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speculative fiction

science fiction

The Passing of Guests

Jay Lake



horror

The Shift Manager

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fantasy

Haunting Hattie

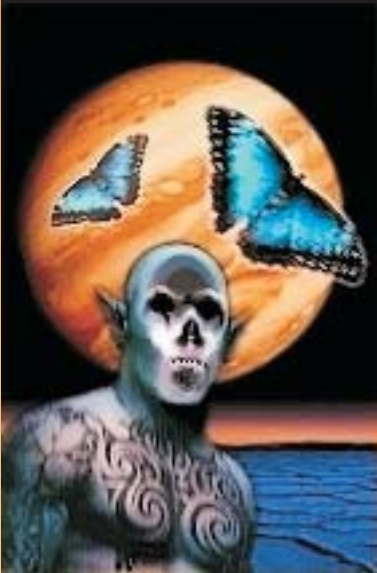
Dorothee Danzman



classic

The Nigthingale and the Rose

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s p e c u l a t i v e f i c t i o n

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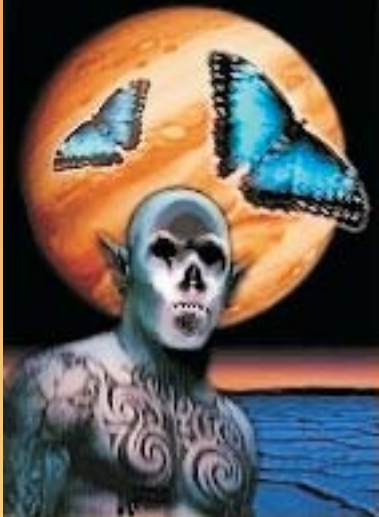
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White Figure on a White Background

A look at **William Gibson's** *Pattern Recognition*



"If it's true that a great novelist always leaves something of themselves within their work, then William Gibson must be one of the great sterility fetishists of our time."

I'd hate to be a guest at William Gibson's house. I bet it's always cold, and the place is full of shiny, expensive objet d'art, and chrome surfaces and exposed floorboards, and you're never allowed to touch anything. I bet you have to take your shoes off at the door and have a disinfectant footbath before he lets you in, and you have to wear cotton gloves so you never ever leave a fingerprint. I bet you have to wear a paper suit over your real clothes.

If it's true that a great novelist always leaves something of themselves within their work, then William Gibson must be one of the great sterility fetishists of our time.

Pattern Recognition concerns itself with Cayce Pollard, a 'cool consultant' who uses her sensitivity to trademarking to advise companies as to which logos and designs should prove successful in the marketplace. Pollard is the ultimate extension of the Gibson sterility fetish: a character who is allergic to logos and trademarks, allowing Gibson to remove even the ephemeral images of our existence from his world view.

Pollard is on the hunt for the creator of a series of images found on the web, images that seem to be making some sort of movie, or visual comment that Pollard and her net-friends find irresistible. Along the way Pollard jets from London to Japan to the former Russian states, all the while agonising over her American-ness and how it compares to the

increasingly homogenised surroundings in which she finds herself.

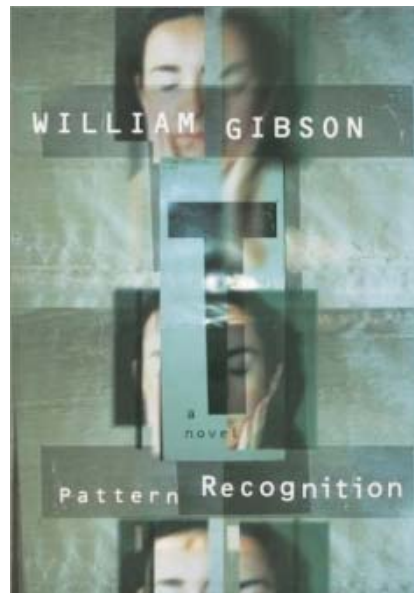
Not that location seems to matter to Gibson. Each new locale is just like the last. Sterile, blank, white upon white. From the London flat of her best friend, emptied of furniture with only a game cube and three featureless body casts for company, to the ultra-clean, barren surroundings of Japanese hotel rooms, Gibson invests his settings with a lifelessness that forces the characters and their actions into an unnatural highlighting.

This is Brechtian theatre: no sets, no costumes, nothing to distract the audience's attention away from the slightest movement or mannerisms of the actors in front of us.

And this is a novel of mannerisms. Everyone has a second agenda, everyone is hiding something from everyone else, alliances and betrayals are forged and broken with the slightest of

motions as Cayce and those who surround her spiral inexorably toward the maker of the fragmentary web images that have captured their attentions. It is testament to Gibson's extraordinary skill as a novelist that he sweeps us along on this journey, drawing us into the games and paranoias of his cast. For in truth there is no great surfeit of pure plot here, and without endless descriptions of time and place to absorb us Gibson is forced to rely on his characters to take us to the end of this book.

And that they do, with power to spare.





"If it's true that a great novelist always leaves something of themselves within their work, then William Gibson must be one of the great sterility fetishists of our time."

Because *Pattern Recognition* becomes a truly absorbing book. The minor gains and reversals that make up the delicate power games within it become a constant tickle to the reader's system, until the reader finds themselves carried pell-mell into the minor, yet completely captivating resolution of all the separate threads of Cayce Pollard's journey: the creator of her images, the fate of her father who may or may not have disappeared some time before, the self-realisation that she has so desperately wished for and seemed unable to find.

It's been a while since I've read Gibson. After his *Neuromancer* series he disappeared off my radar. It's fascinating to see the elements of his style that have survived the twenty year gap, to see him transform into a novelist of artistic power. I'm interested in what he does next, because I'd like to see him reverse the tone of this novel: get rid of the paper suits, track mud into his house, empty the disinfectant foot-bath and let people leave fingerprints and coffee marks wherever the hell they like. In short, I'd like to see Gibson step outside the sterility and get dirty. The final image of *Pattern Recognition* is of Cayce Pollard up to her knees in grime and mud, digging in filth. I hope that image carries over into Gibson's next novel, that he imbues it with such texture and dirt that we feel grit between our fingers as we turn the pages.

Um, I've just admitted I want to see William Gibson get dirty. Does that make me a perv?

Lee Battersby is the lead character in the Dilip K. Phick novel The Man In The Low Castle, about a man living on the border of two countries ruled by exhaustion and depression. Most people have an opinion about which one will get him first. Most people wish they'd get on and finish the job....



Jay Lake

Ideomancer Featured Author **Jay Lake** answers a few questions from resident philosopher **Mikal Trimm**.

Mikal Trimm: For those of our readers who aren't familiar with your accomplishments, let's start with a little background. Not only do you write, but you're also an editor for the successful *Polyphony* anthologies, and until recently you were a reviewer for *Tangent Online*. Anything else we should know about you?

Jay Lake: Um, I kilt me a b'ar when I was only three. No, wait, that's not it.

Let's see...my first memory of reading is a *Cat in the Hat* dictionary in French, in about 1967 when I was three and my Dad's job took us to Dahomey. My first publishing credit was some poetry in the English-language *China Post* in the Taiwan around 1974, when I was ten. After that there was this really long dry spell until I was 36.

In everyday life, I work in high tech marketing and sales, which involves a lot of writing. I keep a very heavy writing schedule and submission rotation going. I'm a regular in three different workshops here in Oregon, and do quite a bit of critique-trading online. Typical early career stuff, I think. Hard on my family, sometimes, but my wife and child are both very supportive.

In the vein of actual, documentable accomplishments, I've been a Writers of the Future non-published finalist — for year XVIII — and I'm a first place winner for year XIX — that's this summer's book. I'll also become Campbell-eligible this year, with a sale to *Realms of Fantasy* (two actually) scheduled to appear, along with the *Writers of the Future* appearance. My first pro story, "The Courtesy of Guests," won the Best of Soft Science

Fiction prize in 2001. Also, I have a collection coming out this summer with Hugo-nominated artist Frank Wu called *Greetings from Lake Wu*. Thirteen of my stories, thirteen of his paintings

My real accomplishments in writing are my sales, which means I have an opportunity to reach readers, and the work with *Polyphony*.

MT: Is there a story about rum, lively conversation, a group of fellow writers, a bar booth, and a major convention you'd like to tell us?

JL: Apparently, lost in a stuporous alcoholic haze of some sort, I have been advised by counsel not to admit to actionable or libelous statements of any kind. Plus, there's so many bar booths at so many Cons...give me another hint!

MT: You were wearing a large Hawaiian shirt at the time...What's with that, anyway?

JL: Well, um, I'm large, so me and small Hawaiian shirts would be courting disaster of several types. More to the point, at every Con there's about a hundred guys who answer to my general physical description — "fat guy with a lot of hair and a goatee" — so it's an attempt at branding, and making me easier to find. The tie-dyed socks are usually a giveaway, too.

Bruce Taylor can pull off that ice cream suit and top hat look. Me, I'd look like Moby Dick in his rig.

MT: Well, back to the sober portion of the interview. The first *Polyphony* anthology received some very impressive reviews. How did you get involved with the project?

JL: Inside job, I'm telling you. One of my workshops meets in Eugene, Oregon, every Tuesday night. I live in Portland. That's a 110 mile trip each way. Deborah Layne and I carpool most of



the time, so when she began laying out her dream to edit a magazine (the idea of which eventually became the *Polyphony* anthology) I was there at the beginning, working my way into her plans — sort of an editorial version of Grima Wormtongue. What else are you going to do for two hours down, two hours back, every Tuesday?

MT: So basically you rode in on someone else's coattails. That explains so much....

JL: Story of my life. There's this special train called "The Coattail Express," and if you get on it, people give you money and stuff. Oh, wait, if I tell you that, I have to cut off your head and put it in a safe. Never mind.

MT: There have been a lot of opinions expressed in the last year or so about the so-called 'new wave' of writers and publications in the speculative fiction world. Do you think that something different is really in the air, or might it be that those involved in genre writing tend to look for trends that aren't necessarily there?

JL: Well, yeah, I've found myself in the middle of one or two of those discussions, and mentioned in one or two more. Both Rich Horton and Jed Hartman have publicly expressed opinions about this.

I think there's two or three things going on that need to be distinguished. First of all, this trend has been associated with writers who are "new" writers in the sense that they haven't been around as long as Harlan Ellison, like Kelly Link, Jeffrey Ford and Jeff VanderMeer. It has also been associated with "new" writers in the sense of people with publication histories that only began since the late 1990's, like Tim Pratt, Christopher Rowe, Greg Van Eekhout, and me. (Apologies to all the fine writers, many of them my friends, whom I should have just mentioned but didn't.)

Finally, there's a publishing niche filled by the British anthology *Angel Body*, the recent *Conjunctions* issue on fabulism, *Polyphony*, *Starlight* (to some degree)

and *Leviathan*, the aircraft carrier of this current incarnation of this trend. Online and print zines such as *Ideomancer*, *Strange Horizons* and *Say...* also fall under this rubric.

All that being said, ain't nobody in that pool of people and publishers who would say they're not writing, publishing or promoting good fiction. That's the goal. There's Harlan Ellison and Roger Zelazny stories almost as old as I am that clearly fit this niche — nothing "new" about it.

Maybe one way to talk about it is as literary fiction within the speculative fiction genre. I think the difference is pretty simple. In speculative fiction — science fiction, fantasy, horror, and all that slipstreamy stuff that slides in between — the author must work to make the central conceits of the story and world function for the reader. In literary fiction, the author must work to make the central conceits of the character and theme function for the reader. This 'new wave,' or 'new new wave,' or maybe 'new new new wave,' is really the same old wave, a fusion of speculative and mainstream traditions.

Of course, *Polyphony's* very existence is a comment on the opinion shared by Deborah Layne and myself on the availability of such fiction. (Watch how much trouble I get into for that one...)

MT: So, it's a pretty deep subject for many. Speaking of deep subjects, Rene Descartes or Jean Paul Sartre: Who would win in a no-holds-barred, steel cage death match?

JL: "I think therefore I mean nothing. "Descartes comes out scrambling, brandishing his proof of the existence of God. Holy heck, look at the coordination on that man! Sartre is stumbling a little, like he wants to find an exit. Will you look at that smackdown? Sartre's hands are dirty now! But Descartes with that rare maneuver, "before the horse," and Sartre's down! It looks like reasoned faith is going to triumph over existential despair, but...wait! Sartre's making a heroic effort not to believe in Descartes! Descartes is reeling. If this were a tag-



team, he could bring in his old buddy Pascal, always a sure bet, but no, good old Jean-Paul's got him in a headlock. He's whispering something to Descartes. And the match is over! Descartes has vanished from the cage! Sartre, in this moment of triumph, well, he just looks depressed.

MT: The wrestling world just hasn't been the same since we lost Schopenhauer....

JL: Now *there* was a showman. He could whip Kant's ass with the thing-in-itself, and Nietzsche wouldn't have been half the eye-gouger he was without old Arthur. A man who really knew the meaning of the word "pain."

MT: Between your writing, editing, and review work, you've had a good chance to see a lot of the work that's coming out in the field. Are there any particular newer writers that you especially enjoy reading, or that seem to have a good chance of a career in writing ahead of them?

JL: New, newer, newest. As I said before, the field sometimes defines "new" writers as writers of the last ten years or so. Recently arrived major writers I am completely enthralled with include Ted Chiang, Andy Duncan, Jeffrey Ford, Jeff VanderMeer and Ray Vukceovich.

Truly new writers, those with a good chance of a career ahead of them (and some publishing history to show for it) that I would call out include John Aegard, Ken Brady, David Moles, Tim Pratt, Chris Rowe, Ken Scholes, Heather Shaw, Greg Van Eekhout, Carrie Vaughn, Robert Wexler...anyone in the Rat Bastards, for that matter. There's a powerful new generation out there and its only growing.

Finally, one thing Deborah Layne and I try to do in the *Polyphony* series is publish a first story in each volume. In *Polyphony 1*, those first stories were from Victoria Garcia and Vandana Singh. In *Polyphony 2*, those first stories were from Brendan Day and Honna Swenson. In *Polyphony 3*, we'll feature Celia Marsh. These are the newest of writers in whom

we've seen something special.

MT: You no longer live in Texas, but Caldwell County has played a part in many of your stories. Do you use personal detail extensively in your writing, or is this more of an exception than the rule?

JL: No, my use of personal detail is extensive. Most of my stories have a strong autobiographical component to them. I think this must be true of all writers, because we write from our own experiences. Personal detail provides so much more texture than imagination.

I didn't really start writing about Caldwell County until after I moved from Texas to Oregon. It's as if the lens of memory needed to be interposed before I could make fictive sense of it. There's whole parts of my life that haven't come into play in my fiction yet...both absurd and tragic. Happily, the absurd has generally outweighed the tragic.

The other way real life intrudes is on-the-spot. I write at least one short story a week, for several reasons. It's a creative commitment that keeps me focused, it's a good exercise, and enough of them are worthwhile that I can keep my submission inventory well-stocked. (I highly recommend this to anyone aspiring to be a professional, published writer.)

This week I've been staying in a cabin in Colorado, in the Wet Valley between the Sangre de Cristo and Wet Mountain ranges. Ponderosa pines, prairie below me, a visit to a wolf sanctuary among other things. Last night I sat down and wrote a story for a symmetrina I'm doing in collaboration with Bruce Holland Rogers, and lo! The story wanted to be set in a forest, and there were wolves in it.

Funny about that. Programmers used to say GIGO, garbage in, garbage out. For a writer it's WIWO, world in, world out. In my case, some of the world lurks for years, or even decades, before re-emerging, while some of the world passes from eye to keyboard faster than beans through a baby.

MT: "In Defeat Of Transcendent Epiphany" featured Ship, a setting that



almost serves as a character in the story. From what I understand, Ship is featured in other stories as well. What's the genesis of this strange vehicle?

JL: Weird obsessions on my part. I have several of them. Ship is one. Ship also appears in "Fat Jack and the Spider Clown," which will be in *Black Gate* later this year, as well as "On the Dangers of Heeding the Tarot," a story of mine which won the Amateur Short Fiction contest at WorldCon back in 1997. There's several others out there in submission for circulation.

Yes, I have been thinking about Ship for a while. Ship is infinitely large, on an endless voyage between the stars, and contains within Her manifold holds a profusion of societies delimited in various and sundry ways — morally, materially, ecologically. The most immediate influences on the idea are Jack Chalker's *Well of Souls* series and Gene Wolfe's *Urth of the New Sun*. Lots of other stuff in there too, from *Silent Running* to the whole bookshelf of apocalyptic SF. (Or maybe that's a bookstore's worth by now.)

What's important about Ship is that sometime in Her recent history, Crew withdrew from the functioning life of Ship's inhabitants. Maintenance has gone to hell, no one is providing direction or available for arbitration and problem-solving, and so forth. The little societies within Her holds are going bad. Draw your own conclusions about the Nietzschean metaphors here, I just write 'em.

From a writerly perspective, I sometimes like working in tightly delimited worlds. Every Ship story is a little petri dish. Experiments both great and trivial can be run almost independently of outside reality, yet still in principle be dramatically compelling.

MT: Hey, you can't bring Nietzsche into this — no tag-team!

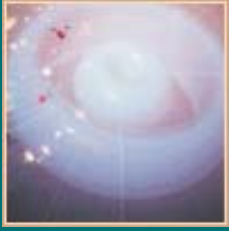
JL: Watch it, buddy, or you'll wake up with a Leibnizian monad in your bed. Which is illegal in seventeen states and most counties in Alabama.

MT: Describe the sum total of human

experience in twenty words or less.

JL: Terry Pratchett said it much better than I will ever be able to, in *Hogfather*. This is probably my favorite citation ever, from any author. To very slightly misquote him:

"Man is where the falling angel meets the rising ape."



"Ahriman,"
Port said,
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"There is
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The Passing of Guests

Jay Lake lives in Portland, Oregon with his family and their books, in sight of a 12,000 foot volcano. In addition to *Ideomancer*, in 2003 his stories will appear in a number of other markets including *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons* and *Writers of the Future XIX*, where he is a first place winner. Jay's joint collection with Frank Wu, *Greetings from Lake Wu*, will be released this summer by Wheatland Press.

Last year Jay had the opportunity to contribute to *Beyond the Last Star*, in the same series as *Bones of the World*, where his story "The Courtesy of Guests" had first appeared. It seemed logical to write a sequel. Port and Ahriman were characters that appealed to Jay, and they had been popular with readers. The theme of *Beyond the Last Star* was stories from the end of time, so it wasn't enough to continue the action of the first story. Jay took the theme literally, and with the help of an astronomer friend and a biologist friend, took Port and Ahriman all the way to the end of time, as best he could.

Hydrogen happened. The neighboring particle density doubled, then redoubled within seconds.

"Ahriman," Port said, interrupting a molecular-level simulation of oceanic behavior. It had been tweaking hurricanes at micro-erg energy levels for amusement. "There is hydrogen."

"What does that mean?" asked the electronic ghost of Port's first and oldest friend, cuing the conversation from its personality template. Ahriman's body rotted in a vat deep within Port's basalt keel.

"I have no idea. But it's the first spontaneous retrograde entropy in billennia."

"Something comes," Ahriman's ghost said with an inappropriate flash of insight. The template immediately initiated a self-diagnosis to correct the fault.

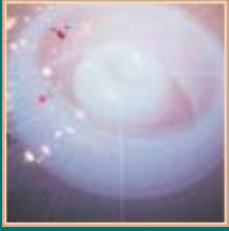
"What?" Port had long ago forgotten that most human of emotions, fear. "What comes?"

Ahriman's ghost was afraid. "Port," it said. "Something is wrong with me."

"No!" shouted Port. "Every time I restore you, you degrade further."

"Help," the ghost said. It slipped away from its interfaces, quantum handshakes with Port's systems dissolving like coastal fog on a billennia-vanished summer morning.

Ahriman's clone-worm stirred in its vat. Subtle errors across millions of generations



of replication had reduced the ghost's body to a loose bag of lipids with calcium concentrations. Monitoring subroutines escalated queries to Port's consciousness.

Mourning its friend's ghost, Port allowed itself to be distracted by the emergent hydrogen. Fresh photons were emitted, in sprays of a few thousand at a time, but even that meager lightshow was dazzling in the darkness of the end of the Universe.

Inside the vat, the worm contracted, amino acids dissolving and knitting back together as increasingly complex proteins. The bony lumps arranged themselves in a longitudinal pattern with bilateral symmetry. A flash of scales, a bright black eye, a clawed finger, all bubbled like stew in a cauldron.

"I am here," whispered Ahriman, after a while. "But where is here?"

His claws found a large bar just beneath the lid. He pushed. The lid popped off to a jangle of alarms.

Port was finally distracted from the lightshow.

"Where have you been?" Port spoke on every wavelength, every frequency, up and down the audio and video channels, on quantum loopbacks. "I have been so lonely."

"For the love of life," Ahriman said, picking goo out of his finger webbing, "settle down. I've been dead."

"But *where*?" Port howled.

Ahriman winced. "Dead. It's not a where. It's not anything at all. Dead just is."

"People don't un-die."

Ahriman flexed his osteomuscular linkages, running through basic shapeshifting exercises. He tasted the air with his tongue -- the atmosphere was brittle with the tang of a trillion of years of storage. "I did."

Port retreated to a more normal tone. "Oh, my friend. How did this happen?"

Ahriman surprised himself by saying, "God sent me." The answer felt right, the way breathing felt right.

Hydrogen continued to happen, at a prodigious rate, until a cloud of glowing gas enveloped Port. The cloud swirled like a boiling pot, agitated by the white fountain at its heart.

"Ahriman."

Pacing his tiny chamber deep in Port's basalt heart, Ahriman said, "Yes?" He had settled into the human form he had worn during the long millennia of his life with Port, back on Earth. He had been a cultural anthropologist, studying the history of the then-vanishing race of Man. Port had been a city, longing for and fearing its creators.

"Where is God?" Port asked.

"Everywhere."

"There is no everywhere, not any more. There's just here. Nowhere else."

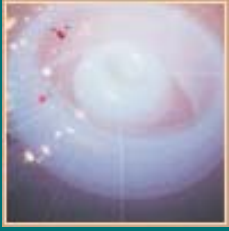
"That will be true soon," said Ahriman, "but not quite yet."

"Far-infrared says the last brown dwarf has vanished. How could something millions of light-years away suddenly disappear?"

"Perhaps it died millions of years ago, just in time to disappear from our view now."

"I cannot believe in such a coincidence."

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"Then you must believe that everywhere has become smaller," Ahriman said. "Is God here?"

Ahriman smiled, seeing in his mind's eye the white fountain boiling outside Port's basalt walls. "He comes closer all the time."

"Ahriman, are you God?"

"Just His message."

"He sent you to me."

Flicking goo from a deep skin fold, Ahriman sighed. "Not exactly."

The cloud enveloping Port warmed to six degrees Kelvin, dangerous heat for Port's vacuum-degraded infrastructure. Port moved away, warping the cold, dead superstringlines underpinning spacetime. It was virtually free transportation, albeit slow, leaching only a minute amount of the energy Port converted from its finite supply of mass.

Port soon found itself orbiting the boiling cloud, a tiny planet around a peculiar nebula. Bits of frozen gas trapped in the crevices of Port's eroded surface infrastructure sublimated under the radiant energy of the cloud, sending free oxygen and nitrogen into space for the first time in hundreds of billions of years. Meanwhile, the roil of the cloud stabilized into a measurable spin state.

"The cloud appears to be condensing the remaining matter and energy in the Universe," Port announced. "It could have happened anywhere, but it happens here. The odds against this occurring in my proximity are incalculably small."

"So were the odds of me coming back from the dead," said Ahriman, "but here we are together again, at the end of everything."

"You said God did it."

"What is God but all the long odds that have ever been beaten?"

Port objected. "God or no God, there is no mechanism that could draw the Universe's matter and energy back together, even if simultaneity held any meaning."

Ahriman laughed again. "In these late years everything is simultaneous. These are just the last, longest odds He will play."

"You imply that through its own sheer improbability the Universe should never have existed."

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Ahriman quoted. "Think of all the Universes that failed to exist, missing their odds. We are guests of chance, Port, privileged to witness God's ultimate wager."

"I fear we shall not last that long. This white fountain grows at a pace that will soon overwhelm even my best maneuvers," said Port.

"As you said, all the matter of the Universe is gathering in one place. It would hardly be a quiet event."

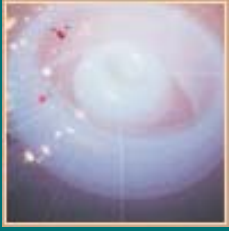
"How do you *know* that?"

Ahriman wasn't sure. He looked inside his mind and found conceptual maps of spacetime, built from the forty-two balancing equations that solved for the net mass-energy budget of the Universe. "God said so," he said. "I think."

"Exactly what is God saying?"

"I am the message, not the messenger," said Ahriman. "What God means is for you to determine."

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Port said,
interrupting a
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Port boiled with a panic not felt in billions of years, thoughts rolling in synch with the white fountain -- which had definitely become a star of sorts, though unmatched in Port's vast astronomical records. The edges of the Universe continued to be missing from Port's instrumentation. Port needed to fight the protostar, or flee.

Fight with what? Flee to where? Port accelerated, trading orbital proximity for speed to set up a potential slingshot departure into...nothing.

The surface of the protostar seethed with images. At first they seemed to be noisome fractals, which resolved to chains of regular patterns, dancing themselves into larger forms like self-replicating biochemical molecules. Larger shapes arose, round and flat, blocky and elegant, rough and smooth.

"It replays the history of the Universe, I think," whispered Port, "as it grows denser." Even the light flooding from the protostar seemed pregnant with meaning, freighted with the significance of all the lost depths of time.

"Repent, for the end is at hand," said Ahriman, watching the show on one of the walls of his basalt prison.

"Repent?"

"An old human saying, long before our time my friend. I picked it up from the leading edges of the electromagnetic broadcast bubble when I first studied humans."

"Them," said Port. "Meschia and Meschiane, the last humans we ever saw, who came to shut me down. Somehow they have sent you back."

"Man as God?"

"No. But Man transcended reality in some fashion I have never understood, not in the trillion years since my creators vanished from the cosmos. Are you their message?"

"I am God's message."

"Is God the protostar?"

"I was here before that protostar," Ahriman pointed out.

"With it, not before it. And we will both end with it, as the protostar grows faster than I can escape. I can only radiate so much heat."

"Soon, Port, soon." Ahriman stroked the basalt walls the way he once caressed the ceramic tiles of Port's Earthly streets.

Port shivered, tumbling slightly in its orbit. "Gravitational waves from a disturbance in the protostar."

"Watch," said Ahriman.

On a timescale Port could no longer measure for lack of external referents, the protostar collapsed even as its density grew. Port pulled itself outward to avoid the tidal stresses of the expanding Roche limit.

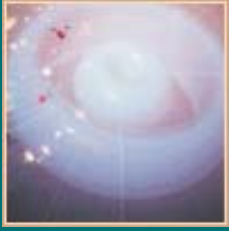
The light was dying. Nothing was left in the observable Universe but Port and the protostar, now glowing with a dim and fitful spite. Port didn't orbit through anything that could be considered normal space.

Neither was the protostar normal matter anymore. "It seems to have become a giant...quark?" Port couldn't begin to measure the quark's diameter -- it seemed impossible to correlate with the size of Port's own basalt keel, the only available yardstick.

"Ylem," said Ahriman with satisfaction. "Undifferentiated matter. The ultimate predecessor -- and successor -- to all the matter and energy in the Universe."

"Almost all. We're still here."

*"Ahriman,"
Port said,
interrupting a
molecular-level
simulation of
oceanic
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hurricanes at
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"There is
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"Precisely God's point."

"How's that?" asked Port.

"We're here, together. Because you survived everything. Literally. Beating all odds."

"You didn't survive. You died."

"But you needed me. You've mourned me across the billennia, and finally, here I am for you. Again, beating all odds."

Port stared at the ylem, which still had that faint glowering sheen. Temperature in their little surviving pocket of the Universe had dropped back to a fractional point above absolute zero. "I loved you in another age of the Universe," said Port, "for you saved my life and set me on this long course. But that shouldn't be enough to bring you back."

"Would you follow Man into transcendence?"

"I..." Port could not answer. No fates were left except the ylem. Port realized its substance was already joining that ultimate end, that the ylem's faint sheen came from a growing stream of particles sublimating from Port's basalt keel and long-ruined surface structures, showering into the ylem in suicidal dives.

Ahriman traced equations on the basalt wall, then tapped the place where his finger had laid out the first. "I can show you how to open the way. You can return to them."

Port tried to imagine life on the other side of the veil of transcendence. Would its human masters welcome it after all this time. What would that mean, that life? What was paradise to a machine like Port? Unlimited energy. Purpose. Potential. Perhaps it took a soul to imagine salvation -- electromechanical houris dancing attendance on endlessly recreated avatars seemed a hollow dream.

"Or I can orbit here," said Port, "and monitor the ylem until I erode away."

Ahriman tapped the second equation. "Which will restore the ylem to its original state, satisfying the equations. Then the game is over. All odds paid off, the betting window closed."

"God does not play dice," quoted Port.

"We are but guests in His Universe," said Ahriman, "coming to death along with our host."

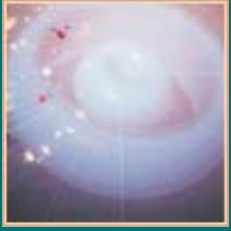
More of Port's substance eroded, making a delicate lace of its outer shell, opening tunnels into its body. Port's seat of reason, its computation cores, would be endangered soon, as would Ahriman's chamber. If the power converters did not go first.

"Your life, your choice," Ahriman said.

"I would not take you with me into death, and somehow I doubt you could attain even whatever transcendence is available to me." Port tried again. "Is there anything else?"

"A third way," said Ahriman, pointing to where he had traced the last equation. "You can ignite the ylem and make a new Universe. A sufficiently chaotic impact will destabilize the ylem, introducing the density variances required for eventual differentiation of matter and energy. Together we can give up transcendence to be the lightbringers, this time."

Port considered its life of service, and the astronomically longer life of independence that had followed. Port had played god in the lives of younger races, failures that still haunted it, then roamed the decaying Universe. It had collected data, by the petabyte. But had it learned truth? "After surviving these billions of years, I have earned transcendence. What does God say?"



Ahriman had no reply. Port would have to choose soon. The ylem continued to eat Port's density.

"Transcendence without the Universe behind it has to be a quiet sort of hell," Port continued. "There would be nothing against which to measure bliss. As you said, we are only guests of God in this place."

Port read the three equations Ahriman had traced on the wall, and chose one. Port then reeled in the very few remaining superstringlines inside the tiny allotment of spacetime that still survived, displacing its angular momentum to spiral inward.

"Together we will make a better light," Port said. It accelerated into the ylem trailing the tattered remnants of spacetime behind like a skein to disrupt the ylem's unstable equilibrium.

"Even God must talk to Himself," Ahriman whispered proudly. "Sometimes He also listens."

Port and Ahriman knew everything, for a moment, before they became everything new.

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interrupting a
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"When Claire, at six-years-old, stuffed the dog collar into the pocket of her overalls, she didn't know that she was stealing anything."

The Shift Manager

Spencer Allen lives in the Midwest with his dog, his wife and her pregnant belly. He has sold to various small-press and professional markets, including *Fangoria (Frightful Fiction)*, *Gothic.Net*, *Flesh and Blood*, and *Space and Time*. Spencer loves to meet fans of his work — in fact, introduce yourself now...he's behind those bushes outside your window.

Having worked as a grocery store shift manager himself, once upon a time, Spencer thought of this story while pondering how someone who has devoted his life to the fluorescent glow and soulless Musak of a grocery store could be anything other than supernatural.

The sickening mix of high-menthol cigarettes and petroleum jelly finds Claire even before she strolls into aisle eight. She almost abandons her cart next to the coffee and escapes back into the biting December evening. "This is silly," she whispers. Realizing she is thinking aloud, Claire forces a smile on her thin lips to excuse herself from anyone that might have overheard. *I'm a grown woman*, she thinks. *That was twenty-two years ago*.

Instead Claire pushes out of aisle seven, stopping only to grab a jar of catsup from a display on the end.

And there he is.

When the catsup shatters on the linoleum floor, the woman behind Claire grunts because now she will have to take the long way around to avoid the mess. A young man from the meat department rushes over with a dust pan and paper towels.

"Ma'am," the butcher has to say twice before Claire breaks from her daze. "Can you move forward for me? You'll step in it back here." He politely urges her into the aisle — toward the shift manager — as he stoops to scrap the mess, blocking her easy exit.

It can't possibly be him, not after so many years. So many miles from where she had lived when she was six. Then he turns to face her, the wrinkles of his owl-like face pulled into a frown. The organs in her stomach and chest clench and pound and freeze because she can see him, can smell him —

"You need a hand?" the owl-faced man calls over the cacophony of the shoppers.



His frown is vulgar.

— and can hear the grating baritone of his voice, bringing back emotions Claire thought she had left with her little girl nightmares back in Tennessee.

When Claire, at six-years-old, stuffed the dog collar into the pocket of her overalls, she didn't know that she was stealing anything. All she knew was that Gus, her slightly overweight terrier, breathed with a horrible wheezing sound when she took him for walks. Never mind the fact that Gus's little chipmunk of an owner didn't move fast enough, or that he choked so much because of a mad canine obsession to chase whatever had just skirted across the street or behind a house.

So Claire took a bigger collar from the pet supplies and stuffed it in her pocket as she skipped down the aisle to catch up with her dad.

Minutes after checkout, her red-faced father dragged her back into the store, found the shift manager in charge, and told Claire to confess what she had done, because, you see mister, my dog...

"Maybe we should sit down at one of these tables and talk, darling," the manager cut in, gesturing to a small break area near the bakery. Claire caught him throwing a wink at her dad, which made her feel fine, just A-OK, because Claire knew that nobody could stay mad at her very long.

Claire plopped in the seat that the owl-faced man had pulled out for her. He smelled like Dad's cigarettes, and a little like the slime Mom rubs on her chest when she has a bad cold.

Claire waved cutesy at her dad, who frowned at her from the magazine rack. This is serious business, his raised eyebrows said *wipe that Pollyanna grin off your face and show the man you're sorry*.

"Claire," the owl said. "I'm very happy that you came in and gave this back to me." He patted the collar, and Claire nodded, though she had become fascinated with a fake tooth that kept slipping loose in the front of his mouth. He used his tongue to push it back into place occasionally between sentences. "You have a little doggy at home?" His deep, hollow words smelled like coffee and tobacco.

Big nod. "Uh-huh, Gus. And he goes like this — hehk, hehk — when I walk him. I didn't mean to take the collar, but I was afraid for Gus."

The SHIFT MANAGER, which is what it said on the red nametag pinned to his green apron, smiled and nodded because maybe he had a dog that goes hehk, hehk too, and he knew how worried a little girl could get. Claire flashed her chipmunk brown eyes and then remembered to frown and look sorry for what she had done.

"You know what happens when people take things that don't belong to them, don't you?"

"Dad says you might call the police, and that I could spend the night in jail with the robbers, and to think of how sad Mom would be if I didn't come home for a couple days and only had bread and water to eat and a board to sleep on."

He smiled. Patted her hand.

Then an old couple, the only other occupants of the break area, finished their coffee, stood up, and tossed their empty Styrofoam cups into the trash, the old woman smiling at Claire. "You all have a ringer-hum-dinger day," the owl said to them, lifting carefree hand in their direction.

As he turned his attention back to her, the shift manager's smile transformed into a fire and brimstone sneer. This and the sudden darkness in his gray eyes made Claire

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look to her dad, who was glancing at his watch because they had to get home soon and start supper. He wouldn't have seen the manager's face from where he stood. Wouldn't have seen the way those owl eyebrows raised to a wicked, devil's arch.

"No, Claire-bear, when I catch a little girl stealing from my store, especially a lollipop-dew-drop little turd like yourself, I grab her arm," which he did, holding it fiercely in his skin-covered talons, "and I cut off her hand and mix it in with the hamburger."

Claire felt cold run through her body and suddenly couldn't breathe, wanted to hehk, hehk just like Gus.

Then the shift manager smiled and released his grip. Impatient to get home, her dad drifted over just in time to see this gentle old man, who probably didn't have it in his heart to be too stern with a little girl, stand up and pat Claire on the head.

"Lesson learned, young lady?" her dad asked.

"Oh, we had ourselves a ringer-hum-dinger little talk," the shift-manager said. "One more hardened criminal reformed and ready to start spreading smiles."

And now, twenty-two years later, he has come back because — *because Sarah was messing with things and I didn't*

"Watch where you're stepping, ma'am," the man from the meat department says, putting his hand on the small of her back.

The shift manager frowns at her and shakes his head from down the aisle.

Twenty-two years and his hair is the same mix of copper and silver threads, and those same owl eyes watch her because she is the little field mouse that might try to scurry away, but swoosh, snap, swoosh and the owl has a tail dangling from its beak.

Even at this distance she can see his tongue worm along the edges of his front teeth, feeling for that one much-too-white bastard that won't stay secure against his gum. He should be somewhere between seventy and dead by now. Should be crapping prunes at a retirement home back in Tennessee.

But he's come back because little Claire-bear didn't listen very well the first time.

"Come on, lady!" the butcher curses as Claire backs right over the mess, the cart and her shoes trailing pasty red. The lollipop-dew-drop little turd bumping into some fat guy, knocking against a tower of mayonnaise that almost falls because she thinks, silly girl — thinks that the shift manager has come back from the past, the grave probably — come for her hand to grind it up and sell for two-ninety-nine a pound during this red light special, folks.

And Claire is at the front of the store, stumbling away from her cart, which she can't believe she pushed this far anyway, and she hurries toward the automatic doors, which open to a night that is draining of daylight so quickly this deep in winter.

"Finding everything all right?" this pudgy high school kid asks her because she has stopped suddenly, aware that the shift manager's odor is strong here too. He has already slipped outside to wait by her car.

As if she hasn't heard the kid, because she hasn't really heard or seen anything in this frantic state, she finds the cart again and pushes it to the checkout lanes because here there are people. People with a thousand and ten coupons, perhaps, and seven screaming kids each. People who have to argue about the two cents in the price of every single goddamn thing, and then not have enough money in the end anyway. But there are people, and Claire is safe again. Can breathe again.



The girl behind the register doesn't smile or ask Claire how she is doing, but talks to a teenage Dana Carvey, who is tossing the groceries into bags. Sometimes the checker has to run something over the laser eye four, five times because she's so busy telling Dana Carvey that if her car doesn't get fixed by this weekend, maybe she'll hook a ride with him to the party. Claire doesn't mind. This girl can take all night to scan that can of creamed corn if she needs to.

"Know how much this is?" the girl asks. Smacks her gum a requisite three times before asking again.

"No, I...maybe it was in the ad, but I don't..."

"Fetch, Doug," she says, tossing the can to Dana Carvey, who disappears into the deep of the store. She scans a bit more efficiently now, her lazy arm sliding the bar codes over the crisscross of red lines, letting each item roll or tumble to the large pile of groceries accumulating with no bagger.

"My goodness," Claire hears behind her. "This is a ringer-hum-dinger of an order piling up here."

"Doug's on price check," the cashier mutters, but the shift manager has already slipped past a petrified Claire, taking Doug's place. He smiles at Claire and then begins politely bagging the items.

"Turning into a cruddy-duddy evening out there," the shift manager says. "That rain is turning into ice as soon as it hits. Streets'll be as slick as a buttered banana peel, my mother would say." He winks at her and throws in a friendly aside, "Though, for the life of me, I don't know why anyone would ever butter a banana peel."

"Three for a buck," Doug says, and the shift manager takes the can from his hand, stuffing it into a bag.

"I'll take this one, son. This lady is a dear friend of mine. You've let too many carts gather up out there in God's wrath. You know what happens to young men who don't bring in the carts?"

Doug throws him an annoyed look as he throws on a raincoat and heads out, punching out some rap song under his breath.

"He must not know what happens to boys who don't bring in the carts," the shift manager whispers to Claire, grabbing a quarter-pound package of beef. "But we know, don't we, Claire-bear?" He presses his thumb through the cellophane over her ground beef and drops it in the bag.

"Ninety-five-twenty-two, Ma'am," the checker tells her.

Claire, who doesn't understand why she hasn't run out screaming or fainted yet, just wants to scribble her check and then get out, get out, get the hell out of here. But her pen, which had been in her hand a moment ago, is gone.

"It's on the floor, dear," the manager says, taking a moment to push that tooth back into place. "You dropped it just a second ago when you turned all white."

The cashier just shrugs her eyebrows and smacks her gum, as if to say, "Don't ask me to explain the old creep."

"Of course you'll let me help you out with these," the shift manager says. "I'd be as happy as a Japanese jay bird to do it."

The gum-smacker messes up and begins punching the check in again. Has to ask for change because Claire wrote the check for ninety-five-fifty-two for some reason, but there are no dimes in her drawer. And Claire is just about to scream as the owl faced man's voice keeps drilling into her head.

"No...I mean, it's fine...I don't need the..."

"Amy, bring me some dimes."

"When Claire, at six-years-old, stuffed the dog collar into the pocket of her overalls, she didn't know that she was stealing anything."



"I'd hate to have you slip trying to load these bags."

"It's just thirty cents...."

"Wouldn't feel right if I didn't give you a hand."

"Amy!"

"Just keep the...excuse me but..."

Then Amy tosses a roll of dimes, which the checker opens like an egg against her register, handing three of them to Claire, who grabs the cart and jerks it away from the shift manager.

"You have a ringer-hum-dinger of a day," he calls after her, sending a rolling shiver down Claire's back as she hurries into the wind and pelting ice.

As she throws the bags into the back of her car, some mischievous devil in her mind tells her to glance back at the door because he is standing there. Smirking. Watching, with his sharp brown eyes, as the chipmunk girl scurries away.

That same mischievous devil makes her take notice of the crumpled passenger door and the makeshift cardboard window because Claire knows that this is the reason he has returned.

He knows about two weeks ago, when she stood at the nearly empty intersection, waiting for the police.

Amber and Sarah crouched next to the Honda, which belonged to the old lady. They had become fascinated with the tangle of metal and plastic where the headlight and bumper used to be.

"I had the green," the old woman muttered aloud, though this is mostly to herself as she pulled her coat tightly around her shriveled body and looked up at the traffic lights. The bitter air, with its flecks of sleet pinging against the skin, was too much for her eyes, and she lowered her head again.

"Well, I know what I saw," Claire said, exerting herself over the woman's unsure recollection. "But I don't know how long it's going to be for the police, so I'm taking my kids back into the car to wait. Too cold to stand here."

Claire's Escort has turned a complete one-eighty, finally stopping against the curb across the intersection. The old woman's vehicle hadn't been going too fast, just accelerating out of a stop. Any faster and Amber, who had been sitting against the crushed door, would have...

She couldn't bring herself to imagine this as she ushered her daughters back to the car. With the shattered window, the cold still crept in, but the wind was not so bad.

There had been no witnesses. Shouldn't have been anyone on the road with the weather the way it had turned out, but Claire had to run and pick up a prescription for herself and Sarah. Both had been running a fever since that morning.

"Honey," she said to Amber, "and Bunny," she patted Sarah's shin, "You girls sure you're all right." Both gave her big nods, Sarah scooting away from a gust of awful that just swam through the shattered glass. "Nothing hurts? Your head? No scratches?"

"Mommy, polli saucer." Sarah cried. *Police officer*, Claire realized, needing a second to translate this four-year-old language. Sarah pointed at the black and white car edging over the hill a block away. "Girls, I need you to listen carefully. If the police officer asks you any questions, you need to tell him the light was green for Mommy, OK?"

They nodded, though Sarah was too fascinated by the polli saucer, which was

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slowing to a careful stop, its red and blue lights brilliant within the bleached background.

Amber nodded too, but she didn't look at Claire as she did this. Shifted nervously, but still nodded.

"And don't tell him how Mommy was getting onto you about playing with the window, all right Sarah. You're not in trouble anymore, OK, but the police officer might get mad if he finds out."

Sarah always liked to brag, after getting in trouble, that she would never, ever do it again because Jesus is watching. Claire was not sure her warning would work, but she knew who would get this ticket if the officer found out she taken her eyes off the road to yell at Sarah because the rear window just kept squeaking down and then up and then down and then up.

As she opened the door to greet the young officer, Claire told them to stay in the warm — Amber, watch your sister. But Sarah didn't want to miss talking to a real polli saucer, and she was out the back door before her older sister could stop her.

Though the officer seemed to believe Claire, he did, as it turned out, ask Sarah about the accident. The cute-as-a-button little girl seemed fascinated with him, and he couldn't resist talking to her.

"Didn't open window, polli saucer," Sarah said slowly, her eyebrows arched in sincerity.

"Mom had the green," Amber cut in. Her somber words, her refusal to look at her mother pushed the November cold right into Claire's gut. Because Amber knew — big girl, good as gold — that her mom had asked her to lie.

When she arrives home from the store, Claire carries the bags into the kitchen and shoves them onto the counter — just lets the groceries sit there a moment as she collapses into a dinette chair and lets loose what has been building since aisle eight.

It is an empty little house when the girls are not home. They are with Brad until the weekend, and things like the pages of homework cluttered on the refrigerator or Amber's collection of ceramic pigs along the top of the kitchen counters are throbbing reminders of their absence.

Finally Claire wipes the wet from under her eyes and begins to put the groceries away, pressing play on the answering machine as she passes. The first message is from Amber. "Mom, Cathy said our dance performance is January twenty-ninth." Amber finishes saying goodnight and Sarah pops on for a few seconds. "Amber dance tonight and..." Claire misses the rest of this as she scribbles down the performance date on her calendar.

"Six-forty-seven," the digital voice of the machine announces, and Claire realizes she has missed their call by fifteen minutes.

The next message is an unfamiliar girl's voice. "Ms. Richter, this is Terra from Fresh-Mart. It seems you may have left a bag of groceries behind, so if you...hold on, what?...no, it's just the answering machine..." Terra's voice is distant as she talks to someone else at the store. "Ms. Richter, one of our managers is heading home now and said he would run it by. Sorry about the hassle."

"Six-fifty-one."

She stands quickly, moving away from the patio door because her reflection looks, for a brief moment, like an owl-faced man peering through the glass. There is a

"When Claire, at six-years-old, stuffed the dog collar into the pocket of her overalls, she didn't know that she was stealing anything."



moment of light-headedness, and Claire is sure she will faint, but when this doesn't happen, she runs to the counter and finds a large knife in the cutlery drawer.

The aggressive winter evening has completely absorbed the afternoon, and the only light out her living room window is the pale cast of sickly white from a few streetlights.

Her instinct is to call 9-1-1, but what is the emergency? Excellent customer service?

Drawing the Venetian blinds closed, Claire pries them apart just a hair, enough for her to peer into the darkness. Movement to the right of her yard, and she nearly cuts her own hand out of fright. Deep breath. It is only the Bradford pear bending to the wind, but there is a pair of headlights slowing at the top of the hill, turning onto her street.

The car slows as it nears her house. It's him, she thinks, but the car continues past. Just cautious with the slick and poorly lit street. It is a silly tan bug anyway, not a car he would drive.

There are no more headlights at either end of the street and Claire considers that she just might have enough time to run downstairs to her car and be anywhere else when the shift manager comes for her.

Then she sees it. Already in her driveway. A large gray sedan has been waiting there as long as she has been at the window. A glowing orange insect darts inside the windshield. He is sitting there watching her.

Claire-bear. She imagines him whispering her name through the smoke rolling over those pale, chapped lips. *Little lollipop-dew-drop turd didn't listen. Stealing from that poor old lady by having your two chipmunk daughters lie to the cop. Stealing from her insurance and stealing from her wrinkled soul because she lies awake at night now, thinking that she almost killed your precious girls by running a red light, which was really green and you know it.*

The car door opens, throwing a soft yellow throughout the interior, and Claire drops her gap in the blinds and checks the deadbolt on the door. She has left the living room light off, and maybe he will think she isn't home after all.

Now, as Claire backs into the hall, she is convinced that the shift manager is really a vampire or a demon or a ghost.

Three quick knocks on the door and then her doorbell echoes through the house. As she clenches the knife, her knuckles turn white, and she crouches on the stairs to the basement, ready to run there if he breaks open the door or window.

Three more knocks, each one reverberating through her chest, but then the man outside the door calls out, and his voice is not deep and empty at all. "Hello," he calls again, and Claire edges back to the window, peering again through the blinds at the overweight man standing in front of her door. He is shaking his head, frustrated and ready to leave.

Turning on the porch light, Claire yells for him just to leave the groceries on the mat; she will come out and get them. And the overweight man does just that before shaking his head with frustration and shuffling back to his car.

She watches out the blinds as the sedan backs into the street. Certain the shift manager is standing outside, waiting for her, she is content to let the groceries sit by the door through the night.

Finally she dares to throw her door open long enough to snatch the bag. Throwing the deadbolt back into place, Claire rests against the door for a moment, catching her breath.

It isn't until she has tried to call the girls — busy — that she has calmed enough

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to begin doing something so normal as putting away the rest of the groceries. By then she is beginning to doubt it was the same man at the store after all. She still isn't used to living alone after the divorce, and her guilt from the accident is just playing with her mind.

Then she finds the blue dog collar hiding beneath a box of cereal and, with a hysterical scream, slaps the bag off the counter, and from it spills groceries over the orange and brown linoleum.

And from it spills Sarah's hand.

Only it isn't Sarah's hand, she realizes, but a gnarly piece of gingerroot, though Claire could have sworn that a moment ago she had seen her daughters pale little fingers, including the pink butterfly ring she always wears.

Then something in her subconscious emerges, telling her there was something in the phone message she hadn't heard the first time. "Oh, God no," she cries, pressing the play button on the answering machine again.

"Amber dance tonight," Sarah tells her, "and she ringa-dinga, he said."

Ringer-hum-dinger, he said. The shift manager had been at the dance class with them.

"Byemomloveyou," she says before hanging up.

Her desperate fingers fumble Brad's number three times before she is successful, but the number is busy. Brad is on the internet or has the phone off the hook because she tries again but it won't ring —

— ringer-hum-dinger —

— or the shift manager has already reached the house and cut the line.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod!" Throwing open the phone book, Claire thumbs madly through the pages.

The high school girl answers on the first ring. "Fresh Mart. Help you?"

"Tell him to leave them alone," Claire screams into the phone.

There is a moment of silence as the girl at the assistance desk tries to decide whether to yell back or hang up.

"They didn't want to do it," Claire continues. "I told them to lie, and they didn't want to make me mad."

She is yelling so loud she doesn't hear the girl telling someone near her about the lunatic that has just called in. Sounds high on something, she tells this person.

"Just hang up the phone," the shift manager's deep, hollow voice tells the girl.

"No, no, they didn't do it. I'm the one who stole from that old lady. Tell him it's all right now. He doesn't...doesn't have to...cut their hands...oh, oh God...I'm the one who stole." Her voice is trembling now, the words tripping over sobs. There is a soft click from the other line, but Claire doesn't notice this. She cannot hang up anyway because the phone is clamped between her shoulder and ear.

"Tell him I'm...I'm doing it...I'm...because it's my fault, not theirs." There is nothing left but a disconnect tone now. "He doesn't have to...please tell him to leave my little..."

Her right hand is hacking with the knife.

"Little girls...not *their* hands."

Her shoulder spasms with pain, and the phone drops with a wet smack on the linoleum floor. Outside, the wind picks up and the sleet pelts against the patio door. The weather will continue like this for most of the night.

"When Claire, at six-years-old, stuffed the dog collar into the pocket of her overalls, she didn't know that she was stealing anything."



Haunting Hattie

After almost 20 years of selling books in various independent bookstores in Hamburg, Germany, Dorothee Danzmann is now translating books in a tiny village high up on a mountain in mainland Greece, where in the future she will also be writing books, as soon as she has learned to cope with six feet of snow in winter and blazing heat in summer.

"Haunting Hattie" is her first published story and was inspired by the picture of an elderly gentleman, an old bridge in Hamburg and the dog of a homeless person all appearing at the same time in the authors mind, begging to be brought together in a slightly surrealist manner.

"Hattie nevertheless suffered subsequent nightmares, visions of herself walking like the Pied Piper next to a partially materialized grandfather."

These last few days Hattie has not been alone on her errands around town. As soon as she leaves the house, an elderly gentleman turns up to accompany her. Hattie thinks he must be a ghost. She knows the gentleman. She also knows — even if only from old, yellowed photographs — the dark suit he is wearing, the beat-up leather briefcase he carries tucked under his left arm. And she knows stories about the man more than enough. Hattie has the strong notion that for the last two weeks she has been followed around Hamburg by her maternal grandfather who has been dead these 40 years.

He is not always clearly visible. Some mornings only a dim outline floats alongside Hattie, perhaps that depends on the light. Or his moods? Not on Hattie's to be sure. She has tried banning the old gentleman from her view by mentally but quite sternly objecting to his being there, but to no avail. Just the opposite; his presence seems stronger the more she wants him to go. Since that became apparent, Hattie has tried to never look at the man. She also strictly forbids herself to question his presence or even think about him.

Which of course is impossible. More so because she cannot be exactly sure that she alone is able to see him, which makes things hard for Hattie who is by nature a shy person and easily embarrassed. Will the grandfather behave himself? She has little recollection of him; she was still quite young when he died. But she does remember Sunday afternoons at her grandparents', heated debates and roaring laughter, her grandfather always in the center of things. And now she is pretty certain



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to have noticed, out of the corners of her eyes, various moments of communication between the grandfather and other people. Vibrations only, hardly recognizable, but they make her nervous nevertheless.

There is, for example, the almost always slightly intoxicated young man, who together with his dog, lives on the old railway bridge that Hattie crosses daily on her way to work. He nods in greeting nowadays when she walks past him and Hattie is also smiled at by women of all ages when she is in the company of the grandfather. The blue-haired punk, who the other day followed her and the old man for several blocks after they all had been on the subway together may have done so by chance, but Hattie nevertheless suffered subsequent nightmares, visions of herself walking like the Pied Piper next to a partially materialized grandfather, trailed by suspicious looking individuals, meeting with one embarrassment after the other. She remembers her grandmother talking fondly of the dead man having made friends constantly with the most unlikely people, something Hattie has never really found desirable.

Hattie cannot deal with the presence of her grandfather at the present time. With him at her side she seems to be treading on ice that is way too thin. He is simply too much right now; he does not fit in with her life, which feels to her like a bundle of half blown balloons she is desperately holding on to. Just a month ago Hattie left her partner of long standing and moved out of the flat the two of them used to share. She now wants, on her own and without anyone bothering her, to reconstruct her life from the banalities of everyday chores: work, meals, the new apartment. She really and truly has no wish for anything out of the ordinary.

Because of her pursuer, Hattie does not dare leave her flat once she has returned from work in the evenings. She finds herself huddled into the armchair next to the telephone, clutching the receiver to her ear, reluctantly answering questions from her friends. Yes, the grandfather is floating rather than walking. He only joins her in the streets. He carries the briefcase she remembers from old photographs, and he seems to be flirting with all kinds of women. No, he does not try to approach her directly, he does not talk to her and he just appeared out of the blue. There is no special occasion, no anniversary. And she is quite certain she has not unconsciously asked for him. Hattie speaks very softly, and sometimes the friends find it hard to understand her. She freely admits that she fears the old man might cause embarrassment, that she is even embarrassed to talk about him much. And she does not want any of her friends to come over to keep her company.

The friends are worried, very interested and full of theories. They want to find out even the minutest detail. They phone each other up regarding the affair, they obtain all the relevant books and meet more than once for afternoon coffee and consultations. They assure Hattie she will not be left alone with the problem, that they are all quite open and willing to approach the topic. Much too open, feels Hattie, who has secretly been hoping the friends would find her slightly crazy, recommend a good therapist and send her off on a vacation. But obviously one is expected to take ghosts and forefathers seriously. The friends supply Hattie with a lot of advice on what to do and not do and she finds it hard to communicate her own desire, which is to simply get rid of the grandfather.

She is quite willing to admit that she would have enjoyed his visit had it happened at some other time. There have been quite a few periods in Hattie's life where she would have relished the company of the deceased, would have involved him in long conversations and, if possible, introduced him to her friends. After all, it is her good grandfather who has come for a visit, the one she is proud of, the one who was part



of resistance in Nazi Germany. Tales about this man's love for life, people and adventures are to this day told at family gatherings and Hattie has often wished to possess a bit of her grandfather's spirit. But all of this seems so far away right now, and Hattie is so bound up in her own life that she finds it quite impossible to be interested in the past.

The friends are now quite worried and also a bit disappointed. They have put forward so many excellent ideas. They all consider the grandfather's presence to be so meaningful. Why cannot Hattie accept that? What blocks have to be demolished here, what arguments can still be presented? They have become totally dedicated to the subject and explain eagerly how important it is to analyze the grandfather's visit in detail. Why has he come, why now, what significance does his coming bear for Hattie's life, for the world at large? Will there be messages for Hattie, for mankind? What a marvelous chance to unfold secret parts of family history, to clear up misunderstandings, to heal old wounds! One could even ask questions about the afterlife — how could Hattie wish to let such an opportunity pass?

Hattie in turn thinks the grandfather has just turned up out of a fancy. Perhaps he likes Hamburg. A message to mankind he would have long ago delivered, family secrets, if this had been his mission, at least mentioned. And she will certainly not bring up the afterlife with one who spent his life on earth as a firm atheist and never believed in it. No, she thinks he will just glide around town with her for a while and then be gone again, and what has that to do with her? Hattie is willing to openly disagree with her friends on the grandfather issue and she does so firmly but softly until in the end she realizes that she is left alone with her problem.

A new morning and again Hattie and the ghost march down to the subway, to be met by the punk lady they have met before. Green-haired now, but the same woman, the young lady purposefully climbs out of the train after the grandfather at Hattie's stop and they all leave the station together. Hattie, the grandfather and the punk then cross an old bridge over some railway tracks and turn into the quiet side-street where Hattie is using a tiny old shop as her office. At the corner of the street, not far from the bridge, leans the young homeless person, already no longer sober. He greets, as is his custom now; Hattie, the grandfather, the punk, all of them? A dog sitting next to him wags its tail.

On the steps leading down to the shop the grandfather dissolves, like every morning, and the young woman watches as Hattie unlocks the door and enters her office. She then lights a cigarette and settles down on the steps. Hattie locks the door from the inside and for a moment leans her head against it. Through the door's tiny window she can see one of her neighbors passing by, carrying some shopping and staring curiously at the green-haired smoker. In this part of town people don't smoke on doorsteps; nobody around has green hair either. Hattie sighs. She now has the punk lady to ignore as well as the grandfather.

Hattie is a translator and normally loves her work, the patient search for the right words, the satisfaction of a text successfully rendered into a shape that can be understood within another cultural context. Apart from anything else Hattie translates letters and one of her most faithful customers is Jens, a successful advertising agent who for the past three years has been carrying on a stormy love affair with a budding young politician in Dublin. Jens does not speak English, Brian does not speak German and neither makes an effort to learn. They see each other during the weekends that Jens spends in Dublin and in between visits there are literally kilos of letters, the translation of which rests solely in Hattie's hands.

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The two men are very strongly and eloquently in love with each other and, of course, many a misunderstanding arises because they can't talk. Hattie earns a pretty penny from the two. And while her almost daily sessions with Jens, drinking tea and chatting not only about Dublin, form a major part of her cherished everyday life, she has for some time also felt a rising impatience. Everything with these two men is always so important, Jens wants instant attention when he needs it, no matter what else might be on her mind or computer. Ever since the grandfather came she has found herself writing model letters in her head: Jens to Brian, Brian to Jens. Are the promises of love the two keep exchanging endlessly really as original and witty as they — and Hattie — have been thinking so far? Shouldn't there be more to her working life than helping two rather nice men remain lazy and skirt the issue of making a real commitment?

This morning the grandfather has disappeared. The green-haired lady is smoking on Hattie's doorstep, who knows what else the day might bring. Hattie decides that Jens will simply have to learn English or else find another translator. Three years is a long time. Hattie feels surprisingly glad about the decision and begins to think about the many opportunities this new slot of unoccupied time in almost every working day might offer her. She puts her kettle on and risks a quick look out of the window. The punk is no longer smoking on her own; an elderly lady with mauve hair and an old-fashioned smock has joined her. They take turns drinking something from the screwed off top of a thermos flask. Another one of Hattie's neighbors — carrying a bag of oranges fresh from the market — slowly passes and watches the two longingly, and somehow Hattie gets the feeling that even the young homeless person and his dog are not far away. She sighs again. And then the humor of it all catches up with her. Slowly a tiny warm spot takes root inside her, spreads out, rises and turns into a giggle. The more she has been locking herself in, wishing to be left alone, not wanting to hear or see anything except banalities, the more a strange and bizarre life has crept up around her. A rift of raucous laughter drifts in from where the ladies are drinking and smoking and suddenly Hattie wants to meet the smock-wearing woman who might even be her, Hattie's, neighbor. She also wants to wave to all the other ladies with their proper perms and nylon stockings, who seem to be forever shopping, forever staring. Before she can change her mind, Hattie opens the door. Both ladies look a bit guilty when she joins them but quickly recover and Hattie is offered a sip of hot chocolate with rum, which is what the two of them have been drinking. And, for the first time in she cannot remember how many years, Hattie spends a normal working day not at her desk.

A few hours later Hattie sets off for home. The neighbors have said goodbye and left, the punk as well. Jens has had his tea and left a bit downhearted. Hattie is in a splendid mood. She feels strangely refreshed. She might visit a friend or even watch a movie this evening! She is joined by her grandfather but does not mind at all. Quite peaceably, side by side, they approach the bridge where the young homeless man leans, a can of beer raised in greeting. The dog sitting next to him jumps up and looks expectantly. Hattie stops. "Be off now, will you?" she says bravely but not without love in her voice. Promptly the grandfather hoists himself up to a post in the railing, spreads his arms and in one graceful, dignified movement glides into the evening mist. With perhaps a bit too much pathos, Hattie thinks. Completely aghast the young homeless man bends over the railing to stare.

"That was my grandfather," Hattie proclaims and the man straightens himself up.

"You must be completely crazy!" he says, whistles to his dog and staggers off.

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Hattie senses someone tugging at her sleeve; the little green-haired one. "I have wanted to tell you all afternoon," she whispers. "I find you very attractive. May I accompany you a bit?"

Hattie is speechless.

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The Nightingale and the Rose



Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was known almost as much for his very public private life as for his writing. Remembered by genre fans primarily for his novel *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*, Oscar also managed to turn out some 'children's stories' filled with elements of the fantastical. As with most of his other work, though, Oscar could not help but subvert the field a little with his attention.

"The Nightingale and the Rose", published in 1888 in the collection *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*, seems to follow the rules of children's literature. Then things turn a little Wilde....

"His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow."

She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses," cried the young Student; "but in all my garden there is no red rose." From her nest in the holm-oak tree the Nightingale heard him, and she looked out through the leaves, and wondered.

"No red rose in all my garden!" he cried, and his beautiful eyes filled with tears. "Ah, on what little things does happiness depend! I have read all that the wise men have written, and all the secrets of philosophy are mine, yet for want of a red rose is my life made wretched."

"Here at last is a true lover," said the Nightingale. "Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night have I told his story to the stars, and now I see him. His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow."

"The Prince gives a ball to-morrow night," murmured the young Student, "and my love will be of the company. If I bring her a red rose she will dance with me till dawn. If I bring her a red rose, I shall hold her in my arms, and she will lean her head upon my shoulder, and her hand will be clasped in mine. But there is no red rose in my garden, so I shall sit lonely, and she will pass me by. She will have no heed of me, and my heart will break."

"Here indeed is the true lover," said the Nightingale. "What I sing of, he suffers — what is joy to me, to him is pain. Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more



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precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold."

"The musicians will sit in their gallery," said the young Student, "and play upon their stringed instruments, and my love will dance to the sound of the harp and the violin. She will dance so lightly that her feet will not touch the floor, and the courtiers in their gay dresses will throng round her. But with me she will not dance, for I have no red rose to give her"; and he flung himself down on the grass, and buried his face in his hands, and wept.

"Why is he weeping?" asked a little Green Lizard, as he ran past him with his tail in the air.

"Why, indeed?" said a Butterfly, who was fluttering about after a sunbeam.

"Why, indeed?" whispered a Daisy to his neighbour, in a soft, low voice.

"He is weeping for a red rose," said the Nightingale.

"For a red rose?" they cried; "how very ridiculous!" and the little Lizard, who was something of a cynic, laughed outright.

But the Nightingale understood the secret of the Student's sorrow, and she sat silent in the oak-tree, and thought about the mystery of Love.

Suddenly she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She passed through the grove like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed across the garden.

In the centre of the grass-plot was standing a beautiful Rose-tree, and when she saw it she flew over to it, and lit upon a spray.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are white," it answered; "as white as the foam of the sea, and whiter than the snow upon the mountain. But go to my brother who grows round the old sun-dial, and perhaps he will give you what you want."

So the Nightingale flew over to the Rose-tree that was growing round the old sun-dial.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are yellow," it answered; "as yellow as the hair of the mermaid who sits upon an amber throne, and yellower than the daffodil that blooms in the meadow before the mower comes with his scythe. But go to my brother who grows beneath the Student's window, and perhaps he will give you what you want."

So the Nightingale flew over to the Rose-tree that was growing beneath the Student's window.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are red," it answered, "as red as the feet of the dove, and redder than the great fans of coral that wave and wave in the ocean-cavern. But the winter has chilled my veins, and the frost has nipped my buds, and the storm has broken my branches, and I shall have no roses at all this year."

"One red rose is all I want," cried the Nightingale, "only one red rose! Is there no way by which I can get it?"

"There is away," answered the Tree; "but it is so terrible that I dare not tell it to you."

"Tell it to me," said the Nightingale, "I am not afraid."

"If you want a red rose," said the Tree, "you must build it out of music by moonlight,



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and stain it with your own heart's-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine."

"Death is a great price to pay for a red rose," cried the Nightingale, "and Life is very dear to all. It is pleasant to sit in the green wood, and to watch the Sun in his chariot of gold, and the Moon in her chariot of pearl. Sweet is the scent of the hawthorn, and sweet are the bluebells that hide in the valley, and the heather that blows on the hill. Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?"

So she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She swept over the garden like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed through the grove.

The young Student was still lying on the grass, where she had left him, and the tears were not yet dry in his beautiful eyes.

"Be happy," cried the Nightingale, "be happy; you shall have your red rose. I will build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with my own heart's-blood. All that I ask of you in return is that you will be a true lover, for Love is wiser than Philosophy, though she is wise, and mightier than Power, though he is mighty. Flame-coloured are his wings, and coloured like flame is his body. His lips are sweet as honey, and his breath is like frankincense."

The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books.

But the Oak-tree understood, and felt sad, for he was very fond of the little Nightingale who had built her nest in his branches.

"Sing me one last song," he whispered; "I shall feel very lonely when you are gone."

So the Nightingale sang to the Oak-tree, and her voice was like water bubbling from a silver jar.

When she had finished her song the Student got up, and pulled a note-book and a lead-pencil out of his pocket.

"She has form," he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove — "that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good." And he went into his room, and lay down on his little pallet-bed, and began to think of his love; and, after a time, he fell asleep.

And when the Moon shone in the heavens the Nightingale flew to the Rose-tree, and set her breast against the thorn. All night long she sang with her breast against the thorn, and the cold crystal Moon leaned down and listened. All night long she sang, and the thorn went deeper and deeper into her breast, and her life-blood ebbed away from her.

She sang first of the birth of love in the heart of a boy and a girl. And on the topmost spray of the Rose-tree there blossomed a marvellous rose, petal following petal, as song followed song. Pale was it, at first, as the mist that hangs over the river — pale as the feet of the morning, and silver as the wings of the dawn. As the shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver, as the shadow of a rose in a water-pool, so was the rose that blossomed on the topmost spray of the Tree.



"His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow."

But the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. "Press closer, little Nightingale," cried the Tree, "or the Day will come before the rose is finished."

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and louder and louder grew her song, for she sang of the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid.

And a delicate flush of pink came into the leaves of the rose, like the flush in the face of the bridegroom when he kisses the lips of the bride. But the thorn had not yet reached her heart, so the rose's heart remained white, for only a Nightingale's heart's-blood can crimson the heart of a rose.

And the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. "Press closer, little Nightingale," cried the Tree, "or the Day will come before the rose is finished."

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart, and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb.

And the marvellous rose became crimson, like the rose of the eastern sky. Crimson was the girdle of petals, and crimson as a ruby was the heart.

But the Nightingale's voice grew fainter, and her little wings began to beat, and a film came over her eyes. Fainter and fainter grew her song, and she felt something choking her in her throat.

Then she gave one last burst of music. The white Moon heard it, and she forgot the dawn, and lingered on in the sky. The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy, and opened its petals to the cold morning air. Echo bore it to her purple cavern in the hills, and woke the sleeping shepherds from their dreams. It floated through the reeds of the river, and they carried its message to the sea.

"Look, look!" cried the Tree, "the rose is finished now"; but the Nightingale made no answer, for she was lying dead in the long grass, with the thorn in her heart.

And at noon the Student opened his window and looked out. "Why, what a wonderful piece of luck!" he cried; "here is a red rose! I have never seen any rose like it in all my life. It is so beautiful that I am sure it has a long Latin name"; and he leaned down and plucked it.

Then he put on his hat, and ran up to the Professor's house with the rose in his hand.

The daughter of the Professor was sitting in the doorway winding blue silk on a reel, and her little dog was lying at her feet.

"You said that you would dance with me if I brought you a red rose," cried the Student. "Here is the reddest rose in all the world. You will wear it to-night next your heart, and as we dance together it will tell you how I love you."

But the girl frowned.

"I am afraid it will not go with my dress," she answered; "and, besides, the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers."

"Well, upon my word, you are very ungrateful," said the Student angrily; and he threw the rose into the street, where it fell into the gutter, and a cart-wheel went over it.

"Ungrateful!" said the girl. "I tell you what, you are very rude; and, after all, who are you? Only a Student. Why, I don't believe you have even got silver buckles to your shoes as the Chamberlain's nephew has"; and she got up from her chair and



went into the house.

"What a silly thing Love is," said the Student as he walked away. "It is not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything, and it is always telling one of things that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to Philosophy and study Metaphysics."

So he returned to his room and pulled out a great dusty book, and began to read.

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