

H.P. Lovecraft's

MAGAZINE
OF HORROR

BURIED
ALIVE

A TRIPPLICITY
OF TERROR

NEW STORIES BY

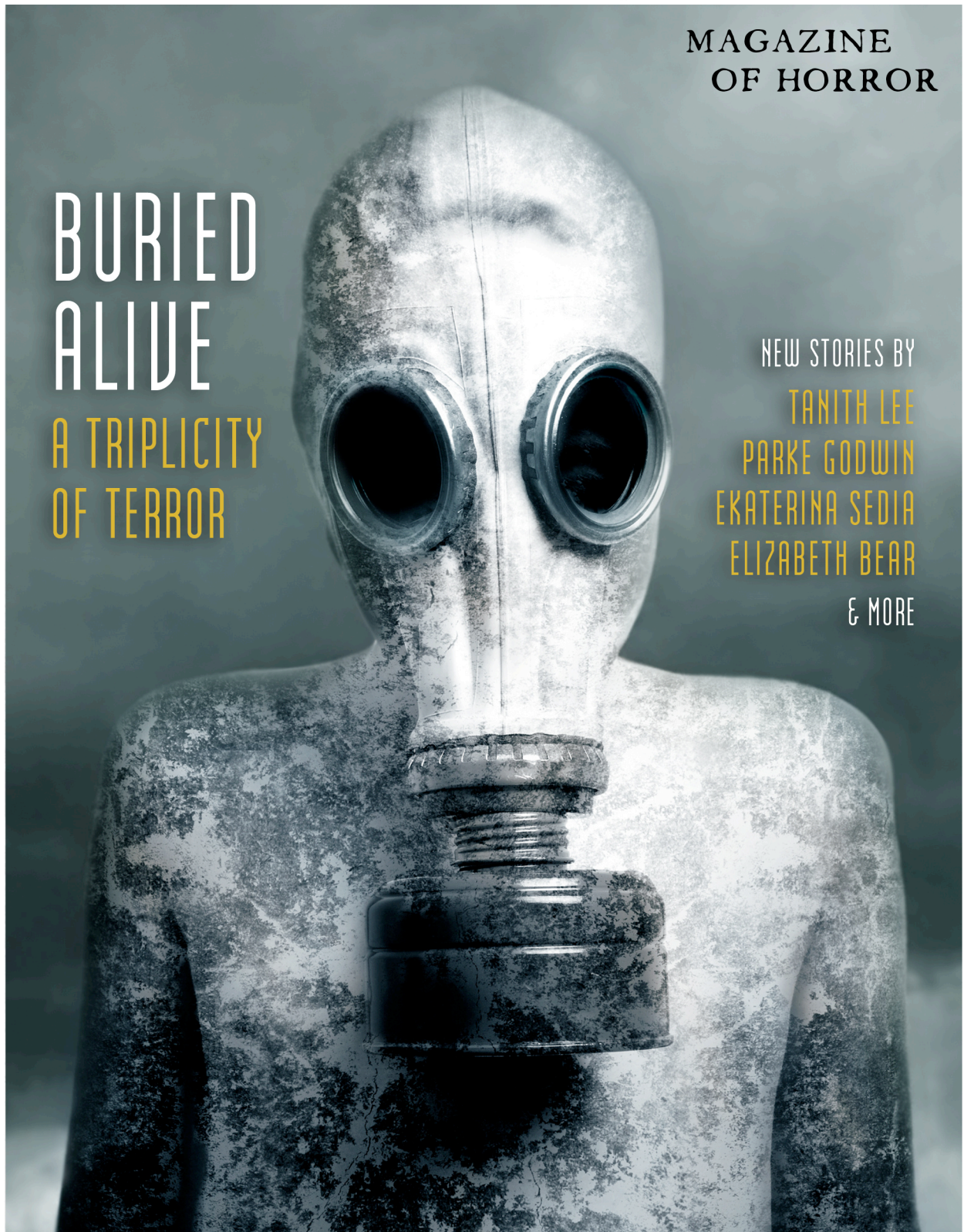
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PARKE GODWIN

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& MORE



SPRING 2009 / ISSUE NUMBER 5

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H.P. Lovecraft's

MAGAZINE OF HORROR

S P R I N G 2 0 0 9

ALL-FICTION SPECIAL

02 THE OUTSIDER

editorial by Marvin Kaye

04 A BIT OF LIFE

by Alexandra Honigsberg & David Honigsberg

12 CHERRYSTONES & SHARDS OF ICE

by Ekaterina Sedia

18 BAGS by Mike Allen

20 DESCANT by Terry Bramlett

24 THE THING'S THE PLAY by Andrew J. Wilson

32 GOING AFTER TIMMY by Parke Godwin

42 ICHTHYS by Arrin Dembo

51 BOXING DAY by Leah Bobet

52 OSTRACA by Jane Alice Kelly

58 CRYPTIC LIFE by Jill Baumann

60 THE PIPER'S CHAIR by Terry McGarry

66 FORMIDABLE TERRAIN by Elizabeth Bear

68 WITHIN YOUR SOUL I SIGHTLESS SEE

by Eugie Foster

74 THE MONSTER IN THE LIVING ROOM

by Marc Bilgrey

80 BETWEEN OURSELVES

by Tanith Lee & Rosemary Hawley Jarman



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THE OUTSIDER

editorial ✨ by Marvin Kaye

Buried Alive

I never knew I was claustrophobic. True, when I visited Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, I had to negotiate a cramped section of passage called Fat Man's Misery, where you have to edge round a tight curve with a roughly hemispheric chunk of rock pressing into your gut. I didn't like it... kept thinking about all that packed earth over my head... but I was not severely troubled, either, maybe because it didn't take long to get past.

But then I had my first MRI.

An actress I know who had one said she just ran lines for a one-woman show she was rehearsing; when they took her out of the tube, she was disappointed because she hadn't finished Act Two. Well, I had no such *savoir faire*. I thought the medical team would administer some sort of time-altering substance, but they said that would take time and suggested I do without. I foolishly agreed... and spent the next forty-two minutes worrying about power failures, fires and other natural disasters that might distract the technician supposed to get me out. I've had two more MRIs since then; the second freaked me out so much that, afterward, when I entered the huge central at Grand Central Station, my first thought was, "Ah, this is big enough," only to be immediately followed by, "Oh, no it isn't!" (The third one I had was an "open" one — less worse than the closed variety, but still not good.)

During each MRI, I promised myself that someday I would use these harrowing experiences in something I wrote. I haven't yet had the opportunity to do so, and other than Poe's "The Premature Burial," I can only bring to mind one other example, and that is the horrific sequence in Quentin Tarantino's film, *Kill Bill, Volume 2*, when the wronged protagonist is trapped in a coffin and buried alive. I'm sure there must be other examples, but I can't think of any more. Which is why I am pleased to feature two strong new short stories on the theme in this issue of *H. P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror*. The first, "Ichthys," is by one of our genre's important newer writers, Arrin Dembo, while "Ostraca" is by a non-genre writer, Jane Alice Kelly. (And an excellent short-short "flash" piece by Leah Bobet makes three!)

Other featured stories this issue include a new and moving fantasy from my old friend and erstwhile collaborator Parke Godwin; an unsettling nonpareil from Tanith Lee in collaboration with Rosemary Jarman; another tale by Andrew Wilson of the school for delinquent wizards that makes Hogwarts look tame by comparison; plus new fiction by Terry McGarry and others. ♪

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Wildside Press regrets to announce that the print edition of *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror* has been suspended indefinitely. Subscriptions have been taken over by the new and improved *Weird Tales*, which is full of Lovecraftian horrors and the very best eerie storytelling. More information is available online at www.WeirdTalesMagazine.com.

YOUR TOUR OF LOVECRAFT COUNTRY BEGINS HERE...

A wide-ranging and friendly journey through H.P. Lovecraft's tales of cosmic terror and wonder, the *Tour de Lovecraft* is the ideal companion to the work of the twentieth century's greatest American horrorist.

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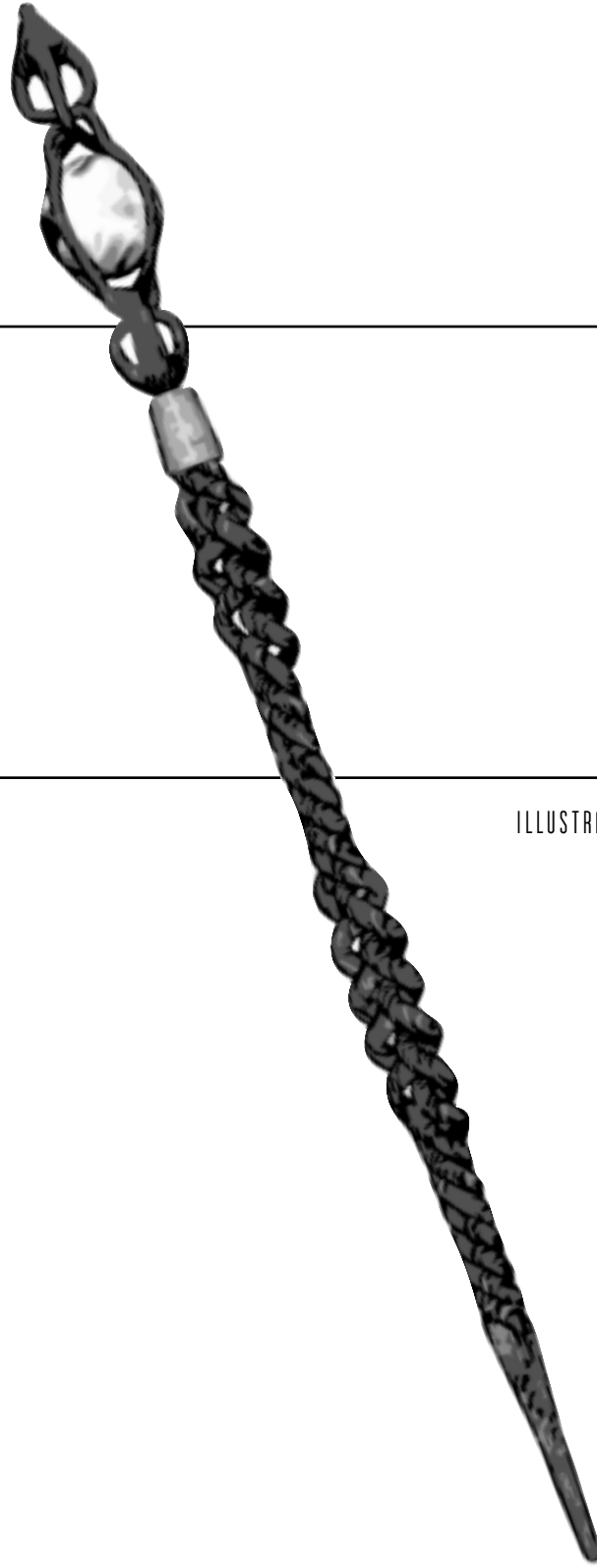


ILLUSTRATION BY OLIVER LENZ

EVEN THE MILDEST FAMILY
MIGHT HAVE SECRETS
LOCKED AWAY . . .

A Bit of Life

by Alexandra Elizabeth Honigsberg
& David M. Honigsberg

Damn shame—about Peters.” Donald Summers paused at the sound of a familiar voice and the shop’s door as it clicked shut, a bell tinkling with the motion. He looked up from his oaken rolltop full of newspapers, eyes narrowed. “Hello? And what was that about Peters?”

Stepping around a pair of Chinese lions into full view, his hands jammed into the pockets of his tweed sportcoat, Tom Jamison repeated, “I said that it was a shame, Donald.”

“Yes. I’d just read it in the morning papers—boating accident, it seems. Quite tragic.” Donald sighed and neatly folded the newspaper, then rose to tidy up some gentlemen’s accoutrements in one of the smaller display cases nearby. “I’ll miss him, of course, and not simply because he frequented the shop. I assume your firm will be trustees?”

The attorney nodded and walked across the plush carpet. He took a seat in a leather chair by Donald’s desk.

“I grow weary of loss,” Donald continued. “The past year or so has been particularly difficult. No less than seven of my faithful customers have met with . . . unfortunate ends. Leaves one to wonder.”

Jamison arched an eyebrow. "Overwork makes people careless, Donald. You're not known for keeping company with the ranks of underachievers, last time I checked."

Donald chuckled at the remark and Jamison went on.

"And what about you, man—time for a vacation, perhaps? Even though she's just out of school, I'm sure Julie's capable of dealing with the shop for a while."

The barest wisp of a smile remained upon Donald's lips, as if he'd heard some far off melody. The smile faded and he answered, "I would, were it not for some urgent business at hand."

"When isn't your business 'urgent,' Donald?" Jamison replied with a wry grin.

Donald ignored the good-natured gibe and polished a silver-handled razor. "I'm in the final, rather delicate, stages of negotiations for the resale of some estate items—those of the aforementioned clients—especially the walking sticks I'd sold them. I wouldn't want them to end up in the hands of somebody who couldn't appreciate the work and I'm not quite sure Julia's up to handling all of the fine points of this sort of diplomacy, despite her considerable business acumen."

"Well, at least when it comes to business, she is your daughter. Still, I know how it is—whenever I'm away, the hardest thing is to leave my cases to any of the junior attorneys, no matter how capable."

Jamison strolled about the shop, scanning the mementos scattered upon the walls: pictures and clippings from friends and clients, portraits of elegantly slender men who appeared to be Donald's ancestors, articles about his well-publicized philanthropic efforts or unique collections. Donald tracked him and watched as Jamison stopped before a nautical scene.

"That's odd," Jamison nodded towards the framed clipping. "Peters sailed, solo, around the world twice—if I'm reading this caption right—and in that transatlantic race three or four times. Unlikely for someone like him to make a rookie error, wouldn't you say?"

"Overwork taking its toll, as you pointed out. He overextended himself, with deadly results," came Donald's measured reply. "And Nature is a fickle mistress, after all—but not to speak ill of the dead."

"Indeed," Jamison said, glancing at his watch. "I need to run, but I'll come by later in the week with a few things that need your signature. We can finish then," he added, by way of good-bye, and walked towards the door.

Donald followed him, they shook hands, and the door tinkled shut with Jamison's departure. The shopkeeper kept watch at the window as the stout little figure made its way down the stairs to meet a bustling Madison Avenue at lunch hour and finally disappeared into the flow of humanity.

Inside, all was quiet, the traffic noises muffled by renovated window frames which held thick panes, some of stained glass. The muted, multicolored light had a life of its own, played and danced upon every visible surface about the shop. Donald stood alone, absorbed, surrounded by objets d'art—from Tiffany, to classic nudes, to Erté.

His reveries were broken when the front door opened again. A petite, attractive young woman stepped into the room,

momentarily obscured by the glare of unfiltered light.

Julia.

She crossed to him, a smile on her face, kissed him on the cheek. She set a Chanel shopping bag beside her desk and got to work.

"I hope that's not one of those skimpy little things I saw in *Women's Wear Daily*, the other day."

Julia gave him that *you're-so-old-fashioned-and-I'll-do-what-I-please* look and deflected the comment away from herself.

"How do you do it, Dad? You hardly look a day older than you do in that picture," she said, pointing to the wedding portrait. "And I just passed Tom Jamison on the street. What's up?"

"Touché, my dear. And you never miss a thing, do you? Always digging. But, to the point—he wanted to talk about Peters' death—seemed rather thoughtful about it, actually."

Julia shrugged. "Well, what do you expect after six years of my picking through all those dusty old archaeology books? Have to put that to some use. And, after all, death at sea isn't exactly routine, unless you're a boat person refugee, and you know how Tom loves a good mystery."

"Perhaps, yes," Donald muttered, almost to himself, his mind still on the larger task at hand. "Julia, I need to be in Montauk for a few days to talk to Peters' widow—about buying back that walking stick from the estate."

"I think I remember the one—with the compass inside of it?"

"The same."

"Must not've worked very well. But I still wish you'd sell it to me for my trips," Julia mused.

"He didn't have it with him this trip, but it worked just fine. And you know that your owning it is out of the question, Julia. Totally unsuitable," Donald snapped at his daughter.

Julia paused, held her father's direct gaze for a moment, then turned away, but not before he could note the brief flicker of defiance in his daughter's eyes and feel an equally brief pang of regret for his outburst. She'd probably bring it up again, later. Persistent.

Returning to his desk, Donald slipped a jeweller's loupe into his left eye and commenced examining some of the latest estate arrivals. In a calmer voice, he said, "I wonder if you would mind taking care of the shop for a few days while I'm gone?"

"Mind? After I and everyone else in creation've been nagging you to take a vacation for a year, now?" Julia answered.

Donald shot his daughter a glance calculated to wither, but her genuine concern for his well being softened him. "Very well. Then let's get through these trinkets before lunch, shall we?"

Julia's sternness dissolved into her familiar smile. She reminded him so much of her too long-dead mother, of too many things long dead—and of life, itself.

Donald drove his BMW up the entry ramp onto the westbound Sunrise Highway. The high-pitched whine of the turbo coupe's engine settled down to a steady hum as he sequenced through the shifts into overdrive and leveled off at cruising speed.

The meetings with Peters' widow had gone better than he could have hoped for. Another one of the walking sticks he had coveted was tucked safely inside its case and locked in the boot. He could feel its presence, like a long lost friend.

Donald recalled the first time he had seen that particular piece, at a meeting in London many years before. The night was clear, punctuated by the flicker of gas lamps amidst the green-black foliage of Russell Square. The soft clip, clop of the horses' hooves and their cabs coming and going along Great Russell Street could be heard through the open windows of the men's club across from the British Museum. On occasion, the roar of one of the new horseless carriages broke the peaceful quietude of the tree-lined street.

One of the guests was holding forth, punctuating his words with a walking stick.

"You see, I have held for some time that it is (*thump*) possible to command the laws of physics by sheer force of will (*thump*)—for those who can master the discipline. And that (*thump*) is what our Order of the Golden Dawn's about," he turned to Donald, "and why men like him might wish to join our ranks."

Donald waded in, "But in my own studies, I've found it easier to work when a focus is available, even an organized pattern."

"Oh, you're quite right about that, Summers," Mathers replied. He held out his walking stick towards Donald. Donald reached for it, but Mathers withdrew it, hastily, much to Donald's chagrin.

"Waite and Yeats," Mathers said and nodded in the direction of his other companions, "found this for me in a curio shop a fortnight ago. They say that there's more to it than meets the eye." In a soft voice he added, "Seems the previous owner swore up and down that it once belonged to a sorcerer."

Donald's eyes widened.

A sly grin crossed Mathers' lips. "This is of interest to you?"

"It might be," Donald replied, seeming to examine the contents of his brandy snifter. The light played will-o-the-wisp games through the faceted crystal, ignited phantoms that swam through the swirls of amber liquid as Donald balanced the glass between his palms. He looked up to engage Mathers' direct gaze over the crystal rim.

"Good. If you pop 'round my flat tomorrow, we can talk about it." With a smile, Mathers tipped his stick towards Donald, then spun on his heels and strode from the salon.

The memory of those chats brought a smile to Donald's face. His foot grew heavy on the gas pedal. He was eager to bring his precious cargo home, soon to rest in its proper position in the pattern.

"WHO'S Arthur Lawson?" Julia asked.

Donald slowly looked up from his endless paperwork. All seven of the most recently available walking sticks were finally in his possession. "Arthur Lawson?"

Julia nodded, lips pressed together. She held a massive, leather-bound tome in her arms.

"I'm sure I've mentioned him before. He's an ancestor of ours, lived during the eighteenth century—a distant cousin, as

I recall. Why do you ask?" Donald remained casual, but caught himself toying with the watch in his vest pocket.

"I was working in the vault—way in the back of the climate controlled section—rearranging some things. I found a box I'd never seen before and, when I opened it, discovered this." Julia hesitated, then continued. "At first, I wasn't sure that I'd seen it at all. It was very strange. But then I checked again and there it was." She put the book down in front of her father.

Donald didn't look at his daughter, preoccupied. He couldn't imagine how she'd gotten through the wards and other protections he'd placed on the piece since the day he'd first held it as his own. He reached for the book, running a finger over its cover, then paused and answered. "There have been others with my name, Julia. Besides, do I look old enough to have known Cousin Arthur, personally?"

Undeterred, Julia turned the book around and opened to a marked page. Turning it back to face Donald, she told him, "Read this. Very weird stuff."

He looked down and recognized some of his own markings. It took effort not to look away from the page as he recited, from memory, the decades-old words etched upon his mind. ". . . To the North is Uriel, Guardian of the Gate . . ."

Donald pulled back from the incantation and chuckled softly. "Julia, my dear, I think that Jamison has got you going with some of his conspiracy theories."

"Oh, maybe—all that FBI and UFO stuff. But what's all this about 'tapping trees' on the one page, or that intricate pattern on another? Gives me the creeps."

Donald saw an opening and took it. Despite all her education, natural smarts, and curiosity, he was certain that he could handle his own flesh and blood, as he had done before with others, though her questions persisted. "It's been rather hushed in the family lore of that era, but Lawson dabbled in a considerable amount of mumbojumbo that seems to have affected his mind. He was quite an embarrassment to the London aristocracy with which he'd once hobnobbed."

Julia seemed to lay the matter to rest, at least for the moment, though remained uneasy. His story matched the others he'd told her of the notoriously private lives led by the Summers clan. That had to be enough.

"He sounds like somebody whose company I'd've enjoyed, even if I wouldn't want to work with him," Julia quipped. "You'll have to tell me more, sometime."

DONALD closed the doors to the ancient wardrobe and settled into the silence of his sanctuary. He sat in a simple wooden chair, the book Julia had recently discovered open upon his lap.

He thumbed through the yellowed pages, reading a line here, a paragraph there. The light of candles burned all around him, moving, flowing, giving the words on the page an ethereal quality.

They stood upright against the wall, each in its own specially crafted stand—nineteen walking sticks of fine-grained and rare woods, each adorned with some precious bit of metal, a unique gem. Three other stands gaped, empty.

Donald turned to the back of the tome, looked over the

markings there, carefully took stock. His eyes gazed at, and then beyond, each wand-as-walking-stick and his expression changed with every new contact. He could feel his forehead tense and relax with the exertions.

He closed the book with a satisfied sigh and leaned back in the chair. "Almost there," he whispered to himself. "Three more pieces and the Tree will be whole."

Setting the book down upon the inlaid wood floor, Donald moved to a small bookcase in the corner, where he lifted a parchment scroll from the top shelf. His heels echoed on the warm, shiny surface with the precise click, click, click of a fine watch. He settled back into the chair and unrolled the scroll.

Donald breathed deeply, the incense from a thurible hanging in a stand near his chair filling his nostrils. His eyelids fluttered shut, heavy. With the next breath, he opened his eyes, drawn to the flame of one of the candles. Slowly, deliberately, he read the words which he had penned over one hundred years before:

*Teacher, student; victor, victim—hear me.
Partner parted—come to me, be with me, speak.
Out of the depths I call unto thee, blood of my blood,
Kin that was and is now in me.
Thou who wast Arthur Lawson, show thyself.*

As he finished the incantation, he placed a pinch of incense into the thurible. The coal flared with the contact for a moment, crackled red hot as the powdered resins burned on its surface. Smoke rose and hovered before him. Then, slowly, a face appeared in the haze—lean, angular, silver hair swept back from a regal forehead. It bore a strong resemblance to his own.

"Why have you dared disturb my rest, Cousin?"

"I just thought it was time you and I had a chat," Donald answered evenly.

The face of Arthur Lawson sneered through the smoke. "Oh, come now, Donald. Do you expect me to believe that you've gone through this considerable effort that we might have tea again, for old time's sake? I'd thought poison to be beneath my best student. Careless of me, that."

Donald bristled, but continued. "I did what had to be done and now we need to discuss one last bit of business before I can complete our work."

The cloud vibrated with Lawson's wry chuckle. "Our work? It was my work—death has not granted me the luxury of forgetfulness, Donald—but I'd have shared it all with you. The last piece would have been yours, as well. Eternity's too vast to have spent it alone. Mortals would come and go, turn to dust, and not understand."

The mage stood and drew closer to the spectre he had conjured, the old connection pulling him in. But he would not be swayed.

"I have my daughter. For now, that is enough."

Lawson's voice sounded impatient. "Your daughter, Donald? Didn't you learn anything from my . . . personal follies? Blood cannot be fooled forever. It knows."

Donald shook his head. "Julia's not like us," he insisted. "Her mother was delicate, charming, a protector of life, and

utterly unversed in the arcane. I can manage Julia. She's no threat to me or the work."

The image seemed to look away, up. There was a long pause before he next spoke. Donald found himself holding his breath.

"Yet she is her father's daughter," Lawson informed him. "Even now her signature aura vibrates in the rooms above us—not even oblivion has made me numb, after all—and it is almost identical to yours. Have you denied it for so long that the obvious hides in plain sight before you?"

"That's how she passed my wards," the words escaped the mage's lips. He cut off the next fearful thought before he could articulate it, his eyes never leaving the phantom Lawson. Donald began to weave a pattern in the air before him, his motions sure, feline.

"Banishing me so soon, Donald? That won't undo what's been done. The Wheel turns, with or without us."

Donald never missed a beat. The smoke began to dissipate, grew dimmer with each pass.

"She stands in your way." Lawson's voice was softer now. "You've made two costly errors in your unnaturally long life—destroying me and living the illusion of a happy family, untouched by your past or present practices."

The mage glared at the visage in the smoke as he completed his spell. "You talk too much for a dead man, Arthur. I liked you better in life. At any rate, I will succeed. The Tree will come to life for me, feed me their lives. Then four-by-four-by-four hundred years will be mine, as it is written."

The image of Lawson vanished, but the scent of incense lingered long after he was gone.

"HAVE you considered that somebody's trying to frame you, Donald?" Jamison said over lunch at the Stanhope, the white stonework of the Metropolitan Museum and the greenery of Central Park filling their view across the street.

The antique dealer stopped, soup spoon level at his chin, and said, "Excuse me?"

"Look, Donald, you engage me to protect your assets. It's my job to be suspicious of everyone around you. The news about that breeder's being attacked by his own dogs, just after he'd won here at last year's Westminster, was all over the Times, along with the shot of him and his signature wolf's head cane. He was a client and that is one of your pieces, isn't it? And now Peters."

Donald nodded, set the spoon down beside his plate, and sat back.

Jamison took this as a cue to continue. "Have the police been by?"

"This morning. Nothing out of the ordinary. Purely routine. They seemed perfectly satisfied." He'd made sure of that, Donald reassured himself. Artful misdirection became easy after 200 years of practice, he mused. People believed what they wanted to believe.

"I'd like to make a suggestion, if I may, just to be on the safe side. Buy back the other sticks, whatever it takes, even if you have to play on your clients' superstitions—tell them that the items are cursed, or something. Anything. Diplomacy's your job, Donald. Just don't sell any more, at least for a while. Let things settle, blow over."

Donald leaned forward, hands clasped before him on the table, and smiled. "Ah, Jamison, my friend. Forever the faithful watch dog. You've certainly saved me from considerable . . . embarrassment in the past. I'm afraid I've been preoccupied since Peters' death. I'll get on it right away."

Three more bits of unpleasantness and the final branches of the Tree would be his, Donald thought, as he made his way across East 55th Street to the Friar's Club, in his hand his favourite cherry-finished walking stick with its concealed sword. There were no real men's clubs left, but this was as close to the old-style haunts as they got—gothic building with leaded, stained glass windows, burnished woods, brass fittings, fine upholstery. The walls veritably reverberated with the voices of old greats, living and deceased—Milton Berle, George Burns, Groucho Marx—ageless performers, timeless performances.

All around the bar, people—mostly men—indulged themselves and drank only the best: twenty-five-year-old single malts, thirty-year-old tawny ports, and the occasional Louis XIII cognac, all out of lead crystal. Even the smells spoke of another era—the spirits, smoke from fine pipe tobaccos, Dunhill cigarettes, and illicitly gotten Cuban cigars. It made Donald long for those bits of the old days. He realized he'd been away too long.

He found them there at the bar, three old chums from the vaudeville circuit. Between them, they had owned his canes for nearly seventy-five years. The gathered lives thrummed, made Donald's ears ring. Slowly, he coached himself. He had planned this last bit of his task for too long to hurry things now and misstep in the final turn.

"Mort, how are you?"

The man Donald addressed looked up, very spry for what must have been his ninety or more years. Donald had lost count. "You're late, boy. We don't see him for twenty years and he's late. Just like his grandfather, isn't he?" Mort gestured with his cane to his friends. The head was of an Egyptian design with wings, enameled brass. Donald reached out and stroked it, felt a spark. It was set. Mort retracted it with a grunt.

"Aw, be quiet," the man next to Mort said. "Bad luck to speak ill of the dead." He lifted the head of his cane to an old stogie and flicked the edge. A small flame sprang forth and lit the abomination till the smoke wreathed his head, then went out. Ernie hacked miserably.

"Must you, Ernie?" Donald coughed, pushed the cane aside.

Mort scolded, "You know the doc told you to quit."

"You'd deny an old hoover this simple pleasure?" Ernie shrugged.

Donald gave up. It would all be over, soon. He tried to stay calm, despite the sudden closeness of the room. He didn't like pushing things along one bit, but Jamison's jitters hadn't left him much choice. He no longer felt as if he could allow the magic to run its natural course over the owners. The canes had absorbed their years. Now it was time to cut the connection and reclaim them.

"And what about you, Will? Chess, perhaps? Grandfather



always enjoyed his games with you," Donald said to the quiet man among them.

With a wink, Will rose and ascended the spiral staircase, the other three men behind him. His cane made a solid clomp, clomp with each step. Once upstairs, they filled the small-but-sumptuous private room with their presences and closed the heavy wooden door behind them.

Donald and Will faced each other across a chess table set with onyx pieces. Ernie and Mort sat beside them, close, to better view the opening moves. It did not take long for Donald to reveal a Dragon Defense, his favourite. A fire burned in the small hearth between two window seats on the opposite wall. He made his move.

Will muttered something about "typical Summers' defense" under his breath. Donald changed the subject.

"I trust that the flask in your walking stick remains unbroken, because I have a little surprise for you, my friend."

Will smiled, "No damage to this baby. Not while it's in my hands."

"Well, this is a special brew and particularly potent, so don't touch it till you get home and are safely in bed," Donald said and produced a gentleman's hip flask—embossed silver, with his initials, carried in a silky, soft, cordovan leather pouch. Will unscrewed the head of his cane and withdrew a vial-sized glass flask which he uncorked to receive Donald's delicacy, then carefully replaced it.

Mort commented, "Your grandfather's flask, if I'm not mistaken, eh?"

"And Grandfather's recipe, as well," Donald replied. His words were met with a trio of conspiratorial nods.

"Best damned hooch in the county, it was," piped Ernie. He took another draw on his cigar.

They played for several hours. Donald was ruthless and held his liquor a sight better than his deteriorating compatriots were able to manage. Their cantankerous chess banter soon

turned to squabbling between the three old timers. Donald wanted to hold his ears against their racket, but their condition did bespeak that it was well time enough for him to make his exit, before things got difficult.

"I can't keep up with you three," Donald stretched his legs full out on the carpet, leaned back in the Chesterfield, and yawned. "I think I'll call it a night."

"Coward. Just when things were getting heated," snorted Ernie.

"I prefer cooler climes," said Donald, bowed to them, and walked out. He hurried down the stairs and out to the street. The air was brisk, cool. It kept his wits sharp. The short walk back to the shop would do him good, he thought. He was too keyed-up to immediately go home to an empty bed.

Shouts from above snapped Donald to attention. It was Mort. The man hung over the balcony two stories up, his cane in his hand. "What's gotten into you, boy?" he yelled down into the street. "You get here late and you leave early, before any of us can whomp you at the board!"

Mort finished with a drunken flourish. Donald's eyes widened. Everything happened in preternatural slow motion—Mort bending over the wrought iron railing like a sack, then upending and tumbling to the pavement before Donald's feet. The mage was too stunned to move. Mort looked up at him for a moment, shocked. The last of the air rattled from his lungs. He went still.

Normal time returned and Donald found his voice to add to the shrieks of others who'd been leaving the club and those of Will and Ernie, suddenly sobered, above. The mage steadied himself with his own cane, dizzied by the efficiency of the magic. The wand had done its job for him, after all. The holder of the winged cane had flown, if briefly.

In the tumult which followed, Donald harvested the cane, which had rolled into the gutter, and tucked it under his trenchcoat. Finally, he watched as the paramedics loaded Mort's body into the ambulance and sped away.

THERE was a light on in the shop. Donald entered and climbed the stairs, cautiously, still rattled by the rush of unexpected magic. He'd always been very careful to keep his distance from his victims when he'd felt their time coming, in the past. This was still a bit of a shock to him. He clutched his cane, ready to draw out its steel surprise. But when he opened the door, he found Julia and Jamison hunched over some documents at her desk. It looked like a college all-nighter.

Donald cleared his throat. Julia started, but Jamison just looked his way, forever casual.

"Jesus, Dad, what's happened? You look like hell."

Donald didn't have to do much to feign his unsettledness, at least. "Old Mort, drunk—fell off the balcony at the Friar's Club, right at my feet. Dead."

Julia fell silent. Jamison gave a long whistle.

"At least it was Grandfather, and not you, who sold him his walking stick—a rare Egyptian model, it says here," Julia said. "We've been doing some history of inventory, item class by item class. Don't want any more surprises leaping out at us from the vault or coming back to haunt us. The canes are fas-

cinating. And I'm wondering if they have anything to do with that book I found. Just a feeling that won't let go."

"And I'm here to see that you don't get any more visits from the police due to any suspicions based merely upon circumstantial evidence, Donald," said Jamison. "Keep it in the family, and all."

Donald mustered all his control after Julia's last comment—she has no proof!—and merely raised an eyebrow at Jamison.

"And if Tom didn't stop you from making some fatal mistake, you know I would, Dad."

A momentary look between Donald and his lawyer gave the mage cause to wonder just what Jamison, and Julia, meant. What were they thinking? But he pushed it aside, fatigued. Nothing big to worry about. It would all be over before they could dig too far, even if they got lucky with their hunches. He'd double the wards for the next few days, cover his bases, be even more discreet. That should set them off any scent they might believe they're on. Julia loved and respected him, though she seemed to have her own considerable mind more and more, lately. Jamison was a mortal, albeit a very shrewd one. The man was sharp, though he lacked Donald's vast life experience. It reminded him of that old saying about age and treachery winning out over youth and skill. That was a bit of comfort, at least for the night.

A package arrived at the shop several days later. Donald opened it to find notes from the widows of Ernie and Will. The former seemed to have succumbed to his cigar smoke, while Will died quietly in his sleep after a nightcap, reading. The inseparable friends had wanted Donald to have their canes right away on their demise, for his "grandfather's" sake.

Donald breathed a sigh of relief. It was over. The magics had worked subtly. Quiet deaths. No more questions, now, he hoped. All he had to do was his part. He need wait for no one, any longer. Yet he felt a near sadness at this—all his unknowing accomplices gone, never to recognize their essential contributions to his grand scheme, never to see it come to fruition.

The mage descended to his sanctuary, released the wards, and entered, resetting the wards behind him. It felt, somehow, different, like there was a new presence in the room with him, something vibrating at the edges of his perceptions, familiar, yet not. But the room had never contained all the branches of the Tree before, and he carried three in his arms, plus his regular piece. He couldn't really know what it would feel like, until now.

He walked to the empty stands, wombs to be filled, and placed each cane in its rightful place. He looked about the room, all the implements set and waiting for him. The space crackled with a faint static and Donald feared backlash if he did not set, charge, and tap the pattern very soon.

Donald lifted his white robe from its rack by the wardrobe and felt it, again, that odd-but-familiar presence. It made him want to hurry, this hint of unexpected energy spikes, but he took a deep breath and donned the robe, secured it about his waist with a sun-gold cincture. He dimmed the electric lights and then lit each candle at the room's quarters with the calls

that Julia had read in Lawson's book—Uriel's green, Raphael's blue, Michael's red, and Gabriel's yellow—then left the room to the candles' glow. He took a cobalt glass bowl filled with white sand and, from north to south, began to outline the pattern that was to become his Tree of Life. Twenty-two paths grew from the sand that ran through his fingers to the floor. It sparkled at his feet.

Once finished, he went to a table set with ten golden goblets and a matching pitcher. He took one in his hand and poured, filled it with a blood-red cabernet, then set it at the head of the pattern and spoke that point's name. Kether. He did likewise to the ends of each of the branches and certain cross points, adorning his nearly formed Tree with fruit that seemed to glow with each setting. Chochmah, Binah, he proceeded south, Chesed, Geburah, in pairs, right to left, Tiphareth, beauty at the heart, Netzach, Hod, and finally, the trunk, Yesod, and Malkuth, the base, the roots.

Sweat ran down the sides of Donald's face as the room pulsed with his sorcery. He found himself uncharacteristically short of breath.

Then, around the perimeter of the room, he faced each of the canes that had been his quest for two centuries and, one by one, he placed them between the sephiroth and they became the branches of the Tree. Twenty-two paths he laid, each near to bursting with the life it contained from the lives of the ones it had bled. The sticks sang in his hands and he had to fight the compulsion to draw on them, to drink, before the ritual was completed. His ears filled with a sound that rattled his skull and threatened to breach his pain threshold.

The energies swirled all around him and the sounds began to reveal themselves as the cries of his victims at the moments of their deaths. In all his years of planning, in all his experience, Donald could not have prepared himself for this. His limbs became leaden, his movements strained. He realized that he was aging. The ritual was draining him to near death before it would reanimate him. The process had taken on a life of its own.

Supporting himself with his sword cane, Donald fought his way through the flows and eddies to the center of the Tree where the Tiphareth goblet sat. He called upon the last of his reserves and drew up on the cane's head. The sword slid from its wooden sheath with a satisfying snick. The mage raised it above the golden cup, point down.

"By these deeds, I claim these lives," he intoned, "*Lachaim vachaim*; from life, to life."

A movement from the far corner distracted him. He spared the barest glance towards it and saw the door of the wardrobe open. To his astonishment, Julia emerged. She had found his lair, just as she found the book and gone digging, he now understood, too late. Latent talents. Spikes. Presence.

Julia's look of defiance turned to horror as she took in the scene in its totality.

He watched as she began to edge her way towards the sanctuary door, her eyes never leaving his.

"Julia, wait," Donald rasped, but she paid no attention.

As Julia sprang and threw open the temple door, Donald felt the other presence enter his space and knew that Julia had-

n't figured her way through this alone. She'd had an accomplice whom he'd underestimated. But they were too late. He plunged the sword into the goblet and heard, dimly, Jamison's shout before the joined elements of cup and blade released every bit of energy once held by the wands.

Everything exploded, the room alight with an electric blue haze. Jamison's words broke through.

"Donald! I can't let you finish this! It ends now!"

The sorcerer sank to his knees, forces bearing down upon him, the sword still within the goblet. He felt the years lift from him, sensed everything in the room with a greater clarity than he had ever known in his centuries of life.

"There is no end," he said in a thunderous whisper.

Through the haze he saw Julia stand in front of Jamison. His daughter walked through his magic, sparks flying, as if it were a part of her, her own creation. Donald remained transfixed, fascinated even as he now feared her. In a sort of dream time, she bent down and reached for the cane-trunk of the Tree.

"It ends with me."

The words echoed directly into Donald's mind. She lifted the cane, removed it from the Tree.

The Tree shattered. Jamison dove for Julia, but not in time. The force flattened him and slammed her against the south wall. Donald heard her gasps, even as he felt the wave of chaos hit him. Life began to shoot and spark randomly, from cane to cane, through his body. He watched in mounting awe as each cane, one by one, split asunder upon the outlines he had drawn, until the array was strewn with nothing but splinters, the goblets at each nexus twisted and toppled. Wine ran in red rivulets upon the once beautiful floor, now cracked and singed.

"Julia!" he called. Her wordless cry struck him down.

His body began to age again, untold years suddenly added to his already ancient frame. The skin upon his hands sunk to the bone, dry like parchment. The sword fell from his grasp, his world imploded.

With his last unnatural breath, Donald Summers cursed Arthur Lawson's warning — and his own, inescapable mortality. ♪

Alexandra Elizabeth Honigsberg is known for her darkly numinous romantic-gothic poetry and fiction. Anthologies such as the Dark Destiny series, Dante's Disciples, New Altars, On Crusade, Angels of Darkness, and Blood Muse are its literary homes. She is also a professional musician and a scholar of comparative religions. Her late husband and collaborator, David Honigsberg, was an author, musician, and rabbi. His fiction appeared in such anthologies as Elric: Tales of the White Wolf, The Ultimate Silver Surfer, On Crusade: More Tales of the Knights Templar, and Bruce Coville's UFOs. He also wrote a number of role-playing supplements for Atlas Games and for Hero Games, most notably Ars Magica: Kabbalah.



ILLUSTRATION BY EMIN OZKAN

THE DEAD WALKED LIKE THE LIVING.
WAS IT A CURSE? OR A
STRANGE BLESSING?

Cherrystones and Shards of Ice

by Ekaterina Sedia

I sat with my face in my hands; not due to inebriation, which was greater than what my finances allowed, but less than what I wanted it to be. My distress was caused by a combination of events that involved the crooked militia, a slick merchant, and a deceitful woman. As a result, my financial and moral state left much to be desired; so I drank on credit. Just as the world was starting to soften around the edges, a shadow fell across the stained tablecloth of the restaurant table. I did not look up. While I was not a man to avoid the inevitable, I still did not relish the sight of my doom's portends. I wanted to see neither goons, nor the ungrateful bitches.

"Excuse me," said a male voice directly above and far, far from my bowed head. "Messer Lonagan?"

The address was polite enough to make me raise my gaze. Two thugs in the uniforms of the Areti clan grinned at me with as much sincere joy as a shark that spotted a flounder.

"Yes," I said, too smart and too experienced to lie. "What can I do for you?"

"Venerable Mistress Areti desires to see you."

I sighed and took another sip of my wine. "I'd rather stay where I am. I had the most wretched day, and surely the Venerable Mistress can find someone better qualified than I." Not that I liked turning down a paycheck, but Areti's gold

to a businessman was like a millstone to a swimmer.

One of the thugs grabbed my right wrist, pressing it against the table where it rested. The other goon opened his jacket, extracting a pistol with a heavy handle, flipped it in his hand with a rehearsed motion, and brought it down across my fingers—lightly, but with enough force to give me an idea of how much it would hurt when he did it in earnest. His eyes glinted with a malicious promise.

“Please don’t break my hand.” I felt tired rather than scared. “I need it.”

“Will you come then?”

What was a man to do? I followed them out of the restaurant, into the streets filled with silvery mist highlighted by an occasional hazy sphere of a gas lamp. On our way, we took a shortcut and skimmed along the edge of the deaders’ town, where ghostly dead man’s birches shone through the droplets of moisture in the air, their branches studded with tiny green flickers, the condensation weeping silently down their trunks.

We walked across a wooden bridge that creaked and resonated under our feet. I smelled something musty, and a moment later spotted a dead beggar, who sat in the middle of the bridge, reclining by the guardrail. His eyes bulged out of his swollen dark face, and his thick purple tongue protruded where his lower jaw used to be, but was now gone, lost forever. He would not walk around for long, and seemed to know it—his white eyes were turned upwards, greeting the stars as they sprinkled across the darkened sky.

“Filthy rat,” said one of my guides. “He probably died a beggar.”

“Likely,” I agreed, and couldn’t look away.

The other guide spat, propelling a gob of saliva and phlegm that landed with a satisfying smack onto the beggar’s left eye. “I can’t believe it. They are everywhere nowadays—their part of town just keeps on spreading.”

“That doesn’t require a great deal of faith, to believe that,” I said. “The dead will always outnumber the living.”

“How’s that?”

“You live, you die. Everyone who’s now alive will end up in the deaders’ town. Even you, so be nice to them.”

The guards huffed, but their gazes slid off the beggar and turned downward, to the slats under our feet. One could live in this place and be carefree only if he did not think of his inevitable demise, the inexplicable one-way traffic. I couldn’t ignore this silent but constant shuffling from one side of the town to the other; I couldn’t forget that the deader city swelled with every passing year, encroaching onto the town of the living. Soon, the alivers’ town would be but a fleck in the sea of rotting flesh. I was never carefree.

I shook my head and stepped off the bridge onto the quartz pavement, where the gaslights were installed with regularity, and the trees emitted no deathly glow, but cast deep, cool shadows, soft as crushed silk. A light perfume of jasmine scented the night, and soft singing came from nearby—the sort of thing the alivers enjoy.

The Areti manor squatted squarely on the hillside, its windows shuttered, but a soft glow of lamplight seeped around the edges, beckoning. The three of us entered the hallway.

Darkness pooled in the rounded recesses of the walls, and my soft-soled shoes seemed too loud. There didn’t seem to be any people here, just echoes. There were no doors either—just curtains that billowed in the entryways, blown about by the dusty winds that skipped around the manor, unchallenged.

“In here,” one of the goons said, and pulled open a curtain decorated with a beaded dragon. Its eyes glinted in the firelight that reached from within.

I entered a vast hall drenched in shadows. “Venerable Mistress?”

“Right this way, Lonagan.” She reclined on a chaise made of solid oak, and still it creaked under her weight. The fireplace cast a semicircle of orange light, and I stepped closer.

Her face was oval and pretty, with large doe eyes and a prim, full-lipped mouth. Her long auburn hair curled and cascaded, descending onto her shoulders and chest, playing like waterfalls across the vast terrain that was her body. She was a landscape, not a woman—hills and valleys of flesh stretched before me in every direction, barely contained on the gigantic chaise. Only her face and hands seemed human.

I bowed. “What can I do for you, Venerable Mistress Areti?”

She smiled, and for a moment I forgot about her distended body, and looked into her ink-blue, almost black eyes. “I hear that you can find things.”

I inclined my head. “That is indeed the case. What would you like me to find?”

Her smile grew colder, tighter. “I thought you could figure that out.”

“No,” I said with rising irritation. “I’m not a magician. I’m just a thorough man.”

She undulated with laughter, sending slow, hypnotic waves through her flesh. “All right then. I lost a gemstone—or rather, it was stolen from me. By the deaders.”

“Are you sure?” The deaders were not known for crime—that was the province of the still-living.

“Oh, quite sure. You see, they are recent deaders, and I fear that my men were somehow responsible for their transition.”

It still sounded strange to me, but I nodded. Who was I to judge? Perhaps they had the stone on them while they transitioned; perhaps their passions were slower to die than was common. “What is this stone like?”

“It’s a cherrystone.” She lifted a delicate, fine hand, and spread her index finger and thumb half an inch apart. “Small, pink. You’ll know it when you see it.”

I was certain of that. Even though I’ve never held anything as valuable as a cherrystone in my hands, I heard enough about them and their powers to know how rare they were. Especially pink ones—chances were, it was the only one in town.

“What about those who took it?”

She shrugged. “Ask my guardsmen for a description.”

“Do you know their names?”

“I would imagine they’ve shed their names by now, so they would be useless to you.”

So it was longer than a week since they were dead. Yet, I couldn’t imagine why she would wait a week to start looking for her cherrystone. The only conclusion that made sense was the

one that didn't make sense—that they were dead while committing the theft.

"Be discreet," she said, just as I was about to leave. "You understand how precarious my situation is."

"Of course, Venerable Mistress. I won't say a word."

I left the crackling of the fire and the oaken chaise behind, and walked along the corridor, back to the entrance. This place did not fill me with trepidation any longer—the air of lonely neglect made me feel sorry for her, despite the Areti's bloody reputation. I liked to think that my sympathy was not contaminated by the promise of a paycheck.

One had to be careful in the deaders' town, and I watched my step, even though I had connections there. The inhabitants were not violent by nature, but protective of what little lives they had. I prepared myself for the stench by putting a generous dollop of wintergreen ointment under my nose, and stowed the can in my pocket. Abiding the old habits, I waited for the nightfall, to sneak in under the cover of darkness.

The moment my foot touched the soft moss that grew through the cracks in wooden pavements, I realized that I was foolish—deaders did not sleep, and night made no difference. I heard the ice merchants calling in high voices, and the scraping of their trunks full of green translucent chunks of ice as they pulled them by the ropes.

I kept close to the buildings, and hid my face in the collar of my jacket. A few passersby did not seem to notice me, as they shambled along. Jas, the deader I was going to see lived well away from the border of the alivers; it wasn't the first time that I visited him, but the gravity of my task made me feel ill at ease.

I saw his house, recognizable because of the brick-red shutters, and sped up my steps. The houses seemed superfluous—if it wasn't for the need to contain the cold, the deaders could've just as easily lived outside, shambled along whatever streets, forests or valleys they chose. But they kept to the town, nestled inside in the protective cocoon of ice, trying to slow their decay. Couldn't say I blamed them.

I passed a white house, with a small courtyard and a garden in front of it, and paused. One did not see decorations in these parts too often. And I also saw a young girl in the yard. Unaware that anyone was watching, she hummed to herself, and practiced her dance steps. She must've died just recently—her skin was pale but whole, and her downy hair blew about her thin face as she twirled with her arms raised. I didn't know exactly what happens after death, but I noticed that it affected coordination; the girl stumbled, and almost fell over. Stubbornly, she steadied herself, and started on sidesteps.

She noticed me watching, and gasped. In her fright, she bolted away, running straight into a gatepost. It would've been comical if the impact wasn't so great—it threw her backwards, and she landed on her rump.

I swung the gates open, and helped her up. "I'm so sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just stopped to watch—you dance very prettily."

She sniffed. "Do I have a bruise?"

I nodded. An angry purple spot was spreading across her white forehead.

She gave a little cry and whimpered. Dead didn't weep, but there was a phlegmy rattle deep in her chest.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's just a bruise."

Her mouth curled downwards. "You don't understand. It'll never heal."

I knew that she was right, and felt wretched. I didn't mean to shorten her time, I didn't want to speed up her decay.

She finally looked at me. "It's not your fault. It was an accident."

I nodded. "Thank you."

"You're an aliver. What are you doing here?"

"I came to see your neighbor," I said. "The one who lives in that house."

"I know him. I think. A tall young man, right?"

"Yes, that's the one. I guess I'd best be going."

"Why do you want to see him?" I was certain now that she hadn't been among the dead for long—she asked too many questions. The deaders were usually more reserved, less curious.

Of course I wasn't going to tell her the exact truth; but I wasn't going to lie either, not after I hurt her. "He's my brother," I said. "Used to be, I mean."

Her mouth opened in awe. "And you still see him?"

"Why not?"

"No one else does."

She was right, of course. I opened the gate, all the while feeling her curious stare at the back of my neck. Before I stepped into the street, I turned to face her again. "I know. The alivers prefer not to think about the folks here. And I can't stop thinking about them... you."

I knocked on the dingy, peeling door of the house with red shutters. It gave under my knuckles, and I stepped inside. My teeth started chattering as soon as I crossed the threshold.

"It's you," Jas said.

"It's me. How are you?"

He sat slouching on the floor, his back propped against an ice chest. It was half-full of dirty water, and pellucid ice shards. He had changed little since last I saw him—perhaps a bit more decay darkening the skin around his eyes and on his temples, perhaps more sinking around his mouth; but he was still in good shape—as good as one can expect after ten years of death. "All right, I suppose. You?"

"Same." I sat by the door, the warmest spot of this one-room house. "Want me to fetch an ice merchant for you?"

"Nah. What do you want?"

I gave a laugh that sounded unconvincing even to me. "Do I need a reason to see you?"

He coughed, and it sounded like something came loose in his chest with a sickening tear of wet tissue. "Nah. But you usually have one. I'm not as dull as you think."

"I don't think you're dull. You're right; I do have a question. I'm looking for two deaders—new ones. One is tall and dark, has only one hand. The other is medium height, light hair, no beard. Young."

The ruin that was my brother nodded. "I know them. Still, it wouldn't kill you to come and just visit."

"I didn't think you wanted me to. Every time I come you act like you don't want me here."

"I don't want. I can't; I'd like to, but I can't. And I forget a lot, y'know?" His tongue turned awkwardly in his mouth, scraping against blackened teeth. "When you come, you remind me. And I don't want to forget. So please come. To remind me."

"Jas . . ."

"Lemme finish. Other deaders, they don't remember squat. Who they were, and they tell me, they tell, 'How do you know you even have a brother? Who can know such a thing? You can't remember about the alivers.' But I do, because of you. I'm lucky—everyone else, they're alone. But not me, not me."

"All right, Jas." My voice shook a bit, but I didn't think he'd noticed. "I'll come more often. But now I need to know about those men."

"Why?"

I hesitated; not that I mistrusted Jas, but the deaders had loyalty to their own kind, not to the alivers—even if they were kin. "They might know something that is of interest to me."

Jas shook his head. "You're still dealing in secrets. Dangerous trade."

"I know. I almost had my hand broken the other day."

Jas sat up. "Like the man you're looking for."

I felt a chill, and it didn't come from the icebox. "I thought his hand was missing."

"They broke it first, then cut it off, then slit his throat." Jas spoke with relish. I noticed it before; the deaders seemed to enjoy the details of death.

"Who?"

Jas shrugged. "The Areti goons, who else? I sure hope they don't want anything from you; they and the deaders have been fighting for no one remembers how long."

"You know why?"

He nodded. "Every deader knows. It's about a curse, and a cherrystone."

"Areti's cherrystone?"

His lungs whistled a bit—the sound that signified laughter. "Is that what she'd been telling you? No, that's ours. It's our curse, see, and we're keeping it, Areti or not." Jas stood. "C'mon. There's someone I want you to meet."

I stepped toward the door, but Jas shook his head. "It's too warm out. We'll go the other way."

He creaked and groaned, but bent down enough to touch the earthen floor. He groped around in the dirt.

"Can I give you a hand?"

"Sure." He pointed out a bronze ring mounted on a wooden trapdoor, hidden under a layer of dirt. I never noticed that it was there.

I pulled on the ring, and as the dust and grime cloud settled, I saw a rickety ladder leading downwards. "Where does it go?"

"To other houses... everywhere. It's nicer to travel underground, cooler."

That explained the scant traffic on the surface. I let Jas descend, and followed him. It wasn't nearly as dark as I had expected—strange fluorescent creatures darted to and fro among the weakly glowing walls of the tunnel, and sick, gangly dead man's birches illuminated the way with their dead light.



There were ladders everywhere, and the deaders too—the underground seemed a much more animated place than the surface. I mimicked Jas' shambling gait, eager not to attract attention. "Should I even be here?" I asked Jas.

He stopped and mulled it over for a moment. "Don't see why not. You'll move here, sooner or later. As long as you don't hurt the deaders, you're all right."

I was moved that he never even considered the possibility of my betrayal; then again, perhaps it was one of the deaders' limitations. Just as they forgot their relatives, so perhaps they lost their understanding of the ways of the living.

He led me deeper into the labyrinth. The passersby grew less frequent, and the light—weaker. I could not discern the direction, but guessed that we were close to the river once I noticed drops of moisture seeping along the support beams through the earthen walls.

He stopped and looked around, as if getting his bearings. Then, he sat down on the earthen floor.

"What now?"

"Now we wait," he said.

We didn't wait for long. I did suspect before that the deaders could communicate with each other through some unfathomable means. Soon, four deaders showed up, then three more. All of the newcomers sat down on the floor and remained quiet, as more of them kept arriving.

There were all kinds of them there—young and old, and even one child. Some were dead long enough to lose most of their skin and flesh—at least two hundred years; others were quite fresh. Even the girl I met earlier showed up; I noticed with a pang of guilt that the purple bruise on her forehead was spreading. Despite my repeated application of the wintergreen ointment, the air grew putrid with their smell, and my heart was uneasy. There I was, underground, surrounded by a throng of deaders. If they turned on me, I would never be able to fight through them—or find my way back to the surface. The trust I attributed to Jas was actually mine.

* * *

Underground, I had lost the sense of time, and only knew that it was passing—slowly, like water weeping from the walls. The sounds of soft, dry voices of the deaders mingled with the dripping of water; while the monotony of it was somewhat lulling, the content was certainly not.

I learned that the cherrystone in question was cursed. A traveling warlock passed through our town, many years ago. When the Areti came to the warlock, demanding that he lend his talent to them, they were met with a refusal. They sent their thugs to make him pay for their humiliation, but the thugs were never heard from again. The warlock was nonetheless angry with the Areti. Before he left, he hid the cherrystone somewhere in town, and told them that as long as the cursed stone was within the town walls, our dead would walk the land.

When his prediction came true, the Areti looked for it. They looked everywhere—on the bottom of the river, under every rock, even in the catacombs under the deaders' town. After a few years they stopped looking—old legends are easy to forget. The cherrystone was left be, until the present Mistress of the Areti clan realized her mortality. The search for the cherrystone had become an obsession, and she sent her goons and hirelings to look for it. It took her a while, but she had learned that it was in deaders' town.

"Why does she want it?" I said.

"To end the curse," said one of the oldest deaders.

I nodded. I could understand that desire, and yet I wasn't sure why the Areti were so concerned about it.

"It's their family's curse, or so they see it. It's the matter of honor for them," said the child. "They don't care what will happen to us. They only know that they don't want to become us."

There was no good way to ask this question, but I asked anyway. "Do you... do you like being like this?"

They whistled and chortled, their laughter akin to scratching of nails.

"You'll see when you're in my shoes," Jas said. "It's more life, even though you might not see it as such. See, I don't relish being what I am, but I still prefer it to lying still in the ground, being eaten by worms."

"Do you know where that cherrystone is?"

The crowd grew silent, and I felt their eyes on me, judging, weighing. "Course we do," Jas said. "That's the first thing you learn as a deader—it's important, see. And we tell it to each other every day, so that we don't forget—about the Areti, about their snooping goons..."

The appearance of two more deaders interrupted him. One was tall and dark, one-handed. The other, a teenager, seemed young enough to be his son, but his light hair belied this conclusion. His nostrils were torn open, and a slow trickle of pus trekked across his pale lips and down his chin.

"You came to kill us," the youngster said.

Once again, I grew aware of the precariousness of my situation, and protested my innocence with as much sincerity as I could muster.

"The Areti sent you," his companion said. "Just like they sent us."

I shrugged. "So? I find things; I never killed anyone."

Jas' heavy hand lay on my shoulder. I could feel through

my jacket how cold and clammy it was. "He wouldn't do something like that," he said to the gathering. "He knows better."

I nodded. "I do. Only others don't. You think people across the river would listen to me? Or to you, for that matter. Far as everyone's concerned, if the stone is gone, so much the better. The Areti won't leave you alone. Not with the present Mistress."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"She won't stop," the bruised girl said. "Not until she's one of us." She gave me a meaningful look. "Will you help us?"

"Whoa," I said. "You're not asking me to kill her, are you?"

They murmured that it wouldn't be a bad idea, and after all, it wouldn't be all bad for her. The deaders' town was a nice place.

"I'm not a murderer," I said. "But I think I can help you. The stone needs to stay in town, right? Doesn't matter where?"

"No," Jas said. "But she won't stop looking."

"I think I know a good place for it," I said. "Just give me the stone, and don't worry about a thing. She'll never find it."

Their silence was unnatural—not even a sound of breathing broke it. Dozens of dead eyes look at me, expressionless, weighing my proposal in their oozing, ruined skulls. I asked a lot of them—to put their very existence into the hands of an aliver, a being as alien to them as they were to me.

If I were in his shoes, I doubt I would've done what Jas had done: he pointed at the girl with the purple bruise. "Give it to him," he said.

The girl stepped back, away from me, and I reached out, afraid that she would stumble and fall again. She remained on her feet—I supposed she was getting a hang of her new limitations. "Why do you think he'll help us?" she asked Jas, but her hand was already reaching for her chest.

"He's my brother," Jas said.

Her fingers pushed away a flimsy shawl that cradled her slender shoulders, and I gasped at the sight of a deep wound, left by a dagger. That was what killed her—an angry father, a jealous husband, a sullen stranger. She reached deep into the wound, pulling out a small round object, covered with congealed gore. I tried not to flinch as the bloodied cherrystone lay in my palm.

"Be careful with it," the one-handed man told me. "It's a powerful thing."

"What can it do?" I said, rolling it on my palm gingerly. It left a trail, but didn't seem very powerful.

"Whatever it has to do," Jas said.

The sight of the moonlit Areti manor greeted me from afar. It was deep night, and not a window shone in the darkness. The bulk of the building sat immobile but sinister as a stone gargoyle ready to come to life and rip out the heart of the next victim. I heaved a sigh and slowed my steps; no doubt the manor would be guarded, and I was disinclined to reveal my presence just yet. Fortunately, in my line of business I had learned a thing or two about surreptitious visits.

I avoided the front door, where the two goons of my recent acquaintance sat on the steps, trading monosyllabic talk.

My soft-soled shoes made no sound on the grass as I edged around the corner and along the wall, looking for a different point of entry. There was a back door, as I had expected, latched shut from the inside. Worse, the door was cased in iron, and a slightest manipulation would surely reverberate through the building.

In the pale moonlight, I let my fingers run along the edges of the door, looking for a gap. The door was quite well fitted, and I procured a short knife with thin blade from my pocket, and forced it between the door and the wall that surrounded it, trying to feel the latch inside. The scraping of metal against metal tore the still air. I jerked my hand away, and fell into a crouch by the wall. I waited for a long while, but nobody appeared.

I explored the perimeter of the manor again, in hopes of finding a ground level window or another door. None were forthcoming, and I returned to the back entrance guarded by iron. I wondered if the cherrystone could be of use, and took it out of my pocket. It glowed softly, and I touched it to the door. Nothing happened.

"Come on," I whispered to it. "Do you want to be found and destroyed?"

The stone did not answer.

I felt foolish, carrying on a conversation with an inanimate object, but persisted. I sat down, my back against the cold wall, cradling the stone's tiny light in my open palms. "See," I told it, "it's like this. I could just give you up, take my money, and go home. But it's bigger than me or her or even you..."

My voice caught in my throat as my own words reached me. There was no doubt that the Areti would kill me—break my fingers, cut off my hand, perhaps rip my nostrils open, just like they did to the dead boy. But I also realized that it would be better to die now and have a place to go than eke out another few years and succumb to the black nothingness to which people from other places went. We lived with the deaders for so long that we saw them as a nuisance; we didn't realize how lucky we were to have them—to become them. And this stone made it all possible. I closed my hand around it, protecting it, protecting all of us.

The stone grew warmer in my hand, and soon it burned it. It shone brighter too, and narrow white beams of light squeezed between my fingers—my fist looked like a star. When I touched it to the door, the metal sang, barely audible, and the door swung open. I entered the dark dusty hallway, my way illuminated by the cherrystone.

I followed it to the dark recesses of the sleeping manor, to the kitchen. There, a massive brick stove towered against the far wall. The light beams cut through the stone as if it was butter, forming a long, narrow tunnel behind the stove, just spacious enough to let my hand through.

I released the cherrystone, and let it roll into its new hiding place. As it cooled and darkened, what was left of its power sealed the passage, returning it to the normal appearance of the brickwork of the stove and stone of the walls.

As quietly as I entered, I left. I crossed the river as the sun was rising above the rooftops. I listened to the crowing of roosters and to the first banging of shutters, inhaled the sweet aroma of baking bread, basked in the first sunrays alighting on

my shoulders. I was heading back to my favorite restaurant, where I intended to drink until the Areti thugs found me.

I thought about what would be my last trip to the deaders' town—how I would shamle along, until I arrived to Jas' house. I would have to tell him right away that I was his brother, before I forget and lose the tentative connection between us, and ask him to remind me. Then I would settle next to the ice chest, and we would talk, in loopy, halting sentences. And we would remind each other every day, so that we don't forget, keeping the memory of our shared blood alive. ♣

Ekaterina Sedia is the author of the critically acclaimed novels The Secret History of Moscow and The Alchemy of Stone, the latter of which she describes as "a tale of automated anarchy and clockwork lust." She is also the editor of the urban-fantasy anthology Paper Cities. A native of Moscow, Sedia now lives in New Jersey.



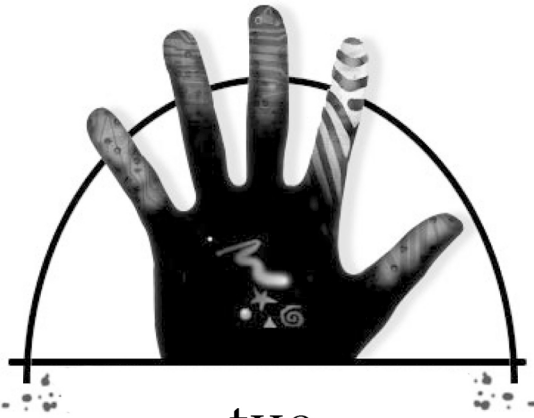
Bags

BY MIKE ALLEN

Some say it's the wrath of the wind itself.
The dark animus of nature's spirit pushed
past the brink.

They descend from the trees,
a shapeless horde, rustling with the mystery
of movement, an airborne display
of bright colors and brand names, loosed
from the branches to twirl and somersault
and glide along the sidewalks with a hiss.

Pathetic, the victims left behind,
heads swathed in plastic, snappy store logos
binding mouths and eyes, flesh purple
with suffocation, packaged to go.



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ILLUSTRATION BY RUI DALE DE SOUSA

AND I WOULD NOT
FEEL SO ALL
ALONE . . .

Descant

by Terry Bramlett

STEPHEN: Glenda thinks I'm losing control, but I see the statue move. Saint Columba reaches toward me as I turn. Only at vision's edge does the stone saint move. My head turns and his free hand reaches out, grasping air.

I mention this to Glenda. She thinks I don't see her eyes roll. After twenty years of marriage, she is tired. The relationship meanders along with her steady hand guiding my art. She is a history major, which is why my last two pieces, Saint Columba and The Black Madonna, have intersected with her interests. I want her to acknowledge me again. I want the passion bursting into flames. Instead, she regards me with cold eyes, stripping me of dignity and of art.

"Stone statues don't move," she says. "Really, Stephen. Can't you get back to reality?"

"Columba moved," I say. Her raised eyebrow tells me what I need to know. She does not love me, hasn't loved me for years. I open my mouth, but just shake my head and walk away. *Useless*, I think. *Useless*.

I rub my skin, feeling the hardness as it continues to develop. Scaly patches appeared at my elbows last night. This morning I had trouble getting out of bed. I put my soul into that statue and it steals my flesh, taking more every minute. I stare at Columba from the kitchen and wonder how much of my soul the saint has stolen.

The jutting jaw and tilted head gives Columba the look of a god rather than a saint. Massive arms bulge above the elbows. The long sword rests with its tip on the ground, held at the hilt. The free hand reaches toward nothing, grasping for understanding, or maybe for freedom. The eyes stare toward the ceiling, praying to God for an answer to his stone-bound predicament. Sometimes, rocky tears form. I shiver. I did not mold the body in that posture. The pose comes from Columba's movement.

Columba lowers his gaze until his eyes stare into mine. I take a sharp breath. I read the question with ease. *Why?* he asks. I look at Glenda who studies the wall opposite Columba. I know she sees, but she will not say.

GLEENDA: Stephen stood immobile in the kitchen staring at the statue. I had known for some time that Saint Columba lived. I suspected Stephen's talent when he sculpted the Black Madonna, which sold to an offbeat gallery at the edge of New Orleans. It brought a good price, but I hated to part with the Gnostic icon. I heard her voice at times, telling me to wait.

Columba lowered his gaze, pleading for an escape. I studied the inner wall. Through the mirror, I saw Stephen glance my way. When he looked to Columba, I studied my husband. Dark hair fell to his shoulders when he worked. A receding hairline left a tuft up front. He was still a handsome man at forty-five. I saw the way women gazed when he walked into a room. For a couple of years, I wished he would find someone and leave, but he never noticed others. Ever the artist turned inward and to hell with the world, including his wife, especially his wife.

Stephen had not loved me for years, though he thought he did. Our marriage died a slow painless death through neglect and too much comfort. Columba sagged in the shoulders, fear within the stone eyes. I talked to Columba when Stephen slept or left the house. I expected the old Celt to understand Latin, though he spoke Gaelic or Old English.

Stephen mumbled something and trudged toward the stairs, moving with a wooden gait as if his skin turned to stone as he brought Columba to life. I smiled at the thought and turned back to Columba as Stephen pulled his way up the stairs. I waited until the bedroom door shut and then walked to the statue. I whispered to Columba in Latin.

"Do not worry, Columba," I said. "God would not let you live in such a condition, not one of His saints."

I caressed the cheek. The stone sent chills up my back. The head turned slightly. A smile formed on Columba's face. The eyes warmed my heart as I wished Stephen would trade places with his stone creation.

STEPHEN: I hear Glenda whispering to Columba as she plots my demise. She is doing this. I don't know how, but she is responsible. My anger wells up in my breast as I feel the hardening of my feet. I lie awake afraid that if I sleep I will become stone, as much stone as Columba and the Black Madonna. Sleep takes me when I least expect it.

I stand in front of the Madonna. Darkness encompasses the gallery except for a bright light that outlines her head. The eyes shine and I see the stone face smile.

"Stephen," the Madonna says. "You and I will be together, soon. Ignore your wife and her obsessions. Her heart craves stone as mine longs for flesh."

Anger flashes when she mentions Glenda. "She's trying to kill me."

"No," the Madonna says. "She sets you free."

I wake with a start. Glenda did not sleep with me last night. Anger and jealousy burn my stomach. Struggling to get out of bed, I realize that my knees bend only with effort. My feet clunk as stone on the wooden floor. I walk to the bathroom and understand the true meaning of kidney stones. Pain racks my body as I expel little fluid. I dress, put my hair in a ponytail, and descend the stairs with care.

Glenda gazes at Columba, her eyes glistening with love, his hands cupping hers. She hears my clonking gait on the carpet of the stairs and pulls away from the statue. Columba turns his head, easier than last night, as I glare.

"Did you sleep well?" My words convey anger and hurt. How could she?

"I didn't sleep," Glenda says. A furtive glance cast at Columba as she walks away. "You seemed tired and I decided to stay on the couch. Caught an old movie."

I glare at Glenda and then to Columba. Yesterday I had not yet finished the sculpture, but now he stood complete in the pose I had sculpted. As if I believe for one minute he did not sleep with my wife. "I am going into town today," I say, trying to tone down the anger. "I thought I would visit the Black Madonna. Want to come?"

Glenda shakes her head. "I have some errands to run. And I have a lunch date with Cedric about selling your latest work."

I stop and stare. Glenda holds my eyes with her gaze. "You *want* to sell Saint Columba?" I closed my mouth after realizing I left it open. I can't believe she wants to part with Columba.

Glenda laughs. "You did create this thing for money, didn't you?" She raises an eyebrow. She plans something, I can tell. "I'm going to have Cedric over this evening to finalize the deal."

I nod. "Do you need anything while I am out?" She shakes her head, so I walk to the door and leave. I linger for a moment, until I hear a voice speaking in Latin, a man's voice coming from my apartment. A tear rolls down my face and cracks as it hits the floor.

GLEENDA: "How do we do this, my love?" Columba's voice growled through stone vocal chords. "I can kill him with my sword as he walks through the door."

I smiled. He might be a saint, but things have changed since his day. Explaining about police and laws was out of the question. "No, you mustn't kill him, my love." I stroked his face, which feels less than stone. I found certain aspects fleshier than others last night. "He will see the Madonna today. That should finish the job."

My lips brushed his and I felt his kiss return. "I have things to do, Columba. I'll be back later." He grunted his answer.

Lunch with Cedric went well. He always wanted the newest thing Stephen created. The Black Madonna caused a stir at the gallery when she was unveiled. "This last sculpture is his best, Cedric."

Cedric dabbed at his mouth, removing residual oil left from his salad. He was a fastidious little man, impeccable in dress and fashion. Cedric epitomized the art crowd of his studio, from his extravagant lifestyle to the androgynous look. I liked him because I never worried about Cedric making a pass.

"There is no way that he could top the Madonna," Cedric said. "She has soul and heart that I have never seen in stone."

I smiled. "Be at the loft tonight by seven-thirty. This one positively lives and breathes."

Cedric grinned. "Oh my!"

STEPHEN: The Madonna's eyes follow me as I drag my right leg behind me. Breathing becomes difficult and I wonder if I will be able to drive home, but she beckons me toward her though she does not move. The beauty of her face amazes me. To think I created such splendor. The Black Madonna gave me love and strength as I rescued her from the stone. Columba sucks life, stealing my soul and my flesh. And then he steals my wife. The Madonna smiles. I decide Columba must be destroyed before he destroys me, before Glenda can use him to destroy me.

I pull myself up the stairs to the loft, both legs dragging behind me. The flesh hardens each leg to the hip, but as I get to the top of the stairs I can stand and walk in a stiff manner through the door. He stands where I left him. His sword point in the stone ground I created. *I created.* Those become the operative words. What I create I can destroy. To hell with Columba, to hell with Cedric, to hell with Glenda.

I walk past Columba. His eyes follow my movement as if he does not trust me, his creator. *You shouldn't trust me,* I think. I grab the sledgehammer I keep in the utility closet and approach my nemesis. Hate spears me as he glares. Columba knows. I raise the sledgehammer and swing it toward his torso.

The stone sword swings up, parrying the hammer. Rock breaks from the sword and I see steel gleaming in the apartment lights. A smile forms on Columba's face. I scream, swinging with all my might. The sword catches the wood at the handle and splinters it, leaving me weaponless. My flesh thickens at the legs and I cannot move. My pants have turned to stone. Coldness creeps up my body. What's left of the handle falls from my hands as they too turn to stone. I open my mouth to scream, but my mouth shuts with its own volition and the scream is frozen within. Vocal chords harden. My chest constricts in pain, but my heart does not stop. Blood still flows to my brain. I see Columba approach, grinning, wielding his sword. He raises it back to cut me in half.

"Stop!" I hear Glenda's voice scream. She has come to save me. I try to turn but my neck has stiffened and become immobile. "Columba, it is through."

Glenda walks into my sight. A gray haze covers her body as I realize that my eyes have changed. Glenda smiles and I realize that she shows her happiness at my condition. I feel my brain congealing in my stone head.



"The perfect self portrait," Glenda says. "That's what Cedric will buy, Columba. Not you, my love. Cedric will buy Stephen."

Columba grins and mumbles something in Latin. Glenda turns and kisses the now flesh-and-blood saint, as my brain finishes its transformation to stone. Glenda grabs a sheet and throws it over my head.

Darkness encompasses the gallery. I see the Madonna's gleeful stare, the evil eyes. Why did I not see them before? "You will always be with me," she says. "Always." ↻

Terry Bramlett says: "While sitting in the Episcopal Church, St. Columba's, which I attend, I saw the word descant on a sixteenth century hymn. My wife said descant meant the song had two complementary melodies. I brought the idea to this short story, which is why the title has little to do with the story line. Instead, the title describes the story's structure. Once I had the structure, the writing followed both melodies."



DOCTOR JOHN DEE, 1527-1608

EVERY PERFORMER DREAMS
DYING ONSTAGE. BUT
NOT LIKE THIS . . .

The Thing's The Play

by Andrew J. Wilson

You have absolutely no idea how scary a real, live pantomime horse can be until you see one of those bastards in the flesh. If two grown men put on a silly costume and indulge in a little slapstick on stage, it's all good, clean festive fun. Primary-school kids love it, teenagers think it's painfully unfunny and any adults in the audience get a sentimental trip down memory lane to the corner with amnesia street. Now, imagine the real beast foaming at the mouth, iron-shod hooves striking sparks on the flagstones and both, separate, unholy halves stampeding dementedly towards you: It's absolutely terrifying.

What makes it worse is hearing someone—someone who sounds suspiciously like your drama coach—scream at the top of her already very high voice, “Dear God, this isn't in the script!”

I SUPPOSE it all began the afternoon one of our teachers sawed Fat Malky Fairbairn in half.

“Dinnae, Mister King, sir!” Malky shouted as he thrashed around in the coffin-like box at the front of the classroom. The rest of us wrestled him down, and I crammed his head through the hole at one end and shut the lid with a bang.

“Gonnae no dae that?” our schoolmate added as we snapped the clasps shut.

“Quiet in the cheap seats,” Mister King said, popping a jam doughnut between Malky's flapping lips. That shut him up and Mister King was free to go on with his lesson.

“Now, this trick is conventionally performed with a handsaw,” our master of misdirection told us, “but there is absolutely no reason why we can’t update it with something like this!”

We all gasped as he produced a chainsaw from within his flapping cape and gunned the engine with enthusiasm.

“Cool!” said Jonah Jones.

Mister King looked very dashing standing there by the blackboard in full evening dress with petrol fumes rather than bad language turning the air blue around him. Unlike the rest of our teachers at Boleskin House, he was a stage magician, and a class act at that.

“Abracadabra!” he cried as the chainsaw bit into the middle of the plywood box. A cloud of sawdust joined the exhaust smoke and then a crimson gout of liquid sprayed out of Malky’s mouth.

“Cool!” said Jonah again.

I didn’t say anything. This was supposed to be a conjuring trick, not a human sacrifice.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Mister King said to Malky, “that sometimes happens.” Our teacher wiped the red splashes from his pupil’s face with a Paisley-pattern handkerchief,

“Why?” asked Malky, much to our surprise.

“Bakers get bored sometimes, my boy. They have little guns to inject the jam into their doughnuts. They’re only supposed to give each one a single squirt, but sometimes they fire twice or three times, just for devilment. When someone bites into it, the pressure make it explode.”

“Still tastes good,” Malky replied, licking his lips.

We were summoned to pull the two halves of the box apart. Jonah peered into the lower part hoping for a glimpse of Malky’s guts, but his undamaged legs unfolded from the upper section. The bottom of his pullover did look pretty frayed, though.

Mister King sent us all back to our seats with a doughnut each. He was our favorite teacher and his Friday afternoon lessons were the most fun we had all week. It beat free-style spontaneous combustion or levitating without a net—and left fewer scars.

“So, boys, there you have it,” he said gesturing to the diagram explaining the trick on the blackboard. “Sawing the lady in half or, as the case may be, taking a chainsaw to a big-boned lad. Yet another example of the noble art of sleight of hand, legerdemain or prestidigitation.”

Mister King sat on the edge of his desk and doffed his shiny top hat. “Now listen to me closely, class—‘stage magic’ as your other teachers no doubt contemptuously call it is ninety-nine percent of any kind of sorcery. From the rain-forest shaman to the magus in his ivory tower, the humble illusion shoulders most of the load in making other people believe that these adepts have true magical abilities. And belief is the essential ingredient to any miracle . . .”

He twirled a length of chalk between his fingers as he spoke and one end of it suddenly began to flap in a rubbery way. Unperturbed, Mister King popped this end between his lips and started to chew. Somehow he had turned his chalk into cheese.

There was a polite knock at the classroom door and we all turned to see who it was.

“Mister King,” said an old woman in a twin set, “may I have a moment of your time?”

“Why certainly, my dear. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

“I,” she said with a dramatic pause, “am Miss Sim, Miss Sheila Sim.”

“Excellent!” Mister King cried, producing a bouquet of flowers for her from up his sleeve. “Boys, stand up and welcome your new drama teacher!”

Miss Sim had no time for political correctness. She was old-school even by comparison with some of the dinosaurs who taught at Boleskin House. Our drama teacher wore her spinsterhood with pride and despised the neologism “Ms.” “It sounds like a bluebottle trapped in a bedpan,” she liked to say with a sneer. Besides, since her first name was Sheila, she thought that Miss S. Sim had a nicely palindromic ring to it. Of course, it also had enough sibilants to keep a nest of vipers happy, but that’s another story.

If you think I’m laboring the point here, it’s because names have a vital significance within the benighted walls of this institution. Boleskin House is one of the few reform schools which specialize in the black arts. If a kid suddenly starts to show some talent for the paranormal and is unlucky enough to get caught, then he’s whisked away to this dump before you can say “child-care services” or “due legal process.” Of course, wild talents run stronger in girls, but they get banged up somewhere down the road, more’s the pity.

The curriculum mostly consists of classes in heavy-duty arcana designed to amplify our powers, which is pretty ironic since even low-grade magical abilities are what allow the Government to take you off the streets in the first place. However, there’s recently been a slight change of educational policy at Boleskin. After the disastrous Blitzkrieg tournament that my class was press-ganged into—where the body counts were higher than the scores—the Head, the bodiless blob that runs this hellhole, decided there might be more to school morale than being “good at games.”

Enter Miss Sim, a thespian of a certain age employed to expand our creative sides and let us indulge in a little self-expression by staging the Christmas play. They said that they wanted to make us more fully rounded individuals . . . As an idea, it had about as much merit as trying to teach a troop of baboons to juggle with live hand-grenades.

“Now, class,” she told us the next morning in the school’s flea-pit of a theatre, “I know you’re all probably annoyed that you have to spend your weekend working with me, but the Head should have made it clear at assembly that the alternative will be even less to your liking.”

She wasn’t kidding. We either rehearsed the school play or we did cross-country running—after being parachuted into an unfriendly country.

“The school board has decided that this year’s production will be the only known dramatic work by Doctor Dee,” she announced.



“Isn’t he one o’ they gangsta rappers?” Jonah whispered.

“That’s Doctor Dre, ya bam,” Malky told him. “John Dee was an Elizabethan wizard.”

“Thank you, Malcolm,” Miss Sim said pointedly, “I hope you’ll be as eager to contribute in rehearsals.”

We were given poorly Xeroxed copies of a handwritten folio entitled: *Al-Hazred, the Tragedie of the Mad Moor, A Play in Five Unnatural Acts and Many Unfavory Scenes*

“To be frank, Doctor Dee’s script is rather badly written,” Miss Sim told us, “but I’m reliably informed that there’s an audience for it . . .”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention as I flicked through the pages. Our coach was right—it wasn’t the most elegant piece of writing in the world, but as far as I could see, all the spells worked. “Corpsing” on stage had just taken on a new and deadlier meaning.

Did ye hear about the time they staged *Mac*—? Someone managed to smother Poor Wullie’s mouth just in time.

“You mean *the Scottish play* . . .” little Spud McFee hissed. He was one of the new boys, but he learned fast.

“Aye, right—sorry, Ah forgot!” Wullie apologized.

Shakespeare’s Caledonian tragedy may have an unlucky reputation among theatrical folk, but the one and only performance at Boleskin House had been downright apocalyptic.

“They had real witches in it . . .” Jonah whispered, “including a wee cameo frae Hecate, the witch-goddess hersel!”

“Yer no gonnae tell me Banquo’s ghost was real an’ all?” Malky asked shaking his head.

“Well . . . Ah’m nae sure aboot Banquo, but there was one actual spook.”

“What happened?” Spud asked, the appalled expression making his face look even more like an unwashed potato.

“The real Macbeth turned up,” I told them, “in spirit if not in person.” Everybody tried to shush me for uttering the sinister name. “Look, it’s OK! The play’s only unlucky because the genuine King Macbeth was slandered by Shakespeare. You can mention his name safely as long as you don’t make out he was a bad guy . . .”

“Ah heard he possessed the audience,” Wullie said.

“Naw, it was more a Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane kindae thing,” Malky replied. “The auld King set all the trees in the local pine nursery on the audience and cast. I think almost everyone survived.”

“Except the director . . .” I pointed out.

“Aye,” Malky agreed, shivering, “he ended up as the fairy oan top o’ the Christmas tree that year!”

It was after “lights out” and we were all huddled together round the one wheezing radiator in the dorm. What with being wrapped in blankets to keep out the December cold, we looked like low-budget Bedouin, which was pretty appropriate considering most of us were going to be playing Arabs in *The Tragedie of the Mad Moor*. Anybody not cast as a desert nomad was going to be acting as a jinn or dressing up as some sort of buzzing insect.

“D’ye reckon this thing’s gonnae be any safer than the Scottish play?” Jonah asked.

“The only thing you’d feel safe in is a musical version of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*,” Malky sneered.

Jonah lunged for him, webbed fingers reaching for Malky’s fat neck, and bellowed, “Ah’ve telt ye afore—Ah’m nae an amphibian!”

Our blankets flapped like superhero capes as we desperately struggled to separate Jonah and Malky before they graduated from throwing punches to casting spells on each other. We had all been locked up for being “dangers to ourselves and others”, and I think the state hoped we would save them money by wiping each other out.

Spud’s eyes rolled back into his head and their whites began to glow. His little body quivered and I thought he was going to throw a fit. Malky and Jonah froze.

“So sorry, Malcolm,” Jonah said, offering a shaking hand.

“And I’m sorry too,” Malky replied, taking it.

Both boy’s voices sounded weird and sweat trickled down their foreheads. I realized that wee Spud was making them do this. Then the new boy stopped his mental puppetry, and we all edged away from him.

“Thanks, Spud,” I said, shaken by this display of power. He had never told us what he had done to get set down to Boleskin and now I didn’t want to know.

“Look, you lot,” I went on nervously. “I keep telling you, we’ve got to look out for each other. Have any of you actually read the play yet?” Everyone looked so blank you could have used them as shop-window dummies. “It’s dynamite—no, not dynamite—it’s a theatrical H-bomb. Doctor Dee wasn’t writing a crowd-pleaser, he was scripting a summoning ceremony—”

“Whit was he trying to conjure up, then?”

“I don’t think anybody knows, Wullie. I did a little bit of research in the library and I didn’t like what I found.” I had everyone’s attention now. “Dee didn’t want it performed in his lifetime . . . The manuscript turned up in his effects. He didn’t exactly die a happy man, so I think the play was supposed to be some kind of act of posthumous revenge—”

“Haud on, haud on!” Jonah interrupted. “Slow doon there, Tinker-boy. Are ye tellin’ us this thing’s niver been put on before?”

"Yes, Jonah."

"An' that it's some kindae magical booby-trap?"

"Yes."

"Well, why are they makin' us do it?"

"Because they're no stupid enough to do it themselves, ya bam," Malky reminded him.

"There's got to be more to it than that, Malky," I said. "Someone or something wants these rituals performed at last, but no one in their right mind would want to muck around with these forces. There's something very weird going on because, if the play works as Doctor Dee intended, then it's curtains for everyone."

Now, boys," Miss Sim said, "let me explain the long or medial 's' to you. You need to understand this archaic spelling to be able to pronounce the words in Dee's script correctly."

We shuffled nervously in the moth-eaten seats of the theatre as our drama coach went on. It was a shadowy barn of a place and the flock wallpaper seemed to writhe with a life of its own.

"It's a form of the lower case letter 's' that was once used at the beginning of or within a word. A good example is 'sinfulness.'" Miss Sim wrote "finfulness" on the blackboard standing on the middle of the stage before giving us a meaningful look. "The form we use now was called the terminal or short 's'."

"Short arsel!" Wullie shouted.

Miss Sim gave him a venomous stare, flicked her wrist and stotted her chalk off his forehead so hard it vaporized on contact. Wullie collapsed, stunned, and our teacher returned to her lesson.

"The medial 's' is often mistaken for a lower case 'f', and sometimes even has an f-like cross-stroke drawn through its middle. The confusion between the medial 's' and 'f' has been the subject of some low humor, but if any of you attempt to have fun at my expense by referring to me as 'Mifs', I will have your tongues tied in granny knots."

Wullie groaned as he came round, his pale face made even whiter by its dusting of chalk.

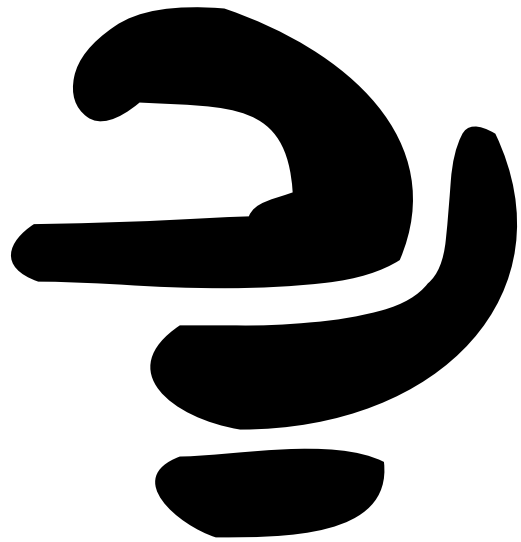
"Miss," I asked carefully, "can you tell us what the play is for?"

"What's it for?" For a moment, our teacher looked fazed, then she smiled as if receiving an unseen prompt. "It's for entertaining the school board during the festive season."

"Pardon me, but I meant the text itself."

"Well, like any play, it's a work of self-expression," our teacher told us with a smile so distant it looked like it was being faxed in from abroad. "A story told by performers who act out the highs and lows of human experience, tugging the heart-strings of their audience like emotional puppeteers . . ."

Miss Sim was drifting away, remembering her former career on the stage. We'd been told her days as an actress had ended when her immersion in character had gone too far and she'd begun to channel the characters she played. Her performance in Medea as the enchantress herself had been her last. While no one would have suggested that she'd died on stage, everyone else in the cast had.



"She doesn't realize," I whispered to the rest of the class while our teacher was distracted. "They've set her up too . . ."

This was worse than I'd thought. We were in serious danger of becoming the world's first kamikaze theatre company.

"Miss, Miss!" I shouted, trying to bring her to her senses. "Are you sure we should even be rehearsing this play if all the magic works?"

She shook her head and was back in the room with us again, no longer hypnotized by her memories, but still under a glamorous spell. Miss Sim had been charmed into thinking only in terms of acts—theatrical acts—not their actual consequences.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about peaking too early, boys. All drama needs an audience, and the Head has told me that the stars have to be right for the performance to work properly. You just have to be ready for opening night."

"I wannae know what we're opening," Malky whispered as we were sent down to the props room under the stage.

"Uck-uck-uck," went something in a tea chest covered by a rotting piece of backdrop.

I hauled the manky cloth away and saw Mr Wood's peeling head staring back at me.

"You're 'ucked!" our old teacher cackled. "Every last gloody one o' you!"

Malky hauled the remains of the evil ventriloquist's dummy out of the chest and stuck an exploding cigar in its clacking mouth. I waved a box of matches in Woody's face.

"So that's where you got to," I said.

I looked the wooden head in its painted eyes and made the sign of the evil eye, saying, "Tell us what you know, or we'll smuggle you into woodwork and use the sander to turn what's left of you into a cue ball . . ."

Before we stuffed the dummy back with the other props, the little blockhead had spilled the magic beans.

MAKING your way through the unlit corridors of Boleskin House after curfew is no picnic if you're a pupil—not least because things get let loose at night which would happily make

a meal out of you. Malky and I didn't have any choice though, so we used a very bony set of skeleton keys to open the mystical locks on the dormitory door. We badly needed some friendly advice on how to survive the performance of Doctor Dee's play at the weekend.

As we scrambled through the eerie hallways of the staff quarters, the ghouls in the grounds scabbled at the windowpanes, and inside the building, long, loping things tried to flute in our ears in the dark. Malky clutched a burning Hand of Glory to light our way and shield us from the gazes of the worst of the nightmares. He told me that he'd found it in the medical waste bags dumped outside the infirmary, but from the smell of the smoke, I guessed it was probably a mandrake root he'd filched from the kitchen garden.

We found the door to Mister King's room and rattled the doorknob to attract his attention, expecting it to be locked. The door swung slowly open and we slipped inside.

"Hello, boys, I've been expecting you," the conjurer said before telling us to close the door.

He stood with his back to us, dressed in a velvet smoking jacket and apparently stirring the log fire burning in the grate.

"Sir! Sir! Please, sir!" Malky babbled before I hushed him.

"How did you know we'd come?" I asked.

Mister King turned slowly and sighed, "Because you've already been to see me, in a manner of speaking." Stepping away from the fire, he let us see the dismembered remains of the two small, gray-skinned things which he was trying to burn, things which had once looked like us.

"In the name of the wee man!" Malky yelled. The creatures were melting like foul-smelling cheese in the fire. They had come off a poor second in sleight-of-hand-to-hand combat involving Mister King's fire irons.

"What indeed? So-called Enochian angels, I think," our teacher replied, stroking his drooping mustache with one hand while leveling a red-hot poker at us with the other. "And I'll need a little proof of identity to make sure you're both really who you should be, if you see what I mean."

"Aw no, what're we gonnae do?" Malky whispered to me. "How do we do that?"

"It really is us, Mister King," I said and pinched Malky's flabby gut.

"Ow—that hurt, Tinker!" Malky squealed, cuffing my head. "What d'ya think yer tryin' to do?"

Mister King smiled and nodded.

"You've put me at ease, boys. Your lethal twins were much better behaved. It seems the otherworldly creatures which deluded Doctor Dee are in our midst and impersonating people to further their dubious ends. I would suppose that some of the staff are under the Enochians' spell—the one's who aren't mad enough to want your class to stage the end of the world. Your class may also have been infiltrated . . ." He kicked the rest of the dismembered inhuman remains into the coals and put on the kettle. "We need to have a little chat to plan our strategy, but first—cocoa, anyone?"

"DEAR God, something's eaten the Baby Jesus' face!" Miss Sim cried shrilly. She flung the prop infant across the stage and

into the stalls. "How in heaven's name can anyone expect me to work in these conditions?"

"The show must go on, dear lady," Mister King said soothingly, "and someone with your remarkable talents can always rise above the inadequacies of any situation."

He looked at us speculatively. We were in full costume, but the dress rehearsal was not going well.

Those of us cast as Arabs wore tea towels tied round our heads with snake belts. Moldy old tartan blankets made do as our robes, and we'd had to draw sandal straps on our feet with greaspaint. In a misguided attempt at realism, Poor Wullie had stupidly drawn on his soles too and now he could barely move without sliding across the boards. I hoped our fake beards were cotton wool, but from their color, smell and general itchiness, I suspected they were made out of loft insulation material. Some of the other boys seemed to think it was candy-floss and had gone from chewing their facial hair to eating it.

"Agh!" yelled Jonah. The polystyrene wings of his scarab beetle costume had got caught in the scenery again. The rest of the giant insects gathered round to help and a locust untangled Jonah.

"Ya divvy," Malky sneered even as he slapped his bare arms to keep warm, streaking his blue greaspaint. Being the biggest boy in the class in all dimensions, he'd got the part of the high heid yin of the jinn. Unfortunately, all he got to wear apart from the color blue were a tea-cosy turban and a loincloth that looked like an enormous nappy, so he was freezing.

"This is a farcel!" despaired Miss Sim.

"I think it's rather more like a pantomime," Mister King replied sardonically.

"I seem to recall that Pantomime is supposed to be next door to Pandemonium . . ." she sighed.

"Well, let me help with the lighting and effects, and perhaps we can save the day."

Our drama coach nodded wearily as she went back to her script so she didn't see Mister King's meaningful wink at me. She was still under the spell that hid the true meaning of this production from herself and the rest of the staff. Only Mister King, being an illusionist too, had seen behind the veil dark forces had cast over events.

"Places, everyone," Miss Sim ordered and we began to run through *Al-Hazred* for the last time.

The Tragedie of the Mad Moor is an old, familiar story: A poet flips his lid on jimson weed after getting one too many bad reviews, goes on holiday in the ruins of Babylon and the secret underground chambers of Memphis—the Arabian city, not the one Elvis lived in. Then the idiot spends ten years lost in the Empty Quarter, the great southern desert of Arabia, trying to charm the jinn, djinn or genii—whatever—with his awful doggerel. Finally, some kind soul, or more likely, an abomination from outside space and time takes pity on him, telling him to go and write a book. The Moorish McGonagall hitches a lift from a passing caravan and heads for the publishing hotbed of Damascus. The poet settles down and writes his magnum opus, *al Azif*, the pocket guide to ultimate evil, better known in Dee's English paperback translation as the *Necronomicon*. Thankfully, a critic acting above and beyond the call of duty tears the old

loony to pieces in broad daylight for crimes against literature and appalling spelling. Allegedly invisible, the reviewer may simply have wished to remain anonymous out of modesty.

"That will have to do, I suppose," Miss Sim told us as we finished the last song and dance routine—or invocation, as we didn't like to think of it. "Break a leg tomorrow, boys."

"I think I already have," Malky moaned, rubbing his shin.

"WELL, I have to admit, it's really going rather well," Miss Sim said as the curtain closed on the penultimate act of *Al-Hazred*. "We may produce a triumph yet."

She was both right and wrong. Our class had performed brilliantly, but it's easy to act scared when you're so terrified you have to keep running to the toilet between scenes. Miss Sim had been channeling Stella Adler and there was method in this madness.

Furthermore, Mister King's excellent special effects and trick lighting had been complemented by the full-on poltergeist activity, ball lightning and spectral apparitions generated by simply reading the wrong script at the right time. This was big-budget stuff for a school production.

Our problem was to keep it up for long enough to play our trump card. The dark forces had to think things were going to plan so that we could be sufficiently mentally and physically intact to turn the poker tables on them. Someone among us was not who they seemed—there was an Enochian joker in the pack.

I peeked out at the audience as the lights went up and shivered. The school board sat sternly dressed in what could only be described as "Presbyterian Gothic." The staff were done up to the nines, or even the tens, and our dear leader, the Head, nestled on a pile of cushions in one of the boxes. The other classes were slumped unconscious, but they might have dozed through the show anyway without any magical help. And there among the hypnotized audience, unseen by them, was a horde of little gray men with big black eyes—the Enochian angels—who were behind the whole charade.

These otherworldly entities had set up Doctor Dee and led him down the gentle path to perdition. The thing was, Dee had finally tumbled to what they were up to and refused to do their bidding any more. Now they had revived his last, great terrible invocation, targeted Boleskin House and were back to finish their business along with the human race.

"They look like those Garys off of the telly," Poor Wullie said suddenly, startling me.

"Keep it down!" I muttered under my breath. "You're thinking of Grays."

"Aye, the aliens that abduct folk and finger their particulars . . ."

"They probably have done some of that kind of thing," Mister King told us leading us away from the curtain and helping us change for the final act. "But that doesn't mean they're from outer space. If you read your Celtic mythology, you'll find that some of the Fair Folk of Fairyland were supposed to look and carry on exactly like them too . . . Perhaps they're from a parallel world. Who knows? Let's just send them back to wherever they came from with their tails between their legs."

"Do they have tails too?" Poor Wullie asked.

"Shut up!" everyone snapped.

As we got ready to go back on stage, Mister King took me behind the curtain and whispered, "Remember what we talked about and be prepared . . ."

"Yes, sir," I said, hoping that the butterflies in my stomach were metaphorical. There had been enough of the flappy little buggers treading the boards already.

The house lights dimmed and then the plan went to Hell.

"Step aside, please, Mister King," growled Miss Sim in an unnaturally low voice. "I believe you have been misguiding my pupils . . ." she held a double-barreled shotgun in her bony hands, "and I am the director of this production!"

Mister King slowly raised his hands in the air. The Enochians had rumbled us and the jig was up. They had over-ridden their hypnosis and fully possessed Miss Sim. When I say "they", I mean one in particular—Spud McFee. As he stood beside her, working our drama coach like a puppet, his human features faded and he showed his true colors—gray with a hint of bile. The little bastard waved a three-fingered hand at me.

Miss Sim turned the gun on us as the curtain went up.

"I believe that's your cue, boys," she said, grinning.

Poor Wullie died spectacularly. Saddled with the role of Al-Hazred, fake blood sprayed everywhere as he was tossed about the stage by an invisible monster, played with enthusiasm by a malignant poltergeist. His bruised body hit its mark with a bone-jarring thud. Wullie played dead as if his life depended on it, and so help me, it probably did.

I felt sick as I delivered the closing speech of the play:

*Take up this mortal flesh and bear it hence
To a grave unmarked, yet mourn Abdul not.
Remember not who he was, nor his acts,
Think only of the words he wrote in blood
And their dire effects on this ball of mud.*

My class began to chant the final incantation to the pounding of an unearthly heartbeat. For obvious reasons, I'm not going to copy the text down here—a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, they say, and believe me, this spell contains far too much information.

The lights flickered out one by one and the air turned to treacle. Pupils, teachers and the school board gaped at us, deep in their hypnotic trances, drool running down their chins. I saw the Enochians dancing on their seats in glee.

As we chanted the last lines, evil charged the theatre like static electricity, but the Enochian finks looked rattled. I couldn't understand why—after all, they'd won, hadn't they? Then I heard us chanting the final word of the incantation and realized that we were saying "fins", not "sins." We'd forgotten about the long "s" in our terror and mispronounced the whole incantation.

Something was being summoned—after all, the grim grammar of Dee's incantation was correct—but our broad Scots accents and blatant mispronunciation had changed the Enochians' order into something else to go.

A crack of thunder inside the theatre made plaster from the ceiling rain down like dirty snow. Then a huge pall of

smoke billowed from the burning spot where the eldritch lightning had struck the stage. As the stinking fumes cleared, the Enochians took one look at what had turned up and broke for the fire exits. Unfortunately for them, all the doors in the auditorium had been welded shut by the electrical discharge as it crackled round the theatre.

The boards jumped and splintered as the monster stamped its enormous hooves. It snorted and acrid droplets sprayed from its flared nostrils. Rorschach patterns melted and reformed along its flanks while its tail thrashed like a flail. Eyes like frying eggs turned wildly in hollow sockets. Then the two halves of the abomination split apart with a sickening slurping sound and its writhing internal organs wriggled into view like groping fingers. The self-propelled guts grabbed the thing that had pretended to be Spud McFee and pulled him apart like a wishbone.

“Fuck me!” Malky yelled. “It’s a pantomime horse!”

The Enochians’ hypnotic spell was broken and the fighting began.

The Head shot into the rafters like a Montgolfier balloon and spat his caustic saliva down on the little gray devils. The rest of the teachers snapped out of their trances too, and unleashed a salvo of curses, hexes and old-fashioned head-butts.

We had other things to worry about as the demonic pantomime horse stampeded around the stage on its wonky legs. This was something that was never meant to be and it knew it. Because Dee’s incantation was properly formed, the spell had to summon something, but since the words were nonsense, the magic had just made something up.

“Ooyah!” Malky screamed as the hindquarters kicked him into the backdrop. Meanwhile, the front end sank its snaggle-teeth into Jonah’s polystyrene wings and tore them off his back. None of the class had time to cast any defensive spells.

“Run for it!” I yelled, waving everyone behind the scenes. I got to the backstage door and threw it open. In a moment, we were scrambling across the flagstones of the courtyard.

Then the two halves of the horse-thing smashed the doors off their hinges and began to circle us. Poor Wullie moaned, “It isnae fair,” and began to cry.

“That is quite enough!” yelled a very high female voice, and Miss Sim walked out of the theatre, shotgun clutched in her hands. Our drama coach was almost herself again and now seemed to be channeling Lillian Gish in *The Night of the Hunter*.

Both bits of the pantomime horse rounded on her, fused together and charged. Sparks flew as its hooves clattered across the courtyard.

“I will not tolerate gratuitous improvisation!” she shrieked and gave the monster both barrels.

The hindquarters exploded in a shower of stinking offal, and the furious front end stumbled to one side, crashing into the wall, but the job was only half done. The surviving part of the horse showered us with foam from its champing jaws and turned on Miss Sim again.

“Perhaps I can be of some assistance!” said Mister King brightly as he stepped out of the building, doffing his shiny top hat. “Abracadaver!”

The beast roared in fury. Mister King waved a white-gloved hand at it and then plunged his fingers into his hat. The monster screamed again, but this time in terror. The conjurer kept reaching deeper into his topper until he was up to his dinner-suited armpit. The pantomime horse flinched and staggered on the spot. Mister King’s arm had not come out the other side of his hat—it had gone somewhere else.

Our teacher clutched something and began to pull. First came the flags of all nations knotted together in a chain, then his topper spewed out brightly colored internal organs as Mister King pulled and pulled. Our nemesis began to shrivel as it was remotely disemboweled. Finally, it rolled its yolky eyes and died.

Mister King gingerly peeled off his soiled gloves, dropping them on his ruined hat and the steaming pile of guts.

I looked at him in amazement: “You told us your kind of magic was all about illusions . . .”

“Well,” he said, smiling kindly, “I said ninety-nine percent of all magic was about illusion, boys. The other one percent does come in handy sometimes.”

He strolled over to Miss Sim and offered her his clean arm.

“My dear, dear man,” she said as they walked back into the theatre, “I am so grateful to you, but you must tell me your first name so that I can thank you properly.”

“Nosmo,” he replied dryly, “in the best music hall tradition.”

And as we stood, astounded, among the festering remains of the demonic pantomime horse, Mister Nosmo King led our drama coach off into the sunset, even if it was only a painted theatrical backdrop.

THINGS got back to normal pretty quickly at Boleskin House. As our Christmas present for saving the day, we were told to clean the theatre up. The Enochians had come to a rather messy end.

We had almost finished sweeping the stage when I smelled smoke. Someone had lit a cigar. I shaded my eyes and looked into the stalls. Two shadowy figures sat puffing away in the back row. Jonah turned up the house lights and we saw that the last members of the audience in the house were not so much shadowy as ghostly.

“Mister Macbeth, your royal highness, sir,” Malky blurted.

“Doctor Dee, I presume,” I said, nodding to the other shade.

The ghost of the not-so-good doctor winked and the ancient Scottish king saluted us.

“Now, that’s entertainment!” he said. ♪

Andrew J. Wilson has published short stories in magazines and anthologies in Britain and the United States, including DAW Books’s Year’s Best Horror Stories, Markings, Fear, and The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases; he has also read his work on BBC Radio Scotland. His plays The Terminal Zone and The Black Ambulance Gang have both been performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. He is the science fiction, fantasy and horror reviewer for The Scotsman, as well as the co-editor of Nova Scotia: New Scottish Speculative Fiction.



ILLUSTRATION BY IAN DANBURY

HE WOULD DO ANYTHING
TO SAVE HIS BROTHER'S LIFE.
EVEN AFTER IT WAS OVER.

Going After Timmy

by Parke Godwin

What can I say about what I had to do or what I do now, except I've been there. What you call heaven isn't all that great, hell's not what you'd expect. Even the names are misleading, but it's mostly the in-between I know. Sad trip, but I had to go after my kid brother Timmy. No way did he deserve to be in hell. But Charley Lenihan did; in spades that bastard did. That warehouse heist that got Timmy wasted, everybody in the 'hood knew Charley thought up the whole deal, and Timmy just went along with him like always because Timmy was a follower all his life. So he got offed by a nervous rookie cop while Charley saved his own worthless ass. But Timmy's my brother, and from my first sight of him, a blue-eyed little lump just home from being born and snoozing in our mother's lap, I knew without words he was mine to take care of.

That's a lot to lay on a kid little as I was then but our mother had to work two jobs, Francis Morris being a permanent absentee father. We used to say he was in manufacturing, which was half true. He made license plates up in Sing Sing for icing a Gambino family soldier who offed a close friend of his. When it all hit the fan, everlovin' Dad got 25-to-life, which turned out to be life for real when the Gambinos got to him with an inmate's shank. Some of the neighbors helped us out, because homeys here stick together, but after a long shift in a restaurant and another at a launderette, Mom didn't have much time or energy left for us.

So I'm like nine years old, making breakfast and packing lunches for me and Timmy, in charge of getting us to and from school, which could get very old. I bullied him sometimes the way big brothers do, but Timmy wasn't one to nurse a grudge. His anger exploded, then it was gone. It didn't wait cold inside like mine. There was an iron bond between us—Danny and Timmy against the world—because there wasn't really anyone else to care. Sometimes he got mad and threw things at me, but if someone else picked on him, I was there to give the perp a knuckle sandwich. Worked both ways; once when a big kid was whaling hell out of me, Timmy put his lights out with a brick. No, I couldn't stay mad at Timmy more than five minutes. We were so close, after a while it was like the same thought in two heads; we could just look at each other and understand or break up laughing. Hard not to love him, a big-hearted kid with a sunny, trusting smile, he was always tagging along after me, short and pudgy but determined to keep up, or getting into trouble with other kids and always the one who wound up with egg on his face, like the last betrayed night of his life. Me, I always had to be watching out for both of us, so I kept people at a distance. You get careful living in a mean 'hood like Clinton, which used to be Hell's Kitchen before Kennedy Center and gentrification. You get so you can see trouble coming two blocks away. When Mom sent me to fetch Dad out of Feeney's bar, I could usually spot the skuzzballs who'd start trouble before the night was out; something in the eyes I recognized because it was in mine too. But everyone loved Timmy. I mean loved. With any friend he was always good for five or ten because he was the only twelve-year-old monte dealer on the West Side and raking in school yard lunch money. He ran a straight game: no shill, card bending or Mexican flip. With two to one house odds, he didn't have to. Even then Timmy had the casino philosophy: Win enough for a profit, lose enough to keep them coming back.

"They all want something for nothing, Danny," he told me. "Why not? That's the easiest way."

He grew up good looking with our mother's even features, not a mutt like me, and a real charm to warm your soul by. At his funeral three old girl friends showed up without their husbands. Afterwards when we all went out to get blitzed and tell Timmy stories at Feeney's bar, they cried like a Florida rainstorm and swore they still loved him. Kind of embarrassing; I mean they were all dogs. For all his smarts at figuring angles, Timmy had a junkyard taste in women. His talent was for getting around things "Always an easier way, Danny," he figured. "And I always find it."

In high school he was cranking out fake IDs, gorgeous jobs. We drank under age at Feeney's for a year on those, not to mention what Timmy made selling them. You'd think the way people just took him to their hearts, he'd be a natural con man, except he liked too many people too much, usually the wrong kind. After graduation he went into flat-busting with me and Charley Lenihan who didn't come to his funeral but had the balls to send a mass card from St. Malachi's.

It was Charley who proved my talent for spotting losers. Something like wrong notes in music, and always a hard luck story, nothing ever their fault. Charley saw a good thing in

Timmy and talked him into flat-busting, ripping off apartments. Okay, I went along because we always needed money. We stayed out of the neighborhood because Timmy and I would not take from homeys. That burned Charley who didn't give a shit about anyone. And vicious? At a party one night, there was this deadbeat creep who owed him big time, maybe a hundred. Charley gave him a lot of friendly attention, filling his drink as soon as the guy finished it, arm around his shoulder, the whole bit.

"What's with Lenihan?" I asked Timmy. "You'd think he was gonna marry that bum."

"That's Charley's way. He's out for payback." Then Timmy gives me that million-dollar grin that could mean anything from Have a nice day to Screw you, and adds, "Stay out of the way when it goes down."

Sure enough the dumb bastard got so loaded he couldn't get off the floor, and that's when Charley kicked his teeth in. And while the guy is lying there spitting blood, Charley outs a razor and makes a road map out of his face. I'll never forget his expression then, crouched over the deadbeat, mouth twisted in an ugly leer, eyes pure hate like a hungry rat about to finish the job, but Timmy pulled him away and somebody hustled the casualty out the door. That's when I knew sure as hell Someone's gonna do you, Lenihan. No way you're long for this life, and that's a blessing for the world.

After that the 'hood called him Crazy Lenihan. Charley wasn't psycho, just a greedy dirtbag. Partly we went into flat-busting with him because Mom was terminal with emphysema then. There had to be money for the hospital and after that the funeral. It was a no-brainer. Timmy and I were good at busting. Now and then it went sour with an alarm system we didn't count on or a small dog with large attitude, but our system was down cold. Get in, two minutes to inventory, go to work. We stuck to electronics for quick resale: VHS, CDs, DVD players and laptops. Snip the wires off close, stuff it into a duffel bag, never more than we could carry easily, and out of there.

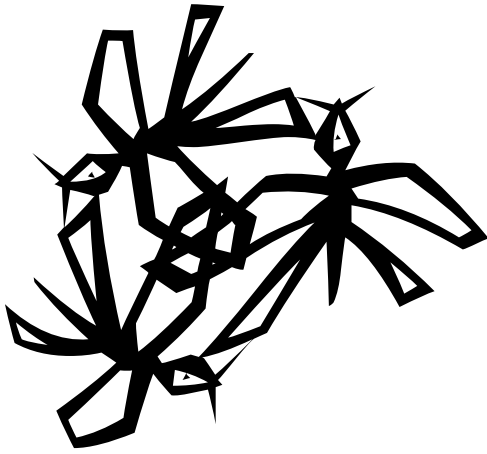
Except for Charley—not wacko but not a rocket scientist either. He got off scavenging somebody's pad and knowing he could take whatever he liked; it made him feel exalted like a kid turned loose in a candy shop with twenty bucks in his hot little fist. Timmy and I are snipping and stowing, and there's Lenihan rooting through drawers and closets and coming away with mostly junk. Timmy ragged him with that what the hell laugh of his that started up in the tenor and slid all the way down to baritone.

"Ah, you've ruined him, Charley! Got his Nike runners." Looking at his watch while Charley tossed a drawer full of underwear. "Any old freakin' time, Lenihan."

"Wait a minute; this guy's just my size!"

"Christ, Danny, can you believe this? Let's split."

We busted for a couple of years paying off our mother's funeral, may she rest in peace, but more alarm systems and neighborhood watches came in until we were running more risk than profit. By then I'm into my 20's with a straight job for a change, and there was a nice girl with an apartment on West End Avenue up in the Nineties. We hit it off okay and she invited me to move in with her. Mistake. I mean Monique was



fine; the problem was, like always, I couldn't let her really close to me. I knew it wouldn't last. So long it was Timmy and me closed up against the world, there was never room for anyone else. After a while our relationship got down to great half hours in bed and a war zone the rest of the time. More than that, my dull job in an office mail room was a drag and, let's face it, I missed the old life in the 'hood. At least there I fit in. Timmy and I had different strains of the same disease. He always needed people around him, always headed for the brightest lights and the loudest noise, while Danny the Watcher never trusted anything far enough to make it work. Okay, I'm a loser, but I can spot my kind a mile away. That's why the Front Office keeps me in gravy. I'm real good at what I do now.

So I'm home one Saturday when Monique's out shopping, and who calls me but Timmy. We'd not seen or talked to each other in a few months. He needed money, wouldn't say for what, meet him at Feeney's like now. His voice had always been piercing clear; now it sounded reedy and strained.

I got there around three, when Feeney himself was back of the bar. He drew me a Miller and nodded to a back booth. If he sounded bad on the phone, Timmy looked worse—nervous and irritable, his hands shaking visibly. I'd never seen my little brother like this. He looked drained, all the personality that was the Timmy I loved now just wiped clean out of his face, leaving it drab and aged ten years.

"Jesus, where've you been, a war?"

He ignored the question, slumped over his hardly touched beer. "Got a job coming up tonight."

"Like what?"

Timmy dropped his eyes. "You don't need to know."

"Busting?"

"Piece of cake, but I need a touch now."

I didn't need to ask what for. Even in the shadows, Timmy's pupils were too small. When he raised his beer, it jiggled in the glass. "I gotta get straight before tonight."

That hit me like a death, my own brother with a habit. The helpless rage began to build in me with nothing to hit at now but Timmy.

"How long you been hooked?"

"A while."

"Dumb. Who's dealing, the Westies?"

Again with the evasion, not meeting my eyes. "It's around."

I grabbed his arm and held on hard enough to make him wince. "Is it Charley?"

"Yeah, yeah." Timmy shook me off, angry. "He deals to pay for what he uses. That's how it is." When he looked at me square again, he was naked desperate, pleading. "I'm flat until tonight and bent way out of shape. I'm hurting, Danny. Can you let me have about sixty?"

Painful to look at him needing a fix just to feel normal. You did this, Charley. And I had to freebee my brother to another hit? "I only got twenty and change."

"Not enough." Timmy's body jerked suddenly as if all his muscles revolted, spilling some of his beer. "Cash."

"Cool it. I'll write a check."

"It's Saturday." His voice jittered and cracked. "The banks closed early."

"Easy, Timmy, for God's sake."

"Okay, let's find an ATM." And then what was left of my kid brother took my hand, and I heard all the love and bond of all our years in his voice. "Please, Danny."

What could I do but pull out my checkbook and lie to Monique later? "Feeney'll cash me." Which he would always do for regulars. I put the money in Timmy's hand with a promise, praying my brother heard me good. "Get on a methodone program. I mean now. Get in rehab or I swear I'll turn you in myself."

"Don't, Danny. I'll handle it."

"Yeah, real good you're handling it, and you shooting what? Sixty bucks a day? Eighty?"

"Get out of my face, Danny!" It came out of him too loud. Feeney turned around behind the bar and two old tads in a booth across from us looked over. "I'll be okay."

"Do it, kid." Monique would be home now and wondering where I was. I didn't leave her a note; hell, I never did. I got up to go, feeling as sick inside as Timmy must. "Do it. Jesus, you stupid bastard, I love you. You're all I've got close to my heart in this world, and for the first time in my life I don't want to look at you." It wasn't anger that made me say the rest, just the hurting love. "I got problems of my own, so get straight or go to hell."

I walked out of the bar knowing I shouldn't have pushed him away like that, but I damn well would turn him in. Too late. Feeney himself called me next day: Timmy dead in a warehouse break-in on 12th Avenue, one unknown perp escaped.

I had to go downtown to identify the body, the worst day of my life because I was looking at me on that table, my own death, and the best of me would go into the ground with my brother. I went into serious hock for the funeral and wake, and then stayed drunk for three days—no, that doesn't describe it. All the years with Timmy boiled up as I drank and blacked out into a terrible dream of myself lying in his coffin and Timmy bending close, begging me to come back, come back.

Drunk? I was Pompei, St. Helen's and that volcano in the Pacific that blew up a whole island, going down and down into blackness shot with the color of blood. Monique called everywhere, frantic, finally got me at Feeney's where he'd laid me

out to sleep in the store room. He poured me into a cab and took me home where I sobbed out the pain hanging on to Monique, screaming how I should have taken better care of Timmy, and now both of us were dead. She got me into bed, sympathetic but scared. She'd never seen me so soul-bleeding helpless before and couldn't handle it: Good, white-bread Monique who had no darkness in her.

That's when everything changed for me, when it all started, what I did next and what I do now. The voice was tiny at first, a whisper in my mind: Timmy was calling me. All through the day, at work or with Monique, the thought kept coming back stronger each time. Timmy and I could always read each other with just a look, think the same thought together, but this was twilight zone.

I started dreaming it, Timmy reaching out to me and mouthing my name with no sound. Again and again I dreamed it, not silent any more but Timmy pleading, calling to the only soul he ever had in this world to love or trust. Monique started to rag on me big time: Where was my head at? Why didn't I ever think of her feelings sometimes, and she'd have no more of me coming home wrecked from Feeney's, that place catered to a bad element . . . you get the picture. Sure, there was a bad element in Feeney's, mine. She was beginning to nag like a wife. That split us for good. I kissed Monique bye-bye and moved back into the 'hood, but the dreams kept coming. One day I'm eating lunch in Burger King and Timmy's voice came through so loud that I jumped.

Danny, help me!

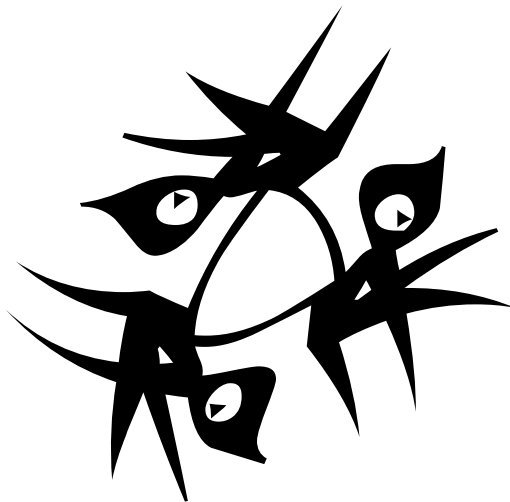
I put down the sandwich and closed my eyes around the thought: *Okay, Timmy. I hear you.*

I never thought for a minute I was crazy, just desperate enough by now to talk to Father Joe Reilly at St. Malachi's, who confirmed Timmy and me when we were kids. Weird as it sounded, I gave it to him straight: Wherever Timmy was, he still needed me, and what could I do about it? Father Joe's an understanding priest but wasn't much help beyond suggesting the prayer for the dead that I couldn't ever remember. Out of habit, I headed for Feeney's because that's where homeys went for company and consolation, gossip, connections, who's heard from relatives in Belfast, and anything else they might need to share.

Clarence Feeney, bless him, is a hands-on owner and operator. Friday and Saturday nights he puts on extra bar help, maybe a waitress on St. Pat's Day, but mostly he's there himself watching the register because he doesn't trust the help all that much and it gets him away from Mrs. Feeney who was born a living bitch and still is. But Clary I always liked. Come evening he dims the lights over the back booths with a remote switch and lets his regulars drink in peace. He was a pal of my dad's in the old days and sort of inherited me.

I remember, that was a Tuesday after Timmy died, a slow night, so Feeney leans over the bar—fat since forever with silver hair that never combed right and a worn-out face like every old mick who ever came through Ellis Island—and he asks me, “Ah, y' look bad, Danny. Troubles?”

“You wouldn't believe.” My question was important but I kept it casual. “Charley Lenihan been in?”



Feeney took a napkin to a ring of wet on the mahogany bar. “Not since.” Which meant not since Timmy died. In our ‘hood a lot of things don't get spelled out. “Place smells better without him.”

I finished my Bushmill's and chased it with beer. “Amen.”

“Here, have one for Timmy, rest his soul.” Feeney pours me a fresh Bush, but his expression is dead serious. “Someone's going to remove Charley one of these days. Simple sanitation, people say.” And he holds my eyes with the clear meaning in his own: Who better than you? Then like an afterthought: “He's hanging out at P.J. Clarke's now.”

“Who said?”

“Little geek in a cheap suit. Comes in now and then. Don't know his name.”

I got the message. The job was mine to do, and from the looks I got from homeys, Feeney was speaking for everyone. Easy to say but a lot to think twice about at home later. I've been outside the law often as in but nothing like this. Could I put a gun to Charley Lenihan's greasy head and do him? The Westies would take a contract on anyone, but those humps did messy work; I couldn't afford them anyway. Do it myself, I'd pass the point of no return, and there was enough church left in me to know there'd be heavy dues. While I was mulling all this before bed, it happened again—Timmy's voice clear as if he were in the room.

Danny, help me!

“I'll try, honest,” I promised out loud. “Tell me how.”

Carlos knows. He'll find you.

Whoever and whatever, I'm no hero. I wondered if I could handle it. “Gotta know one thing, little brother. Was it Charley with you at the warehouse?”

Who else? A real stand up guy, Charley. He ratted out when he heard the cops and left me swingin' in the wind.

“How'd it go down?”

Dark. I couldn't see. Had an armload of DVDs, tripped up and went ass over tea kettle. First cop in is this rookie kid. Says to put my hands up, and all I'm holding is this stupid DVD. He thought I was pointing a gun. Timmy's laugh slid down the scale, dry and bitter.

You and I were pros, never carried a piece. So who does me? A freakin' amateur. Timmy's voice started to fade. *Get me out, Danny. This place is...*

I could barely hear him. "Where the hell are you?"

Carlos knows...

There it was. Hell or wherever, I'd get him out, but Charley first. He sold the fix that got Timmy straight but probably took away his sharp edge and got him killed. My father's old .38 was still wrapped in a towel in a bottom drawer, serial number filed off, untraceable as it was thirty years ago. I ran a rag patch down the barrel and gave it some oil. Scared, hands shaking, but Timmy deserved a clean job.

The next night at Feeney's Clary set a small paper bag beside my beer.

"What's this?"

He spread his hands innocently. "Now, would I open your mail? That little guy I told you about, he left it for you. Said his name is Carlos. With dandruff like his, he shouldn't wear dark suits."

The bag contained six .38 shells and a piece of yellow notepaper scrawled with a single sentence. "After you dump the garbage, be here any night at twelve."

Too clear. There was the weird feeling I was now part of a larger machine that just got into gear.

I scouted a couple of nights at P.J. Clarke's on Third Avenue.

A different world. Clarke's tries to look old-time with the battered oak bar and cracked tile floor, but it's upscale. The bartenders wear red waistcoats and bow ties, the music bounces off the walls like a war, people screaming at each other to be heard. The place is an overpriced yuppie hangout where they're always trying to make out with a new woman, run a stock deal or impress one another. Tailored suits and designer dresses, too-cool young guys with important-looking attache cases. I figured my old briefcase wouldn't be noticed. I wrapped the gun in a thick towel and went across town.

The night I found Charley there, he didn't see me at first. He was wedged in a corner behind two guys, looking lost and out of place as a stray dog in a gathering of Persian cats. I edged through the crowd to the bar for a Miller Lite and a cheap double bourbon I knew was Charley's favorite. Waiting for the drinks I got my pitch straight: We were just two homeys who loved Timmy and didn't know jack about the other guy on the warehouse job.

"Charley, boyo! Good to see you. Here, brought you one."

"Danny!" He hugged me like a fellow prisoner of war in an enemy camp. "Thanks. Glad to see another stud around here. Can you believe these faggots?" The big hello, but I saw the scared question in his eyes, like how much did I know? "How you holding up, Danny?"

When I just shrugged, Charley put his arm around me, very understanding. "Danny, I told him, I said you don't want to pull no job without Danny and me. You can't go in with some dumb freak don't know what he's doing."

He would have gone in on the job himself, but his mother was sick again, so he stayed home that night. I'm good at what I do. He was pumping hard, but for all he could read me, I was

just a grieving brother and he was innocent as a baby's prayer. "Yeah, well, he did. Nothing for it now."

He finished the fresh drink too fast. "So what's the word? They catch the other guy?"

"No, bastard got away clean. Come on, we're a long way from the bar, and we've got to pray Timmy to heaven."

Charley yearned over the dry bottom of his glass. "Too pricey here."

"Screw it, I'm buying."

"Hey, Danny?" His tongue was thickening now; I'd make it even thicker. "What's with the briefcase?"

"Office stuff."

After we wedged in at the bar, it was easy. I played him like that deadbeat he cut up. Pure poetic justice, since Charley always guzzled his whisky like a thirsty horse but couldn't hold it any better than he could a decent job. We drank to Timmy while Charley actually got weepy sentimental—"He's in heaven sure, Danny"—and I kept the bourbon coming. When he started getting sloppy—spilling his drink and blathering about his old mother who laid guilt on him every day, but he loved her dearly—I knew the time was near. He could hardly hold his head up, and the Joe College type behind the bar was giving him the kind of looks that get drunks eighty-sixed.

Eyes unfocused and half closed, Charley pawed at me with bourbon-scented affection. "You're a good man, Danny. You'n Timmy, they don't make 'em like you boys any more. Oh Christ, I'm wrecked."

"Hey, it's late and I got a heavy date at twelve." I leaned over him. "Want me to put you in a cab?"

Charley hung over the bar, half out of it now. "Good man. Get me home. All tore up."

I steered him through the crowd, Charley leaning on me—"Gonna be sick, Danny"—and me praying he could hold it a minute. I thought I'd be queasy as he looked, but something else was working in me. I felt nothing, like looking at us both from outside.

On the sidewalk, Charley swallowed hard twice. "All tore up. Gon' be sick."

But just then two couples sailed out of Clarke's laughing, looking up and down the avenue for cabs. "Not here," I hissed. "You want to puke in front of people?"

In the street light, Charley was going green and desperate. "Gonna be sick."

That's when the clear voice sounded in my head at high volume—not Timmy but someone else, deep and firm like a general used to giving unquestioned orders. *Not here, Mister Morris. Take him around to the back.*

That's how it went down, in back of Clarke's by the piled up garbage sacks. When Charley bent over to heave, I snaked the gun out of the briefcase and put two in the back of his worthless head for Timmy. There wasn't much noise; the towel muffled the shots. Charley just fell forward and blended with the rest of the trash. Done. A little later I threw the gun far out into the East River and gave Charley his kiss off. "You bastard, go to hell if they'll have you."

Eleven-thirty now. Carlos said be there by twelve. I caught a cab back to Feeney's and grabbed a back booth. Just at mid-

night the door opened. The figure that filled the entrance couldn't be Carlos. Feeney said he was a runt; this guy topped six-four. Carlos wore cheap suits. My visitor's gray double breasted was the kind of expensive that doesn't need to advertise, set off with a quiet maroon tie and shoes like mirrors. Definitely not what you saw in Feeney's more than once in a lifetime. Big, but he moved like a welterweight. Heads turned as he glided past the bar straight to my booth and skewered me with that commanding voice I'd heard at Clarke's.

"Daniel Morris." Statement, not a question. Without thinking I stood up in respect.

"We can sit." He melted down into the booth gracefully as a woman half his size. From the face I couldn't tell what he was—Irish, Italian, German, Jewish, you name it. He looked like the whole history of Man, sitting there still as a stone, manicured hands resting on the table, deep-set black eyes looking clean through me. After a minute I noticed that he never blinked. Just fixed me with those two cold marbles like Judgment Day.

I cleared my throat. "Uh, can I ask—?"

"Ender," he finished my thought. "From the Front Office."

I ducked away from that unsettling stare. "I don't want to sound stupid but are you—?"

"An angel? Not that nor any opposite." Ender allowed me a millimeter of smile. "They always ask. The prejudice of parochial thinking notwithstanding, there's nothing adversarial about us. High to low, we're all one system. The only evil spirits we get are from here. Your kind has a capacity for guilt equal to its penchant for destruction. My department is Sanitation. We remove toxic waste."

Sanitation. Feeney said that about Charley. "Toxic?"

"The unlamented Lenihan."

"So it was you I heard."

"And Timmy," Ender admitted. "The link between you two AT&T would kill for." Like a statue he sat there. I could feel the power coming off him in waves while his broad chest never rose or fell. Ender didn't breathe. "So Timmy wants out. They all do and never will leave, just as they never knew how to live.."

"Where's Timmy?"

"Ifrinn—is that the word?"

"Hell." I knew that much. "The Irish word for hell."

"Some of your neighbors call it that." Ender moved a little, a kind of shrug. "Tedious place, boring, but no more pain than people bring with them. Your brother deserves it."

"The hell he does! I don't care who you are, don't knock Timmy to me."

His black eyes widened with a glimmer of interest and maybe a little more respect. "And you want to get him out."

"I will get him out."

"To what, Mister Morris?"

"Out of there. What'll it take?"

Another millimeter. What Ender called a smile would give frostbite to an Eskimo. "From you? Perhaps more than you are willing to part with."

I looked down into my Bushmill's. "No way. I should've—"

"Taken better care of him?"

"All right, yeah." Really bugged me the way he read my thoughts, but one thing I've known since grade school. Big time or small, there's a price on everything. I already did Lenihan. What else could be so bad? "If I get Timmy out, what's the deal?"

The statue of Ender moved slightly. "The Front Office has already framed your agreement."

"Front—that's hell?"

"No." Ender allowed himself to look annoyed. "I said it's all one system with different departments, different agreements. Yours is non-negotiable."

"Okay, what?"

"Timmy moves on. You take his place."

Before I could even begin to feel scared, Ender went on. "You have unique qualities, Daniel. Timmy was sunlit, you're the dark. Do you have the heart to move him on?"

"And stay myself?"

"Removing Lenihan was your choice. Where we put you is ours."

True, I was past no return. I'd been scared all my life but nothing like that moment, Ender looking straight through me and maybe knowing my refusal already. I swallowed the rest of my drink, needing to stall. "Just tell me one thing straight. Is Charley down there now?"

"Where else? He was born for it. Choose, Daniel. Yay or nay."

At least I'd sent Lenihan to the right place. For the rest, man, I had to think hard on that. "I don't know."

"Yes you do."

"Gimme time to think. One day."

"Only one day?" Ender glided to his feet smoothly. "My compliments, sir. Better and braver men than you have hesitated months, years, and then turned us down. The same time here tomorrow night." Ender took out an expensive kidskin wallet and laid a twenty by my glass. "Tonight is on us."

He looked around at the curious regulars who'd been eyeing him. I heard a bored weariness when he spoke. "That's what we deal with, Daniel. Dangerous losers. You'll do splendidly."

Yes or no. Maybe I knew my answer already; that didn't stop the *No* from screaming at me. All right, Timmy was weak but people loved him. I never had the knack to be loved, never could trust enough, never married or stuck with any woman, not even a decent job ever. Okay, I never ratted on anyone and always looked out for Timmy until that became my life. How far would that go toward parole? I remembered Father Joe's lectures on sin and atonement. As for Revelation, I suspect John was snorting something heavy when he wrote that.

Take their lousy deal and I was dead as Timmy. Then again, could I go on living with him stuck in that place? The whole 'hood mourned him. I wouldn't even leave a cat for someone to adopt. Monique? Forget it. Her parting words said it all—

"You're a bum like your brother. Get out of my life."

So what's so good here I should hang onto?

The next night I walked into Feeney's before twelve and

just stood there a bit taking in the tired scene: old regulars guzzling their paychecks, couple of Westies talking loud at the bar. What was to miss? When he brought my beer, Feeney nodded toward the low-lighted rear.

“Back booth. That Carlos guy.”

That was him all right. Cuban or Puerto Rican I'd guess, sallow with thinning black hair plastered down, new snowfall of dandruff on the shoulders of a suit I'd be ashamed to steal. Carlos looked like he started worrying in the womb. His eyes never stayed on you but darted about nervously, grubby hands with nails bitten down to the quick, stubbing out a cigarette in an already crammed ashtray. But alive, breathing like me with his nose buried now in a pint of ale.

“You're Carlos.”

“Danny Morris? About time.” He swallowed more ale and smacked his lips. “Runs like this I can at least get a decent drink. By the way, nice clean job on Lenihan.”

“You work for Ender?”

“Courier and conductor.”

There was a familiar stamp on Carlos I knew from way back. “You got a cop look.”

“Used to be. Undercover narcotics. You know, buy and bust, now and then dealt a little on the side. Goodbye job and pension.” Carlos finished his pint and checked his watch. “So what's it to be, amigo? You with us?”

Somehow the *Y&s* stuck in my throat long enough for Carlos to frown with impatience. “Come on, Danny boy. We get lots of nobodys, but Ender says you're special.”

Half in hell already but I had to know something for sure. “He said Lenihan's there now.”

“Sure he is. We get lots of Lenihans.” A shade of boredom like Ender's flitted over his wary narc expression. “Charley's the usual pain in the ass.”

“Usual?”

“He's an explainer like all the rest. They sit there alone telling the walls how nothing was ever right for them or their own fault, or how they could've done so much more if they had the breaks, and how their husband or wife dragged them down—get the picture? They spent their lives doing that number; why should now be different?”

Carlos leaned back with a sigh. “They never knew anything else, like me, except I know it was me flushed my life down the john. They were all scared to die but more afraid to live when they had the chance.”

Lenihan gone to his reward. I finished my beer, thinking okay, if my own life was a washout, at the end I got something right. “Screw it. Let's go.”

“Good man.” Carlos led the way past the bar but I tapped him at the door. “Wait outside. Want to say goodbye.” I leaned over the bar, my hand out to Feeney. “So long, Clary. Won't be around for a while.”

Feeney held onto my hand. He's second generation, and now and then he just knows things as if he had the Sight. “Slan leat, Danny. I'll be telling Father Reilly.”

That really touched me, how he'd said goodbye in the old language. I remembered a few words of it from my dad. “Slan agat, Clary. God bless you in the morning.”

From Ninth to Twelfth Avenue isn't far. We ended up at the door to a run-down warehouse—locked, but whatever Carlos did, we had no trouble getting in. Not an impressive road to Hereafter.

“This is where Timmy got whacked,” Carlos told me. “I collected him myself. Nice guy,” he added as he led me through the dust and shadows to a rust-stained metal door. “Just too trusting. Here we are.”

We went down into a sub basement and then more subs underneath, each older and dimmer than the last. Past abandoned pipes, rotting asbestos and ancient machinery solid brown with rust. The last one had a bare dirt floor and feeble oil lamps along a passage more like a carved-out tunnel, always downward until it opened out into a space so vast I couldn't see where it ended, if it did. The near part was gloomy enough under a cold bluish light.

“How big is this place?”

“Big as it needs to be.” Carlos kept moving. “Walk faster,” he snapped. “I don't spend any more time down here than I have to.”

As we went on toward wherever, I heard a blurred sound that grew louder until I recognized human voices, hundreds of them. “What's that?”

Carlos clued me. “Like I told you, the explainers. That's what they do.”

“Just yak at each other all the time?”

“At the walls. You heard 'em for years in Feeney's. Nobody listened then; they don't now.”

It grew darker, but as we moved on I made out men and women sitting or standing alone, no two together but all of them babbling urgently as if their whole existence depended on someone somewhere finally understanding—

“... he always beat me up bad when he was drunk, and I took it and took for years, what was I to do, until Harry come along, and, Jesus, it was only right after all Walter done to me that Harry and me would want each other. At the trial I said Harry killed Walter, the cops forced that out of me. Harry said I done it but it was both of us. Okay, I bashed Walter's head in, but what else could I do . . . ?”

Someone I recognized sat on a stool turned away from anyone close so he wouldn't have to make any contact, I guess. Tony Fiore who used to collect for loan sharks in the 'hood. Not a made Mafia guy but very persuasive at two hundred and twenty-five pounds. Broke a lot of arms and kneecaps in his time, but in this place Tony had shriveled to the nothing he was inside—

“... I didn't mean to lean on Hickey that hard, no way I meant to kill him, but he was a month behind and smelled of what he was drinking up when he should've been paying, and I was sick of his bullshit, so . . .”

The worst, frightening thing about them all—they never stopped, these miserable leftovers. They were like tape loops spinning out their pathetic excuses and then, no pause at all, starting all over. None of them looked much like people any more but what Ender said they'd made of their lives, warped with decay. This place was a human garbage dump for people like abandoned cars, rusted and gutted. It was hell, and all I

could think about was getting Timmy out, not the price or what I'd shrink to down here.

Carlos nudged me. "There's Lenihan. You want to talk to him?"

I did not. Sniveling, babbling on his little stool, Charley was no more than three feet high. No way would I get near that; I felt dirty enough already. Carlos agreed with a snort. "Yeah, you heard it all already. Nothing was ever his fault, not the way his old man always beat him up and how he had to take care of his sick mother, but he was just about to straighten out his life for good when you did him, so it was really you to blame."

"Just a misunderstood altar boy."

"You got it. Come on." We moved on past other shapes I could barely see in the blue-gray light, then Carlos stopped and faced me, serious. "Want you to think real hard now. Up to here you can still change your mind and I'll take you back, no strings." He was searching me for something. "No shame either. Lot of talent change their minds about here. Don't have the stomach for this."

From what I'd seen and heard, who would? Carlos's eyes weren't evasive now but glued to mine, testing me. "Which way?"

This little ex-narc/dealer couldn't be any sicker of his life than I was. Heroism is not my thing, but I had a deal in place. Timmy got sprung—and besides, maybe this wasn't the last stop for me either. It still took all the courage I had to point forward into the dark seething with that dismal noise like the keening of old women at a wake. "That way."

His grin held open admiration. "Ender said you were a class act."

The light came up a little as we went on, with nothing to see but more of the same until Carlos stopped again and . . . there was Timmy. I would have run to him, but Carlos stopped me, one finger to his lips. "Dig him a minute. He's different from the rest."

Thank God. Timmy wasn't twisted or shrunk, no part of the endless dirge of voices that flowed over him like sewage. He sat still and silent. As I watched he dropped his face into his hands, but when he sat up I read no self-pity in him, not a drop. I saw my brother plain then, and—if you can understand—felt proud, even justified. We were both small-time hustlers, but all our lives we had a kind of code. "Hell is other people," some guy said. Maybe, but Timmy and I never blamed anyone else when we bent ourselves out of shape.

Carlos gave me the moment, a long one. "The one who writhes silently is Brutus.' Some weird Italian wrote that about hell way back. He never made this trip, but the line fits Timmy." Carlos faded away from me back into the gloom. "Go get him."

A woman's voice rose like a thin mosquito whine over the drone. At the sound Timmy's head snapped up. His lips went back in disgust; he came off the stool like a rocket, barking into the shadows. "That's it, Gracie. Fifteen shows a day is enough. Okay, so he ruined your life. So he took your money and got you hooked on coke and your baby drowned in the bathtub. Don't run it into the ground! "

I felt my heart well up. That was my little brother for you, dead maybe but Timmy Forever, and yeah! He was worth any trade. "Give 'em hell, Timmy."

"What? Who's there?" He needed a moment to realize and then believe it was me—"Danny?"—then he was all over me, hugging me close. "DannyDannyDanny! Jesus, what the hell're are you—Don't tell me you got whacked, no way."

"Long story. Carlos came with me."

Timmy squeezed me again. "My big brother," he wondered, as if somebody had just handed him a miracle. "It's so great to . . ." He trailed off and the cocky grin faded as the explainers flooded into our ears. "Who am I kidding? Welcome to Losers' Lane. Got no class, but on the other hand the people are boring like you wouldn't believe."

"Good news," Carlos told him, coming out of the dark. "You been paroled."

"For real," I confirmed. "I got some pull with the Front Office."

Timmy stared at me. "Those pricks never paroled anyone." "You going to stand there looking stupid or move? You're out. Come on."

"Hey, Lenihan!" Timmy belted it out to the darkness, wheeling his arm in a great triumphant circle. "Listen up, dirt-bag, and eat your heart out, 'cause TIMMY MORRIS IS LEAVIN' BRIGADOON! Yo, Gracie! Look on the bright side. At least this place got you off coke."

"Like I said," Carlos mused. "You gotta love a guy who can find laughs down here. Come on, joker." He took the lead again, guiding us across the endless space. As we went on, the lights brightened a little until he stopped by a door marked UPPER LEVELS. We climbed a long flight of stairs, then Carlos opened the last door to warm sunlight and a street more than familiar. Timmy raised his head to the light like he was praying. People passed us, actually going places and talking to others like they were human.

"It's the 'hood," Timmy whispered. "It's Sixty-second Street. Danny, look. There's our old building."

Where we used to play by the stoop and I looked out for cops during Timmy's monte games. Carlos tapped him on the shoulder. "Go on. Your ma's cooking dinner and your old man wants to buy you a drink."

"Made it," Timmy breathed. "We finally made the big time. Let's go home." He started to cross the street but stopped at the curb, seeing I hadn't moved. "You coming?"

Hard to look at my brother then. "That's the bad news, kid. I have to go back."

Carlos gave it to him straight. "He takes your place."

When he dug it, Timmy looked like he'd been kicked in the stomach. "Down there?"

"Your brother's solid gold," Carlos said, "but that's the deal. Come on, Danny."

"No. No!" Timmy shook his head with that hissing-bomb look I knew too well. If I hadn't stopped him, Carlos would've been a hospital case.

"Who did this?" Timmy raged, struggling to get at him. "Who said, you little—"

I held onto to him tight. "Timmy, cool it."

"Nobody does that to my blood!"

"It's done." I pushed him out to arms' length. "You understand? The only way it could go down. Go home."

"You coming or not?"

"Hey, dummy, what part of 'done' don't you understand?" I tried to make him feel better than I did, which was a stretch. "No problem, kid. I've had worse gigs. Remember that flat-bust where the goddam neurotic cat attacked me?"

Timmy remembered; in spite of everything, he had to laugh. "That was one sick beast."

"The Norman Bates of cat-dom. I got an infection from his claws and the owner didn't even have a TV. Or the night the cops hauled you in drunk, except I wouldn't let go of you unless they busted me too, so they did."

"Do I remember that. Next morning in court you were hung over and lippin' off to the judge so bad, he could've given us three years. I must've said a hundred Hail Marys. Christ, Danny, don't do this." The words stumbled on something in Timmy's throat, and he ducked his head so I wouldn't see the tears start. "Didn't hurt half this bad to die. You were always all I had. Always came through."

"Yeah, I'm a saint."

"In a manner of speaking," Carlos put in. "As our department goes, the job's wide open. I mean, the morons down there can always get out, just they don't know how. Even alive they never knew; why should now be different?" He dug in a frayed pocket of his coat, found a crumpled cigarette package and threw it away. "Hell, I'm out of cigs. Let's split, Danny."

I held Timmy for maybe the last time, saying but not believing it: "I'll be back, kid. Kiss Mom for me."

I watched Timmy start across the sunlit street and break into a run as someone waved to him from a high window.

So we're back down in Losers' Lane and Carlos is getting antsy for a cigarette while all around us the shriveled explainers are moaning their endless lament. Maybe in a hundred years I'd get used to it, but there was one thing I wanted now.

"Can I have a decent chair? Even shrunk like Charley, no way will I squat on one of those kindergarten stools."

Carlos only said, "Here comes Ender."

The man himself, towering over me, this time with something more like a genuine smile. "Ah, Daniel. Good work, Carlos. You may take him home now."

That didn't register right away. "Home?"

"Come on," Carlos urged. "I'm having a nicotine fit."

"But that jazz about the Front Office—?"

"They stand by the agreement," Ender said. "You take Timmy's place; they just didn't say where or in what capacity." He laid a hand on my shoulder and looked clean through my soul again. "We tested your mettle with Lenihan."

"That was personal."

"No, that was talent. On a scale of one to ten, you rate most of humanity as a minus two. The darkness in you senses their weakness as a wolf smells a blood trail. Welcome to Sanitation. You work for us now."

"Said you were a class act," Carlos put in. "Where to, Mister Ender?"

"The way you came. Leave him at Feeney's." Ender handed me a fat sheaf of large bills. "For Timmy's funeral and a trifle in advance."

The money in my hand was—hell, did I say gravy? This was caviar.

"Highest pay slot in the department," Carlos allowed. "Takes subtle work. Not everyone can do it."

"Oh, a last sentiment from Timmy," Ender remembered as he glided off into darkness. "He said to give them hell."

And that's what I do now, sort of a long-range undertaker. I don't do hits any more and I can't change what's bound to happen, just speed toxics on the road they're traveling anyway. Carlos sends the word through Feeney, what you might call sales leads, but I don't need much to spot my kind of guy. Not garden-variety losers, just the dangerous ones. I get their trust because I'm a good listener, and the story they sing to me in Feeney's is the same one they'll be doing later. Like the wife-beater who'll really kill her someday because he'll never change. I sympathize about how women are always out to take power away from a real man, and the loser swallows it. Sooner or later he'll do her and maybe himself because that's all that's left.

Or the angry ones convinced they've been screwed all their lives by a vast government conspiracy led by that s.o.b. in the White House, and someone's got to make the world a better place by doing him, etc. When I tell him how many noble men like him have died for that belief and never counted the cost, I can see the inspiration glow in his eyes. A few nights with me playing kindred soul, and he's on his way into history. Then an anonymous tip to the Secret Service data base and one day he goes out doing his thing in a blaze of *Mein Kampf*.

Like the rapist last week who liked little girls. He was sloppy, covered his tracks as well as a dog with diarrhea. After one session with me, he was so revved up, he got whacked by the girl's father his third time out. I took that one below myself and got him a stool near Lenihan.

Or this crumb I'm waiting for tonight, a low-rent Hitler (think Manson and Koresh) so frustrated by failure that he's just thirsting for a cause and a bunch of little losers to follow him, which they always will. I tell him the world doesn't change by laws but catalysts—"Man, guys like you with the balls to act on what you believe." Sure enough, there'll be another Waco or Ruby Ridge. Like the song goes, Lenihan, you'll never walk alone.

See, the object is to tag them early so that instead of a lifetime of damage, we get them after a little. The downside is we always get them after, and I'm beginning to look like Ender.

So—here comes my loser. 'Scuse me. I have to go to work. ♪

Parke Godwin is the author of many books, including the Firelord Arthurian trilogy and an acclaimed retelling of Robin Hood. His short story "Influencing the Hell out of Time and Teresa Golowitz" was the basis for an episode of the television series The Twilight Zone. He has also been a radio operator, a research technician, a professional actor, an advertising man, a dishwasher and a maitre d' hotel.



ILLUSTRATION BY MILOS LUZ

THERE ARE PATHS TO AND FROM THE
WORLD BELOW — BUT THEY
ARE NOT CERTAIN . . .

Ichthys

by Arrin Dembo

The room was found at 4 p.m, just minutes before the swing-shift whistle. The great drill suddenly hit a wall of stone. Monteverdi, the day operator, had long ago lost his hearing to the roar of his earth-boring machine; still he managed to stop the drive mechanism within seconds. Many years underground had taught him to listen to the TBM with his bones, not his ears—he felt the change in vibration instantly, as if his own teeth had bitten into a piece of aluminum foil.

In the single moment it took him to pull the lever back to a full stop, the drill ripped through two feet of stone and mortar and screamed triumphantly in the open air of a long-buried chamber. The damage was done. Monteverdi cried a warning: the wall crumbled, a cold exhalation of stifling, centuries-dead air rushed past his face, and the men of the day shift echoed his shout as a cascade of red earth and loose stones showered from the roof of the tunnel.

The shrill cry of the drill slowly trailed away to a low moan, and silence. It was this, as much as anything, that brought the foreman running. “What’s happened, Monteverdi? Are you all right?”

The old man nodded. He pointed to the hole in the tunnel wall ahead, not bothering to speak, and the foreman swore bitterly.

“Deo cannel! Not again?”

“Si, Signore. Stone, then air; it is a hollow place.”

The foreman shook his head in disgust. “Back the drill out of the way,” he said. “We’ll send for Father Macchi.”

The archeologist came from the ancient catacombs to the newly excavated subway tunnels on foot. Summoned by phone, it was still almost forty minutes before he arrived at the work site. He had come the whole distance at a trot, carrying a heavy can of lacquer in one hand and a pack over the opposite shoulder. "Where is it?" he gasped. He bent and set down his gallon can, then took off his hard hat to wipe his brow; thinning hair stood up in angry tufts around his balding pate.

"The place is here, Padrone," Zadora said. He handed the priest a lantern and pulled up the corner of a plastic tarpaulin, which had been rudely hung over the breach. "Only Trochino and I have been inside. We tried to save it from the air, as you said, but . . ."

The foreman of the subway's digging crew wouldn't meet his eyes, and Father Macchi knew that it was very bad. Bracing himself, he ducked under the tarp and stepped down into the room.

It was a small, square chamber, walled and floored in stone. In the far corner, the surveyor, Trochino, stood silently. Macchi had met the man before, but never paid him much attention—he was cut from much the same cloth as the other workmen in the tunnels, a short, bandy-legged man with the bull neck and thick shoulders of a digger. Now, however, Father Macchi could see the man's dark eyes were filled with genuine anguish.

"Too late," he whispered hoarsely. "Too late, Signore."

Macchi raised his lantern high, illuminating the whole room with its electrical glow. Three walls were still standing intact, paneled all around with marble friezes. Each metope had been painted with a vivid scene; it was as if eight lively windows had opened from this room. The oldest known style of Roman painting, and seldom seen; the place must have lain undisturbed since a full century before the birth of Christ.

Everywhere he looked, however, the once-bright paint clung to the walls in ashen tatters. The pigments were darkening and peeling away even as he watched. The atmosphere of modern Rome had done its work quickly—in less than an hour, the hot living air of the tunnel had eaten up everything that the cool dead calm of two millennia had managed to preserve. Now the ancient paintings were burning in an invisible fire, crisping and curling, falling away from the wall in tragic flakes.

Macchi did what he could, working with a delicate brush to coat the remaining images with preservative, collecting the larger flakes of the paint with a pair of tiny tweezers. While his lacquer dried, he used his digital camera to take as many pictures as possible of the room and its walls, the stonework of its domed ceiling and the few stairs leading upward to an earth-choked doorway.

The foreman waited while Macchi measured the room and recorded its dimensions in his little notebook. "Well? What do you think it is, Padrone?" he asked at last.

The priest shrugged sadly. "A sleeping chamber, perhaps. Very old. They may be able to date the paintings from the samples I've taken. Unfortunately, the images . . ." He winced and let the words trail off.

"It's directly in our path," the foreman said pointedly. "Trochino here has done a survey of the ground nearby—this was a single room. There are no other stone walls beyond it."

Macchi turned to the surveyor. "Is this true?"

Trochino cleared his throat and nodded. "Si, Padrone," he said. "We are very deep here, far into the earth. This one room was at the bottom of a long stairway. There were no rooms beyond, and no house above."

Macchi sighed. "Yes. The stairs which once led to it collapsed, and it was forgotten." He turned to both men with the next question. "Tell me—did you look at these paintings, before they were so badly damaged?"

Zadora avoided both the priest's eyes and his question, but the surveyor spoke up quickly. "Si, Signore. I did." Trochino took off his helmet, holding it in his hands—like one speaking of the dead. "I am very sorry they would not wait for you."

The priest pursed his lips. "Was there a boy with a harp, by any chance?"

Trochino nodded. "Yes. The pictures told the story." He pointed to the stone panels on the three standing walls as he spoke, indicating a scene painted on each metope. "A musician, whose wife died of snake bite. She was buried, but he led her back from the Land of the Dead." The surveyor looked at him with open admiration. "But how did you know, Padrone?"

Macchi pointed to an image still dimly visible on the wall. It was the figure of a woman, dressed in a flowing white robe, a long veil hanging down over her face. "I thought I recognized the lady," he said simply. "Her name is Eurydice—the boy with the harp was Orpheus, who later became a god of music and poetry." He looked down at his notebook and quickly scribbled a few more words.

Zadora shifted his weight uncomfortably, but said nothing. Trochino met the foreman's eyes and turned back to the priest, trying to speak casually. "Would you say that this is an important finding, Padrone?" he asked.

The priest made a face. "It might have been. Very little is left to study, obviously. But I have seen a room like this once before, in Rome—many years ago, when I was a student. A sleeping chamber, deep underground, with a secret stair leading down to it. It was tiled, rather than painted, but it also depicted the myth of Orpheus."

The foreman cleared his throat. "What shall we do, Signore?" he asked. "My crew is waiting."

Macchi removed his spectacles, cleaning them with his handkerchief as he deliberated. "Remove the panels," he said at last. He put the glasses back onto the bridge of his nose, his face settling into long-familiar lines of stubborn resolve. "Have your men pry them from the walls as carefully as they can. Clear the debris from the room with brooms. Empty all of the earth into boxes, so that it can be sifted. And tell Ferrero at the museum and Professor Standhope at the University what was found; the two of them can come and see if there is anything worth keeping."

"And then . . . when we have done all this . . . we can continue?" the foreman said.

"And then you can continue. I have been told that you cannot stop work for everything." The priest shook his head. "I must be getting back to my own digging now."

Zadora bowed his head. "Thank you, Padrone."



Macchi shrugged. "It is nothing. Thank you for calling me, Zadora. I am grateful. I only wish I could have come faster."

"There will be a faster way," the foreman said proudly, "when we are finished with the subway."

Macchi's lips curved in a thin, cheerless smile as he bent to pick up his can. "Of course."

The priest made his way back through the press of workmen and their machines, a stooped lonely figure in his black frock and wire spectacles. He had not gone more than 100 feet from the work site, when he heard the clump of booted feet behind him.

He turned to see Trochino hurrying to catch him, clutching a brown paper bag in one hand, holding his helmet onto his head with the other, his tool belt flapping at his hips with each step.

"Yes, Trochino?" Macchi said, as the stocky surveyor skidded to a halt. "Have I forgotten something?"

"No, Padrone. Only my work is done for today, and I thought perhaps you should not walk back to the catacombs alone."

Macci frowned. "Are the tunnels not safe?"

Trochino made a dubious face. "In truth—no, Padrone. The second and third shift workers have had some trouble lately. We cannot find the place where they are sneaking in—but we know things have been stolen."

Macchi took a deep breath through his nostrils and then sighed aloud. "Yes," he said at last. "We have had similar troubles. I think they are only vagrants from the city above, come down to seek shelter at night—the artifacts in the tombs are never disturbed. They take only tools, or food which has been left behind."

"In any case, Padrone, one never knows. Perhaps not all of these vagrants are so harmless." Trochino shrugged. "It is safer for two men to walk together, no?"

Father Macchi nodded and continued walking, inviting the surveyor to come along with a tilt of his head. "Of course. It is thoughtful of you to offer. Still . . ." He made a quick gesture to encompass the workman's passage, with its electric bulbs strung along the ceiling and wooden planks laid end-to-end in the red mud at their feet. "There are streets above which are not nearly so well lit and hospitable."

The surveyor nodded. "Very true, Padrone."

"Rome is not what She used to be," the priest said.

"No, Padrone. The city is rotting, like the souls of its people."

Macchi gave the surveyor a sharp glance, surprised, but nodded in agreement. "Perhaps you are right, Trochino. People often ask me if I am afraid, when I am alone among the dead. But I am far less afraid in the tunnels than in the city. Rome is becoming more dangerous every day. Even a poor divinity student is no longer safe."

Trochino walked beside the priest, hustling to keep up with Macchi's long stride. "Student, Padrone?"

Macchi nodded grimly. "One of our young assistants disappeared a few months ago, at the beginning of the summer. He was from an American university; the police say that he left work one evening and never arrived home."

Trochino touched the pendant he wore at his throat. "That is terrible, Padrone. And no one knows what happened to the poor young man?"

"No, they have not found him. They thought at first that he might have been kidnapped. But many weeks have passed, and no one has received any demand for ransom. I fear the worst."

"I am very sorry to hear it, Padrone. The people of Rome once had true faith—and respect for men of God." The surveyor's voice had dropped a register. "But they are reverting to beasts now. Pagan beasts."

The old priest smiled. "Surely it is not so bad as that, my friend."

Trochino looked up suddenly, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Padrone. I should forgive, I know. But living in such a city can poison a man's soul." The two men walked in silence for several seconds; finally Trochino cleared his throat awkwardly. "Could we talk about the paintings?"

"Of course," the priest said. "Let us change the subject. Did you have a question, Trochino?"

The surveyor tilted up the brim of his hard hat. "Si, Padrone. I have been thinking . . ."

"Thinking is a dangerous habit for a working man," Macchi said, hoping to set the surveyor at ease.

Trochino bared his teeth awkwardly at the joke. "Yes." He hurried on, struggling to force out the words. "Only that it seems a shame, Padrone. For such things to be destroyed, as they were today."

"I could not agree with you more," the priest said.

"I was wondering—do you think it would be possible to teach one of the workmen to preserve the paintings, as you did?"

Macchi raised his eyebrows. "One of the workmen?"

"Si, Padrone. I wondered if it would be possible to teach one of us—perhaps even a few of us—to save the old things, before the bad air of the tunnels can destroy them. If we were ever to find another such room . . . perhaps . . . something could be done to keep the paintings fresh." Trochino rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, looking at his boots. "Until you arrived," he added.

Macchi pursed his lips and weighed the idea quickly. "It is an interesting notion." He shrugged. "Unfortunately, it takes

many years to learn these techniques. They cannot be taught in a day, or even a week—and an inexperienced hand often does more harm than good.” He shook his head. “A trained archaeologist should accompany the digging crews as they work on these tunnels—I have asked many times. But no one would listen.”

“Not listen—to you? Why would they not, Padrone? You are renowned—they say you are the greatest Roman archaeologist in two hundred years.”

Macchi waved away this away a rueful smile. “I could be the Second Coming of Our Lord, Trochino—it would not matter to the city’s planning council. They make many excuses—the inability to guarantee safety, et cetera. In reality, I’m afraid I simply made too many enemies when the new subway was proposed. My colleagues and I opposed the digging for many months.” He gave a mild half-shrug of regret. “But you are right, Trochino. It is a great shame. I would very much like to have seen those paintings—especially the images of Eurydice.”

“She was the girl who returned from the dead?” The surveyor scratched his beard nervously.

“Yes. The bride of Orpheus.” The two men had reached a nexus of tunnels; several passages twisted away in all directions. Father Macchi set down his can again, resting for a moment. “This is my turning, Trochino.”

“Si, Padrone. I know the catacombs. I grew up in the underground; the men of my family have always been diggers, for many generations.”

Macchi paused and took his handkerchief out of his pocket again, wiping the grit from his neck. “Really? That is interesting.”

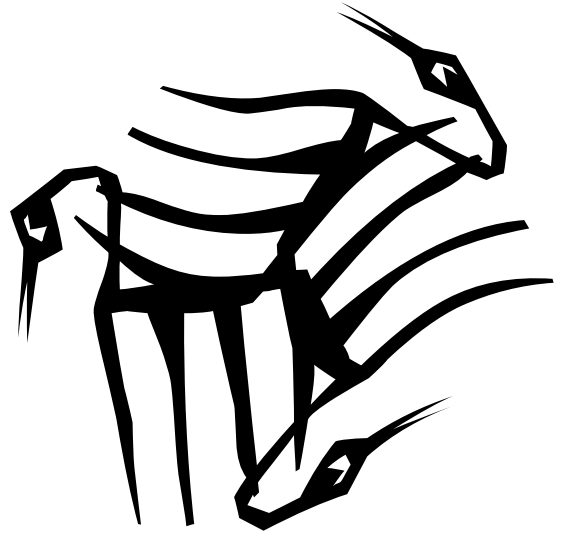
Trochino lifted his chin with a proud smile. “My great-grandfather worked for Rosetti, when they first re-opened the old tombs. He even said that we Trochino were among the first furores, when Nero was emperor. I think perhaps he was exaggerating?”

Macchi gave him a kindly wink. “Perhaps not much, Trochino. Some families in this city can easily trace their lineage back to the old Roman days.”

Trochino’s bright black eyes shone with pleasure. “I would like to come with you the rest of the way, Padrone,” he said. “It has been many years since I have walked in the sacred places. My mother used to bring me here on holy days, when I was a boy, to see the martyrs.” The shorter man bent and scooped up the heavy can that Macchi had been carrying by its handle. “Perhaps I can carry this for you, as well.” His smile flashed bright in his black beard. “You have already carried it so many miles today . . .”

The old priest nodded. “As you wish, Trochino. It is still quite a distance to the dig site, but I appreciate the company.” He stretched his neck and bent his head to the left, easing the weary muscles of his right shoulder. “And I confess, my old joints appreciate the rest.”

The two men turned and took the left-hand path. Like the workman’s tunnels, the catacombs were lit by electrical bulbs; here the lights were dimmer, more intermittent. The stone floor beneath their feet was now cool and dry, not churned to mud by the passage of heavy boots and hydraulic machinery.



Long horizontal niches had been cut into the walls of pale, chalky tufa. Empty now, they had once served as resting places for the first Christians buried in Rome. Here and there, a larger gallery opened; in these areas one might find the stately sarcophagus of a wealthy family, or a miniature basilica where a small congregation of secret worshippers once met, centuries before, to celebrate their salvation.

Periodically, the roof was pierced with long vertical shafts which ran all the way to the surface, allowing for a flow of fresh air. For the most part, the way was too narrow to allow the two men to walk side by side, but Trochino clumped along behind the priest, still beaming happily as they walked through the winding tunnel. “Is it much farther, Padrone? Perhaps you could tell me about this girl in the paintings—to pass the time.”

The priest shrugged, glancing back over his shoulder. “Not much to tell, I’m afraid. The story is an old one. A very talented young man married his sweetheart. She died of snakebite, and was buried—in those days they believed that all of the dead went to the same Hell, regardless of virtue. But Orpheus so loved his wife Eurydice that he could not bear to leave her in that gloomy place. He went before the King of Hell—Hades, of course, not Satan—and begged for her release.”

Trochino nodded. “Si. I saw this in the pictures. He played the harp for this King of Hell?”

The priest smiled. “Yes. A song of love and grief so powerful that even the God of Death was moved. He allowed Orpheus to lead his bride back up out of Hell. There was a long stair which led back up to the open air; the only proviso was that Orpheus could not look upon her face until she was back among the living.”

“But he looked, did he not?” Trochino asked. “He lifted her veil.”

The priest smiled. “So the story goes. He could not wait. As she stood on the threshold, he turned to behold her face—thus breaking the pact he had made with Hades. Eurydice was forced to return to the Land of the Dead. Orpheus had lost her forever.”

“A sad story, Padrone.”

“It is. But an interesting story. And I believe that it may have been more important to the people of Rome than anyone has imagined. You see, I have seen that same image of Eurydice twice now. It struck me very forcefully when I first saw the lady thirty years ago, in another underground chamber; it struck me again today. Eurydice as she appears in these underground rooms reminds me very much of a similar image—one which I see a dozen times a day, here in the catacombs.”

The two men had come to another open gallery; the simple frescos painted on the walls had been well-preserved. Macchi paused for a moment, turning to an alcove beside the walkway. “Here she is now. We call these ‘orantes’—the prayerful ones.”

The image on the wall was the standing figure of a woman. Her body was gowned in voluminous white, concealing almost all of her form except for the hands and feet. The folds of a veil hung down to conceal her face. “To the Christians, these orantes are a symbol for the departed soul,” the priest said. “We see the same image again and again—on tombs, in the basilica, on the walls. Look at her, Trochino—is she not the spitting image of our Eurydice?”

Trochino peered at the painting. “I . . . cannot say, Padrone,” he said at last. “I am not an expert in such things.”

Macchi shrugged. “To me, the resemblance is very striking. More importantly, an orante like this one was painted always to represent the happy soul of a Christian. She is the symbol of a person who was buried here in these galleries. The early Christians came here not only to bury their beloved dead, but in a sense to commune with them—an orante like this one is often depicted sitting at a feast table surrounded by the members of her happy family, or speaking and celebrating with them in some other way.”

Trochino cleared his throat. “I do not understand, Padrone.”

Macchi turned with a shrug. “No one does, Trochino. It is a strange thing. We have studied these passages and their paintings for nearly two hundred years, but we still do not fully understand the orantes. Man, woman or child, the spirit of a departed loved one was always depicted as an adult female—and always wearing a gown and veil like this one. There is a painting in one of these rooms of St. Anthoninus, pierced by a dozen spears—the martyr’s bleeding body is on the ground, but the female orante is springing up from his corpse with an expression of joy ...”

Trochino frowned and squinted at the painting again, as if trying to see some resemblance to St. Anthoninus. “Did the old Romans believe that men became women when they went to heaven?”

Macchi chuckled and continued walking. “I don’t think so, Trochino—not literally, at any rate. No one knows for certain what the orantes meant to those who painted them. But many of the words and symbols used in these old places of worship, during the times of persecution in particular, are difficult to interpret. When their faith was forbidden, the Christians learned to celebrate their faith secretly, using symbols as a code. No one could reproach or punish them for painting a simple

fish upon the wall—but to the faithful, that fish might remind them of the story of Jonah, the miracle Our Lord performed at the wedding feast at Canaan, or even the name of God. The name of the fish, in Greek, is ‘ichthys’. The early Christians saw in this word an acronym for the name of Our Lord: ‘Iesus Christos, Theou Yios Soter’—Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Savior. Many modern-day Christians still use the Fish as an emblem of faith—even you, Trochino.”

Trochino ducked his chin toward the pendant around his neck, and the priest smiled. “Yes,” he said. “I noticed your fish right away.”

“Si, Padrone. I believe in God the maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only son, conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified—”

“—and buried, and on the third day arose again from the dead,” Macchi said, smiling. “The Apostle’s Creed. Very good, Trochino! You were well-schooled.”

Trochino bowed his head. “Thank you, Padrone. Would you mind if I stop for just a moment? I believe there is a pebble in my shoe.”

The surveyor set down the heavy can of lacquer and quickly unlaced one boot; just as he was bending over to remove it, however, an ominous rumble sounded in the ceiling above. Before he could think twice, Father Macchi had given the younger man a tremendous shove, sending him sprawling forward—just a split second before the roof of the tunnel collapsed.

Sudden, absolute darkness. The priest found himself lying on the rough-hewn stone of the tunnel floor, listening to the ominous boom and thump of stone slabs shifting and collapsing behind him. His legs were trapped, buried in rubble; choking clouds of dust and grit washed over him, and pebbles rained from the ceiling.

Somewhere in the darkness to his left, he heard Trochino try to clear his throat. “Padrone?” the man croaked.

“Yes,” the priest replied. “I am here.”

“Oh, Dios Mio,” the surveyor said. He sounded so distressed that the priest felt a genuine surge of pity for him. “You are alive, Signore.”

“Yes,” the priest said. “We must remember to thank God later.” He took a deep breath and braced himself, trying to move his feet beneath the pile. A few stones shifted around his legs, and brought the dull throb of his left ankle into sudden, shocking focus—he clenched his eyes and teeth tight, the pain bursting like fireworks in the dark.

Trochino shifted somewhere ahead and to the left, sending stones and pebbles clattering as he tried to orient himself toward the sound of the priest’s voice. “Where are you, Padrone?”

“I’m hurt.” Macchi’s voice shook, despite his best efforts. “I think my leg may be broken.”

From the surveyor’s direction came a flurry of scratches and scuffles, followed by another shower of sand and pebbles. Larger rocks rolled away in the dark as Trochino moved closer. “I am coming, Padrone,” he said. His voice seemed to have risen a few feet from the floor.

"Careful," the priest said. "Do you have a light, Trochino?"

The silent pause that followed seemed almost deafening. Then there came the creak of leather, and the clink and clatter of Trochino's tool belt. Suddenly a circle of light exploded in Macchi's right eye.

The priest raised a hand, wincing. "Please do not blind me, my son."

"Sorry, Padrone." Trochino turned the flashlight beam aside, playing it over the heap in which the priest lay half-buried. "We must get you out of there."

"Yes," Macchi said. "But carefully. My ankle."

Trochino wedged the flashlight into a pile of fallen stones and worked with a will, quickly lifting away the broken chunks and slabs of stone which had pinned the priest's legs. "I am terribly sorry, Padrone," he said. "You were hurt trying to save me from harm."

Macchi winced as his leg shifted. "It was nothing, my son. You would have done the same for me, I am sure."

Trochino stopped for a moment, stricken—then bent and redoubled his efforts to clear the debris. "I would like to think so, Padrone," he said. "But I am afraid that I am not so good a man as you. Roma has polluted my soul."

"You are a good man, Trochino. Your soul is not polluted; God's love and forgiveness will wash away all of your sins."

Trochino turned and gave the priest a feeble smile. "If you say so, Padrone, it must be so. I am sorry that my faith is sometimes weak." The surveyor squatted to scoop away the last of the sand and earth away from the old priest's legs. "I believe we should try to turn you over, Padrone," he said. "Are you ready?"

Macchi nodded, and clenched his teeth to brace himself. Trochino's arms were strong and his touch surprisingly deft and gentle—but still the priest winced as his ankle shifted.

Trochino propped the priest up in a sitting position, ignoring his grunts and grimaces of pain. When Macchi was upright, the surveyor removed a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped the cold sweat on the old man's brow. "I am sorry, Padrone," he said. "Is the pain very bad?"

"Yes," Macchi gasped. "Just a sprain, thank God."

Trochino rose to his feet, looking around. "We are trapped, Padrone. The catacombs both ahead and behind us have collapsed."

Macchi nodded. "I thought as much. I have been through a few cave-ins before. Usually it happens in new excavations—I could have sworn these passages were well-braced." He shook his head. "In any case, someone will certainly have heard that noise. They will come and dig us out soon enough."

"Yes. I am sure someone will come for us," Trochino said. He turned and found his paper bag in the dirt. "Here; let me give you a sip of wine, Padrone. I still have some of the food I brought for today."

Macchi did not protest or resist as the surveyor placed the thermos bottle to his lips; if anything, he was surprised by his own greed, taking it in his own hand to down the remaining contents. The wine was sweet and sharp; he could feel a cool rill dribble down from the corner of his mouth, but did not stop to wipe it away until all the wine was gone.

Trochino had removed a half-eaten loaf of bread from the bag, and now sat squatting on his heels eating it, watching the priest drink with a thoughtful expression. "You were thirsty, Padrone."

Macchi took a deep breath. "Yes. Thank you, Trochino." The surveyor held out his torn loaf, offering it, but Macchi waved it away. "No. Is that all you brought for your afternoon meal, Trochino—bread and wine?"

The surveyor nodded, ripping off another chunk of the bread with his strong white teeth. "I had a bit of fruit as well."

The priest raised an eyebrow. "You are a vegetarian?"

Trochino shrugged as he popped the last piece of bread into his mouth. "We are what we eat, Signore. I do not wish to be a beast, and so I do not eat the flesh of beasts."

Macchi smiled weakly, fighting down his pain. "You are speaking to a Jesuit, Trochino. Such statements tempt me to debate."

Trochino raised his hands in mock surrender. "I am not so wise as you are, Padrone. I could not win an argument. I only know that when I drink the wine of Sicily, I can taste the shadow of the volcano. When I eat a loaf of new bread, the grain of Tuscany carries the memory of rain and sun. The lives of the plants are sweet and full of grace—the lives of beasts are painful, full of suffering and confusion."

"I see." Macchi tilted to his head to one side, studying the surveyor with narrowed eyes. "I have never heard it expressed quite that way before. Very . . . poetic, Trochino."

The surveyor rubbed his thick hands over his thighs, eyes downcast and embarrassed. "I am no poet, Padrone."

Father Macchi pointed to the flashlight, still wedged into a pile of fallen rocks. "May I have it, please?"

Trochino handed him the light and Macchi played it over the surrounding walls. "Interesting," he mused. "I believe the side of this tunnel has collapsed as well as the roof behind us—I would have sworn that section there was a solid wall, but there appears to be more space behind it." He looked at Trochino, licking his lips. "Tell me—do you think there is anything in your tool belt that we could use as a splint?"

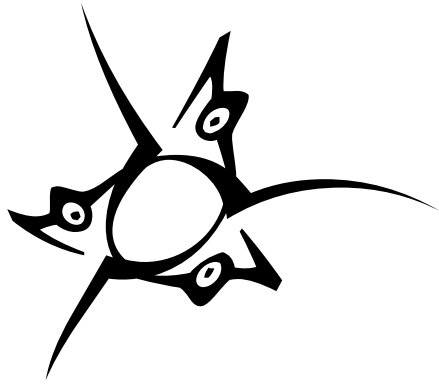
Trochino nodded. "I think so."

It took a few minutes to make the dressing; Trochino found a few pieces of broken wood in the wreckage and used them to brace the sprained ankle, wrapping the priest's ankle in electrical tape to secure them. By the time the operation was finished, Macchi was white-faced and shaking.

Trochino looked up at the priest, concerned. "Are you sure we can move you, Padrone?"

Macchi swallowed hard. "I think it would be wise. More of this area may collapse; if there are rooms beyond, there may be a safer place to wait for rescue. Please help me to my feet, my son—I think I will need to lean on you for a while."

The surveyor bent and allowed the old man to put an arm over his broad shoulder, raising him easily to his feet. Macchi clung to him with one arm, holding the flashlight with the other—playing it over the fallen earth and stone. "Yes," he said decisively. "I have come this way a thousand times. This was not here before." He urged Trochino forward, half stumbling



and hopping toward the breach in the far wall. “A new passage has opened.”

Trochino remained silent, helping the priest up to the edge of the rubble and standing solid as he leaned into the darkness, playing the beam of the flashlight into the room beyond.

“My God,” Macchi said. “It is an entirely new gallery. Look at the dust upon the floor—how thick it is. Untouched.” He turned to the surveyor eagerly. “You must help me, my son. Please, lift me over this obstacle—I must see.”

Trochino hesitated, then bent and scooped the old man up into his arms. He carried him lightly over the broken heap of stone like a bridegroom and set him down again, gently, on the other side.

Macchi’s flashlight beam played over the room eagerly, darting here and there as the old man’s eye took it all in. “Amazing. Look at the orantes . . .” His light played over the richly painted walls; the figures of the women in their veils stood all around the semi-circular chamber, facing the viewer with their hands raised in prayer. In the center there was a standing statue, its robes turning in frozen waves of white marble. Its back was turned; Father Macchi hobbled closer, urging Trochino to circle around through the thick carpet of dust.

“Amazing,” the priest muttered. “I don’t believe I have ever seen such a sculpture before . . . it must be an orante . . . but is it Roman—?” His eyes flicked up and down, taking in the details. “Perhaps not. The balance is fine, the pose refined—a Greek artisan, surely . . .”

Trochino stood silently as the priest hobbled away from his steadying arm, moving closer to the marble lady. “Her gown . . . the veil . . . It must be an orante. Or is it Eurydice?” His flashlight beam swept upward. “Ah, it has been damaged,” he said, disappointed . . . and then hesitated. “No . . . the veil has been tied back. Her face . . . it is—”

Some instinct made the priest turn at that moment, just in time to see the dull white sheen of Trochino’s eyes and the flash of his teeth in the dark. Macchi cried out, the flashlight dropping from his hand as he clutched his shoulder—something sharp in the surveyor’s mouth had penetrated cloth and skin as easily as a serpent’s tooth.

“Trochino,” Macchi said. “What—?”

His knees buckled, the muscles and nerves of the legs going suddenly slack. The priest’s mouth dropped open as he slowly toppled onto his side, helpless. His unblinking eyes con-

tinued to stare toward Trochino, as the surveyor’s boots moved toward him across the dusty floor.

“I am sorry to interrupt you, Padrone.” Trochino’s voice was suffused with genuine sadness. “But you are right—someone will come digging for you soon enough. It is time for us to go.”

Macchi’s throat worked silently, trying to speak . . . but only a low rattle emerged.

Trochino bent and picked up the priest. Now that the room was almost completely black, Macchi could see the way his eyes shimmered in the dark. “I know you must have many questions,” the surveyor said gently. “You cannot speak yet because my venom has paralyzed you. It is a gift which my people have; the old Romans believed that we were the descendants of the goddess Proserpina—‘the first serpent.’”

He bent as he crossed a threshold, carrying the old man deeper into the tunnels. Macchi’s throat made another feeble whine. In the walls here were old sconces, built for torches—someone had hung modern glow-sticks from these, the plastic tubes glowing eerily in the dark.

“I wish I could tell you all about my people, Padrone. I know you would find them interesting,” Trochino said. “Our men are much like myself—we appear normal to the casual eye, difficult to distinguish from men such as you.” He opened his mouth, lifting his thick tongue toward the roof of his palate—and a sharp white thorn seemed to spring forward from the tissue beneath. “We carry a sting, of course. The poison paralyzes quickly—even a younger man would find himself unable to move almost instantly.”

Macchi’s breath wheezed feebly in his chest.

“But our women are different, Signore,” the surveyor said. “The ladies of my race are . . . more sublime. They live much longer than the men do, and are even more sensitive than we. My mother, my sisters—they could never eat such things as wine and bread.”

Macchi’s lips quivered, and Trochino smiled down on him gently, his swift stride carrying them further and further into the fluorescent glow of these strange catacombs. “We are what we eat, Signore. Please try to understand—we have lived beneath the city of Rome for longer than you can imagine. When we began, we ate the leavings of beasts and wild things—we were little more than wild things ourselves. When the first men came, we hunted them as an animal would. But when the first of our people ate the flesh of yours, our eyes were opened—we became as wise and cunning as the men of that age.”

Trochino’s eyes shone. “We lived thus for many centuries. The city of Rome rose high above us, and we rose with it. Through the flesh of its people we gained knowledge, and tasted the world. We learned a love of finer things. Art. Music. Spectacle. Our tunnels became richer, and decorated with beautiful things. Sometimes, we found friends in the world above; the gifts of our women were appreciated by a select few.”

Macchi’s throat worked again, and a single syllable emerged. “Eur . . .”

“Eurydice,” Trochino said. “Yes, Padrone. When our women partake of the flesh . . . they take in the spirit of the one

who has died. They become the dead, know what they knew, feel what they felt, remember all that they remembered. They can speak with the voice of the one who was lost. For a grieving man who needs one last word from the woman he loved . . . it is a great gift.” Trochino shrugged. “But of course, she cannot come with him to the world above. And it is always better if he does not lift her veil.”

“Trochino,” Macchi wheezed. “Why have you—?”

Trochino shook his head sadly. “I am sorry, Padrone. We never intended that you should suffer; you were not meant to survive the falling rocks. We have almost reached our destination.”

The priest’s eyes rolled slowly back and forth as the corridors swung past, trying to gain some sense of the paintings—and the dark contents of the niches along the walls.

“Try to understand,” Trochino said. There was an note of pleading in his voice that made the old priest shiver. “We did not know that we were sinners, Padrone. Eventually the Romans came to suspect our presence, and began cremating the bodies of their dead. My people were reduced practically to animals for many years, able to eat only the offal that was cast from the temples, the corpses left after a bloody show at the coliseum. We had access only to the lowest sort of men. We were becoming the lowest sort of people ourselves.”

Trochino had come at last to an open room; here he finally put the old priest down on a flat tablature of stone. Around the room, a few electric lanterns hung. Macchi’s head lolled to the left and he saw another doorway leading away into the dark. Trochino kindly readjusted his head; the priest was still unable to turn it back on his own.

“One day there was a great event in the hippodrome of the emperor Nero. A vile and evil man, a persecutor of the innocent—but nonetheless, a man to whom my people owe our very souls.” Trochino’s voice had dropped to a reverent whisper. “In the arena that day, a great man was crucified. His head hung low; he died suffering, a mocking parody of another execution which had been performed many years earlier, in Jerusalem.”

“S . . . Saint Peter,” Macchi said, forcing out the words.

Trochino nodded. Tears had begun to flow down his face. “Si, Padrone. It was my great-great-grandmother who brought us the true faith. Through the two Apostles and the martyrs that followed, through the generations of Christians who were buried here, my people learned of the great sacrifice which Our Lord and Savior had made, and of the joy to come in the life hereafter.”

Trochino bent low, his voice dropping still further. “It has been hard, Signore. Very hard. Faith is dying in the city above us. The people of Rome have once again become low, and cold—interested only in material things. They are poisoning my people—we are losing our faith. And their new digging drives us deeper and deeper into the earth.

“These new Romans are not like the Christians of old. They have forgotten us—and it is better so. They would not understand—would not bring their dead to us willingly, as the first Christians did. They do not understand that we must be saved—that our faith must be kept strong.”

Father Macchi struggled to speak. “The student . . .”

Trochino turned his head to one side sadly. “Yes, Padrone. My deepest regrets. His name was James Keller. A talented and intelligent young man, very sensitive. His faith was strong, his love and respect for ancient things even stronger. We have learned much from him—and gained new concerns, as you might imagine.”

Trochino frowned. “We too are digging, Padrone. We must delve deeper, to make a new place for ourselves away from the world above. Like the subway crews, we are finding many ancient and marvelous things—but unlike the city planning council, we have learned to respect them. We do not wish to see them destroyed.”

Macchi’s eyes suddenly widened. “No . . . Trochino . . . please . . .”

Trochino knuckled the tears from his cheek. “I am truly sorry, Padrone,” he said brokenly. “I had hoped that there was some other way, but you said yourself that your great skill could not be taught to a simple man like myself. There is only one way that my people will gain your wisdom.”

Macchi’s head lolled to the side once more. Pale figures were emerging from the gloom, the slim robed figures of women. Their faces were covered by long, sheer white veils—but beneath the fabric, there was a shifting movement which made his skin crawl.

“God help me,” the priest whispered. “God save me!”

Trochino’s hand patted his chest, as if to give reassurance. “He will, Padrone,” he said. “You have been a good and honest man. You will sit at His right hand.”

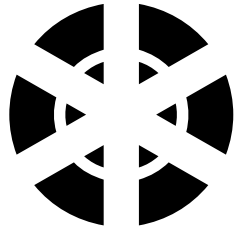
Macchi turned his head toward Trochino, but the surveyor was now backing away. The women glided silently into the room, and now encircled the stone table. There was a faint, wordless whisper from beneath their veils—a soft, expectant hiss.

One of them was speaking; Macchi recognized the words, although the Latin intonation was strange. “. . . From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”

The rest of the women joined in simultaneously, completing the final words of the Apostle’s Creed in a chorus: “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Church; the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.”

“Amen,” Trochino said—but Father Macchi did not. As the oldest of the women lifted her veil, bending to deliver the Kiss of Peace, he simply tried to scream. ♠

Arrin Dembo’s writing has appeared in a wide array of venues, including The New York Review of Science Fiction, Computer Gaming World, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, The Vancouver Courier, and Pretty-Scary.net. She is the creator of the “Sword of the Stars” computer game universe and the author of the “Sword of the Stars” novel The Deacon’s Tale. She is currently pursuing a degree in anthropology from the University of Tennessee, and in her spare time enjoys working with independent filmmakers, especially those specializing in horror.



Boxing Day

by Leah Bobet

I should have never bought him socks for Christmas. Jacob's always been touchy – the kind of person who read Poe instead of Dr. Seuss – and the look on his face when he saw them was all the warning I needed. My brother was in a mood again, and from the way he clenched the glittery red-and-green greeting card, I was going to pay for it. I looked at Mother, worried, but she hadn't noticed. She was smiling blissfully over her new tea cozies.

I should have left that night, but she begged me to stay. We'd go shopping for Boxing Day. Maybe I thought I could get him something else, something to make up for it. The fancy grown-man toys he wanted, the ones that were too much of a stretch for my budget. Jacob needs to be shown he's loved.

I woke up at dawn to banging, pounding. I couldn't move, and instantly I knew it was too late.

"Jacob, I'm sorry," I said, and my voice echoed in the small space which enclosed me.

His reply came muffled and calm through solid walls. "I thought you loved me."

"I do, it's just—"

"Just nothing," he said, and the banging resumed.

Desperate for something to grab onto, something that would make him stop and let me out, I tried another tack. "What're you going to tell Mom?"

He didn't even pause. "I'll think of something, I'm sure."

"Jacob—" It was hopeless. He'd made up his mind. I was doomed.

"Socks, sister dear. Socks."

The last nail went in, loud as a gunshot. ♪

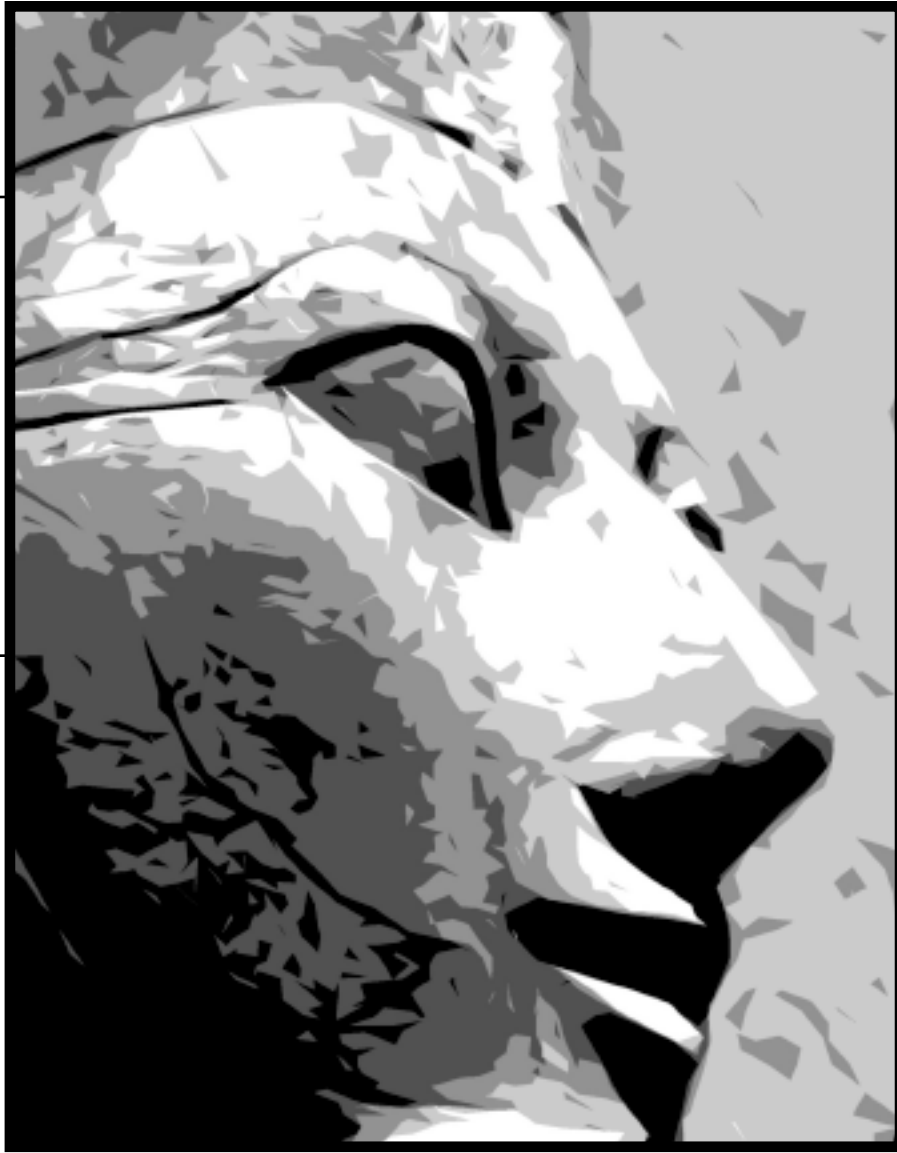


ILLUSTRATION BY PIERRE HELGER

WITHIN AN EGYPTIAN TOMB,
HER DESTINY LAY
WAITING.

Ostraca

by Jane Alice Kelly

A woman walks across the Theban Hills, surrounded by men in long pale blue galibayyas. They want to be her guide through the Valley of the Queens, to sell her postcards and scarabs and tiny copper pyramids. But Merrill shoulders past them, as if she were back home in New York. As if she knew where she was going.

“Amrika, Amrika,” they call to her. She is too angry to answer, even if she knew the Arabic for what she wanted to say. She never should have negotiated with unreliaables. But she is not one to dwell on past mistakes. She will walk to the Valley of the Kings. The guidebook said it isn’t far. Only an hour or so. She is glad to be striding off on her own, after a week of being led here and there, in a herd of tourists. Only an hour, maybe a little more, because of the heat and her ridiculous shoes.

“Amrika, Amrika.” Now only the younger men follow her, the boys who like to look at her even though she is a middle-aged woman in a khaki pants suit. But soon they return to the tombs, to try their luck on other tourists. After a little while longer, even her anger leaves her, and she is completely alone.

The trail follows the curves of the rust colored hills. The Nile is somewhere to her right, to the east where the sun lords it over the sky. Floating on the Nile

is the Cleopatra IX, moored side by side with all the other cruise ships. But even though she traveled just ten minutes in that filthy cab, she cannot see the river or the city of Luxor. She has gone beyond the narrow edge of green where proximity to water enabled things to grow.

The trail is not easy to see anymore. Like everything else in Egypt, it has been obscured by the sand. She picks her way up a rise and across a plateau. The desert is so empty. The desert is so enormous. An ocean of nearly white sand, stretching on and on beyond the horizon. The only marks are ripples made by the winds. Who came this way before her? Who made this inadequate path? Grave diggers. Grave robbers. The funeral processions of pharaohs. History threatens to make her feel insignificant.

And then she falls in a hole.

"AH, Egypt." The travel agent had smiled as he spread his brochures before her.

Much as she loved the thrill of speed, Merrill hadn't wanted to go on yet another skiing trip. She kept thinking of the pyramids, whenever her brain couldn't absorb another earnings ratio, she didn't know why. But she knew that of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World, only one remained.

"Such a bargain now, after the trouble, though it's safer than ever. But you can't just see the pyramids, you must take a Nile Cruise." As the agent described the beauty of the other temples, and the fine dining on the ships, Merrill was mesmerized by his faint accent. And so she forgot she would be the woman there, and not some other Merrill, leaning on the rail, while the Nile breezes wafted her scarf and her companion pointed out the smile of the crescent moon.

"Single occupancy?" the agent said.

"No, double. Two tickets," she said, daring herself to ask someone to go with her.

AFTER the dirt and rocks cease to fall on her, she tries to catch her breath. She wipes her face with the scarf she wears out of deference to other people's religion. She drinks half her bottle of water, in great anxious gulps, before she realizes that she should be saving it. Her leg throbs. God how she needs a drink. A real drink. She makes do with one more little sip of water.

On the ceiling of rock, eight or nine feet above her head, is part of a painting. She cannot tell of what, since the sun is directly in her eyes. She inches along the ground, trying to escape the bright heat. But she is afraid to travel too far into what must be some kind of tomb. Whenever she moves, more things fall from above.

"Help," she cries. She assumes someone will come. She needs help, therefore help will arrive. Eventually. Her niece Karla will notice her absence, even though this trip has not been the bonding experience Merrill intended to have with the only one likely to visit her in a nursing home. Mido the guide will miss her, when they return from Banana Island. After all, keeping track of tourists is supposed to be his job.

THE mutiny had happened at breakfast, a meal which Merrill considered a waste of time. Since the ship had no newspapers

or market reports, Merrill always read about that day's destination in her guidebook while having her coffee on deck. After learning all about the Valley of the Kings, she found her group still lingering in the ship's dining room. Her niece Karla was pouring Mido another cup of tea and saying, "It would be so cool to spend the day on a boat!"

"But you're on a boat," Merrill said.

"Not a—what do you call it, Mido?" Karla said.

"A felucca," Mido said.

Felucca felucca, men had crooned to Merrill whenever she walked along the Nile. She had been afraid to ask Mido what it meant. Felucca sounded so sinister and decadent, like a brand of opiate to be smoked in those Alice-in-Wonderland water pipes which squatted by the circular brass tables in the coffee shops.

"Let's take a felucca to Banana Island!" the Canadian honeymoon couple and the British school teachers and the Scottsdale seniors all said. They were tired of dusty old tombs. To them, columns and carvings were ancient history.

"I don't care what you do, but I'm going to see King Tut's tomb," Merrill said.

"You cannot go by yourself," Mido said. "I am responsible."

"Then you should stick to the promised itinerary," Merrill said.

"Please Mido," they all began again. After Karla placed both her hands on his arm, he said to Merrill, "Perhaps you can go with one of the other groups."

"That won't be necessary." Merrill left the table, as hurt and angry as if another sort of promise had been broken.

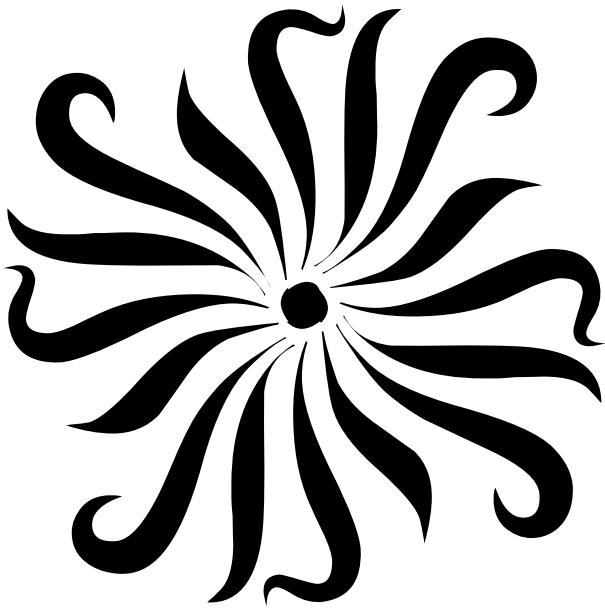
From the deck, she watched them sail away in their felucca. The tall curved sail resembled the wing of a bird. Karla leaned over to trail her fingers in the Nile. Mido gave a cigarette to the dark man who steered the boat with his bare foot on the tiller. But Merrill would have been ashamed to travel halfway around the world to visit a place called Banana Island.

ANOTHER hour passes. Maybe two. She can't say for certain. She rations glances at her watch just like the sips of water. She argues with herself over whether the passage of time increases or decreases the probability of rescue. She looks in her pocketbook, hoping for a bag of peanuts from the jet, a cough drop, a mint flavored toothpick. Naturally she finds nothing like that. She has always prided herself on being a tidy, well-organized person, eager to discard whatever she did not need.

But she does have the guidebook and her pen and a packet of tissues and the five postcards which Karla had written to her boyfriend and Mido refused to mail, claiming they would get to the U.S. faster if Merrill carried them there herself. And of course she has her wallet with its slots full of credit cards and a photo she never looks at and money. She has plenty of money.

THE trouble was, Egyptian cabs had no meters. But she did not realize that until they were already on the bridge crossing the Nile. "How much are you charging me?" she said.

"To Valley of the Kings? Not much. Very reasonable. Also I wait while you visit King Tut's tomb. Then I take you to



Hatshepsut Temple. Then back to your ship. You stay on a ship? Right? All that for seventy.”

“Seventy pounds! I won’t give you more than thirty.”

“Thirty dollars. But no Hatshepsut.”

“Who said anything about dollars? Egyptian pounds.”

The man protested. Thirty pounds was nothing, wasn’t even gas money to cross this bridge. But he took her. Grumbling all the way, he took her. She smiled as she sat in the back seat. In her business, she had a reputation for being a keen negotiator.

She intentionally got out of the cab before paying him. He cursed the three red bills and drove away quickly. She asked where King Tut’s tomb was. There were never any signs in Egypt. A man pointed way off in the distance to a rim of cliffs. She thought he hadn’t understood. But she was the one who was wrong. She was at the Valley of the Queens.

The women were not buried anywhere near their husbands. The women were given smaller and less spectacular tombs, on the far side of the Theban Hills from the marvels which Merrill had intended to see.

SHE can’t afford to get upset. Her anger only makes her hotter. She forces herself to take deep breaths. She will focus on what she can do. She will not fight battles she can’t win. That is how she has built her success.

THE postcard of the Manhattan skyline had been purchased at JFK airport. Merrill had not wanted Karla to buy it, since leaving the gate necessitated another agonizing wait to pass through airport security. But Karla insisted. The writing was in purple ink, large loopy letters decorated with hearts and flowers and smiles.

Dear Kyle, I miss you soooooo much. I didn’t eat the chocolate truffle they gave me on the jet. I’m saving everything for you. My aunt’s kind of weird. She keeps talking about maximizing my potential. Whatever that means. All I know, is I love you. Love, Karla. XOXOX!!!!

Merril grabs her pen and writes.

Maximizing potential means making the most of opportunities! Not wasting chances by going to Banana Island!

Her handwriting is much smaller than Karla’s, the black ink intricately woven between the lines like the threads of a carpet.

But here I am. Nothing to do but wait. I guess I’ll be as famous as Howard Carter for discovering this tomb. No gold here, though, like in King Tut’s. Just broken bits of pots and probably bones somewhere. That is the purpose of the place. But I refuse to add mine to the collection.

At the Antiquities Museum in Cairo, all the other tourists crowded around the golden treasures which had been removed from King Tut’s tomb. But Mido took his group into another nearby room, which contained no statues and no gold, just glass cases displaying broken bits of rock.

“Why have you brought us in here?” Merrill said.

As usual, Mido preferred to address his remarks to Karla whose wide eyes appeared perpetually in admiration even when she was not paying the slightest bit of attention. “This is the ostraca. You may think the pyramids are nothing but a pile of rocks. But this is not true. Each giant block had to be carved to fit together perfectly. To make the angles which reach to the sky. These bits of stone are what’s left of that carving. The ostraca prove that space aliens did not make the pyramids with super technology. My ancestors chipped away each fragment. Then on these shards, the artisans practiced their hieroglyphics. They left their own names here on the ostraca.”

“They should have found bigger pieces to write on,” Merrill said, making yet another attempt to expand her niece’s ambitions.

Mido said, “They wrote on what they had. And left a mark which outlasts the centuries.”

Dear Kyle: This is a picture of Hatshepsut. She was like the only woman to be a pharo. That’s why she has a beard. Mido calls my aunt Hatshepsut. She bates it, but it suits her, so we all do, when she can’t bear us. I’ve been praying to love her in Christ’s name. But it’s a real test of my soul. You are so easy to love. Love, Karla

I NEVER asked to be loved. Just respected. I can’t help how I am. And Hatshepsut couldn’t help that her husband died before she could produce a male heir. Why should she have been deprived of power just because another wife had given birth to a son? Let her rule, if she can. Only the boy grows up, hating her. And once she’s dead, he orders all her statues defaced and her name scratched out, unwritten, and everything she tried to do undone.

“SHUKRAN!” Her mouth is very dry from shouting. The guidebook does not list the Arabic word for *help*. So she calls out “Shukran!” Thanking somebody, anybody, if they might

hear, if they might come. “Shukran!” Thanking the sun for leaving the sky. Thanking the moon for coming to mitigate the night. When it peeps over the rim, she has the idea that if she can see the moon, then whoever else looks at the moon can see her. If they were still looking. If they hadn’t given up for the night.

She painfully shifts her position as the moon crosses the sky; she is reluctant to lose its company. And when it reaches the western edge of her horizon, she knows it is rising in some other part of the world. A young man might look up from his basement apartment, through the window with the bars and the red curtains which had been photographed for her by the private detective. That young man might see her reflection in the white circle, along with the sun’s light.

Then she shuts her eyes and hides her face in the sand. After all these years, she does not want him to see her like this. She wanted him to be in awe of what she had achieved.

THERE were a hundred pyramids in Egypt, and who knew how many more buried by the sands. But the main three, the famous grouping seen in all the photographs, were in a suburb of Cairo. The group traveled there in a minivan, passing half-built high rises and dusty shops and patches of ground being farmed with the same lack of technology used in the time of the pharaohs. After a day of touring perfume factories and souvenir shopping, Merrill was glad to be finally checking an accomplishment off her list.

As soon as the van stopped and the Scottsdale seniors eased their bulk out of the middle seat, Merrill sprinted past them right up to the base of the Great Cheops.

It was enormous. Nearly five hundred feet tall. Even the individual blocks of granite were huge—three feet high and six feet long, each weighing several tons. According to her guidebook, there were two million of them. Merrill had never seen a million of anything. Her own millions were abstract. But here was a manifest representation of wealth. Although her own fortune more accurately resembled an upside-down pyramid, since she made her money by cleverly placing that first large block of capital and letting others heap more on top of it. Still, here this stood, after four thousand years, ready for her to conquer. She took one giant step up onto the bottom layer of blocks and prepared to make her climb.

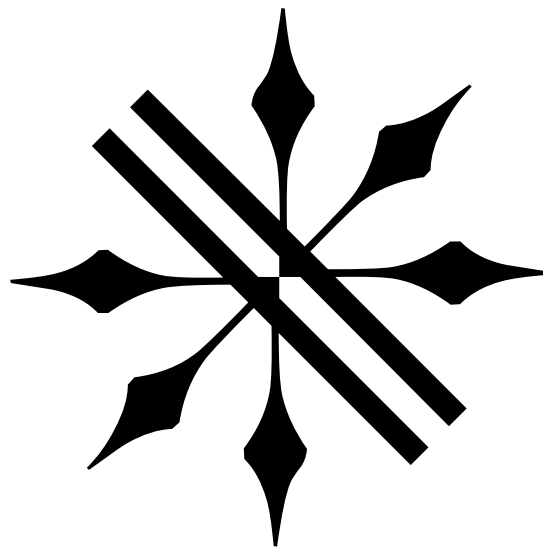
Immediately a soldier in a navy blue woolen uniform waved his AK-47 at her. She went up two more levels. Surely he was there to protect her from terrorists, not to guard the pyramid from her. When the soldier shouted, Mido came running over and put himself between the gun and Merrill.

“Climbing is not permitted,” Mido said.

“But Napoleon did,” Merrill said.

His answer was the sort she hated. If every tourist scrambled up the side, the structure would crumble. She explained to Mido that she was not every tourist. She couldn’t care less about every tourist. If anyone ever deserved to climb, she did.

Mido extended his hand to make her descend. He reminded her that the pyramids had not been built to enable the pharaohs to stand on top, but instead to bury them within.



IN the half light, just before dawn, the rescuers come. She has slept fitfully if at all, and so she knows she is not dreaming. She feels the thudding of the horses’ hoofs. She feels the sand sprinkle down upon her like magic dust. “Shukran!” she yells. “Help!” She pushes herself up into a sitting position to be ready for them. The thudding is pounding now in her heart and in her head. “Shukran! Shukran!”

Men peer over the edge. Their heads are wrapped in turbans. Their faces have brown leather skin with deep creases and hollow cheeks and glittering eyes. But these are not the old guides who practically live at the tombs and for a little bak-sheesh will help you find the place where Rimbaud carved his name. It’s her partner, Marty. Her lover, Stephen. Her ex-husband, John.

She cries then. Even though she tries not to. Tears are such a waste of body fluids. But she didn’t want these men. No, she didn’t want them. She wanted the only one who had really loved her, even if just for a little while.

The ancient Egyptian world was divided between two sons. Osiris and Seth. As with most divisions, the split was obviously unfair. Osiris got the good part, on the east side of the Nile. And Seth got all the desert on the west. So Seth, like any ambitious person, decided to kill Osiris and take over his part. Once Osiris was dead, Isis, the sister-wife of Osiris, tried to claim his body. To prevent this, Seth hacked the corpse all up into pieces and fed the penis to the crocodiles. But Isis was undaunted. She collected all the bits (somehow finding the penis too) and reassembled the body. She wrapped it up in cloth, creating the prototypical mummy. Miraculously Osiris managed one last night of passion and impregnated Isis. She gave birth to a son Horus who grew up in the swamp, away from his jealous uncle. When he reached manhood, Horus avenged the death of his father by killing Seth in a bloody battle near Edfu. Into the underworld went Seth. For no one wanted to resurrect him.

ALTHOUGH the water bottle is empty, she keeps the cap on tight. Sometimes she puts the bottle in the shade. Sometimes

she puts it in the sun. She is hoping the change in temperature will cause condensation. It is the hottest part of the second day, but she is still hoping. She is not praying yet.

SHE stood alone on the deck of the floating hotel, looking off toward the setting sun. The western side which was the land of the dead. She felt the ship insert itself into its surroundings like a wicked thought. Off along the shore, women washed clothes in the river. Children splashed and played in the mud.

Mido came to stand beside her. "I didn't really mean you couldn't enter the dining room unless you wear Egyptian clothes. We can't keep you from your dinner."

She shrugged her shoulders. She had no interest in the Egyptian Night festivities.

He lit a cigarette. Most Egyptians smoked a great deal, since that vice was not expressly forbidden. He offered her the open pack. But she hadn't come to Egypt to resume a habit she had struggled to give up.

The ship carried them onward. The chugging of the engines was like a pulse. The night air was soft and warm. She was still trying to determine just what made Egyptian air feel so lovely to the skin. "You know, I imagined myself here like this, only with a moon."

"The moon is over there." He put his hand on her arm. Together they walked to the other side of the ship. Toward the land of the living.

Since the bank was closer on this side, she could see the children on the shore, shouting and gesturing at the ship. "What are they saying?" she asked.

But Mido only shook his head.

"I understand. They hate what they can't have. Probably the only way their mothers can explain these grand ships is to call us infidels. They don't want to tell their children that they're stuck in a poor country with no prospects and no hope."

Mido threw his cigarette into the Nile. "I must return to the dining room."

"Wait," she said, not knowing why she wanted to keep him with her. "Can I have that cigarette?"

He walked off, however, just barely turning back to say, "Since you are so wealthy, you can buy your own."

Dear Kyle, We didn't get to see this old temple lit up in pretty colors like it is on the card. Oh well. Tonight is Egyptian Night. We are all dressing up in Egyptian clothes, except of course my aunt. She should give her sorrow to the Lord, along with her baby, and let Him help her with the burden. My costume is green trimmed with little gold bangles. I can't wait for you to see me in it! There's going to be a belly dancing contest. Mido wants me to enter but I don't think I will although I probably would win. love, Karla

OK. I give my sorrow to the Lord. I give Him this whole bloody hell of a mess. I pray to Him and all the other gods Osiris, Isis, even that cow god with the horns, whatever her name is, I pray to her especially to DELIVER ME FROM THIS. Oh God, deliver me from this.

* * *

BUILDING the High Dam was supposed to accomplish much for the Egyptian people. No longer would they be at the mercy of the whims of the Nile. The flow of water could be controlled. And from that control would come irrigation, hydroelectric power, and all the miracles of modernization. But when the waters rose behind the dam, certain tombs and temples would be drowned. Amazingly enough, funds were found to elevate Abu Simbel and to move the Philae temple to higher ground on a different island altogether in the new Lake Nasser.

It was lovely on the island, in a way that Egypt had not been. Egypt was starkly beautiful and awe inspiring, but Merrill never found a place where she wanted to linger until that row of windows through which Isis was supposed to have mourned her husband Osiris. Under each opening were a series of deep scratches. Parallel lines, three inches deep and four inches long—they seemed to have been made by the claws of monsters.

"Did the Christians do this too?" she asked Mido. Whenever the early Christians took refuge in an ancient temple, they hacked out the faces of the Egyptian gods and did their best to obliterate the penises.

But Mido placed his hand over the indentations and rubbed his fingers through the gouges. "This is how they were made. Time after time, woman after woman, century after century. Even the rock will wear away."

"But why?" Merrill said.

"They want to have the help of Isis. So that they too can have children."

"You're kidding," Merrill said.

"Of course you wouldn't understand," Karla said. "You never wanted any."

But Merrill wasn't shocked by the desire, just the absurd method of accomplishing it. She put her own fingers into the grooves. There was no reason not to tell Karla. It wasn't a secret. In fact, her sister had been so good about commemorating all the holidays in those first few years, when Merrill still had care of the boy, that Merrill was surprised and disappointed that the contact had not continued. "I did have a child. A son."

"How did he die?"

Karla was so young, she still thought that death was the only way to lose somebody.

MERRIL takes the money out of her wallet. She buries the thirty dollars she had not wanted to give the cab driver. She makes a pile of coins for the man who stood just outside the bathroom at a restaurant near the pyramids. In this land of few trees, there was so little paper, that the towel he gave her was just a scrap. He wanted his tip so badly, he whined like a dog when she walked on by without giving him his baksheesh..

In New York, she never gave money, especially not to street musicians who reminded her of her son. She used to believe that money would do them no good. Money in their hands would only be drunk up or shot up or otherwise disappear in smoke. But the money in her wallet would accrue and amass until it acquired the vast weight of a pyramid.

The paper dollars only fall back down onto her face. The effort is exhausting. So she stops trying.

Dear Kyle, Doesn't this camel look sweet? But Mido says they are actually very mean. I didn't win the belly dancing contest. The girl who did had been taking lessons. That's not fair, right? But I did win the mummy contest. Mido wrapped me up in toilet paper. I had to keep very very still or I would mess up the paper. Which was hard because it tickled. All this eating, I'm gaining weight! Mido says it looks good on me, but I wonder what you'll think. Oh well. Soon I'll be finding out. love, Karla

I HAVE to be prepared. I feel so dizzy sometimes now. I can't say that I'm frightened. I'm not. Just very sad. It's such a waste, after all. And I am bothered that in fact I am already dead to you. So when they find me. And then when they find you. What difference will it make? There will be a lot of money. That's all.

They may yet come. And if I get my second chance, I won't be afraid of what might happen if we met. Maybe you do not hate me. Maybe you are a better person than that. Maybe we can have lunch every few months, no strings attached. I would like that. Very much. It gives me hope to think of it. I need hope. But I'm rationing it, like the water.

On the morning of the third day, she can barely hold the guidebook. But she reads. She has finally found an explanation for the painting above her head.

The faces are familiar to her. They all have those wide eyes and mechanical poses, which make the people resemble space aliens. But they are gods and goddesses, because of the elabo-

rate ornaments on their heads. Two are seated in thrones, looking at a balance scale, where a heart is being weighed against a feather. The feather is the Feather of Truth. The heart is the seat of intelligence. (The Ancient Egyptians paid so little attention to people's brains that they did not save them in canopic jars.) If the heart is heavier than truth, the person is guilty and that heart is fed to the crocodiles. But those found worthy were led to the presence of Osiris and allowed to begin the process of resurrection.

WHEN you find this, you should know. I remember. The last Saturday I had you. We went to the Empire State Building. That's where you saw the pictures of the Wonders of the Ancient World. In the lobby, we waited on that long line. I was trying to show you the pyramid. But you weren't interested. You said you wanted to go home. You missed your mommy. I told you I was your mommy. But you screamed no.

I took you straight home. Somehow I never saw you again. And so I never got the chance to say that I was afraid you would always like the new wife better. I couldn't bear being hated by you.

I am not afraid now. It's a little easier, thinking how you will read this. How you might gather up all my pieces and make sense of them. If you will

WHEN they found her on the fifth day, she was still holding a little rock in her hand. It had nothing drawn on it, nothing written, it wasn't even sharp as a shard. But they put it in the box with her other belongings and her son kept it, never knowing why it was important. ↻

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BY JILL BAUMANN

Lifeless tomb,
Dusty shrine,
Pallid flesh,
Stagnant wine.

Mausoleum,
Chilled and dank,
Deadened spirits,
Hearts that sank.

Sealed off crypt,
Standing stark,
Buried treasures,
Deadly dark.

Mortuary,
Windows sealed,
Silent slab,
Wounds unhealed.

Psychic prison,
Oppressive stare,
Waking nightmare,
Beyond repair.

Cloistered cave,
Hollow halls,
Infertile chambers,
Barren walls.

Frozen fortress,
Enclosed in space,
Inverted time,
Forgotten face.



UNDERGROUND THE EXILED ONES WHISPER...

“A clever cocktail that’s one part Bulgakov and one part Gaiman — dark, disturbing, audacious, and wry as only a true Russian fantasy can be.”

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ILLUSTRATION BY ANTANINA RASHCHYNSKAYA

THERE ARE THOSE WHO PLAY MUSIC.
AND THEN THERE ARE THOSE
WHO *ARE* MUSIC.

The Piper's Chair

by Terry McGarry

Aidan Rourke—fifty-eight years of age, lanky of frame, red of hair, blue of eyes—enters the pub at precisely eight o'clock. He hefts a large black case. It contains one lung of an ancient world. Through it he will inhale resurrection.

All chairs around the designated tables are occupied. Tall barstools migrate over. Folding chairs come up from the cellar. Musicians accrete. The seisiún core expands into the customers' space.

The boundaries blur.

There is chatter, as people settle. The comfortable discordance of tuning instruments. Then it begins, without fanfare or flourish. The sound swells. Fiddles and flutes, accordions and banjos, concertinas and bodhrans, mandolins and guitars and tin whistles add their distinctive flavors. Picks and bows and fingertips, lips and tongues and lungs, palms and knees and elbows blend into a joyful, disciplined, transcendent whole.

No one can understand this, Aidan thinks, without being in it. No one seated at the bar, outside the circle, can appreciate the threedimensionality of this music. It is tangible, feelable; it fills space like a substance.

For this, the first tune, he's left his uilleann pipes sitting quietly on his lap, deflated. He is new to this session, and though he knows the tune well—"Man of the House," a standard E minor reel he defers, for the time being, to the regulars.

He listens, familiarizing himself with their idiosyncrasies, gauging the players. His old regular session, in Brooklyn, has disbanded. This could become his new one.

The first set comes to a close. He believes he has their measure. They seem to believe they have his, too. His keen ear picks up the comments: "Don't sit there, now, you won't hear yourself think." "Mind where you're sitting that fella's a queer one." "Wouldn't say a word to me at the Gloc, if he weren't a piper I'd think he was deaf." "He thinks who the hell he is, that's what he thinks."

He does not acknowledge what he hears by even the slightest hunching of shoulders. He has not come for the craic, for the chitchat. In a moment, or two moments, or three, it will be time for the next tune.

He is ready now.

A wiry man squeezes into the empty chair beside his. Aidan scooches over, concealing his surprise; you take chairs where you can find them. The man greets him with the quick twist of the chin customary on the back roads of rural Ireland. Aidan trained himself out of that long ago his students thought he was spastic and just nods in return. They wait, a small silence within the rising bar noise, for the next tune to start.

Some sessions have a leader, a good player who consistently comes up with good tunes; some take on a round robin style. Aidan prefers the ones like this, conducted in the manner of a Quaker meeting: whoever has a tune in mind simply begins playing it. These sessions, Aidan feels, are the most heartfelt, the most eerie. In these sessions, the organism has no head; it finds its way using senses deeper than thought or sight. These sessions, Aidan feels, are mystical. They are the ones that transport him to something like that place of love he once knew, that place of love he can never allow himself to think of ever again.

He snugs his reed in place. He cut the reed himself, as pipers must; there are few enough uilleann pipers left in the world, and fewer pipe makers still. A piper is on his own, with the instrument most difficult to maintain and most difficult to play of any in traditional Irish music. Old instruments, not designed for a world of mass production and tech support. Some pipers, to offset the isolation of their craft, form small groups within the traditional subculture itself. Aidan has not joined them.

Someone to his left a man playing a straight flute, a beautiful blackwood thing with silvernickel joints has started a set of jigs, almost too low to hear at first. "The Wandering Minstrel," a signature Seamus Ennis tune. A tune made for pipers.

Aidan gently collects his instrument. His fingers, not arched but straight, position themselves at the holes on the chanter. He switches the drone off, does not touch the regulators; their sound will not be appreciated. He operates the bellows with his right elbow: the pipes breathe in. He presses his left elbow against the bag: the pipes breathe out. He begins to play.

He listens more to the tune that surrounds him than to the tune he produces himself. He joins and accompanies; he learned long ago not to dominate. Except for the accordion, his is the loudest instrument here, and since earliest childhood he has feared its fullest sound. He melds the nasal tone of his pipes into the center of the music. He plays with all the courtesy and

consideration his personality seems to lack. You can sit next to him and still hear yourself think. He does not drown out; he floods from within. He gives the melody roundness and the chords depth. He expands them the way air expands a bag.

The way the breath of life fills a lung.

"The Wandering Minstrel" leaps from middle notes to low note like a dancer, spinning in the upper register before landing back in the middle, only to dip and leap again. Its A part bespeaks the rise and fall of expectations. The B part is mid octave surges of emotion followed by wry resignation; the C part, grasping at high As and Bs, is all the brightness of a life lived in pursuit of joy, and the poignancy of its inevitable failure, resolving into a sense of completion, of happiness in the face of the ephemeral.

As the tune ends, Aidan so fully expects it to go into "Jackson's Morning Brush" that he segues right into it. They are statement and response, these two tunes; they are mirror images of joyful striving; they are fugue and variations, uncomplete without each other. Other players have anticipated the pairing also. Aidan's heart swells, like the swell of air in the bag against his side. The musicians are one.

These are the instants that keep him alive. Like his elbow on the bellows, they force breath and life into the shell he inhabits. Aidan does not entirely believe in his own existence. In class he hears his own history lectures as an unmodulated drone, the endless undercurrent of his days. But at these times, as assembled players verge on something like telepathy, he has faith: he is alive.

After "Jackson's Morning Brush," the flute player, perhaps jokingly, strikes up "Lark in the Morning." It is a favorite tune of whistlers, a sweet melody that trills like the bird it's named for. Peripherally, Aidan is aware of percussion strategically adding to the repeat. The rumbling heartbeat of the goatskin drum, applied in the right measure and at the right moment, quickens the pulse but it is more than that: the hypnotic syncopation of another, clicking percussion, to his right. As the variations mount in the fourpart jig, the spoons add a spindly insectile sound to the almost subliminal boom of tipper on drum. It is mesmerizing; and the closer Aidan listens, the better he plays.

Then the set is over. Aidan subsides into his halfstate, his half life, as the wave of chatter surges in to fill the between tune gap, the "Will you have another then?"s and the "By the way, I meant to tell you"s. The pub has grown crowded, noisy; musicians continue to arrive, and the barman produces extra chairs as if by magic, wedging them in around the table or adding them, like the rings of a tree, to the periphery.

"Heard you up at the feis," the man next to Aidan says without looking at him. Not a regular; someone like him, someone unmoored. His spoons protrude from a back pocket, catching on the chair when he turns; a pair of bones flank his dark pint on the table. He played well, with a manic gleam in his eye and a wicked grin. "You were very good," he goes on.

Aidan won a low level piping section at the Westchester event, and played for a children's step dancing competition. He thanks the man, but adds nothing, encourages nothing. The praise unnerves him.

"Haven't heard piping like that in a long time now," the man says. Bored, looking for conversation. Aidan regrets having let him squeeze in. He has nothing against conversation, as long as other people are having it.

"The old style. A way of playing that can only be learned from the old masters."

Aidan's heart goes very still.

"Wicklow, is it?" the man guesses, fingering his smooth bonesreal bone, not wooden substitutes.

"I'm from Mayo," he says, finally. "Castlebar."

"Psssh, you never learned to talk like that in Castlebar." The bone man turns very old eyes in Aidan's direction.

Seeing those eyes, Aidan contrives a sudden need to use the jacks. Yet he finds that he cannot induce his legs to lift him up; he finds that he does not, in fact, have to use the jacks at all.

It has been years, so many years . . . and all that he lost, all that he fled . . .

It's no place for a child, the company of the likes of us.

He hasn't heard that voice for decades. This old man, this bone man, has brought it back.

Who are you? he tries to ask, and finds himself naming a county in the southeast of Ireland, the county his family moved to from Mayo when he was four, a county that has produced no pipers of note in a hundred years.

The bone man nods, and falls silent, for a tune has sprung to life across the table, and he is not a bored old garrulous man at all he is a man who respects the music, who has respected the music for a very long time, and, Aidan is beginning to suspect, a very long time before that.

They told him not to be going in those pubs, bothering those fellas. They told him not to be playing that filthy old thing he found a chanter, he'd tell them, it was called a chanter, it was the thing pipers practiced on, but they said they didn't care what it was called, he wasn't to go messing with it, it sounded like a strangled swine, the noise could wake the dead. Banned from the pubs where the old men played the young weren't interested in the music or the dancing, it was a new world now he would linger at windows, absorbing tunes, growing skillful at learning them on one listen. He'd keep the tunes in his heart, all the tunes he could hold, and then skulk away to his secret place to play them where no one would hear. He had many secret places, and every one of them was found out, humiliating him again and again.

Until he found the old cottage. Out past the bogs, at the intersection of two ancient, overgrown paths, it was little more than a tumble of mossy fieldstones, with a hearth cold those many years, two empty rooms occupied only by damp, its thatched roof replaced with corrugated tin that itself was rusting away. It might have been a pub once, a wayside stopping place a house of gathering and welcome, before the paths of the world moved on.

No one ever found him there. He could play as loud as he liked, as long as he liked. The bogs swallowed the mournful tones; the porous limestone rocks absorbed them. He practiced all summer, whenever he could get away. The decrepit ruin welcomed him each time he arrived.

* * *

AIDAN blinks, looks around the room, desperate to anchor himself here, now; afraid to be swept back into that place.

All these people...all these real, human people, joining together to play shared tunes it is continually incomprehensible. He is used to it, part of it, it is the best part of his life, it is life itself to him; yet there are still moments when he sits in awe of its social nature.

The banjo player has struck up "The Flagstone of Memories." Aidan joins in. Some of the customers have cleared a space, at the far end by the jacks, to dance a threehand reel. The bodies weave between and around each other; from his vantage point, beyond the pub crowd, they dance in and out of view, as if through a screen of trees.

For a moment, it seems the scuffed floor under his shoes becomes a firm dirt road, dust settled by a recent, soft rain. He is the piper at the roadside, where folk from all the little farmsplit and split again, always too many sons and not enough landgather on a summer's night to dance under the stars. It is the crossroads where the cottage grew. Who lived there? Was it a piper's house? He's never known, and never will.

He is that piper now. The summer stars of centuries past whirl in the rafters over his head, as the dancers whirl to his music.

It's not healthy for the lad.

Sure, he's all right; where else can he go?

I tell ye, it goes against nature. He'll take harm from it, you mark me.

If nature were opposed to it, he'd not see nor hear us now. You mind your tongue, old fella. Next you'll be scaring him away.

WARM bodies, making music, now, right now, here he must brace himself in that reality. But how do you know what is real? He inhabited two realms for so long, from such a young age. . . . He would almost rather live in the past, the spectral, see-through past, unreal except in the mind that believes in it.

It hurts too much, hurts deep in the part of the brain where fundamental assumptions are formed.

Who is to say that the bone man isn't a spectre himself?

Aidan has fled such questions for the better part of a lifetime. The most love he's ever known, and the worst pain he's ever suffered, were in that tumbledown cottage. He would never know such love again, not in the realm of men; and so he pushed it all firmly behind him, that he might at least be spared the pain.

"It's not lost forever, you know."

"Leave me alone!" he cries to the bone man. It comes out a whisper.

"You're already alone, lad," the bone man replies. "If I leave, or you leave, it'll make no difference a-tall so."

Aidan will not believe that. He is not alone, not when he is surrounded by the music, cupped in its golden hands. Not when it is music made by living beings, with heartbeats in their chests and warm pulsing blood under their skin.

The room has taken on the soft lambency of inebriation, though Aidan hasn't touched a drop.

"You've come back to the crossroads, Aidan Rourke," the bone man's voice says from beside him. But the bone man is gone.

And don't all the youngsters learn from the old players? It's how you learned yourself, don't be denying it. Plastered to the piper's knee at every boogie, at his feet at every crossroads dance, every parlor ceiling. "Round the house and mind the piper!"

We're older than the oldest of that lot, now.

Aye, and better pipers too. No bay to bring in. No turf to cut. We've plenty of time for it now.

AIDAN plays. Fear contracts his elbow against the bag, produces a sound of strangled desperation. People look over at him, brows raised, and he cringes against the hard wooden back of the chair. To be heard is to be noticed. To be noticed is to be silenced. With, he must play with, he must be ever part of the music. His arms sag; his fingers seize. He falls silent. It is worse than terror.

He turns toward the sound of movement, a scrape of chair legs: some of the earlybirds behind him are vacating their comfortable spot by the wall. Leaving his jacket, his instrument case, he moves quickly into the emptied space. The woodpaneled walls meet here in angular safety. He braces himself against their joining, and takes up his pipes again.

We've got to do something for the poor little fella. It's a terrible thing, to lose your mam.

It's enough your being here, he told them. Just don't leave me.

And sure where would we go, then? they said, laughing. No, lad, it's you who'll be leaving, one fine day. We'll be here as we've always been. We'll play as we've always done.

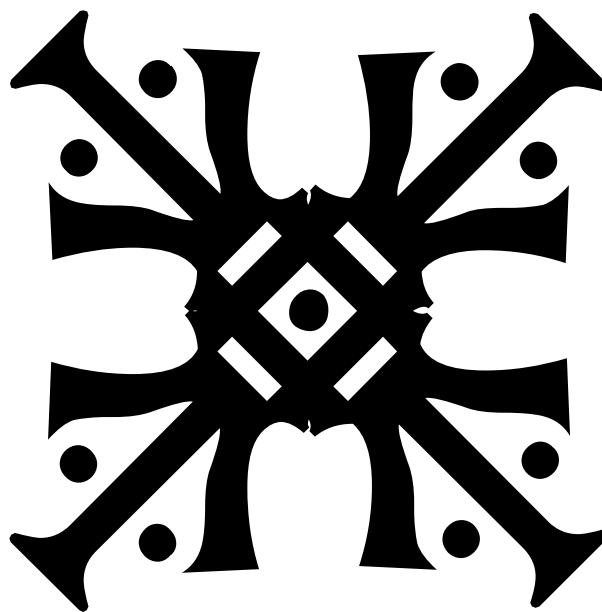
I believe you, Aidan said, and hefted his pipes his first full set of Irish pipes. Newer than theirs, made of better materials, but weaker for that somehow. Over the years, he would break them in. They would age with him. No need of the coveted historical pipes, the expensive ones made in the seventeenth century, now collector's items. He could hear those pipes played here and now. By the men who had played them when they were new.

For me mam, he said, beginning a slow air he'd gotten off them.

For your mam, they replied, and listened while he keened.

THEIR voices speak in the music, in the breaths the whistlers take between phrases, in the crackle of peat in the hearth. Wherever peat is burned, there are ghosts of the old Ireland. Aidan knows; it is what brought them, that winter's night when he had to steal some turf to burn in the crumbled hearth, risk discovery by the smoke, or freeze. They could not warm him, the Grey Men; they could not warm his hands to help his fingers move in the frosty air. They were as frost themselves, a condensation of breath, fine mists of smoke and ice in the shape of men.

But they warmed his soul with their playing. Sometimes he slept there, comforted by the rise and fall of their ancient accents, their chatter about the past his lullaby the forgotten



tunes, the tunes that no O'Neill or Mulvihill had ever catalogued.

They listened to him. It was all he'd really asked of anyone, and all that had really been denied him, as the industrial estates went up and the jobs materialized and the money began to come in. In his music, they heard his triumphs and heartaches; through his words they accepted the small irritations of his days, the eager excitements. They saw him off with jaunty grins and sly humor; they welcomed him back with serene complacency.

He belonged there. He would always return.

GROUNDING by the building's structure, he finds the music in him again. A set of breakneck reels begins, and he plays, his fingers flying, cutting and striking, rolling each note into ornament. There is no tonguing the elbow pipes; they speak in a language of limbs.

He has never been so fluent. His hands and arms articulate all that his words never could. No more fear of his own sound now, nor ever again. He switches the drone on, opens the regulators with the heel of his hand to produce thirds, fourths, fifths. In his embrace, the pipes sing longing, sing heartbreak.

As long as he has the music, he will exist. In these tunes he will go on forever, a being out of time.

Never lose the music, lad, they said when he set off for university. It's a big place, Dublin. You'll find your chances to play. Just don't let them stuff your head with so much education it squeezes the tunes out.

I won't, he promised. I won't. . . . And he made good on that promise, as he made good on his promise to return.

It was not their fault they couldn't make good on their promise to be there.

* * *

He continues to sit, in his forgotten corner, long after the last of the other musicians have left. The night barman lingers late, hosting a few old gangers after hours; then later stillguardian of his domain, perhaps reluctant to leave it to the memories and the shadows. But in the end he too is gone, the lock tumbling into place behind him. His last check of the premises did not reveal Aidan's presence.

In the slender hours before dawn, Aidan listens to the reels and hornpipes echoing in the shadows. At last, as he senses the first hint of morning in the grey hours, when the air outside pales to the hue of frost, he lifts the chanter, fills the bag with the pub's breath, and begins to play the tunes of his youth.

He is safe. No one hears him. The shadows dance alone.

HE stood completely still, looking at the foundation hole where the cottage had been. He stood so still, so long, that it seemed a rime of frost formed on him, made of him a frozen thing, a relic of his disastrous absence.

If I'd been here! he wanted to cry. *If I'd known!*

But no one had told him. No one had known about the time he spent at the crumbled ruin. The start of yet another industrial park, on the outskirts of a small town three counties away, had not been news in Dublin. While he'd been receiving the degree that dangled from his numb fingers, they'd been tearing the cottage down, scooping out the first loads of earth.

Tá brón orm, he whispered. *There is grief on me.*

He fled that day, never to return. He could not live in a land that demolished its own ghosts.

IN the morning, he is paler than the paling shadows.

He knows, now.

He has become a Grey Man.

The day barman cannot see him. He subsides into a kind of sleep, a sleep of memory, deep below the stones, the earth, the schist, deep in the past of another land.

He will spend the days in the nooks and crannies of his childhood, and the nights as a lonely wraith, and if a child should come, to learn, a child of any age, he will be here a teacher, a good teacher, taught by the best teachers himself. When the sessions form like crystals, he will sit in, on the periphery. He will suggest tunes, gently, into the minds of those coming up blank.

Then, on a breath of remembrance, he will play along. ♪

Terry McGarry is a freelance speculative-fiction copyeditor and Irish musician. In her past lives, she has been a bartender on Wall Street, an English major at Princeton, a street trader in Ireland, a Page O.K.'er at The New Yorker, and a SFWA officer. Her short fiction has appeared in more than forty magazines and anthologies, and her poetry is collected in the award-winning chapbook Imprinting. Terry's most recent novel is Triad (Tor Books, 2005).

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Formidable Terrain

by Elizabeth Bear

The stench of rot strikes you like a train: it drives you to your knees and you blink, eyes watering, burning as you try to reconcile the realization that this thing is *flesh* with its sheer, absolute enormity.

I'm a biologist. This is—geology. What am I doing here?

Shattered buildings lie under its bulk. It oppresses, a fleshy tsunami, canyons and rifts red deep inside, oozing pestilence, maggots writhing in streams. *Pseudopods*. Trying to classify, mind refusing. *Rubbery . . . skin? Is that a mouth?* It looks like a crater.

Pulling the hood of your NBC suit over your face, you switch to internal oxygen. And then you stand and move forward (your tools spade and mattock rather than scalpel and forceps) to analyze the thing that fell from the sky.

Later, stripped of the red-daubed Tyvek, you lean forward in the passenger seat of a circling helicopter, finger numb on the shutter button of a camera, listening to the autozoom, autofocus whir. “Bring it lower.” The pilot obeys, although you’re sure the fetor of the thing rotting thickens the air enough to trap the flimsy helicopter like a dragonfly in amber. Lower doesn’t help: the scale of the thing’s grey-blistered integument is too vast. You might as well try taxonomy on a watermelon held up to your eye. You think of the blind men and the elephant and you laugh underneath, because you know if you let the sound out it would bubble up like hysteria. It would *be* hysteria.

Ecological disaster, you think. *This thing will foul Lake Michigan like a rotting buffalo in a water hole*. You wonder about alien bacteria, viral propagation, impact on endangered species. And then you realize that the decaying latex plain you spiral was once Detroit Wayne County Metro Airport and with the realization comes comprehension: any impact you can imagine is *just too fucking small*.

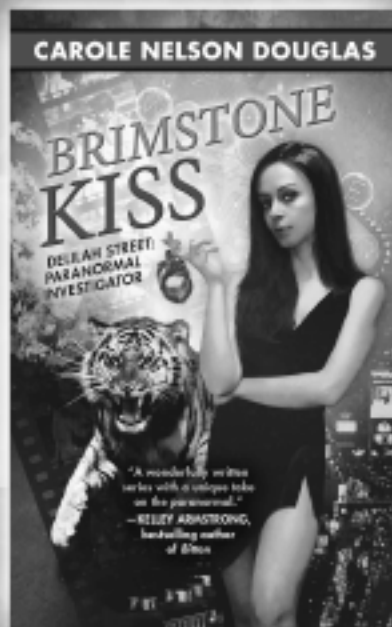
“Take us up some.” The pilot does, and the scale starts making sense. Five red furrows like canyons run eerily parallel, and then another five, and then the vast ragged wound, the massively torn section that can only look *cheved*, and—because you are a biologist, were a biologist before you were the President’s science advisor, because you *are* a biologist—you think of shrikes and thorns, leopards and gazelles draped high in the overarching branches of convenient trees.

“Holy shit,” you whisper, and the helicopter shudders with the pilot’s reaction to your outburst.

You raise your eyes to the azure sky. Because it must have been a meal too big even for whatever goes with the claws, the teeth that rove those craters, those canyons.

And predators don’t cache kills unless they plan to return.

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HOW COULD MAN'S BEST FRIEND
SURVIVE MANKIND'S
WORST ENEMY?

Within Your Soul I Sightless See

by Eugie Foster

It started with Olson. Olson isn't a mean dog or an aggressive dog. In fact, he's just about perfect in every way aside from his inappropriate chew toy foibles. But then, I might be biased. Olson's my dog. He's a Beagle-Doberman mix; I call him a Deagle when anyone asks. He has the copper and black markings of a Doberman, with the short, stumpy legs and lovable, floppy ears of a Beagle. Olson's voice, when he has something to say, which is fairly often, is a sort of *bruff* sound, too nasal to be the trademark scent hound bay but too yappy to take seriously as the holler of a real attack dog.

For all his comical appearance and voice, he has a certain dignity to him. And he loves me. He waits with his wet nose pressed against the front windowpane for me to come home after classes and wriggles like a puppy when I rub his belly.

We grew up together, pup and boy, our names blurring together: "There goes Oliver-n-Olson" or "Ollie and Ollsie, out for some trouble." And now the both of us at college, living in a cheap, rented student house with three other guys. He's my best friend, and he was the first victim of the Blindman.

It was spring break. All of my housemates were partying it up elsewhere—Palm Springs, Daytona, the Bahamas—leaving me the place all to myself. I had a whole week off from classes. I should've been working on a paper for my Abnormal Psychology class, or reading chapters for Bio, but I wasn't. I was lying on the stained and patchwork couch, enjoying the luxury of doing nothing as the

silvery light of early evening fell on the hand-me-down curtains my mother had foisted on us. The only sound was Olson in the backyard, barking at squirrels or birds, or maybe the Thompson's cat next door. That cat enjoyed teasing the doofus, sitting on the fence between our yards with her back turned to him, her tail waving and twitching. Lacking the proper dig-its, I'm sure it was her way of giving Olson the finger.

Then I heard Olson scream. Not yelp, not whine, but scream. The scream of a dog is a baby's wail, jagged fingernails scraping an old fashioned chalkboard, and a dentist drilling a crater in your back molar, all wrapped together. It dropped a ball of ice into my gut and shot adrenalin in spiky shockwaves down my spine. I was off the couch and out the backdoor before my conscious brain knew something was up.

In our yard with the six-foot privacy fence, someone was bent over Olson. My dog was lying on the ground, and he was no longer screaming; he was crying. The someone wore a ragged trench coat in the balmy April weather and had hanks of gray and black hair that wreathed his face. His hair and the wraparound sunglasses he wore obscured his features.

I took off, waving my arms and shouting. "Get the hell away from my dog!"

The figure turned to face me. His skin was pasty white, so white in the twilight he glowed. He had a stylus or a scalpel of some sort in his hand. The weapon almost slowed me down, but then I saw Olson.

Blood was streaming from my dog's ruined face; his eye sockets were a mass of red gore. He writhed on the ground, whimpering and moaning in pain.

I howled. At a dead run, I slugged the guy in the face as hard as I could. He went backwards, his shades flying off.

The part of my mind that had reacted to Olson's scream recoiled when I saw his attacker's face. Where human eyes should have been was a mass of puckered scar tissue, and his mouth was red and dripping wetness. But I ignored the part of me that was screaming unholy terror. I bent over Olson.

He must have been in terrible pain. His beautiful, laughing, brown eyes, those eyes that had watched me with such adoration and trust had been completely gouged out. I knelt, afraid to touch him, afraid of hurting him more.

He scented me. Even through his terrible agony, he knew me. His tail thumped the earth.

A sound or movement made me look up, searching the area where Olson's attacker had fallen. I was murderous, mad with fury. I would have killed him then. But he was gone. Scarred-eye-sockets blind and over a six-foot fence, gone.

I didn't have time to hunt for him or wonder about his sightless agility. I cradled my dog in my arms and carried him as gently as I could into the house. He tried to lick my face, all the while bleeding and oozing liquids I tried not to think about onto my shoulder. I called 911. They refused to send an ambulance out for a dog but said they would send a squad car to look for Olson's assailant.

I wasn't going to wait for the cops. I wrapped my dog in a blanket and drove him to the emergency vet across town. I think I broke every speed limit and ran every stop sign there.

The vet people were more sympathetic than the 911 oper-

ator. They took Olson into their trauma center immediately and started working on him.

Seeing them put a conical gas mask over his muzzle and pump a syringe full of pink stuff into him released me from the tense stasis I'd been in during the drive. I staggered into their bathroom and threw up the cold pizza and flat Pepsi I'd had for dinner. When I was done, Olson was in surgery and I wasn't allowed in. The receptionist led me to the waiting room. I didn't realize there were tears streaming down my face until she handed me a box of Kleenex.

The vets were able to save Olson's life. He would be a long time healing—the gouging had been brutal and clumsy—and he would have to learn how to function without his sight. But he had a lot of scent hound in him, and the vet said he expected Olson to be able to make the transition reasonably well. He couldn't go home that day. Not until they were sure his wounds weren't infected and he was stable.

With my roommates gone, the house had been comfortable, liberating even, with all that space to myself. Without Olson, it was too quiet, too big, and too empty.

The cops came and asked a bunch of questions, but with a bored, detached air. They didn't care about some dog, and they didn't believe me when I told them how Olson's attacker had looked. I wanted to hit them for not caring more.

They began to pay more attention when it happened again. This time it was the Thompson's cat. The sicko killed her. He struck out her eyes like he'd done to Olson and ripped out her heart.

If I hadn't been there to rescue my poor dog, would he have torn out Olson's heart too?

People kept their pets indoors after that. Then a kid rollerblading his way home from a matinee showing at the local second run theatre vanished. In broad daylight even. They found him in a dumpster, dead—his eyes torn from his head, his chest opened up, and his heart missing. The media got involved, and the police started stringing yellow tape everywhere.

The local tabloids called the psycho the Blindman, indulging in the typical tawdry sensationalism they loved so much.

WHEN Olson got to come home his head was a mess of bandages. He was groggy from all the painkillers the vet had shot into him, but I was glad for that. I didn't want him to hurt.

The house wasn't empty any more, but it wasn't the same either. Olson lifted his white-swathed head every time I entered the living room. I'd set him up a comfy nest with his favorite blanket and a jumbo-sized pillow next to the couch. I would've had him on the couch proper, except without his sight, I was afraid he'd fall off. He knew it was me, though, and always gave a half-hearted wurf and twitched his tail, but then he'd put his head back down.

After the attack, Olson was different. For the first time in his life, he moved like an old dog, rather than a pup, and he was so quiet. The Blindman had torn away more than my dog's eyes; he'd also maimed his spirit. So I grinned and felt like

jumping up and down when Olson's distinctive *bruff* echoed through the house.

I was in the kitchen, fixing peanut butter crackers and Doritos for me, and a bowl of kibble for Olson. He started baying his "Someone's here" bark, and then he started growling.

Olson never growled. When he barks at mailmen and Girl Scouts, it's like he's a herald announcing a visiting dignitary—never hostile, never aggressive. But this time I could hear the Doberman in him, the breed of dog policemen and security firms use to scare the bejeebers out of gang bangers and hardened criminals.

I dashed into the living room, my hands still sticky with peanut butter. Olson growled at an empty corner, pointing like a bird dog. His lips were curled back from teeth I'd never thought of as anything but kibble munchers and shoe manglers, but now he reminded me they were weapons, the kind that tore out throats and splintered bones.

"What is it, boy?" I said. I inched closer to him. Surely, surely, he couldn't be dangerous to me.

He shivered when he heard my voice and his tail lifted. But it didn't wag. Olson kept growling, a long, non-stop undertone of menace and threat.

"There's no one there, fella. You're okay. Good dog." I crooned nonsense words to him, silly doggy things, as I edged closer. When I was close enough, I reached out a hand to stroke him, to let him know I was there. As soon as I touched him, he lunged.

I fell back on my butt, throwing my arm over my throat to protect myself from his clashing fangs. Except he wasn't attacking me; he leapt past me. His teeth closed over something I couldn't see with the unmistakable sound of wet meat and tearing cloth. I heard a grunt and Olson was flung away. The thin walls vibrated from the impact. He lay very still.

Faster than I could react, could move, could even cry out, the unknown, invisible something, someone pinned me flat. I couldn't see him, but I could smell him—like how the air is on a summer day when it's so hot the tar melts on the road, when the dust and pollen lays heavy as a blanket, and you can taste the burn of metal in your sinuses.

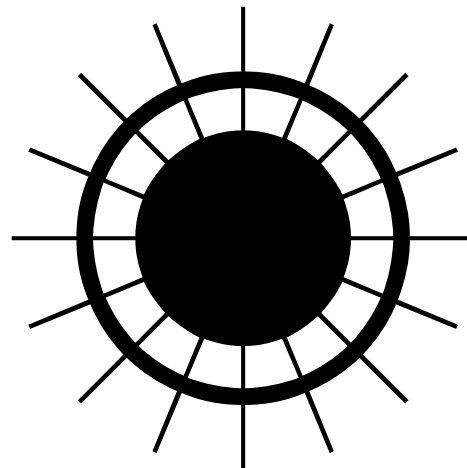
My left eye exploded in a starburst of agony. I shrieked, but I couldn't move. The only thing I could do was scream out my pain and terror.

I saw what was hovering over me. It was the psycho who had blinded Olson. He glowed a sick, milky white. The same weapon he'd had before—a silver scalpel—was bloody in his stick-thin fingers. He held the mashed pulp of what used to be my left eye, and as I screamed, he brought it to his mouth and swallowed it.

He bent over me, and even in my horror and agony, I realized something. I wasn't seeing him out of my intact right eye; I was seeing him out of the socket of my ruined left.

I struggled to move, to fight him off as he knelt with his pointed weapon. He brought it closer, grinning through gore-smear lips. I couldn't even shut my eyelids.

The scalpel sliced down. Before it could connect, the Blindman was knocked back and over. Olson stood on his chest, his stumpy front legs pinioning him, snarling like an



angry thundercloud. My paralysis lifted, and I rolled to my knees, clutching at my face, unable to stop the grunts of anguish from escaping through my clenched jaw. Olson's teeth snapped closed over the Blindman's throat, but there wasn't any throat there. No Blindman. I checked through both eyes—the whole one, and my bleeding, ruined socket. He was gone, leaving my dog whining with frustration.

The left side of my face was fiery pain—lightning spikes of agony fragmented into bursts of red-hot anguish through my head. I really wanted to pass out and maybe throw up, in that order if necessary. But then I thought about what would happen if I were unconscious and the Blindman came back. I called 911 instead.

The paramedics put up a big fight when I insisted I wasn't going anywhere without Olson. I finally told them I refused to go with them, that I'd prefer to die of shock and blood loss than leave Olson behind. They probably thought I was hysterical—hell, I probably was—but they let Olson ride with me to the hospital.

The doctors were actually decent about him being there. For his part, Olson didn't act up or even bark. I saw him as they wheeled me into surgery. He sat outside the trauma center door with his bandaged eye sockets trained on me, silent and anxious. It reminded me of a similar waiting room scene but with roles reversed.

They patched me up, put a huge white dressing over the left side of my face, and hooked me up to an IV baggie chock full of antibiotics and painkillers. There was nothing they could do to restore my left eye. But I'd known that as soon as I saw the Blindman swallow it. There was some talk about a prosthetic for appearance sake after I healed.

The police came and took me a lot more seriously this time.

The doctors wanted to keep me overnight or longer, but they were beginning to get antsy about Olson. If my dog couldn't stay, neither would I.

I checked myself out, woozy still from the meds, and took a taxi home.

That night, Olson slept in bed with me. At first, I couldn't sleep. The ache and twang from my eye made me insomniac, tossing and moaning despite the painkillers the doctors had

given me. Then I had dreams. In all of them, I watched scenes unravel from two perspectives, like I had two heads, two sets of eyes. In one head I was a regular guy and people walked around and did normal, people things. In the other I was a freak with white, glowing skin, and I watched tentacled monsters oozing pus and ichor pace beside not-human people with too many eyes, or not enough limbs, or extra animal parts. The screaming-weird part was the two visions overlaid each other so the normal people and the not-people were the same. And it all made perfect sense to both of me.

I woke to Olson licking my face. Groggy and confused, images from my dreamscape were still stuck in my head. Olson looked like a normal dog, as normal as a disfigured Deagle can look—copper and black fur, banner-like ears, and wagging tail. But like a bad special effect, an image was superimposed over him. His markings writhed, blurring on his body so it looked like something was slinking through his skin. When I looked into his face, his eye sockets were filled with a bright, green light.

I yelped and shoved him. He yelped back and cowered at the foot of my bed. I woke up completely and remembered it was Olson, my Olson, who I'd just batted away.

"I'm sorry, fellah," I said. "Had a bad dream. Didn't mean to scare you. You're a good dog. C'mere, boy."

He crept to me; his tail lifted from where he had tucked it between his legs. I fluffed his ears and tugged on his dangling jowls. "Good boy."

He drooled happily on me and lolled on his back so I could rub his tummy. He peered up at me, his doggy face grinning and trusting, and his phantom eyes glowing neon green.

I stopped myself from recoiling by will power alone. This was still just Olson. I forced myself to continue ruffling his belly fur as he eyed me sideways, wondering why I was being so stiff but willing to be forgiving about it.

I saw he only had ghost eyes if I looked at him through my empty left socket, which shouldn't have been able to see anything. With my right eye, no green glow, nothing but bandaged dog face.

I couldn't stay inside. Jitters prickled up and down my spine, and my skin felt like it was going to get up and slither off me if I didn't do something. The clock told me it was five-thirty in the morning. Early dawn when the world would be crisp and new, the streetlights beginning to turn themselves off, and the sky just light enough to see your feet against the whiteness of the sidewalk.

"Wanna go for a walk, boy?"

Olson's tail thumped.

I pulled on a t-shirt and a jacket over the sweatpants I wore to bed, and tugged on the sneakers Olson usually didn't chew on unless he was feeling ornery.

Outside, it looked different. The air shimmered and glinted, heavy like I could reach out and touch it, feel the textures of it between my fingertips. Indigo shadows dipped in and out of the edges of my sight. I tried to follow them and caught afterimage effects, like blinking from a flashbulb pop. The shades mimicked the monsters of my dreams. They made faces at me, leering at a spot between my shoulder blades.

I should have been unnerved. But instead, I was amused. It was funny. I laughed.

I think the sound offended them. The shadow shapes zipped away. I watched them enter homes—the Thompson's, the frat house across the road, the other buildings that lined my street. I watched it all from my left, like you'd focus on a telescope with both eyes open, but only paying attention to one side.

Olson *bruffed* and set off at a trot.

"Where you going, fellah?"

He turned his head. Glowing green eyes regarded me, and he *bruffed* again. *This way*, he said in clear-as-day dog talk. We have to go this way.

So we went that way. I walked silently on my rubber-soled, gnawed-on sneakers, and Olson prowled beside me—a fierce hunting dog on short, stumpy legs.

He turned into a driveway. An elderly lady lived in the house that driveway belonged to. I didn't know her name, but I knew she fed the birds and squirrels. A feeder and birdbath ornamented the huge oak tree in her front yard. I'd seen her, now and again, putting millet or seed out as I drove to class.

Olson led me around back. I knew, the same way I knew to look out of my left, we needed to be quiet. More than quiet. We needed to be invisible.

Not understanding why or how, I reached out to the mercury air, and touched it. It felt like cool water streaming over my palm. It clung to my hand, and I wrapped it around us like a mantle. Now we were grey and silver too. As soon as the edges of our air-cloak closed around us, I heard it, smelled it: the burning tang of tar in summer, the high, shrill sounds of a woman's death cry. A second later, the screams sheered off, truncated.

We slipped around the corner.

The Blindman bent over the bird and squirrel-loving old lady. A sack of seed and corn lay scattered over the ground; the grainy textures splashed with bright, bright red. The woman's blood, strewn across the yard, gleamed in the bleak pre-dawn, pulsing a hot, tawny crimson. Her chest was a pulp of tissue, nothing but shredded meat. As we watched, the Blindman reached into the ragged cavity and pulled out her heart. He shoved it into his mouth, crammed the whole thing in, and swallowed. I didn't need to look to know he had already taken her eyes.

Olson and I, we moved together, launched ourselves at the Blindman, silently, swiftly, invisibly.

His left eye socket glowed fiery red; his right was a mass of scars. The light of his eyes flickered as I ran, right, left, scars, no scars—my mind wasn't used to focusing only out of one side when I was in motion.

I slammed my fist into his face; Olson locked his teeth around his calf. I heard the snap of bone as my dog's jaws ground together. The Blindman gibbered and went down, reaching for the silver air. He plucked free a great sheet of it and wound it about himself in a cocoon of nothingness.

I smacked his hand aside, and he lost his grip on the rippling ether. We grappled and I sprawled on top of him.

"What the hell are you?" I snarled.

He laughed. It was a terrible laugh, sharp like the sound of a man's neck snapping at the end of a noose, and wet like flesh

being torn from bone. "I am lost innocence and hatred. You can't kill me. You or your animal." His voice was the rasp of night ghouls mocking you as you huddle under the covers, the hyena cries in the bush no animal throat makes, and everything evil that waited in the darkness for a moment of weakness.

I shuddered and felt my strength ebb away.

"Watch and judge, watch and judge." The Blindman jabbered on. "When you tire of all those eyes seeing, all those minds hating, you'll understand. You too will devour them, the blackness of their hearts."

He surged up. I couldn't hold him; he was so strong. He threw me and Olson off, knocking us to the ground, and went after my dog. The scalpel in his hand plunged into Olson's side.

Olson yowled and bit at the Blindman, but his teeth passed through him, not connecting, not slowing him.

I tried to tackle him, but I couldn't touch him either. I passed right through him with the sensation of syrupy air all around me as I flew through his body.

The Blindman sawed at Olson, showing his scalpel deeper into my dog's squat body. I knew he was going for the heart.

Olson howled, struggling but unable to sink teeth into his tormenter. I tried to grab the Blindman's arm and felt only air. Viscous air, but just air. My hand slipped down, unimpeded, until it jolted against the scalpel. Olson yelped.

I could touch the scalpel.

I wrapped my fingers around it and pulled, fighting the Blindman for it, trying not to widen the terrible wound in my dog as we struggled.

The Blindman's fingers raked my face. I felt the sear of jagged nails score my right cheek, dangerously close to my eye. He was going for my eye.

In that moment when the Blindman was solid, hurting me, Olson lunged. His teeth closed over the Blindman's arm, and the Blindman's grip on the scalpel loosened.

I tore the blade free. As hard and as fast as I could, I shoved the scalpel into the Blindman's chest, aiming for his heart. Looking leftward, I could see it thrumming there, quickened with the heart's blood of all his victims.

I slipped the weapon through his ribs and punctured that putrid, beating organ.

The Blindman shrieked, flailing and spitting. His hands closed around my throat. I ignored the spotlights firing behind my eyes and focused on cutting. I had to cut out his heart. I knew it. He'd told me so himself.

His blood was hot as it coursed over my hand. Blisters erupted, but I kept sawing, slicing him open, through meat, bone, and muscle with the scalpel, sharper than it had any right to be.

Then I had it. His shuddering, beating heart in my hand. He fell back and watched me with his glowing eyes.

"What now, filth?" he whispered. "Can you do the rest of it?"

I looked at Olson, so still on the ground, his ghost eyes dimming but still lit. I used the scalpel to chop the Blindman's heart in half. I bent over my dog, presenting him one half, while I crammed the other into my mouth.

Olson accepted my offering, wolfing it down in a single gulp.

The Blindman screamed.

The gash in Olson's side seamed closed. I felt the gashes on my face heal and the blistered skin soothe. The Blindman's heart tasted of bile and night—bitter darkness, acid hate, and fear. I ate his heart and saw into his soul.

It was an old soul, older than memory, as old as the stories parents tell their children at night to get them to behave. But once, a long time past, he had been a young man, and he had been a victim too. He had lost his eyes to a worse evil, a nameless horror. That evil had left him insane from the visions coursing through his wrecked head.

The Blindman—his true name had been mislaid in time's fog—could look into people's souls. All of humanity's quirks and weaknesses, the petty hatreds, the malice, the loneliness—revealed to him, even drawn to him, like circus clowns cavorting for a rapt audience.

He repaid pain with violence. He discovered if he ate the orbs of sight it would give him relief from his own visions—at least for a while. The more innocent the soul, the longer the relief. And hearts gave him life—stolen vitality, pilfered years. It also gave him a moment of empathy and insight into the souls he hated.

I think he'd been asleep for a long while. Who knew what had wakened him.

So where did that leave me?

His infernal vision had spread to me, me and Olson. How did Olson see me; what did he think of the petty malices around us? Did it bother him, the skewed shadows that gibbered and leered silently at me from my left? (How apt, the sinister side.) Maybe with his simple dogness he trusted what he scented, what he felt and heard, more than what he saw.

The touch of the Blindman opened a means to immortality as well as the ability to wield the stuff of reality, the mercury air. I distrusted both gifts. I still had one eye, could still see the sunny-bright world if I only looked to the side. And I still had Olson to keep me company, to remind me ear scratches and belly rubs were good, never mind the hell spawn sulking in the corner.

I could resume walking my days as I had before. Maybe I'd switch majors to Psychology. If I could see what was wrong, surely I'd be better equipped to fix it, without resorting to scalpels and a diet of eyeballs and raw heart.

Seeing into the souls of men wasn't a surefire sentence of insanity and violence. Surely it didn't have to be.

Or that's what I keep telling myself. ♪

*Engie Foster's fiction has received the 2002 Phobos Award; been translated into Greek, Hungarian, Polish, and French; and been nominated for the British Fantasy, Bram Stoker, Southeastern Science Fiction, Parsec, and Pushcart Awards. She is the editor of The Fix, the short fiction and poetry review magazine published by TTA Press, and also the editor/director of Dragon*Con's on-site publication, the Daily Dragon. Her short story collection, Returning My Sister's Face and Other Far Eastern Tales of Whimsy and Malice, debuts March 2009 from Norilana Books. More info online at www.engiefoster.com.*



ILLUSTRATION BY RONALD HUDSON

ALWAYS READ THE FINE PRINT.
ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS
READ THE FINE PRINT.

The Monster in the Living Room

by Marc Bilgrey

Don Lampert tightened the drawstrings on his beige cotton pajama bottoms and yawned as he walked into the kitchen of his Manhattan apartment. His wife, Meg, who was dressed in a robe and a pair of fuzzy pink slippers, sat at the table eating a bowl of Rice Krispies.

“Tired?” said Meg.

“Very funny,” replied Don. Then he sat down opposite her and poured some cereal into a bowl.

“Maybe you can talk to the super again,” she said, softly.

“I’ve talked to him four times already.”

Neither of them spoke for a half a minute, as the sound of rock music vibrated through the walls.

“It’s eight o’clock Saturday morning,” said Don. “Doesn’t he ever sleep?”

“I’ll call my cousin.”

“We don’t need a lawyer, we need a hit man.”

“We’ll find another apartment.”

“You know how hard it was to find this one? No, I’m thirty-six years old, I’m not going to move out of our building just because some jerk neighbor feels like playing loud music twenty-four hours a day.”

“Why don’t you try talking to him again?” said Meg.

"I'm through talking. I haven't slept in a week. At this rate the bum is going to cost me my job. Nobody likes an assistant office manager who can't stay awake. No more talking, now it's time for action." Don stood up, feeling a surge of adrenaline.

"Where are you going?" asked Meg.

"To buy a gun," said Don.

"You're going to murder our neighbor because he plays his stereo too loud?" she said, as she followed him into the bedroom.

"You have a better reason?" he said, putting on a pair of boxer shorts.

"Don't do anything you might regret."

"Oh, I won't regret this, I'll like this," said Don, slipping into a pair of jeans.

"It's only been going on a month, maybe it'll stop."

"It's a month and half since he moved in and you know it. It'll stop when he drops dead and not before," said Don, as he buttoned his shirt.

"I don't like this," said Meg. "What am I going to when the police arrest you and take you to prison?"

"Nobody's taking me anywhere, and by the time this weekend is over we'll both be able to get a good night's sleep."

"That would be nice," said Meg, wistfully.

Don got off the subway near the financial district and walked into a dark side street. As he passed a few antique stores (which were closed), he wondered if Meg was right. Maybe it was a crazy idea. He was a law-abiding citizen, not a killer. Then it occurred to him that instead of a gun maybe he should buy a knife. He rejected the idea on the grounds that the sight of blood made him barf. He was considering purchasing some poison when he happened to walk by a metaphysical book shop. Ordinarily, Don would have kept going, but something in the window got his attention. There, among the crystals and toy pyramids was a little book whose title was, *How to Get What You Want With Magic*.

Don walked into the store and asked the bearded man at the counter where he could find the book. The man produced a copy from under the counter and said, "It's one of our best sellers."

"What exactly is in it?" said Don, who, up till that moment had had no interest in the supernatural.

"It's a single spell, so powerful, that once said, can get you whatever you desire," said the salesclerk.

"Why doesn't everyone have a copy?" asked Don. "I mean politicians, crooks and people like that?"

"Who says they don't? We have a big mailing list. One dollar and it's yours."

"One dollar? What's the catch?"

"I can jack up the price if you prefer."

"No, I'll take it. But does it really work?"

"Let me put it to you this way," said the man, "two months ago, I was working at a hamburger joint mopping up after kids with zits and now I own my own bookstore. Why? Because I found this book."

Don wasn't convinced, but for a buck, he decided it was worth a look. He gave the clerk a dollar and the man put the

book (which was really no more than a pamphlet) into a small brown paper bag.

"Perhaps you'd be interested in something else?" said the man, "I've got some powder made from a unicorn's horn that'll put lead in your pencil."

"I'm very satisfied with the current status of my pencil, thank you," said Don, and left the store.

A few hours later, Don sat on the couch in his living room, silently reading the pamphlet in the fading sunlight. Meg walked in, sat on a chair next to him and said, "Why didn't you just trade the family cow for some magic beans?"

"Quiet," said Don, "I'm almost done reading this."

"Do you really think that you're just going to mumble some words and he's going to stop playing his stereo?"

The dull thud of "music" continued to pound through the walls.

"We'll see," said Don, as he closed the book and stood up, "now help me with the furniture."

"What are we going to do, throw a chair at him?"

"No, we're going to move everything to one side of the room so I can draw a circle on the floor, just like it says in the book."

"I'm starting to think a gun was a better idea," said Meg.

HALF an hour later, the living room was cleared of furniture and rugs, and Don had drawn a chalk circle on the floor.

Meg looked at it and said, "I don't think chalk is good for parquet."

"They laughed at the Wright brothers too," said Don, as he sprinkled a few spices around the circle.

"Hey," said Meg, "are those from my spice cabinet?"

"Do you want him to stop making noise or not?" said Don.

"I d, but I don't see how putting my oregano, cumin and sweet basi on the floor is going to make him do it."

"It's all part of the spell."

"This is wonderful," said Meg, "I'm married to a thirty-four-year-old man who sprinkles spices on the living room floor. What are you going to do next, toss a salad in the bathroom sink?"

Don lit a few candles and said, "I'm ready."

"Well, what do you suggest I do about it, give you a drum roll?"

Don looked at her, sighed, then turned out the lights and read from the book. The words were in a strange language which had been printed phonetically in English. Don chanted for five minutes and then stopped.

"Now what?" asked Meg.

"Now something is supposed to happen."

"I see something happening all right, you're dripping candle wax all over the floor."

Suddenly there was a puff of smoke and a slimy green, scaly humanoid creature with big purple eyes, and a reptilian tails appeared. It smiled, revealing a mouth full of sharp piranha-like teeth. "Hi Don," said the creature, "I'm Mardarth, you can call me Mard, all my friends so, not that I have many left. I ate most of them."

"Hi, Mard," said Don. "Say hello to Mard, honey."

"Hi, Mard," said Meg, then looked at Don and said, "And to think I used to get upset when you had your friends over for poker."

"So, Don," said the monster, "what can I do for you?"

"My next door neighbor plays loud music all the time, and it's very annoying," said Don.

"I could twist off his head and toss it to him," said the creature.

"Perhaps something less gruesome," said Don.

"I could pull his guts out and make a quilt out of them," said the monster.

"Maybe you can just scare him a bit," said Don.

"Whatever you say, Master," said Mardarth. The creature stepped out of the circle, walked to the front door, opened it, stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him.

Don looked at Meg and said, "Not bad, huh?"

"I hope he doesn't track dirt into the apartment with those webbed feet of his."

Is that all you can say?"

"You're right," said Meg, "Boy, does he ever need a deodorant."

Don gave Meg an irritated look as the music next door stopped. Suddenly there was a crash, and then, a loud thud against the wall, followed by a muffled scream.

Half a minute later, the creature opened the front door and walked back into Don and Meg's apartment. "You won't have to worry about your neighbor anymore," said Mardarth.

"What did you do?" asked Don.

"I smashed all his equipment, then threatened to pull his brain out of his ears if he ever made any noise again."

"What did he say?"

"He said he's moving out of the building, effective now."

Don and Meg heard footsteps in the hallway. "That's him leaving," said Mardarth.

"That's great," said Don, "you got rid of him. Now we can sleep again. I don't know how to thank you."

"Forget it," said Mardarth, as he sat down on the couch. It collapsed under his weight. "Sorry about that."

"Hey, I just had that sofa re-upholstered," said Meg.

"Uh, Mard," said Don, can you leave now?"

"Sure, all you have to do is say the spell to get rid of me and then I'm out of here."

Don flipped through the pamphlet. "Is that the one I said to get you here?"

"Let me see that," said the creature. Don handed him the booklet. The creature looked at and said, "No, that's not it, that just gets me here."

"So, how do I get rid of you, no offense."

"None taken. You just have to say the right words."

They don't seem to be in this book. It only has one spell in it."

Meg walked over to Don and said, "You can't expect me to let this creature stay here, can you?" Then she turned to Mardarth and said, "Can you go to a hotel till we straighten this all out?"

"I can't do that, Ma'am, I have to stay with my magical host here," said Mardarth, pointing to Don.

Don looked at Meg and said, "It's that guy at the store's fault. He tricked me, he knew this would happen. Wait a minute, hey Mard, can you get me the spell that'll send you back to where you came from?"

"Sorry," said Mardarth, "I can't do that."

"It's already ten o'clock at night said Meg, "the store's closed. I guess you'll have to wait till tomorrow."

"How do you like that?" said Don. "I've been rooked, flim flammed and bamboozled."

"Will wonders never cease," said Meg, and headed into the bedroom.

LATER that night, Don and Meg were woken up by strange music. They turned and looked at each other.

"I thought we got rid of our noisy neighbor," said Don.

"It's not coming from next door," said Meg, "it's coming from our living room."

Don and Meg went to the living room and saw Mardarth sitting on the floor, listening to a large pulsating crystal that had loud unearthly music emanating from it.

"What are you doing,?" asked Don.

"Oh, hi, Don," said the monster, "I was just listening to some music from my crystal. I always listen to music."

"Can you turn it down? We're trying to get some sleep."

"I can't turn it down, Don, it plays when it wants to play and at whatever volume it likes. I haven't got any control over it. It's an all-demon group. Got a real beat to it, don't you think?"

"Yeah, a real beat," said Don, as he gritted his teeth and pulled up his slipping pajama bottoms.

Dona and Meg went into their bedroom and looked at each other.

"The cure was worse than the disease," said Meg.

"I'll fix all this tomorrow," said Don, "you'll see."

"Yeah, right," she said, and crawled back into bed and put a pillow over her head to try to drown out the wailing in the next room.

Hi, friend," said the man behind the counter, as Don walked into the little metaphysical store.

"Don't hi, me, buddy," he snapped, and tossed the booklet on the counter, "what's the big idea of cheating me?"

"Having a problem, are you?"

"You know damn well I am. You sold me a book with only one spell in it and now I have a monster in my living room that plays his crystal all night long. What are you going to do about it?"

The man smiled, reached under the counter and dropped a samll panplet on top of the first one. He said, "The antidote."

"Pretty sneaky," said Don, "I'll take it." But before he could touch it, the man snatched it and held it close too himself.

"Not so fast, young man," said the clerk, "this one is a little more expensive than the first edition."

"So that's the idea, huh?" said Don. "Okay, it's highway robbery, how much?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"What? You must be crazy! I'm not going to pay you five thousand bucks for some crummy little pamphlet that looks like you ran it off in your basement with a hand-cranked printing press."

"As a matter of fact, I did. Well, too bad then, I guess you'll just have to live with that monster for all eternity. That's its life span, you know. Actually, it's eternity and a day, but why quibble over a detail?"

"Can't we work out some kind of deal?" said Don, as he thought of the creature following him around through his old age.

"The deal is five thousand dollars."

"Do you take plastic?"

"Yes, but the booklet is non-returnable and all sales are final."

"Why you, you..." said Don, stopping himself. No use provoking the clerk, he thought, who knew what the man was capable of? Maybe he could turn him into a bug and step on him. Besides there was a monster at stake.

Reluctantly, Don took out his wallet and handed the man his credit card. The salesman ran it through his machine, got the approval code, took out a receipt and Don signed it.

Then the man put the book in a bag, handed it to Don and said, "Thank you, call again."

"It'll be a cold day in hell," said Don.

"That can be arranged," he replied.

"Never mind," said Don, and he ran out of the store.

WHEN he got back to his apartment, Don stood in the living room and asked the monster if he could get his five thousand back. "Sorry," said the monster, "I can't do that. In fact, I can't get you any money. It's not my area."

Don sighed and looked at Meg. She shrugged.

"Okay, Mard," said Don, turning back to the monster, "step into the circle, please."

The creature did as it was told, then Don opened the second pamphlet and read it out loud. As soon as he was finished, there was a puff of smoke and Mardarth disappeared.

"Well," said Don, "that's the end of that."

No sooner had he spoken, then there was another puff of smoke and now, standing in the circle, was a different creature who was much larger than Mardarth. This one had reddish scaly skin and an even bigger tail than Mardarth's.

"Hi, Don," said the new creature, "my name is Zardarth."

"What happened to Mardarth?" said Don.

"Oh, he's gone back to where he came from," said Zardarth.

"But, what are you doing here?"

"You called me."

"I did not."

"Did too."

"Don," said Meg, "if this huge person says that you called him, perhaps he knows something."

"Did I call you?" said Don.

"Yes," said Zardarth, "by reading the incantation that got rid of Mardarth, you simultaneously called me."

"I'm gonna kill the guy at that store," said Don, as he stared at Zardarth. "Say, maybe you can kill him for me."



"Sorry," said Zardarth, "I don't know why, but he's the only human being on the face of your planet that I am forbidden to harm."

"Figures," said Don.

"Do you have anyone else that you'd like revenge on?" said Zardarth.

"No," said Don, "I don't."

"How about someone you just don't like?"

"No."

"What about that rude man at the deli last week?" said Meg. "The one that claimed he was out of cole slaw when he wasn't?"

"You want to kill a guy you don't know just because he wouldn't sell you cole slaw?" said Don.

"You have a better idea?" she said.

LATER that night, Don and Meg were woken up by the sounds of strange clanging. They went to the living room and saw the creature huddled next to a huge flickering crystal. Loud noises were coming from inside it. The monster looked at Don and Meg and said, "Nice beat, don't you think?"

"Yeah," said Don, "nice."

"HOW may I help you?" said the salesman, as Don walked up to the counter.

"Take a wild guess."

"Ah, I see that you are here for volume three. They're a set, you know."

"No, I didn't. You somehow forgot to mention it the last time."

"Must've slipped my mind," said the salesman.

"Okay, how much?" said Don.

"This one is absolutely guaranteed to get rid of your latest problem and not create any more."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five thousand."

"You must be kidding."

"Enjoy your creature, good day," said the man, as he started to walk into a curtained-off room behind the counter.

“Okay, okay,” said Don, “will you take a check?”

“With two valid pieces of I.D. I might.”

Don took out his wallet and wrote the man a check knowing that the amount would clean out his bank account. He wondered how he would explain it to Meg. They were living beyond their means as it was. Don gave the man the check. The salesman examined Don’s I.D. as if he’d never seen him before, then reached under the counter and took out the third pamphlet. Don grabbed it and started for the door.

“Wait,” said the salesman, holding a rolled up poster, “you forgot your complimentary positive affirmation chart.”

“I’ll give you a positive affirmation—drop dead!”

“Another satisfied customer,” said the salesman.

THAT night, Don asked Zardarth if he could get him his money back. Zardarth replied that it wasn’t his area. Don groaned, coaxed Zardarth into the circle, said the incantation and watched the creature vaporize into the ether. Then Don told Meg about the money. She was not happy. At least that’s the feeling that Don had while he was dodging the plates that she threw at him.

Two weeks later, Don and Meg moved into a much smaller apartment. The day after the move, Don’s boss informed him that the company had just been sold to foreign investors and that Don was fired.

The following Sunday, Don and Meg were lying in their bed, reading the *Times* (she was reading the travel section—he, the book section), when Don said, “At least it’s quiet.

Meg wads about to answer him when a loud blasting noise shook the walls.

“What was that?” said Don.

“It’s our neighbor,” said Meg. “Their eleven-year-old son plays the tuba.”

“I wondered why we got such a bargain on the rent,” said Don, as he picked up the first pamphlet he had bought and flipped through it.

On the last page he found a line printed in very small type that he hadn’t noticed before. It read: *Good for one use only.* Don got out of bed and started getting dressed.


“Where are you going?” asked Meg.

“To buy a gun.”

“You’re going to kill him?”

“No, myself,” said Don.

“Oh, honey,” said Meg, “do me a favor, on your way back, will you pick up a bottle of oregano, I’m all out.”

“Yes, dear,” said Don, as he put on his jacket and trudged toward the door. 

Marc Bilgrey’s short stories have appeared in anthologies including Slipstreams, Merlin, and Crafty Cat Crimes. He’s written for television, comedians, and syndicated comic strips. In addition, Marc has written and drawn his own cartoons that have been featured in magazines and newspapers including The Wall Street Journal, The Harvard Business Review and Funny Times. He is hard at work on his next novel.

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THERE ARE MORE PLANES OF EXISTENCE
THAN WE CAN SEE. BUT SOMETIMES
WE CATCH A GLIMPSE . . .

Between Ourselves

by Tanith Lee &
Rosemary Hawley Jarman

I live in an extremely thin tall grey building which being set between two robust red houses resembles a fragile gentlewoman jostled by louts.

The view from my apartment could be what Sherlock Holmes might have expected to see (did he ever exist), but although the long sash window is original Victorian, the outlook is modern: a shopping mall, the tops of buses often glistening with rain.

A week ago the apartment below became occupied. For the five years I have lived here as a single gentleman it has been uninhabited; no sounds, vibrations or odours have penetrated my domain. So far (and this I must later qualify) so far, the new tenant has been remarkably muted. And yet I feel in the presence of this other, gender unknown, as if the whole building were in some ineffable way enhanced, or altered.

I had never seen inside the apartment. On the day of arrival there were the usual clumpings up and down stairs and the moving in of heavy objects, and I wondered idly how the new occupant's furnishings compared to my own. Everything save my grandmother's secretaire and a few bits, goes with the lease. There is a red velvet chaise-longue (a naughty deed in a good room, ha!), a picture of melancholy Highland cattle over the fireplace, and a deal table on which I write. All day. To order. I am a mercenary of word-wars.

I write as a surrogate lover, beggar; I write demanding satisfaction of one kind or another. I write letters imparting useful secrets, unforced condolences, congratulations, commendations, forged references, false Wills. I write as servant of the unlettered, the lazy, the unscrupulous, the desperate. And as I have other modest means and tend rather to shun the outside world, this mode of living suits me well. More than well; I can represent others very effectively; with the merest soupçon of effort I can, it seems, live as long as is necessary under their skin.

Returning however to the new tenant: having all my life suffered from nervous debility I was complacently relieved by the absence of noise. I had naturally no inclination to go down and introduce myself, yet at times I wondered whether there were indeed anyone there; there were no comings or goings. Last night I was rudely disabused of this notion. I said so far had the new tenant been muted. This was prior to the crash which reverberated up through my floorboards, a crash so vibrant one could think an elephant had collided with a grand piano. It sent me to my feet in panic. The crash was followed by a heavy dragging sound, then silence, for the next couple of hours.

I was about to retire when I was assaulted by a new noise. Someone had begun typing on what sounded like a possibly antique electric machine. After five years of unsullied peace, to hear them rattling away like a demented woodpecker nearly unhinged me.

At eleven I prepared for bed, thinking: Someone is writing a novel. Maybe another WAR AND PEACE. I foresaw my sanity crumbling. I should have to pack up and leave, etcetera. I came to a decision. If by midnight the noise still persisted I would go, dressing-gowned, below: "I say, do you know what time it is?"—justly indignant but courteous. On this thought I slipped between the sheets and with extraordinary suddenness, fell into the most vivid dream.

I was standing by the typewriter, a heavy ancient model as envisaged. I could not see the typist but only watched as lightning fingers sent the paper scudding up through the rollers. I saw a brief black army of words which became, instantaneously pictorial as a movie—and there was myself! with a recent client, a foreign gentleman needing exit documents anonymously—money passing through our hands—a tranche of my life revealed. I woke as suddenly as I had slept, with the sensation that a gun had been discharged in my cerebral cortex and an echo that made no sense. An unknown voice saying "The art of displacement". In the now total silence I felt strangely exposed, threatened by my own subconscious . . .

I was surprised to find it was morning, that my hands were shaking, and that my ears were tuned to every nuance—the faint traffic in the street, a bird's hoarse cry—listening hard for what I knew not. My vigilance was rewarded by the faint bang of the door below and quick footsteps going downstairs.

I rushed to the window in time to see the back view of my fellow tenant as he emerged from the front door. A slim man in a fawn overcoat and black trilby, he walked swiftly away, rather, he swaggered away down the street, rhythmically stirring the air with a silver-headed cane.

As soon as he had disappeared round the corner I ran quietly downstairs and halted outside the front door. Feeling irra-

tionally nervous, I studied the name-slots beside the door. Only two—my own and what was obviously the new tenant's—written in a looping violet hand and more or less completely illegible. It could have been Causley, Beesley, Karlovsky, heaven knew what—and by now I was full of a sickening curiosity. The tranquil tenor of my days had been roughly disturbed and it went ill with me, all the more because there was no logical reason for it.

No-one else was in the building. The concierge seemed to be absent most of the time, and today his little office window was shuttered. I went up to the newcomer's door. Feeling more fearful than foolish, I peeked through the keyhole!

The aperture was unusually large. I had a good view. There was a reproduction of Madame Recamier over the fireplace (I had only cattle), an immense mahogany round table (how on earth did they get that upstairs?) A globe of the world, and a glass cabinet full of enormous tomes. The angle of vision disallowed much more but I could see what looked like the end of a long ornately carved bench with a hint of silver and something hairy dangling off the end. The noisy typewriter however appeared to be out of my line of sight.

As I made my way back upstairs I felt odd, and weak. There was again no reason, but when I opened the door of my own apartment, I could not believe my eyes.

Gone were my Highland cattle. Gone too, was my saucy velvet sofa. My deal table. Even the door into my bedroom seemed altered. My heart began to pound, I felt cold sweat on my face. My room had disappeared. I was in the room below, the place into which I had not two minutes ago, been peeking: Madame Recamier now reclined over the hearth, the bookfilled cabinet stood against the wall, the huge table . . . and the ornately carved altar.

It was then I believe I swooned. It may have been for instants or longer. Yet when I came to my senses I found I was lying on my own well-worn carpet beside my own fireplace, being gazed on by those mournful bovine eyes.

When I first saw the house—tall and thin and grey—I didn't much take to it. But I had to set up somewhere. I thought I'd just start here, then maybe move on.

After my time in the wars, about which I shan't say much, except that I wasn't your average nicely-kitted-out soldier lad, I had a bit put by. Then I lost most of it—on a woman, being a fool. So then I came back here and took what I could get, which was a flat in the tall, grey house.

The rooms below were used for storage of some kind, generally quiet. The old boy upstairs, they'd told me, was silent as the grave. He wrote, they said, longhand. I thought he was probably some intellectual type, and they often like nice quiet things, soft music and carpet slippers. That suited me fine. And at first, all I heard was exactly that, the faint padding of light footsteps overhead, and once a flicker of a tune — something classical — from a radio or even an old gramophone. I saw him once, too, up in his window, one evening about eight, when I was walking back from the local pub. He didn't actually look that old, I thought. I'm used to making quick judgments

on appearances, things and people, you had to be, the stuff I'd been involved in. He was slim and, well, elegant, you'd say, gliding over his window in the lamplight. He had an aquiline profile, not aristocratic, better, like the actors used to look years ago and don't any more. And yes, he looked quiet, as if he wouldn't make a row.

Then comes this bloody great crash overhead, and everything shakes. I'd been dozing, and shot out of my chair swearing blind. I thought it was a bomb for a minute. I've been around enough of those, I can tell you.

But then the ceiling didn't come down, the windows were still in the frames—no dust, no screams—no fire and smoke and wailing medical vehicles. No blood dripping through. Instead, a kind of dragging sound. Furniture being moved? Heavy furniture . . .

I thought, bloody old fool, what's he up to? I wondered if I should go up and see if he was all right, or even go down to the housekeeper guy who sits all day and half the night in a cubicle off the lobby—unless you want him, of course, then he's off somewhere. But really, I try to keep out of other people's lives. Either you maintain your distance, or pretty soon you have to tell a pack of lies. So, I left it. And the dragging stopped. And later I heard his soft footfalls upstairs, so I reckoned he was O.K.

I went out again that night. Once or twice a week, I'll take a couple of pints at the pub, or a whisky or two if I'm flush. I came back around 11 p.m., and as soon as I started up my bit of stair, I heard the new noise. It sounded like an electric typewriter, but the old kind that makes a real racket. Clackety-clack-clack-swurrr it went. So much for the genteel writing in longhand.

For an hour or so I sat in my room, listening to the typewriter. It's one of those noises, like a talentless kid playing scales on a piano, that can drive you crazy. I thought O.K., mister, I'll let you off tonight. Maybe it's some special job you have to do, and handwriting isn't good enough. But if this starts again tomorrow, or goes on much longer tonight, I'm going up to pay you a visit in the morning, my friend. I'm a big bloke. I can make my opinion felt fairly easily. Then again, we'd have to sort something out. He had a right to get on with his business sometimes, whatever the hell it was.

After I got to bed, despite the continuing typer, I went out like a light. Not usual, that. I don't generally sleep that well. I had a dream too—which is odd, because normally I don't remember my dreams, if I even have any like they say everybody does. What I dreamed was, the old man upstairs was typing a novel about me. He'd got to the bit where I, and five others of my platoon, were sheltering in that bombed-out hotel in—well, somewhere hot and filthy. And across the wall, the type words were running, and they said: "You are a displaced person."

When I woke up, I'd slept later than I usually do, and as I washed, shaved and drank my coffee, the grey house hung there round me, all silence again, not a squeak.

I had to get some shopping for myself that day—I really miss a woman to do that, they do it better. A woman would make a furnished flat a home, too, but there, I was on my own. When I'd got outside the building, I had a sudden curiosity. I

went and looked at the names by the door. Only two. Mine, which at the moment is Rausloy, and this other name scrawled above. It could be anything, illegible, like doctors' handwriting—Crowle? Gourte? Corall?

I glanced up from the pavement at the upper windows. No one to be seen today. All that typing and furniture-moving must have tired him, he must be sleeping it off!

When I came back from the mall, I saw my neighbour, there ahead of me on the stairs.

I'd rounded the corner, and he was just in front of me, and obviously it was the man from upstairs because, aside from my own flat, there was nowhere else he could be going.

Yes, even from the back you could see he was the elegant actorly type. Thin and smart in an expensive overcoat and black hat. He'd got a cane too, silver top, didn't need it, just twirling it idly in one thin hand that had a ring on it with a big black stone.

Seeing him, God knew why, I felt queasy. Probably something I ate last night, I thought. I know how to look after myself but don't always do it. Fish and chips out of the paper isn't always the answer.

But anyhow, I spoke. "Good morning," I said.

He didn't even look round. He just glided on up the stairs and disappeared from view around the next bend.

I thought, He's deaf, or he's rude.

I shrugged, and went into my flat.

All the shopping fell to the floor. It made a bloody mess, I can tell you, those twelve eggs broken, and the carton of coffee burst.

I haven't described my room, have I? It has brownish-pink florals on the walls, a tiled fireplace with a gas-fire shoved in, and over that a picture of some animal or other, a stag probably, but so muddy and faded you'd have to study it to see, and who would want to.

However, my room had changed. The worn carpet had a different pattern. The wallpaper, though similar, was not the same, and marked in different places. There were knickknacks about that weren't mine. I didn't have anything like that. There was a piece of complicated walnut furniture—a secretary I think they call it, something like that, and a ripe red couch-cum-chair thing. The stag had been replaced by a herd of cattle.

Someone else—he might have thought he'd somehow let himself into the wrong room. But I've spent most of my life knowing where I was and what I was doing, it's how I stayed alive, if not quite intact. So, I knew I'd come in the right door, and that everything was altered. I even walked over to the window and saw it now looked out on a higher wider view. I could see all the way to the mall.

None of that though was what made me drop my bag and break the eggs. I did that when the ceiling bulged inward at me, like dough rising, and out of it there stared, for one split second, a face like nothing, even with the various horrors I've witnessed, I have ever seen. It was raw—it was not human. It was indescribable. One split second—then gone. Thank God gone.

When I opened my eyes, the room was mine again, the ceiling just a ceiling with a light-fitment and a stain.

* * *

April 4th. Evening. I have decided to keep some form of journal. My delicate nervous system has suffered from the recent inexplicable occurrence. I thought a minor regulation of the daily round might serve to restore my equilibrium. Meanwhile, I am applying myself to my latest commission.

“My dearest Louise”—

This is to be handled with care, deferential but not unctuous, amorous but not too familiar. The lady to whom I am plighting my surrogate troth is filthy rich and her suitor an idiot. This letter is going to cost him plenty, I thought as I laid down my pen. Even with the whole house still—no distractions of any shape—it was difficult to get going with my usual fluency.

I took a turn around the room. In an oblong mirror I regarded myself; no longer young, but trim of figure. I have looked after my health. I have been told I resemble Gielgud in his prime or, and here I was certainly flattered, an older version of the divine Ivor Novello.

When younger, I lived for a time in Paris. I remember someone who for a decade or more confounded people with his stage hypnosis act, for it went beyond the usual circus show. He called himself Professor Lightguard, but I always found him more a thing of the dark. He made one believe the unbelievable. Young girls especially were in thrall to him, to his advantage and their sometime ruin, and for a time I held power over him to the tune of a few million francs. He came to mind today because I recalled he was an illusionist.

Early in our acquaintance, while I still had his trust, I allowed him to “put me under” and I saw monsters and marvels. Now: was my momentary disorientation apropos the rooms merely some hallucinogenic flashback (similar to a mescal hangover) from that time?

Ah. Things went on in Paris. I do not speak of the revels of those silly faux Bohemians with their cocaine-and-champers games. No. I witnessed acts in the privacy of shadows that none should see, things I have told no living soul and never could.

“My dearest Louise,”

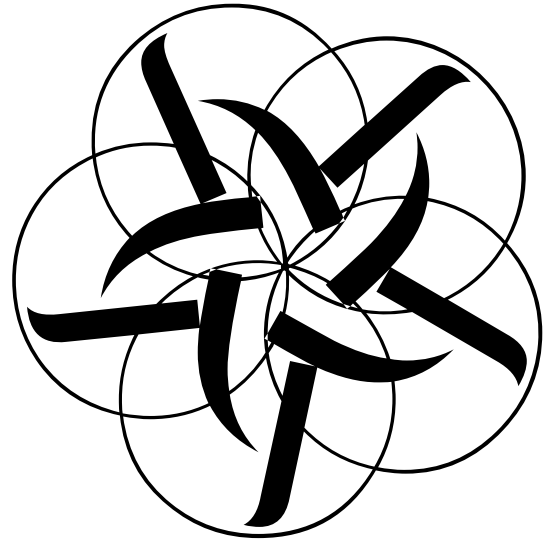
“They say that amor vincit omnia—love conquers all” (in case the dear virgin needed educating). “When I saw you at the Gala premiere I envied the flowers at your breast; whiter than the swan, your beauty dimmed those roses; I would gladly fade as they will, for one touch . . .”

Wrong. Too intimate. Young Louise must not feel threatened. I needed a stimulant for my flagging poetry.

I had selected some vermouth when, rising from below, a sound alerted me. Music. Not a tune I recognised, in fact unlike anything I had ever heard and would not choose to even if I had the equipment on which to play it—I listened, bottle unopened in my hand. Hideous music, soft with an insidious cunning throb underlying the beastly melody if one could call it such. Really, I thought, that person below. He continues to pollute my space. It is insupportable.

The sounds raised my neck-hairs.

April 8th. Late afternoon. I am continuing this record in case it could be used in evidence, but of what? Not



exactly a Noisy Neighbour offence—but of one human disturbing the inner peace of another?

The night before last I think he had a woman in his apartment for I heard faint voices—one light and high—and after a time silence. I suppose I cannot object to his entertainments. And yet! how I wish he had never arrived!

And last night I had difficulty sleeping. My nerves are like hot wires and I found myself obsessed by the “apparition” of the room. Can I believe what I think I saw? As it happened I had an unexpected opportunity to verify or cancel my doubts for, going out to mail the Louise letter, I noticed the person’s door was slightly open, and heard him below, talking to the concierge. Trembling, I pushed the door wider and peered in. I saw a dim shabby place, broken down armchair, faded “Stag at Bay” print on the wall, a carpet-bag open on the floor, an empty half-bottle of whisky . . .

I turned and hastened back upstairs. All was well in my room, too, no massive furniture, no “altar”, no hairy something, no painting of Madame . . .

How come Madame Recamier had changed into the Stag at Bay?

When I went out later, I looked again at the nameplates by the door. My own—Grolere—and his. I could read it now—Yolsuar. A foreigner.

April 10th. Very late. I do not know how late it is. A day has passed. I only know that my neighbour is not a nice man. I am up out of my bed, sleep impossible because of the soft drumming that tugs at my nerves and now there is a new sound rising above the ghastly non-music that woke me earlier. Laughter—inhuman—almost the laughter of the insane . . . God knows.

And this laughter reawakens memory, for it is of the same odious timbre as heard in that upper room in Paris, where a thing brayed and scratched and yowled to come through . . . and oh, mon pauvre! if only I could have stopped it—but I did no such thing. It was impossible, so I ran away, and I must put off

these thoughts, they are too much to bear. I have locked away that time in the deepest vault of my mind. Until now. Curse him.

I have lit all the lamps. Sleep is murdered. Brandy is called for. Courvoisier Grand Cru, in a sparkling balloon. As I raise it to the light it is the gold of tigers' eyes.

April 11th Early. There is glass on the floor, and blood.

As I raised my brandy in a toast to no-one, my eye was caught by a dark shimmer of movement in the far shadows of the room, and I saw the edge of the carpet fold up on itself. It reared up like surf at the sea's edge and began to travel towards me, fold on fold. I took a step back and felt the table edge behind me.

The tsunami, the great tidal wave of Japan came into my mind. It begins far out to sea, initiated by some fathomless sub-oceanic eruption, then gathers speed driving a crescendo of water higher and higher until it envelops all in its path—so did the carpet come at me in lightning corrugations, rearing up as if hungry to clutch my naked feet . . . I screamed and sprang back on to the table top, lifting my legs. The brandy glass crunched in my hand. Blood and liquor splattered the carpet which now stood in a peak level with my face, and in that second something other than carpet revealed itself.

Eyes out of Hell. A long flick of tongue. A bestial stare to paralyse and maim. And then—gone.

The carpet was flat again, flat as the day it was laid.

That time I was in Africa, I saw a few things. You couldn't always explain them away. I saw a black bloke once, clothed himself in fire—it was real, the fire, he let me put a stick to it, and the stick went up but he didn't—scorched my hand. You get so you think O.K., that stuff is here in the world too. And then you keep away from it, because it's like a particular weapon you can't ever be trained sufficiently to handle. Or it's like gambling, or too much drink, that you have to learn to leave alone.

Put it this way, that change in my room, that thing that came out of the ceiling, I didn't have any doubts I'd seen them. But I turned my back on it all pretty quick once it was gone. Nevertheless, I knew who'd caused it. That guy upstairs, with the ring and the cane.

In the next few days, I heard a couple of sounds up there. There was some kind of music that didn't sound right, a heavy thick beat, like something from the East . . . Certainly not the dainty whiff of the classics he'd put on before. Also, I heard a woman up there one night. She sounded giggly, pissed, frankly a bit off her head. But she'd have to be, to go after a bugger like him, wouldn't she?

I did my usual, and kept out of it.

Only, I started to leave the house more. I'd walk round the streets at night, trying to stay out of the pubs. One night I picked up a woman myself. She was all right, nothing special. But it kept me out of the pubs and the flat.

Back at base, anyway, I started not sleeping. I mean the worse kind, where you just don't, as if no one invented sleep

yet. All your past starts coming back up then, like your brain's throwing up. In the early hours I'd be making tea and playing patience. I never looked at the ceiling, not even in bed with the door on the other room open. I'd moved the chairs and the table away in there, to the sides of the room, against the wall.

One other thing, I went down to find the caretaker bod, and for once when I was looking for him, he was there in the lobby.

"My flat," I said. "Any chance of changing it?"

He looked affronted, a scrawny little chap who can't shave himself properly, all whiskery like a rat.

"Your rooms is very nice," he told me.

"A palace, mate, but they don't quite suit me like I hoped they would."

"What's wrong with than?" he asked. "There ain't nothing wrong with them," he answered himself.

"There's damp, and a drip," I said. "It runs down through the ceiling."

I watched him closely when I said this. Not a flicker. But I hadn't thought there would be. He didn't know about any of it, or didn't want to, like me.

"No damp," he said.

"What about the flats below mine? Any going spare? I can pay a bit more, if it's right."

"No other flats. American people pay a lot of money to store old furniture, innit."

And upstairs, I thought, it's taken—presumably by a crazy magician in league with Christ knew what. I wasn't going to bad-mouth him either, not to this one.

I said, indifferently, "I may have to move out then."

The rat shrugged.

It had been worth a try.

I went back up to my place, and put the whisky I'd opened and drunk quite a bit of back in the kitchen cupboard. I didn't want to move on, not yet. That was the whole idea of bivouac-ing here.

So, there I am, and tonight I hear the voice.

I say voice, but was it? It was like—gravel scrunching between someone's teeth.

I'd been lying awake as per usual. The clock said three minutes past 4 a.m. I'd been just about to get up and put the kettle on, when there was this kind of rushing sound, like a high wind—and then the first noise, like gravel whispering—and then—

I heard what it said, despite its lack of clear diction or a posh accent. What it said was: I ARE OORL. I ARE INWORLD. GREETINGS THEE, MY NEW-FOUNDED DESPAIRORS.

It was exactly that. I know, because it said it over and over, like it wanted me to learn the message off. Which I damn well did, of course. Even the name—if it was—Oorl—that's the only way I can spell it. And inworld all one word. And this other word that isn't a word—despairors. Between each phrase I heard something else too, a little soft sipping.

I lay there rigid. Listening, learning. It must have gone on about fifty minutes.

In the dark, I kept my eyes on the ceiling of the outer room. There was nothing to be seen, just the stain that had

always been there. The dark made that darker, too, that was all.

He's done something, I thought. He's brought something out of—somewhere—into here. How's he done it? Oh, I've seen them try, in various parts of the world—black magic—in the past, what they did never worked. It's blood. He's offered blood, spilled it for this—thing, whatever it is—that guy upstairs, the goddamned bastard.

Once the filthy rotten noises stopped, I got up and went into the bathroom. I was cold and sick, but I was no longer ready to stand aside. I was angry, and I know too I've been in situations where, however insane it is to run out with the cannons blazing, you'd better bloody do it because it's the only answer.

I've taken a bath, and shaved with extra care. I've put on the one suit I own, which is shit-hot, some prince gave it me, had his own tailors do it for me. You can tell from the sleeves, good as Savile Row—better maybe. It fits me like a glove, a big glove. I said, I'm not a little guy. After that I wrote all this down.

I've had a tot more of the whisky too, just enough, I know at these times how to pace myself.

The sun's well up now. Milk-floats and kids have been along the street below, and shoppers are out there now, idling towards the mall. Everything ordinary and fine.

There is a new stain up there on the ceiling, all over the first stain. It's red and wet. And there are marks around it, as though something has hung there by means of something sharp, licking at it.

Yes, I could move out. But I get this feeling—this dirty, icy feeling, whatever it is that he—that bastard—has introduced into our human spaces, has latched on to me. I'm—one of its despairors. So that's why, in five more minutes, at the nice civilised hour of ten o'clock, I'm going up to the flat above. I'll knock, and then I'll knock again. And if I have to, I'll break the fucking door down.

I am not sure of anything any more. I am recording these current moments desperate to engineer some order into this confusion and black fear. Fear! In my time I have sailed close to the wind, escaping retribution by a whisker. Yet at no time have I known fear of this magnitude.

I have slept for only a few minutes; I succumbed at dawn having up until then been too terrified to close my eyes. I thought of consuming the bottle of brandy but then—my God! to keep my wits about me was paramount.

I am afraid I am insane. None of Professor Lightguard's magics could have reduced me thus.

For an eternity I stared at the motionless carpet, stared and looked away, stared and looked away. Eventually I decided: I would roll up the carpet, open my door and cast the thing out down the stairs. Terror loaned me strength. I grasped the carpet's edge, and found—around its entire perimeter—it was stoutly nailed to the floor!

I must rest, or I shall swoon.

. . . begin again, for now I realise what he is doing to me. Him! down below, in his slender guise of black hat and jaunty stride and silver cane . . . —that modish gentleman ha! a mis-

nomer if ever there was—that creature come to wreak my ruin—he has followed me. And if not him, one of his hellish agents, for they are legion . . . because I broke the chain, failed the moment . . . after all this time has found me out and will chastise me. I have felt his power again, heard it, even smelled it—on the stairs one day there was a curious whiff of blood and burning and corpse-odours from the mire of death.

Yes, I am going mad. In my brain again comes that high cracked voice as the first ceremony I ever attended rises to a climax . . .

"viens, viens-toi, maitre, voici le sang! Voici les Puissants . . . !"

And then the squalling and panting and the drip of blood and the woman cackling in pain or glee under the hairy haunches . . . longing for the Horned One . . . and *that* was the reminder flashed before me when I saw through the keyhole . . . I have only just realised it.

My God! Someone is coming up. A hard decisive tread, coming here. I am trembling all over. This could at best be someone who owes me ill-will—who has found me out in some chicanery—or worse! I stand staring at the door. I have locked it, but if this is no human agency, if it is, God forbid I cannot name him and no lock ever kept him out . . . now the door shakes under a fist. I might as well open.

THE second thing I noticed about the man who stood there was his suit. Even in that split moment I saw its beauty of fabric and cut. But as for the first thing . . . !

The man was on fire. Completely enveloped in flame. Lit up like a martyr at the stake and seeming quite oblivious of it. It was I who uttered a great alarmed cry and, following an instinct, lunged forward to try to extinguish the visitor. I tore off my jacket and whirled it over his head, smacking my hands about his ears. In return he shot out a large fist and felled me with an expert blow. Before I hit the floor I managed to register one more startling fact: the flames were cold.

When I opened my eyes he was no longer alight, nor even singed. Bending over me, his face was close to mine. An angry, tanned face, with a lock of yellow hair dangling, and hard blue eyes blazing at me. When he saw I was conscious again he hauled me upright most ungently.

I staggered and fell against him. By rights I should have smelled the recent fire on him, but there was only the faint silken aroma of fine cloth, and the tang of whisky.

He was built like a young bull. His hands were merciless, grasping my upper arms. We stood there close and tense; I muttered something (I think) as we stared into one another's faces. What mine revealed was unknown, but I saw on his first savage anger then puzzlement as if he were suddenly presented with an alien.

I realised then that I in turn had hold of him, my fingers gripping both his wrists in a weak effort to make him unhand me. And as we stood haphazardly joined in this uncomprehending instant, the room went dark. As if a massive thundercloud had covered it, the window lost all light, leaving my companion and myself as obscure as shadows in the gloom. A peculiar blackness swept the room in rolling waves, like those seen on the point of fainting.

I tried to speak. At that moment the darkness partially cleared and gave way to an aureole of luminescence that flamed round us, lighting our faces as suddenly as a struck match blazes in its primary instant. In that hellish, unnatural light we saw one another clearly, and had I been able I would have shrieked out loud.

The light did not fade; it shivered and danced. It illuminated the countenance of the man who still gripped my arms, and whose strong wrists I held. His face had altered. I gazed into the hideous, pallid blue-white face of a corpse drowned yet living; the face of a demon in which white eyes rolled and glared and its mouth opened on long jagged fangs foaming venom, and from this malevolent mouth issued deep gibberish more terrifying than the one who uttered it . . .

“We are Oorl! oorl, oorl, oorl . . . !”

I shook with terror. The vice on my biceps tightened. Desperate, I tried to pull away. To my horror, I found that I myself could not let go of the creature’s wrists. We were joined as if glued together, and then of their own volition sounds issued suddenly from my own lips:

“Oorl, oorl, oorl! Despair, all!”

Yet in that same moment I saw the wild white eyes change, become glazed with fear. And the face of the man regained its humanity, the blue eyes aghast, and, as I tasted a thin ripple of blood crawling from my bitten tongue, I knew that my face too had changed, into something capable of turning men sick . . .

I felt the skin of my face tighten, and my features shrinking into something wizened and vile. I had become monstrous. I knew whose face masked mine. He had come into me, had been brought from Paris, invading me for my punishment. And I knew, as I had always known, that anyone touched by the occult, even in the smallest way, will be contaminated forever, in a secret incurable malady of the soul . . .

All the time the man was struggling to break our dual grip. With a mighty effort he suddenly wrenched himself away. I was free too, just as the hellish light around us shrank leaving us in the dark. “Jesus!” I heard him say violently. I think I let out a wail rather than a word. Then the floor beneath us began to shake. Like the fatal tremor miners feel before a cave-in—it shuddered and bounded and plunged under our feet . . . and we reeled and floundered crying aloud as a roaring vibration cast us into the vortex and we descended into hell.

He wasn’t the man I’d seen up in the window that first time, nor the one on the stairs. That’s what I was thinking when he first opened his door. He was sort of that type—slim, elegant, handsome enough to make certain women turn round in the street—though I got a kind of impression that wouldn’t do much for him, a woman doing that . . . The thing was he had dark hair, with a bit of—not grey, silver—in it, and he was taller than that other chap too—altogether, just different. I suppose, they could have looked like half brothers—or close friends who’ve gone around together so long, they end up like a married couple’s said to, and start to look alike. Anyhow, all this took about one quarter second to register, and then he goes bloody mad. Tries to attack me. Well, I stopped that pretty quick.

When he came round, the first thing he murmured—probably didn’t know he did it—was: “So glad the fire didn’t spoil your suit.”

I dragged him upright. “Don’t try to get funny with me.”

And then —

Well, I’d grabbed him by the arms to keep him still, because if he started again I’d really have to hurt him, and he looked like he wouldn’t be able to take much of that. I’m not keen on murdering civilians, even if they appear to be devil-worshipping scum.

About as soon as I had hold of him, it started going dark in that room. I thought it was the sun going in, but when I glanced at the window, the window was the only bright thing I could see—except it gave no light. It was as if something just sucked the daylight up off it before it could enter the room.

I could still see his face though. My night-vision’s good. He was going nuts, staring at me and mouthing as if he wanted to scream.

He could see something where I was, that was obviously it. What?

Then my own mouth opened. I’d been going to ask him what the hell—but instead the voice came out of me—not mine. It was made of gravel. It said We are oorl.

I tried to let go of him. I reckoned he was making this happen. My hands seemed to have grown into his arms, I never felt anything like this before.

It wasn’t him any more.

What I held was a green rotting corpse. It was alive only with crawling maggots.

I knew who it was. It was my mate, Lon. Lon Clitheroe, black as they come. I couldn’t have done anything that time. I know that. They had me, and they had him, those bastards. They made each of us watch what they did to the other. Then they’d say, “Three more day and TV come, we show you at your people, you tell them we right and they wrong.” And Lon and me, we kept saying, sure, sure, whatever you want. But they still kept doing the other stuff to us. In the end, the TV crew didn’t arrive, and our captors got all irritated, and shot Lon in the guts. He died slowly. They made sure I watched. Then I had to stand, tied under that banana tree, and watch as he decayed. It was hot there. The decaying happened quicker than the dying had. One night after that I got away, running on a broken leg. I don’t know how I did that. I only killed one of them. Sorry about that. Sorry, Lon—just sorry.

I managed to break my grip on him then, Christ knows how. Oh I mean I knew it wasn’t Lon Clitheroe. I knew I was just being made to see Lon Clitheroe by the guy upstairs.

Next everything went dead black, and we fell apart.

What had he just yelled? Something about despair—but it had been the voice again—not his voice, cultured and actorly—but this Oorl that presumably he’d conjured up and now couldn’t control —

Then the floor —

It was like the earthquake, the big one that time, in Asia. We both went over. It was worse than that. We fell on the floor and the floor wasn’t there.

As we fell through and down and on—even in blackness, I could see he wasn’t being made to look like Lon any more.

Then we were spinning. It was like being sucked down some enormous supernatural plughole. Hitting the sides—couldn't breathe from the velocity. This went on I'd estimate about seventy seconds.

We landed abruptly, but without any sense of shock. Absolutely no impact at all.

We lay there in darkness, and gradually, like a stage, the lights came up—

They showed a colossal chamber. That was what it was, you couldn't call it a room. Everything was heavy wood panelling, and gilt and plasterwork, and lamps on stands, and statues from all over—Greece, Rome, China, Africa—and heavy brocade drapes running with tassels. There was a globe that looked like incised uncut corundum. That's the stuff makes sapphires, I've seen it in the East. There were book-cases stuffed with books old as the hills, half rotten with age and held together with gilded cords to stop them crumbling like mouldy cheese. There was a slight smell of mould too, and a strong smell of perfume, and incense, and faintly a whiff of other things that had to do with blood and offal.

You couldn't miss the altar, it was carved all over with things too tiny and intricate to be seen as anything but patterns, inset with shell-work and silver and gold, and crowned with two crenellated horns like ibex horns, but about four times the size—impossible.

An empty hairy skin—goat? some sort of bear?—lay over the altar, which, as I glanced at it, seemed lazily to twitch in its sleep.

"It's the same as the room I saw —" he gabbled, my neighbour—"all the same—but larger—vast—full of the breath of evil, I can smell it—your smell."

"It isn't mine, mate. Thought it must be yours."

"Mine? Mine? In God's name what do you think I am?"

"Maybe we'll leave that one.. I'd rather get out of here."

I went round the panelled walls, looking for the exit. There wasn't one. I found other things, a couple of human skulls with polished emeralds and rubies fixed in their horny foreheads, some drawers that wouldn't open, some that would and were full of little fine nasty-looking implements, like a demonic manicure set, and rolls of paper, scrolls covered with insane curlicued symbols, that I didn't touch.

"Don't touch them!" he cried, flailing at my shoulder.

"That's the last thing I'm likely to do. What are they?"

"Magic," he said. "Perverted filthy manuals to facilitate commerce with unnatural horror—Oh Pierrot!" he suddenly burst out. "Pardon—mon cher—ah. *Sieur, pardonnez-moi* —"

Across the room was a big mahogany table, polished the way you don't often see outside a palace. On the table were a decanter and goblets—the drink looked like ruby port. Now the ripe red liquid began to ripple. Was the earthquake coming back? I braced myself. Just as well I did.

A door opened in the wall. It was at a place I'd checked thoroughly, there'd been no door there. I had a glimpse of blowing silk curtain—and he walked into the room..

Now it really was the one I'd seen before, the man with the hat and the silver-topped cane. He didn't have those now, but the black ring was still on his finger. His hair wasn't grey, but

blond. If women would turn to look at my pale pal from upstairs, they'd fall over turning to look at this one.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said, "you are most welcome. Let me introduce myself. My name is Yolsuar. I am here to teach you your parts."

Welcome, gentlemen. I am here to eat your hearts." So said the being, as it stepped delicately, horribly, towards me.

One goes beyond fear sometimes. I felt my spirit cringe and falter like a beast run to death. I could not look at what addressed me. But then I could not not look. High red heels clock-clacked on the floor and echoed from the oak-panelled walls. The voice was female.

"My name is Erelorg." There was something familiar about it, I knew what it was. My own name spelled backwards.

She had come straight out of the Book of Revelation. Her Medusa-hair was ice blonde. Her bodice was open in the fashion of the ancients, revealing flawless breasts with nipples like bruised fruits. Her pelvis, gold clad, rotated seductively as she advanced, but her eyes were two demons. Within each pupil was an impression, in miniature, of the unspeakable thing that had reared from my carpet. She came on, hateful in sumptuous false beauty, and reached for me with both hands—the one, which wore an ebony ring, aimed for my groin, the other for my heart. I backed towards the wall, and, as she made a lazy lunge at me I managed to shudder aside from her, clutching the thick ivory stem of an antique lamp and interposing myself between lamp and wall.

She chose now to laugh.. Laughter that seemed to emanate from beneath the earth. She leaned to me, jutting her jewelled hips forward. Her glistening lips came near. I jerked away. The deep laughter altered, guttural with muffled sounds—"Oorl, oorl, oorl take world, make world . . ."

And as she moved her body lasciviously about, a slime of blood came from her mouth. It ran down over her gleaming skin, swelling as it hit the floor and morphing into a red-black lump of veined, pulsing offal, stinking of the charnel house. The lump leaped and scuttled across the width of the bizarre great chamber and, with one chuckling jump, gained the top of the altar. There it sat, an eyeless, gurning abortion, right between the terrible horns of Pan.

I knew it now for what it was—an elemental, servant of vile masters, formed from past evils and wicked intentions, fed fat on cruelties and crimes, and I felt my heart bursting with an ancient guilt not quite stifled by terror.

At this point the lovely harpy ceased her libidinous dance and was still, and when she next spoke her voice was mink and silver.

"Write me some lies, my dear,"—softly, "and say me some prayers, backwards."

I shivered. The sturdy lamp flickered and creaked in my clutch. I stared past her, forcing my eyes again to the altar where a myriad little monsters, devils, grotesques and countless entities of perversion were dwelling among the intricately carved furrows—all of them running like water, moving like flame and lightning up and down and round so that the whole

carven surface resembled a bristling and complicated exposed nest of buzzing excited creatures . . . a million blow-flies going oorl oorl oorl world world world accompanied by a sucking gloating noise. Every other second a sheen of blood appeared on the altar—as if from a sacrifice—and shimmered, diffused and faded, while overall came a foul miasma of ordure, burning, and things long-dead.

I had forgotten my companion absolutely. Then I saw him standing by the polished table with its silver goblets. He was still, but his eyes were travelling the room and lingered on the altar with its awful occupants, and I saw his broad frame shudder and heard him swear.

The she-demon turned at the sound. Her attention became intensely directed on him. I thought: praise be, a diversion, he will . . . they will . . . and somehow I can make my escape from this abominable place.

For as much as she repelled me I was confident he would respond to her. In this matter I could guarantee we were at opposite poles. And he was welcome! If, for instance he was indeed responsible for the terrible happenings which had plagued me since his advent (although by now I was not so sure of this) then, I thought, let him take whatever comes . . . she had left me and was stalking back across the chamber towards him . . . during those few seconds I glanced desperately about in search of a way out and found none.

And then, in that little strap of time she assumed a shape the antithesis of what had lately approached me with such intent.

My companion was faced with something male, a stark naked hominid, an Atlas. Glistening hair flowed and rooted from its back; its buttocks were cones of dark marble and it was in an extreme state of priapic arousal. It smelled my awe, for it turned its massive head and looked me full in the eyes in a kind of horrible conspiracy before it moved on my companion. Amorously.

It was not welcome. I saw the attacker furiously attacked, heard cursing that rang the roof, and saw the manifestation shrink under a windmill of blows and kicks, to become opaque. It shimmered like a burning desert and formed itself into air. Perhaps the most chilling thing of all was the sense it left behind—a watching, invisible presence.

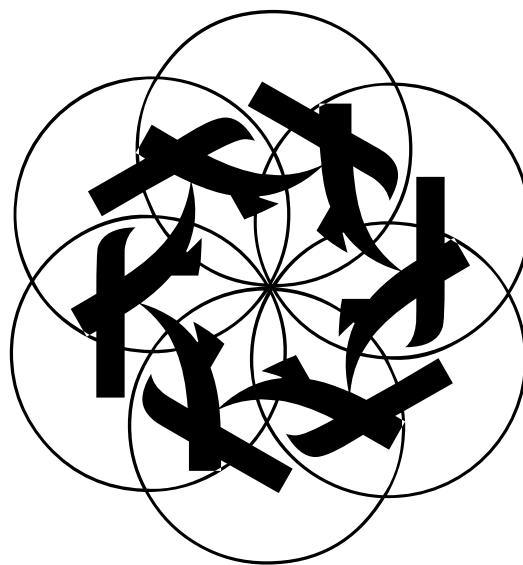
I came tentatively out from my refuge. My companion was sucking his bleeding fist and muttering. He was flushed, then pale the next minute.

“Who were they?” he demanded.

I shrugged weakly. “I thought perhaps you could tell me.” Vertigo swam in my head.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen.”

This was another voice entirely, and another personage, groomed and dapper, leaning against the table. His appearance was extraordinary. He looked somehow unfinished—as if whatever created him had been unable to decide what features to give him—what colour eyes—one grey, the other blue. Or hair—one side was fair, the other black—and the chin was malformed, only half made up, square merging into oval, with one tanned cheek, the other pallid. His hands were languidly clasped across a harlequin waistcoat, and the large onyx ring he



wore was changing regularly from black to red and back to black again.

“Gentlemen!” (as if wishing to calm us down). “Please. Join me in a drink.”

Neither of us spoke. He poured three goblets from the decanter and, elegant as a butler, placed them before us. We stood like wax.

“This scene is where you toast one another. Sante! Salud! Cheers!”

Considering our recent ordeals, his insouciance was mordant. I glanced at my companion. I found my voice.

“What is it? Hemlock?”

“It is only wine.”

The drink’s surface rippled as if agitated by something within. My companion said:

“It looks like blood.”

It is wine, I told you. Come, your health.” And I saw the goblet lifted and drained by that strange malformed mouth. My friend (as I had begun to think of him) picked up his vessel, and I thought, I will not show cowardice. Not this time. If he drinks, so shall I. Together we drank, deep and in silence.

Together we gasped and choked, clutching at our separate throats. I had swallowed the cold of a thousand year old iceberg, laced with a glacier. I had drunk from galaxies on the northern fringe of space. Chills broke out all over me, my blood turned to stone. Icicles formed on my teeth.

Beside me my friend hissed and writhed. A vestige of smoke left his lips which were quickly becoming blistered. I reached across and passed my fingers across his mouth. Instantly the burns faded, leaving no mark, and warmth rushed back into my body.

“Excellent!” Our host was in high spirits. He clapped his hands like a child who has got away with mischief.

“Gentlemen you are perfect! We all hoped, and we are not cast down.”

The buzzing and chittering from the inhabitants of the altar intensified, while the thing atop it gurgled and moaned. Our host glanced back at it fondly.

"You have both heard from our emissary, the Soul Wrecker. You have experienced displacement."

He turned, neat and vulpine, and walked smartly towards the jabbering altar, and, as he passed, touched lightly the great jewelled globe, which flamed for an instant under his fingers. He tapped the altar and the huge horns there lit up in a similar manner. My heart turned over with horror. I remembered the price of raising Pan . . .

The pulsing red lump sprang down and crabbed across the floor towards us.

"And now for the next scene," the man said.

I was as ever terrified, but my friend was enraged, cursing and being talked down.

"You have been through displacement. Listen and know. It is the will of those who live between the wells of the world. Only when two of such disparity as yourselves come together can we work. That is why you are so fine."

The red canker had grown long fleshy legs and was moving on us.

Our host began to speak more rapidly. ". . . Only when two like you come by chance to the same place. . . then can the gap occur. And the gate be opened to those who strain to come from the places below, and behind, and between. Now you shall learn Despairing."

Neither of us could stir. We were simply fixed to the ground. The man was standing close to the great gemlike globe. With the chameleon ring he rang it like a bell and it flared into blinding light, while the ground beneath our feet began to tremble once again; I threw out my arm and caught that of my companion. We stood together desperately trying to keep a foothold on a floor now crumbling and rocking and surging into infinite chaos—the darkness returning, swirling round us with a reek of pitch and sulfur—and the great jewelled globe opening into glittering segments, the last image almost blinding me as we clung together in one delirious whirl of terror . . . there was a voice speaking far away, a darker darkness . . .

. . . bursting open, shards flying, a wind stinging my eyes as I hurtled into an unknown dimension. A desert.

A sickly yellow sunset over a crest of hills. The voice echoing in my brain: "Change of scene, gentlemen dear!"

Before me on a ridge stood six gigantic stone figures. In place of their heads were transparent, monstrous eggs, each containing a seething flux of movement. Within each shape was a scene of carnage; torture, bloody warfare, axes and guns and bombs, prisoners hooded and naked being dragged about by sneering captors, mutilations like the worst Goyaesque images. These were ovoid worlds of Armageddon; they were eternal. They were prophetic.

I was lying where I had been thrown. Behind me sounded a groan. My friend, (still unnamed) was bound to a solitary bare tree. At first sight his bonds looked like fine hemp, and then I saw they were energy impulses, running around his body in dashes of green and red. His fine suit was torn. There was blood on his face.

"And who shall be the saviour now?"

The voice, mocking. And no more.

* * *

Fear doesn't have to disable you. You learn that fairly fast, if you want to survive in my game. You've just got to use the adrenalin.

Only thing was, I could get control of myself, but not much else. Besides which—that—what can I call it? Thing seems too complimentary—our Host maybe I should say—he seemed to be able to make me do stuff I'd never normally do. Maybe it was the same for my neighbour from upstairs.

I mean, how else did we drink that muck off the table? Wine? Sure, it had the smell of wine, a nice little red from Chile, perhaps. But it looked—I'd never have touched it. Only I did. Picked it up, swallowed it—Christ. Alcohol Concern should learn that trick. Aversion therapy that'd work. Thought I was dead until the coldness came, and wiped all the burning away like an Arctic rain. My friend from upstairs. Quick thinking. He was no fool after all.

And I know what he thought when Mr. Universe came at me next, with his dick stuck up so high it was practically up his own nose. Thought I'd clock the bastard. Which I did. It was only a test, mind you. Even I could see that. They—our Host/s—were making sure we were exactly what we were. Otherwise why launch that tart at the guy upstairs? I'd been surprised he wasn't sick all over her. Then again, he obviously thought I'd take her on OK. But you were wrong there, pal. I don't like that type of brassy bitch shoves it in your face. Never mentioned Alice, did I. She was my type. Little and slim, and a smoke-cloud of dark hair. Soft and cool, and then looks up at you with those eyes full of shadow and sex—and your blood sizzles. So he was wrong about that. And anyway it was just a test. But They were all pleased with us. We were turning out just fine.

Opposites. That's what they wanted. Total opposites.

But now.

How to describe this.

There was another earthquake effect to start with — and the guy from upstairs and I grabbed each other, mostly instinctively to keep from falling over. And then —

It wasn't like the first time, the trip down the plug-hole. This was more like when you wake up violently in some unknown place, maybe where someone's thrown you after a beating.

I picked myself up cautiously, off a carpet.

Vomit-yellow sunset was oozing through windows draped in heavy old lace. Velvet curtains partly drawn.

But in the rest of the room was a kind of blackness, lit by candles that didn't light it, somehow, gave no light, though they were blazing up in crazy gusts. And then again, though there wasn't any light, you could see a lot pretty clearly.

It came to me. It was like a stage-set, or a movie-set.

And then I see the bloke from upstairs, over in a corner, and he's whimpering to himself, crying soft, like a kid scared he'll be overheard.

Something was happening too in the shadow beyond the candles, some kind of flickering and thrashing about, grunts that sounded like pain, and probably were, a woman's moans . . . But I didn't go over to see.

I went up to my neighbour.

"Hey—"

No response. He wasn't seeing me or hearing me. He was staring into the flicker-thrash over there, listening to the noises.

Then he spoke. He did it in French, like the other time.

"Pierrot—I can't help you. I didn't know. But yes, I did—I knew—no, I never did know—not this—Pierrot—I must run away. I must run away and live, for I can't save you —"

"Hang on, mate." Again no response. So then I try some French too, only mine has an African accent. "What is happening here? Tell me."

"They're killing him, to slowly raise, drop by drop of blood—it falls into the stone mouth of a thing that squats open-jawed below him! He calls up the horned one—Listen! The woman is part of it, and soon Pierrot too —"

Almost against my will I stared into the busy void beyond the candles. I couldn't make out a thing. Was I going over there?

Then, I find I can't move. It isn't like the magic stuff before. It's—it's just plain fucking terror. I've been afraid, I said, you learn to use it. Now—I can't. I'm like some boy of fifteen who hasn't learned yet . . . like I was back then. And I'm like—like him—the guy with his actor's voice, and he's a coward, and he can only preserve himself, he runs away—and leaves his friends behind. Maybe leaves his lover behind, this Pierrot, maybe that was what Pierrot was—and this one just ran out and left him . . . But something else is happening now —

Jesus Christ—what —

What—?

You are dead, monsieur. *Tu est mort.* Oorl oorl oorl . . ." The voice of the elemental cackling through small red teeth—it came flapping, scudding along the desert floor, unspeakable, at my heels like an obscene pet.

And a storm blowing me, a hot wind jerking me about and my own voice howling, a long drawn out "Ayiiiiie! What do I do?" "Sauve qui peut!"

Howling in the blind hot sand I was lifted and hurled across the gap to where the other stood clamped by racing stinging bonds of pure energy . . . into a changed landscape.

Dense stands of trees now, palm, bamboo, banana, fringing a jungle clearing where I was gripped again by the fierce wind. I was lifted and thrust right through the raging circle of energies that held that drooping other body, and the bonds gripped me too and thrust me close against him, closer than a lover. He raised his head. We looked into one another's eyes. And I saw,— as if his eyes were the viewfinder of a camera—a vile yet fateful and familiar scene. The upper room in Paris filled the lens of his eye like a camera image . . . and time was turned back and the force seized me once more and whirled me so that my back was against the tree. Now it was I who stood alone, bound, but now with robust lines of sturdy hemp. And not only they had changed. I looked down at my body. I had become that comely, yellow-haired man!

The years flowed from me and a vigour which I had not experienced even in my green days surged in me and I pulled against the bonds with my strong tanned hands gilded with down, my hands yet not mine, and I sucked air through the lungs of youth and felt a fierce young heartbeat under where

the hemp lines were painfully stretched. And for the tiniest moment I knew joy, even my genitals pulsing with ardour, but with that youth-pleasure came pain. Blood poured from my left thigh where flies congregated around a recent bullet wound.

A moan jerked me alert. Across the clearing, similarly bound to a bamboo tree hung a young black man naked except for a loincloth. His head hung low as if he had been tortured.

On the periphery of the clearing were men, bearded, grimy, in tattered combat fatigues. They were armed with pistols, and also with AKSUs—the assault rifles, shortened AK-47s usually fired in confined spaces. How I had this knowledge I had no idea—but have it I did.

One man had an ancient camcorder which he sporadically and inefficiently waved in our direction. Somehow I knew these men were rebels, that some coup had taken place but by what faction and within what nation there was no clue. They stood and jeered at us. One jabbed the captive black man in the belly with the point of a machete.

This act galvanised me. I felt a great anger pouring through this young body like a forest fire. The roar of rage which came from my mouth jarred every cell. My blood seemed literally to boil. The rebels turned from their captive to stare at me. The pain in my leg was a goad. A cataclysmic knowledge told me that the black man must not be harmed further. The next second I had burst through my bonds like Samson in the temple. I had become a colossus.

I rushed at the enemy. Blood spurted from my wound. It seemed to lighten me. I was spurred, a bull under the shafts of the picadors . . . I was fired at—bullets wildly aimed and missing the mark—the mob were suddenly panicked, their eyes white, the stutter of their weapons mingling with the screech of birds flying out of the vegetation . . .

I had a young tree in my fist. I had torn it bodily out of the ground. Samson-like, I wielded and thrashed it in mighty sweeps. I killed at least three of the gang—I spattered their brains and entrails—my roaring shook me, shook the jungle, the earth, I wrought carnage among men I had never known and the sight of whom made me a wild beast.

And now, somehow outside this raging potent young body, I saw its rampant force as at a distance. And above everything, above all the blood-hunger, I felt a burning love. Love such as I have never felt. The love that soldiers feel, shoulder to shoulder in comradeship and more than that—I saw my blood brother, my precious friend with whom I had faced death many times in a history that spawned this burning boiling wave and made me scream aloud through my fury:

"Lon! Lon! Hang in there . . .!" then, "Run, you bastards!"

The life of that man hanging almost Christlike across the glade meant more than my own. It was that which had made me for one supranormal moment, an agent of the gods.

The mob were in flight, and several lay mangled on the ground. I sprang across the clearing and seized the black man in my arms. As if under some unearthly fire his bonds burned and shrivelled and freed him; we stood raging heart against raging heart.

It was then my valour failed. My consciousness swirled and eddied and faded. Blackness filled my head and eyes. Some

force, heavy and dark as vulcanite enveloped me, and I was dying, sinking.

I fell, through atoms of time and space, still locked together with my companion, a shuddering sickening descent through centuries, through aeons, an eternity of falling, and then at last a devastating impact on a hard surface.

As full faculties returned, so did my familiar ageing body, and I lay stunned on an icy unforgiving pavement.

What the fuck?"

And then. If you've ever had that *déjà vu* sensation, that sickening, it's happening again—when it's the most horrible in the world—well, this was it, only worse.

I was seeing things no sane person was meant to see, and I've been in Haiti during the voodoo season. Speaking of which that is where Lon and I first came together, and that's another pretty dark story, that I'll tell another time . . .

This scene. This place. Jesus. I knew it, but from a long time ago. I had always known it. I knew them all. I knew the altar with its nasty little ornaments.

Fuck. The oorl had shown up, buzzing and gloating round my path with its sickening chant as I stumbled round in that weird half—dark. If my guys could have seen me . . . my yellow bellied shaking . . . couldn't help it. The thing was at my heels, no time to lunge, to kill . . .

My heart, going like a trip hammer. This bloody chamber. Dark as Satan's arse but still candlelit enough to see.

And I knew it. I'd seen it before. I don't know how, but I had. The man with the ring. The goat.

Big bastard. Not a goat at all, but a man with a headdress and yellow gleaming torturer's eyes. Hairy, powerful, riding the girl, curled horns bobbing above her bare butt . . .

The girl's head hung down. One strange moment—did she look vaguely familiar? but then all this looked familiar. I couldn't see much and it was only for a glancing instant and then she didn't look like anyone I knew . . .

And the thing. Just like he said, and like I knew. Living stone. The stone mouth jutting, living, thirsty, hungry stone . . .

And the victim. Naked like the girl, hanging backwards over the gape. Throat exposed, ready. Good looking young man, pretty young man. Terrified bloodshot eyes watching his own death.

The ringed hand held a straight blade opening a tiny gash in the man's jugular, just a little, stealthily, like a doctor who cared might, but with such a look of relish it nearly made me heave. There was a noise too. Coming from the altar—a thrumming excited chant. All the nasties gathered to sing the praise of evil—of panic. PANIC! I raised my hands to my face.

Not my hands, though. Age-speckled, delicate, gentleman's hands. Never done an honest day's work.

And I was whimpering in a corner. Sobbing.

Not my voice, that sobbing. Not my thundering heart.

I was slender and frail and my head was going crazy, with thoughts.

Thoughts from some other bastard's brain!

I'm reeling about. Clutching at myself. My face, streaming with tears. (I'd last cried when I was seven—after a beating—my bastard dad—never since).

And my heart was breaking.

Breaking, as I looked into the face of that seriously beautiful young man.

Not my style. God. Not my way.

This was different.

My beloved hung there in sacrifice.

My son.

"Pierrot" I heard my voice quaver across the gap. He was bleeding now, my son . . .

Then my brain exploded. A great alien intelligence crashed through it.

My flesh, seed of these sparse ageing loins but long ago, in a time hardly remembered . . . And these weren't my thoughts, nor my voice—even the way I spoke was not my idiom . . . "Pierrot! I never meant any of this to happen. I swear. I never meant to put you in danger. They said they were going to raise the god, but HE was too strong" . . . my quaking old voice—like from another life.

"Moi—I was too afraid—ah, mon fils—I pushed you—I so longed for you to become an adept—to be more powerful than HE . . ."

The first garnet drop hit the stone mouth. It didn't look like stone now. It had become flesh. A pulsing grey gape. It rose up—like some hideous trumpet-shaped blossom—stretching, expanding on a long neck—

And then. Another voice. Deep inside me. A majestic thunder.

You can stop it.

The voice. Roaring through my fragile aching body, my delicate chest. I hurt from the giant sound.

MAKE IT STOP!!! Then—"Lightguard showed you."

You took enough of his power in your time. More, Goddamn it, then he ever knew. You felt it.

I'm feeling it now.

The roaring sank to a hiss—the voice of many serpents: *Use . . . use . . . useeeee—*

And I cried out loud: "Use what? for the love of God . . ." "Use the elemental."

And I had taken two steps forward. Rather—I'd been pushed forward. Something mighty sent me out of the corner. It lifted my hands and streamed from my fingers like a power surge—enough, you'd think, to light up Las Vegas.. . It raced through me and jumped the gap.

The oorl was still chattering, biting the air, all red maw and needle-teeth, relishing the ritual. A visible ray, crackling, lethal, sped from me. It struck the oorl full on.

The thing disintegrated—flew apart in bloody shards like some unspeakable exploding foetus. It left a stench—carrion and brimstone. The air was thick with a flying red spray—its essence.

And the force growing stronger in me—so fierce I thought I'd break under it. Then came the ricochet—the power that shook me struck the black ring on that murderer's hand.

Three things happened.

Pierrot was invisibly seized, raised and lifted away. For an instant he floated. An angel amazed, he was returned to earth.

The hand holding the razor shrivelled to bone.

The thing's grey mouth reared up. Swallowed the razor's owner whole. That event was like everything folded up—like when you put a telescope away. And there was a long drawn-out whistling shriek—similar to a train entering a tunnel, and disappearing—but a million times more frightening . . . and once again my world went crazy.

Spin, roll—that awful tornado feeling. Sight and hearing in tumult. Gone. Everything I was or ever would be, swirling in a vast centrifuge.

For a nanosecond Pierrot—standing puzzled in an empty room. Rubbing his neck. My beautiful son.

No altar. No adept. No goat-man. No half-recognised young woman. My body swelling, finding its old shape. Muscle and bone—and an echo—that great thunder, roaring Redemption . . .

Blackout.

A hard pavement beneath me. Someone tripping on my feet.

“Bit early in the day, ain't it?” Laughter, fading.

I had my arms round him and he likewise was clasping me. My heart felt it was about to burst. My face was pressed against his yellow hair. His body was close to mine, pouring its vitality into my tired, corrupt old body. Forgive me . . . I whispered, but of whom I asked pardon I did not know. My whispering trailed on, away . . . “Pierrot . . .”

The pavement smelled of toasted gorse blossom.

The sidewalk reeked of cats' piss. Nothing to forgive, I began, and my name isn't fucking Pierrot, then was interrupted by a sharp pain in the kidney. I rolled my head up and around. This elderly lady is poking me with the tip of her broolly.

“You should be ashamed, both of you.”

A rubicund gent at her side nodded vigorously. “And they're on about longer licensing hours too.”

The pair moved on. My eyes got focus and I saw we were lying just below the bottom step of the tall grey house. The House of Chaos, I call it. We rose. Swaying, clutching, teetering. I saw the door was ajar. We mounted the steps together and went in.

FOR all I know.

For all I know, Lon Clitheroe is off somewhere, alive and sound, fighting in some minor skirmish, giving grief to some pompous authority, battling for justice against tyranny. Can never keep out of trouble, Lon.

What I do know is that the tape has been rewound. The execution repealed. The scar on my leg has gone.

No one will ever believe what I know. But sure as all-get-out I expect a scratchy misspelt letter one day soon, suggesting I join him. A letter from Lon.

This I know.

He never communicates, but for all I know, my son is continuing his valuable work for mankind on the other side of the world. Whole, unharmed, undefiled.

Ask me not how I know, but this I know.

I look into the blue eyes of this man, who loaned me his power.

We were standing in the hall, where grey shadows gathered in a hush. Not a sound. The house waited.

“We were all to be destroyed.”

“Yeah. They used us.”

“But we were too much for them.”

“Yeah. Experiments. We were lab rats. Rats that got away!”

Laughter, and it was as if the house gasped.”We were too strong.”

“No. We were too good.

Too good?

A very long silence.

I HAVE said farewell to the man whose true name I never knew, nor he mine. He packed up his few things and saluted me like a soldier, before striding off down the road. Our souls had come apart like the division of molecules in some arcane experiment, as he said. We had traded brain and heart and cell structure and empirical knowledge, to reconstitute them in a climactic; together we had shaken Heaven and Hell.

I knew that he and I would always be bound, but at a distance. There, the charge of our selves could wreak no justice, cause no havoc, breed no monsters.

The sun came out as I wished him good fortune.

I am going to find Alice and marry her,” he said. “Should have done it long ago.”

I looked at him.

“Do you think you will recognise her?”

He said: “Why wouldn't I?”

I watched him depart.

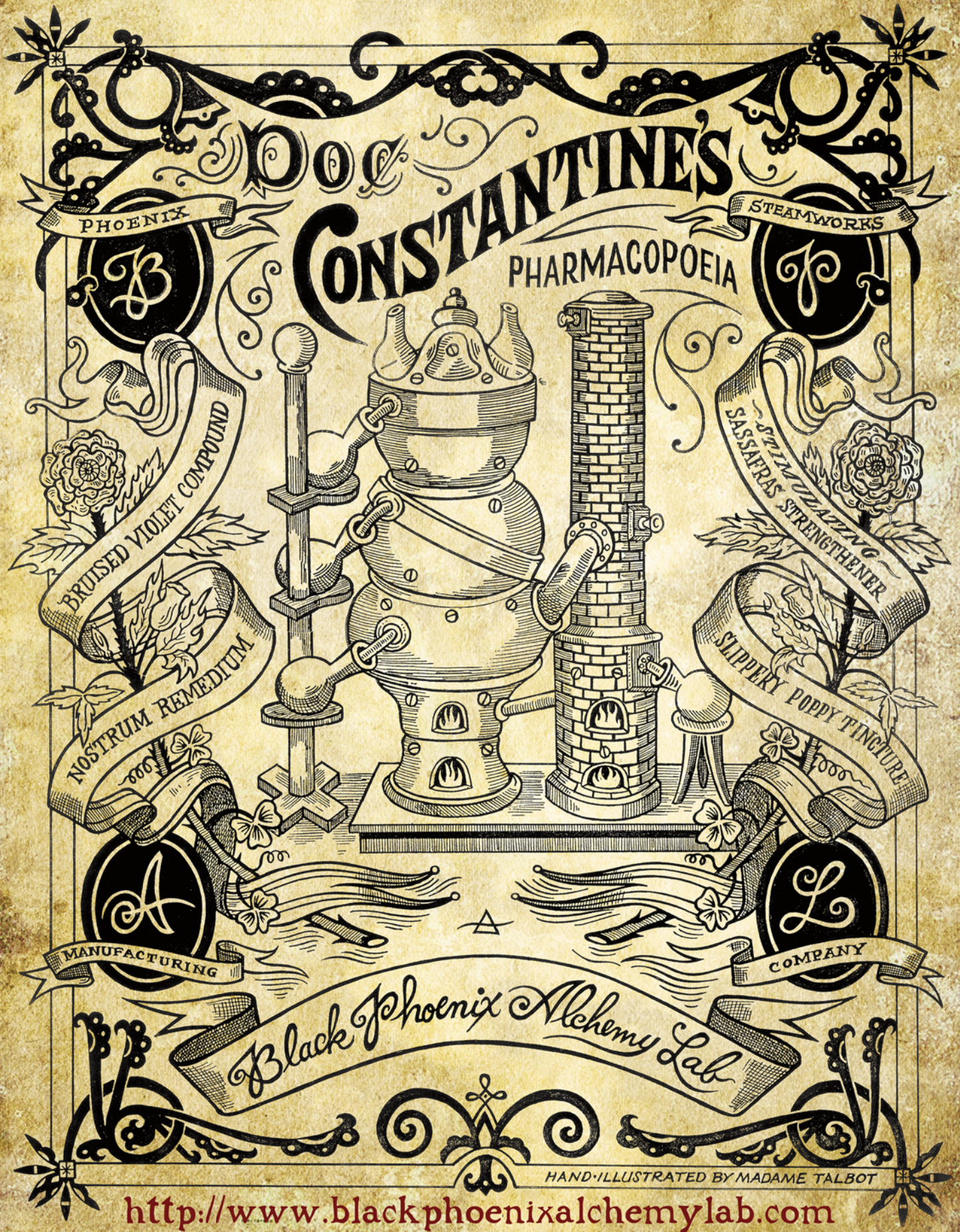
I knew an Alice once. She was one of HIS acolytes. Small and dark, très séduisante, she partook in the rituals.

It is said that the present is Time nudging Eternity. Its wheel comes around and again around and sometimes it doubles back on itself, defying the cosmic law for reasons not for our telling.

Standing on the front doorstep I glance up and back at the tall grey house where I intend to continue dwelling. It looks prim and very proper, ever so slightly nervous, like a maiden lady sitting meekly between two ruffians. ↻

Tanith Lee, who prefers writing longhand with a pen, has won the August Derleth, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards. She has written almost 90 books and well over 250 short stories. Tempting the Gods, the first volume of her collected stories, is now available from Wildside Press; the second volume, Hunting the Shadows, is forthcoming in summer 2009. Lee lives on the English seacoast with her husband, John Kaiine.

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