

BLACK GLASS

Karen Joy Fowler

It was a Wednesday afternoon in the Senate Bar. Schilling, the proprietor, stood behind the curved counter, stroking the shot glasses with a towel. Every part of the bar was reflected in the mirror wall behind him: the marble and black onyx floor, the oiled cherry-wood counter, the brass bar rail. A chandelier hung in the center of the ceiling. Rows of cut-glass decanters filled the shelves. Schilling ran his towel over their glass stoppers. In the corner, on the big screen, Cher danced and sang a song for the U.S. Navy. Schilling had the sound off.

There were three customers. Two sat together at a table near the door. They were businessmen. One of them smoked. Both of them drank.

Every time either of them picked up his glass and set it down again, he made a new wet ring on the table between them. They were careful to keep the spreadsheet out of the water.

The third customer, a college student, sat at the bar, drinking his way through an unexpected romance with a woman old enough to be his mother. He'd asked Schilling to bring him three drinks at once, three different drinks—a Bloody Mary, a Sex on the Beach, a Velvet Hammer. As a compromise, Schilling had brought him the Bloody Mary and put in an MTV tape, picture only, out of deference to the businessmen and as a matter of personal preference.

A fourth man came into the Senate Bar from the street. A shaft of sunlight sprang into the room when the door opened and vanished when it closed. "Give me a drink," the man said to Schilling.

Schilling glanced at the man briefly as he polished the wood bar with his sleeve. "Get out of here."

"Give me a drink."

The man was dirty and dressed in several tattered layers, which still left a bare hole the size of a tennis ball above one knee. He was smoking the stubby end of a cigarette. It was not his cigarette; there was lipstick on the filter. He had retrieved this cigarette from the sidewalk outside the bar. "You pay your tab first," said Schilling.

"I don't have any money," said the man. Cher closed her eyes and opened her mouth.

"Where's my Sex on the Beach?" asked the boy.

"You're disturbing my customers," Schilling told the man at the door. "You're stinking up my bar." He reached under the counter for a bottle of gin.

"He gave me my first drink," the man at the door said to the

boy at the bar. "I used to be just like you." He took two steps into the room, leaving two gritty footprints on the black onyx. "Finish what you started," he told Schilling.

"Get out," Schilling said.

The boy rolled a quarter down his nose and let it drop, catching it loudly in his empty Bloody Mary glass. "Can I get another drink?" he asked. "Am I going to get another drink?"

A second shaft of sunlight appeared in the room, collided with the mirrored wall. Inside the sunlight, barely visible, Cher danced.

She turned her back. Schilling heard a woman scream, and then the Cher in the mirror broke into five pieces and fell behind the counter. The sunlight disappeared. "Madam," said Schilling, hardly breathing, in shock. A nightmare dressed in black stood at the door of his bar, a nightmare in the shape of an enormous postmenopausal woman. In one hand she held a hatchet. She reached into the bodice of her dress with the other and pulled out a large stone. She wore a bonnet with black ribbons.

"Glory be to God!" shouted the woman. "Peace on Earth! Goodwill to men!" She hit the big screen dead center with the rock. The screen cracked and smoked, made spitting noises, blackened. She took a step, swept the cigarette from the shabby man's mouth with one hand. "Don't poison the air with your filthy gases!" she said. Then she held her hatchet at the vertical. She charged into the bar, clearing the counter. Maraschino cherries and stuffed olives flew. "Madam!" said Schilling. He ducked.

"You purveyor and protector of obscenity!" the woman shouted. "Has your mother ever been in this place?" The boy at the bar slipped from his stool and ran for the rear door. In three steps the woman caught him. She picked him up by the neck of his sweater as if he were a kitten, throwing him to his knees. She knelt over him, singing. "Touch not, taste not, handle not. Drink will

make the dark, dark blot.” He struggled, and she let him go, calling after him, “Your mother did not raise you for this!” The back door slammed.

The businessmen had taken cover under their table. Schilling remained out of sight. The shabby man was gone. The woman began, methodically, with her hatchet to destroy the bar. She punctured the decorative keg behind the counter and then, apparently disappointed to find it empty, she brought her hatchet down on the counter, severing a spigot from one of the hoses. A fountain of soda exploded into the air. She broke the decanters. Pools of liquor flowed over the marble and onyx floor. The woman’s bonnet slipped to the side of her head.

“That brandy costs seventy-five dollars,” Schilling said.

“Broth of hell,” she answered. “Costs your soul.” She gashed the cherry wood, smashed the mirrored wall. She climbed onto a stool and brought the chandelier down with a single stroke. Schilling peered over the bar. She threw a rock at him, hitting a bottle of bright green crème de menthe behind him.

He ducked out of sight again. “You’ll pay for this,” Schilling told her. “You’ll account for every penny.”

“You are Satan’s bedfellow,” she said. “You maker of drunkards and widows. You donkey-faced rum-soaked Republican rummy.” She lifted the hundred-and-fifty-pound cash register from the counter and held it over her head. She began to sing again. “A dreadful foe is in our land, drive him out, oh, drive him out. Oh, end the monster’s awful reign, drive him out, oh, drive him out.” She threw the register at what remained of the big screen. It barely missed the tabletop that hid the businessmen and crashed onto the marble and onyx floor.

She worked for twenty minutes and stopped when there was nothing left to break. The woman stood at the door, straightening her bonnet, tightening the ribbons. “Until the joints close,” she

said, “the streets will run red with blood.” She opened the door. Schilling crouched lower behind the bar. The businessmen cowered beneath the table. Nobody saw her leave.

“The sun was in my eyes,” Schilling explained to the police. “When she opened the door, the sunlight was so bright I lost sight of her.”

“She came in screaming?” A man from the press was taking notes.

“Shrieking.” The first businessman tried to read the reporter’s notes, which were upside down from his point of view and cursory. He didn’t enjoy talking to newsmen. When you dealt with the fourth estate, accuracy was your social responsibility. You could still be misquoted, of course. You wouldn’t be the first.

“Kind of a screech,” the second businessman offered.

“She’s paying for everything,” said Schilling. “Don’t even ask me to be chivalrous.”

“She was big,” said the first businessman. “For a woman.”

“She was enormous,” said Schilling.

“She was as big as a football player,” said the first businessman carefully.

“She was as big as a truck,” said Schilling. He pointed with a shaky finger to the register. “She lifted it over her head like it was a feather duster or a pillow or something. You can write this down,” he said. “You can quote me on this. We’re talking about a very troubled, very big woman.”

“I don’t think it’s such a good idea,” the second businessman said.

“What’s not a good idea?” asked the reporter.

“Women that size,” said the second businessman.

“Just look what she did,” said Schilling. Rage made his voice squeak. “Just look at my bar!”

Patrick Harris had been a DEA agent for eight years now. During those eight years, he had seen some action. He had been in Mexico and he had been in Panama and he had been in LA. He had been in one or two tight spots, but that didn't mean he couldn't help out with the dishes at home.

Harris knew he asked a lot of his wife. It couldn't be the easiest thing in the world, being married to a man who disappeared into Latin America for days at a time and might not even be able to get a message out that he was still alive. Harris could run a vacuum cleaner over a rug without feeling that he was doing his wife any favors. Harris could cook a meal from the very beginning, meaning the planning and the shopping and everything, without feeling that anyone needed to make a fuss about it.

He stood with the French bread and the Gruyère cheese and the imported Emmentaler Swiss in the nine-items-only-no-checks checkout line, wondering how he could use the tomatoes, which he hadn't planned to buy but were cheaper and redder than usual and had tempted him. The woman in front had twelve items. It didn't really irritate Harris. He was only sorry that it was so hard for some people to play by the rules.

While he waited for the three extra items to be tallied and worried in an ineffective, pleasant way over the tomatoes, he read through the headlines. Evidence of prehistoric alien cannibals had been found in Peruvian cave paintings, and a statue of Elvis had been found on Mars. A husband with bad breath had killed his wife merely by kissing her. A Miami bar had been destroyed by a sort of half woman/half gorilla. Harris saw the illustration before he read the story, an artist's rendering of Queen Kong in a black dress and bonnet. He looked at the picture again. He read the headline. One of his tomatoes spun from the counter to the floor. Harris stepped

on it, squished it, and didn't even notice. He bought the paper.

He had never been in so much trouble in his life.

The doors were heavy and padlocked. A hummingbird dipped through the entryway twice, held for a moment over an out-of-season fuchsia, and disappeared. The largest of the MPs tried to shoulder the doors open. He tried three times, but the wood did not give. One of the women smashed through a window instead. Harris was the fifth person inside.

The soldiers searched for fugitives. They spun into the hallways, kicked in the doors. Harris found the dining room on the other side of some broken glass. The table was set with china and the flatware was gold. An interrupted meal consisted of rack of lamb, braised carrots, curried peach halves served on lettuce leaves. The food had been sitting on the china plates for at least twenty-four hours.

He started into the library, but one of the MPs called to him from farther back in the house. The MP's voice sounded self-consciously nervous. I'm still scared, the tone said. Aren't I silly?

Harris followed the voice down a hallway and through an open door.

The MP had her rifle slung over her back. In her hands she held a large statue of St. George, spear frozen over the neck of the dragon. The dragon was considerably smaller than St. George's horse.

Behind the MP, three stairs rose to an altar with red candles and white flowers and chicken feathers. The stairs were carpeted, and a supplicant could kneel or lie supine if the supplicant weren't too tall. The room itself was not carpeted. A black circle had been painted on the stone floor, with a red triangle inside. The four

cardinal points of the compass were marked.

Harris looked east. The east wall was a wall of toads. Toad-shaped stones covered every inch of seven shelves, and the larger ones sat on the floor. The toads were all different: different colors, different sizes. Harris guessed there were four hundred, five hundred toads. “Why toads?” Harris asked. He stepped inside.

The MP shook her head and put the statue back on the altar. “Shit,” she said, meaning nothing by it, merely making conversation. “Is this shit for real?”

One of the smallest toads was carved of obsidian. Its eyes were a polished, glassy black; it was no bigger than Harris’s thumbnail. It attracted him. Harris reached out. He hesitated briefly, then touched it. At that moment, somewhere in the room, an engine cycled on. Harris started at the sound, closed his hand convulsively over the toad. He looked at the MP, who gestured behind him.

The noise came from a freezer back by the door. It was a small freezer, not big enough to hold the body of an adult. A goat, maybe. A child. A head. Harris looked at the MP. “Groceries,” he said.

“Stash,” the MP suggested. This made opening the freezer Harris’s job. Harris didn’t think so. He would have stared the MP down if the MP had only looked at him. Harris watched to be sure the MP wasn’t looking. He put the black toad in his pocket and went to open the freezer. He was simply not thinking about the toad. Otherwise he would never have taken it. Harris was DEA, and even when he was undercover he played by the rules. Taking the toad marked the beginning of a series of atypical transgressions. Harris was at a loss to explain them. It was not as though he wanted the toad.

The freezer worked laboriously. When Harris and his wife were first married, they’d had a noisy refrigerator like this. They

would argue: arguments of adjustment, kitchen arguments as opposed to bedroom arguments, as vehement and passionate as they were trivial. And the refrigerator would be a third voice, grumbling in dissatisfaction or croaking in disbelief. Sometimes it would make them laugh. Harris tried to resurrect these comfortable, pro-appliance kinds of feelings. He closed his eyes and raised the lid. He opened his eyes. The only thing inside the freezer was a stack of pictures.

Harris pushed the lid up until it caught. Some were actual photographs. There was a Polaroid of the General's wife seated in a lawn chair under a beach umbrella, a fat woman who'd left the marks of her nails on more than one of the General's mistresses. There were some Cubans, including Castro, and some Americans, Kissinger and Helms, pictures cut from magazines, but real photographs of the President and the ex-President. There was a fuzzy picture of two men shaking hands on the steps of a public building. Harris recognized one of the men as the Archbishop. The edges of every picture had been dipped in red wax.

He still had the toad in his pocket that night when he attended a party at the home of Señora Villejas. Many American officers were there. Señora Villejas greeted him at the door with a kiss and a whisper. "*El General llego a la embajada con calzoncillos rojos.*" The General had turned up in the Vatican embassy wearing red underwear, she said. She spun away to see that the band had refreshment.

A toad in a hole, Harris thought. It was Christmas Eve. Harris arrived late, too late for the champagne but just in time for the mixed drinks. The band was ethnic and very chic. Harris could hear a concertina, a bobla, a woowoo, the triangle. They played a waltz.

"Have you heard the one about the bitch at the dog kennels?" one of the American captains asked him. The captain had a strawberry daiquiri; he stirred the strawberries with his straw.

“I have now,” said Harris.

“Don’t pull that shit with me,” the captain said. He drank. “You some kind of feminist? You got a whole lot of women working undercover in the DEA?”

Harris ignored him. He spotted Ruiz by the windows and made his way toward him. Some couples had started to dance in the open space between Harris and Ruiz. Harris dodged through the dancers. A woman he had never seen before put a drink in his hand, alcoholic, but hot and spiced. “What am I drinking?” he asked Ruiz.

Ruiz shrugged. “You had a chance to call your wife?”

“This afternoon,” said Harris. “I’m on my way home tomorrow. You?”

“South,” said Ruiz. “What any of this shit has to do with anything I do not know.”

“It’s a statement,” said Harris. “At least it’s a statement.”

“It’s an invasion,” said Ruiz.

Well, of course there was that. Harris was sorry Ruiz was choosing to see it that way. “He collected toads,” Harris offered, by way of changing the subject. “Stone toads.”

“He collected yachts,” Ruiz said. “The *Macho I*, the *Macho II*, and the *Macho III*. Don’t ever tell me he had a problem in this area. And don’t tell me he lacked imagination.”

Harris took a sip of his drink. It stung his mouth. “Why toads?” His eyes were watering. He took a larger sip, drained the glass halfway.

“Maybe they were hollow,” Ruiz said.

“No.”

“Maybe just one was hollow and the others were all to hide

the hollow one.”

A young woman refreshed Harris’s drink. “*¿Que estoy bebiendo?*” Harris asked the woman, who left without answering.

“Have some of mine,” Ruiz said. He was drinking a margarita. He handed it to Harris. Harris turned the glass to a virginal part of the salt rim and sipped. He rotated the glass and sipped again. “Go ahead and finish it,” said Ruiz. “I’ll get another.”

The music had begun to sound odd. A man stood in the middle of the dance floor. “I’ll tell you who’s coming here. I’ll tell you who’s coming here!” he shouted. He threw the contents of his drink into the rafters of the house. Others did the same. Harris laughed and drank his margarita instead. He started to say something to Ruiz, but Ruiz was gone. Ruiz had been gone for a long time.

The dancers began to stomp, and the high treble sound of the triangle reached too deeply into Harris’s ears. It hurt. Harris could smell alcohol and herbs, drifting down from the roof. The drums and the stomping worked their way into his body. Something inside him was pounding to match them. Harris resisted finding out what. He pulled the little toad from his pocket. “Look what I have,” he said to Ruiz, but Ruiz had gone; now Harris remembered, Ruiz had gone south to get a margarita. It was quite some time ago.

“In short, you were stoned out of your gourd,” said Harris’s superior.

“Now it gets a little blurred for a while,” Harris told him. This was a lie, one of several lies. The story Harris was actually telling was far from complete. He had certainly not mentioned stealing the toad. And now he was not mentioning remembering a woman in an evening gown who smiled at him, holding out her hand. There were flowers in it. They bloomed. Everyone was dancing.

“My ears hurt,” Harris told her. “Ants are crawling on me.” He tried to brush them away, but his hands wouldn’t move. She knelt and was still above him so he must have been on the ground. The flowers turned into a painted egg. “This is your brain on drugs,” Harris said, laughing. She held it out to him, knowing he couldn’t reach for it, teasing him.

“What do you want?” Her shoulders were bare; she answered the question as she asked it by breathing deeply so that her breasts swelled at the neckline. “In your heart, what do you really want?”

Harris’s soul detached from his body and floated away.

“I think I had a very narrow escape,” Harris told his superior.

“It’s a hazard of field work. Sometimes you draw suspicion to yourself by refusing. We know that.” The tabloid Harris had purchased was spread out on the desk between Harris and his superior. His superior was adding a mustache to one of the cannibal aliens in the Peruvian cave painting. He blacked in the teeth. It pained Harris, who was not the sort of person to deface pictures and certainly not prehistoric pictures. “I appreciate your coming in, but I don’t think I’m even inclined to report this. I mean, in your case, it wasn’t even advertent. You were inadvertently drugged.”

“I was poisoned,” said Harris.

“What does it have to do with gorilla women?”

“Guerrilla women?” Harris repeated. “Everything. I was poisoned by female agents of the Panama Defense Forces.” He took a deep breath. “You got anything here I can drink?”

His superior gestured to the wet bar. Harris poured himself a shot of whiskey. He swallowed it all at once. “The toad is an important Mayan symbol of hallucinosis.” Whiskey warmed his tongue and his throat. “In medieval European witchcraft, they used to decompose toads in menstrual blood for use in potions.

“ ‘Toad, that under cold the stone, / Days and nights hast thirty-one / Swelter’d venom sleeping got, / Boil thou first i’ the charmed pot!’” Harris said.

Harris’s superior was staring at him. Harris’s superior was not an educated man. “Shakespeare,” Harris said, by way of apology for showing off. “I’ve been reading up on it. I mean I don’t know these things off the top of my head. I’m not really a toad man.” Harris’s superior continued to stare. Harris poured another drink to steady himself. “In Haiti, the toad is symbol of the zombie.” Harris tossed his whiskey into his throat and avoided looking at his superior. “What do you know about Carry A. Nation?” Harris asked.

“Make it a written report,” his superior said.

Item one: There are real zombies.

The woman could see where Harris was floating above his body. She began to sing to him, low, but he could hear her even over the drums. “Ti bon ange,” she sang. The egg in her hand became a jar made of clay. She held it out so he would come down closer and look. She wanted him to look inside it and not at her, because her shape was not holding. She was not a beautiful woman at all; she was an ugly woman, old and ugly. Her skin folded on her neck like a toad’s. Harris found this transformation a little insulting. He remembered how much he loved his wife. He had spoken with her only today. He couldn’t wait to get back to his body and home to her. He refused to be seduced by an ugly old woman instead. “Ti bon ange,” she sang, and her voice was low and croaked. “Come look in my jar.”

Item two: the ti bon ange. Ti bon ange

means the little good angel. Every person who has ever lived is made up of five components. These are the z'etoile, the n'ame, the corps cadavre, the gros bon ange, and the ti bon ange. We need concern ourselves here only with the last three.

The gros bon ange is the undifferentiated life force. It binds you to the rest of the living world.

The ti bon ange is your personal life force. The ti bon ange is your individual personality.

The corps cadavre is your body.

Harris could see the dark opening of the jar beneath him, a circular pool of black. The circle grew until he could have fit inside it. He didn't know if it was growing because the woman was raising it or if he was slipping toward it like sand sucked into the throat of an hourglass. Either way was perilous. Harris looked for someplace dark to hide. Harris slid into the bright blackness of the stone toad, resting in the hand of his inert corps cadavre.

The American captain came and knelt on the other side of Harris. "What have we here?"

"DEA." The beautiful woman was back. The American captain wouldn't have even spoken to the ugly old woman. She turned her jar into a wineglass and drank from it innocently.

Item three: creating a zombie. In order to create a zombie, you need to separate the ti bon ange from the gros bon ange. You need to take the ti bon ange out of the corps

cadavre and leave the gros bon ange behind.

The bokor accomplishes this with bufotoxin, an extremely potent poison milked from the glands of the *Bufo marinus* toad, and tetrodotoxin, taken from the skin, liver, testicles, and ovaries of the Tetraodontiformes, a family of fish that includes the blowfish. Bufotoxin stimulates cardiac activity. Tetrodotoxin causes neuromuscular paralysis. In proper doses, taken together, they produce a living corpse.

It is critical that the dosage not be too high. Too much poison and you will kill the body, forcing the gros bon ange to abandon it as well.

“I know,” the captain said.

The woman wanted the captain to go away so that she could sing to Harris again. “He’s had too much to drink.”

The captain flicked a finger at Harris’s nose. Harris saw him do it. “Undercover is pussy work. I wish just once the DEA would send out an agent with some balls.”

The woman was angry and it made her old, but the captain wasn’t looking.

“Pompous self-righteous pricks,” he said. “The most ineffective agency in the whole U.S. Government, and that’s saying something.”

The captain looked at her. She was beautiful and drank red wine. Her eyes were as bright as coins. “I wish...” said the captain. He moved closer to her. “Shall I tell you what I wish?” he said. Harris was relieved to see that the captain was not going away, not

unless the woman became old before him, and this was something she was, apparently, reluctant to do. Perhaps she wanted to surprise the captain with it. It served the captain right, seducing some old crone. The party spun around Harris, dancing couples, drinking couples. The black opalescence of the toad cast a yellow filter over the scene, but Harris could still see, dimly, that inside every woman there, no matter how graceful, no matter how beautiful, there was an old crone, biding her time.

“What are you writing?” Harris’s wife asked him. She had come in behind him, too quietly. It made him jump. He leaned forward to block the screen.

“Nothing,” he said. Harris loved his wife and knew that her dear, familiar body did not conceal the figure of a hostile old woman. Hadn’t he always helped with the dishes? Hadn’t he never minded? He was safe with her. Harris wished she wouldn’t sneak up on him.

“What are you reading? Children’s books?” she asked incredulously. She taught British, American, and women’s literature at the junior college. She was, Harris thought, but lovingly, a bit of a snob. In fact, he had a stack of books on his desk—several Japanese pharmacologies, several volumes of Voudon rituals, and a couple of temperance histories. Only one was for children, but this was the one Harris’s wife picked up. *The Girl’s Life of Carry A. Nation*, it said on the spine. “Are you coming to bed?” Harris’s wife asked.

“In a moment.”

She went to bed without him, and she took the book with her.

Five-year-old Carry Moore sat on the pillared porch and

waited impatiently for her mother to come home. Her father had bought her mother a new carriage! Little Carry wanted to see it.

The year was 1851. Behind Carry was the single-story Kentucky log house in which the Moores lived. It sat at the end of a row of althea bushes and cedar trees. The slave cabins were to the right. To the left was the garden: roses, syringa, and sweet Mary. Mary was Carry's mother's name.

Carry's mother was not like other mothers. Shortly after Carry was born, Mary decided her own real name was Victoria. She was not just playing let's pretend. Mary thought she was really the Queen of England. She would only speak to Carry by appointment. Sometimes this made Carry very sad.

Carry saw one of the slaves, Bill, coming down the road. Bill was very big. He was riding a white horse and was dressed in a fine red hunting jacket. Didn't he look magnificent? He carried a hunting horn, which made loud noises when you wound it. *Honk! Honk!* The Queen was coming!

Carry could see the carriage behind him. It was the most beautiful carriage she had ever seen. It had curtains and shiny wheels and matched gray horses to pull it. Henry, another slave, was the coachman. He wore a tall silk hat.

The carriage stopped. Mary got out. She was dressed all in gold with a cut-glass tiara. She wanted to knight Farmer Murray with her umbrella. Farmer Murray was their neighbor. He was weeding his onions. Farmer Murray tried to take Mary's umbrella away.

"Oh, Ma," said Carry. She ran down the road to her mother. "Take me for a ride."

Carry's mother would not even look at her. "Betsey," said Mary. Betsey was one of the slaves. She was only thirteen years old, but she was a married woman with a baby of her own. "This child is filthy. Take her away and clean her up."

“Ma!” said little Carry. She wanted so badly to go for a ride.

“We don’t want her in the house,” said Mary. Queens sometimes say we when they mean I. Mary was using the royal we. “She is to sleep with you tonight, Betsey,” said Mary.

Carry didn’t mind sleeping with Betsey, but it meant she had to sleep with Josh, Betsey’s husband, too. Josh was mean. “Please don’t make me sleep with Josh,” Carry asked, but her mother had already walked past her.

Sometimes Carry’s mother was not very nice to her, but Carry had lots of friends. They were her slaves! They were Betsey; and Judy, who was very old; and Eliza, who was very pretty; and Henry, who was smart; and Tom, who was nice. Carry ate with them and slept with them. They loved Carry.

One night Henry told a scary story. It was dark in the slave cabin, and they all sat around the fire. The story was about a mean slavemaster who died but came back in chains to haunt his slaves. They all believed in ghosts, which made the story even scarier. The story made Carry shiver.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Carry jumped right out of her seat. It was only Mr. Brown, the overseer. That made Carry laugh. “We thought you were someone bad coming,” Carry said. Mr. Brown laughed too. He had just come to talk to Eliza. He took Eliza away to talk to her in his cabin. Judy and Betsey scolded Henry for telling a story that frightened Carry.

Item four: On Christmas Eve, at a party at the house of Señora Villejas, I narrowly survived an attempt by the Panama Defense League to turn me into a zombie. The agent of the attack was either a beautiful young Panamanian woman or an old one. She appeared to me as both.

Under ordinary circumstances, the body's nerve impulses are relayed from the spine under conditions of difference in the sodium and potassium concentrations inside and outside the axon membrane. The unique heterocyclic structure of the tetrodotoxin molecule is selective for the sodium channels. A change in the sodium levels, therefore, alters the effectiveness of the drug. My escape was entirely fortuitous. I had just drunk half a margarita. The recent ingestion of salt was, I believe, all that saved me.

I hardly need point out the usefulness to the drug cartels of a DEA agent entirely under their control.

Harris's hands were sweaty on the keyboard. He licked a finger to taste the salt. There was a map on the wall beside him, marked with five colored pins. One pin went through the Vatican embassy in Panama. One was in the Senate Bar in Miami. The others continued northward in a more or less direct line. If extended, the line would pass through Washington, D.C.

Item five: the loa. At death, the ti bon ange survives and returns to live in another body. Each of us has a direct spiritual lineage back through history. After many such renewals, the individual spirit metamorphoses into disembodied, undifferentiated energy. It joins the cosmic pool of life where the loa reside. When a loa is called back, it returns from this pool as a

purified, mythological version of itself. The individual *ti bon ange* has become archetype. The same mythological figures we know as saints of the Catholic Church also appear to the Voudon as loa.

On the evening of December 24, 1989, I convinced several DEA agents to join me in calling forth a loa. We did not call forth a specific spirit by name. We called to our own spiritual ancestors. We asked for a weapon in our struggle against the drug cartels.

“Send us a DEA agent with balls,” Harris shouted. He was laughing, ecstatic to be in his body again. His hands tingled, his lips were numb, his thighs were warm. The war was over and he was not among the dead. It was Christmas Eve. Ruiz and Casteneda and Martin and several others, ties loosened, suit jackets askew, shoes off, danced the dance with Harris in Señora Villejas’s garden. They threw the contents of their drinks into bushes pruned to the shapes of elephants and camels and giraffes. They crushed flowers with their hands, and Martin had unzipped his pants, reziping them so that a white hothouse iris extended from his crotch. Of course, it hadn’t really been the dance. It had only been something they made up.

I would prefer not to identify the men who joined me in this ceremony since the suggestion was entirely my own. I would like to repeat, in my defense, that I was at this time under the influence of bufotoxin, known for its hallucinogenic properties, as well as alcohol. I was not conducting myself

soberly. We did not for a moment believe that we would be successful in calling up such a spirit. The entire enterprise was conducted as a drunken lark.

Clinically speaking, I suppose we were trying to protect ourselves from our fear of the Voudonist by making a joke of it. I had just survived an attack on my soul. That I did not believe in this attack, imagining it to be purely hallucinatory, does not change the fact that I was unnerved by it.

In the light of recent events, however, and with the benefit of hindsight, it seems possible to me that we have underestimated the effectiveness of the South American drug cartel Voudon. The Haitian zombie is typically described as dim and slow-witted. Among our top government officials are men who fit this description, men known also to have been in Latin and South America. The DEA should make a list of these men, meet with them on some pretext, and offer them heavily salted foods.

Ruiz was gaping at him. A z'etoile fell from the sky into the garden. It came in the form of a burning rock. It landed in one of the camel bushes and melted the garden.

The shapes of the flowers and trees remained, but now they were made of fire. The DEA agents burst into flames. Harris could see their shapes, too. They continued to dance, stamping their flaming feet into the liquid fire of the lawn, shaking their flickering hands.

A woman emerged from the camel bush, not a real woman but a woman of flame. She grew larger and larger until she was larger than he was, wrapped her fiery arms around him. The air was so hot he couldn't breathe it. Harris panicked. He fumbled for the toad in his pocket, remembering how he'd escaped into it once already, but she touched it with one finger, melting it into something small and phallic. She laughed and melted it again, shapeless this time, a puddle of black glass.

"Who are you?" Harris asked, and she told him. Then she scorched the bottoms of his feet until he fainted from the pain and had to be carried home.

The next morning, the toad was in his pocket and his feet were healed. Ruiz came to say good-bye. "Feliz Navidad," said Ruiz. He brought a present of candied fruits. "Kiss your wife for me. You lucky bastard."

Harris thanked him for the gift. "Great party," said Harris carefully.

Ruiz shrugged. "You had a good time," he agreed. "You were a wild man."

They said little else. On his way to the airport, Harris directed his taxi past the home of Señora Villejas. The garden was green.

Carry's mother was sometimes better when she had new places and people to see. Carry's father, George, had trouble with his real estate business. The Moores moved often, and they grew poorer. When Carry was ten years old, they moved to Cass County, Missouri. Carry missed Kentucky. She missed Bill and Eliza, who had been sold. She missed her beautiful Kentucky house.

But Cass County was an exciting place to live! Just across the border, in Kansas, people who liked having slaves were fighting with people who didn't. The people who liked slavery were called

bushwhackers. The people who didn't were called jay-hawkers. Kansas had an election to see if they would be a free state with no slaves. Bushwhackers from Missouri took the ballot boxes and said they would count the votes for Kansas.

They said that Kansas had voted to make it illegal to even say that you didn't like slavery. Anyone who said they didn't like slavery could be killed. So many died, people began to call the state "Bleeding Kansas."

This was a hard time for Carry. She went to bed for five years.

Psychologists now say maybe having a mother who thought she was Queen Victoria is what made Carry sick for such a long time. Psychologists are people who study how people feel and behave.

In 1857, her doctor said she had consumption of the bowels.

But George, her father, said her sickness was a punishment for not loving God. He came to see her sometimes in her bedroom. "Why won't you love God, Carry?" he would ask. He would have tears in his eyes. "You are going to die and break my heart," he would say.

Carry didn't want her father to be unhappy. She tried and tried to love God better. Carry thought she was a horrible sinner. Sometimes, when she was a little girl, she stole things for her slaves, little bits of ribbon, spoonfuls of sugar. Her own heart, Carry said, was the blackest, foulest place she ever saw.

One day when Carry was twelve, George took her to a revival meeting. "Who will come to Jesus?" the minister asked. Carry said that she would. Carry had a fever. George was afraid she was about to die, so even though it was winter, the minister and George took her right away to an icy creek. The water was cold! Carry waded into it, and the minister pushed her under.

When she came up, Carry said that she had learned to love God. She made her slaves come to her bedroom so she could preach to them. Carry told them that God sent you troubles because He loved you and wanted you to love Him. God loved Carry so much He made her ill. God loved the slaves so much He made them slaves. Now that Carry loved God, she began to get better, and in two more years she was able to get out of bed.

The slaves thought that since they loved God, maybe they didn't need to be slaves anymore. They told George they wanted to go to Lawrence, Kansas, where slavery was illegal. Lawrence, Kansas, was very close to Cass County, Missouri.

George told the slaves they were all moving to Texas instead. Texas was very far from Lawrence, Kansas.

Item six: I don't know where she got the body. A loa usually manifests itself through possession, but I remember no one at the party as large as this woman is reported to be. In addition, I have a memory of the loa materializing out of flame. I need not repeat that I was under the influence of bufotoxin at the time.

Item seven: The loa are frequently religious archetypes. Carry Nation, by her own account, spoke to angels when she was still a child and saw the Holy Ghost at her basement window. She performed two miracles in her life and applied for sainthood, although the application was turned down. Since the DEA agents and I performed only a quasi-Voudon ritual, there is a certain logic to the fact that we got only a quasi-saint in return. The loa I summoned

was Carry Amelia Nation. She told me so herself.

Item eight: Ask the General why he left the Vatican embassy.

Harris already knew the answer to item eight. Harris had friends among the attorneys on Miami's "white powder bar." It was not that their interests were compatible. It was merely a fact that they saw each other often.

"So what was it?" the attorney told Harris he had asked the General. "Why did you come out? Was it the white room with no windows and no TV? Was it the alcohol deprivation?"

"It was a woman," the General said.

"You spoke to your mistress." The attorney knew this much. She had been in U.S. custody at the time. "She persuaded you?"

"No." The General shuddered violently. His skin turned the color of eggplant. "It was a horrible woman, a huge woman, a woman no man would sleep with." He was, the attorney told Harris, very possibly a homosexual. Hadn't he started dressing in yellow jumpsuits? Hadn't he said that the only people in Panama with balls were the queers and the women? "She sang to me," the General said.

"Heavy metal?" asked the attorney.

"Who Hath Sorrow, Who Hath Woe," said the General.

Harris did not include this in his report. It was an off-the-record conversation. And anyway, the DEA would trust it more if they found it themselves.

Harris pushed the key to print. Only the first part of his report fit on the DEA form. He stapled the other pages to it. He signed the report and poured himself a bedtime sherry.

The Moores did not live in Texas very long. Many of their slaves developed typhoid fever while walking there from Missouri. All their horses died. George tried to farm, but he did not know how. Mary told one of their neighbors that she was confiscating his lands and his title, so he threw all their plows into the river. Soon there was nothing to eat.

George called his slaves together. He told them he had decided to free them. The slaves were frightened to be free with no food. Some of them cried.

It was very hard for the Moores to leave their slaves. But Carry said her father had done the right thing. She believed that slavery was a great wrong. She admired John Brown, a man who had fought for the rights of slaves in Kansas and was hanged for it when Carry was thirteen years old. All her life, John Brown was a hero of Carry's. "When I grow up," Carry said, "I will be as brave as John Brown."

Between Texas and Missouri was the Civil War. The Queen's carriage had been sold. When the Moores went back to Missouri, they had to ride in their little wagon. One day the ground shook behind them. They pulled off the road. It was not an earthquake. It was the Confederate cavalry on their way to the Battle of Pea Ridge. After the cavalry came the foot soldiers. It took two days and two nights for all the soldiers to pass them.

On the third day, they heard cannons. The Moores began to ride again, slowly, in the direction of the cannons. On the fourth day, the Confederate Army passed them again. This time they were going south. This time they were running. The Moores drove their little wagon straight through the smoking battlefield of Pea Ridge.

They spent that night in a farmhouse with a woman and five wounded Union soldiers. The soldiers were too badly hurt to be moved, so the woman had offered to nurse them. She told Carry

she had five sons of her own. Her sons were soldiers for the South. Carry helped her clean and tend the boys. One of them was dying. Mary knighted them all.

“Are you enjoying the book?” Harris asked, surprised that she was still awake. He took off his clothes and lay down beside her. She had more than her share of the comforter. He had to lie very close to be warm enough, putting an arm across her stomach, feeling her shift her body to fit him.

“Yes, I am,” she said. “I think she’s wonderful.”

“Wonderful?” Harris removed his arm. “What do you mean, ‘wonderful?’”

“I just mean, what a colorful, amazing life. What a story.”

Harris put his arm back. “Yes,” he agreed.

“And what a vivacious, powerful woman. After all she’d been through. What a resilient, remarkable woman.”

Harris removed his arm. “She’s insane,” he suggested stiffly. “She’s a religious zealot with a hatchet. She’s a joke.”

“She’s a superhero,” said Harris’s wife. “Why doesn’t she have her own movie? Look here.” She flipped through *The Girl’s Life* to the collection of photographs in the middle. She skipped over Carry kneeling with her Bible in her jail cell to a more confrontational shot: Carry in battle dress, threatening the photographer with hatchetation. “She even had a costume. She designed it herself, like Batman. See? She made special dresses with pockets on the inside for her rocks and ammunition. She could bust up bars and she could sew like the wind. Can Rambo say as much?”

“I bet she threw like a girl,” said Harris, trying for a light tone to mask the fact that he was genuinely upset.

His wife was not masking. “Her aim was supposed to have been extraordinary,” she said in her schoolteacher tone, a tone that invariably suggested disappointment in him. “Women are cut off from the rich mythological tradition you men have. Women are so hungry for heroines. Name one.”

“What?” said Harris.

“Name a historical heroine. Quickly.”

“Joan of Arc,” said Harris.

“Everyone can get that far. Now name another.”

Harris couldn’t think. She tapped her fingers on the page to let him know that time was passing. He had always admired Morgan Fairchild for her political activism, but he assumed this would be the wrong answer. If he hadn’t been so irritated he could probably have come up with another name.

“Harriet Tubman,” his wife said. “Donaldina Cameron. Edith Cavell. Yvonne Hakime-Rimpel.”

She really was a snob, but she was also a fair-minded woman. She was not, Harris thought, one of those feminists who simply changed history every time it didn’t suit her. Harris got out of bed and went back to the study. His feet were cold on the bare wood floor. Blankets or no blankets, it would take a long time for his feet to warm up. He fished Carry Nation’s autobiography out of his stack and brought it back.

“You haven’t read about her daughter,” he said. “There’s nothing about Charlien in the pretty little version for children that you chose to read.” He flipped through his own book until he found the section he wanted. He thrust it in front of his wife’s face, then pulled it back to read it aloud. “ ‘About this time, my precious child, born of a drunken father and a distracted mother, seemed to conceive a positive dislike for Christianity. I feared for her soul and I prayed to God to send her some bodily affliction which would

make her love and serve Him.”

Harris skimmed ahead in the book with his finger. “A week later, Charlien developed a raging fever,” he told his wife. “She almost died. And when she recovered from that, part of her cheek rotted away. She had a hole in her face. You could see her teeth. But it was a lucky thing. Because then her jaws locked shut, and she wouldn’t have been able to eat if there wasn’t a hole in her cheek to stick a straw through.” He made an effort to lower his voice. “Her jaws stayed locked for eight years.”

There was a long silence, a silence, Harris thought, of reevaluation and regret for earlier, hasty judgments. “That is a very ugly story,” his wife said. She took the autobiography away from him and began to turn the pages.

“Isn’t it?” Harris wiggled his arm underneath her. There was a longer silence. Harris stared at the ceiling. It was a blown popcorn landscape, and sometimes Harris could imagine pictures in it, but he was too tired for this now. He looked instead at the large cobwebs in the corners. Tomorrow Harris would get the broom and knock them down. Then he would get out the vacuum to suck up the bits of ceiling that came down with the cobwebs, the little flakes of milky asbestos, the poisonous snow, the toxic powders. Nothing the vacuum couldn’t handle. And then Harris would need a rag to remove from the furniture the dust the vacuum had flung up. And then the rag would need to be washed. And then... it was almost like counting sheep. Harris drifted.

“You can’t possibly think those things happened because of Carry’s prayers,” his wife said.

Harris woke up in amazement. His arm had already gone numb from his wife’s weight. He pulled it free. “So now she’s Carry?” Harris asked. “Now we’re on a first-name basis?”

“Look at the religious climate she grew up in. You don’t believe God afflicted a little girl with such a horrible condition

because her mother asked Him to?”

“What kind of mother would ask Him to?” said Harris. “That’s the point, isn’t it? What kind of a horrible mother is this?”

Harris’s wife was still reading the autobiography. “Carry worked for years to earn the money for surgery,” she told Harris.

“I’ve read the book,” he said, but there was no stopping her.

“She ignored the doctors who said the case was hopeless. Every time a doctor said the case was hopeless, she went home and earned more money for another doctor.” Harris’s wife pointed out the relevant text.

“I’ve read the damn book.”

“The condition was finally cured, because Carry never gave up.”

“So she says,” said Harris.

His wife regarded him coolly. “I don’t think Carry would lie.”

Harris turned his back on his wife and lay on his side. “It’s very late,” he said curtly. He turned off his light, punched angrily at his pillow. Unable to get comfortable, he flipped from side to side and considered getting himself another sherry. “What’s to like about her? I really don’t understand.” Harris felt that his wife had suddenly, frighteningly, become a different person. They had always been so consensual. Not pathologically so—they had their own opinions and their own values, of course—but they had also generally liked the same movies, enjoyed the same books. Suddenly she was holding unreasonable opinions. Suddenly she was a stranger.

His wife did not answer, nor did she turn off her own light. “This is an interesting book too,” she said. He heard pages continuing to turn. “There are hymns in the back. Honey, if you dislike Carry Nation so much, why do you have all these books about her?”

Harris, who always told his wife everything, had not yet found just the right moment to tell her that, the last time he was in Panama, he had summoned a loa. Harris pretended to be asleep.

“You just don’t like her because she had a hatchet,” his wife said quietly. “Because she was a big, loud woman with a hatchet. You’re threatened by her.”

Harris sat bolt upright so that the comforter slid off him completely. Was that fair? Was that at all fair? Hadn’t they had a completely egalitarian, respectful, supportive marriage? And didn’t it make him sort of a joke in the DEA for his lack of machismo, and hadn’t he never, ever complained to her about this?

“Good night,” his wife said evenly, snapping her light off. She had her side of the comforter wound in her fists. It fell just a bit below her shoulders so he could see her neck and the start of her spine, blue in the moonlight, like stitching down her back. She breathed, and her spine stretched like a snake. She pulled the comforter up around her again. She had more than her share of the covers.

Beside the books on her nightstand was the little black toad. Harris had given it to her for Christmas. It stared at him.

And wasn’t he, after all, the person who’d brought Carry back? Now he was glad he hadn’t told her. Harris’s feet were too cold, and he couldn’t sleep at all.

“I’ve read over your report,” Harris’s superior told him. “I took it up top. It’s a little spotty.”

Harris conceded as much. “The form was so small,” he said.

“And not really designed for exactly this sort of problem.” With tone of voice, phrasing, and body language, Harris’s superior managed a blatant show of generosity and condescension. Harris’s superior was feeling superior. It was not a pretty thing to see. It

was not a pretty thing to see in the man who fought so hard to award the Texas Guard a \$2,900,000 federal grant so they could station themselves along the Mexican border disguised as cactus plants and ambush drug traffickers.

Harris looked instead at the map on the wall behind him. It was a map much like the map in Harris's study; the pins were different colors, but the locations were identical. "This is the DEA's official position," his superior said. "The DEA does not believe in zombies. The DEA believes in drugs. One of our agents was inadvertently drugged on Christmas Eve and imagined a great many things. This agent now understands that the incidents in question were hallucinatory.

"If it is ever proved that this agent called forth a loa, then it is the DEA's position that he did so in his leisure time and that the summoning represents the act of an individual and not of an agency.

"The DEA has no knowledge of or connection with the gorilla woman. Her malicious and illegal destruction of private property is a matter for the local police. Do you understand?"

"Unofficially?" asked Harris.

"Unofficially they're reading your report in the men's room for light entertainment," said Harris's superior. "You'll see bits of it on the wall in the second stall." Harris already had. Item six: I don't know where she got the body. Scratched with a penknife or the fingernail-cleaning attachment on a clipper, just above the toilet paper dispenser.

His superior leaned forward to engage in actual eye contact with Harris. It took Harris by surprise; he drew back.

"Unofficially we were impressed with the report the General gave us. We were impressed enough to interview some of the Miami eyewitnesses. They're not the sort of wing nuts in sandals you might expect to find in the tabloids. Our agent spent two hours

with a Mr. Schilling, who owns the Miami bar. He's a pretty savvy guy, and he says she performed feats of superhuman strength. How did she get into the Vatican embassy? No one ever sees her come or go. She took out a crack lab in Raleigh, North Carolina, a week ago. Did you hear about that?"

Harris had not. He was alarmed to hear she was already as far north as Raleigh. He rechecked the map. There it was, a black pin through the heart of North Carolina. "Unofficially the DEA doesn't give a damn where she came from. Unofficially the DEA expects you to take care of her."

Harris nodded. He had always seen that the burden of responsibility was his. With or without the DEA, he had never intended to shirk it. He had already been spending his sleepless nights making plans. "With support?" Harris asked.

"At my discretion. And certainly not visibly."

It was more than Harris had hoped for. He moved to the map on the wall. "She seems to be moving directly north. Sooner or later, I figure she'll hit here." He drew a line north from Raleigh to Richmond, a small circle around Richmond. "Somewhere in here. So. We concentrate our forces in the larger bars.

"Now, the body is the real issue. Is it a real body? If so, it's doable. If not, we're in trouble. If not, we need expert help. But let's say that it is. She shows herself, we attack with the bufotoxin/tetrodotoxin package. This could be a bit tricky. She won't drink, of course. The potion can go right through the skin, and sometimes the bokor simply sprinkles it on the doorstep, but I'm guessing she's the sort who won't remove her shoes. We might try a Shirley Temple, load the tetrodotoxin into the cherry. Even if she won't drink the ginger ale, I'm willing to bet she'll eat the cherry. The dosage will be guesswork, and someone will have to take it to her. Of course, I'm volunteering."

"No hallucinogenics," Harris's superior said.

Harris's mind was filled with cherries. He had to blink to clear it. "I don't understand. We're just trying to persuade the loa to abandon the host body."

"You summoned a weapon. This weapon served us at the Vatican embassy. It's a useful weapon. We don't want it destroyed."

"You don't understand," Harris said. "You're not going to control it. You can't talk to it. You can't reason with it. You can't hurt it. It doesn't feel pity or remorse or self-doubt. It makes no distinction between drugs and liquor and nicotine. And it will not stop. Ever."

"We want it on the team," Harris's superior said.

"You're tying my hands," said Harris. His heart had never beat faster except for maybe that time in Mexico when Rico had slipped and used his real name during a buy, and that time above the Bolivian mountains when two engines failed, and that time when his wife was supposed to be home by seven and didn't arrive until after ten because the class discussion had been so interesting they'd taken it to a bar to continue it and the bar phone had been out of order, and that time he was on bufotoxins.

"The problem is not here in the States with the consumers. The problem is down there with the suppliers."

"You're sending me on a suicide mission."

"We want your loa in Colombia," Harris's superior said.

Harris packed his clothes for Richmond. He had no red underwear, but he had boxers with red valentines on them. They were a gift from his wife. He put them on, making a mental list of the other items he needed. Eggs dyed yellow, fresh eggs, so he would have to pick them up after he arrived. Salt. Red and white candles. The black toad, for luck. Feathers. Harris pulled his Swiss

Army knife out of his pocket and reached for his pillow.

“Patrick?” Harris’s wife called him from the kitchen. “Patrick, would you come here a moment?” Harris put the knife away.

His wife stood in front of the refrigerator. In one hand she had the picture of Carry and her hatchet, torn from *The Girl’s Life*. The edges were dipped in red candle wax. “I found this under the Tater Tots,” Harris’s wife said. “What is it and how did it get in my freezer?”

Harris had no answer. He had to stall and think of one. He opened the refrigerator and got himself a beer. “My freezer?” he said pointedly, popping the flip-top. “Isn’t it our freezer?”

“How did this get in our freezer?”

“I don’t think I would ever have referred to the freezer as my freezer,” Harris said sadly. He drank his beer, for timing rather than thirst, an extra moment to let his point sink in. Then he amplified. “I don’t think you’ll find me doing that. But with you it’s always my kitchen. My Sunday paper. My bed.”

“I’m sorry,” said his wife. She held out the picture. Harris spoke again before she could.

“It signifies,” he said. “It certainly signifies.”

His wife had the tenacity of a hound. “What’s with the picture?”

“I spilled wax on it. Accidentally.” Harris had not survived in the Latin American drug theater without some ability to think on his feet. He took the photograph from her. “Naturally I wanted to remove the wax in such a way as to do as little damage to the picture as possible. This picture came out of a library book, after all. I thought I could remove the wax easier if the wax was hard. So I put it in the freezer.”

“Why were you reading by candlelight?” his wife asked. “You tore the picture out of a library book? That doesn’t sound like you.”

“The book was due back. It had to be returned.” His wife was staring at him. “It was overdue,” Harris said.

He missed the loa in Richmond. A few hours after his wife took the picture out of the freezer and before he’d hidden it under the bed, pinned beneath a glass of salt water to force the loa across an ocean, she struck. Harris’s superior caught him on the car phone on the way to the airport. In addition to Richmond, there’d been a copycat incident in Chicago at a cocaine sale. The sale had been to the DEA. They had worked on it for months, and then some grandmother with a hatchet sent it all south. “I want her on the plane to Colombia yesterday,” Harris’s superior said.

Harris canceled his reservation and drove to Alexandria. She was coming so fast. For the first time, he asked himself why. Was she coming for him?

“Straying tonight, straying tonight, leaving the pathway of honor and right...” The song came from inside the Gateway Bar, punctuated with sounds of breaking glass, splintering wood, and an occasional scream. Harris had been beepered to the spot, but others had obviously arrived first. It was ten in the evening, but across the street two men washed a store window. One sat in his car behind a newspaper. Two more had levered up the manhole cover and knelt beside it, peering down industriously. One man watched Harris from a second-story window above the bar.

Harris set his case on the sidewalk and opened the latch. HAPPY HOUR! the bar marquee read. RAP SINGING! OPEN MIKE! HOGAN CONTEST! He took a bottle of whiskey from his case and poured himself something stiffening. Someone else would have to drive him home. If there was a ride home. Of course there would be a ride home.

He began to sprinkle a circle of salt outside the bar door. He

drew a salt triangle inside it. There was a breath of silence; the awful singing resumed. “She’s breaking the heart of her dear gray-haired mother, she’ll break it, yes, break it, tonight.”

A young woman in a wet T-shirt flew out of the bar, landing on his knee and his salt.

Harris helped her to her feet. She was blond, garishly blond, but that was just the effect of the bar marquee lights, which laid an orange tint over her hair. I SURVIVED CATHOLIC SCHOOL, the T-shirt said. “She told me to go home and let my mother have a good look at me. She called me a strumpet.” The woman had not yet started to cry, but she was about to.

“She was once badly beaten by prostitutes.” Harris was consoling. “Maybe this is a problem area for her.” The beating happened in 1901, when the proprietor of a Texas bar, feeling it would unman him to attack Carry Nation himself, had hired a group of prostitutes to beat her with whips and chains. He had also persuaded his wife to take part. Harris had paid particular attention to the incident, because there was a vulnerability and he wondered if he could exploit it. He was not thinking of real prostitutes, of course. He was thinking of undercover vice cops. Beating was a common step in the creation of a zombie. The *ti bon ange* was thought less likely to return to a body that was being beaten.

Still, there was something distasteful about this strategy. Carry Nation had gone down like a wounded bear, surrounded by dogs. She might have been killed had her own temperance workers not finally rescued her. “There is a spirit of anarchy abroad in the land,” Carry Nation was reported to have said, barely able to stand, badly cut and bruised. For the next two weeks she appeared at all speaking and smashing engagements with a large steak taped to the side of her face. She changed steaks daily.

Probably it had left her a little oversensitive on the subject of professional women. The woman in the street was obviously no strumpet. She was just a nice woman in a wet T-shirt. She seemed

to be in shock. “It was ladies’ night,” she told Harris, over and over and over again.

Salt and gravel stuck to her face and the front of her shirt. Harris pulled out a handkerchief and cleaned her face. He heard twanging sounds inside, like a guitar being smashed. He put away his handkerchief and went back to his case. “I have to go in there,” he said.

She didn’t try to dissuade him. She didn’t even stay. Apparently she had hurt his knee when she landed on him. He hadn’t noticed at first, but now it was starting to throb. The agent in the car, part of his backup, showed the woman a badge and offered to take her out for coffee and a statement.

Harris watched the taillights until the car disappeared. He poured himself another whiskey and had sharp thoughts on the subject of heroines. It was easy for his wife to tell him women were hungry for heroines. She didn’t work undercover among the drug lords in Latin America. Teaching women’s literature didn’t require exceptional courage, at least not on the junior college level where she taught. And when a woman did find herself in a tight spot as this one had just done—well, what happened then? Women didn’t want heroines. Women wanted heroes, wanted heroes to be such an ordinary feature of their daily lives that they didn’t even feel compelled to stay and watch their own rescue. Wanted heroes who came home and did the dishes at night.

Harris rubbed his knee and cautiously straightened it. He took the black toad from his case and slipped it into a pocket. He took a tranquilizer gun and, against all orders, a mayonnaise jar containing the doctored Shirley Temple. The ginger ale was laced with bufotenine rather than bufotoxin. Bufotoxin had proved difficult to obtain on short notice, even for a DEA agent who knew his way around the store, but bufotenine was readily available in South Carolina and Georgia, where the cane toad secreted it, and anyone willing to lick a toad the size of a soccer ball could have some.

Perfectly legal, too, in some forms, although the two state legislatures had introduced bills to outlaw toad-licking.

“Touch not, taste not, handle not!” The voice was suddenly amplified and accompanied by feedback; perhaps the rap singer had left his mike on. The last time Harris had heard Voudon singing he had been in Haiti, sleeping in the house of a Haitian colonel the DEA suspected of trafficking. He had gotten up and crept into the colonel’s study, and the voices came in the window with the moonlight.

*Eh! Eh! Bomba! Heu! Heu! Canga, bafio te! Canga, moune de le!
Canga, do ki la! Canga, li!*

The song had frightened him back to his room. In the morning, he asked the cook about the voices. “A slave song,” she said. “For children.” She taught it to him, somewhat amused, he thought, at his rendition. Later he sang it to a friend, who translated. “We swear to destroy the whites and all they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow.” The cook had served him eggs.

Harris felt no compulsion at this particular moment to be fair, but in his heart he knew that, had his wife been there, she would never have let him go into that bar alone.

The bar was dark; the overheads had all been smashed, and the only light came from something that lay in front of Harris. This something blocked the door so that he could open it just halfway, and he could identify the blockage as Super Mario Brothers 2 by the incessant little tune it was playing. It was tipped onto its side and still glowed ever so slightly. Situated as it was, its little light made things inside even harder to see.

Deep in the bar, there was an occasional spark, like a firefly. Harris squinted in that direction. He could just make out the vacant bandstand. A single chair for a soloist lay on its back under a keyboard that had been snapped in half. The keyboard was still

plugged in, and this is what was throwing off sparks. Harris's eyes began to adjust. Above the keyboard, on the wall, about spark-high, was a nest of color-coded wires. The wall phone had been ripped out and stuffed into one of the speakers. Behind the speakers were rounded shapes he imagined to be cowering customers. The floor of the bar was shiny with liquor.

On the other side of the bar were the video games. Street Fighter, Cyberball, and Punch-Out all bore the marks of the hatchet. Over the tune of the video, Harris could hear someone sniffing. The mike picked it up. Otherwise the bar was quiet. Harris squeezed inside, climbing over Super Mario Brothers 2. His knee hurt. He bent and straightened it experimentally. Super Mario Brothers 2 played its music: *Dee, dee, dee, dee, dee.*

The loa charged, shrieking, from the corner. "Peace on Earth," she howled, as her hatchet cleaved the air by Harris's head, shattering the mayonnaise jar in his hand. The loa's stroke carried her past him.

A piece of broken glass had sliced across his palm. Harris was bleeding. But worse than that, ginger ale laced with bufotenine was soaking into the cut and into the skin around the cut and way down his wrist. He had dosed the Shirley Temple to fell a linebacker with a couple of sips.

Harris dropped the tranquilizer gun and groped blindly to his right until he located a wet T-shirt. He rubbed his hand with it, all in a panic. Someone slapped him. There was a scream. The hatchet sliced through the air above him and lodged itself into the bar's wood paneling. The tune from Super Mario Brothers 2 played on. The other singing started, in cacophonous counterpoint.

"An awful foe is in our land, drive him out, oh, drive him out! Donkey-faced bedmate of Satan," the loa shrieked. She struggled to remove the hatchet head from the wood. She was an enormous woman, a woman built to compete in the shotput event. She would have the hatchet loose in no time. Harris looked about frenziedly.

His heart was already responding, either to bufotenine or to the threat of hatchetation. The tranquilizer gun was on top of Super Mario Brothers 2 and under the loa's very feet, but farther into the bar, at a safer distance, Harris saw his maraschino cherry on the floor. He dropped, ignoring the alarmed flash of pain from the injured knee, and groped with his uninjured hand. Something squished under his palm and stuck to him. He peeled it off to examine it.

It was a flattened cherry, a different cherry. Now Harris could see that the floor of the Gateway Bar was littered with maraschino cherries. One of them was injected with tetrodotoxin. There was no way to tell which just by looking.

Near him, under a table, a woman in a wet T-shirt sat with her hands over her ears and stared at him. NEVADA BOB'S, the T-shirt read. It struck Harris as funny. The word BOB. Suddenly Harris saw that BOB was a very funny word, especially stuck there like that between two large breasts whose nipples were as obvious as maraschino cherries. He started to say something, but a sudden movement to one side made him turn to look that way instead. He wondered what he had been going to say.

The loa brandished her hatchet. Harris retreated into the bar on his knees. The hatchet went wide again, smashed an enormous Crock-Pot that sat on the bar. Chili oozed out of the cracks.

"I shall pray for you," the loa said, carried by the momentum of her stroke into the video games. "I shall pray for all of you whose American appetites have been tempted with foreign dishes." She put her arms around the casing for Ninja Master, lifted the entire thing from the floor, and piled it onto Super Mario Brothers 2. The music hiccupped for a moment and then resumed.

There was now absolutely no exit from the bar through that door. Harris's backup was still out there, peering into manhole covers and washing windows, and the street was two video games away. Harris's amusement vanished. He wasn't likely to be at his

best, alone, weaponless, with a hurt knee, and bufotenine pulsing through his body. Only one of these things could be rectified.

The bar was starting to metamorphose around him. The puddles of liquor on the floor sprouted into fountains, green liquid trees of crème de menthe, red trees of wine, gold trees of beer. The smell of liquor intensified as the trees bloomed. They grew flowers and dropped leaves in the liquid permanence of fountains, an infinite, unchanging season that was all seasons at once. A jungle lay between Harris and the loa. His tranquilizer gun was sandwiched between Super Mario Brothers 2 and Ninja Master. The barrel protruded. Harris wrenched it free. It took three tries and the awesome properties of the lever to move the uppermost video game. Harris tried not to remember how the loa had picked it up off the floor with her hands. He retrieved his gun and went hunting.

She was coy now, ducking away from him, so that he only caught glimpses of her through the watery branches of liquor. A sound here and there indicated that she had stopped to smash a wooden keg or pound the cash register. Harris, himself, was stealthy, timing each footfall to coincide with the tones of Super Mario Brothers 2.

The fountains were endlessly mobile. They rose and diminished unpredictably so that at one moment they could be between him and the loa, screening her from him, and the next moment, without his taking a step, he and the loa could be face-to-face. This gave the hunt a sort of funhouse quality. The loa was likewise changeable now—a big and ugly woman one moment, a lovely young one in a wet T-shirt the next—and this, too, added to the fun. Harris much preferred hunting young women without bras to hunting old ones with hatchets. Harris approved the change until it suddenly occurred to him just what the loa's strategy was. She was fiendishly clever. The same way a maraschino cherry laced with tetrodotoxin could be hidden among other, innocent, maraschino cherries, a loa, assuming the shape of a young woman

in a wet T-shirt, could hide among other young women in wet T-shirts. Harris would have to think of some way to identify her. Failing that, he would simply have to shoot everything in a wet T-shirt with the tranquilizer gun. This would probably require more tranquilizer darts than he had on him.

He would have to entice the loa out of hiding. He would have to make himself into bait.

Several overturned ashtrays were on the floor. It was the work of a moment to locate a cigarette butt, a matchbook with the Gateway Bar logo on it. The matches were damp and sticky. Harris put the butt in his mouth and tried to light one of the matches with his left, bloody hand, his right clenched on the trigger of the tranquilizer gun. He bent several matches before giving up. He switched the match to his right hand, still holding the gun, but not in a ready position, not with a finger on the trigger. He bent several matches before one flamed.

The loa charged immediately. "Filthy poison! Breath of hell!" she screamed. She was old and huge, and her hatchet wavered over her head. There was no time to shoot. Harris rolled.

Harris rolled through the many-colored puddles and fountains of drink and immediately to his feet, shaky on his hurt knee. Before she could transform, before she could regroup herself for another charge, Harris shot her.

She was in the middle of a scream. She stopped, looked down to her right hip where the tranquilizer dart had hit her. Super Mario Brothers 2 celebrated with a little riff: *Dee, dee, dee, dee, dee*. A fountain of red grenadine sprang up. The loa raised the hatchet, took a step into the fountain. The petals of red flowers exploded around her and fell onto her like rain. She threw the hatchet. Her aim was off; it clattered harmlessly a few feet behind her. She took a second step and then fell in his direction. One moment she was an enormous shadow and the grenadine fountain rose behind her like the distant fireworks of the Fourth of July and the smell of

cherries was everywhere; the next she lay in a black heap on the floor, and the fountain had trickled to nothing. But in the tiny, invisible space between those moments, the loa left the body.

Her z'etoile rose from the black heap and spun above it. Harris could see it, like a star in the room. It came toward him slowly, backing him up until his heel touched the hatchet. Then it came faster, fast as falling, blazing larger and unbearably hot. His left hand found the black toad in his pocket so that, at the last possible moment, the moment before contact, when he threw up his hands to protect his face from the searing heat, the toad was in them. The z'etoile swerved and entered the toad instead of him.

Harris dropped the toad to the floor, grabbed the hatchet, and smashed with the blunt end. The toad skittered, and he followed it over the sticky floor among the maraschino cherries, smashing again and again, until the toad cracked in one long rent down the middle and went to pieces. The z'etoile tried to leap away, but it was in pieces too now, like the toad. It shot in many directions and entered video games and broken keyboards and customers and lounge rap singers and ashtrays, but only in subdued, confused sparkles. It was the best Harris could do. He lay down on the floor and imagined there were shoes, open-toed and pointy with nail polish on the toes, canvas and round-toed, leather and bootlike, all about him.

“Come on,” someone said. It sounded like his mother, only she was speaking through a microphone. He must be late for school. The song from Super Mario Brothers 2 was playing in the background, but when wasn't it? Harris tried to open his eyes. He had no way of knowing if he'd succeeded or not. He didn't see his mother. He saw or imagined DEA agents attempting to lift the body of the huge woman from the floor. It took three of them. “Come on,” someone said again, nudging him with a toe.

“I'm coming,” said Harris, who refused to move.

Meanwhile, in an abandoned inner city warehouse...

The background is test tubes and microscopes and a bit of graffiti, visual, not verbal. A bald-headed man stands over a camp stove. He holds an eyedropper above a pot with green liquid inside. Steam rises from the pot. Three more drops, he thinks. He has a snake tattooed on his arm.

Knock, knock! “I said no interruptions,” the man snarls. The liquid in the pot turns white.

The door opens. A shabby man enters, his clothes torn, his hair matted. “Give me some,” the shabby man says.

The bald man laughs at him. “You can’t afford this.”

“I’ll do anything,” says the shabby man.

“This is special. This isn’t for the likes of you.”

“The likes of me?” The shabby man remembers a different life. There is a white house, a wife, two children, a boy and a girl. He is in a business suit, clean, carrying a briefcase. He comes home from work, and his children run to meet him. “Who made me into the likes of me?” the shabby man asks. There is a tear in the corner of one eye.

He lunges for the pot, takes a drink before the bald man can stop him. “Wha—?” the bald man says.

The shabby man clutches at his throat. “Arghh!” He falls to the ground.

The bald man tells him to get up. He kicks him. He takes his pulse. “Hmm. Dead,” he says. He is thinking, I must have made it a little strong. Lucky I didn’t try it myself. He goes back to his cooking. “Two drops,” he says. He thinks, I’m going to need someone new to test it on.

Later that day...

The bald man is dressed in a winter coat. His tattoo is

covered; he wears a hat. He enters a city park. A grandmotherly type drinks from the water fountain. She leans on a cane. Such a cold winter, she is thinking. A group of kids skateboard. "My turn!" one of them says.

The bald man in the hat approaches one of the kids. This kid is a little small, a little tentative. "Hey, kid," the bald man says. "Want to try something really great?"

The grandmother thinks, Oh, dear. She hobbles on her cane to a large tree, hides behind it.

"My mom says not to take anything from strangers," the kid says.

"Just a couple drops," the bald man wheedles. "It's as good as peppermint ice cream." He takes a little bottle from his pocket and uncorks it. He holds it out.

I shouldn't, the kid thinks, but he has already taken the bottle.

"Eeeagh!" Carry Nation emerges from behind the tree. Her cane has become a hatchet; her costume is a black dress with special pockets. "Son of Satan!" she screams, hurtling toward the bald man, hatchet up. *Whoosh!* The hatchet takes off the bald man's hat. *Kaboom!* Carry strikes him with her fist. *Kapow!*

Colors happened on the inside of Harris's eyelids. Harsh, unnatural, vivid colors. Colors that sang and danced in chorus like Disney cartoons, dark colors for the bass voices, bright neons for the high notes. Harris was long past enjoying these colors. Someone had put Harris to bed, but it was so long ago Harris couldn't quite remember who. It might have been his mother. Someone had bandaged his hand and cleaned him up, although his hair was still sticky with liquor. Someone had apparently thought Harris might be able to sleep, someone who had clearly never dosed themselves with bufotenine. Never licked a toad in their life.

Someone brought Harris soup. He stared at it, abandoned on the nightstand, thinking what a silly word *soup* was. He closed his eyes, and the colors sang it for him with full parts. A full choral treatment. Soup. Soup. Souped up. In the soup. Soupçon.

The phone rang, and the colors splashed away from the sound in an unharmonious babble of confusion. They recovered as quickly as the ringing stopped, re-formed themselves like water after a stone. Only one ring. Harris suddenly noticed other noises. The television in his room was on. There were visitors in the living room. His wife was sitting on the bed beside him.

“That was your superior,” she said. Harris laughed. Souperior. “He said to tell you, ‘Package delivered.’ He said you’d be anxious.”

He wishes he worked for the CIA, the colors sang to Harris. Package delivered.

“Patrick.” Harris’s wife was touching his arm. She shook it a little. “Patrick? He’s worried about you. He thinks you may have a drinking problem.”

Harris opened his eyes and saw things with a glassy, weary clarity. Behind his wife was the *Oprah* show, her favorite. No wonder he hadn’t noticed the television was on. Harris’s mind was moving far too fast for television. Harris’s mind was moving far too fast for him to be able to follow what his wife was saying. He had to force his mind back, remember where she thought he was in the conversation.

“I’m a moderate drinker,” he said.

“He sent over a report. Last night. A report the government commissioned on moderate drinking. It’s interesting. Listen.” She had pages in her hand. Harris was pretty certain they hadn’t been there before. They popped into her fingers before his very eyes. She ruffled through them, read, with one finger underlining the words. “To put it simply, people who drink a lot have many problems,

but few people drink a lot.

“ ‘People who only drink a little have fewer problems, but there are a great many people who drink a little.

“ ‘Therefore, the total number of problems experienced by those who drink a little is likely to be greater than the total number experienced by those who drink a lot, simply because more people drink a little than a lot.’”

Harris was delighted with this. It made no sense at all. He was delighted with his wife for producing it. He was delighted with himself for hallucinating it. He would have liked to hear it again. He closed his eyes. The colors began singing obligingly. To put it simply, people who drink a lot have many problems, but few people drink a lot.

“All I had was a Shirley Temple,” Harris told his wife. He remembered the voices in the living room. “Do we have company?”

“Just some women from my class,” she answered. She put the report down uncertainly. “He’s just worried about you, Patrick. As your supervisor, he’s got to be worried. The stress of field work. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, if you have a problem. You’ve handled it better than most.”

Harris skipped ahead in this conversation to the point where he explained to her that he didn’t have a drinking problem and she was persuaded. She would be persuaded. She was a reasonable woman and she loved him. He was too tired to go through it step by step. Now he was free to change the subject. “Why are there women in the living room?”

“We’re just doing a project,” his wife said. “Are you going to drink your soup?” *Soup, soup, soup*, the colors sang. Harris didn’t think so. “Would you like to see the project?” Harris didn’t think he wanted this either, but apparently he neglected to say so, because now she was back and she had different papers. Harris

tried to read them. They appeared to be a cartoon.

“It’s for the women’s center,” his wife said. “It’s a Carry Nation/Superhero cartoon. I thought maybe you could help advise us on the drug stuff. The underworld stuff. When you’re feeling better. We think we can sell it.”

Harris tried to read it again. Who was the man in the hat? What did he have in his bottle? He liked the colors. “I like the colors,” he said.

“Julie drew the pictures. I did the words.”

Harris wasn’t able to read the cartoon or look at the pictures. His mind wasn’t working that way. Harris’s mind was reading right through the cartoon as if it were a glass through which he could read the present, the past, and the future. He held it between himself and the television. There was a group of women on *Oprah*. They were all dressed like Carry Nation, but they had masks on their faces like the Lone Ranger, to protect their real identities. They were postmenopausal terrorists in the war on drugs. A man in the audience was shouting at them.

“Do you know what I’m hearing? I’m hearing that the ends justify the means. I could hear that in Iraq. I could hear that in China.”

The women didn’t want to be terrorists. The women wanted to be DEA agents. Harris’s supervisor was clearing out his desk, removing the pins from the map in his office as if casting some sort of reverse Voudon hex. He had lost his job for refusing to modify recruitment standards and implement a special DEA reentry training program for older women.

In a deserted field in Colombia, a huge woman gradually came to her senses. She stared at the clothing she was wearing. She stared around the Colombian landscape. “Where the hell am I?” her ti bon ange asked. “¿Que pasa?”

From the safety of his jail cell, Manuel Noriega mourned for his lost yachts.

A woman in a wet T-shirt played a new video game in the dark back room of a bar. MY MOTHER TOLD ME TO BE GOOD, BUT SHE'S BEEN WRONG BEFORE, the T-shirt read. Bar-smasher was the name of the video game. A graphic of Carry Nation, complete with bonnet and hatchet, ran about evading the police and mobs of angry men. Five points for every bottle she smashed. Ten points a barrel. Fifty points for special items such as chandeliers and pornographic paintings. She could be sent to jail three times. The music was a video version of "Who Hath Sorrow, Who Hath Woe." The woman in the T-shirt was very good at this game. She was a young woman, and men approved of her. Her boyfriend helped her put her initials on the day's high score, although anyone who gets the day's high score probably doesn't need help with the initials. She let him kiss her.

Harris was back in Panama, dancing and raising a loa. The Harris in Panama could not see into the future, but even if he could, it was already too late. Raising a loa had not been his real mistake. By the time the loa came, everything here had already occurred. Harris had made his real mistake when he took the toad. Up until that moment, Harris had always played by the rules. Harris had been seduced by a toad, and in yielding to that seduction he created a whole new world for himself, a world without rules, just exactly the sort of world in which Harris himself was unlikely to be comfortable.

"Come on," his wife said. "What do you really think?" She was so excited. He had never seen her so animated.

She was going to be old someday. Harris could see it lurking in her. Harris would still love her, but what kind of a love would that be? How male? How sufficient? These things Harris was unsure of. For these things he had to look into himself, and the cartoon looking glass didn't go that way.

He held the cartoon panels between himself and his wife and looked into her instead. He had never understood why Carry Nation appealed to her so. His wife was not religious. His wife enjoyed a bit of wine in the evening and thought what people did in the privacy of their own homes was pretty much their own business. Now he saw that what she really admired about Carry Nation was her audacity. Men despised Carry Nation, and Harris's wife admired her for that. She admired the way Carry didn't care. She admired the way Carry carried on. "I always look a fool," Carry wrote. "God had need of me and the price He exacts is that I look a fool. Of course, I mind. Anyone would mind. But He suffered on the cross for me. It is little enough to ask in return. I do it gladly."

"I know it's not literature," Harris's wife said, a bit embarrassed. "We're trying to have an impact on the American psyche. Literature may not be the best way to do that anymore."

Harris's wife wanted to encourage other women not to care whether men approved of them or not, and she wanted and expected Harris to say he approved of this project.

He tried to focus again on the surface of the glass, on the cartoon panels. What nice colors.

"Kapow!" Harris said. "Kaboom!"

*We come from the cemetery,
We went to get our mother,
Hello mother the Virgin,
We are your children,
We come to ask your help,
You should give us your courage.*

—VOUDON SONG