

The Sons of Bingaloo

*Creativity
takes place in the mind.
- - A creative person
must be, above all,
a person.*

SONYA DORMAN

The last of the triple moons was still in the sky at dawn, when Pettrey woke. A fine, greenish haze predicted a good day, one of clear light. He stretched luxuriously, though he must get up quickly, eat some excellent nourishment, and be on his way. It was licensing week.

The first two days, given over to apprentices, had passed, while Pettrey took his time, took walks, admired rivers, and allowed his mind to go easy. He had suffered the hours of anxiety, as he did every year, and put them behind him. Very likely they would reappear in another form, later on; he used everything in one way or another.

After he had eaten, Pettrey put a fairly new cloak over his shoulders, and left home. The rivers were running silver green in the park where he lived this year. Although it was so early in the day, the roads were busy. Many shops closed during the mornings of licensing week, for apprentices earned their bread at any other trade until the license was granted them, and during this week, few customers came to the stores. It was much more amusing, if a person was free, to attend one of the many tests.

The huge rotunda of performing arts rose in the near distance; Pettrey could see the doorway was clogged with spectators, trying to get in early for good seats. He sighed, and smiled a little. It was good to be alive. Even for those scared apprentices, the people turned out in rousing crowds. The performing artists, unlike Pettrey, depended on the presence of responsive crowds.

As the road widened, he joined and passed groups of people. There, up ahead, he saw the figured gray cloak of Massony, come such a surprising long way since last year's granted license. Pettrey found it difficult to squeeze the anxiety, even jealousy, from his heart, but managed to do so, as he came alongside the other man.

"Ah!" Massony said, looking around. He liked to greet people with this slightly portentous sound, and it nearly always worked; they would be silent, hang on, wait for some revelation.

"Lovely day," Pettrey said, and walked on just enough faster to get ahead and blend with the crowds.

The building he went to was small and looked insignificant, for his work demanded isolation rather than an audience. There was the check-in booth, where he put down his now expired license, signed his name, was told he was third, and took a seat to wait. Massony did not come in while Pettrey waited, so he supposed the younger man was entertaining people outside, in that way he had.

"Ah!" An important, breathy sound, and everyone would hang oh, waiting for Massony to give them something they could pass around to less lucky friends.

Massony was only a few years younger than Pettrey, but had started late, having spent his early years in agriculture, and come only recently to the arts. Pettrey had often thought that might account for his rapid rise to popular proficiency. The genuine force of Massony's work must have been within him all those years, like an egg long incubated before the phoenix was hatched.

No, that's not right, Pettrey complained to himself, folding the cloak over his knees, keeping his eyes on the door where he would enter. *That bird never hatched from an egg,* Pettrey reminded himself. He

sighed deeply. He had spent a long apprenticeship, had come to this building many times, and had failed many times, before his license was granted. Different ways for different men, he thought. Not receiving a license didn't prevent a person from singing or playing the violin, of course; it simply kept him out of public performances and prevented him from taking money under false pretenses.

A perfectly beautiful young woman came in and sat down in the waiting room. Pettrey looked at her with pleasure. But she said, "The Master is outside, talking with people."

Good God, Pettrey thought: *the Master!* It was an obsolete term, and he had never heard it used by young people at all.

"Are you one of his students?" Pettrey asked her.

"Yes," she said, and refused further communication by leaning her head back and closing her eyes.

Pettrey thought it a shame to waste that much beauty in his field, and immediately amended his thoughts, though he couldn't have helped them. It was simply that he liked to see beauty displayed in the performing arts, and didn't enjoy thinking about it hidden in some private burrow such as his own. But then, after a certain number of years . . . what was that kind of beauty worth? . . . compared to his own.

He had no idea how long he must wait; it could be half an hour or half a day, depending on the person before him. At any rate, he'd been here on time, and had spent yesterday morning supporting the apprentice singers with his presence. One or two of them had been quite fine, so it hadn't been a loss for him.

But after all these years, Pettrey was still astonished at how many came to be licensed, how many with no talent, no beauty, nothing but a little bit of a dream. The purpose of licensing was to prevent these people from overflowing in a difficult field, and from swindling the interested public. He could not imagine a better system, even if he fell victim to it. Not if he looked at it objectively.

The entry door swung open, a clerk spoke his name, and vanished.

Pettrey went into the inner room, which was smoothly paneled, well lighted at the writing table, and quite plain, except for the huge chandelier in the center of the ceiling. In the dark, still air, the prisms and crystals hardly stirred, though just his quiet progress across the room to the table caused a small coruscation to occur,

He appreciated the absence of any presence, as he thought of it. He sat down in the comfortable chair, and lined up the writing tools, of which there was a good selection. He fingered the various papers. A new one, this year, with a kind of pale fiber running through. Pettrey thought it might have been begged from a draftsman, it was so nice both to eye and hand. As always, he reached for the plain student block, which was most familiar and comfortable to him.

Now he began his discipline, for which he had been prepared; but nothing went right. The moment he began to breathe evenly, his mind cavorted off, tara-taroo, like a child at recess. How the rivers ran silvery over the white moss. How last week Memee had said to him, "Oh, Pettrey, I'd love you even if you worked in stone."

As if I did not, Pettrey thought acidly, answering her a little too late. For what he must do, figuratively speaking, was to create a lace from adamant rock, to make a lively and flexible dancing slipper from a ton of metal. He could feel it, cold and dead, weighing down his mind.

Now, discipline, Pettrey told himself.

Tra-la, tra-loo, we are the sons of Bingaloo, went his mind.

Pettrey cursed aloud.

He sat in the pool of light at the table, physically comfortable, quite alone as he wished to be, and died

his many deaths. What if it had gone. What if it never came back. What if he could not produce a word today, but woke up next morning and poured out a masterpiece, one day too late? What if he lost his license? What if he could make love to Massony's beautiful student?

Picking up a gernsey point, he wrote one line of exceedingly erotic poetry, and crossed it out in a rage. That was not his *métier*, that kind of celebration; too narrow, and as a person grew older, less challenging. He had already accomplished that so many times.

Pettrey sat back in the chair and closed his eyes, giving his mind freedom. The clichés came to seduce him: worn images, damaged phrases, jingles, and that hideously intrusive children's rhyme about Bungalow. A mythical, rhythmic country, where children dwelled.

He began to breathe at a slower rate. His mind wandered further from its rational tether. For a moment, the little invisible valve in his forehead opened, then it closed again, but he knew it was a start.

No matter how deeply at work or at rest Pettrey was in his chair, he resisted even the slightest thought of the chandelier hanging still as death above him. Before his first license, he had learned all about it; the computer buried in the ceiling, the delicate calibrations which responded to increased electrical activity of a certain kind in the brain, recording quality only, whether of five lines or ten pages, and the stories of great poets, how they remembered the colors and flashing which occurred on their finest occasions.

Meme had said to him, "Oh, Pettrey, why can't we settle down, somewhere and be like other people." Though she knew he didn't wish to settle down, and that term "other people" was meaningless to him, since no person was another person, and he was most entirely himself

Again he took up the gernsey point, with its soft gray writing unit, and began to work in earnest, which meant that for the first time since entering the room he was able to smile a little, to be amused at his own problems, which he should be used to by now. A little self-consciousness remained to him at first, until seven or eight lines were written.

Very gradually, he worked in deeper and deeper, feeling the imaginary valve in his forehead open wide so that the ancestral memories, the images of dream and superconsciousness, could be freed for use. A little fire appeared in the room near the ceiling above him. One prism twinkled. Another shimmered. The lines he wrote grew more dense and he threw the finished page to the floor and took up a new one.

Prisms, like antlers, grew upward from his forehead. Fire flickered and danced, growing more rapid and intricate. The whole chandelier, enormous flame cage of glassy spires, crystal stalactites, loosening teardrops, began to wink and flare, began slowly to swing in ponderous and gorgeous rhythm above him.

Pettrey went on writing his poem. The recordings taken by the computer, masked as a decorative unit, would be read and filed and licensed. There was no one in the room to watch the prisms give off their radiance, no one to appreciate the flashings that would fall still as soon as the poet ceased writing. Perhaps Pettrey was aware of the dance above him, but only on a deep and quiet level. What he really felt, while he worked, was a profound sense of love, a form of praise, perhaps, rising from his heart. He was unaware that it bypassed his conscious mind entirely, and would have denied that, if someone told him about it.

Pettrey did think he might go on forever, at this rate, and asked nothing more of life than that he should do so, but abruptly, and long before he was ready, the work was finished. He knew it by instinct. Anything he might add now would be a frivolity, and would have to be cut later on.

He put down the gernsey point. He picked up the sheets of paper he had thrown to the floor, and placed them, neatly folded, in the inside pocket of his cloak. He supposed they would be worth publishing, after a period of cooling off, and some weeks of polishing. In any event, it wasn't necessary for them to be seen by anyone in their rough stage.

Pettrey was happy. The sense of love remained with him. It was not love of himself as an individual, but love of his place in the world, and the joy of what he was able to do. He wished everyone well, Massony, younger men, and the oldsters. Glowing, he crossed to the exit door, which led him out to the other side of the building. Two young men, both of them evidently successful, were having refreshments near the door.

“Come and join us,” they invited him.

“No, thank you, I’m going to wait outside for a friend,” Pettrey said. “Thank you, though. It’s been a good day, hasn’t it, gentlemen?”

Whether it was the strength of their drinks, or whether their testing had been over for too long a time, he didn’t know, but in spite of their hearty invitation, they looked sideways at him. He recognized the old green faces of envy and aspiration, which so often went together. Though he knew there was no reason for it, there was enough room for them all. The license to practice one’s art guaranteed that.

Pettrey had told the truth about waiting for a friend; he just did not feel like remaining indoors. There was a bench near some colorful flowers and he sat down there, with the edge of his eye on the door. After a while, the two young men came out together and walked away. Pettrey almost snoozed, utterly relaxed.

Hunger made him come to, and he glanced at the day, green and bright around him. But after all, he was not that old, to run home for a meal at the first hunger pang, and as he had planned to wait, no matter how long, he did so. Not without a twinge of wonder at himself, his possible folly.

I could have written a saga by now, he thought, when the exit door finally released her. She had a blind, stupefied look which he recognized with the utmost sympathy, and because of it, he fell into the same long, slow stride she took, without saying a word.

“I didn’t understand before,” she said, at last.

Pettrey was horribly tempted to say, “Ah!” in a meaningful voice, but controlled himself. Instead, he said, “It will have to be understood a dozen times over, you know. Will you come and walk to the river with me?”

She glanced at his face. The dazed look was gone; she now showed an evident sense of pride and of herself. “Yes, that would be nice,” she said. Her smile was delightful as she added, “I’m certainly sick and tired of sitting at a person’s feet.”

Pettrey took her arm and they made swiftly for the russet-colored trees by the silvery green river.