

Some Strange Desire

a short story by Ian McDonald

19 November, 10:30 P.M.

The hru-tesh is a beautiful piece of craftsmanship. Mother says he can remember

Grandmother taking him, while still very small, to watch Josias Cunningham, Gunsmith by Appointment, of Fleet Street at work on it. In that small shop, in

those small hours when the city slept, Josias Cunningham worked away while the

spires and domes of Wren's dream of London rose from the ashes of the Great Fire, chasing and filing and boring and inlaying. It was a work of love, I suppose. A masterpiece he could never disclose to another living soul, for it was the work of demons. On the bone-handled stock is a filigreed silver plate on

a pivot-pin. Underneath, an inscription: Diabolus me Fecit. The Devil Made Me.

He was ul-goi of course, Josias Cunningham, Gunsmith by Appointment, of Fleet Street.

After three hundred years, the firing mechanism is still strong and precise. It

gives a definite, elegant click as I draw back the bolt and lock it.

Lights are burning in the apartment across the street. The white BMW sits rain-spattered under its private cone of yellow light. Have you ever known anyone who drives a white BMW to do anything or be anyone of any significance?

I

cannot say that I have, either. I blow on my fingers. I cannot let them become

chilled. I cannot let their grip on the hru-tesh slacken and weaken. Hurry up and go about your business, goi, so I can go about mine and get back into the dry and the warm. Cold rain finds me in my bolt-hole on the roof, penetrates my

quilted jacket like needles. None so cold as the needle I have waiting for you,

goi. I touch the thermos flask beside me, for luck, for reassurance, for the blessing of the hahndahvi.

Come on, goi, when are you going to finish what you are doing and go out to collect the day's takings from your boys? Voices are raised in the lighted apartment across the yellow-lit cobbled street. Male voices. I cannot make out

the words, only the voices.

Even on my rooftop across the street, the blow is almost palpable. And then the

weeping. A door slams. I uncap the thermos, shake a tiny sliver of ice into the

breech of the hru-tesh. The street door opens. He is dressed in expensive leather sports gear. In the dark I cannot read the labels. He turns to swear one

last time at the youth at the top of the stairs. I let a drop of saliva fall from my tongue onto the needle of ice resting in the chamber. Slide the breech

shut. Move from my cover. Take aim, double-handed, over the fire-escape rail. Coptic crosses and peace medallions catch the yellow street light as he bends to

unlock the car door. The silver filigree-work of the hru-tesh crafted by the

three-hundred-year-dead hand of Josias Cunningham, Gunsmith by Appointment, glitters in that same light. I squeeze the trigger. There is only the faintest tok. He starts, stands up, clasps hand to neck. Puzzlement on his meatlike face. Puzzlement under that so-cool baseball cap at that ideologically correct angle. And it hits him. He keels straight over against the car. His head rests at a quizzical angle on the rain-wet metal. Complete motor paralysis. I am already halfway down the fire escape. Flat shoes. No heels. I have it all planned. As I had thought, bundling him into the passenger seat is the hardest part of the operation. I think I may have broken a finger wresting the keys from him. It will be academic, soon enough. As I drive up through Bethnal Green and Hackney to Epping Forest I pass at least twenty other white BMWs. I sample his CD selection, then scan across the AM wavebands until I find some anonymous Benelux station playing hits from the forties. Childhood tunes stay with you all your life. I chat to him as we drive along. It is a rather one-sided conversation. But I do not think he would have been much of a conversationalist anyway. It is really coming down, the wipers are on high speed by the time we arrive at the car park. I shall get very wet. Another crime against you, goi. It is wonderful how much can be expressed by eyes alone. Anger, incomprehension, helplessness. And, as I pull the syringe out of my belt-pouch, terror. I tap the cylinder a couple of times. I can tell from his eyes he has never seen so much in one needle before. He may consider himself honored. We have our own discreet sources, but we, like you, pay a price. I squat over him. He will take the image of who I am into the dark with him. Such is my intention. "Hear these words: you do not touch us, you do not harass us, you do not try to recruit us or bully us into your stable. We are tesh, we are older and more powerful than you could possibly imagine. We have been surviving for centuries. Centuries." He cannot even flinch from the needle. I find a sheltered spot among the bushes and crushed flat lager cans, away from the steamed-up hatchbacks, and go into tletchen. I strip. I dress in the denims and shell-suit top I brought in my backpack. I stuff the rainsoaked clothes in around the hru-tesh. I go to the cardphone half a mile down the road and call a minicab to pick me up at the pub nearby and take me back to Shantallow Mews. The driver is pleased at the generosity of the tip. It is easy to be generous with the money of people who have no further use for it. The hru-tesh goes back to its place under the hall floor-boards. Rest there for a long time, beautiful device. The unused needles go into the kitchen sink to

melt and run and lose themselves in the sewers of London town. The soaked clothes go into the machine, the jacket will need dry cleaning. I make tea for

my sister, bring it to him on the Harrods tray with the shelduck on it. The only light in the room is from the portable television at the foot of the bed. The remote control has slipped from his hand. His fingers rest near the "mute" button. Late-night/early morning horror. Vampires, werewolves, Freddie's.

A little saliva has leaked from his lips onto the pillow. So peaceful. On the pale blue screen, blood is drunk, limbs dismembered, bodies chain-sawn apart. I

want that peace to last a little longer before I wake him. By the light of the

screen I move around the room setting the watches and wards, the little shrines

and votaries to the Five Lords of the tesh that keep spiritual watch around my

sister. Pere Teakbois the Balancer, Tulashwayo Who Discriminates, File' Legbe'

Prince of the Changing Ways, Jean Tombibie' with his bulging eyes and hands crossed over replete belly, Saint Semillia of the Mercies: the five hahndahvi.

I trim wicks, tap ash from long curls of burned incense, pour small libations of

beer and urine. I may not believe that hahndahvi are the literal embodiments of

the character of the Universe, I have lived long enough among the goi to know the Universe is characterless, faceless. But I do believe power resides in symbol and ritual.

He is awake. The brightness in his eyes is only the reflection of the television

screen. Awake now, he seems a thing of horror himself. Shrunken, shriveled, transparent skin drawn taut over bird bones, fingers quivering spastically as they grip the edge of the duvet. Trapped in that final tletchen, too weak to complete the transformation. His breasts are slack and withered like the dugs of

old bitches.

"I've made tea, but it's probably cold now." I pour a cup, milk and sugar it, hold it steady as he lifts it to his lips. The tea is cold, but he seems glad of it.

"You were out." His voice is a grotesque whisper.

"Business." He understands. Our clients, both ul-goi and goi, are never business.

"That pimp?"

"He won't trouble you again. I can promise that."

"This isn't forty years ago. They've got computers, genetic fingerprinting."

"The people in the car park, if any of them even noticed, will tell them it was

a woman got out of the car. The taxi driver will swear he drove a man."

"Still... "

I take his hand in mine, modulate my pheromone patterns to convey calm, assurance, necessity. It was more than just a pimp harassing us to join his stable, more than him breaking into this apartment, terrorizing my sick sister,

overturning the furniture, desecrating the shrines of the hahndahvi. It was security, tesh security, which is more powerful and paranoid than any goi conception of the word, for it has its roots in ten thousand years of secrecy.

I offer him a Penguin biscuit. He shakes his head. Too weak. Too tired. I

pull

the stand from its position behind the headboard close by the side of the mattress. From the fridge in the kitchen I take the next-to-last bag of blood.

As I run a line in, he says, "There was a call for you. I couldn't get to it. Sorry. It's on the answering machine."

I am back in the kitchen, filling a basin with water. I test the temperature with my elbow.

"Vinyl Lionel?"

I fetch the natural sponge I bought from the almost-all-night chemist around the

corner, whip the water to froth with Johnson's baby-bath.

"A new one," my sister Cassiopia says.

I pull back the duvet. The smell of the sickroom, the terrible smell of prolonged, engrained sickness, is overpowering. As the blood, my blood that I pumped out of myself into plastic bags yesterday, runs into him, drip by drip, I

wash my sister's body. Gently. Lovingly. With the soft natural sponge and the gentle baby-bath; neck and arms and sagging, flat breasts, the small triangle of

pubic hair and the tiny, wrinkled penis and testicles, smaller even than a child's, and the shriveled labia.

15-16 November

Only four days. It seems like a small forever, since the afternoon Cassiopia came back from the pitch at Somerville Road with twenty pounds in his pocket.

"He insisted on paying. One of the lace-G-string-and-stockings brigade. Took me

back to his place. Why do they always have posters of racing cyclists on their

walls?"

Though we do not do it for money, genetic material is the price we ask for our

services, cash in hand is never refused. I had taken the twenty down to the off-license for a bottle of Californian Chardonnay and a sweet-and-sour pork while Cassiopia changed for the evening client, an ul-goi who liked to tie our

wrists to the ceiling hooks while he slipped rubber bands around our breasts, more and more and more of them, tighter and tighter and tighter. Thank God once

every six weeks seemed to satisfy him. Vinyl Lionel had Word he was Something in

the Foreign Office. Whatever, he had taste in tailoring. We made sure he paid for his game with the rubber bands.

When I returned Cassiopia had tletched. He is very beautiful as a woman. When he

tletches, it is like a flower blossoming. Yet there was a subtle change in the

atmosphere, something in his personal aroma that smelled not right.

"It hurts," he said. "Here. Here. Here. And here..." He touched breasts, loins,

neck and on the final here, pressed fingers into belly in the way that says deep

within, everywhere.

Of course, you never think it can be you. Your lover. Your partner. Your sibling. I gave him two paracetamol and a cup of corner-store Chardonnay to wash

them down with.

He scratched all night. I could not sleep for his scratching, scratching, scratching. In the shower he was covered in yellow crusted spots. The sting of

hot water made him wince. Even then I pretended not to know. I convinced myself

he had picked up some venereal bug from one of the goi. Despite the fact that our immune systems make us almost invulnerable to goi infections. Such was my self-deception, I even bought some under-the-counter antibiotics from the Almost-All-Night Pharmacy.

You can imagine the smell of sickness. It is not hard, even for your limited senses. Imagine, then, a whole street, a whole town, terminally sick, dying at

once. That is what I smelled when I came home after an afternoon with a first-timer who had passed furtive notes: what are you into, I'm into, I got a

place... under the partitions of the cubicles in the gents' toilets.

I found him lying on the carpet, hands opening and closing spastically into tight, futile fists. He had failed halfway in tletchen, caught between like something half-melted and twisted by flame. I cleaned thin, sour, vomited-up coffee and slimmer's soup from his clothes. Over and over and over and over and

over and over, he whispered, Oh my God oh my God oh my God oh my God. I got him

into bed and a fistful of Valium down him, then sat by his side in the room that

was filling with the perfume of poisoned earth, looking at everything and seeing

only the shadow my thoughts cast as they circled beneath my skull.

We have a word for it in our language. Jhash. There is no direct translation into your languages. But you know it. You know it very well. It haunts your pubs

and clubs and Saturday night scores. It is the unspoken sermon behind every mint-scented condom machine on the toilet wall. Like ours, yours is a little word too. When I was small and ran in gray flannel shorts wild and heedless over

the bomb-sites of Hackney Marshes, my grandmother, who was keeper of the mysteries, taught me that jhash was the price Pere Teakbois the Balancer with his plumb-bob in his hand demanded of the tesh in return for their talents. I think that was the point at which my long, slow slide from faith began: Grandmother had been a gifted spinner of tales and his graphic descriptions of

the terrible, enduring agony of jhash left me nightmarish and seriously doubting

the goodness of a god who would deliberately balance the good gifts he had given

us with such dreadfulness.

The bomb-sites have given way to the tower-blocks of the post-war dream and those in turn to the dereliction and disillusionment of monetarist dogma and I

no longer need faith for now I have biology. It is not the will of Pere Teakbois, Pere Teakbois himself is no more than the product of ten thousand years of institutionalized paranoia: jhash is a catastrophic failure of the endocrinal, hormonal and immune systems brought on by the biological mayhem of

tletchen.

It can take you down into the dark in a single night. It can endure for weeks.

None are immune.

Let me tell you the true test of caring. We may be different species, you and

I,
but we both understand the cold panic that overcomes us when we first realize
that we are going to die. We understand that there is an end, an absolute
end,
when this selfness will stop and never be again. And it terrifies us.
Horrifies
us. Paralyzes us, in the warmth of our beds, in the dark of the night with
our
loved ones beside us. The end. No appeal, no repeal, no exceptions.
You are goi and I am tesh and both love and life are different things between
us
but this we both understand, that when we contemplate the death of the one we
love and it strikes that same paralyzing, cold panic into us as if it were we
ourselves, that is caring. That is love. Isn't it?

20 November, 9:15 P.M.

Vinyl Lionel's Law: Everyone is either someone's pimp or someone's
prostitute.

By that definition, Vinyl Lionel is our pimp, though he would be quite
scandalized to think that the word could be applied to himself.

Vinyl Lionel subscribes to the roller-and-tray school of cosmetics and wears
a

studded leather collar. Studs, in one form or another, characterize Vinyl
Lionel's personal style. Studded wristbands, studded peak to his black
leather

SS cap, studded motorbike boots pulled up over his zip-up PVC one-piece with
studded thighs and shoulders.

I remember PVC from the Swinging Sixties. You sweated like shit in those
boots

and raincoats. Vinyl Lionel maintains they are trying to remix the Sixties
for

the Nineties. Vinyl Lionel should know about the Sixties. He has an old-age
pensioner's free bus pass, but he won't show it to anyone. If the Nineties
are

anything like the Sixties, it will be that whatever is happening is always
happening somewhere else. My memory of the Swinging Sixties is that they may
have been swinging in the next street or the party next door, but never
swinging

in your street, at your party.

Strangefella's is the kind of place where advertising copywriters and the
editors of those instantly disposable street culture magazines like to
convince

people they party all night when in fact they are at home, in bed, exhausted
by

their workloads, every night by ten-thirty. If the Nineties are swinging, it
is

somewhere else than Strangefella's. Vinyl Lionel has a customary pitch as far
as

the architecture will permit from the AV show and the white boys with the
deeply

serious haircuts doing things to record decks. He is always pleased to see
me.

The pleasure is mutual. When he has a couple of gin slings down him he can be
a

delightfully effervescent conversationalist.

"Darling heart, you're looking especially radiant tonight!" He kisses me, on
the

cheek, not the mouth-to-mouth soul kiss of tesh meeting. He calls for

cocktails.

"Your mother is well, dismal suburbia notwithstanding?"

I reply that business is booming, and tell him about the pimp.

"I heard about that on News at Ten. That was you? A gangland killing, they said,

made to look like an overdose." He takes a Turkish from his silver cigarette case, taps it once, twice, three times. "That was bit of a bloody risk, wasn't

it, dear heart?"

"He'd broken in. Credit him with some intelligence, he could have worked out something was going on."

"Still, Orion darling, you could have left him to us. It's our job to look after

you, and yours to provide us with what we want. You people have a vicious streak

a mile wide. One of your less endearing traits. Smoke?" I take the proffered cheroot.

"So, this new client."

Vinyl Lionel examines his chrome-polished nails. "Well, there's not a lot to say

about him. Nice enough boy. You wouldn't think to look at him, but then you never do, do you? Fat Willy recruited him, you know, the usual way." He moistens

a finger in his Singapore sling, draws a yin-yang symbol on the marble table top.

"How much does he know?"

"The bare minimum. He'll talk the leg off you, dear heart. One of those confessional types. Well, fiddle-dee-dee, if that isn't him now..." Vinyl Lionel

waves flamboyantly, trying to attract the attention of the lost boy by the door,

fidgeting and conspicuous in a chain-store gent's-ready-made suit. "Oh God, I told him don't dress up, Strangefella's isn't that kind of place, and what does

he do? Well, don't blame me if the gorillas bounce him."

"Nerves, Lionel," I say. "You were as bad the first time."

"Bitch," says Vinyl Lionel. He resents any overt reminder of his fall from youth

and beauty while we remain changeless, ageless, ever-young. He beckons the young

man between the tables and the smokes and the back-beat and the bass. "I'll bet

you fifty he drives a Ford."

One bet I won't be taking, Lionel. A Ford Sierra, metallic gray, F-registration,

the odd rust spot. Something to do with metallic finishes, I always think. Garfield crucified upside-down on the back window. Open the glove compartment and cassettes fall out. Home bootlegs, all of them, apart from the mandatory copy of Graceland. Nothing more recent than three years ago.

He is nervous. I can smell it over his Heathrow Duty-Free after-shave.

Nerves,

and something I cannot quite place, but seems familiar. I do not much like being

driven by someone who is so nervous. Gaily lit buses swing past headed down across the river South London way; girls in smogmasks, denim cut-offs over cycling shorts and ski-goggles weave past on clunking ATBs like the outriders of

some totalitarian, body-fascist invasion. I light up a cheroot Vinyl Lionel gave

me as a keepsake as we surge and stop, surge and stop along Shaftesbury

Avenue.

Lionel, the outrageous old ul-goi, was right. This one seems to want to talk but

is afraid of me. I weave pheromones, draw him into a chemical web of confidence.

On New Oxford Street, he opens.

"I cannot believe this is happening," he says. "It's incredible; that something

so, so, huge, could have been secret for so long."

"It has several thousand years of pedigree as a working relationship," I say.

"As long there have been tesh, there have been ul-goi. And our mutual need for

secrecy from the goi."

"Goi?"

"Humans." I wave a lace-gloved hand at the rain-wet people huddling along Holborn. "Those. The ignorant mass."

"And tesh?"

I draw a circle on the misted-up quarter-light, bisect it with a curving S-shape. Yin and yang. Male and female in one. From time before time the symbol

of the tesh.

"And ul-goi?"

"Those who can only achieve sexual satisfaction with a tesh."

The word seems to release him. He closes his eyes for a reckless moment, sighs.

"It's funny. No, it's not funny, it's tragic, it's frightening. It's only recently I've found where it started. When I was a kid I read this comic, the Eagle or the Lion or the Victor. There was one story, one scene, where this skindiver is trying to find out who's been sabotaging North Sea drilling rigs and the bad guys catch him and tie him to the leg of the rig until his air

runs out. That was where it started for me, with the guy in the rubber suit tied and

helpless, with death inevitable. It was such an anti-climax when he got rescued

in the next issue. I used to fantasize about wetsuits. I must have been Jacques

Cousteau's number one fan." He laughs. Beneath folding umbrellas, girls in Sixties-revival PVC rain-coats and Gerry-Anderson-puppet hairdos dart between the slowly grinding cars, giggling and swearing at the drivers.

"You don't know what it is at that age. But it was a major motivation in my childhood: tight clothing. Superheroes, of course, were a real turn-on. I remember one, where the Mighty Thor was being turned into a tree. Jesus! I nearly creamed myself. I was addicted to downhill skiing. If there was ever anything in the Sunday color supplements about downhill skiing, or ballet, I would cut it out, sneak it up to my room and stare at it under the sheets by the

light from my electric blanket switch.

"Jane Fonda was, like, the answer to my prayers. I used to borrow my sister's leotard and tights and dress up, just to feel that head-to-toeness.

Sometimes...

sometimes, when the evenings were dark, I'd pass on late-night shopping with the

family so I could dress up, nip over the back fence onto our local sports field

and walk about. Just walk about. It was good, but it wasn't enough. There was something in there, in my head, that wanted something more but couldn't tell me

what it was.

"When I was about seventeen I discovered sex shops. The number of times I

would
just walk past because I never had the nerve to push that door and go in.
Then
one day I decided it couldn't be any harder going in than just walking past.
It
was like Wonderland. I spent the fifty pounds I'd been saving in one pig-out.
There was one magazine, Mr. S.M... I'd never seen anything like it before, I
didn't know people could do that sort of thing to each other. Then, after I'd
read them all twenty, fifty, a hundred times, I realized it wasn't doing it
anymore. I bought new mags, but they were the same: there were things going
on
in my head that were far, far more exciting than what was going on in those
photographs. In my best fantasies, there were things like no one had ever
thought of before."
"This happens," I say. They all think they are the only ones. They start so
differently, men and women, back among the sand castles and Dinky toys and
Cindy
dolls of childhood; they think there cannot be anyone else like them. But
already they are being drawn toward us, and each other. They realize that
what
excites frenzies of passion in others leaves them cold and uncomprehending,
and
everything falls apart: friends, lovers, jobs, careers, hopes, dreams,
everything except the search for that something that will fulfil the fantasy
in
their heads. Can anyone be as tormented, as depraved, as they? I do not
disillusion them: fantasies and confessions, and the small absolutions and
justifications I can offer; these are treasures held close to the heart. Tell
me
your story, then, ul-goi boy in your best suit, and I will listen, for,
though
it is a story I have heard ten thousand times before, it is a story that
deserves to be heard. You have had the courage that so many lack, the courage
to
reach for what you truly want.
For the homosexual, it is the image in the mirror.
For the transvestite, it is the flight from ugliness to imagined true beauty.
For the sado-masochist, it is the two-edged embrace of guilt.
For the bondage enthusiast, it is the relieved plummet from the burden of
being
adult into the helplessness of childhood.
For the rubber fetishist, it is the return to the total comforting enclosure
of
the womb.
For the ul-goi, it is the frustration of desiring to be what they are and
what
they are not simultaneously.
Where have all the fluorescent re-spray Volkswagen Beetles started to come
from?

What is he saying now? About some 0898 Sexline he used to dial called "Cycle
Club Lust"; how he sat hanging on the line running up obscene bills waiting
for
the payoff that never came. How Telecom regulations compel them to use words
like "penis" and "buttocks" and "breasts." How can you get off on words like
that? he says.
And I sense it again. A scent... Almost totally masked by my own pheromone
patterns; that certain uncertainty. I know it. I know it.... Tower cranes
decked
out with aircraft warning lights like Christmas decorations move through the

upper air. Towers of London. Close to home now. I show him a place to park the car where it will be fairly safe. In this area, you do not buy car stereos, you merely rent them from the local pub. On the street, with his coat collar turned up against the drizzle, he looks desperately vulnerable and uncertain. The merest waft of pheromones is enough to firm that wavering resolution. Gentle musks carry him through the front door, past the rooms where we cater for the particular tastes of our goi clients, up the stairs and along the landing past Cassiopia's room, up another flight of stairs to the room at the top. The room where the ul-goi go.

18 November

On the third day of the jhash, I went to see Mother, a forty-five-minute train journey past red-brick palazzo-style hypermarkets under Heathrow's sound-footprint. When the great wave of early-Fifties slum clearance swept the old East End out into the satellite New Towns, it swept Mother and his little empire with it. Three years after the bombing stopped, the Blitz really began, he says. After three hundred years of metropolis, he felt a change of environment would do him good. He is quite the born-again suburbanite; he cannot imagine why we choose to remain in the city. With his two sisters, our aunts, he runs a discreet and lucrative brothel from a detached house on a large estate. The deviations of suburbia differ from, but are no less deviations than, the deviations of the city, and are equally exploitable. As Mother opened the door to me an elderly man in a saggy black latex suit wandered down from upstairs, saw me, apologized and vanished into the back bedroom. "It's all right dear, he's part of the family," Mother shouted up. "Really, you know, I should stop charging him. He's been coming twenty years, boy and man. Every Tuesday, same thing. Dresses up in the rubber suit and has your Aunt Ursa sit on his face. Happily married; he's invited us to his silver wedding anniversary party; it's a nice thought but I don't think it's really us, do you?" To the eye they were three fortysomething slightly-but-not-too-tarty women, the kind you see pushing shopping trolleys around palazzo-style hypermarkets, or in hatchbacks arriving at yoga classes in the local leisure center rather than the kind that congregate at the farthest table in bars to drink vodka and laugh boorishly. My mother was born the same year that Charles II was restored to the monarchy. We kissed on the mouth, exchanging chemical identifications, tongue to tongue. I made no attempt to mask my feelings; anxiety has a flavor that cannot be concealed. "Love, what is it? Is it that pimp again? Is he giving bother?" He sniffed

deeply. "No. It's Cassiopia, isn't it? Something's happened to him. The Law? Darling, we've High Court judges in our pockets. No, something else. Worse. Oh

no. Oh dear God no."

Chemical communication is surer and less ambiguous than verbal. Within minutes

my aunts, smelling the alarm on the air, had cut short their appointments with

their clients and congregated in the back room where no non-tesh was ever permitted. In the deep wing-chair drawn close to the gas heater sat my grandmother, seven hundred years old and almost totally submerged into the dark,

mind wandering interminably and with death the only hope of release from the labyrinth of his vast remembering. His fingers moved in his lap like the legs

of stricken spiders. We spoke in our own language, sharp-edged whispers beneath

the eyes of the hahndahvi in their five Cardinal Points up on the picture rail.

Jhash. It was made to be whispered, that word. I suggested medical assistance.

There were prominent doctors among the ul-goi. Sexual inclinations do not discriminate. What with the advances goi medicine had made, and the finest doctors in the country, surely something...

"It must be concern for your sister has temporarily clouded your judgment," whispered Aunt Lyra, "otherwise I cannot imagine you could be so stupid as to consider delivering one of us into the hands of the goi."

My mother hushed him with a touch to his arm.

"He could have put it a bit more subtly, love, but he's right. It would be no problem to recruit an ul-goi doctor, but doctors don't work in isolation.

They

rely upon a massive edifice of researchers, technicians, laboratories, consultants: how long do you think it would be before some goi discovered the truth about Cassiopia?"

"You would let my sister, your daughter die, rather than compromise security?"

"Do not ask me to answer questions like that. Listen up. One of our regulars here is an ul-goi lawyer. Just to make conversation I asked him once what our legal position was. This is what he told me: we may think and talk and look like

humans, but we are not human. And, as non-humans, we are therefore the same as

animals --less than animals; most animals enjoy some protection under the law,

but not us. They could do what they liked to us, they could strip us of all our

possessions, jail us indefinitely, use us to experiment on, gas us, hunt us down

one by one for sport, burn us in the street, and in the eyes of the law it would

be no different from killing rats. We are not human, we are not under the protection of the law. To compromise our secrecy is to threaten us all."

"He is dying and I want to know what to do."

"You know what to do." The voice startled me. It was like the voice of an old,

corroded mechanism returning to life after long inactivity. "You know what to do," repeated my grandmother, stepping through a moment of lucidity into this last decade of the millennium. "Can I have taught you so badly, or is it you were such poor pupils? Pere Teakbois the Balancer demanded jhash of us in return

for our enormously long lives, but Saint Semillia of the Mercies bargained a ransom price. Blood. The life is in the blood; that life may buy back a life."

Of course I knew the story. I even understood the biological principle behind the spurious theology. A massive blood transfusion might stimulate the disrupted

immune system into regenerating itself, in a similar sense to the way our bodies

rebuild themselves by using goi sex cells as a template. I had known the answer

to jhash for as long as I had known of jhash itself: why had I refused to accept

it and looked instead for, yes, ludicrous, yes, dangerous alternatives that could not possibly work?

Because Saint Semillia of the Mercies sells his dispensations dear.

Mother had given me a shoeboxful of equipment, most of it obsolete stuff from the last century when the last case of jhash had occurred. She did not tell me

the outcome. Either way, I was not certain I wanted to know. In the house on Shantallow Mews I ran a line into my arm and watched the Six O 'clock News while

I pumped out two plastic bags. Internecine warfare in the Tory party. Some of the faces I knew, intimately. The blood seemed to revive Cassiopia but I knew it

could only be temporary. I could never supply enough: after only two pints I was

weak and trembling. All I could do was hold the sickness at bay. I took the icon

of Saint Semillia of the Mercies down from the wall, asked it what I should do.

His silence told me nothing I did not already know myself. Out there. They are

few, they are not perfect, but they exist, and you must find them. I tretched,

dressed in black leotard, black tights, black mini, black heels, wrapped it all

under a duster coat and went down to the Cardboard Cities.

What is it your philosophers teach? That we live in the best of all possible worlds? Tell that to the damned souls of the cardboard cities in the tunnels under your railway stations and underpasses. Tesh have no such illusions. It has

never been a tenet of our faith that the world should be a good place. Merely survivable.

Cloaked in a nimbus of hormonal awe, I went down. You would smell the piss and

the beer and the smoke and the dampness and something faint and semi-perceived

you cannot quite recognize. To me that thing you cannot recognize is what is communicated most strongly to me. It is despair. Derelicts, burned out like the

hulls of Falklands' warships, waved hallucinatory greetings to me as I swirled

past, coat billowing in the warm wet wind that blew across the wastelands. Eyes

moved in cardboard shelters, cardboard coffins, heads turned, angered by the violation of their degradation by one who manifestly did not share it. When it

is all you possess, you treasure even degradation. Figures gathered around smudge fires, red-eyed from the smoke, handing round hand-rolled cigarettes.

Where someone had scraped enough money for batteries there was dance music

from
boom boxes. They would not trouble me. My pheromones made me a shadowy,
godlike
figure moving on the edge of the darkness.
Where should I go? I had asked.
Where no one will be missed, my mother had replied.
I went to the viaduct arches, the motorway flyovers, the shop doorways, the
all-nite burger-shops, the parking lots and playgrounds. I went down into the
tunnels under the stations.
Trains ground overhead, carrying the double-breasted suitmen and cellphone
women
back to suburbs ending in "ng" or "wich," to executive ghettos with names
like
Elmwood Grove and Manor Grange. The tunnels boomed and rang, drops of
condensation fell sparkling in the electric light from stalactites seeping
from
the expansion joints in the roof. I paused at the junction of two tunnels.
Something in the air, a few vagrant lipid molecules carried in the air
currents
beneath the station.
How will I know them? I had asked.
You will know them, my mother had said.
The trail of pheromones was fickle, more absent than present. It required the
utmost exercise of my senses to follow it. It led me down clattering concrete
stairways and ramps, under striplights and dead incandescent bulbs, down,
underground. As I was drawn deeper, I dissolved my aura of awe and wove a new
spell: allure. Certain now. Certain. The lost children in their cribs barely
acknowledged my presence, the air smelled of shit and ganja.
She had found a sheltered corner under a vent that carried warmth and the
smell
of frying food from some far distant point of the concourse. An outsize Aran
sweater --much grimed and stretched-- was pulled down over her hunched-up
knees.
She had swaddled herself in plastic refuse sacks, pulled flattened cardboard
boxes that had held washing machines and CD midi-systems in around her.
I enveloped her in a shroud of pheromones. I tried to imagine what she might
see, the tall woman in the long coat, more vision than reality, demon, angel,
standing over her like judgment. How could she know it was my pheromones, and
not her own free will, that made her suddenly want more than anything,
anything
she had ever wanted in her life, to bury her face between my nylon-smooth
thighs? I knelt down, took her chin in my hand. She looked into my eyes,
tried
to lick my fingers. Her face was filthy. I bent toward her and she opened her
mouth to me. She ran her tongue around the inside of my lips; whimpering, she
tried to ram it down my throat.
And I was certain. Truth is in the molecules. I had tasted it.
I extended a hand and she took it with luminous glee. She would have done
anything, anything for me, anything, if I would only take her away from these
tunnels and the stink of piss and desperation, back to my apartment: I could
do
whatever I wanted, anything.
The corridors shook to the iron tread of a train.
She loved me. Loved me.
With a cry, I snatched my hand from the touch of her fingers, turned, walked
away, coat flapping behind me, heels ringing like shots. Faster. Faster. I
broke
into a run. Her calls pursued me through the tunnels, come back come back, I
love you, why did you go, I love you....
I rode the underground into the take-away-curry-and-tins-of-lager hours. We

are

not human, my mother told me from every poster and advertisement, we cannot afford the luxuries of human morality. Saint Semillia of the Mercies smiled upon

me. I rode the trains until the lights went out, one by one, in the stations behind me, and came home at last to Shantallow Mews.

The house looked and smelled normal. There was nothing to see. From the outside.

He had broken in through a rear window and trashed a path through the rooms where we entertained the goi. Finding the locked door, he had kicked his way into Cassiopia's room.

The pimp had done a thorough and professional job of terror. Empty glasses and

cups of cold tea shattered, a half-completed jigsaw of the Royal Family a thousand die-cut pieces scattered across the floor, magazines torn in two, the

radio-cassette smashed in by a heel. Shredded cassette tape hung in swaths from

the lights and stirred in the draft from the open door where I stood. The metal

stand by the bedside was overturned; the blood, my blood, was splashed and daubed across the walls.

Cassiopeia was in the corner by the window, shivering and dangerously pale from

shock. Under the duvet he clutched the icons of the five hahndahvi and a kitchen

knife. Bruises purpled down the side of his face, he flinched from my gentlest

touch.

"He said he'd be back," my sister whispered. "He said unless we worked for him,

he'd be back again. And again. And again. Until we got wise."

I made him comfortable on the sofa, cleaned the blood from the walls, made good

the damage. Then I went to the never-quite-forgotten place under the floorboards

and un-earthed the hru-tesh.

Saint Semillia, the price of your mercies!

20 November, 10:30 P.M.

But for the insistence of my perfumes urging him through the door at the top of

the stairs, I think he would run in terror from what he is about to do. Often they do. But they are always drawn back to this door, by the sign of the yin-yang drawn in spilled vodka on a table top, by addresses on matchbooks or slipped under toilet partitions. They come back because nothing else can satisfy

them.

The hahndahvi placed at their five cardinal points about the room fascinate him.

He turns the icon of File Legbe over and over in his hands.

"This is old," he says.

"Early medieval," I say, offering him a drink from the cocktail bar. He takes a

tequila in one nervous swallow. "The hahndahvi. The Five Lords of the tesh.

We

have our own private religion; a kind of urban witchcraft, you could call it.

Our own gods and demons and magics. They've taken a bit of a theological

bashing

with the advent of molecular biology, when we realized that we weren't the demonic lovers, the incubi and succubi of medieval legend. Just a variant of humanity. A subspecies. Two chromosomes separate me from you. As I am talking,

he is undressing. He looks for a wardrobe where he can hang his smart suit and

shirt and jazz-colored silk tie. I slide open one of the mirror-ropes at the end

of the room. His fastidiousness is cute. I pour him another tequila so that he

will not be self-conscious in his nakedness and guide him to the Lloyd-loom chair at the opposite side of the room. As I seat him I smell it again, that uncertain something, masked and musked in a cocktail of his own sweat, after-shave and Jose' Cuervo. Familiar.

He sips his drink, small, tight, fearful sips, as I strip down to my underwear.

I slowly peel off panties, stockings, suspenders, kick them away. His penis comes up hard, sudden, taking him by surprise. The glass falls to the floor.

The

tequila spreads across the carpet. He begins to masturbate slowly, ecstatically.

Standing naked before him, I slip into tletchen. I feel the familiar warmth behind my eyes as waves of endocrines and hormones surge out through my body.

I

will them into every part of me, every empty space, every cell, every molecule

of me. I am on fire, burning up from inside with chemical fire.

"Do you know anything about mitosis and meiosis?" I ask him as the hormones burn

through me, changing me. Moses supposes mitosis are roses. Moses supposes erroneously. "The old legend was that incubi and succubi visited humans to steal

sexual fluids. Sperm, eggs. It's true, insofar as we need haploid cells to self-impregnate every cell in our bodies and, in a sense, continually give birth

to ourselves. That's how we live five, six, seven hundred years, world events permitting. Though, of course, our reproductive rate is very very low." I have

found over the years that many of them find the talking as exciting as the physical act. It is the thrill of abandoning themselves to the implacably alien.

As I speak my breasts, so full and beautiful, dwindle and contract to flat nipples; the pads of flesh on my hips and ass are redistributed to shoulders and

belly; muscles contract my pelvis; my entire body profile changes from wide-hipped narrow-shouldered hourglass femininity to broad-shouldered, flat-chested narrow-waisted triangular masculinity. My genitals swell and contract and jut and fold themselves into new configurations. It excited me enormously, that first time when Mother guided me into tletchen, the ebb and swell of my genitals. Now what I sense is an incompleteness, a loss, when I change from female to male. But I can see what a shock of excitement it is to my

client. I come to him, let him savor my new masculinity. He runs his fingers over my flat chest, twists my flat nipples between thumb and finger, caresses my

buttocks, thighs, genitals. As he thrills to me, I continue, my voice an octave

lower.

"We're essentially an urban phenomenon. We were there in the cities of the

Nile

and Indus, of Mesopotamia, of Classical Greece and Rome some lesser members of

their respective pantheons are tesh in disguise. We need a large population to

draw genetic material from without becoming too obvious --in rural communities

we have rather too high a profile for our liking. Hence the medieval legends, when the country was almost entirely rural, which died out with urbanization when we could become anonymous in the cities. My particular family came with the

Norman invasion; but we're comparative new kids on the block; the branch we bred

into one hundred and fifty years back up in Edinburgh has been here since the end of the Ice Age."

There are tears in his eyes. Pressed close within his embrace, I smell it again.

Intimate. Familiar. Too familiar.

I know what it is, and where I have smelled it before. But I am not finished with him yet. I step backward, out of the reach of his imploring fingers and summon up the tletchen energy again. Contours, profiles, genders melt and run in

the heat of my hormonal fire. My body, my identity, my teshness, my Orion-ness

dissolve into a multiplicity of possible genders. I blossom out of genderlessness into full hermaphroditism. Male and female, yin and yang in one.

He is sobbing now, milking his penis in long, slow, joyous strokes. He is close

now to complete sexual satisfaction for the first time in his life. I let him touch me, explore the mystery of my two-in-oneness. He stands, presses his body

to mine, shuddering, moaning; long keening, dying moans. Exposed. Truly naked.

From every pore of his body, every gland and mucous membrane and erogenous tissue, it pours out. The room whirls with his giddy perfume, the storm of chemicals is overpowering. Yes! Yes! Yes!

I look into his eyes.

"Do you know how we get our names?" I tell him. "We have public, goi, names, but

among ourselves we use our tesh names. We are named after whatever constellation

is in the ascendant on the night of our birth. My name is Orion. My sister is Cassiopia." I tell him, because I want him to know. I owe him at least a name.

I

open my mouth to kiss him, he opens to receive me. Thin ropes of drool stretch

and break. I taste him. And he is right. It is the work of moment for my saliva

glands to work the chemical changes. A drop of toxin falls from my tongue onto

his. It runs like chain lighting from neuron to neuron. Even as the thought to

react, the awareness that he may have been betrayed, is upon him, it locks him

into rigidity.

He is easy to lift. In hermaphrodite gender we have the benefit of the musculature of both sexes, and the hormonal violence of tletchen gives us a supernatural strength. I carry him down the stairs and along the little landing

into Cassiopia's room. I can feel his heart beating against my shoulder. He fits comfortably into the bedside chair. Cassiopia is suspended in a fever dream between sleep and waking; muttering, crying out, twitching, eyeballs rolled up in his head, crazy with hallucinations. I fetch the equipment from the Reebok box under the bed, run a line into Cassiopia's right arm, and let the blue, burned, poison drip from his arm into a basin on the floor. Only his eyes can move. He sees the needle I have for him. Have I said elsewhere it is remarkable how much can be expressed by the eyes alone? Say a thing once, and you are sure to have to say it again, soon. He does not flinch as I run a line into his right arm and connect him to Cassiopia. As I pump his blood along the old rubber tubes, I tell him the tale my grandmother told me, of Pere Teakbois's bargain and the price of St. Semillia's mercy. At the very end, he deserves to know. And at the very end, I think he does begin to understand. Vinyl Lionel's Law. Everyone is someone's pimp, someone's prostitute. Everyone is user or used. Down in the tunnels, she had loved me. You had desired me. She had not loved me of her own free will. You did. I made her love me. I did not make you desire me. Understand, goi, why I could kill the pimp without a moment's moral uncertainty, why now it is your blood pulsing down the rubber tube. We were both the used, she and I. You and he, the users. Believe me, goi boy, I bear you no malice. I do what I do because an older, harder mercy demands it. When the last drop is gone, I close the tubes. Cassiopia has lapsed into a quiet and tranquil sleep. Already the jhash pallor is gone from his skin, he is warm to my kiss. I look at the boy, the rigor of my neurotoxins glazed over now with the serenity of death. When you went to those clubs and bars and made those contacts, did they never tell you the unwritten law of the user? Every prostitute has his price. In tesh, the words for love and passion are antonyms. It is not so different, I think, with you.

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