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excerpted from Douglas Clegg's The Nightmare Chronicles

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Brief note from Doug:

This is just a bit of my collection, The Nightmare Chronicles. In

The Nightmare Chronicles, there are thirteen stories that to a lesser or
greater degree deal with horror and terror all wrapped within a story of
a kidnapping.

Parts of the collection can be brutal - some stories, I think, are

quite beautiful in a way, although horror always seems to come out of

them in one way or another. I'm not sure why that happens. I just take

them as they come to me.

I hope you have some fascinating nightmares from this reading.

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All best,

Douglas Clegg

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The first story of the night began

"UNDERWORLD"

They say that love never dies. Sometimes, it goes somewhere else, to a place from which it may return transformed.

We were subletting the place on Thirty-Third, just down from Lexington Avenue--it was not terribly far from my job up at Matthew Bender, across from Penn Station, where I was an ink-stained drudge by day before transforming into a novelist by night. Jenny was getting day work on the soap operas--nothing much, just the walk-on nurses and cocktail waitresses that populate daytime television, never with more than a word or two to say, so it was a long way to her Screen Actor's Guild card. But she made just enough to cover the rent, and I made just enough to cover everything else, plus the feeble beginnings of a savings account which we affectionately named, The Son'll Come

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Out Tomorrow, because at about the time we opened the account, Jenny discovered that she was pregnant. This worried the heck out of me, not for the usual reasons, such as the mounting bills, and the thought that I might not be able to pursue writing full-time, at least not in this life, but because of a habit Jenny had of sleeping with other men.

It will be hard to understand this, and I don't completely get it myself, but I loved Jenny in a way that I didn't think possible. It wasn't her beauty, although she certainly had that, but it was the fact that in her company I always felt safe and comfortable. I did not want to ever be with another woman as long as I lived; I suppose a good therapist would go on and on about my self-image and self-esteem and self-whatever, but I've got to tell you, it was simply that I loved her and that I wanted her to be happy. I didn't worry if I was inadequate or unsatisfying as a lover; and she never spoke openly about it with me. I was just aware she'd had a few indiscretions early in our marriage, and I assumed that she would gradually, over the years, calm down in that respect. I felt lucky to have Jenny's company when I did, and when I

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didn't, I did not feel deprived. I suppose that until you have loved someone in that way it is impossible to understand that point of view. So I wondered about the paternity of our child, and this kept me up several nights to the point that I would slip out of bed quietly (for Jenny often had to be up and out the door by five a.m.), and go for long walks down Third Avenue, or down a side street to Second,

sometimes until the first light came up over the city. During one of these jaunts, in late January, I noticed a curious sort of building--it was on a block of Kip's Bay that began in an alley, and was enclosed on all sides by buildings. Yet, there were apartments, and a street name (Pallan Row, the sign said), and two small restaurants, the kind with only eight or nine tables, one of them a Szechwan place, the other non-descript in its Americanized menu; also, a flower stand, boarded up, and what looked like a bit of a warehouse. The place carried an added layer of humidity, as if it had more of the swamp to it than the city.

I am not normally a wanderer of alleys, but I could not help myself--I had lived in this neighborhood about a year and a half, and Douglas Clegg "Underworld" an ebook

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in that time had felt I knew every block within about a mile and half radius. But it was as if I had just found the most wonderful gift in the world, a hidden grotto, a place in New York City that was as yet undiscovered except by, perhaps, the oldest residents. I looked in the windows of the warehouse, but could see nothing through the filthy windows.

All day at work, I asked friends who lived in the general vicinity if they knew about Pallan Row, but only one said that she did. "It used to be where the sweatshops were--highly illegal, too, because when I was a kid, they used to raid them all the time--it was more than bad working conditions, it was white slavery and heroin, all those things. But then," she added, "so much of this city has a history like that. On the outside, carriage rides and Broadway shows, but underneath, kind of slimy."

On Saturday, I convinced Jenny to talk a walk with me, but for some reason I couldn't find the Row; we went to lunch. Afterwards, I remembered where I'd led us astray, and we ended up going to have tea Douglas Clegg "Underworld" an ebook

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at the Chinese restaurant. The menu was ordinary, and the decorations vintage and tacky.

"Amazing," Jenny said, "look, honey, the ceiling," and I glanced up and beheld one of those lovely old tin ceilings with the chocolate candy designs.

The waiter, who was an older Asian woman, noticed us and came over with some almond cookies. "We usually are empty on weekends," she said, and then, also looking at the ceiling, "this was part of a speak-easy in the twenties--the cafe next door, too. They say that a mobster ran numbers out of the backroom. Before that, it was just an ice house. My husband began renting it in 1954."

"That long ago?" Jenny said, taking a bite from a cookie, "it seems like most restaurants come and go around here."

"Depends on the rent," the woman nodded, still looking at the ceiling, "the owner hasn't raised it a penny in all those years." She glanced at me, then at Jenny. "You're going to have a baby, aren't

you?"

Jenny grinned. "How did you know?"

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The woman said, "young couples like you, in love, eating my almond cookies. Always brings babies. You will have a strong boy, I think."

After she left the table, we laughed, finished the tea, and just sat for awhile. The owner's wife occasionally peeped through the round port-hole window of the kitchen door, and we smiled at her but shook our heads to indicate that we weren't in need of service.

"When the baby comes," she said, "Mom said she'd loan us money to get a larger place."

"Ah, family loans," I warned her.

"I know, but we won't have to pay her back for a few years. Can you believe it, me, a mother?"

"And me, a father?" I leaned over and pressed my hand against her stomach. "I wonder what he's thinking?"

"Or she. Probably, get me the hell out of here right now! is what it's thinking."

"Baby's aren't 'its'."

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"Well, right now it is. It has a will of its own. It probably looks like a little developing tadpole. Something like it's father," she gave my hand a squeeze. I kissed her. When I drew my face back from hers, she had tears in her eyes.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh," she wiped at her eyes with her napkin, "I'm going to change."

"Into what?"

"No, you know what I mean. I've been living too recklessly."

"Oh," I said, and felt a little chill. "That's all in the past. I love you like crazy, Jen."

"I know. I am so lucky," she said. "Our baby's lucky to have two screw-ups like us for parents."

Now it could be that I'm just recalling that we said these words because I want her memory to be sweeter for me than perhaps reality will allow. But we walked back up Second Avenue that Saturday feeling stronger as a couple; and I knew the baby was mine, I just knew

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it, regardless of the chances against it. We caught a movie, went home and made love, sat up and watched Saturday Night Live . Sunday we took the train out to her mother's in Stamford, and then as the week was just getting under way, I walked through the doorway of our small sublet, to find blood on the faux oriental rug.

Yet the door had been locked. That was my first thought. I

didn't see Jenny's body until I got to the bathroom, which is where her murderer had dragged her, apparently while she was still alive, and then had dropped her in the tub, closed the shower curtain around her. It wasn't as gruesome as I expected it to be--there was a bullet in her head, behind her left ear, but she was lying face up so I didn't see the damage to the back of her scalp. She didn't even look like Jenny anymore. She looked like a butcher shop meet with a human shape. She looked like some dead woman with whom I had no acquaintance. I was pretty numb, and was thinking of calling the police, when it occurred to me that the killer might still be in the apartment. So I went next-door to Helen Connally's and knocked on the door. Helen, in her sweats, saw my panic, let me in, and made me some tea while Douglas Clegg "Underworld" an ebook

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we waited for the police. I hated leaving Jenny there, in the tub, for the ten minutes, but if the murderer was still lurking, I had no way of defending myself.

After the police and the neighbors and Jenny's mother had picked my brain about the crime, it hit me.

I had not only lost my partner and lover, but also my only child.

I cried for days, or perhaps it was weeks--it was like living, for a time, in a dark cave where there was no hour, no minute, no day, only darkness.

When I emerged from my stupor and weeping, the police had arrested a suspect in my wife's murder, and then the mystery unraveled: we had been subletting an apartment from a man who had several such places around the city, and each one was used, occasionally, by the man's clients, as a place of business on certain weekdays for drug dealing. The dealers' assumption had been that on a given day of the week, no one was home. Best the detectives could tell, Jenny had come home too early on the wrong Tuesday, a drug deal was in progress, and one of the men had killed her as soon as she'd Douglas Clegg "Underworld" an ebook

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come in the door. I was devastated to think that strangers could be in our apartment; but of course, it wasn't really ours. The renter of the apartment was arrested; he pointed the finger at a few associates; and within a year, the guilty were behind bars, and I was living in a place off Houston and Sullivan Street, over in the SoHo area. I was seeing, on a friendly basis, Helen Connally, my former neighbor--it was almost as if the tragedy of my wife's death had given us a basis on which to form a friendship. Helen was thirty two to my twenty eight, and, while I knew I would never love her the way I loved Jenny, she was a good friend to me through a most difficult time. We spent a year being slightly good friends, and then, we became lovers.

I was taking some out-of-town friends of ours on an informal sightseeing tour of the Big Apple, and brought them down to little Pallan Row. I thought the Szechwan place would be good for lunch, but when we entered the alley, both it and the cafe were closed;

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windows were boarded up. "Jesus," I said, "just a year ago, the woman running it told me that they'd had it since the '50s."

Helen took my elbow, "C'mon, we can go get sandwiches up at Tivoli. Or," she turned to the couple we'd brought, "there's a great deli on Third. You guys like pastrami?"

Their voices faded into the background, as I looked through the section of the Chinese restaurant's window that was clear, and thought I saw my dead wife's face back along the wall, through the round glass window of the door to the kitchen.

"Oliver," Helen said, looking over my shoulder, "what's up?"

"Nothing," I said, still looking at Jenny, her dark hair grown longer, obscuring all but her nose and mouth.

"It must be something."

"It's just an old place. It was once a speak-easy, back in the twenties. Think of all that's gone on in there," I said. Jenny's face, in that round window, staring at me.

"Cool," Helen said. She was originally from California, so "cool" and "bummer" had not yet been erased from her vocabulary of

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irony. She stood back, and her friend Larry whispered something to her.

I watched Jenny's face, and noticed that when her hair fell more to the side of her face, there were no eyes in her eye sockets.

"Let's go," Helen whispered, "they want to take a ride on the ferry before it gets dark."

"Okay, just a sec," I said.

Jenny moved away from the round window.

My heart was beating fast.

I assumed that I was hallucinating, but the thought of spending the rest of the afternoon escorting this couple around town when I had just seen my dead wife was absurd. I made an excuse about needing to be by myself--Helen always took this well, and I caught an understanding look from Anne, who nodded. I knew they would go on to a late lunch and talk about how I still hadn't quite recovered from Jenny's death; and I knew Helen would act the martyr a bit, because it was so hard to play nurse to me over a woman who had cheated constantly behind my back. I adored Helen for her care and

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caution around my feelings; I wished them a good afternoon, and stood there, along the Row, watching them, until they had rounded the corner and were out of sight.

After a few minutes, I took off my shoe and broke the windowglass, and tugged at one of the boards until it gave. Within half an hour, I stepped in through the broken window, and walked

across the dusty floor to the kitchen.

The kitchen was all long shiny metal shelves and drawers, pots and pans still piled high. But it was dark, and I saw no one. I walked across the floor, back to the walk-in freezer, and looked through its frosty pane of glass. Although I could see nothing in there, I found myself shivering, even my teeth began chattering, and I had the sudden and uncomfortable feeling that if I did not get out of that kitchen, out of that boarded-up restaurant right then, something terrible would happen.

It didn't occur to me until I was on the street again that there should've been no frost on the glass pane at the walk-in freezer, that, in Douglas Clegg "Underworld" an ebook

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fact, there was no electricity to the entire building, perhaps to the entire block.

Helen noticed, over the next few days, that I was becoming nervous. We sat across from each other in our favorite park, me with the Times, and her with a paperback; I looked up and she was watching me. Another day, we went to a coffee shop, and she mentioned to me that my knees, under the table, were shaking slightly. She said this with some seriousness, as if shaking knees were an indicator of some deeper problem. But I doubted myself then, and I did not want to talk about seeing my dead wife in the Chinese restaurant kitchen on Pallan Row. Finally, my restlessness turned nocturnal, and I tossed and turned in my sleep. Helen, sleeping over, finally sat up in bed at four in the morning and flicked on the bedside lamp. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"You have not slept a full night for two days," she said, "you tell me what's going on."

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I spent about an hour dodging the issue, until finally, as she pushed and pushed, I told her about seeing Jenny.

"She was blind," Helen said, speaking to me like a was a lying twelve year old.

"Not blind. She had no eyes. I felt she could see me, anyway.

She was staring at me. She just had no eyes."

"And you went in there and no one was there..."

"But the freezer. Why would it be going?"

Helen shrugged. "I'm going to make a drink. You want something?"

At five thirty a.m., she and I had vodka martinis, and went and sat out on the fire escape as all of Manhattan awoke, as the sky turned several shades of violet before becoming the blank light of day.

"I don't believe in ghosts," I said, sipping and feeling drunk very quickly. "I don't believe that the dead can rise or any of that."

"What do you believe?"

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I watched a burly man lift crates out of the back of his truck down in the street. "I believe in what I see. I saw her. I really saw her."

"Assuming," she said, "that it was Jenny. Assuming that the freezer was running on its own energy. Assuming you saw what you saw. Assuming all those things as givens, what does it mean?"

"I have no idea. I thought at first maybe I was just crazy. If I hadn't seen the frost on the freezer window, I don't think I would've believed later on that it had been Jenny at all. Or anything but an hallucination."

Helen was obstinate. "But it's got to mean something."

"Why?" I asked.

I slept through the next day fairly peacefully, and when I awoke, Helen was gone. I watched television, and then called a few friends to set up lunches and dinners for the following week.

Helen walked through the door at six thirty in the evening, and said, "Well, I found that alley again. I pulled back one of the boards."

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When she said this, I felt impulsively defensive--it was my alley, it was my boarded-up restaurant, I felt, it was my hallucination. "You didn't have to," I told her.

She halted my speech with her hands. "Hang on, hang on.

Oliver, the windows are bricked up beneath the boards."

"No they're not."

"Yes," she said, "they are. You couldn't have gotten in there."

We argued this point; we were both terrific arguers. It struck me that she hadn't found the right alley, or even the right Pallan Row.

Perhaps there were two Pallan Rows in the city, near each other, perhaps even almost identical alleys. Perhaps there was the functional Pallan Row and the dysfunctional Pallan Row.

This idea seemed to clutch at me, as if I had known it to be true even before I thought it consciously.

The idea took hold, and that night, on the pretext of going to see a movie which Helen had already seen twice with friends, I took a cab over to Pallan Row.

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It was colder on Pallan Row than in the rest of the city. While autumn was well upon us, and the weather had for weeks been fairly chilly, down the alley it was positively freezing. My curiosity and even fear took hold as I peeled back one of the window boards, the very one I had pulled down on my last visit. Helen had been right: the windows were bricked-up beneath the boards. But then, I had to wonder, why the boards at all?

I touched the bricks; had to draw my fingers back quickly, for they seemed like blocks of ice. I remembered the owner of the Chinese restaurant telling Jenny and me that it used to be an ice house.

I touched the bricks again, and they were still bitingly cold--it hadn't been my imagination.

I walked around the alley, but saw no way of getting into the buildings again, for all were bricked up.

And then I heard it.

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A sound, a human sound, the sound of someone who was trapped inside that old ice house, someone who had heard me pull the board loose and who needed help.

I am no hero, and never will be. For all I knew, there were some punks on the other side of that wall torturing one of their own, and if I walked into the middle of it, I would not see the light of day again.

And yet I could not help myself.

I found that if I kicked at the bricks, they gave a little. The noise from within had ceased, but I battered at the bricks until I managed to knock one of them out. It seemed to be an old brick job, for the cement between the blocks was cracked and powdery. After an hour, I had managed to dislodge several.

To my surprise and amazement, there was light on within the old restaurant. I looked through the sizable hole I'd made, and saw the former proprietress of the Chinese restaurant standing behind the bar, dressed in a jade-colored silk gown, talking with her bar-man. A few people sat at the tables, eating, laughing. None of them had noticed my activity at the window.

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As I put my face to the hole, I breathed in air so cold that it seemed to stop my lungs up.

I moved back, and stood up. I was sure that this was a delusion; perhaps I needed some medication still, for immediately after Jenny's death, I had begun taking tranquilizers to help blot out the memory of finding her dead. Perhaps I still needed some medical help and psychological counseling.

I crouched down again to look through the opening, and noticed that at one of the tables, facing the other way, was a woman who looked from the back very much like Jenny.

I noticed the ice, too. It was a shiny glaze along the walls and tables; icicles formed teat-like off the chocolate-patterned tin ceiling. I watched the people inside there as if this were a television set; I lost my fear entirely, all my shivering came from the arctic breezes that stirred up occasionally from within.

I thought I heard someone out in the alley behind me, and turned to look.

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Helen stood there in a sweatshirt and pants, my old windbreaker around her shoulders; she held a sweater in her arms.

"I figured you'd be here. Look, it's getting chilly," she passed the sweater down to where I sat on the pavement. She noticed the bricks beside me, and the light from within the building. "I see you've been doing construction. Or should I say, de-construction."

"Do you see the light?" I asked her.

She squatted down beside me. "What light?"

"I know you see it," I said, but when I glanced again through the hole, the place within had gone dark.

"What is it about this place for you?" she asked. "Even if you did see Jenny here, or her ghost, whatever--why here? You and she only came here once. Why would she come here?"

"I think this is hell," I said. "I think this is one of those corners of hell. I think Jenny's in hell. And she wants something from me.

Maybe a favor."

"Do you really believe that?"

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I nodded. "Don't ask me why. There is no why. I think this is a corner of hell that maybe shows through sometimes to some people. I don't even think maybe. I know that's what this is."

"You may be right," Helen said. She stood up, stretched, and offered me her hand to help me get up. I took it. Her hand was warm, and I felt a rush of blood in the palm of my hand as if she had managed to transfer some warmth to me.

And then, the sound again.

A human voice, indistinct, from within the walls.

Helen looked at me.

"You heard it, too," I said.

"It's a cat," she said. "It's a cat inside there."

I shook my head. "You heard it. It's not just me. Maybe Jenny can only show herself to me. Maybe hell can only show itself to me, but you heard it."

"Wouldn't Jenny's ghost be in your old apartment where she died?" Something like fear trembled in Helen's voice. She was

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beginning to believe something that might be dreadful. It made me feel less alone.

"No. I don't think it's her ghost. A ghost is spiritual residue or something. I think she is in here, it's really her, in the flesh, and I think there are others in here. I need to go back in and find out what exactly she wants from me."

The noise again, almost sounding like a woman weeping.

"Don't go in there," Helen said. "It may not be anything. It may be something awful. It may be somebody waiting in there the way somebody waited for Jenny."

I took her face in my hands and kissed her eyelids. When I drew back from her face, I whispered, "I love you Helen. But I have to find out if I'm crazy. I have to find out."

We went and sat in an all-night coffee shop talking about love and belief and insanity. Because I was beginning to convince myself that Pallan Row was a corner of hell, I waited until the sun came up to investigate further within its walls. Helen returned with me, and between the two of us, we managed to break enough bricks apart and

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away from the wall so that the hole grew to an almost-window-sized entrance.

I asked her to wait outside for me, and if anything happened, to go get help. I went in through the window, scraping my head a bit. The room on the other side was empty and dark, but that unnatural ice breath was still there, and, through the kitchen portal window, there came a feeble and distant light.

Helen asked, every few seconds, "you okay, Oliver? I can't see you."

"I'm fine," I reassured her as often as she asked.

I walked slowly to the kitchen door, looked through the round window pane. The light emanated from the freezer at the other end of the long kitchen. I pushed the door open (informing Helen that this was my direction so that she wouldn't worry if I didn't respond to her queries every few minutes), and walked more swiftly to the walk-in freezer.

The freezer door was unlocked. I opened it, too, and stepped inside.

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The light was blue and as cold as the air.

Through the arctic fog, I could make out the shapes of human beings, hanging from meat hooks, their faces indistinct, their bodies slowly turning as if they had but little energy left within them. I did not look directly at any of these bodies, for my terror was becoming stronger--and I knew that if I were to remain sane as I walked through this ice-house of death, I would need to rein in my fear.

Finally, I found her.

Jenny.

Ice across her eyeless face, her hair, strands of thin, pearl-necklace icicles.

She hung naked from a hook, her head, drooping, her arms apparently lifeless at her side.

Her belly had been ripped open as if torn at with pincers, the skin peeled back and frost-burnt.

I stopped breathing for a full minute, and was sure that I was going to die right there.

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I was sure the door to that freezer, that butcher-shop of the damned, would slide shut and trap me forever.

But it did not.

Instead, I heard that human sound again, closer, more distinct.

I heard my heart beating; my breathing resumed.

The sound came from beyond the whitest cloth of fog, and I waved my hands across it to dissipate the mist.

There, lying on a metal shelf, wrapped in the clothes which Jenny had been buried in, was our baby, his small fingers reaching for me as he began to wail even louder.

I lifted him, held him in my arms, and wiped the chill from his forehead.

Someone was there, among the hanging bodies, watching me. I couldn't tell who, for the fog had not cleared, neither had the blue light increased in intensity. I could not see to see. I felt someone's presence though, and thanked that someone silently. I thanked whoever or whatever had suckled my child, had warmed his blood, had

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met his needs. The place no longer frightened me. Whatever energy the freezer ran on, whatever power inspired it, had kept my child safe.

I took my son out into the bright and shining morning.

"This was why I was haunted," I told Helen, upon emerging from the open window. "This is what Jenny wanted to give me."

I can only describe Helen's expression, through her eyes, as one approaching dread. She said, "I think you should put it back where it belongs."

"Babies aren't 'its'," I said, and recalled saying this to Jenny once, too, at this very place. Or had Jenny said it to me? We had been so close that sometimes when she said things, I felt I'd said them, too.

I glanced down at my boy, so beautiful, as he watched the sky and his father, breathing the vivid air.

Across his forehead, I saw a marking, a birthmark, a port-wine stain, perhaps, which spread across his skin like fire until he became something other than what might be called flesh.

THE END

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AN EXCERPT FROM NAOMI by Douglas Clegg

What follows is an excerpt from my novel Naomi (which will be out in hardcover in January 2001, and in paperback in late April 2001. All author royalties from the first paperback edition of Naomi will go to the National Down Syndrome Society - www.ndss.org. Please encourage your favorite booksellers to stock a lot of this book.)

Here is the cover to the limited edition hardcover, available at

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NAOMI

By Douglas Clegg

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Chapter One: The City

1

Destiny lurks, but when the time is ripe, it devours.

New York City, this year, right now, the world seems new as a century dawns, as winter surrounds the fingers of brick and marble.

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Don't imagine for a moment the silver towers of Manhattan, shining in December with sweat and frost. Forget the postcard images in your mind of the city. The looming skyscrapers. The brown and gray apartment buildings obscuring any trace of morning sunlight.

Lose your memory of the small grocery mart with its rows of oranges and apples and cheap flowers. The great clock over the Persian rug shop. The trattoria with ragged awning flapping, traces of soap on its windows. The smell of the street, of the stone, of the people, of the dogs, of the entity that can only be known as city, a thing both dead and alive at the same time.

Imagine instead a vast cavern of overgrown brownstone and gleaming pumice, frozen in spray up to the sky. Imagine the anthill and its inhabitants. Imagine anything but the buildings along 8th Avenue, the yellow taxicabs, the young man in sweatpants and hooded jacket jogging, the gray-suited bald man with glasses, shivering, a steaming Starbucks coffee cup in hand; the handsome and the ugly; the elfin woman still drunk from the previous night, blown by an icy

gust as she walks her Boston terrier on a short leash; the masks and the Douglas Clegg "Underworld" an ebook

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faces they reveal; the two shiny men with gym bags; the piles of trashbags; piles of kids as they wander with their Walkmans and cell phones; the overcoats fluttering; the hat pulled down over ears.

Through it all, the serpent turns.

And it lurks.

And it will devour.

The message steams in the crisp cold air, the breaths of fog that pour like smoke from the mouths of people wandering the chilly city streets. It's written in smoke from the exhaust of buses. The billboards, the walls, the wide boulevards, the narrow alleys, the scaffolding along 14th Street, all of it is a warning to the one boy who understands the omen.

The citadel of stone could stand for a hundred more years, and still none will escape destiny as it waits, hungry.

Only you know it, because you are part of the Below. You are close to the pulse of how this island kingdom runs. You are one of the few who can journey from the Below to the Above and back. With only the fear to keep you going.

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And you know that today, the serpent is loose.

Your destiny is tied up with the serpent, only you don't know why or how. You know, because it has been foretold. You know because destiny is a wicked thing.

But it is an ordinary winter's day. They call the city New York.

They live within the belief that all is well for now.

Somewhere across this island, there are construction workers' jackhammers making the earth's crust tremble. Somewhere, between the Above and the Below, what should've stayed chained has been set free. They all dig down deep but never find the true Below, they never know all the wormholes that the serpent has, but you know. You and the others like you. You know the passages of the serpent. You always have understood the serpent and the darkness. You know that no matter how it looks in the Above, what has been loosed cannot be put back.

But it's business as usual here, in the Above. Up where the sun burns and the city steams even in its frozen glory. Christmas is coming. The lights are up and dazzling, even early in the day. Shop

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windows are heavy with ornament and display. The snow from the week before has all but melted in the city. The trash bags roll and shift with wind, and rats scurry along the side streets as the Village bleeds into Chelsea into the Meat-Packing District with its bones and the smell of the dead.

And she is there.

The woman who seems so familiar, perhaps because she resembles all the other women on the street, but she is their essence. She is determined. She is in focus and still a blur of movement. She is unstoppable in some way.

You watch her walk - no, you watch her stride towards her goal.

In her stride, her destiny.

She is the kind of woman that once seen, will never be forgotten.

Not because of some ideal of beauty, but because of her very nature.

She is the unmade bed. She is the lost unknown. She is the woman of whom other people speak but no one invites. She is unfathomable mystery. She is purity-in-chaos. Something makes you watch her.

Something within you longs to follow her on her journey. Her eyes

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are brutally kind. Her face is pale without being sunless, a redness around her eyes and nose, a vulnerability.

She has the look of having been in the storm, droplets glistening on her skin, crystal snowflakes melting.

You read her thoughts in her hands as she gracelessly reaches in her coat for keys or some Kleenex or a good luck charm or a memento from the past.

You see the child-like way she smiles at nothing, perhaps at the very air itself, perhaps at the folly of life.

She reminds you of the woman you'd want to meet someday; but she has darkness within her.

She has spent her life searching for the serpent. Now, it will find her.

She is dangerous.

2

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"Destiny lurks, it does, I tell you when your time's ripe, it devours, it surely does, it's a devourer, it opens its jaws and unlocks just to get you." That's what the teenaged boy on the corner of 14th Street and 8th said to the woman who had passed up his offer to allow her to give him change.

He shook the can that had once held Del Monte pineapple slices and now clanged with a few quarters and several pennies, and perhaps later on would carry water or soup if he could get some.

His stink was strong, a gust of foulness from the pit of some unwashed arm. His name was long forgotten, but those who called him friend also called him Romeo, for no other reason than the fact that he roamed.

"Listen, you give me change, lady, and I give you salvation. Nice bargain you was to ask me," he said, his voice like the squeal of brakes over shattering glass bottles.

He was too old to be young and too young to be old, and his red baseball cap had seen better gutters. He was probably no more than a

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teenager, but he still seemed ancient. His hair was yellow-brown straw beneath the cap. His eyes were dull and milky as if he suffered from some ailment a woman like this would never want to know about. His grin was infectious in all the unfortunate ways. "All right, lady, destiny lurks but it can devour any second, and just the price of a cup of coffee'll get you some relief. It's a -- whoa -- a huge mother of a snake -- and it gets out and it bites you where the sun don't shine. I said it's got a sting and a bite and then it just chows down like you don't even matter and I seen it. I know what it can do."

He knew his words didn't sound as clear as he thought them in his head, but he said them anyway. Language was different in the Below. Words were used sparingly, there. Words could not be wasted in darkness. (Scabber had told him once about speaking, and how words were like magic. "Magic don't get spent free," she had told him. "Gotta price. Like every damn thing. A big price. A great price.")

The woman with destiny glanced at him once. He was sure that she looked right through him before moving on.

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She walked awkwardly towards the subway entrance, with her tan coat, her faded jeans, the way her hair wasn't quite combed, nor was it quite blond.

And something about the way she glanced back at him let him know that she was not one of the Above People even if she hadn't given him a quarter or the time of day.

She's one of us.

She had the darkness in her already. He could tell. Had she somehow escaped the Below of life and lived in the Above for so many years that she had forgotten the darkness? But the scent of it was still on her. She was meant for shadows.

The street, so alive with suits and skirts and rags and vendors and loafers, washed her image away like a sudden downpour.

Hunger wrestled with his fears. He kept shaking his cup and hoping that he'd get enough change to take care of his great burden. He didn't like the thought of the serpent or of the lady who wanted to find it, but there was no coming between what was and what was meant to be.

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Chapter Two: The Woman in the Subway

1

Don't think, just do.

The words were like mosquitoes humming around the woman who stepped down into the urban underworld known as the subway. Within her mind, the world itself was a mass of mosquitoes all swirling in patterns around her. The past and present blurred into a mess in

her brain, and her head ached with all of the images from childhood and from what she'd been hiding and what she'd been revealing - it was a storm within her flesh that had no calm center.

Just do, she thought, wiping at her nose with a Kleenex.

Quit thinking so much. Thinking too much about it is what screws everything up.

A cold, left over from Thanksgiving, lingered in her sinuses.

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She fumbled with the nasal spray bottle to get one last clear breath . She laughed at herself, wondering why she was so worried about her stupid cold, why she even cared anymore. Inhaling, she smelled the dust and piss of the subway and street. Then her head began pounding again. She'd had a Sudafed with a glass of wine at six a.m., hoping it would allow her to fall asleep. Instead, it just seemed to make the pain more intense.

She wanted to get the feeling out of her system. It manifested itself in a throbbing at the edges of her scalp and a constant hammering behind her eyes. Her head pounded with a thousand words left unsaid, conversations she'd wanted to have, arguments she wished she'd been brave enough to incite. But none of it added up to much, and so little was clear she just wished all thinking would stop. Don't think. Don't let the voices and the words and the darkness come through. You know what must be done. What you must do. You can't go back to what never was. You can't make something gentle from a tangle of barbed wire. You can clean up what has already happened. .

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But one thought above all others pounded at her, the hammer of one thought, up and down, again and again, behind her eyes. One thought.

All she could think about as she went down the cold stone steps was that Alan would never have let her leave the apartment had he known that she intended to throw herself in front of the first train that came down the tunnel.

2

But he'd gone out for an hour, and she had her chance.

In under a minute she laughed, wept, and smiled. Then, she closed her eyes and tried to pray but there were no more prayers in her. She glanced up at the sky before it disappeared from view as she went down the stairway into the bowels of the city.

A last glimpse of sky. White with clouds. The bare trees of winter.

She tried to picture the winter sky as she walked through the passageway. The walls comforted her to some extent; this was a safe

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enclosure, an antidote to the open muddy fields and burnt ruins of her

childhood. The city was a cold but welcome embrace, and she never felt it more strongly than down in the subway.

She knew what he would say.

The Alien. His name was Alan. She liked to think of him as Alien because then it was easier to not let him touch her anymore, to not let him get under her skin in any way.

But still, she knew what he would say if he'd been there to stop her.

"Naomi," he'd say, "it's the winter blues, that's all. Have you been off your prescriptions again? That's not good. That's not sticking with the program."

Sticking with the program.

Learning to cope.

Making do.

Recovering.

All of them, Alien buzz words. "When you have all your ducks in order, we can sit down and talk about the future," he'd say.

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Whenever he used this phrase, she wanted to get an Uzi and shoot all those ducks and watch the blood and feathers fly. Just in her mind. Just the imaginary ducks that the Alien talked about. She wanted to squeeze his voice out of her head. His voice, his metaphors, the sound of his footsteps.

She knew how he would suddenly be gentle with her. And how she would lash out at him. He would sit there and be gentle and even kind. Her thoughts would turn violent; his kindness would feel violent to her. Sometimes kindness was the worst sort of treatment. She wanted to tell him she'd been seeing another doctor who suggested she'd been misdiagnosed. It was a lie, but she wanted to tell him that. She knew that the Alien would really find a way to twist that up so that she would begin to doubt her own sense of reality again. She didn't even blame him.

It was her. It was completely her. "You need to pay for good medical care. These therapists you know," he'd say, his head shaking slowly, "bargain basement prices, and no real training..."

But none of that mattered.

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She had to smile as she bought a subway token -- a buck fifty. A subway ride was still a bargain, one of the last of real bargains. A real bargain basement. You could go anywhere on the subways in Manhattan for a buck fifty. That was New York all over. Anywhere that didn't matter, you could get there cheap. She could go the length of the island and never get back to the place where she'd been happiest.

A child stared up at her as she dropped the token in the turnstile.

Dark hair, dark eyes, a wan look as if he had no expectations.

His mother, a cool drink of water -- that's what Jake would've said.

(Don't think of Jake. You can't undo all of it. He would know. He would find out. He would hate you.)

The boy's mother was in a bad mood. Her eyes were fixed on the boy's hands, like a cat ready to pounce. "Where's your token?" the mother asked and the boy's mouth dropped, drool on the edge of his lips. "Where the hell is it?"

The child watched her even while his mother clutched his hands, demanding his token.

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Two men, tall and stocky, hair on one like a rock star, nonexistent on the other, businessmen in blue and gray uniforms, rushed past her. The earthquake rumbling of the approaching train grew louder. Catching a train was serious business. A crazy woman (she thought as she watched herself being watched) slowly walking to the platform was to be jostled and elbowed. A short redhead in a raincoat practically shoved her. Then the rain of people followed in her wake. From all corners they shoved and slipped between one another, creating pockets of personal space. Black, white, a woman in furs, a teen in a leather jacket with purple hair, humanity as if one big ball of multicolored wax had melted together. They melted into one another as they rushed forward, grabbing their places along the platform. To her, it was not a platform on the subway, but a precipice. It was the Edge.

3

The Edge was everywhere.

The Edge was life, and she was always on the verge of discovering what lay beyond the Edge.

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Her eyesight was all messed up; tears? No, not tears. Tension. The headaches. The memory that she could never dredge up, no matter how hard she tried. All she could call it was the blank spot of her life. The yowling in the darkness; the feeling of rocks; the sense of what was there with her, hiding with her, breathing...But her vision sucked -- she laughed thinking of it that way. The faces in the crowd, she remembered the poem, the apparition of these faces in the crowd... We're all ghosts, already. We reach adulthood and we're already gone from the world that matters. We're just keeping things in order for the next crop of people. We go about our business. And why? We're ghosts. We repeat patterns without knowing that we have no effect. Our lives are determined before we're twenty. After that, we just repeat. It's already the future. These people are already ghosts. I am a ghost. The apparition of these faces in a crowd...

I am no one.

My time has come and gone.

I am ruined, she laughed to herself. It sounded so Victorian, so ancient, so melodramatic. I am ruined. I will be no more.

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She stood there, her head throbbing.

Slowly, she walked to the edge of the platform, closing her eyes.

Her steps seemed completely silent to her. Was she invisible? She could be. Maybe she had always been invisible. She barely noticed the murmurs as those she passed spoke about the lives they were leading, their victories that were really just defeats in disguise. Their eyes had not been opened.

Images bled in her mind:

Her mother, lying in the coffin; the things in the dark, moving like liquid; the Alien, his eyes flashing green, picking her up in the rain outside of Lincoln Center, his car so warm, his manner so smooth, her desperation so great; the blank spot, the blindness of moments in time, moments that were cut from her and had turned to yowling darkness; and Jake -- just his face, sixteen years' old, sweat shining like smoldering
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ashes under his skin...Jake, if only Jake were here...If only I had the courage...

Now, the other voice within her whispered. It was the voice of her highest self, she knew. The one who knew how to do things. The one who knew where she was going.

Now.

The sound of the train grew louder, and the tunnel wind swept her hair --

One foot ventured into the air beyond the platform. The rumbling was loud.

She could feel the train's heat in the wind that gusted through the tunnel.

She could do it. She knew she could. Another step forward. Then she'd fall.

The train would reach her before she landed on the tracks.

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