

jedella ghost

TANITH LEE

Here's a new kind of ghost story, unlike any you've ever read before, featuring a new kind of "ghost," one who lives in the world and yet at the same time is isolated from it in a very peculiar way . . . perhaps forever.

Tanith Lee is one of the best-known and most prolific of modern fanta-sists, with more than sixty books to her credit, including (among many others) The Birthgrave, Drinking Sapphire Wine, Don't Bite the Sun, Night's Master, The Storm Lord, Sung in Shadow, Volkhavaar, Anackire, Night's Sorceries, Black Unicorn, Days of Grass, The Blood of Roses, Vivian, Reigning Cats and Dogs, When the Lights Go Out, Elephantasm, and The Gods Are Thirsty, and the collections Tamastara, The Gorgon, Dreams of Dark and Light, Nightshades, and Forests of the Night. Her short story "The Gorgon" won her a World Fantasy Award in 1983, and her short story "Elle Est Trois (La Mort)" won her another World Fantasy Award in 1984. Her brilliant collection of retold folk tales, Red As Blood, was also a finalist that year, in the Best Collection category. Her most recent book is a new novel, Faces Under Water. She lives with her husband in the south of England.

* * * *

That fall morning, Luke Baynes had been staying a night with his grandmother up on the ridge, and he was tramping back to town through the woods. It was about an hour after sun-up, and the soft level light was caught broadcast in all the trees, molasses-red and honey-yellow. The birds sang, and squirrels played across the tracks. As he stepped on to the road above the river, Luke looked down into the valley. There was an ebbing mist, sun-touched like a bridal veil, and out of this he saw her come walking, up from the river, like a ghost. He knew at once she was a stranger, and she was young, pale and slight in an old-fashioned long dark dress. Her hair was dark, too, hanging down her back like a child's. As she got closer he saw she was about 18, a young woman. She had, he said, not a pretty face, but serene, pleasing; he liked to look at her. And she, as she came up to him, looked straight at him, not boldly or rudely, but with an open interest. Luke took off his hat, and said, "Good morning." And the girl nodded. She said, "Is there a house near here?" Luke said there was, several houses, the town was just along the way. She nodded again, and thanked him. It was, he said, a lovely voice, all musical and lilting upward, like a smile. But then she went and sat at the roadside, where a tree had been cut and left a stump. She looked away from him now, up into the branches. It was as if there was nothing more to say. He did ask if he could assist her. She answered at once, "No, thank you." And so, after a moment, he left her there, though he was not sure he should do. But she did not appear concerned or worried.

"She had the strangest shoes," he said.

"Her shoes?" I asked. Luke had never seemed a man for noting the footwear

of women, or of anyone.

“They were the colours of the woods,” he said, “crimson and gold and green. And—they seemed to me like they were made of glass.”

“Cinderella,” I said, “run off from the ball.”

“But she had on both,” he said, and grinned.

After this we went for coffee and cake at Millie’s.

I had no doubt he had seen this woman, but I thought perhaps he had made more of her than there was. Because I am a writer people sometimes try to work spells on me—Oh, John Cross, this will interest you. You can *write* about this. It does them credit, really, to make their imaginations work. But they should take up the pen, not I. Usually, I have enough ideas of my own.

About ten, I went back to my room to work, and did not come out again until three. And then I, too, saw Luke’s lady of the mist. She was standing in the square, under the old cobweb trees, looking up at the white tower of the church, on which the clock was striking the hour.

People going about were glancing at her curiously, and even the old-timers on the bench outside the stables were eying her. She was a stranger, and graceful as a lily. And sure enough, she seemed to have on sparkling stained-glass shoes.

When the clock stopped, she turned and looked around her. Do any of us look about that way? Human things are cautious, circumspect—or conversely arrogant. And she was none of these. She looked the way a child does, openly, perhaps not quite at ease, but not on guard. And then she saw—evidently she saw—the old men on the bench, Will Marks and Homer Ivory and Nut Warren. She became very still, gazing at them, until they in turn grew uneasy. They did not know what to do, I could see, and Nut, who was coming on for 90 years, he turned belligerent.

I stepped out and crossed the square, and came right up to her, standing between her and the old boys.

“Welcome to our town. My name’s John Cross.”

“I’m Jedella,” she said at once.

“I’m glad to meet you. Can I help?”

“I’m lost,” she said. I could not think at once what to say. Those that are lost do not speak in this way. I knew it even then. Jedella said presently, “You see, I’ve lived all my life in one place, and now—here I am.”

“Do you have kin here?”

“Kin?” she said. “I have no kin.”

“I’m sorry. But is there someone—?”

“No,” she said. “Oh, I’m tired. I’d like a drink of water. To sit down.”

I said, and I thought myself even then hard and cruel, “Your shoes.”

“Oh. That was my fault. I should have chosen something else.”

“Are they glass?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

I took her straight across to Millie’s, and in the big room sat her at a table, and when the coffee came, she drank it down. She seemed comfortable with coffee, and

I was surprised. I had already realized, maybe, that the things of civilized life were not quite familiar to her.

Hannah returned and refilled our cups—Jedella had refused my offer of food. But as Hannah went away Jedella looked after her. The look was deep and sombre. She had eyes, Jedella, like the rivers of the Greek Hell—melancholy, and so dark.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“With—?”

“With that woman who brought the coffee.”

Hannah was a robust creature, about 40. She was the wife of Abel Sorrensen, and had five children, all bright and sound—a happy woman, a nice woman. I had never seen her sick or languishing.

“Hannah Sorrensen is just fine.”

“But—” said Jedella. She stared at me, then the stare became a gaze. “Oh, those men outside . . .”

“The old men on the bench,” I said.

Jedella said, “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be impertinent.”

I said, squaring my shoulders, “I think you should see Doc McIvor. He’s bound to have some plan of how to go on.”

I had formed the impression she was a little mad. And, I confess, I wondered how she would react to the notion of a doctor.

But Jedella smiled at me, and then I saw what Luke had only heard in her voice. Her smile made her beautiful. For a moment I saw her as my muse. I wondered if I would fall in love with her, and feed upon her mystery. The writer can be selfish. But, in my own defence, I knew that here was something rare, precious—rich and strange.

“Of course I’ll see him,” she said. “I have no one, and nowhere to go. How kind you are.”

What happens when the doctor is sick? An old adage to be sure. But Doc McIvor had gone to visit his niece in the city, who was expecting her first baby. Everyone knew but me. But then, I had only lived in the town for five years.

I did not want, I admit, to give Jedella, with her Lethe eyes and Cinderella shoes and heavenly smile, over to the law, so I took her to my rooming-house, and there Abigail Anchor came sweeping forth in her purple dress.

“I can give her that little room on the west side,” said Abigail. “This girl has run away. I know it.”

“Do you think so?” I asked.

“Oh, to be sure. Her daddy is some harsh man. Perhaps forcing her to marry. I won’t sit in judgement, Mr. Cross. Indeed, Mr. Cross, you may know more than you say. But I won’t ask it—”

“I don’t know anything, Mrs. Anchor.”

“That’s as you say, Mr. Cross.”

I met Luke Baynes that night in the Tavern. We had a beer. He grinned at me again.

“They’re talking. Your sweetheart’s stashed away at Ma Anchor’s.”

“Yours and mine. You saw her first.”

“Then it is the girl with glass shoes.”

“A strange one,” I said. “She keeps to herself. But when I came out tonight, she was at her window and the blind was raised. She was looking along the street.”

Luke said, “Don’t you know anything?”

“Not a thing. Abigail has sheltered her from the goodness of her heart. Her name’s Jedella.”

“I don’t believe,” said Luke, “she’s real. She’s a ghost.”

“I took her arm,” I said. “She’s real as you or I.”

“What is it then?” he said.

“I think she’s crazy. A little crazy. Probably someone will come after her. She can’t have come far.”

“But,” he said, “she’s—*wonderful*.”

“Yes,” I said. “A fascinating woman. The woman you can’t have is always fascinating.”

“You’re too clever,” he said. “I fancy going courting.”

“Don’t,” I said. I frowned into my drink. “Don’t.”

Two weeks passed, and Jedella lived in the room on the west side of the Anchor house. She gave no trouble, and I had had a word with Abigail about the rent. I believe Abigail helped with any female things that Jedella might have needed, and certainly, I was presented with a bill before too long. My trade had brought me moderate success, and I did not flinch.

Otherwise, I saw no reason to interfere. I gathered from Abigail that Jedella did not much wish to go out, yet seemed quite well. She ate her meals in private, and enjoyed the services of the house. Now and then I noted Jedella at her window, gazing along the street. Once I lifted my hand, but she did not respond. I let it go at that.

Of course, word had got around about the unknown young woman. I was some-times pestered, but knowing next to nothing myself, could be of little assistance.

Did I want to draw Jedella out? Rather, I was inclined to avoid her. Real life that takes the form of a story, or appears to, is so often disappointing. Or, if one learns some gem, must one become a traitor who can no longer be trusted with anything? I prefer to invent, and that keeps me busy enough.

Luke did try to introduce himself to the woman on the west side. He took her flowers one afternoon, and a box of sweets in a green bow another. But, Jedella apparently seemed only amazed. She did not respond as a woman should, hopefully a flirtatious, willing woman. He was baffled, and retreated, to the relief of the two or three young ladies of the town who had such hopes of him, some day.

On the last Friday of that second week, just as I had finished a long story for the *Post*, I heard at Millie’s that Homer Avory had died in his bed. He was nearly 80, which for the town is quite a youngster, and his daughter was in a rage, it seemed, for she had always loved him and had been planning a birthday dinner.

Everyone went to a funeral then, and presently I heard it was fixed for Tuesday. I looked out my black suit with a sensation of the droll and the sad. My father had once warned me, "You don't feel a death, John, not truly, till you start to feel your own." He was 50 when he said this, and he died two years after, so I may not argue. But I felt it was a shame about Homer, and about his daughter, who was 60 herself, and had lost her husband ten months before to a fever.

On Monday evening I was reading some books that had come in the mail, when a light knock sounded on my door.

It was not Abigail, evidently, who thundered, nor Luke, who burst in. I went to see, and there stood the apparition called Jedella, still in her dark dress, but with a new pair of simple shoes. Her hair was done up on her head.

"Good evening, Miss Jedella. Can I help you?"

"Mr. Cross," she said, "something is happening tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Oh, do you mean poor old Homer's funeral?"

"That," she said, "is what Abigail Anchor called it."

"Abigail? Well, what else. A burial, a funeral."

She stared straight at me. She said, still and low, "But what is that?"

Abigail had her rules, but it was just light. I drew Jedella into the room and left the door an inch ajar.

I made her sit down in my comfortable chair, and moved the books.

"How do you mean, Miss Jedella?"

She seemed for a moment disturbed. Then she composed her pale face and said, "They say the—old man—has *died*."

"He has."

"Was he one of the three men I saw in the square that day?"

"Yes, just so."

"He has some terrible illness," she said. She looked about distractedly. "Am I right?"

This unnerved me. I could not put it together. I recalled, I had thought her slightly insane. I said, quietly, "Unfortunately, he was old, and so he died. But, please believe, he had no ailment. He passed away peacefully in his sleep, I gather."

"But what do you mean?" she said.

"He's dead," I answered. "I'm afraid it happens." I had intended irony, but she gazed at me with such pathos, I felt myself colour, as if I had insulted her. I did not know what to say next. She spoke first.

"This funeral, what is it?"

"Jedella," I said firmly, "do you say you don't know what a funeral is?"

"No," said Jedella, "I have no idea."

If I had been three years younger, I suspect I would have thought myself the victim of some game. But peculiar things happen. Oddities, differences. I sat down in the other chair.

"When a man dies, we put him in the earth. If you are religious, you reckon he waits there for the last trumpet, which summons him up to God."

"In the earth," she said. "But how can he stand it—is it some punishment?"

"He's dead," I replied, like stone. "He won't know."

"How can he not know?"

In the window, the light of day was going out. And it came to me, as sometimes it did when a child, that perhaps this was the end, and the sun would never return.

In ten minutes or so, Abigail's boy would sound the bell for dinner. Jedella did not join the communal table.

"Jedella," I said, "I can't help you. It's too profound a question for me. Can I ask the minister to call on you?"

She said, "Why?"

"He may be able to assist you."

She said, looking at me, her countenance bewildered and yet serene even now, as if *she* had seen that I and all the world were mad— "This is a terrible place. I wish that I could help you, but I don't know how. How can you bear it, Mr. Cross, when you witness such suffering?"

I smiled. "I agree, it can be difficult. But then, it could have been worse. We all come to it."

She said, "To what?"

The bell rang. Perhaps it was early, or I had misjudged. I said, "Well, you're very young, Jedella." Some phantom of my father's words, perhaps.

But Jedella went on looking at me with her Lethe eyes. She said, flatly, "What does that mean?"

"Now this is silly. You keep asking me that. I mean that you're young. About sixteen, maybe."

I confess, I tried to flatter, making her a little less than she appeared to be. One should always be careful with a woman's age, one way or the other. In those days 16 was the dividing line; now it is more 20.

But Jedella, who Luke had thought a ghost, stared into my face. She was not flattered.

She said, "Sixteen years do you mean? Of course not."

"Sixteen, eighteen, whatever it may be."

Outside, my fellow boarders were going down the stairs; they would hear us talking and realize that John Cross had the woman in his room.

Jedella stood up. The last glimmer of light was behind her, and played about her slender shape, making her seem suddenly thin and despoiled. Abigail must have persuaded her to put up her hair. She was a shadow, and all at once, the shadow of someone else, as if I had seen through her—but to what?

"I am," she said, "sixty-five years of age."

I laughed. But it was a laugh of fright. For I could see her there like a little old lady, five years on from Homer's daughter.

"I'm going down to my meal, Jedella. Are you willing to come?"

"No," she said.

She turned, moved; the new lamplight from beyond the door caught her. She was 18. She went out on to the landing, and away up the house.

What we ate that night I have no notion. Someone—Clark, I think—regaled us with jokes, and everyone guffawed, but for Miss Pim, and Abigail, who did not approve.

I chuckled, too—but God knows why. Did I even hear what was said?

In the end we remembered, Homer was to go into the ground tomorrow, and a silence fell. I recall how Abigail lit a candle in the window, a touching gesture, old superstition, but kind and sweet, to guide a soul home.

I had mentioned nothing of what Jedella had said to me, and no one had ventured to ask what she and I had had to converse on.

In my room, I walked about. I lit the lamp and picked up my books, and put them down.

Over in the west end of the house, she was, that girl with dark hair, who had come up from the morning mist, like a ghost.

In God's name, what had she been talking of? What did she suggest? What did she want?

I have said, if I had been a few years younger, I would have thought it a game. And, 40 years older, as now I am, I might have deemed it quite proper, to go across the house and knock on the door. Times change, and customs with them. It was not possible then.

At length I went to bed, and lay in the dark, with all the gentle quiet of that place about me, my haven from the city. But I could not rest. She said she did not know what a funeral was, she inquired how he could bear it, Homer, going into the ground. She told me she was 65 years old.

She was mad. She had come from the river in stained glass shoes, and she was crazy.

I dreamed I was at my father's burial, which once I had been, but no one else was there, save for Jedella. And she looked down into the pit of black earth, and she said to me, "Will you leave him here?"

I woke with tears on my face. I had not wanted to leave him there. Not my father, that lovable and good man, who had given me so much. But surely it had not been my father any more, down there in the dark?

The first light was coming, and I got up and sat by the window. The town was calm and the birds sang. Far off beyond the woods and the forests of pines, I could see, it was so clear, the transparent aurora of the mountains.

I knocked on Jedella's door about 9.30 in the morning, and when she opened it, I said, "Will you walk with me?" I wanted no more clandestine meetings in the rooms.

The funeral was at two. Outside there was nothing out of the ordinary going on. The trees had on their scalding full colour. The stores were open, and a dog or two were nosing down the street. Jedella looked at all this, in a sad, silent way. She reminded me of a widow.

We went into the square, and sat on the vacant bench under the cobweb trees.

"I want you to tell me, Jedella, where you come from. If you will."

She said, "Beyond the woods. Up in the pines. A house there."

"How far away?" I said. I was baffled.

"I don't know. It took me a day to reach this town. A day, and the night be-fore."

"Why did you come here?"

"I didn't know what else to do. I didn't mean to come. I was only walking."

"Why then did you leave the house—the house in the pines?"

"They had all gone," she said. For a moment she looked the way I have only seen human things look after some great disaster, the wreck of a train, the random horror of a war. I did not know it then. What she spoke of was a terror beyond her grasp. It had hurt her, but it had no logic, like the acts of God.

"Who had gone?"

"The people who were there with me. Often they did, of course, but not all at once. The house was empty. I looked."

"Tell me about the house."

Then she smiled. It was the lovely, lilting smile. This memory made her happy.

"It was where I was, always."

"Where you were born?" I asked.

As if from far off, she smiled on at me. "The first thing I remember," she said.

She sat on the bench, and I realized absently that in her old-fashioned dress, she was clad as an old lady, like Homer's daughter or Elsie Baynes, or some other elder woman of our town. The air was sweet and crisp and summer had died. I said, "I'd like to hear."

"It's a big white house," she said, "and there are lots of rooms. I was usually in the upper house, though sometimes I went down. All around was a high wall, but I could see the tops of the trees. There were trees inside the garden, too, and I walked there every day, except in winter. Then it was too cold, when the snow was down."

"Who was in the house with you?"

"Many people. Oh, lots of people, Mr. Cross. They looked after me."

Curiously I said, as if encouraging a child. "Who did you like the best?"

"I liked them all—but you see, they didn't stay for long. No one ever stayed."

She was sad once more, but in a deeper, softer way. She was indeed like a child, that was what I finally saw then, a child in an old lady's dress, which fitted. "When I was a girl," she said, oddly mimicking my thought, "I used to be upset by it, the going away. But in the end, I knew that it had to be."

"Why did it have to be?" I asked, blindly.

"That was their lives. But I remained. That was mine."

"Tell me more about the house," I said.

"Oh, it was only a house. It was where I lived. Some of the rooms were large, and some, my bedroom, for example, quite small."

"What did you do there?"

"I read the books, and I painted on paper. And I played the piano. There was always something to do."

"Your father and mother," I said.

Jedella glanced at me. "What do you mean?"

The sun was warm on my face and hands, and yet the air was cool. A blue shadow descended from the tower of the church. Something had hold of me now, it held me back. I said, "Well, tell me about something that you enjoyed especially."

She laughed. Her laugh was so pretty, so truthful and young. "There were a great many things. I used to imagine places, places I'd never been—cities of towers from the books I'd read, and rivers and seas. And animals, too. There are lions and

tigers and bears, aren't there?"

"So I believe."

"Yes, I believe it, too. Have you ever seen them?"

"In cages," I said.

She looked startled a moment. But then she brushed that away from her like a fallen leaf. "I longed to see them, and they said, one day."

I said, "Did they tell you when?"

"No. I suppose it was meant to be now. After I left the house."

"Then they told you you must leave?"

"Oh no. But when they were gone, the doors were all open. And the big door in the wall, that, too."

I was trying now, quite hard, to follow along with her, not to delay or confuse by protestations. I thought how, when I had spoken of her being born, she had had that look of the polite guest at the party, when you say something he does not understand, but is too nice to debate on.

"The door had never been open before?"

"No, never."

"Did—they—say why not?"

"I never asked, because, you see, it was the way I lived. I didn't need anything else."

She was young—or was she young?—yet surely there had been some yearning, like her wish to see the animals from the books. The young feel they are prisoners even when they are not, or not decidedly. Something came to me. I said, "Did you see pictures in your books of lion cubs?"

"Oh yes," she said.

I said, "And once, you were a child."

"Of course."

Above us the clock struck—it must have done so before. Now it was noon.

Jedella looked about her. She said, "Something's very wrong here. Can't you tell me what it is?"

"It's the way we are, the way *we* live," I said.

She sighed. She said, and there was that in her voice that filled me with a sort of primeval fear, "Is it like this everywhere?"

I said, intuitively, "Yes, Jedella."

Then she said, "Abigail Anchor brought some books up to me. It was a kindness. I didn't understand them."

"In what way?"

"Things happen in those books—that don't happen."

I could have said this might be true of much poor fiction. But clearly she did not imply this.

"You had books in your house," I said. "What about those books?"

"Parts had been cut away," she said. I said nothing, but as if I had, she added, "I used to ask where those pieces were. But they said the books had been there a long time, that was all."

I said, blindly, as before, "For example, the lion cubs were there, and they grew up into lions. But you didn't know how they had arrived there." She was silent.

I said, "And how long did the lions live, Jedella? Did the books say?"

Jedella the ghost, turned her dark eyes on me. She was no longer a temptation, not my muse. She said, "Always, of course. To live—is to live."

"For ever?"

She said and she did nothing. I felt my heart beat in a wild random crescendo, and all at once that peaceful square, that town where I had come to be quiet, was rushing all apart, like a jigsaw, broken. Then it settled. My heart settled.

"Will you come," I said, "to Homer's funeral?"

"If you think so," she said.

I got up and offered her my arm. "We'll take some lunch in Millie's. Then we'll go on."

Her hand was light on me, as a leaf of the fall.

She was quiet and nearly motionless all through the ceremony, and though she looked down at his old, creased, vacant face, before the coffin was closed, she made no fuss about it.

But when everything was done, and we stood alone on the path, she said, "I used to watch the squirrels playing, in the trees and along the tops of the wall. They were black squirrels. I used to throw them little bits of cake. One day, John Cross, I saw a squirrel lying there on the grass in the garden. It didn't move. It was so still I was able to stroke its side. Then someone came from the house. I think it was a man called Orlen. And he picked up the squirrel. He said to me, 'Poor thing, it's fallen and stunned itself. Sometimes they do. Don't fret, Jedella. I'll take it back to its tree, and it will get better.'"

Over the lawn, Homer's daughter walked, leaning on the arm of her son. She was rubbing at her face angrily muttering about the meat dishes and the sweet pie she had been going to make for the birthday. Her son held his hat across his middle, head bowed, troubled the way we often are at grief we cannot share.

"So the squirrel was stunned," I said.

"Yes. And later he pointed it out to me, running along the wall."

"That same squirrel."

"He told me that it was."

"And you think now that Homer is only stunned, and we've thrown him down into the ground, and now they'll cover him with earth, so he can't get out."

We stood, two respectful and well-behaved figures. Her life had been an acceptance, and she was coming to accept even now the unacceptable.

"Jedella, will you describe for me very carefully the way you came here, from your house in the pines?"

"If you want."

"It would be a great help," I said. "You see, I mean to go there."

"I can't go back," she said.

I thought she was like Eve, cast out of Eden because she had failed to eat the Forbidden fruit.

"No, I won't make you. But I think I must. There may be some clue to all of this."

She did not argue with me. She had begun to accept also her utter difference, and that she was outnumbered. She guessed something had been done to her; as I did. She had ceased to debate, and would never resist.

When I first took up my life here, I went frequently to walk or ride in the wooded country. Then I got down to my work and adventured less. To ride out on this cold bright morning was no penance, though I had grown a little stiff, and guessed I should feel it later, which I did. The horse was a pretty mare by the name of May.

We went with care along the route Jedella had outlined, even drawing—she had a fair hand with a pencil—landmarks I might look for. Beyond the road we climbed into the woods and so up the hill called Candy Crag, and over into the pines.

I was high up by nightfall, and I could feel the cold blowing down from the distant snow-lined mountains. I thought, as I made my camp, I might hear a wolf call up on the heights, but there was only stillness and the swarm of the stars. Such great calm is in those places and the sense of Infinity. Some men can only live there, but for me, I should be lost. I like the little things. This was enough, a night or two, a day or two, up so close to the sky. At dawn I went on.

A couple of times I saw my fellow humans. A trapper with his gun, a man far down on the river. Both glimpsed me, and hailed me, and I them. For the rest the wild things of the woods came and went, a porcupine, a deer, the birds, the insects. May stepped mildly through their landscape, her skin shining like a flame. I spoke to her now and then, and sang her a few songs.

I found the house with no trouble in the afternoon of that second day. Jedella had travelled more quickly than I, unless she had lost track of time.

You could see the mountains from there very well, a vast white battlement rising from the pelt of the pines. But near at hand, the forest was thick, so dense we had to pick our way. The house was in a clearing, as Jedella had told me, shut round with its tall white wall. It had a strange look, as if it had no proper architecture, no style of anywhere at all. Like boxes put together, and roofs put on, and windows set in. Something a child had made, but a child without fantasies.

The gate was open, and the sunlight slanted down through the trees and showed me a man standing there, on the path. He wore a white suit, and was smoking a cigarette. I had become used to the pipes and chewing-tobacco of my town. And somehow I had anticipated—God knows what. He was a very old man, too, but spare and upright, with a mane of thick, whitish hair, and eyebrows dark as bands of iron.

He lifted his hand, as he saw me. And this was not the lonely greeting of the trapper or the river man. I could see, he had expected me, or someone. Had he come there to wait for me?

I am not given to drama, except sometimes when I write, and can have it there on my own terms. But I eased myself off the horse and undid my saddlebag and look out the two brightly coloured shoes that looked as if they were made of glass, and holding these out, I walked up to him.

“Jedella’s slippers,” he said. “Did she get so far in them?”

“Quite far.”

“They’re not glass,” he said, “something I fashioned, when I was younger. A sort of resin.”

“I’d hoped,” I said, “you would come and fetch her.”

“No, I can’t do that. I haven’t time now. It had to end, and she has to go on as best she can. She wouldn’t know me now, in any case. She saw me for five or six years, when she was a child, and I was in my twenties.”

“That would make her old,” I said.

“Sixty-five is her age.”

“So she said.”

“And of course,” he said, “it can’t be, for she is eighteen or nineteen, a girl.”

Behind me, May shook her amber head, as if in warning, and a bird hammered a moment on the trunk of a tree.

“I came here,” I said, “hoping to find out.”

“Yes, I know it. And I shall tell you. I am Jedediah Goeste, and for now this house is mine. Will you step inside?”

I went with him up the path, leading May, who I settled in a sunny place. The trees were all around inside the wall, the trees where the black squirrels played. I had been struck by his name—Scandinavian, perhaps, and its affinity of sound to what Luke and I had come to call her: Miss Ghost. *Jedediah*, too, the father’s name, and the daughter taking a feminized version, Jedella. Was it so simple? For yes, if he had been in his 20s, he would be near his 90s now, and she would be 65.

Inside the door was an open room, white-walled, quite pleasant, with ornaments and pictures, and with a large fireplace where some logs and cones were burning. Hot coffee stood on a table. Had he known the hour of my coming? No, that was too fanciful. It seemed to me I had better be as careful as I had been when riding through the denseness of the pines. Something strange there was, but not all of it could or need be.

A wide staircase ran up from the room and above was a sort of gallery. I noticed another man standing there, and Jedediah Goeste gestured to him quietly, and the man went away.

“My servant. He won’t disturb us.”

“Is that Orlen?” I said.

“Oh, no. Orlen is long gone. But Orlen was a favourite of Jedella’s, I believe, when she was still a child. It was a pity they all had to leave her. She used to cry in the beginning. She cried when I left her. But later, they told me, she was philosophical. She had grown accustomed.”

I had given him in turn my name, and he had taken the privilege of the old to call me at once *John*. We sat down in two large velvet armchairs, and I dunk some of the coffee, hot and sweet and good.

“I have come back here,” he said, “to die. It’s comfortable for me here, and I have all I want. A few months, no more.”

I said, “Then shouldn’t you have kept her here?”

“She was given, implicitly, the choice. She might have remained, although I didn’t think she would. If she had been here when I returned, I would, I think, have had to pretend to be someone else. And even then, the shock—“

“Your age. But it’s your death that was the reason for letting her go.”

“Yes. I can’t anymore manage things, you see. The experiment is over.”

“Experiment,” I said.

“Come now,” he said, “I believe you grasp it, John. I truly believe you do.”

“I’ve read rather widely,” I said. “Years ago, I came across the legend of the Buddha.” Goeste folded his hands. He smiled his old strong teeth. “Buddha was originally a prince,” I said, “and they resolved to keep all ugly things from him—poverty, disease, old age and death. He saw only beauty. Until one day something went wrong, and he found out the truth.”

Jedediah Goeste said. “You see, John, I began to think of it even when I was quite young. From the start, everything comes our way. Even when they tell us lies, the facts are still before us. There is a moment when we must work it out. The old lady in the mauve dress with her hands crippled by rheumatics. The dead dog the cart ran over. The bird shot for the table. In Europe in the Middle Ages they fixed a skull over the church door. Under that skull was written, *Remember thou shall be as me.*” He leaned back. His eyes were black, like hers, but, paler with the watery encroachment of old age. “How does the infant learn?” he said. “He copies. The sounds from the mouths that become language. The gestures that become man-ners. The opinions that he will either adopt or rebel against. And he learns that the sun rises and sets, and as the days and the years go by, he grows, he changes. All around, the lesson is we grow to our fullness, but after that we decline. From the summit of that hill, the path leads downwards. Down to weakness and sickness, down to the first lines and wrinkles, the stiffening and the lessening. Down to the bowed spine and the loss of teeth and sight and hearing. Down into the grave that awaits us all. *Remember thou shall be as me.* We are taught from the commence-ment, and reminded over and over.”

He pointed at the rug before the fire, where I had laid the glass shoes that were not.

“I made those, to show it could be done. I’ve done many things like that. I had money, John, and time, and a brain. And, I confess, here and there I have exper-imented with living things—not to hurt them, never that. But to see. Always, to see.”

“Jedella,” I said, “was never told about old age, or death. Illness was for some reason mentioned, but as something that no longer existed. Pages were cut from books. The people of the house were always young and fit, and when it became likely they would cease to be, they were sent away. And when a squirrel died under her window, Orlen told her it was stunned, and took it back to its tree, and later he showed her the squirrel running on the wall.”

“A girl came to me in the city,” said Jedediah Goeste, “it was shocking, I had given her a child. She didn’t want it. So she was paid, and I took the child to myself. That was Jedella. She was a baby—younger than Buddha, who I believe was twelve—too young to have learned anything at all. It was so perfect, John, and I had the means. I brought her here, and for those first years I was her friend. And after, of necessity, I had gone, those who came after me carried on my work. They were well-recompensed, and clever. There were no mistakes. She grew up in a world where no one sickened or aged or died. Where *nothing* died, and no death was

seen, not even the dead animals for her food. Not even the leaves of the trees.”

It was true. She had seen only the pines, renewal but not obvious slough—and then she had come from the open door and down into the woods of fall, where ruby and yellow and wine, the death descends from every tree.

“*Now* she sees it,” I said. “She saw it as sickness to begin with. Or something that made no sense. But she’s turning towards the terrible fact, Mr Goeste, that all things perish.”

“Recollect,” he said, “that she is sixty-five years old. She’s like a girl. So many lessons, all the same. Can they be unlearned?”

I stood up. I was not angry, I have no word for what I was. But I could no longer sit in the chair before the fire nor drink the fragrant coffee, nor look in that old man’s face that was so strong and sure.

“You’ve acted God, Mr Goeste.”

“Have I? How can we presume to know how God has acted, or would act?”

“You think you’ve made her eternally young. You think you’ve made her *im-mortal*.”

“I may have done,” he said.

I answered him, “In a world where all things come to an end—what will be-come of her?”

“You will take care of her now,” he said, so easily, so gently. “Your quiet little town. Good people. Kind people.”

“But her pain,” I said, “her *pain*.”

Jedediah Goeste looked at me with her look. He was innocent, in her way. There was no chance against such innocence. “Pain, I think, is after all in the unfathomable jurisdiction of God. I’ve never been able to believe that mankind, for all its faults, could devise so horrible and so complex a thing.”

“She never questioned?” I asked.

“Questions spring from doubt. Now she questions, I imagine?”

A log cracked in the fire. There was a small ache in my back I would not have had a year ago.

“If you wish, I should be happy for you to be my guest tonight, John.”

I thanked him and made some excuse. Even then, even there, the etiquette of my father stayed with me. Those first lessons.

As I reached the door, Jedediah Goeste said one final thing to me: “I’m glad that she found her way to you.”

But she had not found her way to me, nor to anyone, how could she? She had not found her way.

* * * *

The years have passed in the town, and it has been faithful to Jedella. She has been protected as best we might. She has her little house behind the church, and her piano that we sent for from the city, her paints, her books—all kinds of books now. She reads for days on end, with her clear dark eyes. Sometimes she will read something out for me when even my glasses fail to help with the small print.

More people have come to the town with time, and for them she is a mystery

that, largely, they are indifferent to. The new creatures of the world are very self-involved and this has taken away some of the curiosity, the prying, that came to us so naturally. But then, the avalanches of war, and fear of war, the wonderful inventions that cause so much harm and confusion and noise, all these things change us, the children of this other world, much more so.

Luke died in a war. I have said elsewhere, and will not here, what I did there. Many were lost, or lost themselves. But others take those places. I was even famous for a year, and travelled in the cities and on other continents, and grew tired and came home. And there the town was in its misty morning silence that the new cacophony cannot quite break.

That was a morning like this one, a fall morning, with the colours on the trees, and the new restaurant, where Millie's used to be, was having its windows washed.

But today the restaurant is old and familiar, and instead I passed Jedella's house, and she came out and I knew I should go in, just for an hour, maybe, and drink coffee, and eat her chocolate cake which she vaunts, and rightly so.

I went with caution over that road, for now there are sometimes motor-bikes upon it, and as I did I saw her waiting, pale and slender, a girl, with her hair cut short and permed and a touch of lipstick on her mouth.

She touched my arm at her door.

"Look, John," she said.

My eyes are not so good as I would like, but there in the pure, sheer sunlight, I did my best to see. She pointed at her cheek, and then, she put one finger to her hair.

"Is it your powder, Jedella? Yes, your hair looks grand."

And then I did see, as she stood smiling up at me, her eyes full of the morning, of the new beginning of all things, I did see what she had found to show me with such pride. The little crease that had grown in her cheek. The single bright silver hair.