

THE HOUSE OF MOURNING
by Brian Stableford

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Anna stared at her thin face in the mirror, wondering where the substance had gone and why the color had vanished from the little that remained. Her eyes had so little blue left in them that they were as gray as her hair. She understood enough to know that a disruption of the chemistry of the brain was bound to affect the body as profoundly as the mind, but the sight of her image in the soul-stealing glass reawakened more atavistic notions. It was as if her dangerous madness had wrought a magical corruption of her flesh.

Perhaps, she thought, it was hazardous for such as she to look into mirrors; the confrontation might be capable of precipitating a crisis of confidence and a subsequent relapse into delirium. Facing up to the phantoms of the past was, however, the order of the day. With infinite patience she began to apply her makeup, determined that she would look alive, whatever her natural condition.

By the time she had finished, her hair was tinted gold, her cheeks delicately pink, and her lips fulsomely red-- but her eyes still had the dubious transparency of raindrops on a window pane.

Isabel was late, as usual. Anna was forced to pace up and down in the hallway, under the watchful eyes of the receptionist and the ward sister. Fortunately, she was in the habit of dressing in black for everyday purposes, so her outfit attracted no particular attention.

The ward sister was there because there was a ritual to be observed. Anna couldn't just walk out of the hospital, even though she was classed as a voluntary patient. She had to be handed over in a formal fashion, to signify that responsibility was being officially transferred from one sister to another. Not that Isabel really was her sister in a biological sense, any more than the ward sister was; she and Anna had simply been parts of the same arbitrarily-constructed foster family. They were not alike in any way at all.

When Isabel finally arrived, in a rush, with all her generous flesh and hectic color, the ceremony began.

"You must remember that this is Anna's first day out," the ward sister said to Isabel. "We don't anticipate any problems, but you must make sure that she takes her medication at the appointed times. If she shows signs of distress, you should bring her back here as soon as possible. This emergency number will connect you with a doctor immediately."

Isabel stared at the number scrawled on the card as though it were the track of some mysterious bird of ill omen.

To Anna, the sister said only: "Be good." Not "Have a nice time" or even "Take it easy," but simply "Be good." It's better to be beautiful than to be good, Anna thought, but it's better to be good than to be ugly. She had been

beautiful once, and more than beautiful--so much more as to be far beyond the reach of Saint Oscar's ancient wisdom, but now there was nothing left to her except to be good, because her more-than-beauty had gone very, very bad.

Isabel, of course, had no idea that Anna was on her way to a funeral, and that her role was merely to provide a convenient avenue of escape. Anna waited until the car was a good two miles away from the hospital before she broached the subject. "Can you drop me at the nearest tube station," she said lightly, "and can you let me have some money."

"Don't be silly," Isabel said. "We're going home." Isabel meant her own home, where she lived with a husband and two children, paying solemn lip service to the social ideal. Anna had seen Isabel's husband three or four times, but only in the distance. He was probably one of those visitors' partners whose supportive resolution failed at the threshold of Bedlam--many in-laws preferred to wait outside while their better halves attended to the moral duty of comforting their afflicted kin--but it was possible that Isabel had forbidden him to come in and be properly introduced. Few women relished the prospect of introducing their husbands to whores, even whores who happened to be their sisters-- legalistically speaking--and whose sexual charms had been obliterated in no uncertain terms.

"No we're not," Anna said. "That's just something I had to tell the doctors, so they'd let me out. If I'd told them the truth, they'd have stopped me, one way or another."

"What truth?" Isabel wanted to know. "What on earth are you talking about? I'll have you know that I've gone to a lot of trouble over this. You heard what the nurse said. I'm responsible for you."

"You won't be doing anything illegal," Anna told her. "I'll get back on time, and nobody will be any the wiser. Even if I didn't go back, nobody would blame you. I'm the crazy one, remember. How much cash can you let me have?"

"I don't have any cash," Isabel told her, as she drove resolutely past Clapham South tube station without even hesitating. "I don't carry cash. Nobody does. It's not necessary anymore."

That was a half-truth, at best. At the Licensed House where Anna had worked, the clients had used their smartcards, and the transactions had been electronically laundered so that no dirty linen would be exposed to prying wives or the Inland Revenue. The streetwalkers who haunted the Euroterminal and the Bull Ring had smartcard processors too, but their laundering facilities were as dodgy as their augmentations and most of their clients paid in cash.

"You can still get cash, can't you?" Anna said, innocently. "Walls still have holes, just like spoiled whores. Don't worry about missing Clapham South. Vauxhall will be fine."

"Just where the hell do you think you're going, Anna?" Isabel demanded, hotly. "Just what the hell do you think you're going to do?" That was Isabel all over: repetition and resentment, with plenty of hell thrown in.

"There's something I need to do," Anna said, unhelpfully. She had no intention of spelling it out. Isabel would protest violently just as surely as the doctors would have done. Unlike the doctors, though, Isabel was easy to manipulate. Isabel had always been scared of Anna, even though she was two years older, two inches taller, and two stones heavier. Now that Anna was a shadow of her former self, of course, it was more like four stones--but that

only increased Anna's advantage.

"I won't do it," Isabel said, although the hopelessness of her insistence was already evident.

"I can do anything I like," Anna said, reflectively. "It's one of the perks of being mad and bad--you can do anything you like, and nobody's surprised. I can't be punished, because there's nothing they can take away that I haven't already lost. I could do with a hundred pounds, but fifty might do in a pinch. I have to have cash, you see, because people with scrambled brain chemistry aren't allowed smartcards. Fortunately, there'll always be cash." As long as there were outposts of the black economy that weren't geared up for laundering, there'd be cash--and everybody in the world was engaged in the black economy in some fashion, even if it was only token tax-dodging.

"I don't like being used," Isabel said, frostily. "I agreed to take you out for the day because you asked me to, and because the doctors thought it would be a good idea--a significant step on the way to rehabilitation. I won't stand for it, Anna. It's not fair."

Since she was six years old Isabel had been complaining that "it" wasn't fair. She had never quite grasped the fact that there was no earthly reason for expecting that anything should be.

"There's bound to be a cash-dispenser at Vauxhall," Anna said. "Fifty would probably do it, if that's all you can spare. I've lost track of inflation since they put me in the loony bin, but money can't have lost that much value in three years."

Isabel braked and pulled over to the side of the road. She was the kind of person who couldn't drive and have a fit at the same time. Anna could tell that her sister was upset because she'd stopped on a double yellow line; normally, she'd have looked for a proper parking place.

"What the hell is this about, Anna?" Isabel demanded. "Exactly what have you got me into? If you're using me as an alibi while you abscond from the hospital, I've a right to know."

"I'll be back on time," Anna assured her. "No one will ever know, except your husband and children. They'll probably be disappointed that they aren't going to meet your mad, bad, and dangerous-to-know foster sister, but they'll get over it. You can bring them in one day next week, to make up for it. I'll be as nice as pie, psychochemistry permitting."

"What is this all about?" Isabel repeated, pronouncing each word with leaden emphasis, as if to imply that Anna was only ignoring her because she was too stupid to know what the question was.

"There's something I have to do," Anna said, nobly refraining from adopting the same tone. "It won't take long. If you won't give me the fifty pounds, can you at least let me have enough for a Travelcard. I have to go all the way across town to zone four."

Anna knew as soon as she'd said it that it was a mistake. It gave Isabel a way out. She should have hammered on and on about the fifty until she got it. In the old days, she'd never have settled for a penny less than she'd actually wanted, whatever kind of client she was dealing with.

Isabel reached into her purse and pulled a handful of coins out of its dusty depths. "Here," she said, as if to say, It's all you're worth, you

stupid, fouled-up slut. "If you want to go, go--to hell if you want to--but if this goes wrong, just don't try to blame me. And take your medication." Long before she arrived at the last sentence she had reached across Anna to open the passenger door, so that she could mark her final full stop with one of those dismissive pushes that Anna remembered all too well.

Anna submitted to the push and got out of the car, even though she was only vaguely aware of where she was. She waited until Isabel had driven off before she asked for directions to Clapham Common. It was a long way, but not too far to walk even for someone in her debilitated condition. The value of the coins was just adequate to buy a Travelcard.

She wondered if things might have been different if she'd had a real sister, but she decided that they probably wouldn't have been.

It wasn't difficult to find the church from Pinner tube station. It was larger than she had expected. She was glad that the funeral announcement in the Guardian had given both time and place; so many didn't, because the people who placed them were afraid of being burgled while they were at the ceremony. She waited until everyone else was inside before she sidled in, but she didn't escape notice. Several people turned around, and whispers were exchanged.

When the service was over and the pallbearers carried the coffin out Anna moved behind a pillar, but the people who filed out behind the dead man knew perfectly well that she was there. She didn't go to the graveside; she stayed in the shadow of an old horse chestnut tree, watching from thirty yards away. She couldn't hear what the vicar was saying, but that didn't matter. She could have improvised her own service if she'd wanted to, complete with appropriate psalms. Every bedside locker on the ward had a Bible in the top drawer, and boredom had made her dip into hers more frequently than she liked to think. She knew that according to The . Book of Ecclesiastes it was better to go to the House of Mourning than the House of Feasting, but she wasn't sure that Ecclesiastes had been in a position to make a scrupulous comparison, and he hadn't mentioned the House of the Rising Sun at all, although it would have made a better play on words if he had. Ecclesiastes had also offered the judgment that a good name was better than precious ointment, but Alan certainly wouldn't have agreed with him on that point.

Anna had no difficulty picking out Alan's wife, although she'd never seen a photograph. She was a good-looking woman, in a middle-class Home Counties sort of way. Her name was Christine, but Alan had usually referred to her as Kitty. Anna was mildly surprised that Kitty wasn't wearing a veil. Weren't widows supposed to wear veils, to hide their tears? Not that the woman was weeping; grim forbearance seemed to be more her style.

Anna judged her--on the basis of an admittedly superficial inspection--to be a kind of upmarket Isabel, who probably did believe, with all her heart, that a good name was infinitely to be preferred to any kind of balm that cunning cosmetic engineers could devise.

In the grip of a sudden surge of anguish, Anna wished that Isabel hadn't been so tight-fisted. If Isabel had given her a hundred pounds, or even fifty, she'd have been able to bring a wreath to add to the memorials heaped about the grave. So far as she could judge at this distance most of the mourners had gone for natural blooms, but she would have selected the most exotic products of genetic engineering she could afford, to symbolize herself and the crucial contribution she had made to Alan's life--and, presumably, his death.

Anna had no doubt that the accident hadn't been entirely accidental; even if it hadn't been a straightforward deceptive suicide, it must have been a case of gross and calculated negligence.

When the ceremony was over and done with, the crowd around the grave broke up, its members drifting away in all directions as though the emotion of the occasion had temporarily suppressed their sense of purpose. When the widow turned toward her, and shook off someone's restraining hand, Anna knew that the confrontation she had half feared and half craved was about to take place. She wasn't in the least tempted to turn and run, and she knew before the woman paused to look her up and down that this was what she had come for, and that all the sentimental rubbish about wanting to say good-bye was just an excuse.

"I know who you are," the widow said, in a cut glass voice which suggested that she took no pride in her perspicacity.

"I know who you are, too," Anna replied. The two of them were being watched, and Anna was conscious of the fact that the dissipating crowd had been reunited by a common urge to observe, even though no evident ripple of communication had passed through it.

"I thought you were in hospital, out of your mind." The widow's voice was carefully neutral, but had an edge to it which suggested that it might break out of confinement at any moment.

"I am," Anna told her. "But the doctors are beginning to figure things out, and they can keep me stable, most of the time. They're learning a lot about brain chemistry thanks to people like me." She didn't add and people like Alan.

"So you'll soon be back on the streets, will you?" the widow inquired, cuttingly.

"I haven't worked the streets since I was sixteen," Anna said, equably. "I was in a Licensed House when Alan met me. I can't go back there, of course--there's no way they'd let me have my license back after what happened, even if they could normalize my body chemistry. I suppose I might go back to the street, when I'm released. There are men who like spoiled girls, believe it or not."

"You ought to be quarantined," the widow said, her voice easing into a spiteful hiss. "You and all your rancid kind ought to be locked up forever."

"Maybe so," Anna admitted. "But it was the good trips that got Alan hooked, and it was the withdrawal symptoms that hurt him, not the mutant proteins."

A man had joined the widow now: the fascinated crowd's appointed mediator. He put a protective arm around the widow's shoulder. He was too old to be one of her sons and too dignified to be a suitor ambitious to step into the dead man's shoes; perhaps he was her brother--or even Alan's brother.

"Go back to the car now, Kitty," the man said. "Let me take care of this."

Kitty seemed to be glad of the opportunity to retreat. Whatever she'd hoped to get out of the confrontation, she hadn't found it. She turned away and went back to the black-clad flock which was waiting to gather her in.

Anna expected a more combative approach from the man, whoever he might be,

but all he said was, "If you're who I think you are, you shouldn't have come here. It's not fair to the family."

Another Isabel, Anna thought. You'd think someone like him would know better. By "someone like him" she meant doctor, lawyer, or banker. Something professional in the nonironic sense of the word. Alan had been a stockbroker, careful overseer of a thousand personal equity plans. She'd often wondered if any of his clients had shares in the company which owned the House. Like everything else in today's complicated world, it had been part of some diverse conglomerate; the parent organization's share price was quoted every day in the Guardian's financial pages, under the heading "Leisure and Entertainment."

"I'm not doing any harm," Anna said. "You could all have ignored me, if you'd wanted to."

"I believe that was the gist of the argument which prompted the legalization of prostitution," the other replied, mustering a sarcastic edge far sharper than Kitty's. "It does no harm, they said, and anyone who disapproves only has to ignore it. When the cosmetic engineers progressed from tinkering with shape and form to augmenting bodily fluids they said much the same thing. The new aphrodisiacs are perfectly safe, they said, it's all just for fun, they're definitely not addictive--and anyone who disapproves can simply stay away from the new generation of good-time girls, and let the fun-lovers get on with it. In the end, though, the rot crept in, the way it always does. It all went horribly wrong. Isn't it bad enough that we had to lose Alan,

without having to suffer a personal appearance by his own particular angel of death?"

She felt something stirring in the depths of her consciousness, but the comfort blanket of her medication was weighing down upon it. It was easy to remain tame and self-possessed while the doctors' drugs were winning the battle against her own perverted psychochemistry. "I'm sorry," she said, effortlessly. "I didn't mean to cause distress." Like hell I didn't, she thought, by way of private compensation. I came here to rub your turned-up noses in it, to force you to recognize how utterly and horribly unfair the world really is.

"You have caused distress," the man said, accusatively. "I don't think you have the least idea how much distress you've caused--to Alan, to Kitty, to the boys, and to everyone who knew them. If you had, and if you had the least vestige of conscience, you'd have cut your throat rather than come here today. In fact, you'd have cut your throat, period."

He's a punter, Anna thought, derisively. Not mine, and not the House's, but someone's. He fucks augmented girls, and the juices really blow his mind, just like they're supposed to, and he's afraid. He's afraid that one fine day he, too, might find that he just can't stop, and that if and when his favorite squeeze goes bad, it'll be cold turkey, forever and ever, amen. Like every man alive his prayer has always been "Lord give me chastity but please not yet!"--and now it's too late.

"I'm sorry," she said, again. The words were the purified essence of her medication, wrought by a transformation every bit as miraculous as the one which had run its wayward course within her flesh and her spirit. The real Anna wasn't sorry at all. The real Anna wasn't sorry she had come, and wasn't sorry she was alive, and wasn't sorry that this black-clad prick saw her as some kind of ravenous memento mori.

"You're a degenerate," the black-clad prick informed her, speaking not merely to her but to everything she stood for. "I don't agree with those people who say that what's happened to you is God's punishment for the sins you've committed, and that every whore in the world will eventually go the same way, but I understand how they feel. I think you should go now, and never show your face here again. I don't want Kitty thinking that she can't bring the boys to visit Alan's grave in case she meets you. If you have a spark of decency in you, you'll promise me that you'll never come here again."

The cliches begin to flow in full force, Anna thought-- but even the medication balked at sparks of decency. "I'm free to go wherever I want to, whenever I wish," she asserted, untruthfully. "You have no right to stop me."

"You poisonous bitch," he said, in a level fashion which suggested that he meant the adjective literally. "Wherever you go, corruption goes with you. Stay away from Alan's family, or you'll be sorry." She knew that he meant all of that quite literally too--but he had to turn away when he'd said it, because he couldn't meet the unnaturally steady stare of her colorless eyes.

She stayed where she was until everyone else had left, and then she walked over to the open grave and looked down at the coffin, onto which someone had dribbled a handful of brown loamy soil.

"Don't worry," she said to the dead man. "Nothing scares me. Not anymore. I'll be back, and I'll get that wreath one way or another."

She had no wristwatch but the church clock told her that she had five hours in hand before they'd be expecting her at the hospital.

Anna hadn't been to the Euroterminal meat-rack for seven years, but it didn't take long for her to find her way around. The establishment of Licensed Houses had been intended to take prostitution off the streets but it had only resulted in a more complicated stratification of the marketplace. It wasn't just the fact that there were so many different kinds of augmentation available, or the fact that more than three-quarters of them were illegal, or even the fact that there were so many girls whose augmentations had ultimately gone wrong or thrown up unexpected side effects; the oldest profession was one which, by its very nature, could never be moved out of the black economy into the gold. Sleaze, secrecy, and dark, dark shadows were marketable commodities, just like psychotropic bodily secretions.

She didn't bother to try for a managed stand; she'd spoken the truth when she'd told her dead lover that nothing scared her anymore, but she hadn't time to get into complicated negotiations with a pimp. She went down to the arches where the independents hung out. There was no one there she knew, but there was a sense in which she knew all of them--especially the ones who were marked like her. It didn't take long to find one who was a virtual mirror image in more overstated makeup.

"I'm not here to provide steady competition," she said, by way of introduction. "I'm still hospitalized. I'll be back on the ward tomorrow, but I need something to get me through today. Fifty'll do it--that's only one substitution, right?"

"Y'r arithmetic's fine," the mirror image said, "but y'got a lot of nerve. Demand's not strong, and I don't owe y'anything just 'cause we're two peas

from the same glass pod. It's a cat-eat-cat world out here."

"We aren't two peas from any kind of pod," Anna informed her, softly. "Symptoms are all on the surface. They used to say that all of us were sisters under the skin, but we were never the same. Even when they shot the virus vectors into us, so that our busy little epithelial cells would mass-produce their carefully designed mind expanders, it didn't make us into so many mass-produced wanking machines. One of my doctors explained to me that the reason it all began to go wrong is that everybody's different. We're not just different ghosts haunting production line machines; each and every one of us has a subtly different brain chemistry. What makes you you and me me isn't just the layout of the synaptic network which forms in our brains as we accumulate memories and habits; we tailor our chemistry to individual specifications as well. You and I had exactly the same transformation, and our transplanted genes mutated according to the same distortive logic, but fucking you never felt exactly the same as fucking me, and it still isn't. We're all unique, all different; we offered subtly different good trips and now we offer subtly different bad ones. That's why some of our clients became regulars, and why some got hooked in defiance of all the ads which promised hand-on-heart that what we secreted wasn't physically addictive. You don't owe me anything at all, either because of what we both were or because of what we both are, but you could do me a favor, if you wanted to. You're free to say no."

The mirror image looked at her long and hard, and then said: "Jesus, kid, y'really are strung out--but y'd better lose that accent if y're plannin' on workin' down here. It don't fit. I was goin' for a cup of coffee anyway. Y'got half an hour--if y'don't score by then, tough luck."

"Thanks," said Anna. "I appreciate it." She wasn't sure that half an hour would be enough, but she knew she had to settle for whatever she could get.

She'd been on the pitch for twenty-three minutes when the car drew up. In a way, she was grateful it had taken so long. Now, she wouldn't be able to go back afterward.

The punter tried to bargain her down to thirty, but the car was a souped-up fleet model whose gloss shouted to the world that he wasn't strapped for cash, and there was no one else on the line with exactly her kind of spoliation.

The client was a wise guy; he knew enough about the chemistry of his own tastes to think he could show off. It probably didn't occur to him that the doctors had taken pains to explain to Anna exactly what had happened to her, or that she'd been better able to follow their expert discourse than his fudged mess. Nor did it occur to him that she wouldn't be at all interested in the important lessons which he thought were there to be learned from the whole sorry affair. She didn't try to put him right; he was paying, after all, and the torrent of words provided a distraction of sorts from the various other fluxes generated by their brief and--for her-- painful intercourse.

"That whole class of euphorics should never have been licensed, of course," he opined, after he'd stumbled through a few garbled technicalities. "It's all very well designing fancy proteins by computer, but just because something's stable in cyberspace doesn't mean it's going to behave itself under physiological conditions, and physiological conditions is a politer way of putting it, when we're referring to the kind of witch's cauldron you get up a whore's you-know-what. They say they have programs now that will spot likely mutation sites and track likely chains of muta-tional consequence, but I reckon they're about as much use as a wooden fort against a fire-breathing dragon. I mean, this thing is out of control and there's no way to lock the

stable door now the nags have bolted. Personally, I'm not at all distressed--I mean, I've had all the common-or-garden stuff up to here. I never liked whores wired up for the kind of jollies you can get from a pill or a fizzy drink. I mean, it's just stupid to try to roll up all your hits into one. It's like praying mantises eating their mates while they fuck-- no sense to it at all. Me, I like things spread around a bit. I like it sour and sweet, in all kinds of exotic combinations. People like me are the real citizens of the twenty-first century, you know. In a world like ours, it ain't enough not to be xenophobic--you have to go the other way. Xenophilia is what it takes to cope with today and tomorrow. Just hang on in there, darling, and you'll find yourself back in demand on a big scale. Be grateful that they can't cure you--in time, you'll adapt, just like me."

She knew that in her own way she had adapted, and not just by taking her medication regularly. She had adapted her mind and her soul, and knew that in doing that she had adapted her body chemistry, too, in subtle ways that no genetic engineer or ultra-smart expert system could ever have predicted. She knew that she was unique, and that what Alan had felt for her really did qualify as love, and was not to be dismissed as any mere addiction. If it had been mere addiction, there wouldn't have been any problem at all; he would simply have switched to another girl who'd been infected with the same virus vectors but had proved to be immune--so far--to the emergent mutations.

The punter wasn't a bad sort, all things considered. Unusual tastes weren't necessarily associated with perverted manners. He paid Anna in cash and he dropped her right outside the door of Lambeth North tube station. It was, he said, pretty much on his way home-- which meant that he could conceivably have been Isabel's next-door neighbor. Anna didn't ask for further details, and he wouldn't have told her the truth if she had. There was an etiquette in these matters which had to be observed.

* * *

By the time Anna got back to the cemetery the grave had been filled in. The gravedigger had arranged the wreaths in a pretty pattern on the freshly turned earth, which was carefully mounded so that it wouldn't sink into a hollow as it settled beneath the spring rains. Anna studied the floral design very carefully before deciding exactly how to modify it to incorporate her own wreath.

She was a little surprised to note that her earlier impression had been mistaken; there were several wreaths made up of genetically engineered exotics. She quickly realized, however, that this was not a calculated expression of xenophilia so much as an ostentatious gesture of conspicuous consumption. Those of Alan's friends and relatives who were slightly better-off than the rest had simply taken the opportunity to prove the point.

When she had rearranged the wreaths she stood back, looking down at her handiwork.

"I didn't want any of this to happen," she said. "In Paris, it might almost pass for romantic--man becomes infatuated with whore, recklessly smashes himself up in his car when she becomes infected with some almost-unprecedented kind of venereal disease--but in Pinner it's just absurd. You were a perfect fool, and I didn't even love you . . . but my mind got blown to hell and back by the side effects of my own mutated psychotropics, so maybe I would have if I could have. Who knows?"

I didn't want it to happen either, he said, struggling to get the words through the cloying blanket of her medication, which was deeply prejudiced against any and all hallucinations. It really was an accident. I'd got over the worst of the withdrawal symptoms. I'd have been okay.

Maybe I'd even have been okay with Kitty, once I'd got it all out of my system. Maybe I could have begun to be what everybody wanted and expected me to be.

"Conformist bastard," she said. "You make it sound like it was all pretense. Is that what you think? Just a phase you were going through, was it? Just a mad fling with a maddening whore who went completely mad?"

It was the real thing, he insisted, dutifully.

"It was a lot realer than the so-called real thing," she told him. "Those expert systems are a hell of a lot cleverer than Old Mother Nature. Four billion years of natural selection produced Spanish fly and rhino horn; forty years of computerized protein design produced me and a thousand alternatives you just have to dilute to taste. You couldn't expect Mother Nature to take that kind of assault lying down, of course, even if she always has been the hoariest whore of them all. Heaven only knows what a psychochemical wilderness the world will be when all the tailored pheromones and augmentary psychotropics have run the gamut of mutational variation. You and I were just caught in the evolutionary cross fire. Kitty and Isabel too, I guess. No man is an island, and all that crap."

I don't think much of that as a eulogy, he said. You could try to be a little more earnest, a little more sorrowful. He was right, but she didn't dare. She was afraid of earnestness, and doubly afraid of sorrow. There was no way in the world she was going to try to put it the way Ecclesiastes had--in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow and all that kind of stuff. After all, she had to stay sane enough to get safely back to the hospital or they wouldn't let her out again for a long time.

"Good-bye, Alan," she said, quietly. "I don't think I'll be able to drop in again for quite a while. You know how things are, even though you never once came to see me in the hospital."

I know, he said. You don't have any secrets from me. We're soul mates, you and I, now and forever. It was a nicer way of putting it than saying he was addicted to her booby-trapped flesh, but it came to the same thing in the end.

She went away then: back to the tube station, across zones three, two, and one, and out again on the far side of the river. She wanted to be alone, although she knew that she never would be and never could be.

The receptionist demanded to know why Isabel hadn't brought her back in the car, so Anna said that she'd asked to be dropped at the end of the street. "I wanted to walk a little way," she explained. "It's such a nice evening."

"No it isn't," the receptionist pointed out. "It's cloudy and cold, and too windy by half."

"You don't notice things like that when you're in my condition," Anna told her, loftily. "I'm drugged up to the eyeballs on mutated euphorics manufactured by my own cells. If it weren't for the medication, I'd be right up there on cloud nine, out of my mind on sheer bliss." It was a lie, of course; the real effects were much nastier.

"If the way you're talking is any guide," the receptionist said, wryly, "you're almost back to normal. We'll soon have to throw you back into the wide and wicked world."

"It's not as wide or as wicked as all that," Anna said, with due kindness and consideration, "and certainly not as worldly. One day, though, all the fallen angels will learn how to fly again, and how to soar to undiscovered heights--and then we'll begin to find out what the true bounds of experience are."

"I take it back," the receptionist said. "I hope you haven't been plaguing your poor sister's ears with that kind of talk--she won't want to take you out again if you have."

"No," said Anna, "I don't suppose she will. But then, she's not really my sister, and never was. I'm one of a kind." And for once, there was no inner or outer voice to say Don't flatter yourself, or Better be grateful for what you've got, or We're all sisters under the skin, or any of the other shallow and rough-hewn saws whose cutting edges she had always tried so very hard to resist.

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About the author:

Brian Stableford is a biologist and sociologist turned SF and fantasy writer. He is also a critic and scholar of the literary history of the field, and is so talented, productive, and knowledgeable that he might be called the British Isaac Asimov of this generation. He is a scientific rationalist and stands for reason the way Asimov did. He wrote many SF novels in the 1970s and 1980s, but fell out of print in the U.S. toward the end of the 1980s. His short fiction for the last several years has been extremely impressive, especially his novellas appearing in *Analog*, *Asimov's*, and *Interzone*, and he has been nominated several times for the Hugo and Nebula Awards in short fiction categories recently. His recent works now comprise one of the major bodies of short fiction in the SF field of the decade. Much of his recent novel-length fiction (e.g., *The Empire of Fear*, *The Werewolves of London*) has been published first in England, and only later, and somewhat obscurely, in the U.S., and as fantasy or horror even though most of it has been alternate history SF or alternate universe SF. This story first appeared in Ellen Datlow's *Off Limits*. It's a hard-SF horror story about pain and pleasure, biotechnology, and sex.