

IN SECLUSION

by Harvey Jacobs

Jason Briar and Monica Ploy met on the set of *Beowulf* and the hairs on him crackled with healthy electricity while she took in air like a vacuum cleaner and held it. He, the handsomest and the most virile; she, the softest and best curved, a vessel brimful of estrogen. "He is the very best," thought she, and "She is the tip-top," thought he. *Beowulf* was being shot outside London "where it really happened", so the climate gave them no encouragement. But they needed none.

They became lovers. LOVERS! L*O*V*E*R*S* for themselves, for their fellow players, for the director and the producer and the staff, for the press, the public, for you and I. Their waking lives were gorgeous, working together and all that. To think of them at night running over moors where blue-painted Anglos and Saxons once ran was overwhelming. It was like looking with naked eyes at a fleshy eclipse of the sun, of the moon, of the entire physical universe.

He was married, she was married and they became unmarried and blended. Their ex's gave interviews to the papers wishing them "the best", but theirs were rusty words. Ex Mr. Her and Ex Mrs. Him rattled like empty old scabbards. Who listened? Nobody. Even other empty scabbards turned away. For Jason Briar and Monica Ploy cuddled and fondled and tumbled for everyone. All cells rang like bells.

The trouble was their affair was ill-timed. *Beowulf* ran into production problems. (Something about fog.) So the celluloid climax occurred later than the lovers' hottest heat and by the time the movie was ready for selected premiere showcase theaters, millions of ingrates were thinking of other jangling thighs, of other midnight panting.

The studio sent them into seclusion. It was announced that they were going to be secluded like monks. They were going away to pure isolation, to a place of meditation and cold stone, to a place by the salty sea.

The studio found an abandoned abbey near an ocean. It was fine. There was no furniture. Not even a bed. NOT EVEN A BED. All the windows were broken. The garden was like a crazy man's lair. Ooze made lines on the thick, thick walls. There was, of course, no telephone. Wind

from the waters whistled in the halls. You could hear spiders skitter.

The point? The point was peace. The lovers were going to find peace and repose. They were going to discover hidden flavors far from the candy store. With a few cans and bottles, an opener and a busload of photographers, Jason Briar and Monica Ploy set out to heal themselves in double solitary.

The concept got banner headlines right away. The story grew. The studio was pleased. Even the Ex's gave interviews again. On the fateful day that *Beowulf* opened across the nation the lovers said goodbye to civilization. Their abbey was on a cliff jutting into the brine. There was only one road for access. Guards were placed where the road joined the rest of the American continent and away they went carrying provisions in canvas sacks.

The lovers wandered wistfully. It was late afternoon. A pink cloud covered the sea. The sand was red. Bits of shell reflected sun like broken pieces of an urn. Jason Briar and Monica Ploy retreated into this magnificence. Even they were impressed.

They had never been to the abbey before so first they explored. The old rock house on an ancient hump of land teetered on the edge of Earth. There was a ribbon of sand separating them from the fishes, nothing more. The house itself was a thick cool egg, a ponderous thing with a hundred tiny rooms and one huge cavern downstairs. Jason Briar and Monica Ploy rattled around the premises.

"You know, Jay," Monica said, "I think I actually *like it*."

Jay looked at her and noticed that her lips were wet. Her lips were always wet. She licked them.

"We might as well, puss cat," he said. "Let's go for a swim."

Monica dropped her clothes where she stood. Jay too. Monica was brown as a nut except for two bikini lines. Jay was brown as she except for one bikini line. Monica ran a finger along his appendix scar. It was a shame, that one flaw. The doctor had shaky hands. The scar rambled. He might just as well have been nibbled by a lion.

Off they went to the ocean. The water was chilly but welcoming. They swam and splashed. Monica, lips wetter than ever, got hungry and thirsty. Jay, dripping puddles, pushed back his hair. He peed.

“Why do you have to do that here?” Monica said.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. You pee in the shower too, don’t you?”

Jay slapped her gingerly on the can. Monica yelled. His hand etched on her bottom. She pulled a hair on his chest. They went up to the house.

“This is really fun,” Monica said, and made her little noise, a gargled, swallowed purr for which she was justly famous.

In the cathedral of a living room, if that is what it could be called, Jay rummaged through the provision sacks. He found two cans of beans, a fifth of Beefeater and a long spoon. There was a can opener too, with a bottle opener on the back. Jay opened the beans. Sitting on canvas bags, he and Monica ate. Then they drank down the gin. Soon both felt a glow.

“Watch yourself,” Jay said. “I think I’m in the mood to stimulate a certain party’s erogenous zones.”

Monica stood up.

“Not on the stone floor,” she said.

Jay unrolled their sleeping bags.

“How do you do it in there?” Monica said.

“I don’t know,” Jay said. “But we can find out. Thousands of people do.”

Monica wiggled into a sleeping bag.

“I feel like some kind of product,” she said.

Jay got in with her after some difficulty.

“How come your navel is kind of a football shape?” Monica said.

“What makes you say that?”

“It is. Not that it’s important. But it is.”

Jay could not see his bellybutton in the bag but he wondered about it.

They made love sideways then squirmed out of the bag. Jay checked his button. It was mostly circular, not at all football shaped. Monica was holding a mirror while she put on lipstick.

“A mirror? Cosmetics?” Jay said.

“I smuggled them in.”

“Well the whole point was a kind of enforced austerity,” Jay said.

“Who’ll know?”

“Nobody. Unless some reporter gets by the guards. It’s a matter of keep the faith. Not that that means much to some people.”

“Some people are not hypocrites like other people,” Monica said.

She put on a sack dress. Jay put on bermudas.

“Where do we wash up around here anyway?”

“Pump outside,” Jay said.

Monica went out and found the pump. She worked the handle. A trickle of rusty water dribbled out.

“Is that a pump or an infection?” Jay said. He had come up behind her.

“Help me.”

Jay pumped. The rusty brown water turned grey.

“I think that pump is connected to the sky there,” Monica said.

A heavy cloud covered the ocean and it was indeed the color of the water.

A wind blew from out at sea.

“Brrrr,” Monica said. “I’m starting to freeze.”

After the wash Monica and Jay went to get more clothes. A storm was blowing in, no question about it. Jay found some logs and kindling. He made a fire using a copy of *Harlow* to prime the flames.

“Cozy shmozy,” he said.

“What shall we do?” Monica said.

“Scrabble,” said Jay.

The Scrabble board was set by the fire and the tiles distributed. Jay watched Monica’s face change. She loved competitive games. He hated them. But he liked to watch her love competitive games because he fancied that her true self emerged when she played them.

Games were a kind of sodium pentothal to Monica. After an hour or so of combat Jay knew he could ask her anything and get a quick, straight, honest and therefore cruel answer. Her answers always hurt Jay in his middle. They clashed with his convictions about what a woman should be. Despite that, he enjoyed the whole process. Monica knew what he was about but she enjoyed it too. And she actually did get carried away with the old team spirit.

“Strap on your phallus,” Jay said. “The game begins. And remember in this one you don’t collect \$200 when you pass GO.”

“Ooooo, you’re going to get it,” Monica said and proceeded to give it to him.

Monica could not concentrate on anything for more than a whisper so Jay opened with a spurt. He strained his head from the first gun. Monica came on like thunder too. It was a healthy, absorbing contest. Jay and Monica huddled over the board made great shadows as the flames jumped.

Outside the weather congealed to a murky soup. The cloud grew until it covered everything. The water moaned and churned. The wind whiplashed at waves and rocks. There was no more light.

At the root of the road leading to the abbey the guards looked toward the ocean and saw nothing but fog.

“How’d you like to be stuck out there with that broad?” said one.

“Oh yeah, yeah,” said the other.

Then they went into a little shack that had been built by the studio for their comfort.

So turbulent evening settled on Jason Briar, Monica Ploy, the old stone castle, the ocean, the beach, the road, the guards, and the little shack.

It was at about this time that the creature moved.

The creature was so big that it really had no exact sense of its parts. In fact, it had no sense of anything at all except hunger and wakefulness. It was awake and hungry so it moved.

For breakfast it had eaten a whale. For lunch some dolphins, porpoises and sharks. Fish, fish, fish. The creature was sick of fish. So it moved itself.

The thing on its head signaled meat. Somewhere, nearby, meat. Yum yum. It moved along the ocean floor, tons and tons of it, smacking thousand pound lips with four whopping tongues. Yum yum. The creature pulled itself toward shore.

“*Smart ass* is two words,” Jay said. “As in the expression nobody loves a smart ass.”

“A *smartass*,” said Monica. “You pronounced it yourself. Ha!”

“Negative.”

“Positive.”

“No. No.”

“Churl fink,” Monica said, steaming from the ears.

Jay smiled knowingly as Monica came to another moment of truth. He sat nodding his head left to right while she counted up her points for *smartass* and he saw she was consumed with guilt. He sprung.

“Did you think my performance in *Beowulf* was solid class A caliber?”

he said.

Monica shivered, wet her lips twice and told him.

“You were like walking constipation.”

Jay swallowed dry foam. Tears welled in his eyes. He went for a swig of *Beefeater*.

“You asked me,” Monica said. “Who asked you to ask me?”

When Jay came back to the Scrabble arena, the tears had dried to an opalescent wax. Monica thought he looked sexy that way, with the eyes of a stuffed moose in a men’s bar. She noticed him fastening his wax eyes to a spot on her neck that showed a thin crease and tried not to but couldn’t help pulling at the collar of her dress.

A few hundred yards away, still submerged, the creature experienced a sensation of itching in what could be called its nose. It arched, making an island, then rolled, making a wave, then sneezed, bubbling a billion gallons of brine. Inland, one of the studio guards asked the other if he heard a strange sound. The other, absorbed in a magazine, had heard nothing.

The sneeze, a megaton of mucous, refreshed the creature and left it more awake and hungrier. Onward it went, flowing forward in slimy progress. The creature thought vaguely about its mate somewhere in the Red Sea. The thoughts waved like theatre curtains, rippling through its head. The creature had not made love in a decade, a thunderous thump back in the Straits of Magellan. Its scales practically glowed as memory flared and faded. It felt a bit horny.

The creature’s instinct interrupted its reverie. ‘Eat first,’ the instinct commanded. So the creature sniffed for and found tantalizing promise of gratification. It came faintly from the abbey borne on the water-whipping wind. It was Monica’s perfume the creature smelled, mingled with Jay’s mortification. Mmmmm. Very tasty. Very juicy.

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Fifty miles inland Harold Biple, the Producer-Director of *Beowulf*, sat beaming behind a massive desk with legs carved like tree roots. Into his office came Harriet Troom on plump legs of her own.

“Pineapple,” she said.

“Melon, baby,” he said. “Sit down. Rest yourself.”

Thirty years before a famous philosopher had gasped and died between the pudgy legs which Harriet Troom crossed neatly. He had just completed his worst book. Her legs were famous in intellectual circles just as her column was beloved by millions of readers on many sides of the Atlantic.

Harriet Troom was big on both ends of the IQ spectrum. Her heart held many secrets involving the living and the departed. Her body had shared heat with a variety of types ranging from old child stars to the famous philosopher. The residue of all that experience gave her terrific poise. Harold Bipley was impressed. But that very morning he had had a warning from his doctor. He went to the doctor because his arms felt tired, like heavy salamis. The doctor took Harold off sex and cuff-links. Harold liked both. Without sex he felt restless and sleepless. Without big cuff-links he felt as if his arms would fly out of the floppy sleeves of his silk shirt and hit a total stranger.

“There better be a story,” Harriet was saying. “This is my bridge night and I gave it up for you.”

“There is a story,” Harold said. “As God is my witness.”

“Continue.”

“Word follows word, darling. Word follows word. You know about Monnie and Jay in seclusion?”

“Of course.”

“That’s where they are right now. In seclusion.”

“So?”

“In a fat old church house by the water. Desolate. Bare. Empty.”

“And?”

“Nobody around. Death to intruders. Get the picture?”

“Sure.”

“So everybody is thinking of what’s going on *inside* that seclusion, is that accurate?”

“Proceed.”

“So one person emerges from the horizon to tell them. You.”

“Ah.”

“And its spontaneous, Harriet. Not even Monnie and Jay have inklings. You go out there with a camera and a pad. Top secret Peep a little. Bust in on them. De what you want. It’s all yours.”

“I like it. I buy it”

“I was so sure you would,” Harold said, “I called Hertz, My Rolls is waiting outside.”

“I go alone.”

“Any way you wish it is the way it will be.”

“Where?”

“I happen to have a map.”

“When?”

“Better soon. You know what a honey bucket Monnie can be. And Jay has no concentration either. How long will they last without electricity?”

“Tonight”

“It does me good to hear you say that, Harriet. Your readers are a hundred percent lucky to have somebody like you.”

Harriet Troom took the map and went for the car. Harold Bipley watched her behind sway while she walked. His son was a navy pilot who landed on aircraft carriers. He felt sorry for the boy. A moving target is nice and challenging. But difficult.

At the moment when Harriet Troom aimed the Rolls down the highway toward land’s end, the creature reached land’s beginning.

Before assaulting the beach it garnered its parts together. There was a helter-skelter quality to such size. Pincers, legs, feelers, arms, buttocks, ears, etc. had a way of wandering off. The creature had a natural sense of order so from time to time it paused to take inventory and consolidate into a comprehensible lump.

It piled itself half in and half out of the surf. Because of the foggy dark the mountain it made was invisible. Now the creature, which was extremely light sensitive, felt a sting in a secondary eye. The eye detected a pin dot of light from a chink in the abbey wall. At the same moment a hectic spasm of wind wafted a ripe scent of the abbey's human visitors. The creature perked.

At once the entire scene seemed familiar. Of course. Years before the creature had visited that very beach and enjoyed a supper of Dominican Fathers. Bingle, bong. There was a bell. The creature's primitive head remembered the bell which it had nibbled for dessert Brassy and tart It jiggled for a year afterward. The creature grinned, or tried to grin. One grey-green mass separated from another and exposed a slit of flecked orange mush. For the creature, that was a big, broad smile.

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Inside the abbey Monica was feeling the empty triumph of the conqueror. She had won the Scrabble game by hook and crook. As she totalled her points she cried.

Jay was still in pain from her dirty remark about his talent. She felt sorry for him and for herself. Victory in the game calmed her. She was now free to be nice. Jay needed some nice. He looked older by firelight.

"Darling," Monica said, "forgive me. There's always loom for improvement And it's not easy for me either with every erectable male person in the whole wide world wanting to have sexual congress with me. Sometimes at night I can feel my fans dreaming so hard I practically drown in seminal fluid."

"Don't I have that too?" Jay said. "The women plus the queers."

"Cheer up," Monica said. "It's so clammy and dismal out. We've got hours to kill and I'm not sleepy. I'm not the least bit sleepy. Tell me a story. Tell me how it was when you first saw me."

"No."

“Please.”

“Stop tonguing your upper lip.”

“I will.”

“I first saw you in your first flick, *Beloved Runt*, and my breathing clamped. I thought at last the lord hath made a broad sufficient unto me.”

“Fabulous.”

“And I thought I’ve got to have her. So I met you and had you.”

“What a way to tell it,” Monica said. “How you hate me. You left out the entire love play sequence.”

“You came at me so quickly I had no time for love play.”

“I came at you? Jay, I was a star while you were doing improvisations in the Village.”

“I did not say you had no distance on you when we met”

“I was discovered at 15.”

“I’ll bet you were.”

“It was never like that. Never.”

“Baby, you saw more ceiling before 20 than Michelangelo in a life of decorating.”

“You are a filthy mouth. A sore loser. And don’t ask me to calm you down when the going gets rough. Whisper never talked like you talk.”

“Whisper Jones weighed 50 pounds when you married him and 34 ounces at the divorce.”

“Annulment.”

“All he wanted was custody of the oatmeal. You broke that boy’s spirit.”

“And Sherril? Didn’t her pubic hair fall out from nerves?”

“How do you know that?”

“Never mind. It was all over town. Her follicles shriveled from mental cruelty. Hell, it must have been mental.”

“What does that mean?”

“You break the code. Big virility symbol.”

“Listen Monica, face the fact that your entire reason for being is to transport your mammaries to and from the studio. My work at least has a chance of contributing something, some little thing to the pool of artistic achievement. The best you can hope for is a medal in the tit Olympics. And they’re getting saggy, if you want to know.”

Monica inhaled and held her breath. Her face turned red. Jay watched her take in still more air. And more. She did very well.

“If you burst it’s on your own head,” he said.

Monica let the air gush out.

“Saggy?” she said.

She looked for something to break but there was nothing, only her hand mirror, so she threw a can of vegetable soup which went rolling around the stone floor.

Jay fell to his hands and knees and roared. Monica threw another can, string beans this time, and he scampered away. He knew that she would soon begin to play zoo, being a cat or some kind of rhino and that the argument would end up in jungley love. They had played zoo five times in six days and he was bored with it, but there was nothing better to do. The stone chilled his knee caps.

A log fell into the fire and sent up a shower of ash and sparks. The shadows leapt too, filling half the room with Jay and Monica, dolls cut from black velvet

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Outside the creature made a sound like *goorumbumbum* for no particular

reason. It was on land, sloshing along. The air felt funny after years of water, amphibious or not. The switch from gills made the creature heady, a little drunk. It waved a score of flippers and swooshed a hairy tail. The wind confirmed that fresh meat was imminent.

The creature was sure of its prey. It began to think selectively, like a housewife at a butcher's shop, trying to remember the Dominicans and what of them was most succulent. Bonk. Its vanguard antenna touched something. The abbey gate. The creature had no time to knock. It secreted chartreuse juice, dissolved the rusty metal and squished toward the house.

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"Sleep in your own bag," Monica said to Jay.

She was wriggled inside the sack, all the way in, and curled up sniffing her own perfume. Jay was pacing back and forth hitting his fist into an open palm.

"Once I stepped on a child star," Jay said, "and she didn't scream or yell or howl like other kids. You know what she did? She said 'Hi, there.'"

"I'm sleeping," Monica said

"And the awful thing is, Monica, that child star could have been you. It's what you would say. 'Hi there.' Oh Christ Almighty."

Monica's head came out of the bag.

"Try it," she said. "Try stepping on me."

"I am speaking symbolically," Jay said, "so I don't expect you to comprehend. Go back in the bag."

"Hi there," Monica said. "You think you're so damn superior. Didn't Mr. Biplew tell me how you were latching on to my star?"

"Huh?"

"How did he put it? He's marrying you for your light He is a planet, a lousy planet, not himself a source of heat and smoke. That's what he told me. Hi there."

"Biplew told you that? Well stop the presses. He told me the same

thing. He said, Jay let's face up buddy baby if HE hadn't rested on the seventh day maybe things in the world would be rosier, but he rested so we're stuck with our kismet and must own up to basic truth. Monnie, which is what he calls you, is a great shape, but an empty bottle and you will empty yourself trying to fill her. Beware, Jay, she needs your inner illuminations."

"Bipley told you that?"

"Monnie is a vampire who lives on reflections, he said. Reflections from mirrors, from eyes, from puddles, from hub caps, from sunglasses. Boy, was he a hundred percent accurate. Zowie."

Monica began twisting inside the bag.

"Finished," she said. "It's done. You are out of my life. You are dead and buried. You are garbage. I'm going home right now, you miserable pig bastard, and in a year from now nobody will remember you except like they remember a stain on the toilet bowl."

"That's great imagery coming from a girl," Jay said. "Go wet your lips."

"Don't worry yourself about my lips," Monica said, jumping out of the bag. "Worry about acting lessons."

"You membrane," Jay said, "You no talent You physical bum."

"Listen to limpy," Monica said.

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The creature wrapped itself cozily around the abbey like a moist rag. It started on the East Wing, then goosed over the North, slithered part of itself to the West and met its tail with its nose on the South. The moment of confrontation, front to rear, was rare for the creature and for an instant it fell under the impression that it had encountered a friend. It would have tipped its hat if it had a hat, but it had no hat so it snorted recognition. Its rear end gave no sign, except a faint pulsation, so the creature bit it in primitive rage. A bubble of pain ran through its nervous system along internal cords like seaweed and reached its medulla oblongata with a clonk. The creature wailed. A teardrop formed and gurgled out of a red eye.

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“Both parties suffer in divorce,” Jay was saying when the wail sounded.

“If you’re dreaming dreams about community property,” Monica said, “over my dead body. Because I’ve got you under your own skin. Don’t think she didn’t tell me.”

“What tell you? Who?”

“What tell me who? Bessie.”

Jason froze.

“My god,” Monica said. “The fattest cleaning woman in human history and you married to me and you couldn’t let her go. You had to do it with Bessie the fat cleaning woman. You are some kind of pervert, if you ask my jury.”

“So she told you, did she?” Jay said. “I’m glad. And maybe you will understand about how it was with the rain falling and me alone there in the house and this woman— *woman*, Monica, *woman* not girl. Obese, yes. Older, yes. But a *woman*. A *woman*, Monica.”

“A fat cleaning woman.”

“It was the best and purest moment of my life,” Jay said.

“Yeah,” Monica said. “I had to give her the rest of the week off. And the worst is not the threat of blackmail, no. The worst is she was disappointed. She was crushed. A movie buff left dead with no more dreams even from you.”

“Muskless person.”

“I have more musk in my little finger,” Monica said.

“The deposit bottle boy told me,” Jay said.

Monica twitched and quivered.

“What deposit bottle boy?”

“That deposit bottle boy. The centerfold from the Scout Handbook. Be prepared. Oh, lordy. It was all over the supermarket.”

"I admit it," Monica said. "At least I felt youth and strength surging white heat through my loins."

"Youth and strength? From that senile midget? Youth and strength? They only sent him out after the six ounce empties, the two centers."

"He was so grateful. So damned grateful he cried. And you know what? I'm glad they know in the market. I'm glad because as long as that boy goes around on his bike its like written on a wall you were not man enough to satisfy me. It's a bug on your plate."

"It cost me a hundred dollars to keep him from selling descriptions to the magazines. That fink wrote a piece called *Acne Valentino*."

"You stopped him?"

"For you, honey. It was a *knock*."

"Hooooooo."

"He complained you didn't tip him."

"Hooooooo."

* * * *

Curled around the abbey the creature cuddled its potential goodies. The rump-nip was like an overture to satisfaction. Its gastric mechanism stormed. The creature fed by absorption. It could have absorbed the building but stone lay lumpy in its gut. It sensed the abbey as a shell with the nourishment deep inside. This kind of feasting came natural to a sea beast. The point was to get the inside out.

The creature, cautious, extended a tentative tentacle through a window. A fuzzy purple snake, it squirmed to the floor and along the ground.

"What's fuzzy purple and squirms along the ground," Jay said.

"No elephant jokes," Monica said.

She was packed, dressed, coated. She threw a kiss at Jay and went to the door.

"Monica," Jay said.

She opened the door and walked through it squoosh into the creature's underbelly. Monica recoiled into the room. Backward she came and tripped over the fuzzy purple tentacle.

"There's something damn strange going on here," Jay said.

The tentacle was exploring Monica. She watched this happen, then leaped to her feet. She wanted to scream but could not master sufficient wind.

"It has suction cups," Jay said.

"I deplore suction cups," Monica said in a daze.

Then she let out a bellow that sent vibrations up and down the creature's epiglottis.

"Help, help," Monica shouted.

"I'm here, darling," Jay said.

The creature sent two or three more tentacles into the room. They played tag with Jay and Monica. One of them had an eye at its end, one a lobster claw and one a nostril. All were active.

"Watch out for the squiggly devils," Jay shouted.

"My earring," Monica said.

A deft movement of the second tentacle had snatched an earring off Monica's lobe. It vanished in a bubble of acid. The earring pleased the creature as an oysterette might please a guest at an informal dinner. It wanted more. The tentacle gyrated gluttonously.

"My ear," Monica said.

"Throw it the other earring," Jay said.

Monica hurled the second earring onto the floor. It was caught and consumed.

The tentacle with the eye came over and gawked at Jay. He patted it. It withdrew, blinking.

Jay's band was covered with goosh.

"It's not plastic," Jay said. "I don't think this is a gag. Monica, this isn't candid camera."

Jay quickly lost his composure.

"Do something," Monica said. "It's trying to eat us."

The pincer lunged at Jay's shoe. It got a lace, no more. The nostril sniffed at Monica's discarded luggage. The eye kept its distance but changed expression. It seemed less passive and more malevolent.

Jay and Monica huddled in the center of the abbey's great hall. Their move was strategic. The creature had limitations and one of them was the length of its tentacles. It could not reach them.

But it also had the capacity to divert growth-energy into any special part and its growth was consistent and impressive. With solid will power it shifted its biology and the tentacles began to add inches.

Also, to curb its impatience, the creature forced itself as close into the room as was possible. It seeped in bulges through the windows and the open door. A flap of it squeezed through a crack in die wall. An appendage came down the chimney like Santa Claus and blobbed into the fireplace. Its dampness hissed out the flames. The abbey was pitch pitch black, except for the tentacle eye which had a shoddy luminescence.

After a short silence in which Jay and Monica stood smelling the creature's fabulous presence, Jay stroked Monica's hair.

"We are definitely going to be consumed," Jay said. "Unless this is some Oedipal dream."

"Why? Why?" Monica said. "So full of hope. So vibrant and so dynamic. At the beginning of her career."

"Her career?"

"Our. Our careers. Don't nitpick. Not now."

"A few minutes ago we hated each other," Jay said.

"E pluribus unum," Monica said. "Que sera sera."

"Now we are lovers again. Confessed-out lovers. I feel reborn."

"I too."

"Yet we can't even carve a heart on the floor," Jay said. "We can't even leave a note."

"It sounds hungry," Monica said. "You can sense its ravenous hunger."

The creature's stomachs had begun to rumble.

"It wants food," Monica said. "You could take bets on that."

"Oh it's a people eater all right."

"One wonders how much food is food for something like that," Monica said.

"Whole cities."

"Not if it were snack hungry. Not if it were hot for a nosh."

"I don't think so."

"Sometimes a potato chip is what a person wants more than a steak."

"Not in this case."

"You don't know."

"Not for certain."

"Then why should we both die if maybe a piece of just one of us would do the whole trick?"

"I get your thinking," Jay said. "It's pretty creative."

"In life boats they eat each other rather than all starve. It makes sense, honey."

"I can't let you do it," Jay said.

“Me do what?”

The creature had already added six inches to its tentacles. A foot or so more and it would reach vitamins. It hurled and puffed.

“Who then?” Jay said. “Certainly not me. In life boats the decisions are made by last minute logic. The survivor is the most important, the one who has the most reason to survive.”

“So? The cleaning woman is pregnant?”

“Frankly, sweet, I was thinking along artistic lines.”

“Artistic lines?”

The house shook as a flutter ran through the creature. It was a flutter of confusion, the confusion of appetites again. Now that its eye and nostril were nearer to Monica it experienced an unexpected urge to replace the pincer tentacle with more refined anatomy. It felt a surge of love.

Jay and Monica noticed the flutter and instantly understood from their own personal experiences.

“It’s a female,” Jay said.

“Not in a million Sundays,” Monica said.

“So what’s the difference? Those things carry you into the sea to a fate worse than death.”

“It’s better than being swallowed.”

“You would think so.”

Monica was already smiling in the dark. The eye turned away. The nostril tentacle advanced and Monica kissed it.

“Stop that,” Jay said. “Don’t act like a whore.”

Jay pulled Monica back and the pincer took a crack at him.

“It’s me,” Monica said. “I knew it.”

Jay acknowledged the attraction. He felt a surge of jealousy and envy. So did the creature which squeezed harder at its growth cells. It had determined to eat Jay and spare Monica so that it could carry her into caverns of green to a fate worse than death.

“That’s no kind of relationship,” Jay was saying.

Monica wet her lips for good luck. The pincer was how a fraction of distance from Jay.

“Goodbye, dearest,” Monica said.

“Seriously, what did you think of my job in the film?” Jay said.

Monica chose the course of honesty and said nothing.

Jay bit the creature. He was hysterical with rejection. He took a chunk out of the nearest tentacle.

“Like sardines,” he said.

The creature took a piece of Jay’s index finger. Simultaneously, it got sick.

“Everybody is a critic,” Monica said.

“What’s with this cruddy beast?” Jay said, licking his fingertip.

Monica hardly noticed that the nostril tentacle was wrapped around her lovely waist. She only saw the creature withdrawing from Jay and could detect that it turned a wee bit greener by the luminous eye.

“It don’t like the taste of you,” she said.

“Come back here,” Jay yelled, and took another bite.

The creature was completely intimidated. The fingertip caused chronic indigestion. It wanted to get back to the cool ocean.

“The hell with you,” Jay screamed.

“TS,” Monica said, being drawn by the tentacle. The creature felt icky but still very horny.

“The best to you,” Jay said. “I hope you’ll be very happy together. You deserve each other.”

“We have similar tastes,” Monica said. Then she realized that she was in deep trouble. Flattering as it was, she did not want to go into an unknown world, especially one without mass media. And she could not even trust that Jay would tell the story without distortion.

The creature pulled Monica up and through a window. It carried her like a suitcase as it scuttled toward the water. Jay ran after it taking nips.

“Get me down,” Monica said. “Please, Jay. We work well together.”

The creature hesitated. A prehistoric memory waved curtains in its brain once more. It recalled being caught by its mate in the company of a German lady way way back. The memory was unpleasant, full of flailing. It loosened its hold on Monica, but not entirely.

“It’s feeling guilty,” Monica said with perfect intuition. “It’s letting me go.”

“Talk about summer romances,” Jay said. “Wah when *Variety* gets this poop.”

“You wouldn’t. Not even you would.”

“Hi, there,” Jay said.

“Take me,” Monica was screaming. The creature was trying to shake her loose, but she held on with long fingers.

“Oh look there,” Jay said.

Harriet Troom, camera ready, came rushing down to fee beach in Harold Ripley’s Rolls.

“It wouldn’t eat him,” Monica was saying.

“It wouldn’t have relations with her,” Jay was yelling.

Harriet Troom, clicking flash pictures with her non-driving hand putted the Rolls as close as she could. The creature, terrified, was half in the sea, still whirling Monica around like a propeller. The car with its lantern headlights and the popping flash and the white-lit face of Harriet Troom

grinning widely under glass was too much for it. It resorted to a kind of flying apart which creatures of its type could manage. It turned itself into a broken jig saw of parts, then fused together.

In the splash and roar, Monica was dislodged. Harriet Troom, driving too close, got incorporated. The lights of the Rolls and the popping flash could be seen through the creature's crinkley hide as it vanished under the waves.

Jay and Monica stood on the shore. Neither spoke. Both were committed to eternal secrecy by events that interacted like penalties which nullify one another in football games. They waited mere until high tide rinsed the sand, and washed away the tire tracks and creature marks.

Back in the abbey they gathered their belongings.

"We shouldn't leave until morning," Monica said.

"No," Jay said. "And we have hours before dawn sheds its rosy glow on all concerned."

"I have a pencil," Monica said.

With Monica's eyebrow pencil, by the light of some stars, they wrote Harriet Troom's next column. They could keep filing columns until she was missed or something came up on a beach somewhere.

Later they crawled into Jay's sleeping bag.

Up a way, the guards were fast asleep.

* * * *

Back in the studio, Harold Bipleby dictated a press release into a tape recorder. It told how Jason Briar and Monica Ploy were purged and purified through their ordeal of isolation and seclusion.

"Like an atomic age Adam and Eve," he said to the microphone, "two million dollar talents came back to the world today with new maturity and a solid sense of direction." Then he said, "Hold for release." Then, he thought soft thoughts about his two favorites and how things were going for them out there. Spiritually, he was right with them in the bag.