had the buyer's hundred in his pocket already, in a money clip with an old silver dollar on the front.

The man that the old piano planned to save had wiped his own face on the sleeve of his white shirt, and said something like, "What a waste that would have been, Mr. Applefield."

"You call me Bob, Mr. Johnston." That was not because of the hundred, but because they had worked together taking apart the old piano and getting its pieces onto his truck; it was something that money could not buy.

"Jeff," the buyer had said, and held out his hand; and the hand that had clasped it had been as hard and strong as a leg trap. "You say it was your grandfather's?"

The rancher had nodded. "Used to be in the parlor when I was a kid. He couldn't play or gran' neither, but they'd put on the rolls sometimes. That old bag I give you? You can do either way. Play it yourself or those old rolled-up songs. Let's get out a this sun."

"I wonder if we shouldn't put something over it, a blanket or some sort of cover. I'd hate to have it damaged while we're moving it."

"I got a tarp in the barn," the rancher had said. "Come on, we'll put that over her and tie it down."

When they had found the tarpaulin and were spreading it: "He always said he took it for a bad debt." The rancher had chuckled. "You ask me, he laid out cash for old times' sake. Gran' didn't like the pictures, so he painted over them black, like I showed you. Don't know if you can get that off without gettin' them off, too." They had discussed this before.

"It can be done," the buyer had declared. "There's an art to it." He had not added that he did not know that art.

In the rust-holed tan Buick that had been their second car while he and Isca were together, he had led the rancher to the high white house she had chosen; together they had carried all the pieces, the shabby gladstone, and the stool onto the sunporch facing the

Gulf. There they had shaken hands once again; and then he had been left alone with it, rubbing his jaw and waiting for the old piano's next instruction.

He had gone into the den and poured himself a drink from the cut-glass decanter he used to water for Isca's sake, and had sat down in his reading chair to ponder the matter.

The team picture taken the year they had won the trophy had been on the wall opposite. Studying it as he sipped, he had discovered that he could no longer distinguish his own face. His eyes were going; it would be bifocal time soon.

He had risen and walked across the room to look at the picture—really look at it—for the first time in years. He could name the whole crew still, but how stiffly they had posed with their oars! How young, how very young they had been!

The pictures first. Why not? If he didn't like them, he would have to do something about them, which might take some time; it would be best to know about that from the beginning. The first step, presumably, would be to wash the entire case, and the keys, with warm water and mild soap, giving special attention to the paint-smearred areas on the front and sides. A restorer of paintings, he felt sure, would begin by removing any surface dirt water and soap could take off. He had set aside his half-finished scotch and gone to work.

There was a great deal of surface dirt, as he had soon discovered. Somewhat later, he had also discovered that two fair-size flakes of black had fallen from the largest of the painted-over spots, revealing flesh pink and what seemed to be gilding. A little teasing with his fingernail and the old piano shook off more chips of black, revealing mottled green, a nearly black-brown, dusky purple, and more pink. "Wait till I finish with the rest," he had told the spots.

The case had been deeply scratched here and there, he had found, though the underlying wood was so dark—walnut?—that the scratches were not very

visible. To sand and refinish the whole case would destroy the concealed pictures, obviously. In the workshop that he had never quite finished setting up in the garage, he mixed a few drops of ebony stain into varnish. Sanding smoothed the worst of the gouges. As he touched them up, he had resolved to give the entire case a good coat of wax as soon as the black paint was gone.

More than half asleep that night, the dismantled piano had been conscious of him as it might have been of another person in the barn, more conscious of the rolling waves on the other side of Route 87. It had remembered the waves, once having dwelt long near the sea, and had at last returned to it. Strange, the old piano thought, to consider that they had never stopped during the long, long time that it had been away. Its strings were out of tune, and many had been broken; but it had hummed to itself just the same, as it had in the barn when the moon had peeked through chinks in the roof.

She's gone into the tailor shop and dressed in men's array;

Shipped on board a man-o'-war, conveyed herself away.

"Before you step on board, sir, your name I'd like to know."

With a smile upon her countenance, she answered, "Jack Monroe."

Upstairs, lying on his back in the bed that had held them both, he had been conscious of the old piano on the sunporch as he might have been of a woman moving about the house.

A woman who sang softly to herself. . . .

It was impossible, of course, that it should play—still more that it should play itself. Its action was in one place, its massive cast-iron frame (by far the heaviest thing they'd had to move) in another, its keyboard in a third. The brass works that read its rolls and moved its

keys accordingly were (he recalled with momentary amusement) sitting dirtily on the glider.

Perhaps it was the night wind playing among the strings—or more likely, somebody in the house down the road playing a working instrument—or more likely still, a radio somewhere. An aeolian harp. That was what they called them. Aeolus had been the god of the winds.

With no sense of dislocation, he had found himself astride the heaving topgallant yard of a Nelsonian seventy-four, where the wind had waked a thousand discordant tones in the rigging, from the deep thrum of the forestay to the high-pitched squeaks of the tackle blocks, howling its song to their accompaniment. Far off and obscured by the crests and the driving spray, a pink spark had flickered, speaking like a signaling lantern of brandy, strong beer, and Barbados rum, of hot meat pies, cold ham with mustard and mammoth slabs of soft, fresh bread, of willing girls with curls and laughing eyes, and wild dancing that left you both sweating and out of breath as the whole room shouted for more.

*Take your lady by the hand,
Twirl her 'round a smidgin,
Make her foot us one more reel,
Scatter her religion.*

*Ten mile away in the blue-gum swamp,
Snake lake lies wide and sunny.
'Twas there I hooked my lady, boys.
'Twas there I tasted honey!*

Waking, he had thought of Isca and wept.

In the morning the piano had suggested that he wash its face with turpentine. There had been none in his shop, so he had driven into town and bought two cans at a hardware store, buying his breakfast, too, at a nameless café a block from the docks, where his ham

and eggs and whole-wheat toast had been served by a woman younger than Isca, darker, shorter, and more slender, who had reminded him of her just the same. When she had noticed his stare across the not-very-great width of the serving room, she had winked—then ignored him resolutely for the remainder of his meal, making certain (or at least, so it had appeared) to be absent when he was ready to pay. He had left his bill and too much money on the table.

That had been in July.

Now it was August, and Dolores lay beside him where Isca had lain; the first light of day peeped beneath the dark green window shades that had come with the house. Immobile, with eyes resolutely closed, he heard her wake and slip out of bed and into her robe—the quick, soft patter of her barefoot steps. Old pipes clearing their throats before they spat water into the bathtub.

He rolled onto his back and clasped his hands behind his head. Better, far better, to lie here. To feign sleep until she had bathed and renewed lipstick, perfume, and powder. She would start breakfast. He would hear the distant clatter of pans and the filling of the coffee-pot, get up, wash, and go downstairs.

He stood beside Isca in the bow of a riverboat, watching unpeopled and densely wooded banks creep past to right and left, listening to the rhythmic splashings of the side-wheels; braced, both of them, for the blast from the steam whistle that would welcome Cincinnati or Omaha, St. Louis or Memphis, where she would disembark and he remain. His shell passed their boat, racing upriver. That was the way life was: you rowed upstream as hard and fast as you could until you were too tired to row any more.

Isca had her bottle out. She offered, drank deeply, and offered it to him. He accepted for old times sake, but the vodka was weaker than water. "God, but we used to have some fun," she said. He sensed that she was about

to say, *What's happened to us?* and cringed; but she did not. He returned the bottle, and she drank what remained and threw the empty into the river. That was wrong, because she had always left the empties where he would find them, each a small triumph over him.

His eyes opened, staring at the flat white ceiling. There was a piano somewhere on the boat, a piano at which someone was playing "Oh, Susanna!"

*I come from Alabama with my banjo on me knee,
I'm going to Louisiana, my Susanna for to see.*

He got up and went into the bathroom. When he came out, it was nearly over.

*The buckwheat cake was in her mouth,
The tear was in her eye,
Says I, "I'm comin' from the South.
Susanna, don't you cry."*

*Oh, Susanna!
Oh, don't you cry for me,
For I come from Alabama with my banjo on my knee.*

He went downstairs and onto the sunporch, where Dolores was taking the roll out of the piano. She grinned at him. "That got you up. I figured it would. Mushmelon, sausage, grits, and sawmill gravy. Coffee. That all right? Pretty near done."

"Sure," he said. "Just don't overcook my melon."

"This is that piano you're always talkin' about, I guess. I played some on it, but it didn't take to my playin'. Then I figured out how to work those rolls."

"I tuned it myself, so it's badly out of tune, I'm sure."

"It's in tune, all right. Only it's got that gritty, low-down bass that don't go with the stuff my teacher taught me." She sat down on the stool. "Those études

and all that. This here's a country-and-western instrument, for sure." She patted it as she would a dog. "You goin' to sell it?"

"I don't know," he said. The truth was that he had never considered selling it, though he might have to. "I'm not quite finished yet. Perhaps I never will be." It seemed better not to mention that there had been times when only the thought of work not done had kept him going.

"Seems like it's finished."

"I put it together because I'd finished with the action," he explained. "All the felt had to be replaced, and a few of the rods." He coughed apologetically. "They should be spruce, but I used oak dowels because that was all I could get."

The old piano suggested that Dolores put on another roll, and she asked dutifully, "Okay if I try another one?"

"Of course, any that you like. Some had been damaged, I think by rats, but I've repaired them. There were only two I had to throw away."

She nodded, only half listening, pulling out rolls and reading titles.

"It plays by itself at times," he said. "When I'm here in the house alone, turning itself on and off."

She threaded a roll and closed the cover. "You're kiddin' me."

"Perhaps I am, a little. I'm afraid I haven't got it set up quite right."

"What's this picture?" She tapped it with a fingernail. "I guess I ought not to ask, but you can't help seein' it."

He laughed. "No, you can't. It's Pan observing a wood nymph—at least, I suppose she's a wood nymph, though I've never thought of them as blonds. That's Pan, with the horns, parting the vines."

Dolores leaned closer, studying the picture. "Likes them heavy, don't he? He looks like the devil."

"He isn't, though. He's a nature god, the god of flocks and herds, forests and meadows. I like it because

it's a comic depiction of Isca's name, if you think about it." Too late, he realized his mistake. "Isca means 'God's watching.' "

"Come on," she said, "I smell that sausage."

Midway through breakfast, he put down his coffee cup and cleared his throat. "I should have told you right away—last night, but I didn't want to spoil it. She's coming today."

Her eyes would not meet his. "To stay?"

"No, certainly not." Isca would, he knew, if he begged her; stay until she got herself together and got her hands on more money. Aloud he said, "She's piled up the Mercedes. She told me last night. A friend—a boyfriend, I imagine—is going to drive her out here."

"What time?" Dolores glanced at the kitchen clock. It was eight-thirty.

"Nine, she said." There were several bites of sausage left and a good deal of grits; but he found he had appetite for neither. "It won't be much before noon, really. She won't get up before eleven." He swallowed the last of his coffee. "Just the same, you'd better let me drive you home."

"What's she comin' for, if she's not goin' to stay?"

He did not reply.

"Your car, isn't it? She wants your car, Jeff. You going' to let her take it?"

"Not if I can help it."

Her fork clattered to her plate. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means what I said. I won't let her take it unless I have to."

She patted her mouth with a bright paper napkin, a moment that would remain in his mind for years to come. "You don't want to give it to her."

"No. Of course not."

"She'll wreck it like your other one, won't she? Maybe kill herself."

He shrugged miserably.

"Listen here, Jeff." She reached across the table to him, her eyes, big with sincerity, fastened upon his

own. "I got a way. I was wantin' to ask. I couldn't figure out how, only this makes it fit perfect. I got to take Jimmy to the doctor today."

Jimmy was her son.

"This afternoon. Two o'clock. So you lend me your car, all right? That way she *can't* get it. It'll be gone, and you can tell her somebody stole it. Or anything you want. I'll bring it back around six and cook your dinner."

There was a distant click from the sun porch.

"All right," he said.

She held out her hand. "You let me have those keys."

He took them from his pocket and handed them to her, and basked in the glow of her satisfaction.

She stood, wiping her hands on Isca's apron. "I'll stay and wash these dishes for you, if you want me to. Won't take a minute."

"No," he said. He was listening for the first bars of the music. "I can do them."

"You leave them. I'll wash them for you when I come back tonight. Maybe you ought to show me, you know, where things are. The ashtray and the wipers and all that." Her eyes were shining with excitement; he wondered whether she actually had a license.

Outside, he opened the car door for her. "You've seen me drive it. It's a perfectly ordinary three-speed transmission, with power steering and power brakes." He pointed. "The air-conditioning will come on as soon as you start the engine. See there?" He showed her how to turn it off, how to adjust the fan, and various other things.

"Jeff . . ." She kissed him. "This is just *so* nice of you."

Music sounded from the sunporch, fifty feet away.

*Once I had two lips
As red as the rose.
Now I'm as pale as
The lily that grows.*

* * *

“. . . for Jimmy. Jeff, I just *got* to pay him.”

“How much?”

“Five hundred, Jeff? Please?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t got it.”

“Three hundred, then. Jeff I *got* to give that doctor somethin’.”

*Like the flower in the garden,
All the color has flown,
Don't you see what I've come to,
For loving such a one.*

It was, he decided, pretty reasonable for what he’d had. They went back into the house, and he wrote her a check in his den to the tinkling music of the old piano.

“Jeff,” (she held his check, the keys to the Buick, and both his hands in hers) “you’re goin’ to get this back. Never doubt it. I *will* repay you.”

It was at that moment that he truly understood that he would never see her again. He kissed her good-bye, and stood on the sunporch to watch her back briskly out of the driveway and pull onto the state highway. She waved, but there seemed little point in waving back.

*So it's tie a yellow handkerchief
In remembrance of me.
Wear it around your neck, love,
In flash company.
Flash company, love,
Like so many more.
If it hadn't been for flash company,
I'd never been so poor.*

It was the sage, kindly voice of an old friend lecturing him. He opened the piano and removed the roll. Dolores had cost three hundred and an old car worth, perhaps, five hundred more. And Dolores had been a lot more pleasant. Isca had run something between a

quarter million and three hundred thousand, as closely as he had been able to calculate it; and Isca had become a nightmare that had dragged on for years.

He was learning.

Rubbing his jaw, he contemplated the old piano. Dolores had been right about the growling bass, and it *was* in tune, to his ears at least. That growl was from the soundboard he had made, largely by guess, from one-eighth inch plywood.

He opened the top and looked at it, rubbing his hands. Beyond any question, he could contrive something better now.

As he went out to the garage to get his tools, it occurred to him that the Buick was registered in Isca's name as well as his own. Some good—or some entertainment, at least—might come of that.

The rowdy, joyous song of the old piano floated along the driveway from the sunporch. When he paused to listen, he could just distinguish the sound of laughter and the cheerful cadence of dancing feet. As he pushed a favorite screwdriver into his hip pocket, he began to whistle.

MERLUSINE

by Lucy Sussex

Remember Longfellow's *Evangeline*? It's more than *the murmuring pines and the hemlocks*; it's about the separation of two lovers, French settlers in a part of Canada known as Acadia. When the British decided they wanted to do a little ethnic cleansing of their newly conquered Canadian territory, some Acadians fled way south to the French colonies in Louisiana. After they got over the swamp fever and heatstroke, they settled into a very particular culture, with language, customs and music all their own. Say *a-KAY-dian* ten times fast, and it turns into *Cajun*.

Cajun music has become a passion of mine, ever since I learned, late in life, that I, the most flat-footed and klutzy of grrrls, could master the Cajun Jitterbug in one evening. I've been dancing ever since. Try it, it's simple: no footwork, you just jump up and down on one leg in time to the music, and let your partner twirl you around.

It's not even that hard to find a live Cajun band down at your local club these days: with the appearance of "blackened" protein on trendy restaurant menus, the accordion renaissance and a general upswing of Louisiana chic, there's plenty of *bon temps* for all.

Cajun bands to listen to? For the real acoustic traditional sound, try the Savoy-Doucet Cajun Band, or early recordings of accordionist D. L. Menard or fiddler Dewey Balfa of the Balfa brothers, who, like Mr. Boudville in Lucy's story, flourished in the fifties. The most popular post-traditional band is Beausoleil, led by

the fabulous fiddler Michael Doucet; I also like Filé and the Basin Brothers.

From the French-descended Cajun, it's a short step to the French-and-African-descended Louisiana Zydeco. In chronological order, check out accordion masters Clifton Chenier (1925–1987), Boozoo Chavis, and Beau Jocque, as well as Buckwheat Zydeco, Rockin' Doop-sie, and John Delafosse and the Eunice Playboys.

A good overview of Cajun and Zydeco, complete with notes, is the two-volume set *J'ai été au bal* (Arhoolie 331/332) or "Louisiana Spice" (Rounder 18/19).

Warning: in the song titles, the word *Tit* does not mean what you might think. It's short for the French *petit*, or little, and is pronounced *tee*. *Tit Jean* is Little John to you, *cher*.

The Universal Mother, capricious in her invention, commits her errors and failures when matter is lacking, or when it is plentiful, or when she is on the point of shaping her Work, or when the faculty is disordered or defective. It is not a new thing in the world . . .

"Aiee Merlusine!"

It gets me in the throat even now, that ululation at the start of the old Cajun song, though I've played "Merlusine" hundreds of times. "Aiee Merlusine!" I voice in soprano reply, tapping my feet until the final triumphant chords of fiddle and accordion. My "Merlusine" is on tape, a copy of the original 78, a copy of a performance nearly half a century old, but still I rise involuntarily to lift the needle from the record. As I do, I almost see the rotating disc before my eyes, the spiral twisting ever inward . . .

I live with helices: the double twist of DNA and the spiral scratch of old American folk records. In my thoughts they interwine, a triple helix. DNA plays a song to me, and it is "Merlusine."

. . . *That men have seen the effects of the nature of a Monstrous child . . .*

The next tape I would play is another version of

"Merlusine," but it exists only in memory. The nearest thing I have to it is a CD by Heath and the Ramblin' Roses, *Live in New Orleans*. The Roses adulterate Cajun with soft pop, and whilst not completely ersatz, they're too bland for my purist tastes. However, Cajun acts so rarely tour Australia that I couldn't pick and choose; when a geneticist's conference coincided with Heath & Co's Queensland dates, I skipped the official dinner and went on down to Festival Hall.

Immediately, I took a dislike to Heath: Firstly, because he wore MTV leathers and a silly headband; secondly, because he thought an accordion made a good phallic symbol; thirdly, because although he'd got technique, in the sense of being able to play fast, there was no passion, no feeling behind those furious riffs. The rest of the band weren't such virtuosos—they played with a sense of fun rather than self-promotion, even managing some of the grit and sweat of the originals. So I did enjoy myself, even if I never came close to clapping.

Encore time, though, was different. The Ramblin' Roses trotted out into the spotlight with an additional player: a sixtyish man clutching a violin and blinking owlshly at the audience from behind bifocals. He looked like a farmer on holiday; he looked like the Cajun musicians of the forties and fifties. Heath's fiddle player, a tall girl with a rope of black hair, grabbed the mike and cooed:

"Ladies and gentlemen! A special guest—Mr. Gervais Boudville!"

I don't believe it, I thought. G. Boudville, who cut a couple of discs for an obscure Cajun label in the fifties and never was heard of again? He was marvelous then—but now? As if in answer, the old man grinned like a maniac and launched into "Allons à Lafayette!"

Within a few bars he had proved he was the real thing, as intoxicating as a draft of swamp beer, both for the audience and the Roses. Suddenly, the band was playing, not note for note, but with the true spirit of a vagrant, eclectic music, beginning with chansons de

toile in medieval France, carried by settlers to Acadie in Canada, and from then down to Louisiana when the British evicted the French colonists. Did they sing as they traveled south, to drown out the pain of the forced march? And did their songs attract other exiles, African slaves, with their own tunes of loss? I have an image of black and white grouped around firelight as their two musics interbred, spawning heartfelt, passionate sounds: the French-Afro Cajun and the Afro-French Zydeco.

The transfigured band played "Le Two Step de L'Anse Meg," then "Tit Canard Mulet," while the crowd went bats. It took a full three minutes for the applause to die down after the third song, I know, because I clapped until my hands were sore. When silence finally fell in the hall, Gervais grinned again, flourishing his bow.

Please God, I thought, not that I believe in you. Please let it be the A side from his second disc, the nearest thing he ever got to a hit record.

"Aiee Merlusine!" sang Gervais.

Apotheosis.

. . . And the Philosophers say that in their day was born a child composed of three Natures . . .

My personal style is k d lang meets boffin, so when I went backstage that night, it was obvious I was not some bimbo with a taste for Cajun musicians. The tour manager was happy to believe I was interviewing for a campus radio show, publicity for this tour having been patchy. Shortly afterward, I was esconced in a back room, with a borrowed tape recorder and the rider: a proper cajun meal of red beans 'n' rice, jambalaya, and gumbo, set at one end of a long table, with several crates of beer at the other.

Bit by bit the Roses rambled in, first the guitar player, who had changed into a conversation starter of a T-shirt, emblazoned with "3rd Annual Baton Rouge Record Collectors' Fair." I'd been to the first fair, during my postdoc fellowship in the U.S., so we got on

fine. The next *musos* in—the Roses' rhythm section—proved equally as fond of rare Cajun vinyl, and our conversation became so fevered that when Heath made his grand entrance, he was completely ignored. It took the real star of the show to silence us as completely as if he had commanded:

"Taisez-vous!" (Shut up!)

Gervais strolled into the room with the fiddle girl, proud as a monarch crowned, proud as Clifton Chenier, late King of Zydeco. On my tape of the "interview" all you can hear at this point is his padding footsteps, then an appreciative *"Eh bien!"* at the refreshments. Then, as if signaled, the band started babbling like a brook, so anxious to tell me the story that they interrupted, finished each other's sentences, and switched between French and Southern U.S. at breakneck speed.

See, the fiddle player and the bassist had gone to this shopping mall, in that Surfers Paradise, y'all call it, in search of real U.S. beer, and walked straight into good ol' Gerry Boudville, who'd been the one millionth customer at a Lafayette *supermarché* and so won a trip anywhere in the world he wanted, which was *L'Australie* to see his fille, who'd gotten married to *un soldat Australien*, no the guy's a fighter pilot . . .

"Lucky find," said Heath. "Million to one chance, huh?"

I nodded. It's my professional joke not to call those odds astronomical but genetic, given the chances, say, of a seventeenth century Dutch ship, *The Gilded Dragon*, hiring in Cape Town a seaman whose inheritance included one of the rarest of genetic disorders, and when the ship was wrecked off the coast of Western Australia, this man surviving, going native, leaving descendants, so that hundreds of years later, local Aborigines were diagnosed with a syndrome only found among the descendants of a seventeenth-century Cape Town couple . . .

Had I believed in the soul, I would have bartered it for a find like that, or for this million to one meeting with

Gerry Boudville. You can't have everything—and so, while we ate, I was content to question my Cajun hero.

"Why did you only make two records?" I asked in French.

"*La claustrophobie.*" Not severe, I gathered, but enough to put him off playing in those little recording booths. He played a few dances after that, but his wife didn't like it much.

At that moment the fiddle player was feeding Gerry a spoonful of gumbo, her long dark plait dangling between his knees. I quite saw Mrs. Boudville's point.

"Oh man," Heath said drunkenly. "With all your talent . . ."

The rest of the band went pink at this lack of tact, but Gerry wasn't fazed, merely remarking that playing the fiddle every night to his cows had tripled their yield. In the astounded silence after this anecdote, I deftly introduced the subject of "Merlusine."

"You own a copy of the record?" said the guitarist. "Oh, wow! I've only got a third-generation tape."

"Shoulda been a monster hit," mumbled Heath.

Yes, I thought, "Merlusine" is Cajun classic material, but curiously nobody's even covered it since.

Gerry shrugged, unconcerned.

"It might have caused trouble," he explained.

"Why?" I said, puzzled, and then suddenly thought I had the answer. Most Cajun songs are little more than mating calls, lyrically embellished with references to dance and drinking, or Tante Nana's pistachios. "Merlusine" is unusual in its lyric, which is both bizarre and obscure. "Aiee Merlusine!" it begins, and then follows a tale of woe. Merlusine's pappy sold her to the carnival because she is a freak, with *un tail de serpe*, but everything will be all right (repeated many times, the chorus line) because somebody called Maurice is going to get her back.

"You mean," I said, "on religious grounds, because of Merlusine being the daughter of the devil, like in the medieval legend?"

Utter blank incomprehension appeared on Gerry's

weatherworn face. "What sorta question is that?" asked Heath petulantly, obviously feeling too long out of the limelight.

"I don't know about her being the daughter of the devil," said Gerry. "Nobody said that when, after the record was pressed, I found out the tune I'd learnt from old Lou Charpentier—a great fiddler, but a greater drunk—had a story behind it. I thought it was just an old Cajun song. That's why the radio stations wouldn't play "Merlusine," because one grandson was a sheriff, another mayor, people to whom you didn't show disrespect. And, more than that, their father was still living, the youngest of Merlusine's children, a man who looked like you and me, with nothing to show that his mother was a snake-woman . . ."

And the hair on the back of my neck stood up and reached for the sky.

This was conceiv'd in the imagination and the fancy, and the Citizens of the town of Biseiglia in Pouille, which is a Province of the Kingdom of Naples in Italy, declare that this child was born of honest and respectable parents, the father being Pierre Antoine Consiglio, and the Mother Elizabeth Nastasia . . .

Once upon a time, and it was long ago that I heard these words, in the halting, French-accented voice of my grandmother, the young knight Raymond was hunting in the forest of Coulombiers, and met, as knights do, with adventure in the form of Mélusine, an eerily beautiful woman. He offered his hand at first sight; she offered him in return her beauty and her cunning mind, which would make his fortune. There was one condition—that husband should never see wife on a Saturday.

It must have soon seemed to Raymond an eccentric but very small price to pay. By trickery Mélusine obtained for him a generous portion of land around the spring where they had met, and by magic built a castle, Lusignan, with no more than a mouthful of water and

three armfuls of stones. The couple settled down to family making, with ten healthy sons born to them, great riches in patriarchal France, even if the boys looked a little peculiar: the heir, Geoffroi, had boar's tusks, another had three eyes, a third was furred like a bear, and the rest partook of freakishness in various degrees.

This mutant brood, and the castle won not by inheritance or battle, caused talk and not a little jealousy, to which the couple were blissfully oblivious. It was a spiteful relative of Raymond's who finally struck at his weak spot: that Mélusine, unlike other wives, had a day off each week, and wasn't this a bit suspicious?

At this point in Grandmère's narration, my disbelief ceased to be suspended, in fact, fell crashing to the floor. Raymond had cheerfully accepted a magic castle and a boar-toothed baby without comment—it was surely rather late in the day for him to query his marriage compact. Had he never heard of killing the goose for its golden eggs? Probably not, my small girl-self decided, given that Raymond himself was a character of folktale.

The suddenly jealous husband secretly followed Mélusine to the Lusignan tower, where she spent her Saturdays, and there surprised her, as she bathed in the fountain fed from their forest spring. Did he scream as he realized her true, monstrous nature: a fine figure of a woman to the waist, and below that a serpent, covered with blue-green scales?

Peeping, Raymond thus destroyed his marriage: Mélusine literally flew out the window, leaving the hearth and home she had created, not to mention ten eldritch boys. A broken home and a serpent in the family cupboard should have spelt disaster for the lads, but they did well by the standards of the time, fighting, sacking, marrying, and begetting. One line of descent married into a little-known family called Plantagenet, and thus four hundred years later the Kings of England carried traces of the blood of Mélusine, reveling in the self-description "Scions of Satan."

Grandmère showed me postcards of ruined Castle Lusignan and could even be persuaded, if in a very good mood, to unwrap from its tissue paper a fairing, from the nearby town of Font-de-Sé: a hard disc of shortbread, molded with the image of a serpent, woman. "Voilà!" she would say. "Here's proof of the story."

I didn't need any. Mélusine had taken hold of my imagination, so much so that when browsing in the Baton Rouge Record fair, I came across a 78 entitled "Merlusine," I paid the high price unquestioningly, purely on the strength of the name. And now I found the song was about another snakewoman, a Cajun, still within living memory.

It had always been on my mind that behind the story of Mélusine was perhaps no devilry, or faery enchantment, but simply some form of ichthyosis, a congenital skin disorder, causing those afflicted to apparently grow scales. Stranger things happen in the world of teratogenesis, my professional specialty: the Elephant Man, for instance, or Maria Pastrana, furred like a bear and with two sets of teeth. I had researched these famous monsters as well as many lesser-known but weirder others. Yet never could I have expected that by a million to one chance I would discover a second, researchable, Mélusine.

... Who say that the cause of this Prodigious Child was Elizabeth going to wash linen on the Seashore, where there is a river abounding in Sea Fish and shell fish...

Cajun music and the DNA helix made an odd couple, but they promised to be as strangely fruitful as Raymond and Mélusine. It just took time from first bud (a letter to Ann Savoy, historian of Cajun music), to pollination (her ten-page reply directing me to other Cajun enthusiasts, collectors of Louisiana, local historians and genealogists, to all of whom I wrote) the dropping of the petals (the letters begetting others in

truly biblical fashion, to produce, after about three generations, enough evidence for me to write a research grant application) to tiny green fruit, which I date precisely to the moment I stepped onto a Louisiana porch and clasped the genetic matter of Merlusine in my bare hands, by pressing the horny palm of Huey Ponsonby.

He eyed me politely, but askance: I may have come from the underside of the world to see him, but I was a young woman and a university doctor, two categories never before meeting in his experience. For my part, I thought how little he looked a limb of Satan's stock, being a well-fed pensioner, who waddled, now that introductions had been made, back to his rocking chair, a genuine D. L. Menard. I perched on a stool, beside a table holding beers and two tape recorders—mine, and that of an amateur local historian, called, improbably, Turtle. He had collected me at the airport and driven me out to the farm for the payoff of being in on the interview.

There was a dead silence, broken only by the chirrup of crickets and a frog croak from the river (clearly recorded on the tape). Then Huey opened his mouth:

"Well, I don't know if I can help you much, after you comin' all this way, too."

I drew in breath, not loudly, but audible enough that Huey's wife, a tiny, wizened woman, paused from placing pork rinds on the table to glance sharply at me.

"But you know the story," I said. "About your father, Luke Ponsonby . . ."

"Everybody called him Mistah Luke," said Huey.

"Mister Luke, and how *his* mother was called Merlusine, because she was supposed to have a serpent's tail."

Mrs. Huey, her head still turned toward me, hissed, a thread of sound:

"She had legs."

On the tape, her interjection is barely audible, and cut off by Huey, who proceeded to make quite a speech. He spoke softly, ponderously, and extraor-

dinarily slow—I could have died of frustration just waiting for a sentence to finish. The gist was:

Yes, he knew the story. Even knew the song, too. His late brother Dwight (the sheriff) got taunted with it in the school yard, and KO'd his tormentor. Thin-skinned, Dwight, like the also late Luke Jr. (the mayor). It got like nobody dared to mention Grandma around the boys. Consequently, Huey hadn't thought about the story much for—oh—some sixty years. He really didn't think he could remember the details.

"But it all started here, didn't it?" I said. "Here on this farm?"

Turtle chipped in. "Title deeds show Alfred Fondecy bought the land 1870."

When I had first seen the name, in a letter from Turtle, I had thought: Font-de-Sé, near Lusignan, where my Grandmère's relatives had bought a country house. The surname was a possible, though unprovable link, with the historical Mélusine, assuming that the snakewoman disorder was hereditary.

"And he married his first cousin, Marie, a girl of fourteen," Turtle continued. "But she died in childbed, leaving twin children, Marie and Maurice."

Huey's rocker creaked as he leant forward. "Twins, eh? You know more than I do."

I rolled my eyes in exasperation, and caught the gaze of Mrs. Huey, who with a jerk of her head, indicated the door to the house. She slipped in; I waited a few moments, then followed, as Turtle reiterated his research—which I already had, via letter—to Huey.

Mrs. Huey was waiting for me in her kitchen, standing in front of a graded row of cookie jars shaped like strawberries.

"I ain't puttin' my husband down to his face, but you're going about this the wrong way, Miz Professor-Doctor. Men don't remember family things—it's us womenfolk who keep pickle receeps, mend the christening gowns, and pass stories down over the quilting."

I nodded, remembering Grandmère, whose French family I knew intimately, despite never having met any

of them, and her husband, Grandad, a man whose surname I bore, but whose ancestry was a complete blank to me, for all he ever talked about was fishing.

"But Mister Luke only had sons, and as Huey's the only survivor, I have to interview him . . ."

"Mistah Luke, he was dying," she said urgently. "And he took his time about it. His wife had died years before, and the other daughters-in-law had houses full of babies, so Huey and I moved in here and I took over the nursing. Mistah Luke, he had things on his mind, and I was the only one listening."

"So tell me," I said. The tape recorder was running out on the porch, but I had notebook and pen in my pocket.

She folded her hands neatly over her check apron and began. Unlike her husband, she spoke quickly, singsong, as if recounting a fairy tale. My notes are almost illegible, scrawled and abbreviated, but the first two words are: Monster Ogre.

Once there was a monster ogre, who treated his young wife so bad, she died, leaving two babies, one a boy, normal to the eye, the other a girl, perfectly formed, fine even, but with blue-green scales running from waist to toe. The father, ashamed, kept the girl confined in his house, though the boy roamed free, bearing for all to see the marks of cruel beatings. Come one day, when both children were thirteen, a carnival passed through the neighborhood.

"And it happened like the song says?" I asked. "Father sold daughter to the carny folk?"

"Reckon that's why the song got written," she replied. "To shame old Fondecy, once the neighbors realized his new buggy and suit had been bought with his own flesh and blood."

"Maurice talked?" I said.

A quick nod. "And then went after his sister. But what could a dirt-poor Cajun boy do? Couldn't buy back the star attraction in a raree-show, could he? That would take real money. All he could do, Mistah Luke said, was hang around the carny, doing odd jobs here

and there, waiting for a chance to make their escape. But Mistah Nathaniel, Luke's daddy, happened along first."

"A knight in shining armor?" I threw in.

She started to shake her head, then stopped in mid-motion. For a long moment she hesitated, clearly chewing over words forthcoming, rapping her fingers on the table as if accompanying an inner agitation. The rhythm brought back to me a song called "Oh, how she dances!" a Texas ditty by James Luther Dickinson, modern rock, but with the timeless quality I admired in the Cajun tunes. It has a spoken intro, the puff of a carny barker, but as I recalled the words they sounded strangely different.

"Ladies and gennelmen, discernin' customers! Right this way, right this way to see the greatest show of freaks on earth! See Elastoman, the contortionist, see Two Tons of Fun, the Fat Lady, see Princess Merlusine perform her spectacular snake dance!"

With the song echoing through my mind, I was mentally transported to the outskirts of a small town at night, carnival lights, smells of candy floss and horse dung, pandemonium, following through the crowd a dandy young man in a white suit, smoking a big cigar. He paused, eyeballing a canvas awning, crudely painted with the image of a woman like a mermaid, except her tail had no fin on the end. Then he paid his quarter and strolled into the big striped tent.

Mrs. Huey, in my improbable vision standing beside me, still in her neat apron among the disreputable carny crowd of over a century ago, shook her head reprovingly, finally decided on spilling the family dirt.

"Looks like a gennelman, doesn't he? Sure he had the money to buy Merlusine outa the carny, but it weren't from Christian charity. Mistah Nathaniel Ponsoby mighta come from a fine ol' Georgian family, but he had the tastes of weird white trash, to marry a snake-lady."

She shook her head again, and the vision vanished. We stood in the spotless kitchen, momentarily silent.

"He got thrown out of Ole Miss, that's what Mistah Luke said. Wouldn't tell me why at first, but when his wits went, out it came anyway. I ain't a-tellin' you, 'cos it ain't fit to repeat. Mistah Luke, he was a gennel-man, but he had real bad blood in his family. That's why his mama sent him back here to claim his granddaddy's farm, so he'd be outa harm's way. I mean, outa the way of his brothers, the ones who were snake through and through."

I recalled Mélusine's alien brood, and was about to question Mrs. Huey more closely, but there came a holler from the porch: "Ruthene! More beer!" She bustled off, at the beck and call of her husband. I followed her out to the porch and was greeted by happy beery smiles from Turtle and Huey.

"We been having a real good time out here. Guess we 'bout done your interview for you," said Turtle.

When I played the tape back later, it transpired Turtle and Huey had talked family history for just five minutes—Turtle dominating the conversation while Huey just sat, drank beer, and listened. About all I learnt that was new was that Huey had a belch like a foghorn. Then they got onto catfishing, which occupied them the rest of the time I was in the kitchen.

Sitting in my motel room that evening, I used their voices as background ambience, while I examined photographs. I had taken Polaroids of the old farmhouse, although it had been entirely rebuilt since Alf Fondecy's day, first by Mistah Luke on his arrival from Georgia early this century, after Alf's death, and subsequently by Ruthene and Huey. Then the inhabitants, Ruthene stripping off her apron to pose beside her husband, the pair stiff as boards, Jack Sprat and his wife, in reverse. The last shot was of Turtle, to keep him happy.

I laid these modern images aside, and opened an envelope of photos from the Ponsonby family album. Ruthene and Huey on their wedding day, dressed up to the nines, c. 1929, but clearly no more confident with the camera. Huey, a decade or so earlier, in company

with the future sheriff and mayor, the three boys all wearing short pants and sullen expressions. Most interesting of all was a photo of a sweet-faced elderly man, Mistah Luke himself. Ruthene had provided these precious images just before I left, calling me back the length of the driveway to do so.

As we were, briefly, alone again, I made use of the time:

"I have to know. When you said some of Mistah Luke's brothers were snakes through and through, what did you mean?"

She replied, as I'd expected: "Why, they had scales on 'em. But not as much as their mama."

So the snakeskin gene, though clearly recessive, *could* be transmitted through successive generations! Ruthene was covered in flour from pie making, but nonetheless I hugged the faithful recording angel of a daughter-in-law.

... Which she fancied she saw presently in her mind: this Woman, marveling and ruminating on this, conceiv'd a confused idea of these Fish, and upon this Woman being known by her husband, this great Fancy of Fish influenced the birth of this Child, who was born with fishlike scales . . .

She had, though, missed one vital piece of information—precisely where in Georgia Nathaniel Ponsonby had carried his bride and brother Maurice, and from whence, a generation later, Mistah Luke had returned to Louisiana. However, the deficiency could be remedied, possibly, by a visit to the only place named in her story: Ole Miss, more properly the University of Mississippi, alma mater of the Southern aristocracy.

But that could wait—it was Saturday, dance hall night for all true Cajuns. So we *allons au bal*, me and the Turtle family, and had a high old time to the sounds of the Hackberry Ramblers, vintage Cajun, with not a band member under seventy. I waltzed and two-stepped to my heart's content, my best dance all night

being with one Leesa Jane Thibodeaux, granddaughter of Sheriff Ponsonby. She was a big-haired, bosomy teen, the focus of male gaze in the dance hall—and of mine, too, but for research almost as much as appreciation. As our legs, mine clad in linen trousering, hers in sheer nylons under a leather miniskirt, moved in unison to the music, I discreetly scanned the expanse of skin from her toes to upper thigh, which was interrupted only by a diamanté shoe strap. Alas, I found not a scale anywhere.

Sunday, I declined the Turtle's invitation to attend church, and instead hit the interstate in my rented car. Come Monday, I was sitting in the office of the Mississippi University archivist. A real historian this, genuine PhD, who sat looking at me over half-moon glasses. If he was surprised to see a woman in a bow tie, he didn't show it.

"You have only the name, a possible date of late last century and a home address somewhere in Georgia?" he said sternly.

My heart sunk as I nodded.

"Shouldn't be too difficult, then," he said, tapping on his computer screen.

To fill in the time between taps and bleeps, I said:

"What's a Georgian boy doing this far west? There were universities he could have attended closer to home."

Bleeeep!

"Speaking from my extensive knowledge of the young Southern male, I'd say he was being sent away from bad company. Often as not, the bad's within the boy, rather than an outside influence, but at least he's raising Cain at a safe distance."

He got up and strolled across to a huge card catalog, which filled one wall of the office. "I've computerized some of my indexes, but the rest are still on good ol' hard copy."

He opened a drawer, reached casually inside, and retrieved a card.

"I think we may have your man here. Nathaniel Jef-

erson Ponsonby, from Columbine County, Ga., medical student 1884-7."

He turned the card over, then, almost shockingly, snickered.

"Oh, him! Thought the name sounded familiar. I gave a paper to the faculty coupla years ago, on the misdeeds of the frat houses, last century. Gist was, some things don't change. Nathaniel Ponsonby figured quite large."

He started making notes from the card onto a sheet of paper.

"Take this down the corridor, to my assistant, and she'll find you the relevant records. You're gonna have a fun afternoon."

Indeed. Mistah Nathaniel had been quite a hell raiser, to judge from his appearances in the dean's disciplinary book. Cussin' and drinkin' were only to be expected; but there were other, darker offenses beyond college rites of passage. A divinity student had complained about Nathaniel's taste in room decor, which allegedly had included a shrunken human head from the Amazon. Nathaniel had responded that the head was from a mummified monkey, "sold to him, with tail of cod attached, as that mythical creature the mermaid." Charge was dismissed, upon evidence from the professor of anatomy on the differences between monkey and human physiology.

Within a month he was in trouble again, over allegations he had borrowed a two-headed baby from the Medical Museum to display at his twenty-first birthday party. This time it was clear he had amassed a private freak show in pickle jars, from the evidence of the witnesses, who claimed to have noticed nothing unusual, well, no more unusual than normal, about Nat's room—those who could remember anything of the night, that is. I skipped a few entries, looking for the final enormity that had led to expulsion and had sealed Ruthene's mouth in a prim moue.

When I found it, I bit my lip, for like Ruthene I found nothing humorous about a freshman fraternity

initiation involving sex with a piebald Negress. The shock value even after a century was considerable, and the stir it created at the time was obvious—even the handwriting of the dean's secretary, recording the hearing, became stiff as if in outrage. What seems to have rankled most was the rather high price charged for the freshmen's privilege, and the fact that young Ponsonby was getting a cut of the proceeds.

"That's him," I said, closing the book with a thump and a small cloud of dust. "Couldn't possibly be two Nathaniel Ponsonbys with such bizarre tastes."

"Indeed," said the archivist, from the other side of the reading room. "He was certainly an original. I wonder what became of him. A latter-day Baron Frankenstein, perhaps?"

"No such luck. He settled down to family making—with a woman who happened to be a latter-day Mélusine, complete with scales."

"Ah," he said, rubbing his glasses. "Now, why does that surprise me not at all?"

*. . . On his feet and hands; his Neck and his Face,
like his Nature, are fair . . .*

"Hurrah," I sang as I crossed the border into Georgia.

Hurrah! We bring the Jubilee!
Hurrah! hurrah! the flag that makes you free!
So we sang the chorus from Atlanta to the sea
As we were marching through Georgia!"

Singing a Yankee song in Confederate country was probably a lynchable offense—but it was preferable to the Prozac country on the rental car's radio. And I had already played my Cajun tapes to the point where repetition was threatening to dull pleasure, perhaps permanently; they were inappropriate anyway, since I was *Allons de*, rather than *Allons à*, Lafayette. So like a minstrel out of hell, I sped down the highway on wings of song, shutting up only when I had to stop at Bob's

Gasco to buy a map, to try and find where in Georgia Columbine County was.

What I found instead was Nathaniel Ponsonby, a lawyer from Atlanta, announcing his intention to run for the Senate, via the medium of a giant TV set in which the sad-faced Bob appeared engrossed. I narrowed my eyes at the screen—there wasn't a great resemblance between this Nathaniel and the Louisiana Ponsonbys, but he did have Luke's arched brows and strong chin, features that were quite telegenic.

"Now, what's that you got there?" said Bob.

I jumped—it hardly seemed he'd glanced away from the screen, the whole time I'd been in the station. Then, as he held out one huge paw, I deposited the precious photograph of Luke into it. In dead silence he compared the images.

"They's related," he said finally. "The old guy, he's Billy Carter, Dad Clinton, some kinda skeleton in the family closet?"

"Hardly. Mr. Luke Ponsonby seems to have led a blameless life . . ."

Bob spat, into a spittoon crudely shaped, I saw, into a caricatured Jimmy Carter.

"But some of the family certainly didn't."

"Oh," said Bob, brightening. "That's all right, then." He nodded at the screen. "Democrat!"

. . . Of a not disagreeable color, and his Hair is fine and blond, and below his neck, a black Hue is diffused all over his Body, which is somewhat hairy, pitted, and tousled like a scaly Fish . . .

Nathaniel Ponsonby was trying to be nice, with the resignation of someone practicing for the terminal blandness of high office, but really he was unhappy about inviting me inside his plush Atlanta home. Australia meant only one thing to him, and that was Murdoch tabloids. His suspicion that I was a muckraking journalist in disguise was confirmed when I kept talking about hereditary disease.

"Not on my side of the family, ma'am," he repeated.

I looked at this clean-cut young politico, and tried to imagine his ancestral namesake being a pimp for a woman patterned like a pinto pony, let alone snuggling up to scaly, Cajun legs. As I was cynically aware of the bones behind the whitest of political sepulchres, my imagination didn't have to work very hard.

"I'm afraid it is. I have eyewitness accounts"—a lie, since nobody I had spoken to had encountered a scaled Ponsonby—"that your great-great-grandma Merlusine had a form, possible never before described by science, of ichthyosis."

He saw a way out, and jubilantly pointed at a frame on the wall. "The family tree says her name's Marie!"

"That was her christened name. Merlusine was a nickname, possibly also stage name, after the snake-woman of medieval legend. Do you mind if I have a closer look at the tree?"

Before he could protest, I casually unhooked the embroidered family tree from the wall, propping it on the walnut coffee table. "Ah, I see she and your ancestor Nathaniel had seven sons. Mind if I note the names and dates?"

"If you must."

I noted down the details in my notebook for Nathaniel Jr., Jefferson, Maurice, Raoul (d. young), Robert E. Lee (also d. young), Wendell, and Luke.

"That's my work," said a female voice, dripping with Southern honey.

I looked up, and saw, in the doorway, what was obviously Mrs. Nathaniel—nobody else would have been made over into a cross between Tipper Gore and Jackie Kennedy, complete with pink pillbox hat atop platinum tresses. But the eyes behind those baby blue contact lenses were shrewd, and her smile, as Nathaniel introduced us, etched laugh lines deep in her face.

"I do embroidery," she said, sitting down on the couch. "A harmless enough hobby"—with a meaningful glance at her husband.

"It's beautiful work," I said.

Nathaniel-the-many-generations-junior cleared his throat.

"Shari, hon, we have a *geneticist* here, all the way from Australia."

She took off her hat. "You've come about Granny Snake?"

Her husband went ashen.

"Nate, you're not denying the story?" She looked at him, exasperated. "Sooner or later we're gonna get questions, we can't hide the fact your family tree is . . . colorful."

I glanced down at the embroidery. Sure enough, she had used almost electric green wool for the leaves, and the trunk was a russet verging on orange.

"And frankly, I've been expecting any day to have some newscaster recall that your distant cousin Braxton went to the chair."

I stopped copying names and dates and transcribed this interesting information.

"Not to mention cousin Harv . . ."

"Shari!" Nate said. She quietened, but only for a second.

"I heard all about Granny Snake when Nate and I got engaged. One side of my family came from Columbine County, same as Nate's, and did I get the third degree about that! His relatives were paranoid we might be related . . ."

"Quite sensible," I said. "Seeing as this skin disease appears to be linked to a recessive gene."

She nodded. "Made me think of the rule in the Middle Ages, where you couldn't marry a cousin even nine times removed. I majored in history, so I know about these things."

"The medieval lawmakers may have had the historical Mélusine in mind," I said. "Where this disorder apparently originated. Those sons of hers certainly showed signs of major genetic disruption—medical textbooks, they were. Thierry, furred like a bear, that's hypertrichosis, hirsuteness. The youngest, with three eyes, possibly a Siamese twin . . ."

She lifted one pink-clawed finger. "Stop! I just remembered something."

Several minutes later we were all in the attic, panting slightly and inspecting, in a dusty, Victorian frame, a C17th broadsheet I had seen before only on microfilm. It described one Bernardin Consiglio, a fish-scaled prodigy from Naples.

"Original," I said, after a while. "In good condition, too. Where did you get this?"

"Guess it came from the big old house in Columbine County, before it got burnt down," said Nate.

Very likely, I thought, but did not say, it was part of the original Nathaniel's gallery of monsters.

"Do you have any more stuff like this?" I asked. "Heirlooms, family photos?"

"Not much. It all went in the fire . . ."

Shari replaced the picture, dusting her hands absently on her tight pink skirt. "Arson, wasn't it, Nate? All over inheritance, too. Maurice set the house on fire to spite Nathaniel II, but instead killed Wendell, his favorite brother. Not that it ever got proved in court, but everyone knew he did it."

"Shari!"

She pouted. "Nate, if you go into politics, your history belongs to the fourth estate. And I'd rather have sensational, safely dead relatives than Whitewater any day!"

The magnolia had metamorphosed from soft petals to hard steel. Nate took one look at his wife, swallowed, and suddenly started to cooperate.

. . . Somewhat speckled with white, both the soles of the Feet and the palms of the Hands being white, human in form, but speckled with many Hues like the Turtle; he is ten years of age and is called Bernadin.

Oddly enough, a magnolia tree was planted overlooking the grave of Marie Ponsonby, beloved wife, loving sister, devoted mother, as the white marble attested, and flowers littered the triple memorial, which

was also to Nathaniel I (in the center) and Maurice Fondecy (on the left). Looking at the grave, I was struck by its resemblance to a king-size stone bed. A little farther away were the smaller, but still lavish headstones to Robert E. Lee, Raoul, and Wendell, aged eight, fourteen, and forty. Their uncle and father had lived to fifty and sixty-four, respectively; Granny Snake, as Shari had called her, had made it to seventy.

I crouched on the white paving, taking notes amid the sickly sweet smell of decaying flowers. A succession of afternoon teas with Nathaniel's elderly cousins had laboriously established his line of descent, which had tended to small, sparse families of boys and utter respectability. No snakes here. Days spent in Atlanta libraries, examining old microfilmed newsprint, had revealed much more of the family history. Jefferson, the second born, had become a monk—no descendants there. Luke, I knew, was no snake; which left only Wendell and Maurice II as possible carriers of the snakeskin gene.

I pondered again the fact that the Ponsonby offspring had ranged from saintly (Luke and Jefferson) to demonic (Maurice and Wendell)—the clippings I had gleaned from the library were an extensive history of wild oats, even before the fire. Like father, like some of his sons, I decided, with the difference that Nathaniel I had, after arriving in Georgia with his bride, turned over a new leaf, becoming respectable.

Or had he? For the nth time I pulled out the envelope of photographs I had slowly extracted from the various Atlanta Ponsonbys. Largest of all was a group photo, family on porch, boys in knickerbockers grouped around the figures of two bearded paterfamilias, Nathaniel I and Maurice, one blond, one dark, seated side by side. By Nathaniel sat a woman—but her face and hair were obscured by a sunbonnet, as she bent over the cradle where reposed the sleeping Luke. Other photos showed the boys in detail, an inscription on the back of one identifying Maurice II and Wendell. No mistaking it, these boys had a glint in their eyes . . . but

then, so did Mistah Nathaniel, even when settled down to family life.

Another photograph depicted Maurice and Nathaniel, younger and beardless, in a conventional Victorian pose of male amity. Or was it? Blond charmer Nathaniel gazing into the eyes of gorgeous gypsyish Maurice reminded me irresistibly of the more romantic gays in Robert Mapplethorpe's canon. The last photo, wrapped in tissue paper, for it was the only descent image I had of the snake-woman, showed idyllic lovers, arm in arm on a porch swing—three of them, Nathaniel between Maurice and a dark beauty with a piquant, Gallic face. Her eyes were sharply intelligent, her chin strong; I sensed here another steel magnolia. What had she made, I wondered, of a life of luxury with weird Nathaniel, after a deprived childhood, then adolescence in a carny? I somehow thought she had made the very best of it that she could.

Turning, I eyed the triple bed grave again. I was developing dark suspicions about these three, lying here together, in death as they had in life?

His Mother, dismayed at his monstrous birth, kept him Confin'd, Hidden, and Unknown to all the neighborhood. She dipped him in Water many times, in order to make him shed his scales . . .

"Those Ponsonbys, mumble mumble click mumble," said the old cracked voice on the tape, before bursting into an impish giggle. Zediya Atkinson pressed the pause button with one cocoa-colored finger.

"Did you understand that?"

"Not what came after 'Those Ponsonbys.' I'm not good with Afro-American, particularly when it's that dialectal. And there's a lot of background noise."

"Gramma had this habit of clicking her false teeth. And she liked the TV on loud, all the time. I'm used to it, so I can interpret that she said: 'Those Ponsonbys, they was degenerates.'"

"I know that already."

I had gone looking for Chloe Pearl Atkinson, daughter of another Chloe, this time Chloe Mae, personal maid to Mrs. Nathaniel I. Alas, I was too late, for when I knocked on the door of the little pink house in Rise 'n' Shine, an almost exclusively Negro townlet, I found Zediya, sorting through her grandmother's personal effects. We made a quick trip in Zediya's station wagon to lay some flowers on the new, modest grave, and then returned to the house, and to a briefcase full of cassettes, records of a verbal struggle between a gossipy, contrary old woman and her descendant, an oral historian desperately in search of her Afro-American roots.

"When she got ornery, she'd talk about the Ponsonbys, 'cos she knew I wasn't interested in white folks."

I eyed Zediya nervously, as I had when she had opened the door. She was an alarming figure of black pride with her heavy, clanking ankh pendants, Malcolm X badges, and the African batik that swathed her body, leaving only hands and face visible.

"And so just about every damn tape has stuff about the Ponsonbys. You'll havta listen to all of them, I guess."

"Here?" I asked timidly.

"Well, you're gonna need me to interpret, least till you're used to the way she talks. And it gives me company, while I pack up here, even if it's white company . . ."

So began a very strange week. Rise 'n' Shine was too small for even a motel, but I found lodgings several blocks away with Mrs. Snodgrass, the widow of a Baptist minister and a woman with an extensive collection of gospel records. That at least was a bridge across the melanin barrier, as our evenings were spent around the record player. It contrasted acutely with my daytimes spent in the formal front room of the pink house, solitary except when I called in the helpful/hostile Zediya to interpret. The time was fruitful, I grant that—I discovered a new musical enthusiasm, and first my note-

book, and then a whole stack of index cards filled up with notes.

As I had suspected, Nathaniel, Maurice, and Merlusine had lived very happily in a *ménage à trois* for nearly thirty years. Three of the children had been affected by the snake gene: Raoul, who had died young, Wendell, and Maurice II. They had only been scaled on the calf and foot, Chloe Pearl recollected. The prudery of Victorians, and their total body coverage, had ensured the boys never went barelegged; similarly Chloe Mae was the only outsider to see underneath Merlusine's long frilled skirts.

Thus the secret had been kept, even in an era with intense, prurient interest in freaks. With Nathaniel as family doctor and Chloe Mae as midwife, nobody need look askance at wealthy, happy Mrs. Ponsonby. Things got more difficult when the next generation grew up, and under the influence of Nathaniel's nature and nurture, Maurice II and Wendell ran wild.

The Ponsonbys must have been endearing, I decided, for though Chloe Pearl cackled with glee at their misdeeds, there was affection in her laugh as well. I thought I had an answer, when she recounted how the wild, snakey boys had horsewhipped a Klansman (Zediya, for once, made approving responses to this Ponsonby tale). But then I realized there must be more to it, for both Chloes had kept in contact with the various branches of the Ponsonby tree, to the third and fourth generation.

Bit by bit I came to understand Chloe Pearl's speech, and had less call on Zediya for interpreting. My last morning in *Rise 'n' Shine*, she poked her head around the door whilst showing a real estate agent the property, but otherwise let me alone. Thus she did not see my complete Ponsonby family tree, a system of index cards linked with string, until I had finished it, and laid it out on the carpet.

"Oh!" she said, walking slowly around and around, inspecting my handiwork. I proudly explained how the snake effect was traced by a system of color coding, red

for Merlusine, dark pink for her affected sons, Maurice II, Raoul, and Wendell. Braxton had only been snake an "itty bitty bit" according to Chloe Pearl; he got a pale pink card. Nobody else in the third generation had been affected; the fourth generation, Wendell and Maurice's grandchildren, was snakeless, although I had my suspicions about Cousin Harv. The only son of Braxton, he lived to break family and social taboos, culminating in the ultimate anti-American act of emigrating to Communist Russia. I had put a pink question mark on his card—he was certainly a snake, even if scaleless.

There was a long pause after I finished, then Zediya said: "You better pick this up before I stomp on it."

Because her tone meant business, I did, scrambling off the floor just in time before her temper gave way. Zediya had been placid the whole time I had been in the house—now she howled, aiming a clumsy judo kick at the pile of cassettes, which scattered them to every corner of the room.

"I spent hours lissenin' to Gramma talk about these damn Ponsonbys, wishin' she'd tell me *my* family history, not some white folks'! You've got a full family tree here—yet I can't trace my kin beyond Chloe Mae! Where she was born, who she had Chloe Pearl with, what she did before she worked for the Ponsonbys, I don't know none of these things. You can trace your snake people back to France, maybe . . . but me, I got no roots at all!"

These last words were an impassioned shout, and in the silence afterward we stood awkwardly, divided by an abyss of race and pain. When she spoke again, it was threatening:

"What you lookin' at, white gal?"

The batik had ripped with her kick, a thigh-high split, which revealed that the bare skin on her legs was parti-colored. The sight sent a complex chemical thrill coursing through me: at one level erotic, so violent it was almost painful; at another level cold horror at this unprecedented reaction, when far less flesh had been revealed than with Leesa Jane; and thirdly, a jolt of

pure pleasure in the part of my brain reserved for teratogenesis, for Zediya's enveloping robes had hidden a melanin deficiency. This black woman was a magpie, patched with white.

Trying to keep my voice steady, I said: "Did Chloe Pearl have skin like yours?" It had not struck me as odd before, but there had been no photograph on the grave, and Zediya had never volunteered a visual record of her grandmother. "And her mother, Chloe Mae?"

She nodded twice, the up-down gesture violent as a blow.

"Then I think I can tell you something about your family."

She looked at me opaquely, as she unfastened a badge from her turban and pinned the cloth on either side of the rip, holding it closed. With the ivory white against milky cocoa, that tantalizing contrast, concealed, I felt—a little—more scholarly and professional.

"If you go to the archives of the University of Mississippi, you'll find records of disciplinary action against Nathaniel Ponsonby I, in 1887."

Eons ago, it seemed, I had sat in the Ole Miss archives and wondered at Nathaniel's tastes in women. It didn't seem the least peculiar to me now . . .

"Mentioned in the proceedings is an ex-slave woman called Mary Pinto, yes, like the pony. He'd bought her out of a carnny, as he did Merlusine. I think she's your great-grandmother Chloe Mae."

Her dark eyes were calm now, imploring more information. I wondered whether I should voice my suspicion that Chloe Pearl's interest in the Ponsonbys was precisely because they were *her* family, that the ménage à trois had been à quatre, with Master Nathaniel and maid having, as was common in the nineteenth century, an upstairs-downstairs baby. No, better stay with what seemed more certain, the records in Mississippi, sordid though they were.

Zediya listened to the tale of the frat house prank, then threw me out—just as I had anticipated she would.

. . . But God willed that he should be deemed curious enough by the State, a Child so monstrous, the most terrible thing the world has seen, to be portrayed in the state of Nature.

On the way back to Mrs. Snodgrass' house, every tenth step or so ivory and chocolate cream would recur in my mind's eye, like a fetish, and in order to keep walking normally I would be obliged to concentrate hard on something unaphrodisiac, like Zediya's rage. Yet after a block even that was beginning to seem endearing, and the only solution seemed higher things: Gospel!

I was chilling out to the strains of "Will Hell Be Your Santa Claus?" when the phone rang.

"My name's Frank Thurwell from Decatur," said a basso profundo. "Miz Shari Ponsonby gave me your number. I rang Nate after I seen the TV news."

"We don't have TV here. My landlady says it's sinful."

He grunted.

"I'm a part-time Democratic party organizer. Nate I know, but I never realized he and Braxton Ponsonby were related, till some Republican asshole splashed it all over the news. See, my late father, he was a procrastinator, but even he had to die—"

I wondered where this was leading.

"—Was pathologist for the state penitentiary. I opened Dad's safe for the first time last month and got the fright of my life. There it was, together with notes toward a medical article that never got written."

The song had reached an a cappella crescendo. I ground the receiver into my ear and yelled: "What was in the safe?"

"Why, this foot, in formaldehyde, labeled Braxton Wendell Ponsonby."

The track finished, and in the calm before the next song I said: "That's pretty weird."

"So's the foot."

The next song was "Blessed Assurance," and with precisely that feeling I asked:

"How much do you want for it?"

Ten minutes later I was driving to Decatur. Some hours later I began my return trip to Rise 'n' Shine, accompanied by the ripe, strange fruit of my inquiries—a glass jar, sitting on the backseat, padded in an old quilt and seat belted to be on the safest side. Inside was a foot, adorned with the blue-green scales of a type of ichthyosis never before known to science. "Oh, blessed be to God for procrastinators!" I sang to various old gospel standards, none of which quite fitted the words.

As if God didn't agree with this sentiment, the weather turned foul. I arrived back at Rise 'n' Shine in the middle of a thunderous shower, and was pulling up to Mrs. Snodgrass' house when a figure in flowing batik waved at the car. I stopped, opened the door, and Zediya squelched in. Even through her general damp, I could see she had been crying.

"I've got a buyer for the house," she said.

"Good," I said awkwardly. In her current state, Zediya was no Miss Wet T-shirt, nor threatening, but I was still wary of another embarrassing surge of desire . . . and of her temper.

"But that's not why I'm here. Found this after you'd gone."

It was a postcard with a Russian stamp: "Dear Cousin Chloe, Leningrad is swell. I've even met another American, of similar, right mind, and she is one fine girl. In fact, apart from telling you I'm still alive, though the rest of the family wish I weren't, I'm writing to say I'm getting married!!! To a great comrade from Louisiana, Belle Fondecy. Think from the name we must be related, but what the hell, we're in love!!! Long live the Revolution, Harv Ponsonby.

"It was the cousin bit that made me cry," she said. "The more I pressed Gramma on my family, the more she'd talk Ponsonby. And I never"—here her voice slipped toward sob—"ever caught on."

"I guessed it, but didn't want to say. I thought you'd throttle me."

That drew a small, sad smile. "You thought right." The rain had eased slightly, and she opened the car door.

"Good-bye," she said. "I'm off to Mississippi in search of Mary Pinto."

I looked at the card, pondering Harv Ponsonby. He had undoubtedly known the family phobia of endogamy, of recessive genes producing another Granny Snake, but this had not stopped his ultimate act of defiance, in marrying a possible relative. I mentally calculated how much was left in my grant—enough to take me to Leningrad, once again St. Petersburg? It might be greedy, but I couldn't give up the chance of possibly more strange fruit, living and fresh instead of preserved in formaldehyde. The thought of a Russian Ponsonby, a Boris or Marina, complete with scales, was irresistible. And so, while I was preoccupied with my Slavic Merlusine, Zediya slipped quietly out of my car—and I let her go without a word of thanks, or farewell.

Back at the Snodgrass manse, I let myself in quietly, for it was late. A light still burned in the living room, but my landlady slept, spread around her that evening's task, half finished: the filling of a new album with old photographs. I bent over her, to turn off the light, and suddenly noticed, among the images of church picnics and Sunday schoolchildren, something familiar.

I picked up the photograph and examined it closely. At first sight it was unremarkable, a middle-aged Negro woman, a small child in her lap. It was her gaze that had caught my attention, for she had the unmistakable Ponsonby glint in her eye; and then I noticed that on her neck, legs, and arms were blotches, patches of white. Chloe Pearl, I guessed, hearing in my mind the wicked cackle on the tapes. Yet it was the child she nursed who transfixed me, a little girl, similarly pied, the cornrowed spikes of her hair black and white.

Zediya! and I sat down abruptly on the couch beside my sleeping landlady. I had been ungracious to her, even

unkind—when the sight of her parti-coloration could literally make me weak at the knees. But this time I felt more than eroticism in the charge; for now I longed for her gruff speech, her anger, her dark pride . . . as I never had for any human being before.

I considered the blue-green scales on the foot of Braxton Ponsonby, then transposed them onto a living female form, my hypothetical Russian Merlusine. It was no contest: although, as had perhaps happened with Mistah Nathaniel, teratogenesis had crossed my personal dividing line between passions purely intellectual and those physical, I really could not come at scales. With fondness and relief I thought of the bird in hand at Rise 'n' Shine, my difficult magpie, so angry that the gods of genetics had made a sport of her.

Moving very slowly, so as not to wake Mrs. Snodgrass, I crept out to my car again. The rain had ceased, and as I drove to the pink house, pools of water in the road reflected my headlights dazzlingly. But as I rounded the corner, I saw the little home, dark behind its FOR SALE/SOLD sign; moreover, Zediya's big station wagon was absent from its habitual spot in the driveway.

I paused, dumbfounded—then saw on the crest of the hill rising out of Rise 'n' Shine, where led the road to the interstate, the red of taillights. Living as I had in this sleepy hollow, I knew how little traffic there was at night; the lights might be from a truck, or lovers-a-courting, but equally they could be Zediya's. I reached for a tape as I considered the matter, slotted it into the player, then pressed the accelerator down hard.

Raucous Cajun sounds filled the car as I sped out of Rise 'n' Shine, so that even poor Braxton's foot seemed tapping to the beat. I had made an ideal choice of song; the only possible sound track to my personal chase movie. Even if I had to pursue Zediya all the way to Mississippi, I would find her—though what I would say, once I did, was another matter. And I couldn't imagine what she might say to me.

A yes was, I had to admit, unlikely. But had not I been living in a world of million to one, genetic odds,

ever since I had attended the Ramblin' Roses gig? My backseat companion, rocking in its formaldehyde, was surely proof of that. This investigation had led to a significant scientific discovery; and also a revelation on the level of personal genetics. It had been a long and strange chain of chance, a triple helix, that had drawn me half across the world. Was it too much to hope that my luck would hold for one last link?

"Aiee Zediya!" I sang.

THE DRUMMER AND THE SKINS

by John Brunner

I still had this story sitting on my desk waiting to be read when I got word of John Brunner's death at the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow in August, 1995.

It's the fifth in a series of "Tommy Caxton's Solid Six" stories that he'd been writing for the past 40 (!) years, beginning in 1955 with "The Man who Played the Blues." The most recent was "Djinn Bottle Blues," which appeared first in 1968.

Always a precise craftsman with an eye for detail and a vision that went beyond the mundane, Brunner has left us with a wonderful story in which the Eternal collides most satisfyingly with the Present. The West African god of Thunder is known to be particularly fond of hard drumming and fast dancing. Originally a member of the African Yoruba pantheon, Chango made his way westward with the slave trade to become part of the New World's religions of Voudon and Santeria, reaching from Haiti and Cuba to New Orleans and beyond.

The grand reunion of jazz men in this story reminds me of a joke I just learned from my best joke source, my New York City uncle, Ron (who says he got it off of public radio from Peter Schickele). Ron tells it like this:

So there were these two musicians, Charley and Sam, who used to play together in this small club in Passaic, New Jersey. After the group broke up about thirty years ago, Sam managed to hold it together playing occasional weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, sitting in on studio jobs, giving a few lessons, and having to

resort to a day job every now and then. One day, Sam is walking down Broadway when who should he see walking in the other direction but Charley.

"Charley," he says, "how are you? How've you been all of these years?"

"Well," says Charley, "I've managed all right. You know, after the group broke up, I met this guy who got me a job doing chord charts for Sinatra . . ."

"Sinatra!" says Sam; "that's great! Wow, I didn't know that."

"Yeah," says Charley, "I stayed with him for a while and then wound up in Hollywood, where I started to do some arranging and writing, and was lucky enough to write some scores for a few movies."

"Wow," says Sam. "Movies! That's great. I didn't know that. Boy, that's terrific."

"Yeah," says Charley, "I even won two Oscars for a couple of my movies."

"Two Oscars," says Sam. "I didn't know that. That's fantastic!"

"Then," continues Charley, "I got my own group going, and we made three platinum records."

"Three platinum records. That's fantastic. I didn't know that," says Sam.

"After that," he says, "I started doing bookings and managing, and I've got a stable full of top stars now. In fact," he says, "I was down in Atlantic City last week to see one of my acts, and as I'm heading back to New York in the limo, I thought that it might be nice to drop in at the old club in Passaic and see if it was still there. Well, you know, it's still there, and Leo is still running it. And Leo remembered me, and we sat down and had a nice talk about the old days. We talked about you and the other guys. And then, after a while, Leo thought that it might be fun if I sat in with the group that was playing that night. He had an old horn upstairs, so he went and got it and I sat in with the group for a set. But I don't have the chops anymore. I just couldn't play."

"Yeah," says Sam. "I heard."

Maybe it was a silly sentimental sort of idea. But when it dawned on me that Tommy Caxton's Solid Six would shortly have been playing together on and off for thirty years, I did feel we ought to mark the event in some way.

So I canvassed opinion at our next gig—we still play a dozen dates a year, half of them annual fixtures since way back when, though this was strictly a one-off, or at any rate we hoped so: the wedding of Louie and Cindy Ditton's daughter, Kath—and the verdict was in favor. The next question was where. Most of the venues we'd worked at in the early days had undergone a change of use and not a few, including Nick's Cellar at Marble Arch, had been lost to redevelopment. Not that we really wanted to play in a former crypt again . . .

Fats Hamilton, our drummer, was out of the room when we started on the subject, making room for his next glass of champagne. When he limped back to rejoin us—he has these terrible varicose veins in his right leg, which have more or less made him quit using his hi-hat, though he can still keep the beat moving fine on the bass drum pedal, and the real moldyfigs would say it's no loss, but I've never been that puristic . . . Where was I? Oh yes. He was the one who said, "What about the old Watergate, then?"

Bill Sandler, the piano man, said doubtfully, "I thought that had gone, too."

"Nope!" Fats relit his cigar. He's been under doctor's orders to quit for years, but he compromises. He smokes only five a day instead of ten. Unfortunately, they're twice the size. "Still there, still a pub."

"How do you know?" chimed in Ed, the bassist.

"You forgotten that's where I met my Cora, rest her soul? Her folks still live in the area. I go back now and then, see my nephews and nieces. Had to take a diversion one time—there was a bomb scare—and all of a sudden I found myself in Watergate Street. And there the pub was right in front of me, only the name had been changed. When I got to my brother-in-law's

place, I asked why, and they told me it was because of what happened with President Nixon. The landlord got sick of people making stupid jokes.”

“So what’s it called now?” demanded Alf Reardon, opening the dribble key of his trombone and blowing through because we were due to play another set. By the look of things, we might have to do so without a clarinetist, for Louie was nowhere in sight. But what the hell? It isn’t every day you marry off your only daughter.

“Would you believe the Riverside?”

And he gave one of his slow-burning waiting-for-the-double-take grins.

I’d better explain. The Watergate-as-was had been the home of a jazz club in the early days of the trad revival. We’d guested there occasionally. When the original resident band split up, they invited us to take over. Since at that time a club residency was as close as you could get to a secure job, we jumped at it. We changed the name to the Riverside Club, and for our signature tune, of course, we used “Down by the Riverside.” It wasn’t where we started out, but it was the place we’d played most regularly for the longest time. We clung on until the landlord drank himself into early retirement, by which stage everyone was listening to rock and roll.

Still, we hadn’t quit entirely, even though we never had a permanent base again. In fact, we’d been bloody lucky compared to some. After three decades, we were still able to get together occasionally with our oldest friends, make the kind of music we loved, and on top of that, get paid.

Sometimes, anyway.

So we decided to go ahead. That very evening I phoned up and spoke to the landlord, whose name proved to be Herbie Smithers. He sounded cautiously in favor. He said the old “ballroom” we used to play in was still there, though they hadn’t featured music much lately, more strippers and stand-up comics. Those, he

said glumly, weren't pulling the punters like they'd used to, so he'd been considering a change and wouldn't mind giving us a slot. When it turned out he had a vacancy in two months' time on the actual thirtieth anniversary of our first gig, everyone gave boozy nods and told me to go ahead. Bill said he would design some fliers on his kids' computer, Ed agreed to book ad space in *New Musical Express* and *Time Out* and the local rags, Alf took on the job of contacting survivors who had guested at the Riverside when it was our baby, see if they were free that evening and willing to sit in . . .

And Fats promised to talk his in-laws into decorating the hall and maybe bringing along some West Indian goodies provided the pub didn't sell its own food in the evening. Everything suddenly seemed like it was really going to happen—especially since, when the following week Bill and I paid a visit to check out the premises, confirm the boss had applied for a late drinks license, sign the contract, and make sure there was a tunable piano, we found the place was better than the old days, not only because it had recently been repainted but also in the sense that there was now a bar in the ballroom itself. When we worked there, you had to squeeze along the passage past the toilets to tank up; if you waited for the interval, you had to queue for ages; if you didn't, you missed some of the music, and either way you probably spilled half your glassful on the way back through bumping into people coming out of the loo. Also the car park had been enlarged. Now it extended all the way to the actual water gate after which the pub had first been named, a wicket leading to a flight of steps where ferrymen used to board and land passengers before London's modern bridges were built. And with the clearance of the docks, there was plenty of room to park in nearby streets as well. Mark you, in the old days that wasn't much of a problem. We owned a van. I mean one between us. We'd bought it on fifty-pound shares and did the maintenance ourselves.

Things had changed, and not all of them for the

worse. We found ourselves really looking forward to the big event.

Kath's wedding had been in late August, on a fine sunny day conducive to optimism. When the weather turned wintry in October, we still felt tolerably cheerful. The word was getting around, and all sorts of people who had gone on to wealth and glory kept phoning or telling their agents to write and say they hoped to drop in. Rock Redstone reminded us his first professional booking had been at the Riverside with the skiffle group the Brotherpluckers, before he went on to two gold discs and eventually platinum. Champ Wellington said it was thanks to visiting the Riverside that he had gone back to the piano after a five-year break and would call by and play boogie-woogie in the interval. Victoria Timms, who had given up her brass bass in favor of record production, and indeed supervised our first commercial release, sent apologies—she would be abroad—but she had just found a forgotten boxful of that very 45 in mint condition that we could maybe raffle or auction, and where would we like them sent?

Our course, in short, was set fair until the very morning of the anniversary. Then, while I was practicing some tricky homemade riffs I didn't want to leave out of "Snag It," I had a phone call from Fats's elder half brother Errol's widow Leonie. That was something of a surprise. She was a devout Pentecostalist and her husband had been an equally strict Baptist, so they maintained polite but distant relations with Fats—Tom, as they always called him, he sharing by chance both a name and a nickname with the late great Mr. Waller—who had taken up a profession that often required him to play past Saturday midnight and thus profane the Lord's Day. Cora, his wife, on the other hand, had been one of the jolliest and least inhibited people I ever met. No wonder that, even though most of his tangled web of relatives and connections lived virtually within walking distance of one another

and the Watergate—I mean the Riverside—it had been his in-laws Fats had appealed to.

Sensing something amiss even before I'd heard more than the name of my caller, I waited.

"You been down Watergate Street lately?" Leonie demanded.

"Well—uh—not since checking out the arrangements for our concert."

"Then, I strongly recommend you do that small thing." She spoke a weird blend of Island-talk, formal English and American, having studied briefly at a black college in the States.

And before I could extract further details, she rang off.

I tried to reach Fats. He wasn't home. I tried Louie. Nor was he. In the end, because there had been a worrying shadow of malice in Leonie's voice, I caught a subway to the station nearest Watergate Street. It was the sort of area where businesses don't shut at noon on Saturday or even on Sunday, and there were street markets, so it would have been hard to find a parking place despite redevelopment.

And the moment I emerged from underground, I realized what Leonie meant. The National Patriotic League had been by—or, to describe them more accurately, a gang of racist thugs who disgrace the name of Britain by their very existence. On every blank wall, their hateful pseudo-Nazi monogram. On half the doors, presumably those of houses occupied by people with the wrong color skin, threats against "wogs" and "coons" and "yids." On the roadway at the corner, shattered glass from a newsagents' shop run by a family called Nandy (the name was still on the signboard over the door that also advertised cigarettes) who were miserably nailing boards across what had been their windows.

Across the road half a dozen louts in imitation combat gear and steel-capped boots slouched against a wall: so-called skins, short for skinhead, because they think it smart to imitate—not that they know it—the

cropped hair inflicted on prisoners and army recruits to clean louse eggs from their scalps. Literal nitwits, in other words. Two of them had swastikas clipped into what stubble remained. Two more had the motto from an SS dagger tattooed on their forearms: BLOOD AND HONOR. They were grinning.

I wasn't old enough to serve in World War II, but I did have to endure two years' National Service in the army, and I swear I didn't go through it to make the future safe for walking assholes like that lot, the kind who don't even think with their balls because they haven't got any. For a moment I felt like telling them so. Loudly.

Yet . . .

In Mezz Mezzrow's autobiography *Really the Blues* he describes how he felt, the morning after he premiered an interracial swing band in New York, when he returned to the theater to find swastikas scrawled all over the lobby. I had never felt like that until now. But thanks to Mezz, the only white man I ever heard of who applied to have his race officially changed to "colored," I knew how I ought to react.

I was boiling, blazing, smashing furious. Yet I must not descend to their level.

I mustn't give in.

From behind me, wheezily: "Was it Leonie that told you?"

Even without mention of the name, I'd have known who the speaker was before I turned around. His cigars have taken their toll of Fats Hamilton's throat and lungs the way obesity has of his legs. (We didn't wish his nickname on him; he was already answering to it when he signed with the band, and hinted that he had acquired it at school.)

Not waiting for a reply, he went on, "She's gone kind of crazy since Errol died. Calls London 'Babylon' like the Rastas do. I could believe she tipped off the fascists to spoil our date, help save my soul before it's too late. . . . So what do we do?"

"We go back," I said, "to the Watergate—I mean the

Riverside—and we have a heart-to-heart with Mr. Herbie Smithers.”

Who was most reluctant to discuss the matter. It was only when he realized his wife—we’d been introduced to her as Norah, a little redheaded spit fire of an Irishwoman—was on our side that he consented to talk to us.

Or more exactly, mutter.

It turned out that over the past few weeks the fascists had been targeting by turns each of the pubs in this area that served blacks and Asians. Their base was a so-called bookshop a mile away, its windows sheathed with iron and surveillance cameras below the eaves. Talk was that they wanted next to drive the Nandy family out of the shop we had just seen in order to take it over as another “forward base.”

Because they had just forced yet another publican to refuse black and brown customers despite the Race Relations Act, and they were feeling their oats.

“If you hadn’t come here,” Smithers said bitterly, “we might have—”

It took me that long to draw the deep breath I needed to react. He didn’t mean me or the band, when he said, “If you hadn’t come here.”

He meant Fats.

“You might have acquired an all-white clientele?” I barked.

“I didn’t mean—”

“You did so bloody mean! A pub full of racist traitors? You’re welcome to the stinking thugs! But meantime my band has a contract to perform here tonight”—I was warming to my theme—“and among the guests we’re hoping to welcome are Rock Redstone, who is proud of singing blacker than most blacks, and Junius ‘Champ’ Wellington that nobody could mistake for white at a hundred yards on a foggy night, and . . .”

It wasn’t working. Shutters had slammed down inside the guy’s head. Steel shutters. Still, with Norah’s support, I managed to make him acknowledge

our promise that we would turn up, on time, and go ahead even if the other half of his fucking pub—this bar that we were standing in—were playing host to a Nuremberg Rally complete with storm troopers! Moreover, he would pay every penny of the sum we had agreed, otherwise he would hear from my lawyers plus those of the Musicians' Union. The union doesn't much care for people like me because we used to back visiting American jazzers in the days when there was still a ban on them appearing in Britain, but I didn't have to tell Smithers about that.

When we marched out, Fats's face was practically gray. But he grinned as he clapped me on the shoulder and said he was spending the day with his sister-in-law but would be back this evening. One of his nephews would deliver and set up his drum kit.

As I watched him hobble away, I felt . . . no, I won't say a premonition. A conviction. My old oppo, might well be due to play his last engagement with the Solid Six.

Messages on the answerphone when I reached home made me even more discouraged. The fascists had outdone themselves. They'd exploited their sympathizers on the right-wing trash sheets to circulate threats about trouble in the area this weekend. Champ's agent apologized that he wouldn't be able to come after all, pleading the need to rehearse for a television show. Rock Redstone's agent Gerry Spinks (who had for a short while represented us, too) reported he had an incipient throat infection. And so on.

Picturing Watergate Street the way I remembered it from years ago as the first mists of a winter evening floated up from the Thames and re-created the London of Sherlock Holmes and Fu Manchu, I found Rock's excuse at least difficult to dispute.

But I felt I ought to warn the rest of the band. I managed to reach Alf and Bill, and they insisted we must go ahead. Moreover, they turned out to have hit on an idea I'd overlooked. Alf had located a Chinese restau-

rant we used to patronize in the old days, more often after the session than before. Then it had been the Red Dragon; now it was the Golden Bowl, but it occupied the same premises, and they had booked a table for an early dinner. They had contacted Fats at his sister-in-law's, and he had said he'd do his utmost to show. I felt obliged to do the same, despite the shadow that had been cast over the anniversary celebration I had dreamed of. Instead of driving direct to the restaurant, however, I parked at the pub and went obsessively to check the stage: had the piano really been tuned as promised, had the drum kit been properly set up, were the mikes connected right?

Which was how come I was the only member of the Solid Six actually at the Riverside when . . .

You know this cag about how when policemen start looking young you must be growing old? Well, I've been used to that for a long while, and the same with doctors and indeed just about everybody. I'm resigned.

But when Norah called me to meet this particular busy it wasn't the youthfulness of the face under his black-and-white cap-band that affected me. It wasn't his light tenor voice. It wasn't the lack of lines around his mouth or on his forehead. No, what made me feel outright prehistoric was his attitude. You see, I'm old enough to remember when it was an accepted principle that British police protected everybody equally. So . . .

He was superficially polite, of course. Called me sir. Reading from his official notebook, he said, "Mr. Caxton, I have bad news about your drummer. He's at High Quay Hospital, in intensive care."

My heart clenched like a fist. Had Fats collapsed on the way to the restaurant? It would hardly have been surprising. However, the cop went on.

"He has a fractured skull. Seems he got involved in a fight. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you. Mrs. Smithers says she knows the number of the hospital. Good evening."

Fats? In a fight? I never heard anything so ridicu-

lous! I was about to say so when the guy slapped his notebook shut and turned away with a shrug. It said as plain as words, "I'm glad to be shot of this chore—why the hell should I waste my time on some old nignog?"

In that instant it was clear to me why the local police weren't clearing out the fascists.

They had too much in common.

I don't know how long I sat miserably on a corner of the bandstand, scarcely thinking, just suffering, but the room grew dark because the sun had set and no one had come to switch the lights on. If I was aware of anything, it was of the way our celebration risked turning into a total flop.

"Hey, man."

It was a soft deep male voice from very close by. I roused.

"Man, I heard about your drummer. That's bad."

The words emerged from shadow. There would nonetheless have been enough light for me to see the speaker had he been white. Blinking in confusion, I concluded I must be talking to Fats's nephew, who had come here to set up his drums.

Though I hadn't realized any of his kin were still so outright African black.

I excavated my voice from the recesses of my throat and croaked agreement. I really didn't know what we were going to do. It's one thing to manage without one of the melody line (we'd played four numbers at Kath's wedding before Louie got his head straight enough to rejoin us) and something else again to lose your drummer. Fats's namesake coped fine without one on the session that produced "Harlem Fuss" and "The Minor Drag"—and then the record company stuck the labels on the wrong sides—but though Bill Sandler is a bloody good piano player, neither he nor I would dare compare him with Waller . . .

"So you want I should sit in?"

That hit me like the electric shock hit Frankenstein's monster. I sat up all of a sudden, all of a piece. For a

long moment I was at a loss for words. Mistaking my hesitation, the guy said, "I got kind of a different background, sure, but—"

I cut him short, thinking: rock band maybe? Steel band? Reggae, ragga? What the hell! Like Satchmo said, "It's all folk music! I never heard a hoss sing!"

I burst out, "If you can beat four in a bar, or even two, you're hired!"

"Man"—with a hint of annoyance—"I can beat seventeen-four!"

There was something vaguely familiar about that . . .

But I didn't have time to figure it out. The guy had moved to the drummer's stool, picked up the sticks, and was trying them for feel and weight: a quick flam on the snare, a paradiddle, a press roll—so far okay—then something that made my spine crawl because it was so *damn* close to one of the licks Baby Dodds used on "Drum Improvisation Number 1"—then a chitter-chatter on the hi-hat I never heard bettered by anyone except maybe Max Roach or Kloop Clarke—then a sudden unbelievable outburst that made Fats's single tom-tom sound like all six kettledrums of a symphony orchestra despite having a slack head.

The noise stopped. There was an audible frown in the next words. "I better tauten that skin."

I was laughing! It was all going to come right after all!

Then there was commotion. The band arrived, ahead of time because they were worried that neither I nor Fats had shown at the restaurant. When the back door to this ballroom was unlocked, there proved to be people waiting outside already, a handful of old fans who recalled our stint here. Diffidently, they entered with wives we remembered as pretty girls just out of school, recognizable like ourselves under the mask of years—but barely—and even a few kids, looking resigned but willing to tolerate their parents' foibles just for once so long as it was they who paid . . . Not a big crowd, but a start. It was, after all, still early.

Several of these first comers insisted on shaking us all by the hand, reminding us of forgotten names and/or

giving us greetings cards. None of us responded with much enthusiasm. I'd just had time to circulate the bad news about Fats. The boys were gung ho to delay the show and go visit him until Norah reported that she had rung the hospital, whose number she had by heart because that was where they took the bleeding victims of the after-hours fights too common at pubs around here, and been told he was unconscious, so there was no point.

Resignedly, they unpacked their instruments and warmed them up. It was Bill, though, not having to do anything to the piano except raise the lid, who demanded, "But how the hell are we going to manage without a drummer?"

I said, "We got a volunteer—"

"Who will be back in a minute!" He was heading, apparently, for the gents'.

"Hey!" I bellowed. "You haven't told me your name!"

Well, I wasn't the only one to hear his reply as "Django." I mean, there's no shortage of people who've adopted the same name as Reinhardt the great gypsy guitarist, the best-known nowadays of course being Django Bates, who rose to prominence with Loose Tubes.

We didn't have time to pursue the matter, though. Here came, very nervously, three of Fats's young relatives with boxfuls of Caribbean snacks because they had been promised and the makings paid for but under orders to go home at once. As the door opened and closed on their departure, you could almost smell the tension blowing in from beyond. On her way back from checking a security floodlight in the car park, Norah summoned a girl from the main bar and instructed her to lay the food out on a table at the back of the room, but she had to return to serve on the other side, and there was no one else to help. Norah had engaged another barmaid, but she was black and had phoned to say she was afraid to leave home tonight. Hastily, we agreed not to charge for the eats.

It didn't look as though there were going to be many takers, anyway.

Not, of course, that the small size of the audience would delay us. Jazzers aren't like rock musicians, who think nothing of starting a show an hour late. We were ready to go five minutes after the advertised time, which was about when those of the audience who hadn't met for umpteen years stopped swapping news and arguing over who should stand who the first drink, and started looking at the wall clock. That was something else we hadn't had in the old days.

Where, though, was our substitute drummer?

One of the old fans had bought pints all around for the band. I'd sunk a quarter of mine and nearly reached the point of praying that Django's "different background" hadn't been with one of the sort of rock bands I'd just been thinking about, when there was a faint shifting noise from behind me: the sound of a drummer's stool being moved a fraction of an inch to the ideal location, followed by an authoritative *per-rumph*. How the guy had reached his place without my noticing I couldn't quite figure out, but by sheer reflex I stomped off our old signature tune "Riverside" instead of the one we'd been using for the past couple of decades, a concoction by me and Bill called "Solid, Caxton." The others caught on instantly. There was a sudden burst of applause. The doors opened again to admit half a dozen more of our former fans. Result: I found myself going through the motions on that spavined warhorse of a spiritual, mind mostly on the risk that skins might invade from the other bar, for three entire choruses until I lowered the horn to let Louie solo. That was when I realized: this cat Django was all right!

He had been driving us with sticks, giving precisely the right sort of lift to revitalize a tired old number in front of a cold audience. For Louie he had made a flawless transition to brushes, part on the snare and part on the top cymbal, and the clarinet was skimming

across the bar lines with barely a hint of the underlying four-four.

Yet virtually every foot in the room was tapping, and in time.

I glanced over my shoulder. The lighting was none too good, and Django was sitting well to the back with the piano on one side of Ed's bass looming on the other, deep in shadow, so I could make out very few details. He really was extremely dark. When I held up a ringed thumb and forefinger, though, I was rewarded with a flash of gleaming teeth.

Well, that was how we started having a real celebration after all.

As usual, I announced the title of each number, and since they were all old favorites, each was greeted with a rattle of clapping. But were they familiar to Django? It didn't seem to matter. After the first few times, I didn't even glance a question at him. I only needed to stomp off and every tune swung like sixty. Half an hour into the set, people were getting up to dance, out-of-practice middle-aged couples reviving the jive steps that ballet students evolved at the Hundred Club in the days when we were starting out. Bill jerked a thumb at them and stage-whispered something about needing to clear more room for dancers in the second half.

And after the first hour people weren't just clapping. They were shouting; they were whistling; they were hugging one another with delight, even some of the youngsters who at first had looked determined to be bored.

Fats Hamilton was a great guy. He was an experienced and workmanlike drummer. But this kinsman of his was nothing short of a genius.

It had taken me longer than it should to appreciate the fact. That, I told myself was because, though I'd heard a lot of the real greats like Zutty and Philly Joe and Art Blakey—I always went to concerts featuring the best American jazzers when they were rare and precious—I'd never before had the chance to play in front of one.

This, my God, was chalk and cheese! And no disrespect to Fats. He'd have said the same. At sixty he'd have been asking Django for tips like a teenager.

We had time for one more number before the interval. Really, I felt, we ought to make it a showcase for Django, but I hadn't had time to ask his opinion. I resolved to do so, and give him a big slot all to himself toward the end. So: how to wind up the first session? Should I trot out my personal flag-waver, "Snag It," or postpone that until later and send people off to the bar with what I could manage of Teddy Buckner's stratospherics from his version with Kid Ory of "Tiger Rag"? The latter was a guaranteed crowd pleaser, and it seemed sensible to attempt it while my lip was still in shape.

I had my heel poised to beat out the fastest tempo I was capable of—it goes at a breakneck pace—when there arose a sudden racket from beyond both the internal and the external doors. There came gasps of alarm from half a dozen throats, followed by a shrill and furious shout from someone who could only be Norah.

And the ballroom lights went out.

There remained plenty to see by, through the windows looking on to the car-park where there were enough people and vehicles coming and going to keep the sensor of the floodlight triggered. A heartbeat later while we were still reacting, not just us in the band but the audience as well, what we had been afraid of happened. From the direction of the main bar, brandishing the mugs from which they had imbibed the fake courage they needed to embark on one of their "valiant" expeditions against nonwhite citizens, at least a dozen skins, in khaki sweaters, army surplus combat trousers, and Union Jack brassards, forced their way past the unfortunate girl who had volunteered to check that anyone entering from the inward side had a ticket. Norah had warned that some might pretend to have paid already and just been to the toilet. They drew up

in a wedge formation and did their best to look threatening, even though their average age must have been under twenty.

Crying out in alarm, people scrambled to their feet. I knew in theory what was the proper thing to do—Mezzrow again; he once worked at a club owned by Al Capone. In the early days we might even have been able to strike up the right kind of number.

But we might not have had time anyway.

Barely had we had time to look toward the invaders from inside the building, when the door from the outside was wrenched open. Revealed were the skins I had seen this morning gloating over the plight of the Nandy family. This time, though, they looked infinitely more menacing. They had donned black peaked caps with death's-head insignia and equipped themselves with pickax handles and baseball bats.

"Scum!" rasped their leader, and they sneered and advanced into the room.

"Nigger music!" he bellowed, and they spat and hefted their weapons.

"Rule Britannia!" he roared, and—

Tap. Ta-tap-tap.

What?

It happened again, and I caught on. Suddenly, I found I was grinning so wide I was apt to split my head. I wagged the valves on my horn and raised it to signal the band.

"Now, just a fucking—!"

Bla-blah, bla-bla-blah! I played that in B flat, it being a nice comfortable key for jazz.

Swee swee swee-swee-swee swee! That was Louie. It's not his real name. He adopted it because of Satchmo. But would you rather be called Osbert? And Alf capped it with a series of tremendous grunts right down at the bottom end of his trombone.

Wah-wah, wah . . . wah!

From which Bill Sandler picked it up.

Tink-a-tink-a-tink, tink-a-tink-a-tink!

By that time we had all gathered our wits and so had

most of the audience. It wasn't just the band but a good half of the latter as well that blasted out the final line, unclearly because it was taking awhile to remember the words. The second time, though, it was fit to lift the roof: what we thought of these phony patriots and their misappropriation of a once-proud flag.

"Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves! Britons never never shall be—"

And everybody joined in with a roar, underpinned by as righteous a band as ever collected a second line returning from a New Orleans funeral.

"Marri-ed to a mermai-id at the bottom of the deep blue sea!"

There were people present, the youngsters presumably, who must have never heard that parody before. There were chuckles. Did you ever realize how powerful a weapon laughter is against bigots? The Solid Six used to support the Aldermaston Marches against nuclear weapons. We saw how the pacifists used to surround pro-Bomb right-wingers and start to grin at what they were shouting . . . and then giggle . . . and when they got to chortling, the Bomb lovers would redden and retreat for fear of outright hilarity.

It had never struck me before, but "Rule, Britannia!" makes a damned good basis for jazz improvisation. I cocked my horn toward the ceiling and started decorating the theme with triplets. Alf pumped his slide in traditional tailgate fashion, and Louie tossed scraps of the melody on top of the mix.

Our eyes had adapted by now. We could clearly see how the skins were drawing into two clusters, one by each door, nervously lowering their weapons, or the glass tankards they had clearly intended to convert into weapons by smashing them, their bluster and bravado evaporating with every bar of the music.

Django gave the traditional double thump that military drummers use to signal the end or curtailment of a tune. We ran out the chorus amid a welter of cheers.

But even though we could see better, the room was

still dim. And there seemed . . . It was hard to define. There seemed in some unaccountable way to be more people here than before, and they hadn't entered through the doors.

A word entered my mind. *Coffle*. I couldn't remember where I had learned it, if I ever had, but all of a sudden I had this—this suspicion of what it meant.

I waited. We all did.

Except Django.

Under the dark ceiling, with the noise of London perceptible but distant, he was beating the snare and the tom-tom in a rhythm of unbelievable complexity. It hurt my European head to try and follow it.

Something deep and primal was gathering in the air. Something that hung unseen weights around my limbs, that I half expected to clank as I moved. I found myself thinking of what it must be like to be a slave. Fats's ancestors had been taken as slaves. Django's, too?

On what level that insistent rhythm was communicating, I could not tell. But I knew—somehow I *knew*—that it was saying no.

Now he had added the bass drum. The room felt as though it were about to tilt. As though a monstrous earthquake were about to whelm the city. I couldn't figure out how my friends were reacting. I couldn't even look at Django, though I tried with might and main. I could only see what was happening to the skins.

And that was *strange*.

For they were forming into a kind of crazy conga line.

Each was setting his hand on the shoulder of the one in front. The moment contact was made, they began to writhe their hips. They began to roll their eyes—foam at the mouth—utter animal cries—stamp and yell and curse. Those between them and the outside door hastily made way. They snaked across the floor with faces transformed into masks, that could have been carved in wood.

Or plastic.

The rear exit stood open. They jerked and shuffled

towards it, through it, across the car-park, heading for the water gate. That also stood wide, though normally it was padlocked. We saw them clearly, thanks to the floodlight. We saw tall black shadows on the wall behind them. Uncast shadows. Shadows that were not moving the way the skins were. Shadows that simply watched. Silhouettes that suggested short spears and oval ox-hide shields.

Now and then one of them gave a grim approving nod.

The skinheads staggered onward. Some of them began to realize what was in store. They screamed obscenities. Then they screamed in terror.

Finally, as they tumbled into the Thames, they just screamed.

Fainter and fainter, but never losing its impetus, never losing the naked force driving them like a slave master's whip, the tremendous rolling rhythm of the drums continued until the last of them were out of sight. Only then, in exactly the same moment as the lights came up again, did we hear the police sirens. Not on cars. On launches. Turned out they had been on river patrol waiting for someone rumored to be landing drugs tonight. They hauled out the shivering and whining fascists and listened with amazement as they babbled about how they'd beaten up a fat old Windy and they'd never have done it if they'd realized he could call on the devil for revenge. Please could they go to prison where they would be safe?

But of course we didn't find out about that until the next day's news, nor that it was one of their mob holding the drugs. In this present moment, all other thoughts were driven from our minds as a familiar voice boomed. "Hi, Tommy—Louie—Alf—Ed—I heard about Fats, very sorry—Bill, move over! I promised to provide interval music, and the landlady says the interval is overdue!"

And onto the piano stool plumped Champ Wellington, his left hand already laying down, even before he could get the right one to the keyboard, the solidest

boogie bass you could hope to hear outside of an Ammons and Johnson record. People clapped and cheered.

"Your agent told us you weren't coming," I said feebly.

"Remind me to fire the bastard! By the way, Rock's on his way—says he wants to shout a few Joe Turner blues . . . Is something wrong?"

I could only shake my head, and change the movement to a nod when someone offered me another beer. I needed one. Next second I was being ordered to pose by a photographer from the squarest of the music weeklies, one that normally wouldn't accord space to a trad band even if it went uranium, lured here by Rock and Champ.

We hadn't had our picture in that paper for twenty-five years.

After that it turned into one hell of a good evening. Rock showed up and caught Champ's eye while he was still taking his coat off in the doorway, so Champ immediately started pounding out "Sent for you Yesterday"—what else? When the interval ended Champ vacated the piano stool for Bill, moved to the drum kit (I'd forgotten it was drums he had played before reverting to piano), and they and Rock launched us into the second set in fine style with "Going to Chicago" and the, repeat the, dirtiest version of "Salty Dog" I ever heard or ever expect to. Eventually, I got my chance to show off on "Snag It," and everybody cheered and whistled, and somebody with more money than sense brought us a jugful of Sazeracs on the grounds that we deserved a genuine Louisiana drink, and in the end it was well after midnight when I puffed and wheezed my sore-lipped way through "Riverside" again.

What with one thing and another, it was a long while before I remembered who, or possibly what, had made our celebration so successful.

At that point, however, all of a sudden I became very calm.

I thanked everybody, took leave of friends and fans, said I wanted to walk in cool air for a while and clear my head before calling a cab, and waited outside, shivering a little, among the shadows, among the mists that drifted up from the river even now, in what was shortly to become the twenty-first century. The cars left, one by one until they were all gone. After a prescribed delay, the security floodlight switched itself off. I went on waiting until . . .

A patch of darkness a smidgen darker than the rest was my only clue. Feeling more than a little silly, I cleared my throat and said huskily, "I didn't quite get your name right, did I?"

A chuckle. "I've gone under a good few different names in my time. Don't worry."

"All right. But why?"

Came an audible shrug. "Your friend Fats was a pretty fair drummer."

It took me a while to recover from the implications of that past tense. When I managed it: "And—?"

"You don't need me to spell out the rest."

"Well . . . thanks anyway."

I turned toward the darkness, raising my right arm, took my courage in both hands, and dared to wish him good night under his correct name. The Lord of the Drum chuckled again. Slapped palms. Said, "Keep the faith, baby."

And was gone.

You see, I'd realized why he'd told me he could beat seventeen-four, which was what he'd done to make the skinheads turn themselves into a coffle. (I looked it up. Coffle: a gang of slaves or other captives; by extension a set of linked fetters.) Seventeen-four is the ancient Dahomeyan rhythm of *hun* against *hunpa*, child against mother drum. It speaks power.

And, of course, he isn't really called Django. Nearly, but not really. Though, I felt it best to leave the rest of

the band with that impression. It could have been dis-comforting to tell them Shango Himself had sat in. Also they might not have believed me.

But—*wow!*

AIDA IN THE PARK

by Susan Palwick

There is nothing quite like one of the free summer performances of music in New York City's Central Park.

Even if you don't care about the music, you can go for the spectacle: hundreds of different people spread out across a wide green space on blankets, on folding chairs, gathered to picnic, to drink wine, to look at each other . . . and, finally, to grow hushed as the day dims and the music comes.

Each one has their own story.

*This story is dedicated to
Roger Cottingham*

Prelude

She was editing a story when the call came through on Danny's line. A misdial, most likely. It couldn't be for Danny, because by now everyone knew that he was sick. Before his clients had been reassigned to other partners, she'd had some unpleasant conversations.

"You mean Danny's still out?"

"Yes, he is. Let me find someone else who can—"

"Where is he? How long will he be gone?"

"He's taken a leave of absence, sir. Let me find—"

"A leave of absence? What do you mean, a leave of absence? I saw him three weeks ago, and he never said anything about—"

"Sir, I'm transferring you to another partner, Mark Abnegado, that's extension 5620 in case we get cut off, please hold."

There had been too many of those in the beginning,

but finally they'd stopped. So this couldn't be anyone for Danny. Maybe it was Danny himself. Working on another story, Mary? He always asked her that when things were slow in the office. Yes, she'd have to tell him, I am working on a story, but it isn't the one you asked me to write. I've been trying to write that one for six months, Danny, and I don't know how.

The phone rang again, insistently. Probably it was just a wrong number. Probably it should have gone to the central switchboard. Probably, if she answered it as though it had gone to the central switchboard, it would have nothing to do with Danny at all. She put down her pencil and picked up the phone. "Hummas Jones Abnegado Slather & Tweet, may I help you?"

"Mary?"

"Yes?" The voice—a woman's, with the breathy hoarseness Mary always associated with fur coats and art museums—sounded vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place it.

"This is Julia Gallant. I don't know if you remember me. We met at *The Mikado* back in January, when Danny sang Ko-Ko—"

"Of course I remember," Mary said, wincing. She'd rather not have remembered that evening. She couldn't imagine why anyone else would want to. "What can I do for you, Julia?" And then she realized why the woman had to be calling. "Oh my God. Is Danny—"

"No, no, not yet. I should have said that right away. But it's not good. William took him to Mount Sinai this morning. It's crypto—his intestines, he—" Julia broke off, sounding embarrassed, and said, "It's not good at all."

"I'm so sorry," Mary said. What a stupid thing to say. Of course she was sorry. Everyone was sorry. She swallowed, her eyes stinging, wondering if the other partners knew yet or if she'd have to tell them—why had Julia called her, anyway?—and said, "Is there anything I can do?"

She heard the echo as soon as she'd said it. "Is there anything I can do for you?" she'd asked Danny on the

phone six months ago. It was a ritual question, the one you always asked when there was nothing anyone could do and everyone knew it, and Mary had expected a ritual response, some version of you're-helping-me-just-by-being-there. You're helping me just by calling me at home to give me my messages. You're helping me just by opening my mail.

Instead he'd said, "Yes, there is something," and then stopped as if waiting to be prompted.

"What?" she'd asked, mystified. "Just name it. Shopping? Laundry?"

"No, no, nothing that prosaic. William can do the laundry." He'd paused again and said lightly after a moment, "This is something only you can do. It would mean a lot to me."

"It must be obscure," Mary had said, laughing, "if only I can do it."

She'd thought he was teasing her, flattering, joking the way he so often did, and she'd been relieved. He couldn't feel as awful as he sounded, if he had the energy to tease her. But instead, sounding slightly hurt, he said, "No, really. You're the only writer I know. And since you write fantasy I thought—well, never mind. It's a silly idea. I'm sure you won't want to do it."

"Danny, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be flippant. Of course I want to do it. Whatever it is. What is it?"

He'd paused again, and then said carefully, "I'd like you to write a story about me that has a happy ending."

She'd been trying ever since. And now Julia would say, "Yes, there is something you can do. You can go to the hospital and read Danny the story you wrote for him, to cheer him up." But of course Julia wouldn't say that. Julia probably didn't even know about the story. Julia would say, No-of-course-not-there's-nothing-anyone-can-do.

"Yes, there is," Julia said. "That's why I'm calling. There's—this is going to sound strange, but you know the Met's doing *Aida* in Central Park tonight, and Danny's asked a group of us to go, because he can't.

William, of course, and me and my husband, and you. He asked for you specifically."

"Me?" Mary said. She hardly knew the others—she'd met them only that once, at *The Mikado*—and she'd never liked opera. It didn't sound like music to her; it sounded like a convocation of cats being scalded with boiling oil. It made her teeth hurt.

"I know this is very short notice," Julia said, "and I'm sure Danny would understand if you have other plans—"

"Of course I'll come," Mary said, looking down at the manuscript on her desk. It was about a mermaid who tried to save the Titanic, and failed, and spent the rest of her life being haunted by the ghosts of the drowned passengers. It wasn't the story Danny wanted. Since Mary hadn't been able to give him that, going to *Aïda* was the least she could do.

Act I

That was how she found herself squeezed with three of Danny's oldest friends into a cab creeping past a Central Park West construction site on a day that had broken the heat record set a century before. Still dressed for work, in pantyhose and a polyester dress, Mary felt as if she were trapped in a portable steam room. Danny's hospital room, she thought longingly, is almost certainly air-conditioned. She pictured cool white sheets and plastic jugs of ice water. She tried not to picture Danny.

"'Go see *Aïda* in the Park,' " William said to Julia and Eric as the cab rolled forward another inch. "You should have heard him! There he was, some woman in the next room's screaming at the top of her lungs, the residents only started two weeks ago and hardly know how to tie their own shoelaces, and nobody can find Danny's real doctor and Danny wants me to go to *Aïda*!"

"It's going to be jammed," said Eric, sitting in the front seat. Mary could barely hear him over the horns

of other cars. "Two hundred thousand people showed up at the last one."

"Terrific," William said, raising his voice to compete with the din. "Maybe Danny's doctor will be one of them. Maybe Danny told him to go see *Aida*, too."

Julia, in the middle of the backseat, put a hand on William's. She had insisted that Mary take the window seat because it was more comfortable, but Mary hadn't been fooled. Courtesy had nothing to do with it. Julia had known Danny and William for fifteen years; she wanted to sit next to William. "Danny loves *Aida*," said Julia. "He told me once that the first time he heard it, when he was a little boy, he decided he wanted to be an opera singer when he grew up, so he could sing *Radames*."

"Yes," William said testily, "I know that. I've heard the story. He's only told it a million times."

Mary had never heard the story, although she'd known since the first day she worked for Danny that he loved opera. He'd come back from a meeting, that first afternoon, whistling a snatch of tune. "Do you know this?" he'd asked her, and whistled it again, a tall ungainly man in an extremely expensive suit, standing frowning in front of her desk. "It's been going through my head all day, and I can't for the life of me remember what it's from. Puccini, maybe? It can't be *La Bohème* or *Tosca*; I know those by heart. *Turandot*? *Manon Lescaut*? It's driving me nuts."

"I'm afraid I can't help you," Mary had said. "I'm sorry." In another context, she might easily have mistaken Puccini for some kind of pasta. She knew that *La Bohème* was about a woman with cold hands and a bad cough, and she'd vaguely heard of *Tosca*. Otherwise, Danny might just as well have been speaking Greek, instead of French or Italian or whatever it was people spoke in operas. She'd majored in English; if he'd quoted a line of Shakespeare, she might have had a chance. "Here are your phone messages, Mr. Jones."

"What?" He'd broken off his whistling, blinked at the sheaf of paper slips in her hand, and said, "Oh,

thanks. You can call me Danny, by the way." He'd whistled again for a moment, sighed, and said, "I hate this. Does this ever happen to you?"

"Sometimes, with poetry. A line from Browning nagged me for a week once before I tracked it down. Turned out it was from *The Ring and the Book*." So there, Mr. Senior Partner. You want obscure, I can do obscure.

"Really?" he said, and beamed at her. "I love *The Ring and the Book*. 'God stooping shows sufficient of His light/For us i' the dark to rise by—' oh, that's gorgeous stuff!"

Of course he knows *The Ring and the Book*, Mary had thought irritably. It's about a legal case. The man's a walking trivia exam; he must be a terror in court. But then she realized that the line he'd quoted belonged, not to the judge or one of the lawyers, but to Pompilia, the murdered, dying girl. "Yes," she said, "it's a lovely line. Of course, he borrowed a lot of the imagery in Pompilia's monologue from his wife's poetry. From *Aurora Leigh*."

His phone had rung then, ending the conversation. Round one to her. But a few weeks later she'd come back from the watercooler to find him reading the first page of the manuscript she'd left carelessly on her desk. It was a very rough draft, and it had elves in it. Surely he'd either scold her or sneer, the way her English professors always had whenever she mentioned Dunsany or Tolkien. You shouldn't be doing this at the office, he'd tell her. Why are you writing this garbage, anyway?

Well, why was he reading her manuscript, anyway? It was none of his business. "You must be looking for the Oasis Bank memo," she said coldly. "It hasn't come back from Word Processing yet."

"Oh," he said, and blushed. "I'm sorry. I'm being terribly nosy, aren't I?" And then, eagerly, "You're a writer, Mary?"

"Well, no," she said, startled. "I want to be. I'll probably never be any good at it." The story on her

desk was terrible, and she knew it. "It's just a hobby, really. Something I started when I was a kid."

Danny had nodded, smiling, his eyes bright. "Because you read something wonderful. The most beautiful story you'd ever heard. What was it?"

"I don't remember," she said, although in fact she had never forgotten. It was Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince," reprinted in a special fantasy issue of Scholastic's *Literary Cavalcade* magazine. She'd read it in the doctor's office when she was ten, waiting to have a tetanus shot because she'd stepped on a nail, and when she began crying, her mother thought that the pain in her foot had gotten worse, or that she was afraid of the needle. Mary didn't tell her mother that she wept for Wilde's frozen swallow, for a bird who had stayed in a winter city, out of love for a friend, long after it should have migrated to the warm safety of Egypt. Her mother was an extremely practical woman, much like the Mathematical Master in the story, who did not approve of children dreaming. She couldn't imagine explaining the story to her mother.

Fifteen years later, she hadn't been able to imagine explaining it to a senior partner, either, even one who quoted Browning. She should have known better. Danny never would have asked the question if he hadn't understood. She tried to picture him as a little boy, entranced by *Aida*, but all she could see was the lanky adult, in a garish turquoise-and-red robe, pretending to be a Japanese nobleman who was pretending to be an executioner. "Oh never shall I, forget the cry, or the shriek that shriekèd he," Danny had croaked, just before he lost his voice entirely.

William, clearly annoyed, went on as if Julia hadn't interrupted him. "I said to him, 'Danny, you're ill, I can't go running off to an opera, what are you thinking?' and he said, 'But you have to go and tell me about it.' I said, 'We'll listen to the simulcast on WQXR, maybe it will drown out that shrieking next door,' and Danny said, 'No, no, you have to go *see* it, William. You have to tell me about all the funny

people in the audience, and you have to take Julia and Eric and Mary with you. I want you to have a good time.' A good time! I'm surprised he didn't tell me to pack a picnic!"

Mary hugged the picnic basket on her lap and bowed her head. She wished she weren't sweating so heavily. She wished she were invisible. Julia, who wore cream-colored linen and appeared not to sweat at all, said easily, "We have to eat, William. I'm sure Mary's gotten us a lovely picnic."

"I hope so," Mary said. She'd offered to bring the food, if only to feel useful, and had spent a small fortune on the picnic, spinning the thread of a story even as she handed over her Visa card. Once upon a time four people ate a wonderful meal in honor of an absent friend. She should have known better. You couldn't buy happiness, in fairy tales or anywhere else. William had clearly taken the gesture the wrong way, and Julia, as if to emphasize her superior social position—she and Eric did something esoteric and extremely lucrative for a Wall Street bank—had insisted on paying for the entire meal. "I should at least pay my own share," Mary had said. Julia wouldn't hear of it.

Eric grunted. "That's a neat trick, putting together a picnic basket so fast. How'd you manage that?"

The basket was obviously from a store. Eric, Mary decided, was none too bright. Or maybe he was trying to make a joke. "Magic," William said, his voice toneless, and yawned. "She's an authority, you know. Published and everything. She probably asked the pixies for a picnic. Too bad they can't conjure doctors. Or cures."

"William," said Julia.

William was metaphorically challenged: someone who thought that if you wrote stories with elves in them, you must believe in elves. Mary had tried to tell him otherwise, backstage at *The Mikado*; it hadn't worked. Nothing had been working by then. The entire evening had become a charade, Danny telling everyone feverishly that no, no, he was fine, of course he didn't

need to go to the hospital, he was just a little hoarse, yes, of course he'd see a doctor the next day if they all insisted, but in the meantime, Mary, why don't you tell us about your latest story? She'd felt like a trained seal, and William must have been frantic. Maybe the *Aida* expedition was Danny's apology to all of them, an attempt to replace bad music with good. Once upon a time four people heard a wonderful opera when a friend of theirs was dying, and it made them feel better.

"The picnic's from Zaro's," Mary said tightly. "The place in Grand Central, near the office. It's—a tradition, sort of. Danny always bought—always buys—his lunch there, and when I sold my first story he got me one of their cakes. He's the one who talked me into sending my manuscripts out in the first place, you know."

He had, in fact, lectured her: called her sternly into his office at lunchtime—"Mary, I need to speak with you"—so that she'd racked her brains trying to imagine what she'd done wrong: a misplaced document, a lost message? Instead, he'd sat her down with a ridiculously overstuffed sandwich and said, "Eat. I want you to keep your mouth full, so you won't argue with me. Now, listen, Mary, you have to try to get published. How will you ever know if you're good enough, if you don't try? It will always haunt you. Promise me you'll try. Swallow that bite and promise: good. No, no, no buts! Take another bite and listen to me."

She took a breath and plunged on. "He fed me a Zaro's sandwich while he was talking me into it. So they sell picnics prepackaged for four, and I thought—"

"You thought they'd be the perfect people to cater his imminent demise," William said, still bland, still bored. "How touching. Did they put red ribbons in the basket?"

"William," Julia said sharply, "stop it."

"It's all right," Mary said. She wondered if William knew about Danny's story. She didn't want to find out, because she didn't want to admit that. William was right. She hadn't been able to conjure a happy ending.

She hadn't been able to conjure anything except guilt and ghosts. "William, you're under tremendous stress right now, and you hardly know me. I'll understand completely if you don't want me here."

"Oh, but *he* wants you here," William said, suddenly brittle. "And we're all under orders, aren't we?"

Julia put her free hand—heavily jeweled and perfectly manicured—on Mary's. "Don't be ridiculous, Mary. Of course we want you here."

"Now, look," Eric said, "everybody take it easy. We're all upset, and sitting in a hot cab isn't helping. Danny wants us to have a good time, not fry our brains out in traffic. I think we should get out and walk, clear our heads a bit."

"I'll get out and go home," Mary said, but Julia pressed her hand more firmly just as the cab squeezed through the last construction bottleneck and shot up Central Park West.

"Now, that's what I call magic," William said. "Nice magic, Mary." Maybe it was his attempt at an apology.

Julia sighed and said, "William, Danny's just trying to give you a break. God knows, you need one. You've been taking care of him for months, and now he's in the hospital, where other people can do it. Let them."

"Take care of him? How can they take care of him? They can't even find his doctor! They're understaffed. The residents don't know what they're doing, and the attendings walk around with their hotshot noses in the air, and the nurses barely speak *English*. I asked him how he could stand it, and he said, 'I like it. It reminds me of the opera. They don't speak English there, either.' What's he going to do if he needs help? Sing a *pietà*?"

"He'll call you," Julia said, still holding both William's hand and Mary's. "On the phone." She turned to Mary and said, "We lent William our cellular phone. So he won't have to worry about Danny not being able to reach him. And in the meantime, William, you'll be getting some fresh air."

"Fresh air! Do you think I'd *want* fresh air, even if it

weren't heated to a hundred and ten degrees? I'll have time for all the fresh air in the world, after he dies!"

There was a short, utter silence. "Oh, now," Eric said weakly. "Oh, now. Let's not make this worse than it is. It's only ninety-eight."

"Eric," Julia said, "*please*. William, you can call Danny, too. That's the idea. That's why we gave you the phone. Go ahead. It will make you feel better."

"I can't. He made me promise not to. 'I'll call you if anything happens,' he said. He had to promise that, or I wouldn't have let him out of my sight. 'Only if there's an emergency,' he said. Idiot! What does he think he's in now? And I don't even know if I'll be able to hear the damned thing, over the music."

"Of course you will," Julia said. "We're not going to be that close to the stage. Not at the last minute like this."

"And even if we were," Mary said, venturing reassurance, "you could feel it ringing. You could feel the vibrations."

"Vibrations?" William said. "Oh, yes, of course. How silly of me. From ESP. Or the celestial spheres? I'm afraid I left all my crystals at home."

"From the telephone," Mary said, wishing she'd kept her mouth shut. "When it rings." She didn't believe in telepathy any more than she believed in elves. She'd never even written about telepathy. If mind reading were real, fantasy wouldn't be necessary; fairy tales couldn't happen. The prince wouldn't need a lost slipper to know Cinderella from her sisters. Little Red Riding Hood couldn't possibly be fooled into mistaking the wolf for her grandmother. The townspeople in Wilde's story would have known that the beautiful statue of the Happy Prince wasn't happy at all, and they would have known why, and the swallow wouldn't have had to stay in a freezing city to carry pieces of the statue's golden skin to the starving poor. Fairy tales, Mary thought wearily, can only happen in a world where people don't understand each other. The insight didn't cheer her much.

Julia squeezed her hand again and murmured, "Vibrations. Yes, that's right, Mary, isn't it? Good thinking."

Mary considered pulling her hand away and opted for looking out the window instead. The cab turned into the Park and entered deep green dusk, streetlights winking on and fireflies glimmering among the streams of people heading for the Great Lawn. "You can let us out here," Eric told the driver, and the car stopped and Julia let go of Mary's hand and the four of them piled out into the heavy heat. Eric handed Julia the blanket and took the picnic basket from Mary; William clutched the cellular phone.

I should go home now, Mary thought, her hands empty. They don't need me here. They don't want me here. I hate opera. But Danny wanted a happy ending, and unlikely as it seemed that she'd find one here, there weren't many places left to look. And since she'd gone to the trouble of bringing the damn picnic, she should at least get to eat some of it.

"Come along, dear," said Julia.

"So," Eric said as they set out, "what do we know about this performance, anyway? Is anyone good singing?"

"Let's hope so," William said. "Let's just hope we don't have to listen to any understudies."

Act II

Danny had been Ko-Ko's understudy, back in January. Mary remembered how excited he'd been when the real Ko-Ko got the flu, how he'd called her at home that snowy Saturday and said, "I just found out. You'll come see me tonight, won't you? I'll get you a front-row seat, and I want you to come backstage afterward."

"Of course I'll come! So will everyone else in the firm. Come on, Danny, we'll pack the place. Do you have time to make more calls? Do you want me to do it for you?"

"No," he'd said quickly, "no, no, I don't want everybody from work to come. Just you. Because of your

writing. I know you understand about these things. It's just a little neighborhood production, and I'm only an understudy. If I blow it—"

"You won't blow it, Danny. Don't be silly. You'll be great."

"Well, maybe not. To tell you the truth, I have a bit of a cold myself. William doesn't think I should do this at all, but it may be my only chance. You understand that, don't you?"

"Sure," she'd said. "It's just like one of those old movies: the ingenue's big break. The show must go on, and all that. In a month you'll have quit the firm and be starring on Broadway, and I'll be able to say I knew you when." Later she'd realized that she hadn't been listening. He hadn't said big chance; he'd said only chance. "Don't worry, Danny. Your voice sounds fine." On the telephone, it had.

"Somebody really good is singing Radames tonight," Julia said now, sounding strained. "I saw the ad in the *Times*. Pavarotti, maybe? Anyway, it's a big deal. It's even semi-staged: no sets, but costumes. They don't usually do that. I'm sure that's part of why Danny wants us here."

"How delightful," William said. Glaring, he held up the cellular phone and said distinctly to it, "I suppose you expect me to clap for the nice singers. I suppose I'm expected to make witty conversation."

"You always make witty conversation," Julia said soothingly. Mary kept her eyes on the gravel path in front of her. After Danny lost his voice in the second act of *The Mikado*, he'd pantomimed the rest of his lines, hamming it up, making outrageous gestures because he couldn't make a sound that would carry. "There's a fascination frantic in a ruin that's romantic," he'd mouthed, facing the audience so they could read his lips, and then had rolled his eyes and pointed at himself. From Mary's front row seat, she had seen the sweat beading on Danny's forehead and heard the faint, futile whisper of his words, but his antics had sparked a ripple of appreciative laughter in

the audience. The show must go on, even during flu season.

William, next to her, had sat with his fists clenched on the arms of his seat. He'd stayed that way during the curtain calls, even when everyone else applauded Danny's sportsmanship. Mary had stood, clapping, and yelled "Bravo" at him, and he'd smiled and bowed at her, holding up the hem of his ridiculously garish robe like a child dropping a curtsy. A cold, he'd said on the phone. It was only a cold. She would have clapped harder if she'd understood then how much more it might become.

Backstage afterward, William had barged into Danny's dressing room while Julia and Eric stood outside the door, tight-lipped. Mary had tagged along with them, feeling acutely uncomfortable, even though she knew Danny wanted her there. Other well-wishers—stagehands, cast members—had gathered in a clump, murmuring among themselves. Mary still hadn't suspected anything, not even when Eric said, "He really shouldn't have done this."

"He's always wanted to sing onstage," Julia had answered. "You know that." She'd taken upon herself the task of deciding who could see Danny. People who'd worked on the show could stay; people Danny had invited could stay. A tiny old woman who didn't know any of them, but who wanted to tell Danny she thought he'd make a great mime, was briskly dismissed, and so was someone who thought that maybe he and Danny had gone to the same high school, and so was someone named Chuck. "*You*," Julia said when she saw him, "what are you doing here? Danny would be mortified if he saw you." She took firm hold of the man's arm and led him away from the dressing room, over his protests. "You're a real singer; if Danny knew you'd heard him, he'd have a fit. Yes, of course you want to do something for him, but this isn't the time to ask. Now look, Chuck, let's just keep this our little secret, all right? Go home."

Mary had stood there the entire time, bewildered,

trying to piece together the snippets of conversation around her, trying to decipher the argument from the dressing room, until finally two fragments of William's rage had shot through the door, jagged as shrapnel. "Too many other germs in this place," he'd yelled at Danny, and "flu season, you idiot."

At that instant, it had all become perfectly obvious. Later, she could never decide if she should have guessed earlier or not. She'd never even wondered. Surely it would have been uncharitable to wonder, would have been petty and narrow-minded, poor thanks for Danny's generosity to her. He'd always seemed perfectly healthy. But if she'd wondered, if she'd even suspected how little time he might have left, she would have clapped harder.

She could fix that tonight, at least, if nothing else. Once upon a time someone who hated opera went to see *Aïda* in the Park, and applauded as loudly as she could. But that ending was about herself, not about Danny.

"Just try to enjoy the music," Julia said, reaching out and touching William's shoulder. "We can leave during the intermission if you want to."

"Enjoy *Aïda*? It ends in a tomb, you know. I'd rather see *The Mikado* again." William held up the inert telephone and sang mockingly, "'Here's a state of things! To her life she clings! Matrimonial devotion doesn't seem to suit her notion—burial it brings!'" Julia and Eric exchanged a helpless glance. Mary, feeling ill, remembered that William had winced during those lines in January. At the time she'd thought that it was just because Danny had sung them badly. "That's nice work if you can get it," William said now, and whistled another bar of the melody. "Am I being witty enough, Julia? Oh, look! Central Park's going to the dogs!" A few feet ahead of them, a Doberman had stopped to sniff the hindquarters of a French poodle whose owner, wearing a baby on her back, was trying to pull the dog away. "Pets and children," William went on, his voice far too high. "Just the audience for a story about death

as the wages of forbidden love. If we put someone with a life-threatening case of the runs up there, do you think they'd ask for an encore? How many curtain calls would there be, do you suppose? A standing ovation, at least—"

"William," Eric said, "forbidden love is what all the good operas are about. And most of the good books, for that matter."

"Only the ones for adults," William said, looking at Mary. His voice was somewhat more normal now. "The ones for children have fairies in them. Fairies for children. Good little fairies who never have sex and never die. That only works in Never Land, of course."

"The fairies in Never Land have orgies," Mary said quietly. She didn't write for children, but that was another thing people like William never understood. She wondered if he knew that Oscar Wilde had written fairy tales, tragic ones. "And they have very short life spans, as a matter of fact. *Peter Pan's* a good book, William. You should read it sometime."

"Poor fairies," William said. "I guess Barrie didn't know about condoms. Barrie didn't use barriers. That's pretty funny." He laughed; Mary was surprised he even knew who'd written *Peter Pan*. Once upon a time, evidently, he had paid attention to the stories he scorned now. When he was a child himself, no doubt. Or before Danny got sick.

"If you're going to start making puns," Julia said over her shoulder, pulling Mary along with one hand the way the mother had pulled the poodle, "I'm leaving. We'll scout ahead for a spot. Come on, Mary."

I shouldn't be here, Mary thought. William shouldn't be here. Julia said, "He's being absolutely hateful. I'm sorry. No wonder Danny wanted him out from underfoot for a while."

"Is he well?" Mary blurted, and then, reddening, "Don't answer that. It's none of my business. Julia, he isn't well. He's cracking. He shouldn't be here."

"Yes, he should be here," Julia said crisply. "Danny wants him here. If he weren't here, he'd feel guilty,

later. I'm glad he's a little hysterical: he's been keeping a stiff upper lip for too long. I just wish he weren't taking it out on you. Do you want to leave?"

"No," Mary said. If she weren't here she'd feel guilty, later. "No, of course not."

"Good girl," Julia said, and squeezed her shoulder. "Look, up there. Is that a spot?"

They spread the blanket on a small patch of grass surrounded by scuffed dirt, an improbable island of green. If the fair folk lived in Central Park, Mary thought, she and Julia might have found some here. She wondered if she would have felt compelled to write about magic if she'd really believed in it.

"Danny would like this," Julia said, surveying the Great Lawn with a satisfied nod. "It's like a Shakespearean comedy, isn't it? You go into the woods and have colorful adventures, and then you come back out again."

No one died in the comedies. "We're supposed to tell him what people are wearing," Mary said. She couldn't possibly find a happy ending here; homely details would have to do. She looked around and spotted a woman in an ostrich-feather hat playing chess with a man in a tuxedo. Three young men nearby were eating hot dogs by candlelight, and an elderly woman was attaching a Japanese wind sleeve shaped like a giant carp to a fishing rod stuck into the ground: a landmark for friends, no doubt. The Doberman—or maybe another Doberman—frolicked a few yards away with a large golden retriever. Yes, Danny would have liked this.

He's not in the past tense yet, Mary reminded herself, just as Eric arrived with the picnic basket. William followed, cradling the phone.

"He's still making puns," Eric said, mopping his forehead.

"I decided this should be a benefit opera," William said in a strained voice. "They should pay us to come to Central Park in this weather. It benefits the singers because they get an audience. It benefits us because we

have more money to pay our medical bills. A benefit for anyone who loves someone in the hospital. They could call it Aid-Aids. Like Band-Aids. One of those. The names are perfect. Aida and Radames could be AIDS and Ramses, who sing themselves to a glorious death. Except that it should be set in Troy, instead of Egypt."

Unbidden and unwanted, a quotation came to Mary. "It is not to Egypt that I am going. I am going to the House of Death." She blinked, bewildered. Who had said that? Not anyone in *Aida*, surely. She didn't know *Aida*. And then she remembered. It was the Swallow in "The Happy Prince." Of course. The Swallow, just before it died of the cold.

William gave them all a ghastly smile, and Julia said gently, "I think you need some dinner, William. When's the last time you ate?"

"I don't remember."

Hugging the phone, he sat down on the blanket. "Has he called?" Julia asked.

"No, of course not. He's glad to be rid of me. Eric says I can't blame him. Eric says it's all my fault. Eric says I can't expect anyone to love me if I don't learn better manners."

Eric sighed. "That's not exactly what I said, William. Relax. If he hasn't called, he must be all right."

"Or in a coma and unable to move." William looked around and said, "My God, we're completely surrounded. I never should have let myself be talked into this. How will I get out of here if he does call?"

"Don't worry," Julia said. "We can leave during the intermission, if you really want to."

"We may have to leave before that," said Eric. "Look at those clouds rolling in."

Mary glanced upward to find the sky half obscured by dark thunderheads. "Good," said William. "That's perfect. I can't wait. Listen: is that thunder?"

"I think it's just the sound system," said Julia.

Someone was clearing his throat into a microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we regret to announce that Luciano Pavarotti is ill this evening. The role of Radames will be sung by . . ."

The name of the understudy was drowned out in a groan from the audience, although Mary could make out a few scattered cheers. The understudy's friends, no doubt. He'd probably called them all that afternoon and said, "I just found out. You'll come hear me tonight, won't you?"

Stop it, she thought firmly. You'll only spook yourself. She looked at William. Julia and Eric were also looking at William. William looked as if he'd swallowed a fishhook. "Do you want to leave?" Eric said.

"No," said William. "Of course not. Danny wants us to hear this." He turned to Mary, his face as white as the pancake makeup Danny had worn in *The Mikado*, and said, "So, what's in this magic picnic basket of yours, anyway?"

Act III

The basket held Brie and stoned-wheat crackers, prosciutto and smoked-turkey sandwiches on seven-grain bread, a raspberry-kiwi fruit salad, butterscotch brownies, and a bottle of sparkling cider, along with plastic champagne flutes and utensils and paper napkins. The food, to Mary's relief, was excellent. She kept her mouth full so she wouldn't have to talk, and listened to William, like some veteran sportscaster, charting the perils of the performance. She noticed that even when he was eating, he always kept one hand on the cellular phone.

"He'll probably fudge the 'Celeste Aïda,' " he said, just as the orchestra began the prelude. "Everybody fudges the 'Celeste Aïda.' Any bets on how he handles the ending?"

Eric shook his head and held his finger to his lips, and Julia said, "Be quiet, William. It's starting."

William turned to Mary and said with a sigh, "Oh, well, since they don't like me, I guess I'll have to talk to you. How do you think he'll sing the B flat?"

"Pardon?" said Mary, swallowing fruit salad.

"The final B flat," William said. "In the 'Celeste Aida.' It's scored to be sung softly, but most tenors can't do that and make it carry, so they belt it out instead. I bet this one belts."

"Shhhhh," Julia said.

"What do you mean, 'Shhhhh'? Do you think anyone up there can hear us? We're five miles away." The prelude ended; Ramphis and Radames began discussing the selection of the Egyptian general. Radames' voice cracked, and Julia winced. She and Eric looked at each other, and then at William. "He must be in puberty," William said loudly. "He sounds like he's sixteen. How could they give him that part?"

Because he wanted it so badly, Mary thought. Because he's dreamed of singing Radames ever since he was a little boy. He called all of his friends this afternoon and asked them to come see him, even though he has a bit of a cold himself.

No, of course not: none of that had happened. She was just making it up. "Pavarotti would sound better than that if he were on a ventilator," William said, his knuckles tightening on the telephone.

"William," said Julia, "be quiet."

Behind them, a dog began to howl. "Listen to that," William said. "That dog sings better than Radames does."

"And its owner is shushing it," Julia said.

"All right," said Eric, "here comes the 'Celeste.' Everybody be quiet and listen."

William was wrong. The tenor didn't belt out the final B flat; he missed it completely. A sympathetic murmur went up from the crowd, and the dog resumed its heartfelt howling. "He didn't get any higher than a G," William said indignantly. "He shouldn't be up there."

"William," said Julia, "give him a chance."

"A chance? A chance at what? Making even more of a fool of himself than he has already? Ruining whatever voice he started out with?"

Eric cleared his throat and said, "That's a difficult passage, so early in the first act. Everybody botches it. You said so yourself."

Julia glanced at Mary, who picked up on cue. "He's probably just warming up. I'm sure he'll be better from now on."

"Yes," William said, "you would be sure of that, wouldn't you?"

Julia shook her head at Mary, mouthing *Don't mind him* behind William's back. Damn all of you, Mary thought, her eyes stinging. Damn William's anger and Julia's condescension and Eric's clueless attempts at kindness. Damn everybody except Danny. She bit stubbornly into a butterscotch brownie, because Danny loved desserts. Once upon a time a struggling understudy found his voice halfway through the first act, and finished the opera in triumph.

But Radames only got worse as the first act limped along. His duet with Ramphis in Scene Two sounded as if he were singing through gravel. "My God," William said, tearing up blades of grass with one hand while he clutched the phone with the other, "we sat in a traffic jam to listen to *this*? We shouldn't be here. He shouldn't be here. He never should have been allowed to become a singer. Someone should have talked him out of it."

Maybe someone had tried. "William doesn't think I should do this at all," Danny had said. But how would he ever know if he was good enough, if he didn't try? It would haunt him forever.

"I'm sure he's a fine singer," Julia said. "He's having a bad night, that's all. He just has a frog in his throat."

He just has a cold, Mary thought, as the tenor's voice cracked again. "He shouldn't be here," William said. "He's endangering his health," and for a moment Mary couldn't tell if he had just said that or if it was something she remembered from that terrible backstage scene after *The Mikado*. She realized that her head was pounding, and closed her eyes to try to make

the blanket stay still. She had read somewhere that people could never remember exactly what pain felt like, which must have been why, after she attended her first opera, she had ever let herself be lured to another one. Brahms, she told herself. Think Brahms. She loved Brahms: autumnal, flowing, melodic. But instead she found herself remembering a quotation from a college poetry course. "The dead shall live, the living die, and music shall untune the sky." Dryden, she thought bleakly. He must not have liked opera either.

She opened her eyes to blessed silence; the first act had ended. "Do you want to leave?" Julia asked William. People around them were folding blankets and looking uneasily at the sky. The air grew heavier each second, and Mary found herself tensing in expectation of the first drops of rain. Rain, she thought. Rain, rain. Then, we'll have to leave. Then William can go back to the hospital and I can go home and listen to Brahms and the tenor can go home and nurse his cold. Come on, William. Say you want to leave.

William looked down at the phone in his lap and said tightly, "No, we can't leave. He doesn't want me to leave. He hasn't called. We have to stay until the opera's over."

"Of course we can leave," Eric said gently. "You could go home. You need rest, William."

"Orders," William said. "Remember? I have to stay until the end. He wants me to hear all of it." He shivered, then, even in the heat, and said, "I told him it was a terrible idea. I told him he was too sick."

"What?" Julia said. "William? What are you talking about? We're at *Aida*."

"Of course we're at *Aida*," he snapped. "*Aida* in the Park. Waiting to see the scene where Amneris tortures Aida. 'Radames is dead,' Amneris says, and Aida doesn't know if he is or not, she's frantic, she doesn't know what's happening to him—"

"Yes, she does," Julia said. "Amneris finally tells her he's alive, remember? And she rejoices. And she sees him in the very next act, in the triumphal procession."

"And both of them die anyway, at the end of the opera."

William, too, then, Mary thought. Her limbs felt like lead. After all that work, all that caretaking. She thought of Wilde's swallow, staying in the city out of love for the Happy Prince. "You must go away to Egypt," said the Prince, but the Swallow said, "I will stay with you always." And the bird died and the Happy Prince, ugly now without the golden skin he had given to the poor, was melted down for scrap. William had obeyed Danny's orders; he had gone to *Aïda* in the Park, and both of them would die anyway. She could find no happy endings for anyone, anywhere. If Verdi could not, if Wilde could not, how could she?

The music began again. Mary kept her head down; she didn't want to watch *Aïda* wondering if Radames was dead. She played with the crumbling remains of her brownie for what felt like hours, and looked up only when William suddenly hissed between his teeth.

"What?" Eric said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," William said. "Nothing's wrong." But even Mary, who hardly knew him, knew that he was on the verge of tears.

"He's fine," Julia whispered. "He's there, he's alive, he hasn't sung a note yet. William, why are you upset?"

"I'm *not* upset," he said, his voice breaking. Mary squinted at the tiny figures on the stage. It looked like there were hundreds of them; she didn't see how William could even tell which one was Radames. And then one figure detached itself from the throng, and she saw.

"It's a coincidence," she said, and felt something on her arm. Was that a drop of rain?

She heard Julia stir impatiently in the darkness. "What's a coincidence?"

"His costume. It's red and turquoise. Like Danny's in *The Mikado*. William, it doesn't mean anything, how could it, so red and turquoise is in with costume

designers this year, so what? They've all gone South-western or something. It doesn't mean anything."

"Of course it doesn't," William hissed. "I never said it did. Now be *quiet*: he's about to sing."

He tried to sing. Even as far away from the stage as they were, they could tell how hard he was trying. He opened his mouth, and nothing came out. He closed it, and stood there for a moment, and then opened it again, uselessly. The orchestra slid to a confused halt, and another, larger groan of sympathy went up from the audience.

"Oh, God," said Julia.

"Christ," said Eric. "The poor bastard."

"Fool," William said, his own voice broken at last. "You stupid fool!" Mary, dazed, realized that he was standing, screaming at the stage. "You shouldn't be singing at all! You're sick!"

"William!" Julia and Eric said together, and Mary realized in a rush how William's words must sound to the people around them, the ones who didn't know the story, and she remembered how Danny had smiled and bowed at her when she applauded him and she remembered how guilty she had felt when she learned the truth, because she'd have clapped harder, much harder, if she'd only known. Although she could never, afterward, remember climbing to her feet, she found herself standing and cheering as loudly as she could, trying to drown out William's shouts of despair, yelling "Bravo!" until she herself was hoarse. Some people stared at her and some laughed; Radames, who couldn't have heard either William or Mary from so far away, slowly toppled, crumpling into a heap on the stage as the audience gasped. And then came a gigantic flash of lightning, a cacophony of thunder and blowing curtains of rain.

Everyone ran, stampeding pell-mell for shelter, any shelter, leaving behind blankets and baskets, fish flags, chessboards, extinguished candles. Mary heard people calling to each other, heard dogs howling, heard another crack of thunder, very close. The Great Lawn had

turned to mud. Holding a hand on each side—Eric's and William's, they must have been, because she couldn't feel any of Julia's large rings—she splashed through puddles, her head clearing as she ran. By the time her portion of the stampede reached Central Park West, she'd lost one of the hands. The other belonged to William, who somehow managed to hail a cab and pushed Mary in ahead of him.

"Julia and Eric—"

"I don't care about Julia and Eric," William said, and started punching buttons on the cellular phone. He'll electrocute himself, she thought, with the numb detachment of exhaustion. And me, too, probably. We're both soaked. The entire seat is soaked. She gingerly examined her shoes, which were covered with mud, and thought, at least I don't feel sick anymore.

"Where to?" said the cabbie. Mary looked at William, who was now frantically shaking the phone and holding it up to his ear, and said, "Mount Sinai Hospital, please. William, give me the phone." Maybe the storm had knocked it out or maybe, in his impatience, he was doing something wrong.

"It's dead. I can't get it to work. Danny's probably—"

"Danny's fine, William." She realized that she had spoken too quickly, certain that he would say *Danny's probably dead, too*. No doubt he'd been planning to say something else entirely. Danny's probably been trying to reach me. Danny's probably worried about us, out in a thunderstorm like this. She swallowed and went on, "The storm knocked out the phone, that's all. It's all right. We're going to the hospital. We'll see Danny in a few minutes."

William shook his head, staring at her. "Nothing's going to be all right. Don't you know that yet?"

Stricken, she bent her head. "I—of course, I know that, I'm so sorry, I just meant—tonight. That's all. We'll go to the hospital. We'll see him. Tonight. It doesn't mean anything, about the phone."

"It doesn't mean anything, about the singer," William said. "The singer, who was wearing red and

turquoise. The understudy, who couldn't sing and who collapsed onstage. Oh, no, none of that means anything. Danny's fine."

"Coincidence," she said, her voice thick. "It wasn't him up there. You know that. You have to know that. It wasn't Danny."

"Of course not," William snapped. "I'm not that stupid. It was Danny back in January, but not tonight. Is that your happy ending, Mary? That on this particular evening, Danny didn't collapse onstage? That Danny's dying in a hospital bed instead?"

She tried to speak. She struggled for breath, as uselessly as the tenor had, and at last began to cry. William, watching her, kept talking, calm now, merciless. "I heard that conversation, you know. 'William can do the laundry.' Sometimes I feel like I've been doing nothing but laundry for six months. Doing laundry and filing insurance claims and trying to find a home health-care aide who won't steal the silver and actually gives a damn about the patient. I've spent six months trying to take care of Danny, and I spent six months before that trying to get Danny to take care of himself. Take your medicine, Danny. Don't insist on working all the time; call in sick once in a while when you're exhausted. Don't try to sing Ko-Ko when you're already fighting an upper respiratory infection and everyone else in the cast is fighting the flu. And nothing I said to him did any good, and now you think you're going to visit him in the hospital and make everything all right, just by clapping?"

"No," she said, over the mocking echo. *If you believe, clap your hands. Don't let Tink die.* Even as a child, terrified of Hook and his poison, Mary had felt cheated by Tinkerbell's easy resurrection, had known it to be false. And yet she wondered if William had any idea how cruel he had sounded when he screamed at the tenor, how few of the people around them could possibly have understood that he was driven by love. She wiped her eyes and said, "I never thought I was making everything all right. I clapped because they

were so brave, William. Both of them. Danny and Radames. Going on like that, even when they couldn't. I didn't clap hard enough at *The Mikado*, because I didn't know about Danny. Not until later. Not until it was too late. I didn't know. He never even seemed tired, at the office. You have to believe that."

William shook his head. "He wasn't brave. He was stupid. There's a difference." He stared at her as if she were something under a microscope, and said, "Is that what your story's about? The noble hero who courageously risks his life for an amateur musical?"

Despite herself, she almost laughed. "No, of course not. I—look, whatever you think of me, whatever you think of what I write, I know better than that." Once upon a time a man who had always wanted to be an opera singer got his chance to sing, and died. *More marvelous than anything is the suffering of men and women*, Wilde had written, and he was right, even though he put the words into the marvelous mouth of a talking statue. She felt tears coming again. "I haven't been able to write the story Danny wanted. I haven't, William. Because I couldn't find a happy ending. I tried every way I knew, and I still couldn't make it work. I've felt terrible about that, all these months. Because I couldn't do the one thing Danny asked of me."

"Well," he said softly, and she thought that at last he might show some kindness; maybe at last the two of them, if only for the merest moment and if only for Danny's sake, could be friends. "Well, you know, I'm very relieved to hear that. You'll tell Danny, won't you? If you tell him there aren't any happy endings, maybe he'll believe it. He won't listen to me."

She shook her head; he couldn't know what he asked her to deny. Story itself, the most beautiful thing she had ever known, as opera was the most beautiful thing Danny had ever known—its very beauty a true happiness, however dearly bought—declared useless, hollow, void. How could that be? There were happy endings, she knew it, even if some people ran out of them, even if the running out wasn't fair and never would be. But

she couldn't say that, not to William. Instead she said carefully, "That seems a little cruel, doesn't it? The 'aren't any' part? Why don't I just tell him that I'm still working on it? It boils down to the same thing."

"None for him," William said, quite pleasantly. "Yes, it does boil down to the same thing, doesn't it?" He looked away from her, out the cab window at the rain, and said, "Everyone thinks I'm being horrible. But Danny acts like he has all the time in the world, and he doesn't. There are things—things I think he'd say, if he let himself know that." His voice quivered for a moment and threatened to spill, but he gathered it up and went on. "I want to hear him say them. If that's selfish of me, so be it."

He's looking for a happy ending of his own, she thought, a little vengefully, and then: if Danny believed he had all the time in the world, he wouldn't have asked me to write that story. Doesn't William know that? But what Danny and William knew or thought no longer mattered. She had at last learned completely the lesson Danny had been trying to teach her since they met: no one ever had all the time in the world. You had to do the things that were important to you while you could. You had to do them with all your heart, even if you did them badly, or they would always haunt you. She wanted to see Danny tonight.

The cab stopped. They got out, and William, impossibly, began to laugh, standing there in the rain. "I couldn't have called Danny," he said. "Not even if the phone had been working. It's after nine o'clock. They don't let calls through this late." He stopped laughing and said, "Visiting hours are over, too. They'll only let family in now. Do you mind being a relative?"

"Of course not," Mary said, and remembered the skinny girl reading Wilde, the gawky boy listening to *Aida*. It might even be true.

Act IV

"There you are," Danny said when they arrived. His voice was as weak as Radames', a husky whisper. In

the months since Mary had last seen him, he'd lost more weight than she would have thought possible. "You're sopping, William."

"How do you feel?" William demanded. "Did the doctor ever come? What are all these IVs?"

"Oh, a little better. He came for a little while. The IVs are a little mysterious. I can't read the labels from here." He blinked at Mary, who had just emerged from the bathroom with towels, and said, "Hello, Mary. Why are you wearing a turban? Where are Eric and Julia?"

"I don't know," she said. "We lost them. My hair's wet, Danny. It's raining."

"That's right," he said, and tried to smile. "I forgot. The radio said that. They had to stop the opera." He shivered. "Did you like it? Before it stopped?"

"She loved it." William took the towel Mary handed him and distractedly draped it over the bed rail. "She cheered Radames. Before he collapsed. She thought he was you, you know. Because of the costume. It was red and turquoise."

Damn you, William. I never thought that. You thought that. But Danny shivered again and said, "It was? I wish it had been me. Poor Chuck. The radio said he'll be all right, though. It's just the flu."

Just the flu, Mary thought, and shuddered. "Chuck?" William said blankly, and she realized that she'd heard the name before.

"Chuck. Charles Lightington. William, you know Chuck. The tenor on Sixty-seventh Street. He was the understudy. Didn't you hear it? I heard it on QXR. William, why don't you dry yourself off?"

"We didn't hear the announcement," Mary said. "The crowd was making too much noise. They wanted Pavarotti." Chuck, she wanted to ask, tall Chuck with red hair, who's a real singer? The one who came backstage after *The Mikado*? The one Julia sent home? But, of course, neither William nor Danny knew about that; they'd been arguing in Danny's dressing room at the time.

She had begun to feel very odd. Endings, happy and

otherwise, chased themselves through her head like flocks of birds, wheeling in unison, one moment's leader turning, with a flash of wings, to become the object of pursuit. She shook her head to clear it, and said, "I just wanted to stop by and say hello, Danny. It's late. I should leave now."

"No, no," he said, coughing. "Stay a little. Please."

"She has something to tell you," William said. "Then she'll leave."

Was the thing he had wanted her to say even true anymore? She didn't know. "William wants me to tell you that I'm still working on that story. The one you wanted me to write." That much was true enough. "I'm sorry it isn't finished yet."

Danny reached out and took her hand. His was very hot. "It will be soon," he said. Well then, she thought. He knows. Of course he does.

"Yes," William said. "Soon. Very soon. And not happily. Not happily at all. You know that, don't you?"

Danny let go of her hand and reached for William's instead. "*Io t'amo*," he murmured. "*Io t'amo sempre*. I never meant to hurt you, William. Never. Please forgive me."

Never never, Mary thought. She waited for William to make some crack about Never-Never Land, but he didn't. Instead he bent and kissed Danny's hand. She wondered if Danny had said what he wanted to hear. As little as she liked William, she hoped so. Surely Danny would send her away now, and tell William more of the things there was so little time left to say.

Instead he said, "William, go away. I have to talk to Mary."

Mary stared at him, appalled, but William only made a *tsking* sound and said lightly, "There you go, getting rid of me again." He held Danny's hand in both of his. Mary could see his fingers resting on the pulse in Danny's wrist, as if guarding it. "Maybe I just won't go this time. What do you think of that?"

"Then you'll feel guilty," Danny said. "Later.

Please, William. Go on, and I'll never send you away again."

"Except once," William said, but he was smiling. Something had passed between them that she didn't understand, some secret joke or private memory, some sign that had turned William's taut face suddenly gentle. He got up and left, turning at the door to say to Mary, "I'll be waiting down in the lobby. Let me know when you leave."

When his footsteps had faded, Danny took Mary's hand again. "It's a lovely story, Mary. That it was really me up there, trying to sing. I'm sorry William's being mean to you about it."

It was William's story, not Mary's. She'd seen the parallels; they'd all seen the parallels, but only William had allowed himself, however briefly, to read them as prophecy. She should say something, give William the credit for this narrative, but maybe, after all, it would be kinder not to. He couldn't seem to accept the fact that he'd written it. "It's all right, Danny. He was upset, that's all. We all were. It's very late. I should go now, and give you two more time by yourselves."

"No," he said, tightening his grip on her hand. "I have to tell you something. It's important."

She didn't want to hear what he was going to say any more than she'd wanted to hear the opera, but he needed to tell someone. Her job tonight, apparently, was to bear the brunt of other people's stories. "Go on," she said.

Danny swallowed. "Just before my Ko-Ko, I learned that a friend of mine was dying. He'd always wanted to be a singer. He loved *The Mikado*."

"It was the most wonderful thing he'd ever heard," she said quietly, knowing what was coming next, feeling the wheeling flocks coming surely to roost. "And he'd wanted to sing Ko-Ko ever since he was a child. But he never did."

"No, he never did. He worked in a bank." He frowned and said, "You remembered that. About me and *Aida*. I didn't think I'd told you that story."

"Julia told me. Danny, does William know this?"

"No," he said, squeezing her hand again. "No, no. The friend—William was jealous of the friend. We hadn't been more than that for years, but still. I couldn't tell William. He was so mad about my singing Ko-Ko as it was. Even when he thought I was doing it just for myself. But I had to, you see? It was my only chance."

"You wanted to do something for your friend," she said. "You had to try, even though you had a cold. Otherwise it would have haunted you forever." She remembered Chuck, backstage, being hurried away by Julia. Yes, of course you want to do something for him, Julia had said, but this isn't the time to ask. In the end he hadn't had to ask: he'd known. She could picture Danny, whenever they first met, saying, I'm so jealous of you, because you're a real singer. I always wanted to be a singer when I was a kid, so I could sing Radames. And Chuck, at home that afternoon with the flu, had gotten the call that Pavarotti was ill and had known that he had to sing Radames, for Danny's sake. Even the costume fit.

Danny nodded and relaxed his hold on her hand. "Yes, I knew you'd understand. I wanted to sing Ko-Ko perfectly, for my friend. But I was terrible. And I felt terrible. Because I'd failed him. Failed at the chance he'd always wanted. But maybe—maybe I'd *given* him the chance he'd always wanted. Maybe I wasn't singing badly. Maybe I wasn't singing at all. Maybe he was singing through me."

"Just like you were singing through Chuck," she said. "Who gave you your chance to sing Verdi?"

He laughed soundlessly, his eyes very bright. "Yes. That's right. It's a lovely story, Mary. I feel much better now."

"I'm glad," she said, and she was, even though it wasn't her story and never had been. Danny had managed to salvage, from his lover's terror and the wreckage of two evenings, a happy ending after all. He couldn't thank William without hurting him again,

irreparably this time. He shouldn't have thanked her, either; he hadn't really needed her at all. She was just another minor character, in the story only for the sake of the little she knew. "All right, Danny. Now I'll tell you something. Chuck was at *The Mikado*. He saw you. Julia sent him packing before you got out of the dressing room. She thought you'd be upset if you knew that a real singer had heard you."

He shook his head and smiled. "Ah, no. Come on. You made that up."

"No. I swear to God: he was there. Is that something else William shouldn't know?"

"Probably." She wondered how much William had really known or guessed, whether his jealousy was the cause of Danny's deception or the result of it. It didn't matter. Let the two of them maintain their fictions. "Julia did right," Danny said. "I would have been upset." He laughed again, audibly this time, wonderingly, and said, "It's marvelous, isn't it? Just marvelous."

"No," she said, a bubble of grief expanding in her chest. She couldn't breathe. For the first time she understood why William had been so angry. The story had shortened lives and made mere puppets of all of them. The story didn't care about feelings or consequences. It cared about nothing but itself. "It isn't marvelous at all. It's horrible. I hate it."

"You thought you wrote your own stories," he said, gently and without pity. "But they write you. The good ones always do. Even I know that."

She fought for breath and found it, in a rush of rage. "This one will just keep going, won't it? Some friend of Chuck's was there tonight who knows that Chuck's always wanted to be a lead singer in a punk-rock band. And in a few months when Chuck's dying, the friend will get a call from the bass player for the Preposterous Popes, saying that their lead singer has the gout. And he'll take the gig, for Chuck's sake, even though he has a stomach virus. And he'll botch it. And a friend of *his* will be there who knows that all his life he's really

wanted to play the krumhorn for the Early Music Ensemble, and—”

“*Shhhhh*,” Danny said. “Hush, Mary. It’s all right now.”

“It won’t stop,” she said, terrified and furious. The show must go on. “It’s never going to stop, is it?”

Danny laughed, or tried to. “It’s a story, Mary. Not a disease.” His voice was a scratchy whisper. “Diseases are predictable. Somewhat predictable. Medicine wouldn’t be any kind of science, otherwise. But stories—they’re an art. They hate being predictable. You killed that one. You turned it into a formula.” He smiled at her. “Which means you just saved Chuck and the krumhorn, and all the rest of them.”

“Danny,” she said, her throat tight, “be serious.” He was raving; he must be delirious. She should call a nurse.

“I’m very serious.”

She could hardly hear him; his spate of speech had worn him out. “I should leave,” she said, but he gripped her hand.

“No. Wait. The story, Mary. It has a happy ending. It does. At least, for me it does. And I’m not a bad person, am I?”

She almost couldn’t answer. “You’re one of the best people I’ve ever known. If it weren’t for you—”

He nodded, almost imperceptibly, cutting her off. “So. You see. How could the story be so hurtful, if it’s made me so happy?” He coughed and clutched her fingers. “What was your favorite story when you were little? You never told me.”

“‘The Happy Prince,’” she said. “By Oscar Wilde. Do you know it?”

Of course he did. He knew everything. “Yes,” he said, and his eyes filled with tears. “That’s happy, too, even though the ending’s sad. Because the poor starving people get fed. And because the Prince learns what’s important.”

“Suffering,” she said.

"Love," said Danny, just as a nurse came into the room. "They're coming to chase you away, Mary."

"That's right," said the nurse. "Mr. Jones needs his sleep."

"I have to say good-bye first," he said. "How does it go? The end of the story? Mary, you remember. The Wilde."

"You've stayed too long," the nurse said firmly. "Time to leave now."

"Thank you," Danny said. "Now I remember." He squeezed Mary's hand with his burning fingers and recited softly, "'You have stayed too long here; but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you.'"

She looked it up when she got home. That was exactly how it went. Danny's last words to her had—yes, of course—been the Prince's last words to the Swallow. Shivering despite the heat, she wrapped herself in a quilt, and wept, and promised herself and him that she would live.

Danny died two weeks later. Charles Lightington recovered from his flu and went on, several years after that, to found a progressive opera company; among its early productions was a jazz-fusion interpretation, for tenor and cello, of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. In time Lightington became a musical legend; long afterward, Mary chanced upon an article about him in the "Arts and Leisure" section of the *Times*. She often wondered—especially during thunderstorms, and late at night when some stalled, insistent story kept her from sleep—if he had ever had a friend who played the krumphorn.

BRANDY FOR THE DAMNED

by Roz Kaveney

While he's often been accused of "having all the good tunes," the Devil hasn't always been so lucky. The twelfth century composer and visionary Abbess Hildegard of Bingen was convinced that, as music is an aspect of divine goodness, the Devil must be excluded from it—and so in her musical morality play *Ordo Virtutum*, while others sang, he could only shout.

The later medieval theorists actually banned the tritone interval from the liturgy: nicknamed *diabolus in musicus*, it was considered musically and theologically unstable.

But by the eighteenth century, the Devil was making positive contributions to western classical music: there's a violin sonata by Tartini called "The Devil's Trill." Tartini dreamed he saw a gentleman with cloven hooves sitting on the foot of his bed, playing the hell out of the violin—when he woke, he wrote down what he could remember, and, *presto!* a famous Sonata. In the nineteenth century Franz Liszt performed his own "Mephisto Waltz" with fiendish verve as women fainted. Paganini was able to work technical wonders on the violin that no virtuoso had ever achieved before. It might have been his unusually supple fingers; but in the interests of box office, Paganini did his best to encourage the notion that it was a bargain with the Evil One.

I have to confess that we were sent a lot of "bargain with the Devil" stories for this "music/fantasy" anthology. I knew we could pick only one, and I knew as soon as I read it that it had to be this. Roz really captures, not only

the mindset, but the realities of the life of a world-class musician. Through my work in public radio, I've seen a few. My favorite encounter was backstage waiting to introduce young violinist Nadia Salerno-Sonnenberg, whose passionate, no-holds-barred playing has made her a star. While we waited for the house to fill, she paced around in her undershirt, demanding of the stage hands (who had a TV) what the hockey scores were.

Caroline first noticed the man with no gap between his eyebrows when she was doing the Brahms in Berlin. He was glowering at her from the second row of the stalls when she looked forward in that abstracted moment of drawing all the energy she could from the audience, and the suddenly silent orchestra, before plunging her bow into the cadenza.

She looked out at him again, as she stood, with one hand brushing her fringe from her eyes, smilingly acknowledging the standing ovation at the concerto's end. He was quite cute, she supposed, if you like them young and sardonic.

He caught her eye, half smiled, and shrugged. Not bad, it seemed to her that he was saying in a superciliously conciliatory tone, but *I have* heard better.

This was particularly annoying, because, honestly, she doubted that he had. Except, perhaps, for Franz's rather ragged management of the woodwind during the adagio. But then, she thought, he is probably a critic, and you know how satanically arrogant and perverse *they* can be!

He was there again in Detroit, when she did the second Prokofiev. Again he caught her eye at the end, and again he shrugged. You could be better, she heard distinctly in her head, in an accent that seemed familiar, but which she knew she had never heard.

She hoped she would see him at the reception afterward and be able to ask Franz who he might be, but he wasn't there, and Franz insisted on her going for sushi with some Sony executives, who wanted her to do even

more contractual obligation recordings of the over-recorded or justifiably never played.

"The world does not need my Glazounov," she said to Franz and the limo. "The world does not need anyone's Korngold except the Heifetz. The world should take the Paganinis and burn them in a bin."

"I would have thought, *katzchen*," Franz said, "that you would have liked the Paganinis at least. The others, I confess, I suggested because they have some entertaining work for me in them, but those are just the violin, with the orchestra twanging away in accompaniment like an oversize guitar. Something pure about that, I would have thought."

"Pure?!" Caroline said, "Oh, come on, Franz."

"Had things, or more precisely talent, been otherwise, they are the sort of thing I would have liked to perform myself," Franz said. "But, I admit, I should have asked you first."

He feigned abashment, and stuck out a liver-spotted hand for her to smack, knowing that she would instead respectfully kiss it.

"All the same," she said, "they are just the sort of abstract fiddling I hate. Just technique and precious little music; whir and scrape and tweedle. No real music. I'm surprised that the Sony people are interested—they usually have better taste."

"Ah well," Franz said. "That's the interesting bit—there are other investors than the Japanese, you know. And one of the European backers apparently specifically asked . . ."

It was nice to have the world's most respected septuagenarian conductor acting as your unpaid, unofficial management, but sometimes you could hardly call your soul your own. Then again, even now, at twenty-nine, there had been men who asked for a lot more and did a lot less.

Franz flew off to Hamburg, where he was doing a *Dutchman*. Caroline hung around for a day and then flew back to London. She decided to study the

Beethoven Op. 132 on the way; she rarely got the chance to do any quartet playing these days, but there is no point in not being prepared. And at least it was proper *music*, not just fiddling.

The young man with no gap between his eyebrows arrived in the next seat just after the champagne and smoked salmon.

"String quartets?" he said. "Why bother with all that whirring and scraping when there is real music to play, music with some real dexterity to it, some real art."

"Paganini used to play the Beethoven quartets," she said. "I read a biography. In Detroit, after I learned that someone was trying to make me record the complete concertos. When he got bored with all the virtuoso nonsense, he would sit down with friends and play this."

She tapped the score.

"*Real* music," she said.

"A bad habit," the man with one eyebrow said, "and one of which I broke him."

On an impulse, she turned to the third movement, and looked at its inscription: "A convalescent's holy song of thanksgiving to God, in Lydian mode." She noted her companion's look of mild alarm, and ran her finger slowly across the words.

She started awake, and was alone. Yet there was a bite out of her sandwich less delicate than she usually took, and the seat beside her was uncomfortably warm to the touch.

It all started to bother her when the man turned up again, in the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing. She was playing all three Bach partitas to a hushed and, she feared, rather baffled group of geriatric politicians and industrial mangers, and there he was, sharing a table with the Tanzanian ambassador, the commander of the People's Army Second Tank Brigade and the head of the Shanghai People's Bank. It was noticeable that he seemed even less comfortable with the music than they did.

Do business with me, kid, the voice said in her head, and you'll never have to bore a commissar again.

Caroline was starting to get annoyed with this, so she tossed her head back, pulled away the ribbon that was holding her hair in a bun, and retaliated by giving them the Bartok solo sonata as an encore, full of sparks and rather too much rubato.

That's my girl, the voice said in her head, that's what I like to hear.

Franz was there, and he took her to task in the dressing room.

"The Bach were really rather nice," he said. "Disciplined, almost austere, much too good for that bunch of butchers. But whatever got into you, doing the Bartók of all things as an encore? You played like a barbarian—a very talented barbarian of course."

"There is a man," Caroline said.

"There usually is," Franz said, "—lucky you—but not when you are playing, missie."

"Not like that," Caroline said, repairing her lipstick for the reception—waste of time with Chinese food, she thought. "He seems to be following me. He was in Berlin, and then in Detroit. And on the plane. And now here."

"It could be someone racking up frequent-flier points, *liebchen*," Franz said. "But most likely it is our old friend, mistaken identity. I used to think there was a secret policeman who trailed me everywhere, disguised as a second trombone, but then I realized that all second trombones look more or less the same, and usually play at the same level of mediocrity."

"Honestly," Caroline said, "I know it is the same man."

"Luckily," Franz said, "you have no bookings for three weeks, and your birthday is coming up. Unless you are living in a police state—trust me on this, I know—paranoia is a sign of tiredness, not of good sense."

One of Franz's old boyfriends owned a palazzo in Venice—for someone whom the exigencies of life in

the late German Democratic Republic had supposedly forced into the closet, Franz had managed a fair number of jet-set indiscretions—and he swept Caroline off there, ignoring her not wholly sincere protests that she wanted to spend longer in China. She really did need a rest, she supposed, and, besides, she could use the time to practice her way into the Berg concerto.

Franz and his friend Baldassaro were most insistent, though, that she spend afternoons religiously in tourist mode; Franz even provided the Ray-Bans and the espadrilles.

“You know how to play the violin,” Franz said. “But there is an overgrown Hampstead bourgeois schoolgirl in you, who has never learned how to *play*.”

“That is why I want to practice,” Caroline said.

“You are not listening,” Franz said. “I am talking about *playing*. Not thinking, not thinking about playing, just *playing*.”

On her birthday, they took tea in St. Mark’s Square, or rather she took tea, and the other two devoured rather too many cocktails, multicolored ones, with more than one paper umbrella each. One of the café bandmasters recognized her, or, more probably, had been primed to do so by Baldassaro, and, after leading the band in an improbable segue from “Funiculi, Funicula” into “Happy Birthday,” sent a minion to the table to ask her over to his bandstand.

She took the surprisingly decent little fiddle they offered her, and conferred quickly with the piano player, a cute young man with a mustache and with brilliantine on the collar of his scarlet-and-gold uniform jacket. Short and sweet, she thought, and gave the punters the tenth Slavonic Dance in E minor, and Elgar’s *Salut D’Amor*. The sun was bright even in the shade of the square, and the audience was uncritically happy in a way that a concert audience almost never is, but really, she thought, this really is not at all bad.

As she ended and handed the violin back to the bandsman, there echoed across the square a sudden screech of bow across strings, a C minor chord, that

sent the pigeons tumbling and cracked the glass of the café windows into crazing, without the smallest shard falling from its place.

Happy birthday, my dear, said the voice in her head, and as she stepped down from the stand, she saw a cloaked figure with an out-of-season carnival mask disappear limping past the end of the colonnade. The mask had no eyebrows at all, just a nose, but she knew perfectly well who it was.

When she sat down, back at their table, Franz said that perhaps she was finally taking what he had said about *playing* to heart.

"Life is too short," he said, "for it not to be fun."

This was one of those areas, Caroline thought, where her mentor and she would always be at odds. Music was pity and terror and skill and exhilaration and calculation. It was not fun.

Sometimes, though, it is better to hold one's tongue.

When, after Baldassaro payed a bill that Caroline shuddered to contemplate by scrawling a signature across it, they got up to go. They had not gone a few yards when the headwaiter bustled up to them, with a violin case in his hands. The signorina, he said, had obviously forgotten that she had left her so valuable instrument on the floor, under her chair.

"But it is not my violin, I assure you," she said. "That is back at the count's palazzo."

The headwaiter insisted, silently thrusting the case at her. Look, he pointed out with a voluble finger, *Caroline Spenser* inlaid on the case in letters of gold worrying too buttery in tone to be mere guilt.

She opened the case and found within a violin, whose wood was darkened with what appeared to be smoke, but showed no sign of the warping of heat. It was strung with gut, in the fashion of an earlier age, and goblin faces peered, delicately carved, from the scrollwork and the frets.

She pulled it from its case and took the bow, striking an attitude and an experimental C major chord. The pigeons tumbled again and, she noticed incredulously,

the cracks in the glass of the café windows disappeared as if, as she held the chord, a sponge were steadily wiping its way across them.

The bow, she noticed, was unusually heavy. It had more hair, pulled tauter, than is common, and there seemed to be a steel wire of some sort braided among it.

"A nice tone," Franz clucked, "obviously a present from an admirer."

"Darling Franz,"—she reached up and pecked him on the cheek—"where on earth did you find it."

"Not me, I assure you," he said. "As I said, obviously an admirer."

Baldassaro stared at the violin with wide eyes and a shudder.

"Nowhere on earth," he said. "*Corpo di Christo*, nowhere on earth. It is the Black Stradivarius of Niccolò Paganini."

He moved as if to cross himself, then fingered his Lenin lapel badge for luck instead.

"I know about the viola—that's being played in some string quartet—" Franz said, "and his favorite Guarnerius is in Genoa of course. And the guitar went up in smoke during the Fall of Berlin—"

"—The Black Stradivarius?" Caroline said. "Come on, Baldassaro, you started this hare. Now spill the beans."

Baldassaro's face recovered its color, and he pulled his face into a rather tight-nostriled lecturing mode that Caroline rather liked—it reminded her, against the odds, that he was essentially a serious person.

"It is the one in the Ingres drawing," he said, "except that Ingres had heard all the rumors and did not draw the decorations too precisely, just to be on the safe side. And, of course, that was before the Nice incident, so that it lacked that particular infernal finish."

Franz and Caroline looked at each other; Baldassaro was going to draw this out for maximum effect, but she was damned if she was going to encourage him by asking questions.

After a moment's significant pause, he continued.

"It was, of course, widely rumored that Paganini had sold his soul to the devil to play so remarkably well; what is less well-known is that the rumors were entirely true. And though he played equally well on violin, viola, and guitar, there was one violin in particular that was the talisman of his damnable transaction—the first valuable violin he ever owned—the violin that you are holding."

"So the great virtuoso," Franz said, "was carried off to Hell like Don Giovanni and Herr Doktor Faust? I would have expected to come across this information in a program note before now."

"Don't be silly," Caroline said. "The early nineteenth century was a heyday of sharp business practice—industrial capitalism and all that—so we can assume Paganini died in the odor of sanctity."

"Ah, yes," Baldassaro said. "When he felt his time upon him, he confided in Liszt, who had some such small problem of his own, hence the Holy Orders he took in later life, you understand. And he took it to a shrine of the Virgin in Nice, and hung it up as an ex-voto offering. Dressed in the cassock of a poor friar, he confessed and was anointed and in due course died. The histories tell it differently, of course. Holy Mother Church does not like to encourage this sort of thing."

"And the chapel?" Caroline prompted.

"In due course," Baldassaro said, "and luckily when completely empty, it burned down. Totally to ashes, except for the violin, which acquired its distinctive look at the time. They try to keep it locked up in the Vatican, but it always seems to find its way into the hands of aspiring young soloists."

"Humph," Caroline reacted to the "aspiring" tag, but Baldassaro carried on regardless and enthusiastically.

"I could take it around to the patriarch's palace straight away, if you like."

"Nonsense," Franz said. "Don't be credulous, dear. It is Caroline's birthday, and she deserves a present."

"She is not bringing it under my roof," Baldassaro said. "I am a hereditary Grand Knight Counselor of the

Knights of the Hospital of St. John in Jerusalem, and I have some standards.”

Caroline stood there, silently amazed, as the two white-haired old men proceeded to get very red in the face and shout at each other in a variety of languages. They moved off the subject of her and the violin with remarkable rapidity, and remarks about credulity and godless atheism became general.

There was nothing useful she could say or do, and it is undignified to be the subject of public quarrels. She put the violin and bow in their case and strolled away.

Back at Baldassaro's palazzo, she had only to stick her spare pair of jeans and two sweaters in a traveling bag—the servants could repack her evening clothes—collect her music and her good violin; before an hour was up, she had moved into a suite at the Gritti.

She checked with the management, and they indicated that it was a positive pleasure to have her practice in the hotel—the other guests would be charmed, they were sure.

She spent the earlier part of the evening practicing the Samuel Barber, which Franz had persuaded her to contract to record in the autumn; it was so hard to get the right note of nostalgic delicacy into the slow movement, and avoid sentimental *schwärmerei*. Then, slightly guiltily, she opened the case with the gold lettering, and took out the Stradivarius.

As she did so, the phone rang. She lifted it, with enough of a sense of foreboding that she hummed the *Dies Irae* under her breath.

It was the voice she had heard in her brain.

“Miss Spenser,” the man with no gap between his eyebrows said, “I think it is time we talked business. I remarked to your predecessor that it was always a good idea to talk business at an early stage; that was in Lucca, of course, in 1809, though it was some ten years before we clinched the deal. In modern times, of course, the pace of things is rather faster.”

“What were you trying to sell him?” she said testily.

"I was not aware that they had double glazing or time shares in the early Romantic period."

Then she hung up. She was so annoyed that she put the Strad and its unusual bow back in their case, unplayed.

She dined in her room, on tomatoes, mozzarella and basil, the hotel's own bread, and a fairly unassuming Frascati. There came a knock at the door, and she waited a second before opening it, time enough for Franz to whistle the twelve-note theme from the Brahms Piano Quintet, their private identifying code.

He handed her two apologetically large orchids and a vellum envelope scrawled in Baldassaro's hand.

It would, it appeared, be all right for her to return as long as she kept the Stradivarius in the palazzo's well-appointed chapel; it had a peculiarly large font, now entirely full of holy water, and its draperies were cunningly carved from marble, and thus fireproof.

"What a load of nonsense," she said, handing Franz the letter back to read.

"I know," Franz said. "The poor lamb has always been superstitious, and gets worse the older he gets."

"I had a phone call," Caroline said. "My mysterious admirer turns out to be trying to sell something."

"I thought you were supposed to try and sell them something," Franz said.

"No," Caroline said. "I don't think so."

Franz walked over and took the case in his hands. He opened it and took out the bow, picking at it with distaste.

"There are stories about this bow, apparently," he said.

"Don't tell me," Caroline said, "it's not horsehair."

"No," Franz said. "It is the hair of a woman executed for adultery and blasphemy, and the wire is the garotte. From the tone Baldassaro adopted, I am surprised there is nothing especially sinister about the leather of the case."

"Less is more," Caroline said, "even in the affairs of

Hell. I am surprised that someone capable of your level of imaginative vulgarity, Franz, is capable of such delicacy as a conductor."

Franz looked at her from under his shaggy white eyebrows.

"Have you played it yet?" he asked.

"No," Caroline said.

"Surely just trying it out doesn't commit you to anything?" he said, inquisitively. "There must be some sort of trial offer involved."

"I wouldn't count on it," Caroline said. "Not with a tempter this pushy for a deal. I mean, buying a significant enough chunk of Sony shares is not a cost-effective way of damning souls in any day or age. I'd be worried about that chord I struck in the square if it weren't C major. I think C major is probably more or less safe."

Franz looked at her with envy naked in his eyes.

"I play the piano," he said. "And for relaxation the flute. But I am not good enough—you know. I have music in me, but at the end of the day, I am the bureaucrat, the one who makes trades between the score and the orchestra, and can hardly hear the beauty some time for the haggling and the thinking. But, perhaps, just this once."

He seized the violin and the bow. Caroline, no believer save in the properties, crossed herself as he started to play that bloody Paganini caprice—how vulgar of him—tum tittleytum tittleytum tittleytum tittleytum tum. It was terrible, unless you liked that sort of thing—there is an audience for the Kennedy boy after all, she thought.

"Oh, for God's sake," she shouted.

But he was not listening; his normally kempt hair had fallen in elflocks across his forehead, and his tongue was hanging out like a dog on a hot day. He played it all the way to the end, and then sunk back exhausted into his chair.

As he relaxed, the metal wire snapped out of one end of the bow, and struck at his wrist like a viper. As

blood gushed from his wrist, the wire snapped itself back into its slot. Caroline pulled the ribbon from her hair, thinking to use it as a tourniquet.

Then, with a rather gratuitous clap of thunder, the wardrobe door opened, gushing sulfurous fumes and flames, and the man with one eyebrow stepped out. There was a look of mild disappointment on his face when he saw that it was Franz rather than Caroline that lay with the violin in his hand.

"This is quite impossible," he said. "I can't take his soul. He's a conductor. They have their own tempter."

"I have never seen him," gasped the dying Franz, already white from blood loss.

"Yes, you have," the demon said. "He generally goes around trying to tempt conductors to the sin of rage and to provoke them into fatal apoplexy by bad playing. He usually performs as a second trombone."

Caroline dropped the ribbon, and darted across the room, seizing the violin and the bow. She stared into those dark red eyes and smiled defiantly.

The violin and bow tried to buck in her hands, but she had strong fingers and the instrument soon knew its mistress and lay still. In her head, she summoned the notes of the score, the chorale like unisons with which the movement starts; she had always known this music—her parents argued constantly about the respective merits of the Busch and the Italian, and it was a mixture of the two quartets she heard playing along with her. "A convalescent's holy song of thanksgiving to God, in Lydian mode."

She had done a charity performance of *The Soldier's Tale* and knew how magic violins work, and their cost, and she was not disappointed. The blood that had begun to pool on the floor near Franz began to flow upstream as she played the long slow phrases and, as they alternated with trills in the middle section, the wound closed, the color came back to his cheeks. She played the movement to the end—bad luck to break the charm and this would be, she assumed, the last music she ever played.

Franz was deeply asleep—he had always thought Beethoven a bore except for the symphonies—and she walked across and kissed him on the cheek.

She held out the violin and bow in submission, and curtsied to the demon.

“I am, of course, now entirely at your disposal,” she said.

“I don’t think you understand,” the demon said. “That is not good enough. You cannot damn yourself by an unselfish act.”

“Oh,” Caroline said. “I never thought of that.”

“Well, precisely,” said the demon.

The smell of sulfur in the room had been replaced by Franz’s snores and a general air of embarrassment and impasse.

Caroline put the violin and bow back in their case, and placed it firmly in the demon’s hands. Then she walked to the drinks cabinet and poured herself a large gin and tonic. She looked inquiringly across the room.

“Brandy,” said the demon with no gap between his eyebrows.

“You look as if you need a drink, actually,” she said, noticing his uncommon degree of pallor.

“You don’t understand,” he said, “they’ll punish me for this. I don’t know why it has never worked. I came as close as—well, as dammit—with Paganini. And it has never worked since. And I have quotas to make. Magic violins are expensive. There will be Hell to pay.”

“Not a very serious tempter, are we?” Caroline said.

“It’s what I do,” said the demon. “It’s what I know.”

“But it is not what you love,” Caroline said, “is it?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” the demon said, shifting embarrassedly from hoof to hoof.

“Why do you hang around violinists?” Caroline said. “We are not, in general, a very prepossessing bunch of people, and thus far we have not given you our souls, and yet you still persist.”

“So?” the demon said. “I don’t know what you are driving at.”

"Quite obviously," Caroline said, "you love the music. I bet that you could play really well if you set your mind to it."

The demon looked embarrassed.

"Do you think so?" he said.

"Why don't you find out," Caroline said, "after all, it's your violin."

He blushed all the way to purple, took the violin, and began to play, his eyes closed and his expression sickeningly soulful.

It was the Mendelssohn, never Caroline's favorite concerto, and it was thoroughly dreadful. Not incompetent or anything—far from it—just ineffably vulgar.

She was so embarrassed at his lack of musical good taste that she almost failed to notice the disappearance of his horns, and of his hoofs, and the sudden arrival of a gap between his eyebrows.

He played the solo part right through, with a particularly irritating amount of rubato in the cadenza. Franz woke up halfway through and politely applauded at the end.

The demon looked down at his feet.

"That's not supposed to happen," he said.

"It happens all the time," said Franz, "in Wagner. The demonic male tamed and redeemed by the love of a good woman."

"Oh *perlease*," Caroline said. "Not my type at all. It is simply a case of the transformative power of great art, or something like that."

"I did not," Franz said, "specify what the love might be for. Heaven forbid that the great and good Caroline Spenser should feel an ordinary human emotion for an ordinary human being."

"But he's not . . ." she said, and realized with embarrassment that she was, for once, wrong.

But about that, only. Even as a human, she decided, no one who played like that could possibly be her type. Mendelssohn would never forgive her, let alone Johann Sebastian Bach.

The Sony executives turned up in town that evening,

with another draft of the new contract, and Caroline seized the opportunity to cry off the Barber, and the Paganinis, suggesting that they use it to debut this new young virtuoso, recently escaped from an oppressive regime. And, of course, it worked the moment he played the Mendelssohn to them—they had even less taste than she had supposed. On the other hand, they let her do the Schoenberg as well as the Berg; she won several major prizes for the record, and sold remarkably few copies.

Over the next few months, she noticed from the music press that there seemed to be an awful lot of virtuosos turning up suddenly with refugee status, making debut recordings of infinite vulgarity, and, alas, appeal. Even Franz got in on the act, neglecting her slightly for his newest protégé, a burly youth whose conducting was frenetic in the extreme and whose recordings always featured an over-miked brass section.

“Why does he do it?” she asked Franz one night as they listened to the young conductor’s *Symphonie Fantastique*. “Look, that note from the opheicleide practically jogged my glass off the table.”

“It is loyalty to his origins,” Franz said, with a poker face. “After all, he used to be a second trombone.”

Caroline and the man with two eyebrows meet sometimes, on the juries of international violin competitions; they never speak of personal matters, and they always disagree on the choice of finalists.

THE COLOR OF ANGELS

by Terri Windling

Like her life, Terri's story is full of music and color, fine detail and exquisite understanding. More than most of us, she tends to live with a sound track. When Terri and I were sharing an apartment and a couple of broken hearts in New York in 1985, it was Brian Ferry's "Boys and Girls" that promised us angst and hope in equal measure, morning noon and night, broken up occasionally by the high-energy insouciance of Prince, the wistful romance of The John Renbourn Group . . . our all-night marathon writing sessions were supported by The Waterboys, the Eurythmics and Kate Bush; Rare Air and Boiled in Lead.

In "The Color of Angels," printer Tat Ludvik and the sculptor Yann Kerjean work to a sonic tapestry of musicians firmly in the twentieth century, whose feet are solidly sunk in their ethnic roots: Breton guitarist/singer Dan Ar Bras and harpist Alain Stivell; London-born "Indipop" singer Sheila Chandra; Irish rocker Luka Bloom; Jamaican reggae master Bob Marley, and the rich, expressive voice of British singer June Tabor, each of whose songs is a short story all its own.

But don't look for Terri's early music group Estampie on your local shelves: it is the brainchild of a character in her novel *The Woodwife*—I picture the fictional group as a cross between Gothic Voices and The Dufay Collective, maybe with a little Sinfonye or Fretwork thrown in.

Glass shattered against the wall to the left of Larry's head. "All right, I'm out of here," he said,

departing as suddenly as he'd appeared on Tat's doorstep earlier that evening.

She listened to his footsteps in the hall, and the grind of the lift as it descended to the street. Then she crossed the loft to mop up fragments of glass and the oily turpentine spill. The jar she had thrown had held soaking paintbrushes, which now dribbled turp and paint on the floor. She let out her breath, a long sigh of air that was half disgust, half embarrassment. Only Larry drove her to tantrums like this. And then refused to believe she was patient and reasonable with everyone else.

The phone rang and she reached for it, knowing exactly who it would be. "Now listen, Tat," Larry said from the phone box on the corner, a safe distance from flying art implements, "I've booked us a table at our Italian place. Half past seven. I'll meet you there."

"Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you," Tat said. "I mean it. I never want to see you again."

"Yeah, I know. But you'll feel differently in an hour, thank God. Half-seven. The Italian place. Okay?"

"No, it's not," she snarled. She hung up on him, but she knew he was right. She couldn't stay mad, not at anyone and especially not at Larry Bone. A forgiving nature was a failing, she thought. Those self-absorbed, vain, demanding kind of women—like the actress whose bed he had slept in last night—were better at getting whatever they wanted; while Tat had realized long ago that she'd never have what she wanted most. Not that having Larry in her own bed again was what she wanted *most*, Tat told herself firmly, dropping turp-soaked rags and shards of glass into the rubbish bin.

Tat looked at the clock. She had an hour left to work. She crossed to the studio portion of the loft, where the tables (and the floor, and everything she touched) were covered with spattered inks and paints. Moon lay sprawled beneath the sink, where he'd retreated when voices were raised. The dog's great head rested on long paws as he watched her through soft, ink-black eyes. He was huge (part wolfhound she'd always thought,

with fur the silver of a winter moon) and mute; he'd never spoken once since she'd rescued him from the pound.

Large industrial windows let in the last of the fading dusty light. The rooftops beyond the glass looked sooty, a drawing rendered in charcoal. The ceaseless traffic of London was a sound so familiar it seemed like silence to her. She snapped on an overhead light, retied her carpenter's apron around her waist, then frowned down at the piece she'd been working on until Larry arrived. The painting was a wet expanse of printer's inks in subtle tones: the grays of the November sky, a watery blue from her dreams last night, golds and creams breaking through like a weak autumn sun through a cover of cloud. She'd brushed, rolled, and splattered the inks onto the surface of a large plate of glass; the plate in turn would be run through a press, transferring the image to paper. She finished loading the plate with thick ink, and then she began to pare it away, rubbing with rags, with fingertips, scratching with knives, razors, and pins, stripping the imagery down until shapes emerged, abstract, half-tangible, suggestive of archways and thresholds, of faded frescoes on crumbling walls.

Tat glanced up at the clock again. Just enough time to print the plate; she'd only be a little late, and Larry, of course, would expect that she'd be. Late, breathless, paint on her hands: that's the way she always came to him; while he would arrive precisely on time, order a bottle of good red wine, and flirt with all of the waitresses until Tat finally arrived.

She placed the glass plate on the bed of her hand-press, covered with wet Fabriano paper. She set the weights, and then began to pull the wheel that turned the press, pushing ink and paper together. The wheel was stiff. She fought the rise of panic when it would not move, betraying the weakness in her body, the inexorable deterioration. She took a deep breath and hauled on the wheel. The rollers turned, and the plate

passed through. Dizzy with effort, she peeled the print from the glass and tacked it up to dry.

It was half-seven when she wiped the paint from her hands, from her hair, and off of her boots; five past eight when she entered the tiny restaurant where Larry was waiting for her, a San Gimignano wine open before him, most of it drunk already. His black box of harmonicas sat on the rush-bottomed seat beside him. He had a gig later tonight, but blues gigs always started late, and they still had time to eat.

A small package rested by her plate, wrapped in red and gold Renaissance paper. "What's this?"

"Peace offering," he said with that lazy American drawl that she loved. Inside was the new Rory Block CD. She hadn't listened to the last one he'd given her yet. "Why don't you come to the club tonight?" he urged. "It's been ages since you've heard me play."

"I'm just too tired." It wasn't quite true, but this was an excuse that he wouldn't push. Good blues always made her want to cry; and Larry was very good.

The food and the wine soon restored peace between them, smothering the taste of frustration with the piquant flavors of affection and time. They'd been coming to the restaurant for years, although neither lived on this street anymore. Larry liked to hang on to the past: to places filled with memories, to talismans of their history. His flat was crowded with hoarded mementos—relics enshrining the years gone by. Fifteen years of life with Tat was contained in old photos, postcards from Florence, art show announcements, inscribed dog-eared books. She'd often wondered what the various women he brought home made of all this evidence of her. Perhaps she was one of the reasons that none of his hot love affairs ever lasted long; or perhaps this was simply the way he preferred his affairs—short and sweet, uncomplicated. Tatiana Ludvik was his sole complication. As Larry Bone was hers.

He ran his thumb over her ink-spattered nails. "Did you print that piece in the end? Good. I don't know

why you weren't happy with it. Myself, I could happily drown in that blue."

But she shook her head, disagreeing with him. "Something's not right. Something's gone missing, and for the life of me I just can't fathom what. The gallery sent my last four prints back, and I can't even say I was surprised. I force myself to keep painting these days—and you know how unlike me that is."

"Maybe you need to take a break."

"Yeah, right," she said dryly. "And live on what? No prints, no sales, no rent, no groceries."

"I'm serious, Tat. Don't worry about the dosh. You need a break, especially now. Your sister can help, and Maggie, and your parents. I'll pay your goddamn rent myself. Don't give me that look. There are times, you know, when independence ceases to be a survival skill."

"And I'd prefer to continue looking after myself. Especially now," she added with a look calculated to quell another argument. The waiter brought their bill to the table, and she picked it up before Larry could. "I think I just need a change, that's all. I need to get out of London for a while. I'm going to go down to the chapel, take the phone off the hook, and get some solid work done."

"To Devon? You're kidding. At this time of year?"

Tat shrugged. "There's heat in my chapel."

Larry looked glum. He probably thought she had a lover in the country. She had never chosen to disabuse him of this.

"You could always come down on the train if you miss me."

"I could," he agreed. They both knew he would not.

Tat took out her keys. "I've got my car here. Come on, Bone. I'll give you a lift."

He frowned, still glum. "Should you be driving?"

She let out a short, impatient breath. "I drive better than I walk these days. And I get enough bloody nagging from my sister. Please, don't you start in too, my dear. That's not what I need right now."

"Oh no? And what is it you need?" he said with a fey and narrow-eyed look.

She took his hand as they left the restaurant. She was tall, but he was taller still, tall and thin as his name implied, his nose crested like the beak of a bird, his face long, his eyes bright as fire. "What do I need?" she repeated. "That's easy. Praise, approval, and utter delight in absolutely everything I do."

He laughed, and squeezed her hand, rather hard. She'd be damned if she'd tell him that such things hurt now. "I think maybe I can manage that. How do you want it: time-release approval at hourly intervals, or praise twice daily in tidy lump sums?"

"Constantly. Always. I wither without it." Tat smiled, and yet she thought with a certain dismay that this was not far from the truth. In the country, she'd strip herself down again, rubbing away the Larry-dependence like she rubbed away at the inks on the plates, till she reached the core image. Herself. Just herself. The restless mind, the treacherous body—each with its separate, conflicting demands. The first hungered loudly for solitude, and was halfway en route to the country already. The other clung to Larry's warm hand, hungering for things best left unsaid; tethering her in time, space, to this sidewalk, this night, this cold, this need. She unlocked the car. "Here, you drive, if it makes you feel better."

It did, and he did.

"For heaven's sake, Tatiana," her sister said predictably, her voice rising in volume up the telephone wires from Kensington. "That loft of yours is dodgy enough, but the chapel is positively *primitive*. You'll be miles away from a hospital. What could you possibly be thinking of? What if something happens to you, and nobody knows but some farmers and *sheep*? You can't just *ignore* multiple sclerosis. You have to be *careful* now."

Tat closed her eyes and summoned patience. Patience was yellow—the yellow of a Turner sky,

while calm was as blue as the sea. She knew, far better than her twin sister did, that one couldn't just ignore MS; the limp to her walk, the pain in her fingers, the weariness lodged deep in her bones did not permit such forgetfulness. But to say so would merely up the pitch of Francesca's concern, already too shrill. To Franny, MS was high family drama; to Tat, a mundane, tedious fact of life. And so she sat silent as Francesca scolded, stroking Moon's huge silver head.

"—When you sell the chapel, of course," Francesca was saying when Tat tuned back in again.

She frowned, piecing the rest of the sentence together. "But, Fran, I'm not planning to sell. I only said that someone has made me an offer. Some Frenchman who's bought Deercott Farm."

"So sell," her lawyer sister said promptly. "You'll make a fat profit. I'll handle the deal."

Tat wished she'd never mentioned the offer. She'd done so only to impress her sister with the sizable sum the Frenchman had named. Particularly after Francesca's predictions of disaster when Tat first found the place: remote, derelict, field mouse infested, and blessedly cheap.

"I know you're fond of your funny little chapel, but you must see that it's not *practical* now. Not anymore, Tatiana, admit it. Let me call your estate agent for you and get the scoop on that Frenchman, shall I?"

"I'll get the scoop myself when I'm there," she said to keep her sister at bay.

"So *that's* why you're running down to Devon. All right, that makes some sense. We're busy at the office this week or I'd go along, but I'm sure Mother would—"

"No," Tat said flatly.

Her sister relented. "You always were the stubborn one. At the very least, phone regularly. Is the telephone working? You should have it tested. And drive *carefully* for a change, won't you? The family worries about you, you know."

"I know," Tat assured her dryly.

She hung up the phone and went back to painting, her silent dog nestled close by her feet. She stared at the paints, running her hand distractedly through the tufts of her hair. She had cut off all its white-blond length; it was just too hard to fuss anymore. No one would call her beautiful now. She noticed but did not mind beauty's loss. Francesca was a mirror retaining an image that Tat herself had once shared. She preferred the image in her mirror now—not a generic Pretty Girl anymore but a stronger face, less immediately attractive to men, but a face all her own.

If only she wasn't always so goddamn tired, Tat thought as she blended the paints. Fatigue was the gray of a Whistler nocturne, pain was the white of O'Keefe's sun-bleached bones. She used to be able to work all night long; it had been her best time, the midnight hours. When the clocks would slow, the world would fade, and the muse would come through London rain to Spitalfield's narrow, industrial streets. Once it had been Larry who'd come here by darkness, bringing his soulful harmonica music and bad coffee in styrofoam cups. Now the muse and Moon were her silent companions, since Larry had long ceased to be. Yet lately her muse had also gone missing. Probably off with some bloody actress as well. Tat rubbed her eyes, gave in to her body, and rested her head on the tabletop. The inks on the plate slowly dried, ruining the print, as Tatiana slept.

In the morning she put on a warm woolen dress, and thick woolen socks under sturdy biker boots. Moon watched as she packed a suitcase, thumping his tail with silent excitement. She filled the back of her old Morris Minor with paper, inks, groceries, and books. The dog took his place in the passenger seat, and grinned as they left the city behind. The traffic on the motorway was all London-bound in the opposite lane. Tat shifted up, flooring the accelerator, pushing eighty-five.

The sky remained gray when they left London's

smog. The late autumn air was damp and cold. The car's old heater sputtered, spat and coughed hot breath into her face. She slipped a cassette into the tape deck to mask the heater's death rattle sounds: the women musicians of "Cherish the Ladies" on fiddle, pipe, and bodhran drum. The music was colored a deep emerald green, with flashes of red in the drum's steady pulse. She used to play a mean bodhran herself, back when her traitorous fingers still worked. She snapped off the tape deck. The heater wheezed and whined, and she snapped it off as well. The rhythm of the road was the only sound that traveled with them as she headed southwest, a subtle music, soothing to the soul, as spare and stripped down as her prints.

Four hours later they reached the West Country and turned south onto a small, winding road. The hedgerows were painted in rusts and golds, the sky vivid blue, fields green from the rain. The village of Endicott sat in the distance, resting its back on the rise of Crows Hill. She drove past the signpost pointing to the village, then past the sign to Deerworthy Gorge. She turned onto a rutted dirt track half hidden by hedges and marked by two oaks. The winding track was lined by stone walls buried in ivy, holly, and briars until it entered a small leafless wood and the parallel trees of a beech avenue. Beyond these enormous old trees was a low, crumbling wall and a gate, standing open now. Tat drove through and followed the track to its end in the yard of Deercott Farm. A smaller track led on to her chapel. From here she would have to walk.

She parked by the barns, beside a Land Rover. Perhaps it was the Frenchman's truck. He'd bought Deercott Farm since she'd been here last—and now he wanted her chapel as well, coveting the same solitude that she had enjoyed for the last several years while the farmhouse stood empty, overpriced, windows buckling and roof half-collapsed. She stepped from the car and looked at the farm in amazement mixed with a certain dismay. She'd loved the picturesque ruin of it,

although, to be fair, the fine old Devon longhouse hadn't deserved such neglect. In the nearly three months since she'd been here last, the place had been thoroughly transformed—the windows repaired, the roof re-thatched, a barn wall rebuilt of the local gray stone. The roses by the kitchen door, thinned back severely, were in last autumn bloom. Smoke rose from the great chimney, the sound of a drill rose from the barns. Great, she thought sourly, envisioning workmen coming and going to finish repairs. So much for the quiet of the country. She whistled for Moon, and he leapt from the car.

Tat opened the car boot and picked up her groceries. She'd get the rest of her gear later on. The single box was difficult to carry, and the rain-softened ground treacherous underfoot as she followed the path that led past the big stone barn to the chapel behind it. It was getting harder to manage out here—Francesca had been right about that. But she had no intention of selling to the Frenchman or any other; she'd find a way to get by. Last time she'd hired a Deerworthy kid to chop wood and fetch in her supplies.

Deer Chapel stood among crooked old oaks, built of gray stone with a mossy tin roof. It was small, not quite two stories high, with less floor space than her London loft. A single arched doorway led into the building, with long, narrow windows on either side. Above the door was a carving in stone of a woman, a deer, and three oak leaves—the carving so weathered she had not made it out until a neighboring woodsman explained it. Deer Chapel was older than Deercott Farm, but no one knew the chapel's age, or who'd built it, or who'd worshipped here. For years it had housed a couple of cows until Tat bought it off old Bertie and Bill, the brothers who worked the next farm.

She unlocked the door and switched on the lights, pleased to find that they still seemed to work. She'd done the renovation on the chapel herself, and the wiring was dodgy at best. Inside, the building was one large room: kitchen, living space, studio. Mostly

studio, with three long worktables, an industrial sink, and her big printing press. The living space was confined to some old velvet chairs pulled close to the wood-burning stove, tall bookcases crowded with art texts, and two reproductions in antique frames: Jacqueline Warren's *Angel Wall* and Botticelli's *Annunciation*. A tapestry hung between the woodstove and the low-arched door that led to the stairs. Colored the blue of a midnight sky, it pictured winged deer in a medieval wood. Her sister had given it to her, once Fran had forgiven her for buying the place.

The kitchen was built along the back wall. Or, rather, half built; she'd not finished it, and now couldn't manage the tools by herself. A scrubbed farmhouse table sat under arched windows looking west, through the trees, to the hills of the moor. She put her groceries down on the table, then picked up the phone to see if it worked. It didn't, and Tat was rather pleased. She'd take her sweet time getting it reconnected and savour the quiet, wrapped up in her work.

At least she hoped it was going to be quiet. She could still hear the loud, steady whine of the drill. She scowled, looking out the window to the barn that stood only a stone's throw away. Then she laughed, spotting Moon madly rolling through the dirt of the farmyard, delighted to be here. Tat felt the same quick delight as Moon; it always felt so *right* to be back. But eventually she'd return to the city with this same sense of joy and homecoming. Maybe she was more like Larry than she'd realized, dividing her own life up into separate boxes, labeled Devon and London.

She swept the cobwebs from the corners and put wood in the stove to heat the place up. Then she got back into the Morris again and drove up the lanes to Deerworthy, leaving Moon behind in hot pursuit of his wood shrews and rabbits. Deerworthy was barely a village: a church, a pub, a post office, some castle ruins overgrown with grass, a few old houses tucked into the fertile fields by the edge of the moor. The Red Doe, at the center of the village, was filled with men downing

midday pints. She entered the room at the back, where Alice, the publican, chain-smoked hand-rolled cigarettes, dispensing tall pints of warm local beer, cold cider, and hot village gossip. The Doe was so old it didn't have a bar, just this taproom filled with big metal kegs, and the low front room with one long wood table and benches pulled up to the fire.

"Where's Moon?" said Alice by way of greeting.

"Home chasing his tail, the silly git." Tat perched on a three-legged stool.

"Bertie told us you'd be back this week. Swears he's going psychic now."

"What a liar! He rang me up in London—to tell me the talk is I'm selling my place. Which *isn't* true, by the way. Now what's the deal on this bloke who bought Deercott Farm?"

The old woman shrugged and handed Tat her usual pint. "He keeps to himself, that one. Sometimes he comes in on music nights. There's a session Friday next, by the way—*three* fiddlers. Including O'Leary. Bring your drum. You haven't been to a session in ages, and you never used to miss them."

"I'm not playing now," she said briskly. Embarrassed. She rarely talked about MS.

"So what? Just come. Enjoy yourself."

"Maybe." She took a long swig of beer. "So, Alice. Tell me more about this Frenchman I'm practically living with now."

"Breton, not French. There's a difference, you know—they're Celtic there in Brittany. My brother married a Breton girl. He's a sculptor."

"Your brother?"

"Your neighbor. Yann Kerjean. Bertie says he's a big deal up your way."

"In London? I don't recognize the name. But then, sculpture's not really my field."

"As if we need more artists 'round here," Alice grumbled. "Quite enough of you lazy lot. What we need is a butcher, or a green grocer. Or a vet—now *that* would be something." Tat ignored the old woman's

teasing, and Alice pointed a finger at her. "Kerjean came in here asking about you. Dead-set on buying that chapel of yours. I don't know what he needs it for, mind. It's just hisself in that big old house. His wife and kids still live up in London. He's lookin' for quiet, he says."

"Well too damn bad," Tat said, standing up. "He knew I was there when he bought the place. Now he's just going to be stuck with me. Besides, I'm quiet—and god knows Moon is. *He's* the one making all the damn noise." She put her glass in the sink, her money in the till, and gave Alice a smile. "Can you tell that big, strong grandson of yours that I'd like to hire him again? My phone's turned off."

"No problem, luvver." The old woman lit another cigarette. "Now, mind, that session starts half-eight. O'Leary is going to be chuffed that you're back. I'll tell him you're coming Friday, shall I?"

Tat rolled her eyes. "No more matchmaking. I've got a man in London already."

"So *you* say," the old woman retorted. "All this time, and he's never come here once. Now, what kind of a boyfriend is that?"

"My kind, apparently," Tat replied, retreating through the pub's low door.

She fetched her mail from the post office, and stopped by Bill and Bertie's farm. It was past teatime when she got back home and whistled for Moon to come inside. She was cooking *polenta puttanesca* when Alice's grandson appeared at the door. He hauled her luggage and split her wood with an ease of which she was fiercely envious, and then polished off a plate of polenta with an appetite she envied, too.

It was dark when he left, and colder outside, but the chapel was warm and cozy now. Tat sat on the rug by the stove, Moon dozing in a sprawl nearby. She'd pulled out a pile of old art magazines, curious about Yann Kerjean, scanning the ads, the reviews, the notices of London exhibitions. She thought she might find some brief mention of him—instead what she

found was a full-color spread and reviews of his show at the Tate in St. Ives. She looked at the photographed art carefully. She'd remembered his art, if not his name: carved granite forms, painstakingly worked, in natural shapes, roughly figurative. She noted that they had the same dealer in Rome, and had shown at the same gallery in New York. But *Art News* wasn't beating down *her* door. No wonder he could afford Deercott Farm. The single photograph of Kerjean showed a man of middle height, middle build, and middle age—unexceptional. But the work had power; she couldn't begrudge the man his success. Only the chapel, *that* she'd begrudge him. The chapel was hers, and she had little enough. The mail she'd fetched from the post office had included another offer from him, even higher than the first. She'd ripped it up, with a childish pleasure in the act.

The large barn right next door to her was apparently Kerjean's workshop now. Her walls were thick, but her windows were not, and the wind seemed to carry every sound: the high-pitched drill, the telephone, the tap-tap-tap of a chisel on stone. She knew she had no right to resent it; the farm had been bound to sell one day. But Tat, who used to thrive on change, now found all changes harder to bear. Each change was just another thing gone—like her energy, and her physical strength, her body collapsing piece by piece. Life was tapping away at her like Kerjean tapped away at his stones, paring her down without benefit of an artist's guiding hand.

Tat banked the fire, and turned off the lights. She felt a hundred years old tonight, her body aching from the long London drive. She slowly climbed the winding stone stairs that led to the bedroom, tucked under the eaves. Nestled into the bed that she'd built, under quilts her mother and granny had sewn, Tat fell fast asleep, Moon at her feet, her breath rising and falling to the rhythm of a chisel, and dreamed of gray stone.

She spent the next day cleaning, sorting, preparing the studio for work. She stretched it out, filling the

hours with unnecessary industry. Nightfall caught her by surprise. How long could she procrastinate? Who cared if the corners gathered dust, her bed was unmade, her windows unwashed? Not the galleries, that was for sure. No one would look at a print and judge it more kindly because her house was clean.

She sat down with a fresh glass plate, clean wet brushes, a hot cup of tea, disappointed to find she was no more inspired down here than she'd been in the city. She'd never felt this way before, emptied out of color and line. She scowled at the plate and scowled at the paints, hearing the sound of hammering. Kerjean had been working away for hours, his tap, tap, tap a reproachful sound. Tat sighed. She lined palette and plate with subtle tones chosen randomly: a light sage green, a pale gamboge, terra-cotta, and the brown of weak tea. The sound of the hammer was red as rowan berries, clashing with the colors she chose. Beneath the hammer was another sound. His stereo? Playing "Cherish the Ladies" on fiddle, pipe, and bodhran drum. The music filtered through the night, through windows rattling in splintering panes, spreading Celtic patterns of red and green and gold on the chapel walls.

Tat concentrated on the colors before her, ignoring the ones that came from the barn. She scrubbed, scraped, scratched the paint from the plate, toning her colors down. Paring away. Reaching for a simple core that continued to elude her. An hour later she realized she had a plate that was almost empty of paint. She threw her palette knife down with disgust, annoyed by the music, annoyed with herself. She used to know how to paint. She'd thought such hard-earned knowledge could not be lost. She'd always been able to work very hard and to keep her various dealers supplied. And to earn an honest living, regardless of what Francesca might think.

She turned and flung open flat file drawers, pulling out stacks of older prints, trying to remember what shape inspiration had taken in her life before. These prints were larger than her recent ones. Loser.

Sprawled across the page. She tacked them up on the white pinboard that covered the whole of the southern wall. Then she stood back and stared at them, feeling a shock of memory. The colors that covered the wall were loud and vivid. They overwhelmed her now: ochres, cobalts, indigo blues, deep woody greens and scarlet hues, violets, vermilions, sun-drenched yellows and leaves of pure beaten gold. She'd fallen in love with color, light, and paint almost twenty years ago; it was pinned up here, mixed with the deep jewel tones of other things she'd loved: London, Devon, Tuscany. Good food, hot sex, and a hard day's work. A fast bodhran. Her best friend's poems. Her family and sweet Larry Bone. It was *all* right here, a cacophony, a mess, discordant to the eye. An orchestra tuning all at once, at high volume. A hot and crowded room.

"Bloody hell," she said. Moon looked at her. Those colors were making her feel faintly ill. Tat grabbed her coat, and bolted for the door, stepping out into the bracing cold air. The hammering had finally stopped. The windows of the barn were dark. The night sky was the black of her confusion, masking other colors.

She walked away from Deercott Farm, a ghostly Moon gliding nearby. The oak trees opened out onto vast moorland stretching to the sky. The sky was clear and filled with stars. Sheep drifted on the heather hills, and the darker shadow shapes of wild ponies moved through bracken and gorse. In the distance she could make out silhouettes of nine slim standing stones. She walked, her thoughts cacophonous as her prints, until she reached them.

They stood in a row on the crest of the hill, taller than she was and older than time. One had tumbled into the heather; one stone leaned precariously; seven stones stood straight and tall, saluting the stars above. Tat sat down on the fallen stone, Moon leaning against her knee. She could feel the steady beat of his pulse; and the slower pulse of the granite below. She listened for the song at the heart of the stone. It was silent tonight.

She ached. She shouldn't have walked so far, but the stones were old, familiar friends. She wasn't prepared to lose them yet, although the day when she'd be unable to cross these hills would inevitably come. Tat lay down, cheek pressed to the stone, feeling its age and feeling its strength; finding comfort in the knowledge that it would still be here long after she had gone. She stroked the long, cold length of it, rough beneath her fingertips, savoring the touch, sensing white at its core like the white of pain inside her. Pain kept insisting on pulling her back into the tactile world again. The physical self. The sensual, sexual self which she had long ignored. She'd met other women, ill like her, who divorced themselves from their disease by rejecting the body, lodging in the mind, living in soul not flesh. But her own body kept wrenching her back, rooting her in the physical world. She wasn't sure she wanted this. She had gotten used to calmer tones, clinging to the neutral shades in a life made of clashing colors.

Tat shivered in the rising wind. She ought to start heading home again. Moon looked at her anxiously, the wind ruffling his silky fur. In a minute. She'd get up in a minute, she told herself as she closed her eyes, drifting to the colorless place where weariness always found her. . . . She woke again to Moon's hot breath. Her limbs were cold and stiff with pain. She'd no idea how much time had passed—a few minutes? An hour? Maybe more? Moon pawed her arm, and she was suddenly alert. A man was standing between the stones, wary of her enormous silver dog.

He said, "I startled you. I'm sorry. I wanted to know if you're all right."

Tat scowled at him to cover the flush of hot embarrassment she felt. "Yes, quite. I just got tired, that's all." She rose to her feet—and swayed, tired still. She sat again, fast. She never should have come this far, *goddamn it, goddamn it.*

"Here, take my arm," Yann Kerjean said, his voice

just slightly accented. "That is, if that beast of yours will let me help. What do you think?"

Tat flushed again, not wanting his help. And aware that, in fact, she needed it. He knew that she was sick, no doubt; village gossip would have seen to that.

"Moon, back off, it's okay," Tat said. But it wasn't okay. She felt like a fool. She was limping now, arm over the sculptor's broad shoulders, face tense with effort.

Kerjean talked as she limped along, and the flow of words pulled her over the hills, smoothing the long, uneven path. His voice was raw sienna, a color like honey or light on Tuscan stone. "Those standing stones, they brought me here. I saw them and I had to stay. The Hunters. There are stones very much like them where I was born."

"The Hunters? Is that what they're called?"

"You didn't know that? And you've been here how long? I'll tell you the story, and when I'm done you'll be home again, safe and sound."

He told her a tale of a milk-white deer no hunter's arrow could seem to reach; a tale of nine tall brothers determined to bring the white deer down:

Their sisters begged them not to go. To follow the deer would bring madness or death—death to the hunter, death to the family. Never to the bold white doe. The deer led them a merry chase, through woods and fen and over the moor. Then it stopped, just beyond arrow's reach, and turned into a white-haired girl—a fairy, or perhaps an angel, slim as a birch and strong as an oak. "Throw your weapons down," she said, "and live to hunt another day. Or keep your weapons upon you, and live to hunt no more." Eight brothers threw their weapons down, and vowed they'd hunt the deer no more. But the ninth brother had no love of women or deer or any man; he vowed he would not lose his prey and then he notched his arrow. The arrow pierced her shoulder bone, and she became a

deer again, blood running down her body, turning it from white to red. And at that same moment, the brothers turned into stone upon that very hill, living still, watching over the countryside, where they'll hunt no more.

"They say there are still red deer in these woods. The ones I've seen are always brown. Bertie's seen them, over the years." The sculptor paused. "Have you seen them, too?"

"Just once," Tat said, remembering. "I think I did. She was gone so fast. But I've never heard that story before. It's very sad."

"But very *true*. At least if you think about it, it is. I've been thinking about that story a lot. Now, here we are, at your front door. Safe and sound as I promised."

He shrugged off Tat's awkward gratitude and said a brusque farewell to Moon. Tat limped inside, Moon trailing behind, and stoked up the fire until it blazed hot. Soon she heard the sound of distant hammering begin once again. And Stivell's music for Celtic harp, another recording she also owned.

She knelt on the rug by the fire, shaking, chilled to the bone, emptied of strength. She closed her eyes and saw colors dancing to the rhythm of harp and hammer.

Tat brewed a pot of strong tea, washed sleep from her eyes, and let Moon out to play. No more procrastination today, Ms. Ludvik, she told herself firmly. She ignored the dishes, the crumbs on the rug and went right into her studio, facing those colors by morning light. They shone on the wall like stained glass.

The difference between her old work and her recent work was painfully clear. She knew what she'd been striving for: a minimalist simplicity. Order, restraint, serenity, subtlety—why had she failed at this? She'd been looking at books of Japanese prints, American Shaker furniture, Whistler's spare, tonal paintings, and collections of Maggie Black's poems. But the clarity these artists achieved was a thing that had eluded her.

Her life was not a simple one, it was messy and sprawling and layered with paints. It was as if she'd been trying to squeeze into clothes that were the wrong shape and size.

Tat recalled how years ago, back at school, she'd tried on her sister's clothes, hoping Francesca's elegance would magically rub off on her. The two were nearly identical then, both tall, thin, and fair, and the clothes should have fit. But Tat had looked in the mirror and seen with despair she would *never* be Franny. She'd always be the strange, wild twin. The artistic one, the Ludvik black sheep. Order, restraint, subtlety—those were all words her sister might use. Francesca was made of lilac tones, a color Tat never painted with; while she herself was reds and yellows and blues: the primary colors. When had she started to tone herself down? When her body began to fail, bit by bit? Or perhaps the process had begun when she realized Larry would never change; when hope and desire were colors too painful to bear, and she stripped them away.

All right, Tat thought, rousing herself from self-pity, an emotion she thoroughly loathed. She could see where she'd gone wrong with her art, the hard evidence was before her. But revelation wasn't inspiration. Her muse remained as silent as Moon. She couldn't just pick up her brush and be the same painter she'd been before MS. But neither had illness bestowed her with special grace or Zen-like clarity. *Life's a crapshoot*, Larry used to say, and Tat had come to agree with this, alternately angered and awed by the randomness of the universe. *None of us knows what the future will bring*, Francesca had once reminded her. *None of us have a guarantee. Each day that we wake is a gift.* Tat held to that piece of her sister's faith to make up for the holes in her own, learning to live her life in the present tense and not in the future.

She still sometimes wished she could step into Franny's clothes; then life might be simple and clear.

Fran's world never held the messes and complications that colored her own. "Get rid of that Larry Bone," Fran said. "Find a good man and settle down." It had worked for her sister: the husband, the kids, the beautiful flat, the well-paid job. It had worked for their four tall brothers, all married with kids now themselves. She sometimes wished it would work for her, too, if only for her family's sake. But Tat remained Tat, the cuckoo in the nest. And the world where she functioned best was that part of the spectrum in which Francesca and the rest of her family was color-blind.

Tat scowled and put her teacup down. Emotional procrastination was just as insidious as the physical kind. She was still avoiding the paints, the colors; still feeling emptied of color inside. She took dusty tubes of paint from the shelves, lining them up in a moon-shaped curve, looking for inspiration, hoping the muse was somewhere among them. Kerjean was already working, of course. She could hear a scraping kind of sound. He didn't have music on today. The scraping came in fits and starts. Perhaps she should play some music herself. She had always worked to the stereo before. Music had once been important to her; she used to live surrounded by it—by Larry's blues, and Celtic jams, and the glorious medieval music that her old friend Nigel Vanderlin played. There had been a time when her world had been formed as much of sound as it was of color; when the standing stones hummed their deep bass tune, and the stars were a choir in the night sky, and her breath was a song, a prayer, a glissade of notes floating to the earth. Tat crossed the room to the stereo, dusted it off, and turned it on. Music would give her colors to paint until she found her own once more. She ran her finger down the stack of CDs and chose a recording by Luka Bloom. His music was made of scarlet passions and Prussian blue intensity. She opened the case, then heard Luka Bloom's Irish voice drifting from Kerjean's barn.

The synchronicity was odd. The man could hardly be

reading her thoughts. She put down the case and picked up her brush; she could paint to his music just as well. And to the tap, tap, tap that started up now to the rhythm of voice and guitar, the rowan red of the hammer flashing in sunbursts against her walls. She pictured Kerjean in his studio, seeking the shape of the music in stone. While the world went by, unconcerned with art; cows were milked, roofs were thatched, tractors repaired, potatoes dug. But to Tat, art was as basic as food and shelter—no less, no more than this. Here, on Deercott Farm, it was color and sound that they were harvesting. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing to have another artist next door. Perhaps she should think of the steady tap, tap, tap as encouragement, not reproach. The muse was hovering somewhere nearby; it was clearly visiting Yann Kerjean. And one of these days it would look over its shoulder and remember Tat was here.

Tat worked steadily through the next week. The days were cold but crystal clear. The vivid colors of wood and field were ones she brought inside with her, mixing them with the colors of music, brushing and rolling them onto the plates, reaching for colors outside her while her own were still smoldering embers. Music poured out of the barn, rousing her when her energy flagged. Oak brown from Dan Ar Braz's guitar, Sheila Chandra's vermilion drone, Bob Marley's bursts of heat and sun, the evening smoke of June Tabor's voice . . . each one a recording she also owned, and one she would have chosen herself, as though he shared her moods, her creative process, as well as the land.

Moon was another thing they shared. He often disappeared into the barn. But Tat was shy of Kerjean himself when she passed him walking on the hills. She didn't want to break the spell, and this blessed interval of work. The work wasn't easy, it didn't flow, she was reaching hard for every line and tone. She was teaching herself to paint again—but at least she wasn't bored anymore. Her work absorbed her as it used to do; she was printing in her dreams at night. When Friday came, Tat finally said *enough*, and put her paints away.

She changed her skirt to a soft green wool that moved like wind on pond water. She added an old plaid shawl for warmth, and buckled on her paint-stained boots. Then she whistled for Moon and walked to the car, noting that Kerjean's truck was gone. Overhead, the stars seemed very bright and close, a mere arm's length away. She drove slowly up the farm's long drive, catching foxes in the car's headlamps, then accelerated through the narrow lanes, Moon grinning on the seat beside her.

The single street of Deerworthy was jammed with cars and trucks tonight. The Red Doe was crowded and thick with smoke. The music had already begun. She stood in the door looking over the crowd while Moon dashed through to the pub's back room. She spotted O'Leary with his shock of Irish red hair hanging in long rasta strings. A schoolteacher was the second fiddler, the third was a plumber from Exeter-way. Bertie was there with his accordion, an American lad on Scottish pipes, and some sweet hippies from Endicott on whistle and mandolins. There was no bodhran player sitting in tonight, just old Mad Albert in the corner on the bones. Tat beat out the rhythm with her boot heel on the floor and ached to play.

O'Leary grinned when she entered the room, and lost the beat of the reel himself. He caught it again by the second time around. Tat nodded to him and followed her dog. "Good session," she said to Alice, who smiled broadly and handed her a pint. This was the first Celtic session she'd been to since she'd become unable to play. The music moved her as powerfully as ever, even without her drum in her hand. The music was color. The colors were music. The sound gave her sudden fierce pleasure.

Tat looked for Moon, and found him in the taproom nose to groin with his canine friends. Behind him, Yann Kerjean was talking to a book illustrator Tat also knew: a big, burly man in an outback coat, scion of the local gentry. Beside him, the sculptor was dark and slim, dressed in a T-shirt, faded jeans, and a wool

jacket that had seen better days; he might have been a builder, a farmer, a thatcher—he had no aura of fame. Not like Lord Alastair, the illustrator, who always seemed larger than life; not even like Larry, who made heads turn whenever he entered a room. Kerjean was pleasant-looking and nothing more. He seemed like a stranger to her again. Which was what he was, Tat reminded herself, a stranger. And a married man.

Lord Alastair smiled and beckoned to her. Kerjean turned and watched her cross the room. His greeting was polite but reserved, or else shy—as she suddenly was of him. Alastair said, “I was just telling Yann that I’m doing a book on the stones out your way. A retelling of the red deer story. I’d like to come and sketch there if I may.”

“That stone row is on public land.”

“But I want to draw Deer Chapel, too. If you don’t mind me lurking about in your woods.”

“Of course not, Alastair. Knock if you want a cup of tea. I’m usually in.”

“She’s always in, working away,” the other man said, his eyes meeting hers.

“How do you know I’m working?” said Tat.

“I just know,” said Kerjean, holding her gaze.

Tat looked away, embarrassed. “So look, does everyone know this deer story but me?”

“This land is full of deer stories,” Alastair said. “Not just the one about the stones. There have been red deer in Deerworthy Gorge since anyone can remember. My old Granny was frightened of them. She said they only appeared before a death—but then, she said the same thing about owls at the window and crows tapping on the roof. And magpies flying in sevens or threes. And half-a-dozen other things.”

“I’d rather think of the deer as a fairy or an angel,” Tat said.

“Or the Goddess, perhaps?”

“Which is she in your book?”

The big man shrugged. “She has aspects of all those things. She’s magic incarnate. Magic on the hoof.”

Kerjean smiled. "To me she's the muse. You can follow her, but don't hunt her down. Try to claim her, or own her, and she'll disappear. Or turn you to stone."

Alastair raised one bushy eyebrow. "But, Yann," he said, "you like a good stone."

"To carve, to shape, to let shapes out. Not to be frozen in place myself."

"Frozen in place . . ." Tat said, intrigued. "That's artist's block. When you're struck and can't move on."

"So what is going to release those nine stuck brothers?" Kerjean asked them both.

The illustrator frowned. "The story doesn't say. The fairies' whim? An angel's kiss? The end of the world? I really don't know." Then he laughed. "But if you find out what it is, my lover, don't release them yet. I need to draw those stones, you know." He laughed again, and took their glasses to buy another round.

"Music might release the stones," Tat speculated to Yann Kerjean, feeling the pull of fiddle, whistle, the pipe's low drone, the clicking of the bones. The music was loud, imperfect, completely infectious and sparking bright colors.

"Where I come from," the sculptor said, "the standing stones move once a year. They walk to the sea and bathe themselves, and then they dance till morning."

"In Brittany?"

"Yes. Finisterre. Where we've as many standing stones as here. They love music, those old Breton stones. You can almost hear them singing."

She said, "I can hear the Hunters sing. Sometimes, that is. On certain nights."

He looked at her. He was serious now. "Yes," he said. "I thought you could."

"Yann, Tatiana" came Alastair's voice booming over the music and the noise. He had claimed a spot on the bench by the hearth, and placed their beer on the table nearby. They eased through the crowd to the low front room, where the music drowned all other sounds. Wedged in the space between the two men, Tat was

grateful to sit down again and wondered if she'd make it till closing time as she used to do. Moon appeared and sprawled at her feet, looking distinctly pleased with himself, resting his rump on Kerjean's boots and his silver head on hers.

She lasted past eleven o'clock—when the pub was closed to comply with the law but the music continued behind locked doors. The music threatened to go on all night. Reluctantly, Tat rose to leave.

"You can't go yet," Alastair complained. "We're taking bets on which fiddler fags out first."

"My car turns to a pumpkin at twelve. I'm knackered, and I'm heading home. I'll see you when you come to draw the stones. I'll cook you dinner."

"Good night," said Yann. He actually smiled. "I can bring your dog. He's not ready to leave."

Tat looked at Moon and saw that the man was right. Moon hadn't budged.

"The door will be open if I'm asleep. Thanks," she said. "See you later, Moon."

Moon looked at her, unconcerned that she was leaving, the fickle beast.

Outside the night tasted good and sweet after peat fire and the cigarette smoke. The moon was several days past full, perched on the old stone church tower. Her breath made smoke in the cold, clear air; there was frost upon the car's windscreen. Tat climbed into the Morris, feeling sad suddenly, and alone tonight—no dog for company, no man waiting up at home or warming her bed. Larry seemed a million miles away; he existed in another world. She wanted him here, now. She wanted him close. She just wanted him.

She stopped at the red phone box at the village crossroad, half buried in ivy and briars. She fished change from her skirt pocket and punched in Larry's number.

He answered on the second ring. "Tat?" he said. "Where are you now?"

"In Devon," she said. "Where do you think?"

"Your sister called. She's worried about you. She said your phone isn't working or something."

"Larry, why don't you come down here?" Her voice sounded high and childlike.

"What?" he said, as if he hadn't heard.

"Never mind." She leaned her head upon the glass. It was damp and cold against her skin.

"Ummm, listen, kiddo," Larry began while a woman's voice was calling his name.

"You're busy. I see. Never mind," she said rather curtly.

"Look, Ludvik . . . are you okay?"

"I'm great. I'm wonderful. I'm perfect."

"I could have told you that," said Larry, his voice low now, like a lover's would be.

Tat closed her eyes. "Thanks, Bone," she whispered, and she hung up the receiver.

She drove back through the dark to the farm, hurling the car through familiar lanes. The moon hung low in the beech avenue. Leaves of gold churned under her tires. She parked the Morris beside blocks of granite and walked toward the yellow light of her door. She could hear an owl calling from the woods, and the song of the wind through brown oak leaves. There were animal tracks in the beaten-down path that Moon had made between chapel and barn. Tat stepped inside, took off her coat, and tied her painting apron on. She mixed up colors to capture a smoke-filled room and laughter and fiddles and pipes—but loneliness was a Käthe Kollwitz blue-gray that had muddled her palette.

She was pulling a print from the bed of the press when she heard the sound of a truck in the yard. A few minutes later Yann rapped sharply at her door. "It's open," she said.

He stepped inside. "Tat, come quick. I saw a red deer heading out to the moor. *Vite. Elle est tres, tres belle*," he lapsed into French in his excitement.

She wiped her hands and came, pulling her long coat over the flapping apron.

"Moon, stay behind us," Yann said to her dog. Moon obliged, walking at their heels as they followed the path through ivy-draped oak, through bracken and gorse and onto the moor. "See there?" Yann pointed. Tat saw only a shadow moving. It might have been a deer. "I startled her in the beech avenue. She stood so still in the truck's headlamps. She's red, dark red. A red like dried blood. I was able to get a good long look. Then she headed this way, right past the chapel door and out this direction."

"Let's see how close we can get to her."

"Can you walk? Are you going to be all right?"

"I'll try. If I'm not, you go on yourself."

"Take my hand," said Yann. It was warm around hers, and callused, and strong. A sculptor's hands. She borrowed his strength, letting him pull her up and over the hills.

The deer ran before them, but never too far. Now Tat could see its clear silhouette. It stood, head turned, until they got close, and then it bounded away. It led all the way to the standing stones, and stood posed against them, its head held high. The moonlight leached the color from its fur. It was slim, and small, and seemed unafraid. Tat stumbled, feeling winded and dizzy. The stones were singing, a rich bass hum, a baritone choir that filled the night sky and echoed through the dark earth.

"Look, Tat, that's far enough," said Yann.

"Go ahead."

"No, look. She's stopped for us."

The deer stood still, and it stared at them, so close Tat could see its soft black eyes, as round as Moon's, and its long, pointed face. Tat gulped in air and swayed on her feet. Yann braced her, holding her close to him. The hills underfoot seemed to undulate. The old stones sang, and the stars above, and Moon was howling—a spine-chilling sound. The red deer spun, hooves striking stone, and Tat saw color sparking there, every luminous color she'd dreamed there could be. She breathed it in with lungfuls of cold night air. It filled

every hollow inside. The sparks coalesced in the dark sky above in a shape roughly like a woman's shape—a woman made up of color and music and stars, trailing long lilac wings.

"An angel," breathed Tat.

"*La muse*," said Yann.

And then it was just a small deer on the hill, bounding away, moving faster now and leaping into the darkness.

They did not attempt to follow it. By morning they'd wonder if it had been real, despite the tracks in the beech avenue and the delicate prints in the dirt at Tat's door. Moon hung his head. He was silent once more. The song of the stones was soft and low. Warmth leaked into Tat's body from Yann's against her, and his breath on her neck. "Are you all right?" he asked gently. "Can you make it back? I could carry you."

"I'll make it. I'm too tall to lift." She smiled.

He said, "I work with stone. I lift things heavier than you every day."

"I believe you. But I don't need to be carried, I just need a bit of support, that's all."

"I've noticed that. It's what makes you so intriguing," Yann Kerjean told her.

Tat stumbled home, Yann's arm bracing her. She didn't mind her weariness now. She was filled with color, with sound, with stars. She wanted to paint forever.

He paused when they reached the chapel door. "Why don't you come to the barn instead? It's warmer there. I'll make some tea. I've also got single malt."

"Warmth and scotch sound good," said Tat, rubbing the blood back into her hands. She followed Yann past the corner of the barn, past blocks of stone and machinery and into a workshop filled with carvings in various states of completion.

"It is warm here."

"Central heating," he said, a little abashed by the luxury. "I put it in here instead of the house. Come sit. You must be tired."

But Tat was wandering through the barn, forgetting

all about tiredness now. The stones drew her, and the shapes that Yann made of them, smooth as silk to the touch. They hummed under her fingertips like the standing stones out on the hill. "These are beautiful," she said to him.

His smile was pleased. "Are they?" he asked. As if the critics hadn't already established this; as if it mattered what Tat Ludvik thought. She could feel the colors within each stone. She knew what music had shaped each one. They moved her, stirred the colors within her. They were filled with color themselves, and song. They frightened her, for they made her feel things that she hadn't intended to feel.

Moon sprawled beneath a large wooden desk, looking quite at home in the sculptor's space. The wall above held a large pinboard, where sketches and detailed plans were tacked. On another wall was a pegboard loaded down with mallets and other tools. The barn was dimly lit but for an arc of gold from a hanging lamp. Cobwebs and shadows clung to the roof beams, a powdery dust lay thick on the floor. Chris Isaaks played on the stereo now, his voice as midnight blue as the sky through tall windows looking out on the hills. Placed nearby was an upright stone so lovely it needed no artist's hand. Above the stone hung a single large print, gold streaks embedded in rich earth tones. Loose, abstract, textural, it had been inspired by the moor and the stones. Tat had painted it here when the gorse and the heather were in their bloom.

"Where on earth did you get that?"

"In New York, five or six years ago. We've got the same gallery there, you know. You were in a show that opened after mine. I'd never even been to Devon then, but I fell in love with it all the same. It reminded me of Brittany. Perhaps it brought me here."

"So you know my work."

"Not enough of it. That show, and one other. I'd like to see more."

Tat sat down in the chair he offered, took off her

scarf, and unbuttoned her coat. Yann handed her a glass of Talisker and poured one for himself.

"I don't understand," she said to him, ignoring her shyness, desiring the truth. "If you knew my work, even liked some of it, why be so determined to get rid of me?"

"Get rid of you?"

"You know what I mean. You wanted to buy the chapel from me."

He shrugged. "I thought it was only fair. You'd been used to quiet and privacy here—and suddenly there's a man next door with machines going and trucks delivering stone and the stereo playing at all hours . . . I thought I should offer you fair value for your place, in case you wanted out."

"Just in case I wanted it?"

"Well, yes. Of course. I don't need more space than this. I admit I'm attached to my own privacy—but you're not exactly a difficult neighbor to have. And I'm madly in love with your dog, you know. If you decide to leave now, I want visitation rights."

"I wasn't planning on leaving, Yann. I rebuilt that chapel with my own hands, every floorboard, pipe, and wire of it."

"Well, good. I can't imagine you anywhere else. Not even in London."

She raised her glass and took a sip. The scotch felt good sliding down her throat. "London," she said, "is home to me, too. I'm a city girl, born and raised to it."

Yann's eyes narrowed. "So I've been told. You have family there, yes? And a man as well."

Tat flushed. "You've been talking to Alice, I see."

"Bertie and Bill, as a matter of fact. Worse gossips than Alice is, those two."

Tat laughed, and she set down her glass. "Don't you have family in the city, too?"

"My children, yes. And my wife. Ex-wife."

"Ex-wife?"

"Well, not entirely 'ex.' It's complicated," Yann said carefully.

"What isn't?" said Tat. "The man in London . . . Larry Bone. That's rather *complicated*, too."

"He's not here with you," Yann commented. It was not quite a question, but she answered it.

"We're not together that way anymore. Not in the usual way, except . . . we're not exactly split up, either," she finished awkwardly. Honestly.

Yann sighed. "I could say the same about my wife. Martina. There's still love there. But she fell in love with someone else—another woman—some years ago. It finally feels all right to us both. We're friends; we have two children to raise; we're still a family because of the kids. It's complicated. It's not ideal. But it all seems to work out somehow."

Tat smiled again. "Tell my sister that. She doesn't approve of complicated lives."

"So she wants you to marry and settle down?"

"You got it. That's precisely what she wants."

"And you?" he said. "What do you want?"

Tat sat back and she thought about this. "I want my strength. My independence. And to keep on making art," she said, although it was not the first thing that had leapt to mind at the question. It wasn't Larry she wanted most. It was to be held, to be kissed . . . to be touched by someone besides doctors for a change. Could one actually starve from lack of touch? Was that why she got thinner by the month? She wanted Larry's imperfect love, and she also wanted much more than that. If these were things she couldn't say to Yann, at least she could say them to herself.

She held out her glass, and he poured more scotch. "So what are the odds on that?" he asked.

It took her a moment to realize he meant the odds on making art, not love. "Right now," she answered with rare frankness, "I manage. It's going to get harder with time; MS is a degenerative disease. Already there are simple things I can't do. Lift large plates. Open cans of ink. Play the drum, or meet tight deadlines. And that's just the beginning. Yet I know I'll always find ways to

make art, as long as I'm still drawing breath. If not prints, then it will be something else." She looked at him steadily as she spoke. She was warning him. And daring him to find self-pity in that assessment.

"Did you have MS when you made this print?" he asked, looking at the one on the wall. The colors moved in joyous motion, dancing across the page.

"Yes. But I didn't know it yet. That print was a windy day on the moor. Moon and I were dancing among the stones, and the wind was very strong. I thought the wind would carry me up and away. . . . I used to love to dance."

Yann put down his glass. "So do I," he said. "Come dance with me now," and he offered his hand. Chris Isaaks' sensual music was a deep violet glow in the dark of the barn.

Tat shook her head. "I'm too clumsy. My feet don't always work anymore."

"Who's to know? Come dance among my stones," the sculptor urged her.

He took her hand and pulled her up. She felt graceless, awkward on her feet. But he drew her close, and Tat moved with him, and the rhythm moved and carried her along. She could feel Yann's warmth through the thin T-shirt. She could smell wood smoke upon his skin. The music spread violet shadows around them. The dust of stones made clouds underfoot. Colors were dancing slowly inside her, her own colors, and Yann's as well. Beneath her touch, beneath his calm and his quiet, he glowed a deep rowan red. Also a clear, sweet Turner yellow. And the vivid blue of a late autumn sky. He too was made of primary colors. She could feel a shimmer of white at his core. His touch and his breath were deeply familiar, as if they'd been dancing all their lives.

In the morning, there was a phone message left for her on Yann's answering machine. "Tat Ludvik's family rang," said the woman from the tiny Deer-

worthy post office. "They say that her phone is off the hook. Please ask her to ring them back right away."

Tat fumed all the way into Deerworthy. Francesca was such a royal pain. Tat had been planning to have her phone reconnected on Monday. What was the big deal? You'd think she'd been incommunicado for months, instead of—she counted on her fingers—instead of barely two bloody weeks. The day outside was gray and foul. Rain drowned the colors of wood and field and the jewel tones of joy that had filled her last night. They were still there, pulsing deep inside her, warming her against November's chill. But annoyance was a bolder shade, claiming her attention.

She went to the phone box and slammed in two pounds and some change. Francesca's phone rang and rang. Just before she hung up, someone finally answered. Her youngest brother, not Fran. Her brother began to talk very quickly. Tat listened, her fingers tight on the phone. Franny. An accident. Brakes failing. A car skidding in London rain. Tat told her brother she'd be there at once. She hung up the phone, and she stared at it. She was calm and clear, and that shocked her more than anything that her brother had said. His words were unreal. She couldn't picture Francesca lying in a hospital bed, her lungs collapsed, her collarbone snapped, her perfect white skin badly cut by the glass. They'd operated on her during the night. "They weren't sure that she'd make it then," her brother had said, his voice crisp with fear. "But Franny has a guardian angel, doesn't she, Tat?" And she had agreed. Tat shut her eyes, and saw colors, and stars, and wings made of lilac light.

She got back into her Morris Minor. She was calm, but her hands were shaking as she drove very fast through the slick, narrow lanes. She'd pack. Get on the motorway. She'd manage to drive into London somehow. She took the track to the farm too fast, skidding on mud and wet leaves in the yard. An unfamiliar

car was parked there. A rental car, spattered with mud. She climbed from the Morris and saw a man talking to Yann. He was thin and very tall. Tat knew what she had to do—she should eat, she should pack. Put one foot before the other. She was calm. Until Larry Bone crossed the mud of the yard and put his arms around her.

He thought she was crying. She wasn't crying; it was rain sliding down her bloodless cheeks. She stood shivering, holding him. And then she wiped her face on her sleeve.

"Honey, just throw some clothes in a bag," Larry said. "We've got it all worked out. Yann will look after Moon, okay? You can't take Moon to the hospital. And he's offered to drop the rental car off. We'll take your car to London with us. Don't worry now. Everything's all right."

"Don't coddle me, Bone. It isn't all right. But I'm so damn glad you're here all the same. I want to leave right away. Where's Yann?"

The sculptor had left the drizzling yard. She found him in the barn, with Moon. "I'll take good care of your boy," he said. "Till you come back. You *will* come back?"

She stood dripping puddles onto his floor. "Yann . . ." She didn't know what to say.

"Just go. It's good that your friend is here. Just remember I'm thinking about you, too."

Tat nodded. Everything she could think of to say, he probably knew.

She went to the chapel and found her wallet, some gloves, a warm sweater that Franny had made. Larry looked the place over while Tat searched everywhere for the bloody spare keys. She found them underneath the press, turned off the lights, and locked the front door. She handed the keys to Yann and held him tightly, while Larry looked away.

They were on the motorway twenty minutes later. The rain was pouring harder now. Larry's dear,

familiar face looked drawn. He was running on sugar and caffeine. He'd left the city at two a.m. when the call had come from the hospital. Her parents had known that if anyone could reach Tat, it would be Larry. "Maggie is flying in from L.A. tomorrow. I'll pick her up at Heathrow."

"Maggie is coming here? To London?"

"Of course. She's your best friend, isn't she? And Maggie loves Francesca, too. You'll both do better with Maggie around."

"That's true," Tat said quietly, deeply moved.

They reached the city shortly after noon and went straight to the hospital. Francesca was still in intensive care, looking pale and small through the door's window. Tat busied herself fetching coffee for Fran's wan husband, and holding her mother's cold hand. The rest of the day went by in a blur of color as muted as London rain. Larry stayed close, and Tat was grateful. She was unnerved by how calm she remained. Soon reality would surely hit her; perhaps comprehension would come then, too. *She* was the lousy driver, not Franny. *She* was the one bad things happened to. Not to Francesca, the golden twin, with her long white hair and her French perfume, her perfect marriage and her perfect life. Franny was out of danger, the doctors had told them. She was going to be all right. She'd need plastic surgery, physical therapy. Patience, and care, and time.

It was late when Larry drove her home. The loft was cold, empty without Moon. Larry hung up his leather jacket and kicked off his Mexican cowboy boots. "Shall I cook something? Are you hungry, Tat? Do you want some tea? Or maybe a drink?"

"For heavens' sake, you're exhausted, Bone. Go home," she said to him fondly.

He looked at her over the kitchen counter. "I'd rather stay. If that's all right."

Tat swallowed. Then she shook her head. "Don't stay because you feel sorry for me."

"What better reason is there, Tat? I feel sorry for you. I feel sorry for Fran. I even feel sorry for myself. You shouldn't be alone tonight. And I don't want to be anywhere else."

She hesitated.

He said, "It's Yann Kerjean, isn't it? Your lover down there."

"Yes," Tat said, surprising herself, for they weren't lovers. Not yet anyway. She knew they would be, in the same certain way that she knew Yann was in the barn working right now. He probably had Estampie on the stereo. That's what she would play.

Larry sighed, rubbing his tired faced with his hands. Then he tried to smile. "I'd better be good about this, huh, Ludvik?"

"That's right, Bone." Tat reached for his hand. She needed this. He needed this. She wasn't going to question it now. Maybe it *was* for all the wrong reasons. Maybe he was just lonely tonight. Or Yann Kerjean had made him nervous. But warmth and love were precious things—in whose life were they ever overabundant? Not in hers. She'd take all the love being offered. It might not be wise, or clear, or safe. It might just create even more complications. But she held the long blue length of him, those watery blues of which he was made, and in his arms she lived in the present tense, with apologies to Franny.

Tat woke as dawn colored the sky. She couldn't remember just where she was. Larry was curled beside her, bringing memory both cruel and sweet. She ran her hand down his bony cheek, savoring that soft caress, and then she rose and carefully closed the door to the bedroom behind her.

She crossed to the other end of the loft, and turned on the lights of her studio. She picked up the phone and dialed Yann's number. She knew he was up, though she didn't know how. He answered on the second ring. He was in the barn; he'd been working all night.

Estampie played on the stereo, and the CD was Fran's favorite one: French music, thirteenth century. Colored lilac, like the rising dawn.

"My sister's going to be okay. With time."

"I'm very glad for that." He was silent a moment. "Are you okay?"

"Francesca's going to need me here. I don't know when I'll make it back."

"I figured that." His voice was gentle as always, brown as the winter woods. "Larry will take good care of you, I hope?"

"But, Yann, I *will* be back. I wanted to tell you that. It's just . . ."

"It's complicated," he suggested.

"It's complicated," Tat agreed. "Yann . . . you said these things work out somehow."

He paused. Tat held her breath. "They do," he said to her finally. "And I'll still be here, whenever you come. Moon misses you. And so do I, no doubt much more than I should."

"No more than I'm missing you," she said frankly. And then she slowly hung up the phone. Still feeling calm. Still full of color. Still rooted deep in her body once more. Yann's voice had brought back the scent of wood smoke, the colors of hedgerows, woodland, and moor. She put Estampie on her own stereo, and hoped that it wouldn't wake Larry.

Tat got out brushes, rollers, and inks; she put printing paper in the bath to soak. She had to paint. It was the only way Tat had ever made sense of anything. The colors she chose were lilacs and violets, mixed on the palette with brighter tones. She'd had these colors building inside her ever since that moment out on the hills. Francesca's colors. And Yann's, and Bone's. The color of angels. The music of stones. She had to push them out of her fingers, onto the plate, onto the page. She worked quickly, instinctively, eagerly, present only in the moment now. Another morning rose over the rooftops—another gift, Francesca would say. Tat

Painted, and the muse guided her hands, showing her the way.

—For Jacqueline Warren, whose luminous artwork was a formative influence on Tat Ludvik's.

THE DEATH OF RAVEN

by Ellen Kushner

Unlike most writers and radio hosts, I seem to be an extrovert. Certainly I am a performer. I love to sing for audiences, and while I need to write in a little room all by myself, I then love to emerge and read aloud.

The figure of the fairy-tale minstrel has always had a lot of resonance for me. In *Thomas the Rhymer* I addressed the transformation of the performer from con artist to truth teller. Raven the Minstrel came to me in one of those sudden flashes a writer can get, his personality and story complete.

But minstrels stand in for me as writer not just because I love music, but because to me writing *is* music. Duke Ellington sang, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing," and Ellington was a wise man. The words must sing on the page; a mood must have color and rhythm and texture; a story's got to have a beat, have polyrhythms and theme and cadence and even its own particular key.

I will believe that 'til I die.

Raven the Minstrel lived long, and most would say that he lived well. When he was old—though still not too old to know dawn from dusk, or voices from the wind—Death came to him.

"Come, Master Minstrel," Death said. "You have harped joy for the bride, sleep for lovers, and sung the death of kings. Now it is time for you to be the subject of elegies yourself."

Death stood pale and straight at the foot of Raven's bed. His face was as vivid and solemn as a new winter's morning.

"You may be right," Raven the Minstrel said; "but permit me to question your final point. I have passed through great trial and adversity to become the finest song maker of my day. While it is true that many will weep for me, it is to be doubted that anyone comparable will be found to compose a suitable elegy." For Raven thought that if anyone could outwit Death himself, it would be he; and even the hope of a brief extension of life was better than none at all.

"That may be so," Death said; "that may be so—but you should have thought of that before, and taken care to provide one. You knew I was coming, if not this year, then the next."

"Well," said Raven, thinking desperately, "that is a pity. But before I go, will you answer me one question?" For he was hoping to set Death a question too difficult to answer, and thus to save himself.

"No riddles," said Death.

"Of course not," said Raven. And his thoughts swooped and dived like swallows inside his head as he sought the one true question with no known answer. But all he could think of was, "What is death like?"—and the answer to that was becoming all too clear. "Well?" said Death. The swallow thoughts turned to bats, the bats to something not quite nameable. Raven cried out, "Is there no way I can be free of you?"

Death's winter face grew bright as snow at midday. "Yes," he said, "there is. Now, come: for you have asked your question, and I have answered."

Raven's hand began to shake for fear. He thought: And if I am so easily bested as that now, perhaps I had better go with Death and have done with bargains altogether. The trembling passed his control, and out of despair he found these words: "Have you no mercy? If not for me, then for those who need me, who love me. Consider how they will grieve, when I am gone, and no song to comfort them."

"Their grief does not concern me," said Death; "it never has. But you are wrong here, Master Raven, and how wrong I shall show you. For if you can find one person to weep for you, then you will be free of me."

Now Raven would have laughed aloud for joy and relief. But mindful of whom he was facing, he merely nodded courteously and said, "Very well, Master Death. Will a king do?"

Death smiled. "Let us see," he said.

In the midst of darkness, and a sleep of no dreams, the king awoke suddenly to find his lofty chamber lit by a dim glow, as of early gray dawn. But the windows were firmly shuttered, and in the northern corner of the room stood Raven the Minstrel, whom he had known since he was a boy.

Raven was cloaked in gray, without his harp. He raised one arm and spoke: "Hail, O King! Rise, and weep for me, for Death has shown me his face, and I must needs go with him."

About Raven's form glowed the cold light. The king raised his head, and two tears stood in his golden eyes, and slowly spilled and trickled down into his beard.

Raven smiled, but the light around him dimmed, and there came another voice, like a whisper: "Why do you weep, O King?"

Unafraid, the king replied, "I weep for the loss of Raven, for his songs will no more gladden my hall, nor comfort our grief. And it is a hard thing to lose such a one."

"For his songs," the voice said, and the light was gone.

Now Raven was greatly distressed. In the heat of his trouble he nearly forgot Death's mission to him, so overwrought was he to be losing the proposal, and so shamed. "There is the gratitude of kings!" he said. "And I hardly think that was a proper choice, for kings concern themselves altogether with larger matters, and scarcely see the ground at their feet. I know, for I have lived among them."

Death smiled, in agreement, Raven thought. "Now, come," said the minstrel, "and I will show you one to weep for me: my boy, whom I took in as a child, and fed and clothed him, and have tried to teach him all I know." And they went.

He had been out making merry, having crawled out of his bedroom window and onto the roof and down a vine that might have been grown expressly for that purpose; now he was deep asleep, so that he grumbled, and burrowed deeper into the blankets at the light of dawn. But it was cold in the room, and grew colder. Finally he looked up, and beheld his master, Raven, standing there surrounded by a light that seemed to hide as much as it revealed.

"Weep for me," said Raven, "for Death has spoken to me, and I fear I shall soon be singing my songs for him alone."

The boy looked on his master, and the man was old. He thought of their lessons, of his harp and his songs, and he chewed on his knuckles as tears filled his eyes.

For a moment the room was still; then, just as the boy was about to sniff, a voice came: "Why do you weep?"

The boy swallowed. "I weep for my master, for all the time he spent in teaching me, for I was not as careful as I should have been, and now I will never know it all, nor yet remember the half of it."

"For his teaching," the voice said, and the boy was asleep.

"Youth," Raven said, intrigued, "is like water. Flowing water, that courses over all it encounters, and slowly wears it away, while altering itself no whit."

"How fortunate," said pale Death, "that you are old and reflective, like a pool. Come, Raven."

"But," the minstrel continued, as though his thought was too fascinating to break, even for Death, "there is one thing that, they say, endures, one thing that is timeless and ageless. Or so I have sung."

"And that?" prompted Death.

"Is love."

"Ah," said Death, with not quite a sigh. "Very well."

The woman sat up, cloaked only in her hair. Even the cold light could not entirely subdue its russet warmth. Raven stood at the center of the light. The dark hair that had given him his name was silver-shot now, but his eyes were bright.

"Weep for me," said Raven, "for Death has touched my heart, and soon the rest of me must follow him."

The lady flung out her arms to the minstrel, rippling the amber curtain of her hair, and her slender hands opened and closed on nothing. Her face was drawn in grief, and she cried out, "Ah, must I lose you, then, dear my love? And never feel your arms around me more, nor your sweet breath and gentle hands, and the warmth of you?"

"She weeps," said Raven, gazing on her longing.

"For your love."

"Now," said Death, "no more questions, I think. Soon you will know answers you never knew you lacked."

But Raven stood quite still, and he wept.

"Come," Death said, "enough of weeping. There will be tears aplenty in your wake, and songs, though none quite equals yours."

Raven looked up into Death's cloud-silver face. "I never knew you were a comforter."

"I am all things," said Death. "I alone can take your songs, and your knowledge, and your warmth, and every part of you, known and unknown. Come, sing your songs to me; teach me, and let me enfold you now."

And Raven stepped forward into the light that was not of any morning the world will ever see.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

John Brunner was born in Oxfordshire, England, in 1934, and was educated at Cheltenham College. He is the author of numerous works of fantasy, science fiction, mystery, and historical fiction, among them *The Sheep Look Up*, *Stand on Zanzibar*, and *The Traveller in Black*. He was the first non-American author to be voted a Hugo (for *Stand on Zanzibar*), and has also received the British Fantasy Award and the British SF Award, as well as awards from France and Italy, the European SF Convention Special Award as Best Western European SF writer, and the Clark Ashton Smith Award for fantasy poetry. It was a great loss to the SF community when he died suddenly while attending the 1995 World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow, Scotland.

Ray Davis has lived in San Francisco, New York City, Philadelphia, Cambridge, Guantánamo Bay, and Braymer, Missouri. His first story was published in *In Dreams*. Much of his criticism has been published by *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, and his essay on the pornography of Samuel R. Delany can be found in *Ash of Stars*, edited by James Sallis. He's written on Djuna Barnes for the on-line magazine *Dark Carnival*. Davis earns his living as a software engineer, most recently specializing in multimedia and Web applications, and does volunteer work at the San Francisco Digital Media Center. Miscellaneous obsessions include Restoration-era literature, twentieth-century poetics, and the American class structure.

* * *

Jane Emerson is the author of the Ivory books: *The Gate of Ivory*, *Two-Bit Heroes*, and *Gilt-Edged Ivory* and "Timerider." Writing as Jane Emerson, she published *City of Diamond* (Daw, 1996), the first book of the Three Cities Trilogy. She recently moved from the NY area to LA to exploit the creative possibilities of series television. Now if only series television would exploit her possibilities . . . "It's not bad here," she writes. "I like having a loft where I can look out the window to trees and hills while I'm working, as opposed to the four-lane street and burnt-out buildings I used to face. My genes are Celt, though, and all this sunshine makes me extremely nervous. I cheer considerably after sundown."

Michael Kandel always wanted to play the violin, but his parents said, "We have a piano. You're taking piano lessons." Over the years, his teacher was very patient, even though Michael never practiced enough. Now he wishes he had. So much of Chopin, for example, is beyond him—he can do only the slow and schmaltzy stuff, not the wild études that have so many notes and accidentals, a person can't keep track of them even just listening. Kandel will never be another Evgeny Kissin now; it's too late.

He's also the author of *Captain Jack Zodiac* and, recently, *Panda Ray*. He says, "Fortunately, with writing, you don't have to do your scales. Or do you? Hey, maybe you do . . . Damn."

Roz Kaveney is a publisher's reader and civil liberties activist resident in London; she has published extensively as reviewer both in the SF/fantasy field (mostly in *Foundation*) and outside it (mostly in the *New Statesman* and the lesbian and gay press). She edited *Tales from the Forbidden Planet* and *More Tales from the Forbidden Planet*; and co-edited and contributed stories to the alas! defunct *Midnight Rose* shared-world

anthologies *Temps, Eurotemps, The Weerde: Books One and Two, and Villains!*

Donald G. Keller is publisher and editor of Serconia Press. He has written critical essays and reviews for *The New York Review of Science Fiction* and other publications. He lives in New York City, where he hears a lot of cutting-edge rock and roll (and contemporary classical and folk), and writes about them in his quarterly magazine, *the still point*.

Ellen Kushner's novels are *Swordspoint, a Melodrama of Manners*, and *Thomas the Rhymer*, winner of the World Fantasy Award and the Mythopoeic Award for best novel of 1990. Her short fiction has been collected in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, and has appeared in all of the four volumes of the "punk elf" Bordertown series. A radio host on WGBH-FM in Boston since 1987, Kushner has been a national presence on public radio since 1989, when she became the host of APR's *International Music Series*. In 1992 she created three award-winning Jewish Holiday specials for APR (since renamed Public Radio International): *Festival of Liberation: the Passover Story in World Music*; *The Door is Opened: a Jewish High Holiday Meditation*; and *Beyond 1492*. 1996 saw the premiere of a weekly series created for her by PRI: *Sound & Spirit* is "a musical exploration of the human experience," or, as she puts it, "Joseph Campbell meets Ellen's Record Collection." (To find out if your local public radio station carries it, give them a call, or check out the show's website at WWW.WGBH.ORG/PRI/SPIRIT.) She loves to sing, she loves to cook, and she prides herself on having learned to dance late in life. No one can read her handwriting, and she can only read a map if it is held in the right direction. She can never find anything when she needs it.

Susan Palwick wishes it to be known that she does not believe in elves but believes passionately in fan-

tasy. Her first novel, *Flying in Place*, won the Crawford Award for Best First Fantasy Novel of 1992; her second novel, *Shelter*, is under contract to Tor Books. Her short fiction has appeared in *Year's Best Fantasy*, *Year's Best Science Fiction*, *Best of Pulphouse*, *Xanadu 3*, and *Ruby Slippers*, *Golden Tears*. Currently completing her Ph.D. in English Literature at Yale University, Palwick lives with her husband and their three cats in New Jersey. She has been known to break out in hives at the sound of a soprano hitting a high C.

Delia Sherman was born in Tokyo, Japan, and grew up in New York City, with summer excursions to her parents' kin in Texas, Louisiana, and South Carolina. She has a Ph.D. in Renaissance Literature from Brown University, and has taught Freshman Composition and Fantasy as Literature at Boston University and Northeastern, and fiction writing at the Clarion East Writers' Workshop. She is the author of *Through a Brazen Mirror* (Ace, 1989) and *The Porcelain Dove* (Dutton, 1993), winner of the Mythopoeic Award, and her short fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Xanadu 2*, *Ruby Slippers*, *Golden Tears*, as well as in several volumes of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Science Fiction*. She has joyfully left academia to devote herself to the things she loves best: writing, traveling, and editing.

Gus Smith lives on a small hill farm in England's Yorkshire Pennines, with his wife Tessa, two sons Leo and Giles, and an indeterminate number of animals. He once tried to make a living from smallholding and folk music, but it reduced him to penury, so he returned to teaching. He is also Chairman of the Ecology Building Society, which lends money on ecologically sound real estate. Most of his published writing has been non-fiction, on folk and ecological topics, but he has had an SF story published recently in *Valkyrie* magazine in Britain. This is his first fantasy fiction sale.

Jennifer Stevenson's checkered resume includes the usual dude ranch painting, counterweight shifting, sunflower repair (real and rubber), and advanced degrees in structural family theory and gestalt therapy. Her musical training was in french horn and bel canto art song. Her most recent publication is the lead story in *Women at War* (Tor, 1995), "The Purge."

Lucy Sussex was born in New Zealand in 1957, and works as a researcher and also as a freelance author and editor. She has published widely, writing anything from children's novels to detective stories. She also is a literary archaeologist, rediscovering and republishing the pioneering nineteenth-century women crime writers Mary Fortune and Ellen Davitt. Her short story, "My Lady Tongue," won a Ditmar (Australian Science Fiction Achievement Award) in 1988. In 1995 she was a judge for the international Tiptree award, given annually to the best fiction that questions gender. She has edited four anthologies, the latest being *She's Fantastical*, which collects women's non-realistic writing. Her latest novel is *The Scarlet Rider* (Forge, 1996).

Elizabeth E. Wein is the author of *The Winter Prince*. Her short stories have appeared in *Writers of the Future* Vol. IX and in a young adult collection titled *Not The Only One*. Elizabeth has a Ph.D. in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania; during her years as a graduate student in Philadelphia, she learned to ring church bells in the English style called "change ringing." This gave her a subject for her dissertation, but she discovered not long after that it's much more rewarding and amusing to write fiction about it than to dissertate about it. Elizabeth and her husband, Tim Gatland (who is also a change ringer) live in Marlow, England, "between-Maidenhead-and-Henley-on-the-Thames."

Terri Windling divides her time between a sixteenth-century stone cottage in Devon and a winter retreat in

the Arizona desert, but still considers herself a New Yorker at heart. She is the author of one adult fantasy novel, *The Wood Wife* (Tor, 1996; Legend, 1996), as well as short fiction, children's fiction and nonfiction. Her second novel for adults will be published by Tor in 1997. As a painter, she has exhibited work in galleries and museums across the U.S. and abroad. She has also edited numerous anthologies (including *The Armless Maiden* [Tor, 1995], *Faery*, the *Elsewhere* trilogy and, with Ellen Datlow, the nine volumes of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* and the four volumes of the *Snow White, Blood Red* series of adult fairy tales), for which she has won five World Fantasy awards. Her obsessions include fairy tales, Pre-Raphaelite paintings, literary biographies, strong coffee, motorcycle rides at dusk, and traveling around Europe in search of all of the above.

Gene Wolfe was trained as a mechanical engineer. He practiced that profession for seventeen years, and was an editor on the staff of an engineering magazine for another eleven; he left the position in 1984 to write full-time. He is the author of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, *Peace*, and the *Book of the New Sun* tetralogy, and other books, including *Castle of Days*, which contains a good deal of advice on writing. He has won two Nebulas, two World Fantasy awards, the British Science Fiction Award, the British Fantasy Award, and various other awards—most recently the Deathrealm Award for horror. He lives in Illinois with his wife, Rosemary, who is a pianist.

Jack Womack is the author of *Ambient* (1987), *Terraplane* (1988), *Heathern* (1990), *Elvissey* (1993) and *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* (1994). His short stories have appeared in anthologies edited by Kathryn Cramer (*Walls of Fear*) and Ellen Datlow (*A Whisper of Blood*, *The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy* 1991 and 1994 and *Little Deaths*), as well as in *Omni*. Womack is a winner of the Philip K. Dick Award and a

member of the PEN American Center. Originally from Lexington, Kentucky, he has lived for many years in New York City. His collection of books of eccentric thought and deed is well regarded by the cognoscenti.



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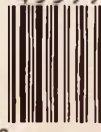
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