

Never Seen by Waking Eyes
by Stephen Dedman

_They say that we Photographers are a blind race at best; that we learn to look at even the prettiest faces as so much light and shade; that we seldom admire, and never love.

Lewis Carroll, A Photographer's Day Out_

The Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the logician and photographer and lesser-known mirror image of Lewis Carroll, first met Alice Liddell when she was three. John Ruskin, a fellow lecturer at Oxford, was also smitten with young Alice, and later became obsessed with twelve year old Rose La Touche. Edgar Allan Poe married his thirteen year old cousin Virginia. Dante fell in love with Beatrice when she was eight and a half.

If you expect me to add my name to this list, you're out of your mind.

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"He was terrified of the night," she said, softly. "Terrified of dreaming, I think. Even beds frightened him."

I nodded. I don't remember any night-time scenes at all in either of the Alice books, or Snark, or even Sylvie and Bruno, and the only mention of a bed to come to mind was 'summon to unwelcome bed/A melancholy maiden!/We are but elder children, dear,/Who fret to find our bedtime near.' The hunters of the Snark 'hunted til darkness came on', with not a word of what happened afterwards, and Sylvie and Bruno Concluded ends (and not a moment too soon) with the stars appearing in a bright blue sky. True, 'The Walrus and the Carpenter' is set at midnight, and features an oyster-bed, but the sun stays up the whole time.

"How did you meet?"

Alice smiled prettily, without showing the tips of her teeth. "In London, outside a theatre -- the Lyceum, I think. I'd seen him before, but I had no idea who he was. When I told him my name, he said, 'So you are another Alice. I'm very fond of Alices.'"

"When was this?"

"Winter. I don't remember the year, but he was about thirty, and he hadn't written Wonderland yet, and I think Prince Albert was still alive. 1860, maybe." I nodded. Dodgson was a compulsive diarist, but many of his diaries disappeared after his death, like his letters to Alice Liddell, and all of his photographs and sketches of naked little girls.

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I suppose it started in the darkroom, at home: developing old, half-forgotten rolls of film is the safest form of time travel; you don't need a license, or even a seat belt. This roll had been in the Nikon for at least a year, and when I finally sat down with the proof sheet and a glass of Glenfiddich, I was ready to see anything. Forty minutes and two glasses later, I was still wondering why the Hell I'd taken five shots of Folly Bridge. Granted that it's where the famous rowing expedition and the story of Wonderland started, and that I don't get up to Oxford as often as I'd like, it's been photographed more often than Capa shot 'Death in the Afternoon'.

There was nothing mysterious about any of the other shots, at least to me. On the proof sheet, they all look harmless enough -- a busy street in Bangkok, far enough from Patpong to be safe; a beach near Townsville; a park in Tokyo; the Poe Cottage in Philadelphia; a slum in Brasilia or Rio. An extremely observant eye (such as Poe's) would notice a particularly beautiful little girl in almost every shot -- never in the centre, but always perfectly in focus. She isn't the same girl. She's always the same girl. She always has dark hair, black or almost black; pale skin; large eyes. Small, slight, almost elfin. The girl in Townsville is probably no older than ten; the girl in Bangkok may be twelve or twenty or anywhere in between. She isn't the same girl. She's always the same girl. And her name is

I stared at the photographs of Folly Bridge; five shots, from slightly different perspectives, but all from the St Aldates side. Long shadows -- evening, probably just before sunset. And no girl. Where the Hell did she go?

I slept badly, that night, but without disturbing anyone. My dreams were obscene; you don't need the details, except that the girl from Folly Bridge was . . . there.

She was smaller than the ideal, with the creamy pallor of the Londoner who can't afford to buy a tan. Her hair was short, but extremely untidy. Her eyes were too dark, impossibly dark, and her smile remained long after the dream had ended. It was not the smile of a little girl. It was the smile of something older, and wiser, and very hungry.

I woke shivering, expecting to find the sheets drenched with sweat or worse. Instead, they were completely dry, and cold, as though no-one had slept there at all.

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Barbara is far and away the best secretary I've ever had. She's a law school drop-out, efficient, intelligent, computer literate, multilingual, empathic, diplomatic, moderately ambitious, extremely attractive, and devoutly gay; we've been having breakfast together for four years now, without ever misunderstanding each other (well, not seriously). Two of the juniors, both avid prosecutors, were sitting at a table near the door discussing the latest batch of ripper murders that were splattered across all the papers. A pot of coffee and a cherry danish were waiting for me in my booth, and so was Barbara.

"Rough night?" she murmured, as I sat down.

I nodded. "What have I got today?"

"Partners' meeting at eight, Druitt arriving at ten and the Mirror's lawyers at eleven, political lunch," she grimaced slightly, "at the Savoy at two --"

"Oh, God, is that today?"

"I've left the afternoon free."

"Good. What about tomorrow morning? Am I in court?"

"No, not until Friday. You have two --"

"Postpone them."

She keyed something into her notebook without even blinking. "Where are you going?"

"Oxford."

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Sullivan (okay, so that isn't his real name) was a numbers man for the Tories, known to his colleagues as the Lord High Executioner. If he ever invites you to lunch, hire a taster. I was still sitting down when he muttered, "I hear the Mirror settled."

He obviously had excellent hearing for a man his age; we'd signed the papers less than twenty minutes before. I merely grunted. "I hope it was expensive?" he probed.

"My client's reputation is worth a lot of money."

"So is yours, by now." He smiled. Like most of the people who run most of the world, Sullivan had managed to avoid the burden of a reputation; you probably still don't know who I'm talking about. A waiter appeared, and I ordered carpetbag steak and a good burgundy. Sullivan waited until he was gone, then asked, "Are you planning to stay in London long?"

"I go where the firm sends me," I replied, "but I think I'll be here for a few years yet. I'd certainly prefer to; it beats the Hell out of New York."

He smiled. "Good. I won't waste your time, or mine. Have you ever considered a career in politics?" I shrugged. "All right. What if I said there was going to be a safe seat vacant before the next election?"

"I'm not interested." I replied, without any hesitation.

"Think about it. This isn't America; you wouldn't have to quit your practice. I know what you're worth -- believe me, I do -- and all right, MPs' salaries are pitifully low: even the travel allowance isn't much of a compensation. But you wouldn't have to give any of it up. I haven't; you know that." I nodded; he'd been a client of ours for many years. "Hell, you already give away more money than most rock stars, more than most people can even dream about. All those kids you sponsor, all those donations to UNICEF and refuges -- oh, don't look so bloody surprised. You really thought nobody knew? Welcome to the twentieth century, or what's left of it."

I said nothing. "I'm not going to bullshit you," he lied. "I don't know why you do it, what you get out of it, but I don't care, either, if it's what you want to do. But if you really want to help the street kids or starving Thais or whoever, you'll consider my offer very carefully."

"Why me?"

"Because I know you can win. You always do. You're the best libel lawyer in the business, you haven't lost a case in years; I've seen you convince juries that black is white and queer is straight. You're a born politician." He paused, leaning back in his chair. "And I'll be honest. I know the other parties haven't approached you yet, and I know they will, and I know we can double whatever they offer."

"You can relax," I assured him. "I'll tell them the same thing I told you. I'm not interested."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, I don't believe it'll be as easy as you make out. I'm single, and I've lived most of my life in the States. Secondly, it's not what I want to do. Thirdly, I've never intended to become a public figure; I prefer to keep my private life private."

Sullivan snorted. "Like I said, this isn't America; we don't expect politicians to be moral paragons. We've had too many kings, and far too many princes; nobody gives a damn if an MP's not married, or if he bonks his secretary occasionally. Besides, you were born here, your father was some sort of war hero, you grew up in Boston so you speak better English than half the BBC, and you're a Rhodes scholar to boot. As for your private life, all right, I know you can't give a lecture without bonking one of the students, but what does that matter? They're all girls, aren't they?"

I looked at him, and said nothing. He was probably right about English politicians' private lives; nobody's ever given him any shit about the curious resemblance between his twenty-seven year old second wife and his fifteen year old daughter. The wife's not brilliant, but I'm sure she's guessed which of them he really wants to fuck. "Yes, they're all girls."

"And all over sixteen." He waved his fat fingers dismissively, then shut up as the waiter returned with our lunch. "All right. At least consider it. I don't need an answer for another week."

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I parked near the corner of Thames and St Aldates, and stared at Folly Bridge, wondering if it had ever deserved its name so thoroughly before. The urge to turn the Jag around and return to London was almost palpable. Instead, I took a deep breath, unbuckled my seat belt, opened the door, and stepped out into the thin October sunshine. Having come this far, the least I could do was visit some of the booksellers. Besides, it was a week before Michelmas term, and I could wander around the colleges again without hordes of undergraduates making me feel like a fossil.

It was past six and almost dark when I headed back to the carpark, footsore from the cobbles, with fresh catalogues from Waterfield's and Thorntons in my briefcase. There was a girl standing outside Alice's Shop, staring into the window, though the shop had been closed for over an hour. She turned when she heard me, and we stared at each other across the road.

I knew, even before I saw her face, that it was the little girl from my nightmare. She was small, maybe nine or ten years old, wearing ripped jeans, sneakers, and a very baggy sweatshirt; her shoulder-length dark hair might have been loosely curled or merely tangled. She leaned back against the window, her right hand cupped before her, in what must have been a deliberate imitation of Dodgson's photograph of Alice Liddell as a beggar-girl.

I stood there frozen for a moment, and then a tourist bus passed between us, blocking my view. Hastily, I turned and resumed walking south; when I looked back, over my shoulder, she was gone. I hurried along, not even wanting to wonder why.

She was five or six metres behind me when I reached the carpark, and she followed me all the way to the Jag. I fumbled for the remote and unlocked the door, almost expecting her to rush ahead of me and climb in. Instead, she disappeared while my back was turned, and I slid into the seat and locked myself in. I sat there for a moment, breathing heavily, then turned the

headlights on. She was standing in front of the car, close enough that the lights illuminated the Oxford crest on her dirty sweatshirt but not her face. After a moment's hesitation, I reached across and unlocked the passenger side door, and waited. I heard the door close again, and she was on me; I felt her bite, and saw nothing.

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The contents of my wallet were spread across the passenger seat when I opened my eyes again, but nothing seemed to be missing except the girl. I examined myself in the mirror; I looked bleary-eyed and slightly dishevelled, and maybe a little pale, but not injured. I peered at my watch; 7.56. If I hurried, I could be back in London by nine.

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I decided to work late on Thursday, finishing a paper for the Harvard Law Review, but sent Barbara home in time for her karate class as a reward for not asking any embarrassing questions. The words I needed, exactly the right words, seemed to appear on the monitor as soon as I knew what I wanted to say; normally, when I write, there seems to be a block between my head and my hands, and everything I try to say clunks and screeches, and I spend hours facing the window rather than stare at the screen. This night, I became so absorbed in my work that it was well after midnight when I looked at my watch and realised why my coffee was so cold and the chambers had become so quiet; everyone else (even the Hatter, who still lives on Eastern Standard Time) had departed, leaving me utterly alone. I looked out the window again, and shivered, and reached for my overcoat and umbrella.

It was cold, and the rain had slowed to a drizzle, almost a mist. The whole city felt sombre and slimy and strange. The streets were deserted, and the only noise was the faint growl of the Jag and the occasional short hiss as something or someone appeared out of the gloom and I had to brake. The statue of Eros looked more like a vampire, and I thought I saw some shadows move beneath it as I passed, a huddle of junkies or a bag lady with a shopping trolley. Driving through London protected by tinted glass and electronic locks always feels wrong, somehow, even in filthy weather; on good days, I feel as though I'm cruising (or catacombing, as my Texan cousins call it); bad nights, I just feel like a voyeur.

As soon as I arrived home, I closed all the curtains and turned on all the lights, then chose a CD at random and turned the stereo up full blast. It wasn't enough to make the place feel like home (it's a company flat; even the paintings are investments), but at least it felt warm and relatively secure.

Most of the partners decorate their rooms with the inevitable Spy caricatures of judges; I prefer to leave the judges outside when I can, and my taste in art runs more to Brian Frouds and Patrick Woodroffes. My private library clashes with the rest of the leatherbound decor, but what the Hell. I collapsed on the couch, and reached for my much-thumbed copy of Faeries. The little girls scattered among the horrors and grotesquerie looked so clean, so innocent, so ethereal. A pretty elf looked back at me with almond-shaped night-shaded eyes, for all the world like

I dropped the book, which fell open to the sketch of Leanan-Sidhe. 'On the isle of Man,' the text read, 'she is a blood-sucking vampire and in Ireland the muse of poets. Those inspired by her live brilliant, though short, lives.'

There was a knock on the door.

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_I will drink your health, if only I can remember, and if you don't mind -- but perhaps you object? You see, if I were to sit by you at breakfast, and to drink your tea, you wouldn't like that, would you? You would say "Boo! hoo! Here's Mr Dodgson drunk all my tea, and I haven't got any left!" So I am very much afraid, next time Sybil looks for you, she'll find you by the sad sea wave, and crying "Boo! hoo! Here's Mr. Dodgson has drunk my health, and I haven't got any left!"

Lewis Carroll, letter to Gertrude Chataway, 1875 _

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I looked through the peephole. It was her, of course, still in the same dirty sweatshirt and tattered jeans. I drew a deep breath, and then opened the door slightly. She smiled.

"Can I come in?" She had a little girl's voice, a rather thin soprano, but it was well-modulated, almost polished: Marilyn Monroe with a hint of Oxford accent. Her tone was curious, rather than arrogant or imploring; her eyes merely watchful.

"Can I stop you?" I asked, only half joking. The building was supposed to be impregnable; even if she'd managed to sneak through the lobby while the doorkeeper was busy, there were cameras in every lift and corridor. "How did you get here?"

"By coach, and bus. Your address was in your wallet."

"Why?"

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Who are you?"

"My name's Alice," she replied, as though that were an answer.

"_What_ are you?"

She paused, smiling with her eyes as though she were trying to invent something. "What do I look like?" she asked, finally. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"What will you do if I don't?"

"Go away," she replied, "and not come back."

I stood there, trying to convince myself that it was stupid to be scared of a little girl, barely a metre high, no matter how dark her eyes were. I tried to imagine myself shutting the door, and going on with my life. And then I stepped back, and let her in.

"What do you want?" I asked, after she'd folded herself up on the chaise longue, her arms around her knees.

"What do you want?" she replied, still looking around curiously.

"I asked first."

"A place to stay during the day," she replied. "Some new clothes. An alibi, occasionally. And maybe you could drive me somewhere, sometimes. I don't know how long I'll want to stay; probably a couple of weeks, maybe a month. Your turn."

"Is that all?"

"What else are you offering?"

"What are you offering?"

Her eyes lit up, suddenly; she'd noticed the open book on the couch, and the rest of the library. "You've got a lot of Alice books. How many?"

"Forty-two."

"Holy shit -- oh, sorry. Why?"

"Different illustrators."

She nodded. "You must know a lot about Lewis Carroll."

"No, not really. There's a lot about him that no-one knows."

"I could tell you some of it. I knew him."

I sat down opposite her, and tried not to smile. "How old are you?"

"I don't really know. Eight or nine."

"He died in 1898," I said, gently.

She looked at me, impatiently. "I know. He got sick just after Christmas, and died a couple of weeks before his birthday. Or so I heard, after he didn't come back. I was still in Oxford; he could hardly take me with him to his sisters' home, could he?"

"Don't look at me like that; you know I'm not making this up."

"Then you must be a hundred years old, at least."

She shook her head indignantly; I think she would have stamped her foot, if she'd been standing up. "I'm eight years old, and I'll always be eight years old. That was what he wanted. That's why he loved me.

"I knew him," she repeated, "and I know things about him that he didn't even tell his diary, things that no-one else remembers. I can tell you what I know, and I've told you what I want in return. Do we have a deal?"

"How do you know it's what I want?"

She laughed. It wasn't a child's laugh, but the way one laughs at a child. "I saw you when you came to Oxford last summer -- June, was it?"

"July."

"I saw you looking in Alice's shop, and in Christ Church, saw you looking up at his rooms . . . And you took my photograph. You pretended you were just taking a picture of Folly Bridge. Have you printed that photo yet?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't in it, was I?"

"No."

She nodded. "_He_ found that, when he brought me up to Oxford for some photographs. I didn't know; photographs were new and strange, then, almost magic, and _very_ expensive. That's how he found out what I was. I'd never even seen myself in a looking-glass, and I didn't know that I never could; looking-glasses were for the rich, and clean water I could see myself in? In London, last century? Hah! I can't even remember seeing myself naked before --"

"You're a vampire . . ." I whispered.

She laughed, a little sadly. "'This must be the wood where things have no names,'" she quoted. "'I wonder what'll become of my name when I go in? I shouldn't like to lose it at all -- because they'd have to give me another, and it would almost certainly be an ugly one.'" She looked at the mirror over the bar, and said, "You can call me a vampire, if you like. _I_ always think of vampires as male. We usually call ourselves sidhe, or mara, or succubi, or even lamia. But don't worry; I promise not to bite."

"You bit me in Oxford."

She pouted. "Not _badly_; I didn't take any more than I needed. You'll be okay. We _do_ live off the living, usually while they're asleep; they feel sick the next day, or depressed, but we don't leave any scars, and we try to give them time to recover. Nowadays, we mostly survive on suicides and roadkill and junkies who're going to die anyway; we leave before the ambulance arrives, and no-one notices if the bodies are missing a pint or two of blood . . . Maybe that's why they say suicides become vampires. Of course, they don't, or the world'd be full of them. Us.

"And there are the symbiotes, who know what we are -- mostly artists or writers. They give us blood, and we give them dreams."

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I slept badly that night. Knowing that there's a vampire in your guest room makes it difficult to relax, and I was terrified of what I might dream.

Why didn't I just throw her out? Maybe because I wasn't sure that I could, wasn't sure what she'd do to me if I tried. And she'd known Charles Dodgson for nearly forty years. Maybe she knew

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I had no experience buying clothes for little girls, but I didn't want to tell anyone about Alice (not even Barbara), and I couldn't take her shopping until she had something better than her Oxford rags. I stopped at a Marks & Sparks on the way home and bought a collection of garments that were roughly the right size. They looked wrong on her when she first tried them on, wrong as a gymslip on a page three girl, but she was a good enough actress to get away with it.

She spent the night telling me about her first encounter with Dodgson. "He asked if he could write to my mother, to get her permission. Anna, my teacher

-- another sidhe -- was working at the theatre, so I told him she was my mother.

"His rooms were full of books -- and toys, of course, but I remember the books better. Anna was teaching me to read, but she wasn't very good at it. When he saw how fascinated I was, he gave me a few books, to keep. I don't think it was meant as a bribe, though he always regarded Londoners as horribly commercial -- he was a terrible snob.

"He photographed me in his room -- this was before they let him build a studio on the roof and let me watch as he developed the plates in a closet . . . I hadn't really known what to expect, and I think he was too surprised to be frightened. Every time I visited him, after that, he had more books on ghosts and things like that -- The Wonders of the Invisible World, The History of Apparitions, The Vampire . . . most of it crap. They were easily gulled in those days. Arthur Conan Doyle even believed in fairies . . .

"I met the Liddell girls a few times. They were snobs, too, especially Alice, but angels compared to their mother. Alice should've been an absolute brat: she was beautiful and knew it, and everyone loved her; men, women, even a prince . . ."

"You?"

"I liked her. I didn't expect to, but I did."

"And Dodgson?"

She shrugged. "Dodgson loved all of them, like he loved most pretty girls who were willing to trust him -- until they became teenagers, anyway. Ina was twelve or thirteen when I met her, and already seriously built; I think she scared him a lot worse than I did."

Saturday was a typical London spring day, bleak and damp and grey -- though Alice warned me that we'd have to come home if the sun appeared; it wouldn't kill her quickly, but a few hours worth would hurt and could crack her skin. Driving down Gower Street, she glanced through the window at a bag lady, and sat up. "You know her?" I asked.

"Yes. She's . . . she's one of us, but she doesn't know it. She doesn't even know she's dead, she can't remember being alive, she doesn't even know why the sun hurts her; she just does her best to hide from it. She's probably been living on cats, rats, all sorts of garbage."

We turned into New Oxford Street, and I asked her to keep an eye out for a parking spot. "You said, last night, that you drank blood. Need it be human blood?"

She shook her head. "It has to be human, but it doesn't really have to be blood; sperm will do, but we need much more of it than one man can make. Hundred years ago, some of the sidhe could fuck or suck enough men a night to stay alive that way, but not now. It takes too long, and it's not worth the effort unless all the men come to you. There are still some vampires in the beats and the bath-houses -- never trust the boys who don't ask you to use a condom, some things are a lot worse than AIDS -- but even they need blood sometimes. I don't know why. None of us are scientists. But it has to be human, too, or you start losing your mind. Or your soul, maybe. You lose you, anyhow; you become stupid, you start thinking like an animal, hunting animals, and then you die. Anna said that's how the stories about vampires turning into wolves and rats began -- that, and the way we used to

catch rabies from them, and them from us. There's one."

I jumped, then realised she meant a parking spot, not a vampire. "Thanks."

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The weekend passed much too quickly, and on Monday morning I returned reluctantly to chambers and the negative nineties. The Hatter and I were dissecting a lease and trying to bore a large hole in the boilerplate when the phone rang. It was Sullivan, wanting to cancel our lunch. I agreed, and hung up, and enjoyed the feeling of relief for nearly a minute before I realised that Sullivan and I hadn't made an appointment for lunch, and that he would simply have told his secretary to phone my secretary if we had. I asked the Hatter to excuse me, and slipped out of the room. Barbara was sitting at her desk, staring intently at the screenpeace as it created mazes and blundered through them. "I just spoke to Sullivan," I said, softly.

"Yes, I know."

"We weren't having lunch today, were we?"

"Not that I heard."

"What's happened? Is he sick?" He had sounded a little strange -- almost emotional.

"I don't think so," she said, carefully. "I think it's his wife -- and I think you'd better call him back."

I nodded, and ducked back into my room. The Hatter looked up from the photocopies he'd spread over my desk. He's a remarkably ugly man, with a distinct resemblance to a New College gargoyle -- big hands and feet, big eyes, a huge nose, and frizzy ginger hair that no dye nor wig could conceal or control -- as well as being a hopeless advocate, but he has an excellent memory for precedents and a fetish for minute detail. He started gathering up the papers as soon as he saw my expression, and quickly disappeared. I slumped into my chair, and reached for the phone.

Sullivan told me the story with remarkable economy, for a politician; Sylvia, his wife, had gone out on Saturday night, and not returned. He hadn't reported her as missing (the police won't act, or even listen very hard, until someone's been gone forty-eight hours), and wanted the whole affair kept as quiet as possible. There was something decidedly strange about the way he said 'affair', and I took a deep breath before asking, "What can I do?"

"If this gets out, I'm going to have to call a press conference. I'll need you there, just to make sure everybody minds their manners. Are you with me?"

If there was a threat in there, it was unusually quiet; he sounded more tired than anything else. If I'd said no, it probably wouldn't have cost me anything more than my job, maybe not even that. "I'll be there," I replied. "If necessary, that is. I'm sure she'll turn up before it comes to that."

He grunted. "Okay. Remember, if you get another offer, I'll beat it; that's a promise. I'll be in touch."

* * *

Alice was asleep when I returned home -- or dead, maybe, but she looked asleep. She was lying on the bed in the guest room, curled up into a foetal

ball, still wearing her jeans and anorak from the night before. Her eyes were closed, and her face had relaxed into a pretty, girlish pout. I stood in the doorway watching her for a few minutes, and then crept into the kitchen. I enjoy cooking, when I have the time, and I often suspect I make the best chilli in England. Alice appeared, wrinkling her nose, while I was chopping the garlic. "Sorry. Is this, ah . . ."

She shrugged. "Don't worry. It doesn't hurt me, it just fucks up my sense of smell. How was your day?"

"Pretty awful. I spent most of it helping a bank get away with knocking down an old building and replacing it with an office tower that looks uncannily like a giant refrigerator; the rest of the time, I helped a politician pretend to look for his wife. How about you?"

"Nothing exciting. Can you drive me down to Piccadilly, later?"

I nodded. She sat in the dining room and watched me cook, and chatted about some of Dodgson's other child-friends and models whom she'd met -- Gertrude Chataway, Beatrice Hatch, Connie Gilchrist, Isa Bowman, Ina Watson, Xie Kitchin, others whose names she'd forgotten. He'd photographed all of them as near naked as they would allow, frequently with their mothers present; the child nude was a favourite subject of Victorian artists, and several of the girls had also modelled for Henry Holiday (then better known for his stained glass windows) or Harry Furniss. "I only saw most of them once or twice," she said. "He usually lost interest in them when they turned eleven or twelve -- I remember he was particularly nasty to Connie, as though it were her fault that she was growing up -- but he was still calling Gertrude 'dear child' when she was nearly thirty, and she let him; I guess she enjoyed it. I bumped into her when she visited in 1890-something, and she recognised me, and we had to pretend I was the daughter of the girl she'd met when she was eight." She laughed. "Of course, I didn't know any of them well; they were sunlight girls."

"He was lucky," I said, as I stirred the chilli. "Nowadays, parents can be arrested for photographing their own children naked, even in the bath. So much for progress."

She looked at me coolly. "Have you ever read any Victorian porn? A hell of a lot of it's about old men fucking girls of ten or eleven, and that wasn't just a fantasy; it was common practice. There's been some progress; women and kids are better off, even if the men aren't."

"Sorry. It was a stupid thing to say."

"Yeah. It was. And okay, it's a stupid law, but where do you draw the line?" She shrugged. "You want to know if he fucked them, don't you? That's what everyone else asks -- or if they don't ask, it's what they wonder. Do you want me to tell you?"

I didn't answer. She sat there silently for nearly a minute, then, softly, "He didn't even want to."

"No, that's a lie. Sometimes, he did want to -- he dreamed about it, even fantasized about it, though he did whatever he could to distract himself from these fantasies -- writing letters, inventing mathematical problems . . . But I don't think he ever touched any of them, especially not when they were naked, and I think that's what matters."

"He never touched me, and I knew him for nearly forty years, and while I was

physically as delicate and fragile and generally unsuitable for fucking as any of them, he knew I sure as shit wasn't innocent. He never let me touch him, either; and he hit me when I offered to fellate him. Knocked me across the room -- he was a lot stronger than he looked -- and apologized later. The thought really horrified him."

Which meant he'd probably had it before, I thought; a man confronted with a new idea, however horrific, has to think about it for a moment before he can react. But I didn't say anything.

"He wanted to be the White Knight, courteous and gentle and dreamy, and clumsy, and bad at his job . . . and he never removed his armour. I think what he really wanted was for sex not to matter. He wanted to be a boy again -- no, a child. Even being a boy implied that sex existed."

"I am fond of children," I quoted, "'except boys.'"

She nodded. "He grew up surrounded by sisters and younger brothers, until they sent him off to school, which he hated. He wanted to return home; I think he spent the rest of his life wanting to return to that home. He was never really cut out to be an adult; he stuttered whenever he spoke to adults, he wasn't even interested in money, let alone sex. He just liked studying, and solving mathematical problems, and writing little satires and nonsense, and surrounding himself with toys and books and children -- all the things he'd done as a child. He never 'put away childish things,' as he once put it, and we loved him for it. Without him, I wouldn't have had a childhood at all."

I looked down at the skillet, and realised that I was burning my dinner. I rescued it as best I could, and asked, "Why didn't you make him a vampire?"

"I don't know how -- Anna never taught me -- and, anyway, he wouldn't have wanted it. It was too late; I couldn't make him a child again, couldn't give him back his innocence, and he wouldn't have wanted to be thirty or forty forever."

I nodded. There was something strange about the way she'd said 'innocence,' but there wasn't time for a cross-examination before the news, and I had to know if Sylvia Sullivan's disappearance had been noticed yet. There were stories about increases in the jobless and homeless figures, a small shipment of crack intercepted in the Chunnel, and massacres in Peru, Kowloon, Johannesburg and Atlanta; I guess they were too busy to worry about a back-bencher's wife, however photogenic. "What's happening in Piccadilly?"

"You wouldn't like it."

"I wasn't expecting an invitation. Meeting more sidhe?" It was two days before Hallowe'en, which the British don't celebrate the way we do, but which might be 4th of July for vampires.

"Yes."

"Going out for a bite?"

She looked at me coldly. "Do you really want to know?"

One of the first things they teach lawyers is never to ask a question unless they already know the answer. "No, I guess not."

* * *

That night, I dreamed about my childhood -- something I hadn't done in years. It was my tenth birthday, and everyone was there; it wasn't until I'd woken up, still feeling good, that I began wondering what was wrong with that. I'd had a tenth birthday party, yes, and I had gotten my first real camera then, and my parents were still together and all my grandparents still alive, so what was

Alice was in the en-suite, brushing her teeth. I'd stopped wondering how she was getting in and out; she'd had more than a century to study burglary. "Is that what you meant, when you said you give your victims dreams?"

"You're not one of my victims."

"Are you sure?"

She spat the toothpaste out of her mouth. Her eyes were blazing, and there was white froth on her chin; she looked horribly rabid. "You're a lawyer. I'm a vampire. There is such a thing as professional courtesy."

"I'm serious."

She shrugged, stuck the toothbrush back in her mouth, and glanced at the mirror; I could see my reflection, but not hers. Eventually, she said, "I didn't give you that dream; you dreamed it by yourself. I just helped you remember it. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit. Nightmare?"

"No."

She smiled at the mirror. "Okay. So I screwed up. Sorry; you looked happier than you had in years, and I thought . . ."

"Years?"

"I remember when you were a student. You went to University College, right? Rooms on Logic Lane?"

I nodded. "Someone in admin must have had a twisted sense of humour . . . You mean you've been watching me for twenty years?"_

"No. Just while you were at Oxford. I liked you; Hell, some of us even fall in love. And I remembered your face, the way you looked at me, and when I saw you again . . ."

"Did you bite me then? When I was a student?"

She looked away from me. "Not seriously."

* * *

_"Seven years and six months!" Humpty Dumpty repeated thoughtfully. "An uncomfortable sort of age. Now if you'd asked my advice, I'd have said 'Leave off at seven' -- but it's too late now."

"I never ask advice about growing." Alice said indignantly.

"Too proud?" the other enquired.

Alice felt even more indignant at that suggestion. "I mean," she said, "that one can't help growing older."

"One can't, perhaps," said Humpty Dumpty; "but two can. With proper assistance, you might have left off at seven."

Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There_

* * *

There was nothing about Sylvia Sullivan in the news that morning, and, as soon as the partners' meeting was finished, I asked Barbara to put a call through to Sullivan; it'd be just like the pompous prick not to tell me if she'd come back. She hadn't.

A moment later, Barbara walked in without announcing herself. I put down the brief that Midas had given me. "What's wrong?"

"You're looking for Sylvia Sullivan?"

I shrugged. As far as I knew, no-one was. "Do you know where she is?"

"No . . ."

"But?"

She sat down, uncomfortably. "I've seen her around the bars before . . ."

I blinked. "Gay bars?"

"Yeah. Not often -- maybe once, twice a month. I think she's got some boyfriends, too. Nothing steady. Do you know her?"

Obviously not. "No."

"I don't know her well, either . . . we've had a few drinks, and talked, but never fucked or anything . . . I don't even know who has fucked her. For all I know, she may be straight."

I had to think about that. It didn't help. "I don't understand."

"She was lonely. I don't think she was looking to get laid, but she probably wouldn't have said no if that was the asking price. She just wanted to be wanted; failing that, she got drunk, and took a taxi home. Do you know the Elton John song 'All the Young Girls Love Alice'? From Goodbye Yellow Brick Road?" I shook my head. "Pity. Sylvia . . . she's a good looking woman, married to an old bastard who never fucks her without fantasizing he's fucking someone else. Can you imagine what that's like?"

I tried. "Where do you think she is?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her in weeks. There are lots of places she might have been that night."

"Can you give me a list?"

She thought about it for a moment, staring out the window. "Maybe. Promise me

you won't just give it to Sullivan?"

"Why?"

"If you find her, that's one thing. She may be running away, hiding, whatever, from the old shit; she may not want to be found. If you look for her, find her, I can live with that -- but I'm not handing her back to him on a platter. I don't know her well, and I never fucked her, but I owe her that much."

"If she was trying to get away, wouldn't she just divorce him?"

She snorted. "Divorce Sullivan? Where would she find a divorce lawyer who'd dare? Some kid straight out of school, if she was lucky. And he'd have the Hatter doing the research, and you or Ashcroft or Midas if it ever got to court . . . More likely the old bloodsucker'd get some shrink to have her committed --"

I shuddered, and stared out the window. London stared back at me, secure in her bulk, like a dinosaur that doesn't realise that it's being killed. "Could you go?"

"What?"

"Go to the clubs, or bars, or wherever. Take my card, and the Jag, and a photo, and ask if anyone's seen her. If they haven't, you don't even have to tell me where you went." I turned away from the window, and almost managed to look Barbara in the eye. "I'll pay you overtime, of course."

She hesitated, then nodded. "When shall I start?"

"Are they open this early?"

"A few of them . . ." I tossed her the car-keys, and she backed out of the room. I looked over at the window again, at the thick grey clouds and the thin grey sunlight. All the young girls love

* * *

Barbara returned at five, and I handed her a wad of taxi vouchers. I didn't need to ask whether she'd had any joy. Getting lost in London is easy -- you don't even have to try -- and I had no good reason to believe that Sylvia was still in London. I'd tried to persuade Sullivan to report her as missing, and he said he'd think about it (Jesus, I hate being lied to, even if it's by a professional). At least he found her passport; her credit cards were still missing, but they hadn't been used since a visit to Harrods on Saturday morning, a fact that cheered him immensely.

I met Barbara for breakfast the next morning. Someone who might have been Sylvia Sullivan had been seen in a bar on Greek Street on Saturday night. She'd talked to, danced with, and accepted drinks from at least three men and one woman, but the barman hadn't noticed if she'd left with any of them. "What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think . . . but it doesn't sound as though she'd arranged to meet any of them."

I sipped at my coffee, forcing myself to wake up. "I agree."

"What now? The taxi drivers?"

I shook my head. "The old man can only cover up for so long; soon, someone's bound to notice that she's gone, and then it'll be the cops' baby. Or she might come back." I probably didn't sound very convincing.

* * *

I was ten years old again, looking through a viewfinder and waiting for the flash to recharge, and Irene was sitting on my bed reading, and someone touched my neck and shoulder

I lay there, wide-eyed in the darkness, feeling as though I were trapped in a bed that was smaller than I was. My feet seemed incredibly far away, and the ceiling much too close, and the red-lipped girl standing beside the bed was

"You were dreaming again," Alice said. "I thought I'd better wake you."

I sat up slowly, vaguely remembering that I was thirty-nine years old and six foot two. "Thanks . . . I think. What's the time?"

"About four."

I peered at her blearily, and tried to focus; my night vision isn't what it used to be (but then again, it never was). "Where've you been -- no, forget I asked. Was it a nightmare?"

"Don't you remember?"

"I --" I blinked, and suddenly felt very cold. "I -- no."

She stared at me, shook her head, and turned to walk out. "No. Please." I rubbed my eyes. "Look, I won't be able to get back to sleep, now. Tell me more about Dodgson."

She stopped, looked over her shoulder, said "No," and continued walking.

"Why not?"

"You're lying to me."

I sat there, numb, and watched her leave. Finally, I muttered, "I'm sorry."

A moment later, she reappeared in the doorway. "Tell me a story," she suggested.

"What?"

"You're obsessed with a children's fantasist who's been dead for nearly a hundred years -- even more obsessed than you were when you were seventeen. Why?"

"I liked his books a lot when I was a kid. My mother used to read them to me; she still loved them, probably because they were so English. When I went to Oxford, everyone seemed more interested in Charles Dodgson the pedophile than Lewis Carroll the fantasist . . . and it pissed me off, hearing them turn someone who'd written books that made so many kids happy into some sort of monster. I mean, there wasn't any evidence, none of the kids or even the parents accused him, you know it wasn't true . . . I guess it became my first libel case, in a way. I did my damndest to prove him innocent . . ."

Alice stared at me, darkly, and then nodded. It was nothing but the truth,

though she must have guessed it wasn't the whole truth . . . "Okay." She walked back into the room, and sat on the foot of the bed.

"There's a Dodgson story I don't think anyone else knows," she said, quietly. "A few people may have guessed -- shit, I'm guessing most of it, but I had about thirty years worth of hints.

"Dodgson was always so nostalgic about his childhood that I don't think anyone's even wondered if he was abused as a boy. They don't know, or they forget, how much he hated his schooldays at Rugby. Maybe they know that he impressed the teachers, but they don't realise how much most of the boys hated him. They may have heard that he had a reputation for being able to defend himself, but they didn't hear him wishing that his school had given every boy a separate cubicle instead of putting all the beds in an open dorm . . .

"Maybe it was an older boy; more likely, it was a lot of them, more than he could fight off. But I'm only guessing . . ."

* * *

They found Sylvia Sullivan's Gucci handbag in a trashcan near Canary Wharf that morning. It gave them the clue they needed to identify the body they'd found between two of the half-empty office blocks on Sunday. The skull had been so shattered by the fall that even the dental records hadn't been enough.

No one knew how she'd gotten up to the roof without setting off a dozen alarms. I had a sneaking suspicion, but I didn't think the coroner would believe me.

* * *

_There are skeptical thoughts, which seem for the moment to uproot the firmest faith; there are blasphemous thoughts, which dart unbidden into the most reverent souls; there are unholy thoughts, which torture, with their hateful presence, the fancy that would fain be pure.

Lewis Carroll, Pillow Problems_

* * *

I rushed home at lunchtime, and opened all the curtains in the house, except for the guest room. It was raining, of course, but I couldn't wait for the sun to re-appear. Alice was asleep, or dead, and her clothes were scattered over the floor. I searched her pockets, finding nothing, and suddenly she rolled over and looked up.

I opened my wallet, removed a photograph of Sylvia, and flipped it at her. She caught it neatly, and flinched slightly.

"You do recognise her," I growled. "I'd hoped I was paranoid. Did you kill her?"

"What makes you --"

"I saw the photographs of the body. There was hardly any blood at all. The coroner's trying to convince himself it was washed away by the rain. I've been trying not to wonder where you've been feeding, but now I have to know. Did you kill her?"_

She shrank back, then shook her head slowly. "Me? No. She was already dead."

"You found her in the alley?"

"No. There was a feast on the roof." She smiled bleakly. "I was guest of honour -- the new kid in town, so to speak. I didn't know she was a friend of yours."

My knees buckled, and I pitched forward onto the bed, crying for someone I'd barely known.

"Kaarina found her," Alice continued. "She's good at spotting suicides before they jump. I don't know the whole story; she hangs around the bars and waits until she sees a jumper, usually has a few drinks with them, listens for a while, tells them that she's thinking of suicide too, suggests they both go along together . . . Most of them chicken out. Sometimes they take her home, but she leaves before they find out what she is. Some of them . . . say yes."

I managed to lift my head and look at her. "For Christ's sake --" My voice cracked, and I tried again. "What sort of a monster --"

"I'm a vampire," she replied. "You said so yourself. Or a sidhe. Or a boojum, maybe. I can't help what I am, what I need --"

"You can help what you do," I snarled. "You told me you can get the blood you need without killing anyone --"

"Sometimes. It's not always easy."

I rested my head on my hands, wearily. "Easy. How easy do you think it was for Dodgson? Hating boys, but never hurting them, just shutting them out of his universe? Loving little girls, but never touching them apart from the occasional kiss? Jesus, even Sullivan, who's as loathsome a human being as I've ever met . . . he wants to fuck his daughter, but he hasn't, and I bet he never will. It's not what you want, I'll forgive you that, we can't help what we want, even if it's wrong or obscene . . . but Jesus, what you do!"

We stayed there for what seemed like hours, me kneeling by her bed like a mourner, before she whispered, "What do you want?"

"I want the killing to stop."

"Is that all?"

I shrugged. Alice looked down at me, then reached out and touched my shoulder where it met my neck, and whispered, "Who's Irene?"

"What?"

"When you dream, you call out for 'Irene'. You did when you were at Oxford, too. Who is she?"

I looked at her. My eyes hurt like Hell from crying, something I hadn't done in nearly thirty years, and all I could see was the dark hair and darker eyes. I knew it wasn't Irene, but it might have been . . .

"Irene . . ." I began. "Irene was the first. The first girl I . . . She . . ."

"She, uh, lived two houses away, when I was a kid. Year older than me."

Beautiful girl, really beautiful . . . her mother died when she was, I don't know, seven or eight I guess, and she lived alone with her father. He was a . . . I can't remember. Doesn't matter."

I took a deep breath, and tried to start again. "She was the best friend I had, and the only one who lived nearby. Her father wouldn't let anyone visit the house, but she used to sneak over to mine before he came home in the evening. Mostly, she liked to borrow books -- he wouldn't buy any, or give her any money -- or just sit on my bed and read.

"When I turned ten -- she was eleven and a half -- I had a birthday party, and invited her, but her father wouldn't let her go. We kept hoping that he'd change his mind, or come home late, or whatever, so she was sort of guest of honour . . . but she didn't turn up. Jesus, I'd forgotten that party, until -- anyway, my parents were splitting up, though I didn't know it then, and it was sort of my father's way of saying goodbye. He gave me a camera -- a good one, a Nikon, with a zoom lens and flash . . . I'd used his camera before, I was better with it than he ever was . . .

"Irene came over the next afternoon. The rain was pissing down, I remember that . . . she was saying how sorry she was that she hadn't come to the party, and she hadn't been able to buy me a present. I showed her the camera, and she asked if I'd like to take some photographs of her. I took a few close-ups of her face, and then she started unbuttoning her blouse. She said it was okay, her father took photographs of her, like that, all the time . . .

"I can still remember what she looked like; dark hair, like yours, big dark eyes; she was a little taller than me, but skinny, very small breasts, little pink nipples . . .

"When I'd taken a few photographs, we . . ." I tried to talk, but there was a lump in my throat that I just couldn't swallow. Finally, I whispered, "did some of the other things she and her father did all the time . . .

"It was 1966, I was ten, sex education was . . . well, my parents hadn't told me anything, and my teachers sure as shit hadn't. Besides, she kept saying it was okay, and I . . . I really liked her."

"Did your parents catch you?"

"No; I wish to Hell they had. My father wasn't home yet, and my mother . . . I don't know. Irene dressed herself, and ran back home before her father got there. Of course, he knew what had happened, and when she told him that I'd taken photographs . . .

"He had a gun -- it was supposed to be for scaring off burglars -- and he went into the bathroom and shot himself in the head. But not before he shot her.

"I don't think we heard anything; if we did, we probably thought it was thunder. The rest of the story didn't come out for another few days. When it did . . .

"When it did, my mother took my camera, and ripped the film out, and burnt it. I don't remember what she did to me."

I took a deep breath, and threw up all over the bed.

* * *

Alice was waiting as I emerged from the shower. She'd closed the curtains, and

the darkness was almost comforting, like a confessional. I suspect I still looked like Hell, but at least I felt human. Almost. I tied a robe around myself, and collapsed onto the couch. "You said she was the first," said Alice.

"Yeah. Well. I didn't have sex with anyone else until I'd nearly finished high school -- my mother made sure of that. Just before graduation, a few of my friends and I drove down to the Combat Zone, but that was a disaster; she was older than me, with big floppy breasts and badly dyed hair and . . . I didn't even try again until I won my scholarship and came to England.

"Soho was a nightmare. I'd been told it was London's answer to the Zone, or Times Square, but I could hardly find a picture of a naked girl who wasn't being spanked, caned or whipped. It was like the London Dungeon -- you know, the horror museum for kids -- where it's okay to look at nudes, as long as they're being executed or tortured. Christ. Besides, most of the models looked old enough to be my mother.

"After that, it . . . became better. Easier. I met a few girls at Oxford who were still in their late teens . . . blondes were best, and redheads. They didn't look as much like Irene, I didn't have to worry about using the wrong name, and eventually I got used to them, but it was never as good as . . ."

Alice nodded. "But you never fucked any other little girls?"

"Once," I admitted. "In Bangkok. There was a child brothel that a client of ours knew about, out in the back streets, they had girls as young as seven. I picked one who looked about eleven; I don't know how old she really was." I shook my head. "I couldn't go through with it, and finally she gave up and I paid her and she said 'mai pen rai,' never mind. I've sent thousands of pounds to Thailand since then, sponsoring kids, but it hasn't made me feel any better.

"And I bought some kiddie porn, once, by accident. Honest. There's a group in America, called the Lewis Carroll Collectors' Guild, and I sent them some money for an illustrated catalogue. I was expecting limited editions or something, not pictures of . . . anyway, I burnt it. Only time I've ever burnt a book. I guess that's when I started trying to clear the poor guy's name."

Alice nodded. "What do you want?"_ she repeated.

I thought about that, and finally replied, "Nothing I can have. I want Irene to have survived. Even you can't do that."

"No," she said. "I can't. Is there anything else you want?"

I stared into the darkness. I could barely see Alice, just a pair of eyes and a hint of sharp teeth. "Innocence. If not mine, then . . . I want there never to be another Irene. I don't want any more little girls hurt. I want the obscenity to stop."_

* * *

Long has paled that sunny sky:
Echoes fade and memories die
Autumn frosts have slain July.

Still she haunts me, phantomwise,
Alice moving under skies
Never seen by waking eyes.

Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found
There_

* * *

Sullivan survived his wife's demise -- politically, I mean -- but I think it's put his challenge for the party chairmanship back a few years. His daughter, I'm happy to say, has been sent away to a boarding school.

There was a postcard from Bangkok in my In Tray this morning. Having a wonderful time; Alice. It's good to know things are going well; it wasn't easy (or cheap), sending a dozen Sidhe to Thailand, finding flights that left and arrived at night, arranging passports for little girls who were born fifty, a hundred, or a hundred and fifty years ago.

I take another look at the article in the Telegraph, warning about tourists disappearing in Bangkok, and white male corpses being found in the back streets. Bled white. And then I fold the paper, and reach for the atlas, and wonder where I'm going to send them next.

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