

Crawling Between Heaven And Earth

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Crawling Between Heaven And Earth

Sarah A. Hoyt

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"Elvis Died for Your Sins" first appeared in *Weird Tales*, Spring 2000. "Like Dreams of Waking" first appeared in *Dark Regions Magazine*, Summer 1999. "Ariadne's Skein" first appeared in???. "Thirst" first appeared in *Dreams of Decadence*, Summer 1997. "Dear John" first appeared in *Absolute Magnitude*, Summer, 2001. "Trafalgar Square" first appeared in *Analog*. "Another George" first appeared in *Dark Regions Magazine*, Winter/Spring 2001. "Songs" first appeared in *Weird Tales*. "The Green Bay Tree," "Thy Vain Worlds," and "Crawling Between Heaven and Earth" appear here for the first time.

Baen Publishing Enterprises
P.O. Box 1403
Riverdale, NY 10471
www.baen.com

ISBN 10: 1-888993-29-4

ISBN 13: 978-1-888993-29-5

Cover Art Copyright © 2002 by A. B. Word

<http://www.epilogue.net/cgi/database/art/list.pl?gallery=9457>

First printing, September 2002

Printed in the United States of America

Elvis Died for Your Sins

Every year, when I catch the flu, I lose about two weeks of work to sitting in a truly enormous arm chair in my office and reading whatever is within easy reach. A victim of laziness and viruses, I have—literally found myself reading nineteenth century biology school books rather than getting up and finding more congenial reading material in my bookshelves. My friends and family are onto me. If they find a book they want me to read, they'll set it by my chair when I get sick. I think my friend who left the biography of Elvis Presley by my chair didn't do it on purpose. However, I still read it. And, since the quasi deification of Elvis Presley has always fascinated me, this story emerged.

"It's whom I'm dreamed that remains eternal. It's him whom I shall return."

Fernando Pessoa

Mid afternoon in Eternal Life, the only New Age Store in Lythia Springs, Colorado, tended to be quiet.

We were through with the lunch-time rush of power-vegetarian-executives and not yet up to the late-afternoon rush of college students in search of books on the Hermetic Order Of the Golden Dawn or those convenient Ouija board kits.

I'd taken my sandals off, grabbed a rice-cream popsicle from the freezer at the back of the store and sat down in the window seat behind the magical-crystal-jewelry counter, with my knees drawn up and the long skirt of my Indian print dress demurely drawn down to hide all but my toes.

My eyes half closed, I heard the rumbling talk coming from the book section.

"Archetypes can come alive. You really must read this book, it takes the thesis of the Golden Bough one step further. You know, the one about the divinization of dead chieftains. It maintains that not only did humanity worship these . . . beings, but that they were actually called into existence by this worship and assumed, not the flawed mortal envelopes in which they had truly existed, but perfect archetypes."

A male voice. Probably a college professor, I thought, from the boring, slow, "I'm going to impart this knowledge whether you want it or not" tone. My first husband had been a college professor. I made a face at the memory.

"Oh, you mean they would take the form expected of them, like John Keel claims happens with UFOs and men in black and fairies . . ." A young woman's voice. Buttering the guy up for the kill? Trust me, honey, not worth it.

"Yes, in a way. They're brought to life by the collective subconscious. Perhaps they existed in another form, some spiritual form." A bout of nervous laughter. "I'm not sure I like the idea of all those idolized rock stars and actors walking around long after death, not even in archetype form. And yet, the idea is so elegant, like something out of Jung, something resonating of the shared collective subconscious"

He continued, on and on, in slow, rolling language, full of names and quotes. His female companion listened in silence and presumed raptness. I sighed and ate my rice-cream and kept my mouth shut. The pickups that took place in this store were as unusual as everything else.

"Mariann?"

I opened my eyes.

My boss, Elroy Peters, owner of Eternal Life, stood by the batik curtain that hid the store area from our warehouse and staff kitchen, what had once been the servants quarters of this converted Victorian. A tall man with snow-white hair, thin to the point of gauntness, Elroy stood as always with his hip tilted to one side and his lower lip poked out, in a way that reminded me of someone, but I could never make out whom. His pruned old face showed. "Hasn't Jonni shown up yet?"

I shook my head.

"Wasn't she supposed to have been here at ten?"

I nodded.

"It's not like her," Elroy said. "She might be many things, but she's also punctual to the minute." He normally spoke in an odd way that Jonni called "chewing on the words." Agitation made it even worse,

and brought out his too-perfect-to-be-true good-ol'boy southern accent.

And he had some reason to be agitated. Jonni, our resident college-student-ditsy-blonde, had never been this late. And Elroy, rightly or wrongly, thought that he was responsible for all of us.

"I've called her," I said. "But there was no answer."

Elroy frowned, threw back a white cowlick. "Mark supposed to come in?"

"At two," I said.

"Tell me when he gets in . . . maybe we can go out and see if there's anything wrong with Jonni." He disappeared into the back, so fast that he gave the impression of walking through the virulently colored batik curtain.

"Miss?" a young man's voice.

I turned away from the curtain that hung motionless, as though no one had gone near it, and looked at the young man who stood at the other end of the counter. "Yes?"

"I'm . . . I'm not sure how to put this," he said. He had wild green eyes and wilder hair and beard in a shade of red not normally seen outside Crayola boxes. His voice came out in odd fits and starts. "But . . . my spirit just took over this body. I'm an advanced soul from the Gorianth sphere and I'm here to lead humanity, but I'm not sure"

Ah, a walk-in. Our daily bread. I took a final bite of my rice-cream. "You want walk-ins. Book section. Fourth set of shelves to the right, in the sunroom area. We have several books that will give you further insight into humanity on Earth and what you're expected to tell them."

"Thanks," he said, flashing odd metal-capped teeth.

I watched his retreating back for so long that I missed Mark's approach until he came behind the counter and almost within touching distance. "Problem?" he asked.

"Nah," I said. "A walk-in. From the Gorianth sphere."

Mark raised his perfect black eyebrows over his bright blue eyes. "No kidding. Another one? It's the tenth since the psychic fair."

"Yeah." I looked at the stick for my rice-cream. The licked clean stick said LIFE IS SENSELESS WITHOUT BELIEF. Well, then, I thought to myself, I shouldn't work at a New Age store. Nothing jaded you quicker. "Elroy wanted to know when you came in."

Mark frowned. He took off his bright blue tapestry jacket, shoved it out of sight under the counter. "Why?"

"Jonni hasn't come in. I think he had some idea of going out and checking on her."

"She had an argument with her boyfriend last night," Mark said, pulling out the schedule sheet to write in the time he'd arrived. "At the Catering Turnip."

Mark played his acoustic guitar and sang his own songs at the Catering Turnip, a vegetarian restaurant. He was such a nice guy I'd never had the courage to tell him that he was too late to be the next Bob Dylan. Even Bob Dylan didn't want to be Bob Dylan anymore.

"Big row," he said, looking up at the clock on the wall and writing down a time ten minutes earlier. "He left her to pick up the check, and she didn't have any cash and I had to lend her money. She left in tears. I expected to hear the entire soap opera today."

I found my sandals with my feet. It didn't sound good. As I made my way to the back I thought that the more I heard about this, the less I liked it. Jonni always took her boyfriends so seriously and she picked them with the same recklessness that led other people to play Russian roulette. "If the guy who wants to be possessed calls, tell him we don't have any particular relationship with supernatural entities and he'll have to find his own way to damnation," I told Mark just before I ducked through the batik curtain.

"What?" he asked, for once surprised.

"Some guy who wants instructions on how to become possessed," I said. "He's trying to get over a fundamentalist upbringing, he says. He called five times this morning. Probably will call again, trying to get a different answer."

Mark gave me a bewildered half smile, as if not sure whether to believe me.

I opened the batik curtain and went it, letting it swing closed behind me.

Elroy was half-hidden by a pile of cardboard boxes marked with BLUE GREEN ALGAE. HANDLE WITH CARE.

"Mark is here," I told him. "If you want to go out or whatever."

"Come with me," he said. "To take care of business."

I hesitated. Like everyone in this store, Elroy was all right but slightly different, like his whole concept of reality hung slightly askew. And I had never fully got over the impression that one day one of them was going to pull out a big ritual knife and sacrifice me to the god or goddess of his or her choice.

"In case I need help, young un. Come on."

"You could take Mark," I demurred.

But Elroy shook his head. "And leave you here alone? Not right for a young lady."

After two failed marriages and in my mid-thirties, I didn't really feel like a young lady, but I bit back my response. I didn't particularly want to hang around and talk to the possession aspirant, either.

I made a quick detour to inform Mark that I'd be going with Elroy and left through the front door.

Elroy waited in the parking lot, warming up his car, a white Eldorado with huge tail fins and pink accents.

Inside, teddy bears in pastel colors filled all except the driver's seat. I tried not to bat an eye as I said, people at Eternal Life store were odd and started to push the teddy bears off the seat onto the floor. Elroy gave me a freezing glare, took the teddy bears and put them in the backseat, next to ten hundred or so of their near relatives.

"You know where Jonni lives?" I asked, as he started up his car.

He nodded and mumbled, "Employment application."

As though he thought I'd suspect him of an illicit affair with Jonni, who must be all of seventeen. I told him about what Mark had said of Jonni, to forestall any more such nonsense.

We drove deeper into the old Victorian district of Lythia Springs, past the zone where houses were converted into shops, through the zone where the houses were houses, each one with a tended lawn to rival the most conventional of suburbs and on to the zone of houses chopped up into apartments, with

beer cans on the window sills, and dried-up, dusty front yards.

Elroy pulled up in front of a narrow, violet townhouse.

As he got out of the car, the sun shone on his belt buckle, a huge gold-and-fake-jewels affair with the initials EP picked out in would-be rubies. I shook my head. I'd never noticed the thing. Then again, I didn't normally go around staring at my boss's belt buckle.

I walked up the maltreated concrete steps to the violet door. Elroy looked in the fly-specked window to the left. "Too dirty," he mumbled. "Can't see a darn thing."

I rang the bell, tried the massive brass doorknob.

"Is it open?" Elroy asked.

"No," I said, giving the doorknob a final shove.

"Here," he said. "Let me try."

"Be my guest." I stepped back and he took my place. The sun shone off something, probably his belt buckle, enveloping the knob in a blinding white light. He turned it. "It was unlocked after all."

The door opened with a mighty creak.

I frowned at the doorknob and followed Elroy into the dark living room. It was decorated *inearly college student*, with sheets of batik in reddish brown tenting the ceiling, covering the walls and draped over the two shapeless sofas.

On the right hand sofa, Jonni lay. "Jonni," I called, making my way around piles of books and mounds of dirty clothes.

"Jonni."

She lay on her stomach, in her long T-shirt nightgown, and she didn't move. Her long blond hair covered her face.

"Jonni," I called. But even before I knelt by her side and put my hand on her cold, cold neck to feel for

an nonexistent pulse, I knew that she was dead. The cause wasn't that far to seek, either. Several empty prescription-labeled bottles lay scattered on the floor near the sofa.

Shocked, gasping, not sure yet what I felt, I yelled out, "She's dead. Don't touch anything." Just as if this were some stupid murder mystery.

Elroy stood by the sofa, staring down at Jonni's body. "I knew something had gone wrong," he said.

"Just don't touch anything," I told him, feeling tears well up in my eyes, moist, warm tears roll down my face. Damn, what did Jonni want to go and do this for? She was so young, so pretty. And, unlike me, she hadn't thoroughly fucked up her life, yet. She should have at least tried her hand at fucking it up further, before giving it up. I stumbled to the kitchen, blinded by tears, looking for a phone. I had to call nine-one-one. I had to get the police out here.

"She's not dead," Elroy said. "She just needs waking up."

I didn't even attempt to argue. No one that cold could be alive.

In the kitchen a narrow cubicle with a stove and a sink piled up with dirty dishes I found a small, white wall-phone and managed to blink away enough of my tears to dial. I'd no more than dialed the nine when I stopped.

From the living room came the sound of Elvis singing "Are you lonesome tonight." A bright light shone through the kitchen doorway.

Damn, I'd told Elroy not to touch anything. Did he have to go and turn on Jonni's music, and every damned light? Damn the man.

I slammed the phone down and walked into the living room, to give him what for.

And stopped. He hadn't turned on any music. Nor the lights.

Elvis, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, stood in the middle of the living room, dressed in a white-sequined polyester jumpsuit, leaning over Jonni and singing, "all my dreams fulfill." Light shone around and from him.

And Jonni, Jonni who had been cold and dead, sat on the ratty batik sofa and stared up at Elvis, her eyes full of wonder, her cheeks red.

I couldn't speak. I could take walk-ins. I could take attempted possession. I could take a hundred different things, but Elvis materializing in Jonni's living room was just too much. To say nothing of this resurrection business.

I leaned against the wall and wondered what had been in that Rice-dream bar.

Elvis took off his scarf and handed it to Jonni.

Jonni, a dazed, enchanted-looking Jonni, clapped enthusiastically.

"Jonni?" I managed to say.

The light went out. I blinked. It wasn't Elvis. Only Elroy, who stood there, with his hip poked out, his lower lip sticking forward in a rakish pout. "See?" he said, turning around. "I told you she just needed waking."

I shook my head. Side-effects of working in a New Age store. You eventually went as nuts as the customers.

I approached Jonni gingerly. She had been dead. I was sure she had been dead. "Are you all right?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she said, in her thin, little-girl voice. "Yeah. I had a bad argument with Pete and I took some sleeping pills and slept late, that's all. You guys want me to come in to the store?"

"Yes," Elroy said, unequivocal. "Why don't you go get dressed?"

"I'll go with you," I volunteered, not willing to let her out of my sight, lest she should revert to a dead state. I followed her up a rickety stair and into a messy room, where I watched her change into a pair of jeans and T-shirt. And heard the full account of her row with Pete, told in a strangely detached voice.

"And Elroy woke you?" I asked, bringing her back to the present.

"Yes," she said, and wrinkled her perfect brow. "Only . . . I didn't even know he was an Elvis impersonator."

Elvis impersonator? So, she'd seen it too? Were hallucinations shared, now?

I led Jonni downstairs and out the door, to the car.

Elroy had cleared a space for her in the back by piling the teddy bears in unholy confusion on one side of the back seat. He sat her down with unusual solicitude, then opened the door for me.

Once I was in and we'd started the drive back to the store, he said, "I hope I never catch you taking sleeping pills again, young one. I don't want you taking any of that trash. That stuff can kill you."

I almost told Elroy that we'd all seen the this-is-your-brain-on-drugs commercial, but it struck me that Jonni, whose full name was Jonnitan and whose parents had met in a hippie commune, *might* never have heard any anti-drug speech from someone she respected. So I let Elroy ramble on in his odd, chewed-up speech.

He sounds just like Elvis, I thought. And his gestures, his hip-positioning, his lower-lip pouting, his disapproving sneer. All of them are just like Elvis. "So, you were an Elvis impersonator, when you were young?" I asked him, when I thought that Jonni had enough sermonizing. Besides, he'd started quoting the gospels mixed up with vintage New Age sayings and stuff about a higher plane.

My question brought him up short. He turned to stare at me. "A what?"

"An Elvis impersonator," I said, just as the weird thought ran through my mind that there had been no impersonation involved. Looking down, I saw that he wasn't wearing any belt buckle, certainly not a huge, gold-and-jewels one. Had I dreamed that, too?

I was so shocked that when I paid mind to Elroy again, he had launched off in another sermon of some sort, this one apparently directed at me, "besides, young lady, unlike some people I don't go through life playing no phony role. It's just that sometimes you're required to be what people need, what people think you should be, and in a way to expiate and to cleanse the sins of who you were or they think you were. For instance, all those ice creams you eat"

"I pay for them," I protested.

"Damn right you do. You can die of overweight, you know. And besides, as my mama used to say"

He had parked in front of the store by the time he finished his sermon. I almost ran out of the car, confused, baffled, feeling like I was having a weird dream and definitely very tired of Elroy's sermon.

Mark was at the counter, on the phone, with a pile of books in front of him and a pricing gun in his hand.

He looked up and mouthed at me, "Jonni?"

"She's fine. She's coming in," I said. I wanted to tell him she'd been dead and Elroy had taken on Elvis' form and resurrected her, but then Mark would just tell me I'd been working for Eternal Life too long. And maybe I had.

"Well, ma'am, if you are possessed by a malevolent entity, I'd say you definitely should quit your job with the nuclear power plant," Mark said, into the phone.

I moved in beside him, took the price gun from his hand, determined to start work and forget what must have been a dream, had to have been a dream.

Looking down at the cover on the first book on the pile, I gasped.

Mark covered the mouthpiece on the phone. "Elroy had them vanity published. Isn't it a hoot?"

I looked at the cover again, speechless.

It showed a figure in a white jumpsuit, surrounded by light. On the top it said Elroy Peters. And on the bottom, in black letters, was the title: *Elvis Died For Your Sins*.

Like Dreams of Waking

I have a Southern friend who talks endlessly of civil war minutia. He happened to mention that Stonewall Jackson was killed by friendly fire. With one thing and another, next thing I knew I found myself writing this story.

(preceding pages rendered illegible through water damage and age) . . . possible that he had been wounded early in the day, more than twelve hours beforehand, and just as possible that all those hours he had lain for dead, in that great butcher-shop that Gettysburg had become.

I'm not sure when he was brought to the hospital we'd established at Plank Farm.

Situated three miles west of Gettysburg, the farm consisted of a good sized building on the west bank of Willoughby's Run. A few of us, medical men, had claimed it early in the morning of Wednesday, the first

of July 1863, and since then we'd been disposing sick and wounded where we best could. Beds and mattresses, as well as anything that could be pressed into service as such, had long since been occupied by wretched sufferers.

We had the orderlies bring straw from the barns and spread it on the floor, so that more room might be made to care for afflicted men.

The man I wish to tell you about lay on the floor of the front parlor, upon the already blood-soaked straw, amid scores of wounded, moaning, crying men.

I thought he was dead. Surveying him from the narrow corridor about six feet away, I thought he couldn't be anything but dead and must have died the moment he received his wound. I couldn't imagine why anyone had dragged his corpse in.

His head was all a mass of gore, from which nothing human emerged.

Yet, the gore appeared to move.

Curious, I stepped amid the wounded, careful to avoid touching the infection-swollen limbs and extricating myself from hands that grasped my ankles.

To be honest, I no longer noticed the grabbing hands, nor the piteous moaning of the poor sufferers, nor could I any longer smell the miasma of putrefaction and illness that pervaded the room. I'd smelled its like or much worse after other campaigns and in other hospitals, worse provisioned than this.

In those other necessity-engendered hospitals, the wounded had lain in tents that could not keep the water fully away from their tortured bodies, and had been crowded so tightly together that there had been no room to step between them.

At least here there was plenty of room around this man for me get close to him. Close enough to realize that what moved amid the gore and blood on his face was no human muscle but a mass of maggots that writhed and danced like children at a feast, all the while making a sound like hogs feeding on mash.

Revolted, my stomach reacting to this sight with a violence I hadn't experienced since the early days of the war, I attempted to find an orderly that would take the corpse away, before its corruption contaminated the living bodies lying beside it.

But just then the assumed corpse spoke, a whisper barely audible above the sound the maggots made while feasting his still-living flesh. "France," he said, with startling clarity. "And the English, too." His voice subsided into a low sound that might not have been more than labored breathing.

His uniform might be a mishmash of Confederate and Federal issue, but his voice held the slow accent of the South.

I rushed out to the yard of the farmhouse, where I found a pail and filled it with water from the pump, displacing the walking wounded who had been taking turns pumping cold water over their afflicted limbs.

Though his words held no meaning for me, they were words, the words of a fellow human being suffering the tortures of hell while in this world. And his accent was the accent of a compatriot. To assist him and others such as him, I'd left my studies in England to come to the succor of my homeland, when it first seceded from the Union.

I'd come back, against my mother's besieging and my father's instructing, and through two years of hard, bitter campaigning, I'd lived to endure the full pain of my decision. But I'd never regretted it, because what use is man if he doesn't do something for his fellow?

I took the pail with water and a discarded rag that I found in a corner of the yard.

Kneeling by the wounded man, I did my best to clear away the blood and gore, and the vermin that infested it. As I cleared the gore, I found his injury was less than I'd at first suspected.

The right half of his head was intact, his elongated dolichocephalic cranium covered in pale blond hair. But the left half couldn't be cleaned. It remained a mass of gore and hair, with bits of bone and metal sticking to it. I could do no more than clear away the vermin and wrap his head in the cleanest ligature to be found.

He would be very young, perhaps twenty at most, and at one time might have been thought handsome, with clean-cut squarish features, somewhat obscured by a puffy swelling of his face.

As a man who'd long been interested in the human brain and the science of phrenology, I marveled at his being still alive despite his wound and wondered what faculties he would find missing, should he survive.

.(pages missing, where a rat gnawed at manuscript) . . .as well as procuring food from the vegetable gardens and pens of the farm, besides keeping those wounded who could and would move about for their own purposes from eating all of it, leaving nothing for the worst sufferers.

While at these labors, I found a bottle of spirits in an unused cupboard and I thought it might be used to comfort some of those in worst extremities. I have to confess I thought foremost of my head-wound case, the nameless man who, as I've written earlier, had made wondrous progress in the last five hours, so that he sat up and looked about with remarkably clear green-brown eyes.

However, upon reaching the front parlor, where he had lain, I saw that his space had emptied, though all about it the wounded lay crowded as before. He must have died.

Yet, as I walked to the door, I looked at his spot once more and saw him standing where he'd once lain.

He looked startled, scared, his eyes wide and unreasoning, like the eyes of a horse about to rear.

I hastened to his side. He showed some hint of recognizing me and allowed me to sit him down.

I proffered the whiskey, and he took a healthy swig, capping the flask and handing it back to me, all as sane as you please. He might have been a fellow drinker on a social visit.

And then he spoke.

"How goes . . . the fighting?" he asked. His voice, scarcely louder than wind rustling through trees, sounded alarmed.

I shrugged. I knew little enough of it, being here, away from the action, and heard close to nothing from the mouths of those I treated. "I hear Stonewall Jackson's command took Cemetery hill," I said. "And it seems as though we'll carry the day, though we get so many dead and wounded, one way and another"

He nodded, as though he understood. The ligature on his head, brown with soot and seeping blood, had remained vermin-free. "So the Yankees won't win?" He spoke in the familiar accent of the Piedmont.

I shrugged again. "It looks like we'll carry this. And in a month the Yankees might well have capitulated and we all be home."

He raised a dirt-encrusted hand to his forehead, bringing it down again before touching that portion of it where the ligature hid broken bone and said, "I had dreams. Dreams like when one dreams of being awakened and in the dream walks and talks and does all the normal things of life. I dreamed I rose and walked as through an open door, and found myself back home, but the Union had won and scavengers from the North descended upon Dixie like vultures on an ill-dead carcass." He looked away. "My wife had died of dysentery. My farm was ruined. I had to sell the house."

"A nightmare," I told him. "You've been grievously wounded."

"Yes," he said, and looked in some distaste around him, at the wounded lying all about, as though he

himself weren't as filthy and meagerly fed and hard-driven as them. "And will I live?"

I couldn't tell him it was passing marvelous that he was alive with half his brain destroyed. Though it was. So I told him . . .

. . .(water damage renders a few lines illegible) . . .and with that he had to be contented.

The rest of the day and through the night I was kept busy with more wounded brought in, half of them at least Federal prisoners that we treated as we did our own, though some of the doctors refused to treat anyone not of their regiment, a crime and offense against divine law for which I often wished they would be incinerated on the spot. Alas, divine mercy and divine justice both being in short supply in this war we had to make do with the human variety that required sweat and blood and sleepless nights for your humble servant.

At daybreak on the second of July, I searched for and found my head-injury case. He walked about the yard, as though in a daze, tracing an erratic path around the fires that warmed those not so seriously wounded. He looked at everything with a strange, detached expression, as though not sure who he was, nor why he walked.

Judging him to be prey to a fever, I found him and took him by the arm and started guiding him back inside.

But he pulled his arm from mine and regarded me, his eyes open wide and his nostrils flaring, the look of a man scared, a man under mortal threat.

"The Yankees won't win, son," I said, addressing him thus because of his youth, though I was not by any means old enough to have sired him. "I know what you dreamed, but it won't come true."

But he only opened his eyes further and hissed breath through his clenched teeth. "No. No, the Yankees won't win. But neither will we . . .I saw it all." He blinked. "Perhaps it was a dream, too, but I swear it was so vivid . . .I stepped through the opening again, and found myself in a strange land . . .a strange land though it was our own. I listened to the people and I talked and I almost got killed for saying the wrong thing." His lips trembled. His ligature had become even dirtier, as though a good many days had passed and he'd wandered far and wide. "I understand that even now Napoleon III of France dreams to establish a monarchy in Mexico. If we win" He swallowed. "With us winning this battle, France and England will recognize us. They'll also subsidize our fighting and prop our treasury." He swallowed again. "When the war is over, in another year, they will own us, lock, stock and barrel. And from here they'll take over the Federal territory too. America will be no more." His eyes filled with tears. "Nor will democracy nor the dream that men of wisdom can govern themselves. Kings will own the land. Forever."

I could tell from his words that he was a man of some learning, and I had to admit the scenario he painted might be likely. Nothing for it but to calm him down and tell him that all would be well, as I took

him back to his spot on the floor and lay him down upon the soiled straw and gave him more of my hoarded spirits to help him rest.

However, when I checked on him later, I found his eyes wide open, filled with understanding. Looking up at me he said, "Of the two, I'd rather sacrifice our cause than sacrifice the whole land and have foreigners split us like preying wolves split a wounded lamb."

(Water damage) . . . some beef tea, that I brought to him and made him drink. He sipped willingly enough. He didn't feel hot to the touch, and didn't rave, but when he finished his drink, he looked at me and said, "It should not be allowed. If I'm given this vision it's for a reason. There must be a reason."

That night I found some time to lay down amid the wounded and get well-earned rest. But though I was tired and hadn't slept in well over twenty four hours, I couldn't settle. I kept wondering about the strange dreams that kept my patient worried. Dreams? Or was it possible, just possible that the human brain, like the rudder on a ship, kept men to one time and place at a time and that a man with his brain injured might move through time and space without direction like a rudderless vessel? And if that were the case, well, then, wouldn't it explain most madness that follows an injury to the head? And most prophesying for that matter?

I remembered from my grammar school days that many philosophers in ancient times thought that what men perceived and reality were not necessarily the same. Like Plato, with his idea that what we saw were no more than reflections of the truth. What if all of God's creation unfolded at once, with his one word, but parts of our brain allowed us to perceive it a little at a time, lest we got mad?

And if so, was my poor patient a true prophet? Did God allow him to suffer this injury and survive it so that he might transmit to me the dangers of our cause? And if so, what could I do?

A heavy wind blew around the building, shaking the trees, but inside it heat collected, suffocating, and every smell of disease, every hint of rot and decay assailed my nose.

I turned and weighed things in my mind. If the Yankees won they would have full revenge on our land. The emancipation proclamation their president had made would wreck the southern plantations and Dixie might never recover from its death blow.

If we won this battle, France and England would recognize us. But would they recognize us without intending to get their own back? Or was their support for us as much interest in our cause as a wish to see democracy as a form of government fail? Since the ancient world, only America had lived in a successful republic. France had tried the rule of the people, only to take it to extremes and retreat shrieking into the arms of monarchy, once more. Was that what they wished on us? Would England, still smarting from the blow given it by our grandfathers, ever let us go once it had a chance to put its feet on our neck again?

I turned and tossed on the filthy straw. I could imagine a land ruled and divided by European powers. I thought that the English, as keen on abolishing slavery as the Yankees, would ruin the south just as certainly, only they might as well muzzle the free southerners to the work in the plantations, making us something between slave and free. Not full citizens. A colonized people.

And yet, certainly my poor sufferer was delusional and I was but following him on the road to madness. A fit destination for someone as short on sleep as I was.

Besides, what could I do about it? And why would the Almighty send me, me of all people, a vision of the future and a choice about it? What was the choice? What could I do?

I tossed and turned. Through the windows, I saw the reflection of fires in the courtyard, heard the rough voices of the men, some of them little more than boys, who sat there, in the warm night outside, discussing the battle, the comrades lost, the charges that had succeeded and those that had failed.

If what I heard was true, the turning point at Gettysburg had come when Stonewall Jackson took Cemetery Hill. What if that hadn't happened? What if Stonewall Jackson had died at Chancellorsville when some of the N.C. volunteers had mistakenly fired upon him?

I'd been there and I remembered General A. P. Hill frantically crying for the troops to stop firing.

They had stopped and no damage done. But what if they hadn't?

If they hadn't, Stonewall Jackson might well be dead and this day lost and . . .and a good man dead to prevent what? The dreams of a man whose brain had been shattered by a bullet?

But if these were dreams, dreams and nothing else, wouldn't my giving him a way to relieve his anxiety within his fantasy be an act of mercy?

And if they were dreams, dreams and nothing else, dreams as yet as vivid as waking and no more, what difference could it make?

That morning, the morning of the third of July 1863, when I found my patient walking around in a daze, I told him what I'd thought. I told him that if one of his doors to other times and places should open to that night of May second 1863 and he could find a way to ensure the friendly fire continued, Stonewall Jackson might well die and the cause of the Confederacy with it.

After I talked to him, he sank into sleep, seemingly relieved by my suggestion.

Wounded arrived in such great numbers that all that day I was kept busy, unable to see my patient.

The next morning we got orders to return to Virginia. The orders from General Lee were that we should take as many of our poor wounded as possible back home.

We loaded all vehicles we could find with wounded and in the commotion I lost track of my particular patient.

After noon the rain started and puddled in the already poor roads. Horses and mules lost direction and became unmanageable. In the wagons the wounded and mutilated men cried out for death as the ultimate reliever.

I went from wagon to wagon, attempting to somehow mitigate the suffering, though there was precious little I could do, absent morphine or the other physics that mitigate pain and those had long been lacking in the Confederacy due to the Yankee blockade.

In the pouring rain, I finally came across the man who was wounded on the head. He sat bolt upright in a wagon, looking into the pouring rain, the eyes of man who sees something else, far away. "We lost at Gettysburg, doctor. We lost. Stonewall Jackson died at Chancellorsville, shot down by his own men."

I thought then, at that moment, that he hallucinated and said whatever was needed to soothe him, paying no more heed to my words than to the sounds a mother makes to gentle a babe to sleep.

Later, walking behind the wagon, with all the other men who could walk, it came to me, as a dream, the awful memory of that sleepless night and the thoughts that had haunted me in those days in Gettysburg.

They were clear, like dreams of being awake, but they made no sense, because of course I knew that Stonewall Jackson had died at Chancellorsville, and that Gettysburg had been a disaster for the Confederacy. We'd never taken Cemetery Hill. My thought that we had, had to be the product of sleepless nights and the shock of working with so many wounded.

The man who'd been wounded on the head died that night, on the wagon, and was buried by the side of the road, like so many other anonymous heroes, who died to defend our land.

(Water damage) . . . these many years later. And yet, sometimes I wake in the dark of night and think of that scene in the woods, East of Orange Plank Road and I remember the circumstances of the North Carolina detachment of Pender's brigade shooting at General Jackson. I remember Hill's frantic pleas for them to stop, screaming "Cease firing," and then the sound of a voice with a thick Piedmont accent calling out, "It's a lie; pour it into them, boys!" and a full volley striking the group, giving General Jackson his fatal injury.

Then I sit in my bed, all in a sweat, and wonder. I wonder if it was me who caused the death of that hero, Stonewall Jackson. I wonder if it was me who put the knife through the heart of the Confederacy. If it was me who made it possible for the North to feed on the South like a jackal on sickened prey.

Of course, if that blame rests on me, then my patient's injured brain allowed him to go through the different paths of time and place and visit the possible futures. And if that was true, then it must be the design of the Almighty that I could save the American lands from being divided between France and England.

And yet, the man had half his brain missing. What if he could truly wander amid time and place, but could not see clearly?

What if I caused the defeat of the South in vain? Did I betray my land for nothing?

I think and I turn and I toss. From outside my window come the sounds of bustling London where I sought refuge after defeat, and where I've lived for forty years now.

As my days draw to a close, rarely a night goes by that I don't hear that voice shouting in my dreams, "Pour it into them, boys."

And that fatal phrase on which the entire war pivoted, on which my sanity hangs, is pronounced in the voice of the wounded man that we left buried by the roadside on the way back from Gettysburg.

Ariadne's Skein

I've always been fascinated with Borges' poem and the idea of a circular time—the idea that the myths and legends of humanity might reflect the time ahead, not the time before them. This story was born of this.

"When Rome is dust Again shall wail in the endless Night of his rank palace"

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Minotaur"

We clambered onto the white deck of a Blue Gryphon 56 sea-to-air and sat on deck chairs disposed in two rows. There were fourteen of us, jet-lagged tourists from pan America and the guide who'd show us

the manufactured wonders of Mythos.

Sunlight showed as no more than a hint of silver on the deep blue waves of the Mediterranean.

The man across from me reclined on his chair, stretched his long legs, threw his head back and half-closed his eyes. He wore only a scrap of shorts and looked no more than twenty. Tanned and sporting fashionably long black curls, he showed better defined muscles than any one man should have been born with.

Instinctively, I glanced at the middle-finger of his right hand.

In the place where an artifact *had* to display the red ring of his slavery or the black ring of his freedom either permanently embedded in the flesh this man wore a thin gold band. Matching ones adorned every finger of his right hand, even his thumb.

So, this exquisite creature had been naturally born, not test-tube assembled. Would wonders never cease?

He looked at me from beneath his artfully lowered eyelids. The corners of his lips lifted in a tentative smile.

"Living, breathing things to see at last." The fidgety older blonde who sat next to him dug a skinny elbow into his supple muscles. She wore a long yellow silk party dress, singularly out of place. "It will be a relief, after all those dried-up stones at Knossos and all the dreadful bits of pottery in museums."

He opened startling green-blue eyes and looked at her with the bewilderment of an innocent.

"But Nary, if you wanted an amusement park peopled with fantastic characters, why didn't we stay in Sea York? They do have those, you know?" His voice would serve a university professor better than a gigolo.

Which proved nothing, except that natural humans seldom lived up to their archetypes. I wasn't about to believe the demigod had paired with this woman out of love.

His girlfriend blushed and primmed thin accordion-creased lips. She glanced at me, lifted her eyebrows at my too-regular features. Her gaze found the black ring of a freed artifact on my right hand and she relaxed.

I was not really human. Didn't count. Not to people like her, I didn't. After all, freed artifacts, though

nominal citizens, could neither marry nor vote.

"Don't be tart, Pol," she said. "Mythos *isnot* an amusement park. It recreates scenes from mythology. It is . . .cultural."

Pol's perfect lips curled disdainfully. "Ah," he said. "I see. Amusement park for*adults*. "

"Pol, you are*not* irreplaceable."

I looked away. I didn't want to empathize with his reluctantly subservient position. True, I'd been subservient most of my life, but I hadn't chosen it as the quickest course to an easy life. I'd been born an artifact. I'd been born owned, one of a few thousand people worldwide who had been created because the unique attributes they could be given outweighed the cost of making and training them.

Willfully abstracting my mind and gaze from the couple and stared ahead where the dark shape of an island rose out of the glimmering sea ahead of the boat.

"Ladies and gentleman, if you please," the guide said. "Could I have your attention?"

We swiveled our chairs to face him.

Dapper and cool in a white linen suit, the guide graced us with a practiced smile. In Pan-America, his position would have been filled by an artifact. But not here. Though he looked just like any of the figures on a thousand classical vases, he lacked the artifact ring. "Welcome," he said.

The self-piloted ship thumped against the shore, mooring on the white sands of the artificial isle.

The guide gestured towards land. "Welcome to the fabulous island of Mythos, where you will see marvels to dazzle your eyes." His perfect, white teeth flashed briefly between red lips. "Our first stop is the palace of the Minotaur . . .the fabled labyrinth. For those of you not familiar with the legend, let me tell you how Pasiphae, the wife of King Minos, gave birth to a monster, half-man, half-bull. This monster was confined in a labyrinth built by Daedalus. Because he ate human flesh, the city of Athens was forced to send a yearly tribute of seven maidens and seven youths. The Minotaur devoured them all, year after year, until Theseus was chosen. Theseus killed the monster with the help of Ariadne, daughter of king Minos. She gave him a sword to slay the Minotaur and a skein of magic thread with which to find his way out of the labyrinth, once he'd killed the beast. Ariadne and Theseus left together, but later Dionysus fell in love with her and compelled Theseus to abandon her while she slept."

He cleared his throat. "Our engineers have recreated the labyrinth and the Minotaur in all particulars," he went on. "Of course, the Minotaur does not eat meat and has the mind and manners of a well-behaved

seven-year-old. As for the labyrinth, do not be afraid of getting lost. If you become disoriented, just remain still. Sensors on the walls will allow rescuers to find you anywhere. Now, follow me to the country of myth."

We rose. Pol helped his companion stand, offered her his arm. She gave no sign of being charmed. Perhaps familiarity truly bred contempt.

His muscled chest glimmered with suntan lotion. I wouldn't mind getting familiar with him. But I would have no chance. He was the wages of fortune and no doubt of natural birth.

Reserved for nats only. No artifacts need apply.

The guide led us down the automatically-lowered gangplank to the shore.

If I hadn't known Mythos had been built by an international conglomerate less than twenty years ago, I would have thought it was just another Greek isle. It looked ancient and weathered another volcanic islet. The only difference was that this one didn't show any signs of ever having been inhabited, much less of the creeping overpopulation that crowded every other isle with massed houses and unsightly high rises.

In Mythos, the white shore rose slowly to a plateau where no building glimmered. Up the white shore, we tourists went scrambling.

The first to reach the summit, I removed my light wrap and stowed it in my ever-present belt-pouch while I waited for the others. Under it I wore a sleeveless short dress, adequate after walking. Even the guide had been left behind by my trot, not surprising, considering what I'd been created to do.

The sun showed itself now, pale but warm. A heated breeze blew. The day would be a scorcher.

On the other side of the beach, at my back, green countryside stretched inland, cut here and there by groves of gnarled, twisted olive trees.

Another party of tourists walked through the middle of a field, stopping to take their tiny cameras to their eyes and snap holos of the view.

The rest of our group finally joined me, one by one and two by two. The guide came first, and accosted me with a buoyant, "You're a fast walker."

Then he looked at the ring on my finger and looked away, towards the approaching party. It took some people that way. As the other tourists arrived, he talked to them, instead, discussing the sea and the heat,

the sand and recreated myths. But I'd ceased existing.

Pol brought up the rear, supporting his less decorative companion.

She leaned heavily on him, and no wonder, since she wore five inch stiletto heels in shiny, rock-hard dimatough. Not the most adequate shoes for walking on sand, and what could have possessed her to wear them?

I wondered how money, or even social prestige, could keep a thinking man in thrall to such a fool. Then, of course, I was assuming that Pol was a thinking manna stretch of the imagination.

Turning away from him, I concentrated on following the guide and not overtaking him as he led us on the same route the other group had followed, up a convincingly weathered narrow path and through a grove of trees.

Flawlessly sensuous nymphs danced with faultlessly goat-legged satyrs for the amusement of yet another group of tourists.

I looked away, counting my blessings. Other than exceptional strength and agility and the eidetic memory and sense of direction necessary for my erstwhile job as a courier, I had no modifications that distinguished me from natural humans.

Oh, my features might be a little too perfect, as designers would make them if they got the chance. And I wore the black ring of a freed artifact. But those didn't matter. It could have been worse. Much worse.

A hundred steps past the grove, a seven-foot-tall stone wall rose. A panel of dimatough, inexpertly made to look like wood, covered a narrow doorway.

Our guide touched a button. The panel slid away.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let us enter the fabulous labyrinth of the Minotaur."

We followed him into a tunnel. Its walls were molded of smooth black dimatough, and the blackness swallowed what light shone from the diminutive lamps on the wall sconces.

The uncertain lighting changed my companions into shapes and shadows. The dank air reeked of manure. It felt like a cheap ride in a second class carnival.

"It smells like a stable," Pol's girlfriend said. "I'm not going in."

The guide turned around. A light affixed at the base of his throat lit his face partially and from below, obscenely emphasizing his mouth. "It's perfectly clean," he said his mouth opening and closing, white teeth shining and making him look like a snarling beast. "But the Minotaur . . . You see, he's an animal. He smells."

In the doorway, square-shouldered Pol bowed meekly to whisper something to his companion.

She giggled. "Oh, don't be silly. No, I wouldn't want to deprive you . . . I know you want to go in."

Another bout of whispering, and a muffled giggle. "No, I won't stay here alone, either. I guess I'm being a silly old woman. We'll go in, Pol. Come along."

They joined the party, her high heels clicking as we walked along the ever-narrowing corridor. We stopped in front of a fresco-adorned wall that depicted, in gruesome color and lurid detail, the Minotaur feasting on the corpses of ancient Greek maidens and youths.

The guide turned to face us, winked. "Follow me," he said.

Flattening himself against the fresco, he slithered sideways, seemingly disappearing into the stone wall. Pol followed, eagerly, smiling like a child at a party.

I tried it next.

There was an opening, of course, to the left side of the panel, an opening so narrow that it required our sliding sideways, squeezing between stony surfaces.

On the other side, Pol smiled at me, and the guide looked away.

"Look what it's done to my dress," Nary said as she emerged. "I don't think anything will get it clean."

Her bright yellow silk dress showed dust and something like a verdigris stain.

The guide looked abashed. "Replacements will be provided, of course," he said, and bowed and turned to lead us down the wider, curving corridor into which we'd emerged.

We walked a long time, between black walls and my sense of direction, built into me for my job as a courier, told me that we actually described a full circle before we took an abrupt left turn.

The purpose of the circle would be to make the way seem longer. However disadvantages of being a human homing pigeon my being forced to take a circuitous route countered my carefully designed instincts for always choosing the quickest way. My mind knew where the turns we took were silly and useless and, trudging along the dark, dank, smelly hallways, I literally ached to take a streamlined path.

The ceiling of the next compartment hung so low that we had to duck our heads. Because of his height, Pol had to bend almost double. His dark hair brushed my shoulder.

No one spoke. At the end of the tunnel, the head of the Minotaur, carved in stone, glared at us. We turned right, suddenly able to stand up. The high ceiling, on which the guide helpfully shone his light, displayed another fresco, this one of the Minotaur standing astride a pile of human corpses, while Theseus pierced the beast's chest with his borrowed sword.

The smell of manure got worse. My hair attempted to stand on end.

"It's too long," Pol's girlfriend said. "And it smells. Can't we take a short cut? Can't you call the beast to us?"

"Ah, my dear, but the Minotaur hides in the labyrinth and ambushes us," the guide said.

Nary murmured something from which the word, "nonsense," emerged.

To my disgust, I agreed with her. She might be an idiot, but even idiots were right sometimes.

The *placided* smell like a stable, a musty animal-waste smell. The dark, cold corridors didn't disturb me any less for my knowing that they were *supposed* to disturb me.

Most attractions didn't try this hard to put tourists off.

We turned left, then right, then left again. Two of the frescoes repeated themselves. The carved head of the Minotaur protruded from the tunnel at regular intervals and if it were not for my sense of direction, I'd assume we were going in circles and passing the same carving again and again.

Couldn't make it too easy to find our way out, could they?

I huffed under my breath, doubting that my complaints would be met with such gentle rejoinders as natural-born Nary's.

Mostly, I was mad at myself. Why hadn't I begged off this particular attraction? For that matter, why had I signed up for this tour of Mythos at all?

But I knew why. Greek mythology, with its capricious gods, its heroic mortals, drew me like a half-healed lip sore, to which your tongue strays irresistibly. Hard to read the myths and not to think of our present world, of capricious humans playing god and long-suffering artifacts enduring their whimsy. Hard not to identify with the situations created.

"Imagine Theseus making his way through these dark corridors," the guide said. "Knowing that at the end he will have to fight a supernatural beast for his life and the lives of his companions."

I shook my head. Not while discreet electrical lights shone on me, not when I knew the Minotaur was vegetarian and had the intelligence of a seven-year-old.

A high pitched, tremulous scream echoed through the chamber. It ended in a gurgle.

Ahead of us, the corridor bifurcated via doorways opening to the right and left of another horrendous fresco.

I froze in place, all my instincts alert. My heart raced.

Scene-setting, my mind said. But my senses protested it had been too realistic. Too real. The scream had sounded too present, too anguished to be part of the scene-setting.

My nostrils flared.

I caught the smell of the charnel house, the metallic tang of blood mixed with animal waste: the smell of sudden death.

"What! What is that?" Nary asked. "What I want out."

"Hey, take us out of here," Pol said. "My friend is" He stopped. "Where did he go?"

I looked around for the guide, as did other tour members. But we saw only each other's frightened expressions. Our guide had vanished.

"Where did he go?" A young teenage girl clutched at my arm with her hot, moist hand. "Where did he go?"

"He ran," Pol said.

"Out?" I asked. My voice sounded alien, disembodied. My heart beat too fast, up by my throat.

"I don't know." Pol shuffled back a step, opened his eyes wide. He looked restless and skittish as if he too could smell better than natural humans. As if he knew that somewhere close by people had died violently. "But he has to have run. He was here, and then not."

The teenager giggled. "It's probably a trick to scare us." She started ahead.

"We should go out, Nary," Pol said, his voice hoarse and low. "Something is wrong. We should"

"I'm not going anywhere." Nary stomped her dimatough heel. "The guide said if we got lost we should just stay where we are and the rescuers would find us."

"But that was if we got lost alone." The girl stared at Nary wide-eyed. "I'm sure it's different as a group. Come on. This is just supposed to make it more exciting. Why else would the guide leave?"

A couple of other people stepped forward.

I backed up against the wall. If this was a simulation, its creators had raided an abattoir for parts to make it smell right.

Then again, Mythos had a very good reputation. Perhaps it came from stage-setting like this. Maybe the girl was right.

I took a step forward. A scream sounded, high, insane, ending in a gurgle. Another, then another reverberated off the tunnel walls. The first one had been female, the last two male.

Pol grabbed his girlfriend and pulled her back, against the wall, away from the noise and the smell.

In the doorway on the right, something large and square-shouldered appeared. Two large horns crowned its bovine head.

I took a step back.

"Run," someone screamed. "Oh, dammit, run."

"No," Pol yelled. "No. Be still, make no sound. Maybe it can't see."

They ignored him. His efforts at holding Nary failed. They ran in a group—stumbling and whimpering, missing the left corridor.

The creature lumbered after them, past us, moving fast, much too fast for its gait. Under the bubble lights, I saw it clearly: recurved horns, blood-stained as was the muzzle, wide green eyes—eyes more like a cat's than like a bull's.

Our screaming companions ran straight back, to huddle by the wall that blocked their path. Still within full view of us, they pushed against the wall and screamed and kicked in a writhing pile. In their panic, each prevented the other from getting through the doors on either side.

The Minotaur trotted towards them, head down, and charged bull fashion. It speared a balding man through the chest of his tie-dyed T-shirt. The man whimpered and fell like a deflated balloon. Blood gushed. His cry ended in a sort of gurgle.

The Minotaur charged the group again.

It all seemed to take place in slow motion and yet I knew it was very fast, taking no more than a few breaths. There was nothing I could do, no time to intervene.

My stomach churned. I didn't want to think, to smell, to see, or to hear. But neither could I close my eyes. If I were to die I wanted to know it was going to happen. I wanted to know it was all over, even if only for a few seconds.

Sweat running down my back, I concentrated on standing still, on breathing quietly.

Pol, two steps to the right and in front of me, looked like a statue, only the slight rise of his broad chest betraying life.

The Minotaur lowered its head again. A sharp cry sounded and a dark red stain bloomed on Nary's yellow dress.

Pol swallowed audibly and shifted his weight to the foot closer to his girlfriend.

The Minotaur lifted her, threw her. She landed in a heap close to us. Drops of her blood sprinkled my ankles.

I closed my eyes, biting my lips together as acid bile rose from my stomach.

Pol made a low, keening sound and the Minotaur turned an inquiring head. Pol bit his lips and, though his face glimmered white with shock and his eyes were wide and expressionless, he made no more sound.

I concentrated on remaining still, on not moving to either help or run away. I could do nothing, except, if I were lucky, save my own life.

I knew quite well, from my crèche days, that artifacts with the Minotaur's cat-eyes were not good at perceiving shapes and outlines. But they could always pick out movement, no matter how dark the surroundings.

If I moved, he'd see me.

I'd bet that the Minotaur could also hear better than natural people. It would have to if it had been designed to hunt in these corridors, to follow people by sound, to seek them out by stealth.

Could its sense of smell also be improved? If it was, could it discern Pol's and my smells amid the stench of the labyrinth?

Who was this beast? No, *what* was it? It couldn't be the good, vegetarian, mentally slow Minotaur we'd been promised, could it?

Perhaps this was all an illusion, aided by great special effects. Perhaps. I opened one eye. The Minotaur, having made mince-meat of my companions, had squatted down to feasting. Its muzzle opened and closed. Blood dripped down its neck. Sharp carnivorous teeth gleamed, crunching their way through bones. I looked across at Pol.

He wasn't there.

I looked down.

Pol had knelt on the ground.

He stretched his hand to his girlfriend's corpse.

With infinite, cautious slowness, he got hold of the woman's ridiculously thin stiletto high-heel and pulled the shoe loose.

Engrossed in his meal, the Minotaur paid no attention.

Pol straightened, clutching his prize. His feet worked against each other, stealthily getting rid of his own flopping sandals.

The Minotaur grunted its satisfaction as it crunched into the mass of mangled corpses.

Pol held the shoe with the heel sticking out like a fantastic dagger. Wearing only tiny shorts, he looked like a mythological hero, himself, as he leapt forward and, with the grace of an athlete, launched himself through the air at the Minotaur's back.

Before Pol reached him, the beast turned.

Pol jumped sideways, fell awkwardly just in front of the beast, who bellowed, outraged. Its sharp teeth clamped onto Pol's left arm. Pol screamed, but shoved the shoe's heel into the Minotaur's eye with his right hand, pushing hard, madly.

The Minotaur bayed. It shook the arm it had clamped onto.

Pol screamed higher, a high, insane screech, as the creature lifted him off his feet, and Pol's body arched back in pain.

Sweat flowed down my back. It would kill Pol. And then I'd be left alone in a labyrinth with a rampaging beast. Sooner or later I'd scream, or sneeze. And be killed.

I bent to pick up the other one of the dead woman's shoes.

As I stood up, the Minotaur's strange cat eyes fixed on me, its gaze betraying only madness and hatred.

It opened its mouth to bellow, dropping Pol to the floor.

I jumped with artifact speed and strength, using it to compensate for the lack of a running start.

It stepped on Pol as it lowered his head and charged me.

The Minotaur's horn, aimed at my chest, caught me in the thigh. Pain burst through my body like a succession of electrical shocks. Everything spun around me. I screamed.

The Minotaur lifted me, in preparation to throwing me.

But I had a moment. Long enough. I grabbed onto its ear with all my strength, as I lay half-across the Minotaur's massive head, steadied between its horns, my leg impaled by the right horn. With my free hand, I pushed the heel of the shoe into the back of the creature's neck.

It bellowed and grunted, and it tried to bite me, but it couldn't because I lay astride its head.

It shook its head, crushing my bone. A red veil filmed my vision.

I knew I was going to die, yet something in me refused to give up. I'd survived the crèche and my harsh training as a courier.

Humans were born to coddling and family, but artifacts were ejected from their crèches like objects in an assembly line. No one had ever cared if I lived or died, and yet I'd lived. I'd survived years of being treated like a machine I wouldn't—damn it—die now. I wouldn't let another artifact, some bio-engineered beast destroy what not all the spite and indifference of natural borns had managed.

My hand, as though of its own accord, kept on digging the heel into the monster's neck, as my vision grew dim and dark.

Pol muttered obscenities, whimpered. I heard him move. His harsh, panting breath rasped from behind me.

My hand on the broad shoulders of the beast, I turned my head to yell at him to go back. Nats couldn't survive what we artifacts could. And, gigolo though he might be, he'd shown courage enough to be an artifact himself. He shouldn't just be killed now.

But I couldn't find the strength to talk and warn him off. My mouth was too dry.

Pol, his left arm hanging like a limp rag at his side, lurched up behind me and, evading the creature's teeth with speed and reflexes worthy of the best artifacts, stuck the shoe heel into the human chest beneath the bull's head.

The beast bellowed and shuddered. Its great head snapped up and back.

My thigh ripped. I flew up and then down again, landing against the wall. Darkness closed in.

* * *

"Wake up, please. Wake up." Pol's raspy voice sounded like he'd cried himself to exhaustion.

I tried to open my eyes and saw his eyes—sea green and full of tears—floating as if in a sea of darkness.

The Minotaur . . . A dream?

Sudden stabbing pain from my thigh brought me to full consciousness.

The pain came from a tourniquet which Pol was tying on my leg. He held an end of the cloth in his good hand and the other between his teeth.

He tied the frayed, bloodstained piece of cloth into a tight, tight noose around my mangled limb, and looked apologetically up at me. "I know it hurts, but the blood."

I nodded. "Your arm?" My voice was a bare growl, but my vision improved slowly. I blinked drops of sweat away from my eyes.

Pol had tied a tourniquet on himself, clumsily but effectively enough.

He glanced at it, shrugged as if the ruin of the pretty body that was his fortune meant nothing. "Repairable," he said. "If we get out of here in time." He gave me a mirthless teeth-only grin and sniffled back tears. "Only I don't think rescuers are coming. I think someone sabotaged the whole site. Unless you believe *that* was vegetarian." He gestured towards the corpse of the Minotaur.

"No," I said. Faint and nauseated, I felt bile burn my throat. No one else moved, nothing else made a sound. Pol and I were the only living beings. Smells of spilt blood and torn flesh stung my nostrils. "No."

Pol's companion hadn't wanted to enter the labyrinth. "I'm sorry about your friend," I said, as I dragged myself up on my elbows.

He flashed me another of his quick, joyless smiles. "Nary? Yes, I'll miss her." He glanced at her corpse. Tears shone in his eyes. "I don't even know . . ." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. We're going to die anyway. I have no idea how to get out of here. We can't rely on rescuers finding us. Not after this. So we're going to die here. Lost."

I almost laughed. For the first time since my freedom, my carrier-pigeon sense of direction would come in handy.

Of course, I'd have to tell Pol about it. I sighed. Weak and tired, I needed sympathy and human comfort, both things he wasn't likely to expend on a bio-engineered creature like me. Of course, I hadn't made a secret of my identity. My ring was there, for all to see. However, judging from the way he'd played up to me, his accomplice looks, his smiles, I couldn't believe he'd seen it.

Once he saw it, he was likely to demand I guide him and never mind if I died in the process, dragging myself down the dark, smelly hallways. Freed artifacts were protected from murder by law. But causing their death from neglect probably would bring no penalty. Judges were natural-born.

No matter. We had to get out. We had to. And I had no time for pride, no patience to wheedle sympathy from this pretty, spoiled nat. Even if I had to crawl out of here, I refused to die. I'd survive. I always survived.

Sunken dark rings surrounded Pol's aqua-marine eyes and he had gone so pale that his lips looked grey. Nats were fragile. *He* needed a doctor.

I would have to tell him of my nature and of my talent. "We can get out," I said. "I was created with a sense of direction. For my work."

He nodded. His eyes widened slightly. His generous lips tightened into a line. "All right, then," he said. "I help you out and you guide us, right?" He bent and offered me his good hand, to help me stand.

Either he hadn't heard what I'd said, or he was unusual indeed. He would help me out? He was still willing to touch me after knowing I'd been created?

I gave him a sidelong glance and sighed. Maybe he was just a practical man. He knew I'd take much too long to crawl out of here.

I sighed. Think of mythology enough, and you might find yourself living it. Just like my mythical

namesake, I'd get to guide handsome Theseus out. And at the islet of Zeus, or some other convenient purlieu, he could leave me asleep and go on to his glorious destiny.

His companion had looked rich. He'd inherit. She would have made provisions. And, if not, there would be some other natural human hungry for beauty and company who would take him in a heartbeat, and provide him with all his heart's desire.

Something I could never do, on my professor's salary.

He helped me up.

"We turn left here," I told him. "And the next one is right, but I'll have to get there before I sense exactly which doorway it is."

My leg hurt like the blazes. I had to lean against him and put my arms around his neck. My face pressed against his broad, golden chest. His heart thumped rhythmically. He smelled of sweat with faint traces of sun lotion.

He put his arm underneath mine, supporting me.

It was the only way I was likely to be embraced by a natural male, much less one this beautiful.

We progressed slowly. I held onto the walls. He held me up.

"What is your name?" His voice echoed distorted, through his chest.

"Ariadne. Ariadne Knossos." If he didn't know what I was before he would know now. Artifacts were always given mythological or pseudo-classical names. It was another way to make us different.

"Ariadne? Really? How appropriate."

Ah. Two minds that thought like one. My throat closed.

I didn't want him to despise me. Not him. Even though I was in pain, I could feel his attraction. He was beautiful and brave and even if he'd allowed himself to be bought, he'd had the decency of crying for the woman who'd paid him—annoying though she'd seemed.

I wanted his attention, his admiration. Long denied hormones surged to the surface of my being.

I'd been taken out of the crèche just at the onset of puberty and my work hadn't required me to come in contact with men. For the company who'd created and employed me, I had been little more than an animated message system. The body and the gender had come as part of a package they didn't find it worth to break up. From the moment of my official activation, on leaving the crèche, constant traveling had kept me from relationships with my kind. As for male nats, I shied away from them. Too many female artifacts were created as pleasure toys and anyone I approached would only think of me like that.

I'd rather be celibate and keep my dignity.

But now, free and almost thirty, here I was with my face pressed up against the most handsome nat I'd ever met and my libido—or something—surged. In my present state I couldn't seduce him. But oh, I wished I could. Even if he thought of me as a toy. Even if it were for only one night.

"What was your . . . job?" He gasped for breath and his chest muscles moved, beneath my face.

It must be hard for him to bear my weight when he was, himself, weakened by blood loss.

I tried to hold myself up. I tried not to burden him. I wanted him to like me, and I wanted to cry at the foolish hopelessness of such a wish.

"Courier," I said. "For a corporation." Thinking of how glamorously my profession had been depicted in movies and books, I added, "Nothing romantic. Just a secure courier. No fighting, no dodging. Definitely no killing. Just a lot of driving and boring office work and occasionally finding people who didn't want to be found." I hissed at the pain in my leg and held on tighter. "This is the first time I saw death." I took a deep breath. "Turn right."

We staggered around the corner—like a strange three-legged animal. I put my arm out to the wall to help balance us.

"You're free?" he asked.

I nodded. As though that would make any difference with someone like him.

"May I ask why . . . I mean . . . usually it's for some great service . . . was it?"

I shrugged. "A lucky break. They wanted to replace me, but I was an outdated model and they couldn't find a buyer. So they freed me and wrote me off on their taxes. Cheaper than continuing to feed me and

less of a public relations blunder than having me put to death. There was a stink, twenty years ago when a company put a whole bunch of artifacts to death. Legal, but it looked bad."

"Oh," he said. "But you must have a . . . pension? The cruise is expensive, isn't . . .?"

"I found a job with a university as an archaeological recorder, went on some digs and . . ." I took a deep breath, willed my vision to clear. It didn't. "I have eidetic memory . . .to memorize messages. I got my doctorate and I teach . . .at a lower salary than anyone else in the same position . . .but I get enough to live on and for little pleasures like this tour of Greece."

"Oh," he said, again.

It took us hours to find the entrance. It felt like days. I dragged my one good leg forward while Pol supported my weight.

Our talk stopped. It took too much effort, too much breath.

Pain and ooziiness clutched at my stomach. I swam in nausea and tried not to drown.

"Don't faint, please. Don't. Without you, we'll both die here." Pol dragged me forward, stopping only to ask me directions.

At last, the ugly dimatough door stood straight ahead of us.

Pol let go of me, leaned me against the wall.

Now, he'd leave me here, in this dark tunnel and pretend we'd never met. I'd be lucky if he told the people outside that I was still alive, wounded, in here. I would be lucky to get treatment and live.

I was so sure of what would happen that it took me a while to realize that he hadn't opened the door, that he was talking.

"You're not listening," he said. "You must listen." His voice had a high, whining sound—like a child begging something of a reluctant adult. "I'm going to tell them I belong to you. In the state I'm in, Nary's daughter, her heir, will just have me put down. She doesn't like me. But if they don't check registration and I say I'm yours, they will just go ahead and regen my arm. And then she'll be more likely to sell me than to kill me."

He looked earnest and pleading.

"What? My what?"

He brought his right hand close to my face. The golden ring was gone from his middle finger. The red ring of an owned artifact shone in its place. "I had to remove the gold ring," he said. "Otherwise, if I passed out and they found us . . ." He made a gurgling sound a suppressed sob, a scream of fear and pain. "I don't want to die."

This had to be a bizarre dream. Were he an artifact, he wouldn't have been stupid enough to conceal it with that gold ring. Not when the penalty for hiding the ring of servitude was death, swiftly administered. And no owner would allow her artifact to conceal his ring. Artifacts were too expensive to squander and the civil penalties befalling the owner of a disguised artifact would have been prohibitive. Even our dear departed Nary couldn't have been that dumb or that heartless.

"Please," he said. His eyes overflowed with tears and I smelled the sharp tang of terror in his sweat. "Please let me tell them I belong to you. Even if they find out afterwards, at most they'll rebuke me before shipping me to my legal owner. They won't do anything to you, because you aren't even fully conscious. I just don't want you to unmask me too soon. It's not like hiding the artifact ring."

Which brought us to why he'd hidden the ring before. I wondered what would happen if the authorities checked the tour records. His legal owner couldn't mean to have Pol killed, could she? Healed, he'd be worth a lot.

My leg hurt and my head felt stuffed with cotton wool. I couldn't articulate any questions.

We must get out. We must get help.

Pol had to open the damn door.

He stared into my eyes. He waited.

"Yes," I managed to say. "Yes. Whatever."

While I sank into semi-consciousness, Pol carried me outside, stumbled onto blinding sunlight, straggled across the narrow path to the nymph clearing.

People surrounded us, swimming in and out of my field of vision, like faces in a nightmare. People screamed.

Through a fog, I heard Pol say, "This is Doctor Ariadne Knossos. She's a free citizen and you must get her help."

I wanted to tell these people I'd buy him. I wanted to yell that no one should kill him, that he had saved my life, that he was a person, too, artifact or not, citizen or not.

I'd never even asked his full name.

Shadows closed in all around and I let myself fall into oblivion.

* * *

I woke up to a woman's heavily accented voice, ". . . terrorists. Their religion forbids artifacts. Or, at least, that's how they interpret the rule against graven images. Your tour guide and the one of the tour before yours were members. They thought that if they replaced the Minotaur with a dangerous beast and it killed a few tourists, it would create fear that other artifacts might have been tampered with, cause a fall in tourism and a backlash against artifacts. Funny, though, how you two were the only ones who survived."

A touch of edginess grated through Pol's voice. "I assure you he showed us no favoritism."

Pol was alive. Fast on the heels of relief, I remembered what he had said in the tunnel. Pol an artifact? It couldn't be true. Hallucination, surely.

I managed to force my eyes open.

My leg didn't hurt. I felt no worse than someone with a hangover.

Pol sat at the end of my bed, his arm encased in the pink bulk of a med sleeve. My leg was encased in one too. I lay in what looked like a hotel bed in a bland but pleasant bedroom with two beds, dresser, wardrobe, all of it white. Framed seascapes hung on the walls.

"The tourism administration will pay for your treatment." The medical technician was young and female and better suited to a travel poster than to the blue uniform of a med. She sniffed, as if she resented having to treat us like people. "And for your lodging, of course. Both of you should be able to travel on within twenty four hours."

She smiled—a tight smile—mumbled something about our getting better, and left me alone with Pol.

I pulled myself up to a sitting position. "I had the strangest dream"

I realized the significance of the two beds; of his being in my room.

He'd told them he belonged to me.

I looked down at his hand. The red ring of slavery shone on his long, square finger.

He took a deep breath. "My name is Apollo Doris."

"Oh," I said. He'd concealed the ring. *No one* concealed the ring. Had he done it of his own accord?

Sitting on my bed, wearing an institutional white robe, he looked beautiful still, but also more naked than he'd been in his tiny shorts. It was as if a layer had been stripped off his skin, leaving him flushed and hesitant, tongue-tied and vulnerable, like a child who wakes in the night amid strangers.

He took a deep breath. "Nary made me wear the gold ring. She'd rather be thought an old fool with a young lover, than someone desperate enough to take an artifact on a tour halfway across the world." He spoke with almost regret. "And she didn't mind the fines, should we be caught."

And she wouldn't mind his dying? I looked at his golden skin, his dark curls, his oceanic eyes and I felt a great anger against the dead Nary. If she were alive, I'd kill her.

Words I'd heard from his companion—Owner? Now took on a different meaning. *You are not irreplaceable* sounded chilling enough when said to a lover, but brutally threatening when said to an artifact. She hadn't cared. If he had got killed, she could have bought another.

Nausea made me dizzy.

He shrugged. "I was hers." His eyes lost all expression as though invisible shutters had fallen over them. "I was not created for such a reputable job as courier. Mind and body, I was designed as a companion, a lover . . . a pleasure toy for humans. And for a time I was owned by a brothel. It was . . . not pleasant. Too many of us, too little room, nothing of my own, no one . . . no one to belong to. It's part of my make-up that I need to belong. When Nary bought me, she gave me what I needed most. She also gave me the chance to play human for a time. She could risk my life if she wished. It wasn't much of a life before her. Now, I'm masterless again . . . Listen, I wish . . ." He looked intent, desperate. "I don't suppose you could buy me? Her daughter has no use for artifacts."

My heart beat fast. I could sense his pain and his fear. He'd thought quickly thinking in the labyrinth. He had feelings, emotions, even wit. But to his new owner, he'd be an object; an unwanted possession.

To me, he was still a demigod, only now attainable.

He was so beautiful. And he had a need to belong.

From the expression in his green eyes, he wanted to belong to me; perhaps belonged to me already through some mysterious imprinting mechanism.

Warm breezes blew through the open window, filling the curtains like a ship's sails.

He looked vulnerable and lost and scared. An intelligent, self-sufficient man, and yet as dependent, as open as a child.

I touched his finger, where the red ring glowed. I'd been bereft of my own kind for much too long.

We made love through the night, with the smell of the sea wafting in on the warm breezes. And despite the injuries to my leg and to his arm, it was all the poets have sung about. Perhaps more.

In the morning, while he slept, I limped out of bed, got on my private link and called up the price of the Doris line of artifacts.

There had been only a hundred made and each of them had sold for ten million narcs only two years ago. Young as they still were, they would only have appreciated. He'd cost much more than I could afford on my ten thousand a year salary. No bank would finance him for me. He was not an appreciable asset, nor a necessity. And if I stole him, I could never go back to my life, my comfortable life. We'd be fugitives. He'd starve along with me.

Not for me.

Artifacts are born alone, without families, and they must learn early to survive alone. I must survive.

I'd once read that no good comes of an artifact loving another artifact. Sage advice, if you could take it.

I left him sleeping and, like a despicable feminine version of Theseus, deserted him to be claimed by the gods for whatever fate pleased them.

I don't know where Pol is—alive or dead, contented or in unbearable servitude. I don't want to think of what he might have become.

I remember him in that hotel bed, his hair black against the white pillow, his face serene, trustingly asleep, not yet knowing himself abandoned.

Thirst

When I first decided to work towards being a writer, I had this vague idea I wanted my first novel to be set in ancient Rome. With this intent I spent seven glorious years "researching" Rome. In retrospect, I should have decided my novel was going to be set in Hawaii and spent a year or so sunning on a beach. The cost would probably have been similar, considering how many Roman history books I bought. At the end of those seven years, I still didn't have even a glimmer of an idea for a novel. However, I had got pregnant and gone through a very difficult pregnancy during which I was hospitalized and had blood drawn all too often. So perhaps it is no accident that on the day after coming back home with my brand new baby, I woke up with the entire plot of this story in my mind. I dragged myself out of bed and to the office and wrote it in a single—eight hour long—sitting. It was the only thing I wrote for the coming year, which involved several house moves. The last line was a complete surprise. I "finished" the story and thought "that isn't right." Then my fingers typed the last line and I thought, "Wait a minute. That can't be . . . Oh!" It was the first and so far the only time a story surprised me that way. For this reason it remains one of my favorite stories.

"Sing to me of that odorous green eye when crouching by the marge
You heard from Adrian's gilded barge
The laughter of Antinous And lapped the stream and fed your drought
and watched with hot and hungry stare
The ivory body of that rare young slave with his pomegranate mouth."

Oscar Wilde, *The Sphynx*

Sometimes I wake up in the evening and think them here, immaterial wisps of dream in the cold twilight air, and yet undeniably themselves: the Emperor and the boy he loved, etched by time into heroic figures without flaw.

The Emperor wears his purple, and the boy stands in one of those sweet, head-drooping postures immortalized in his countless statues.

And sometimes, confused by a day of death-sleep and the centuries that have flown heedless by my changeless self, I reach for them, try to clutch them in my long-dead yet immortal hands.

They laugh and vanish through my fingers like smoke. As they did so many centuries ago.

In those moments, I am again a nameless thing, crouching on the muddy banks of the ancient Nile, my mind filled with hatred, my body with thirst, while I stare at the gilded Imperial barge anchored in the dark waters. And I hear again the laughter of Antinous.

Hylas is my name, or was my name, when I was a mortal among mortals, a living, breathing being in the sun's embrace. A Greek name for a Roman boy born in the Suburra, raised in that maze of smelly, noisy streets that was the pulsing heart of Rome.

My father was a Greek freedman, a grammarian who grew prematurely old teaching Greek and writing to uninterested students on the sidewalk, in front of our insula. My mother, suavely rotund, wasted her life bent over the cooking fire. Both of them were mere props in the stage of my life. I can't recall a thing they said, nor anything they taught me.

They lived in two smoky rented rooms in an insula, a vertical slum, where people crowded side by side and on top of each other, crammed together as close as possible, for the wealth of the rich landlords.

My own life was not confined to such a prison. My true teachers, my true instruction, were in the streets. From other boys, my neighbors, I learned all there was to know. Who could be safely robbed, where to buy the best wine, and just the right time to go to the entrance of the Circus and get the seats closest to the arena, from where we could scream encouragement at our favorite gladiators and hoot the cowards.

I will forever remember those afternoons as the best of my childhood: the sun-dappled, bloodstained sand, the certainty that life and death were shows played for my entertainment.

It all came to an abrupt end the Summer I turned fourteen. Late at night my friends and I waited in the darkened portal of an insula for wayward citizens, full of wine and gold, making their way home through unlit streets. That night I tried to cut the wrong purse. We couldn't have guessed who he was. A merchant, we thought him, because of his colorful, expensive clothing. But we didn't think him rich, certainly not noble, since he walked the streets of Rome alone without a single slave for escort. We were wrong. Publius Aelius Hadrianus, as he then was, thought himself invincible and reveled in facing alone the danger of Rome's streets.

He immobilized me quickly. I thought he would call me *sebaciarus*. But he was full of wine and mirth, and I amused him more than angered him. Besides, I had dark flowing curls, the face of a girl and the well-muscled body of a young thug. All of which he liked, as I would come to know, when our acquaintance became such that I could call him by the familiar diminutive of Adriano.

For the next two years I followed him. To the end of his stay in Rome, where he was house-guest of his cousin Trajanus, the Emperor, then to the far reaches of the Empire with the legions he commanded. He gave me better food than I was used to, better wine than I'd ever tasted, and a position no one disputed.

Even rude legionaries spoke graciously to me because I was the commander's page . . . or lover, or any other name you might care to call it. All of them meant I held power not to be ignored. Two years I lived with him. He was strong and admired, built like a hero's statue, with reddish hair and beard, and dark gray eyes that could see to the depths of my soul.

He taught me to read, and schooled me in rudimentary Greek, amused that I, the son of a grammarian, had never come by such gifts. And he read aloud from the Odyssey and the odes of Virgil and told me of Alexander and Julius and Augustus.

When I was sixteen or maybe seventeen we set out for Rome. To visit.

I never got there alive.

Of late, he had been growing curt and impatient with me. He found his joys elsewhere. Other boys and women, camp followers, common local whores Not that he had ever been faithful or that those had ever been altogether absent from his bed. But now their company was preferred to mine, and if he talked to me at all, it was to remind me of my shortcomings, to mumble improbable reproaches at me for my cruelty and crudity.

I knew what caused it. My body was changing as I became, to all eyes, a man, and it wasn't decent to keep our type of relationship once the boy's masculinity asserted itself.

On our way to Rome we stopped in Athens. While he renewed old acquaintances of one type or another, I found the solution to my problem.

It was late at night, in a tavern where I'd strayed foolishly unaccompanied, proudly confident in my street-wise ways years after I had given them up. A tall pale man sat at my table and bought me drink after drink, even though he never touched his. He spoke of his childhood in the times before Rome, and of the joys of immortality. Liquor and his blue eyes intoxicated me. I followed him out of the tavern, to the fields outside the city. There I lay upon the soft, plowed earth. I thought I knew what was coming.

But instead of the familiar grinding of body against body, his weight crushing my squeezed-together thighs, there was the suave caress of a cold hand against my neck, parting my curls like a curtain, and the sharp, painful kiss that tore my skin, that took my blood, that left me drained and half-dead, lying senseless on the still-warm ground.

Little by little, consciousness returned to me. Consciousness and a sense of loss.

I sat up with too much effort, too much pain. I felt heavy and swollen, like the corpse of one who has drowned, turgid with water and death. And yet, to my eyes, my wrists were as thin as ever, my fingers long and delicate, my small feet effortlessly encased by the gold-laced sandals.

I stood up. My throat was dry and gritty. Each of my joints blazed with pain that burst forth anew with every action.

I walked to town. I don't know how. I also don't know how long I wandered, lost, trying to find my way to the home where we were guests. Some memories were forfeited to the death that even then gripped me. I remember my master's voice, seemingly out of nowhere, merry with wine and tender with amusement, saying, "Hello there, Hylas, Hylas of the sweet locks, how much wine have you had? Can't I let you go out on your own?"

And then his arms surrounded me, supported me, and I felt myself fall, let myself fall, into endless darkness.

When I woke up I believed myself back in my the dark rooms of the insula, the wooden shutters closed against the rain, penning in the thick odors of sweat and cooking and frustrated humanity, all of it lit by the wavering light of a single candle.

"Mother?" I called diffidently.

"Hylas?" a tired voice asked out of the shadows, a man's voice that bore no resemblance to my mother's. "Hylas, are you awake?" The accent of Iberia, where he was born, was thick upon my master's tongue as I'd never heard it. The light of the candle moved around in the dark room, heavy curtains parted just a little to let a thin dagger of light pierce my eyes with unbelievable pain.

"Thirsty," I said, my voice lethargic and low. "I am thirsty."

Adriano moved closer to the couch where I lay. His hair was freshly combed, perfumed, curled. He wore a colorful, loose-fitting, short tunic, as Greek men would wear at home.

I felt ill and scared. Why was he nursing me personally through my illness? Why not entrust me to a slave? So that he could accuse me of stalling his journey to Rome?

He set the candle down on a candlestick. I heard water pour from a pitcher to a cup, then the cup was at my lips, rough silver against skin.

I took one swallow, two. Water, dead and horribly cold in my mouth. Stagnant. Poisonous. I spit it out in his direction, pushed his hand away, that held the cup.

"Are you trying to poison me?" I asked, angrily.

He took in breath sharply.

I realized I could smell him, as I had never smelled another human being. I could smell his life, the pulsing of blood in his body. It was the smell of ground after a rain, the sound of a mountain spring. My throat ached, parched.

"Hylas," he said, gravely. "Hylas . . . have you . . . What happened to you? What did you do last night?"

My head ached. The odor of him was unbearable temptation. "Why would you care?" I asked. "Did you ever tell me where you go when you leave alone?"

In the silence I heard his breathing, noisy to my sharpened senses. I could hear as I had never heard before. I could hear the house around me, all of the house. Slaves argued in the hallway. The matron discussed poetry with a female friend. Somewhere a baby cried. Above all, over all, through every fissure and crevice in the walls and door, through every pore in the stones, through every opening in the hanging draperies, the smell of people, the smell of life, the smell and sound of warm blood running vital through tireless veins came at me.

My throat hurt.

Adriano held my wrist. His skin felt rough and callused against mine. And warm.

"I don't want to argue, Hylas," he said. "You're very ill." His fingers tightened on my wrist and moved slowly round and round, searching, "Gods, but you're cold. And I can't feel your pulse." He switched his grip from my hand to my face. His palms squeezed my cheeks between them. In the dim light he looked pale, his eyes intense and alarmed. "You're dying, do you understand that? And there is nothing I can do for you. All my medical knowledge, all my herbs have been to naught. All I can think is you were given a poison I don't know. Tell me Hylas, tell me what you did, what you ate, what you drank." The tone of his voice became sharp and brutal, "Or die. It's that simple."

"I drank wine," I said. My head pulsed with pain. Something in me writhed and hungered at the scent of life coming from him, at the warmth of his hands on my face, at the guessed taste of his blood. "Someone bought me wine. A man."

He nodded, unmoved. "Do you know this man? Was he anyone you've seen before? Anyone you knew from Rome? Anyone who might have something against me and have taken his revenge on you?"

His hands were warm and appetizing, the way warm bread is appetizing when you're famished and cold. My head pounded more intensely. The nameless animal in me sniffed and lurked scenting prey. "I didn't know him," I said. "He was tall and pale, and blue eyed. He told me stories, said he was born before Rome, before . . . before, he said, *the divine twins were kicked out of the wolf's den* ."

"What?"

"He said he had been born before the founding of Rome and"

"You're telling me this man was eight hundred years old?"

"I didn't say that, I said-"

"You said he was born before the founding"

Did he need to yell? My head would surely split open. "I didn't either," I answered, sullen. "I said *he told* me he was born before Rome, before the gentes streamed into the seven hills and laid the Sabines to waste. Of course I knew he was lying. I am not that stupid. I met old people in Rome and none of them remembered any of that. Also, he told me," I said, in a whisper now, embarrassed to admit the enticement that had drawn me forth to that lonely field. I knew it was a lie like the rest. "He told me if I allowed him, if I allowed him to . . . satiate himself on me, he would make me immortal, and I would never age. I would be forever as I am now. Forever as . . . as you like me."

Adriano whispered something I could not understand. His hands gripped my face tighter. "What did he do to you?" he asked.

What had he done to me? I could hardly remember. "Not what you think. He just . . . he just . . ." What had he done to me? My head pounded, pounded so loudly with the echo of Adriano's heartbeats, the scent of his warm blood, the

My hand held his right arm in a vise grip and pulled, till his wrist was at my mouth. Urgently, my teeth tore the vein, allowed vital, warm liquid to flow onto my cold, cold, tongue, down my parched throat.

"Mithra's crown!" he said, or some other legionary oath. His left hand held my wrist and pulled his right hand free. Then he backed two steps. His left hand held his right. Drop after drop of red liquid fell from his wrist. He watched me from the shadows of the room. There was surprise in his eyes and the fear of a

man confronted with impossibility. "I have heard of such things," he said. "I have heard of them, as I have heard of ghosts and witches and gods. I have heard them all, and believed them all in my moments of weakness, and laughed at all of them in the sunlight . . .but Hylas, sweet Hylas, what could make you crave living blood?"

I blinked, but could not answer. My eyes were riveted, mesmerized, by the drops falling from his wrist, their odor clear and pungent in the stale air of the room. I moved towards him, towards them. My movements were no longer painful. Those few drops of his blood, of his life, had restored some of my own.

But he evaded me easily, stepped back around the two low sleeping couches, took hold of the dark red curtains behind him and opened them in a quick tearing gesture.

Light burned my eyes, my skin. I was naked and every point of my body exposed to this strangely searing light. Pain, unbearable, stinging pain possessed me. I pulled the covers over myself and crouched, trembling, under them, uncomprehending, uncaring, longing for nothing so much as darkness. Darkness and life, to stanch my thirst.

Adriano's laughter rang joyless and loud. Gently, slowly, he closed the curtain. "So it is true," he said, his voice morose and tired. "It is true. There are such creatures. Lamias . . . The legends say they're women with serpent bodies. One of my Germanic mercenaries told me they can also be corpses, dead but living, needing blood to survive and fearing the life-giving sun. And Hylas, always bloodthirsty, has become one of them," he finished with a sort of ironic gaiety.

Encouraged by darkness and the lack of threat in his voice, I pushed the covers back, sat up uncertainly, reached a hopeful hand for his wrist, just an arm's length away, his wrist from which the merry river of life still ran, unheeded. But he was not to be caught unawares. He stepped back, away from my touch. "No, no you won't, Hylas," he said. "I will not trade my blood for death in life . . .nor for life in death." His eyes were interested but repulsed. Thus had I seen him, once, examine a scorpion. With his left hand he tightened the open brass bracelet he wore on his right arm, tighter, tighter, tighter, till it would serve as a tourniquet. The flow of blood slowed to a mere trickle, then tiny droplets. "What am I to do with you?" he asked, coldly. "What did you think I would do with you? Give you my enemies as fodder?"

I found my voice. My head still pounded and my throat still felt desiccated but I found a little of my mind, of my humanity, a morsel of my outraged self. I had done this for him, to keep his love that relentless time and growth were plundering away. "I thought . . ." I said, then stronger, "I thought everything would be as it was . . .as it always was. I would never change, you wouldn't worry about people saying you are pathetic, or" I stopped as his expression clouded.

"Oh, no," he said and smiled, ironically. "Not pathetic, just necrophiliac." Then with sudden force, "I do not share my bed with cold corpses, much less corpses who seek blood to replace a life they have lost."

He stepped back into the shadows. The light of the candle forbore to show his face. "So, what can I do

with you? I hear one can kill such monsters as you, Hylas. Light will kill lamias, and water, that sustain normal life. Should I kill you, Hylas?"

I got up. I clasped the covers about me. He couldn't be serious. I had given him my love, such as it was. He had the enjoyment of my body while it pleased him. He could not kill me.

I protested all this in a high whine, but he interrupted me, "No, you're right. I cannot kill you. Even if you are dead already . . . even if it is the most merciful thing, I can't bring myself to do it." He put the candle down, picked up his cloak from the couch facing mine, threw it haphazardly over his shoulders and said, "I'll be back tomorrow morning. Be gone when I'm back. I'll give instructions for you to be left alone till then." He opened the door, and, framed in the muted light of the central courtyard, the faint light that made my eyes hurt and my skin smart, he turned around and said, "And Hylas, everyone in this house, to the least slave, better be alive and in good health when I return. Or I swear by Mars I'll search you out, drag you from your den and hold you in midday light till you shrivel and die."

He walked out.

I sat on my couch, in pain and anger as I heard voices on the other side of the door and smelled the living blood of the household. It did not occur to me to defy Hadrianus's prohibition. I knew him too well, his prompt and merciless justice.

I found one of my tunics, dressed in it and waited. Now and then, I peeked through the draperies that encased the window. When evening fell, soothing and calm, I climbed out.

In the city, I found plenty to satiate my thirst.

Rich men in search of pleasure found quite something else and were too secure in my embrace by the time they thought of fighting. I learned blood was more than food, life was more than a means of slaking thirst. There was an exquisite pleasure to drinking from the springs of life . . . something, I suppose, like the contentment of a babe at his mother's breast. Food and sex and ecstasy were mine when my teeth tore open the vein and life left my victim and streamed into me. I spared no one, didn't leave any of my victims the tiny spark of life necessary to turn him into one such as I. I gave them nothing, and took all—their life, their gold, their jewels.

When dawn threatened in the Eastern skies, I rented two rooms in a cheap hostelry, and closed the wooden shutters tightly against the day.

I lived this way for uncounted years. Athens, then as now, was a seaport, where people came and went, enough of a feeding ground, enough of a hunting preserve.

My only joy was to stalk the nightly streets, searching for drunken sailors, lost whores, bohemian

citizens. That and to listen for any news of Hadrianus. Hatred, hatred flaming clear and pure, had replaced love. Hatred born of resentment for his coldness that pushed me to my death, for his weakness that allowed my dead body to escape for this life, this quasi life I led.

And when I missed the warmth of the sun, the gentle breeze of daytime on fragrant spring flowers, it wasn't myself that I blamed. Not myself but my erstwhile master and his ways, and the coldness of his heart, the coldness of Rome. Take a boy out of the streets, would he, and show him love and power he'd always been denied, only to throw him out, when his body changed and he turned into the man he couldn't help becoming?

I remembered the smell of his blood, the warmth of it on my tongue, and hungered, and waited.

I heard the news when he became Emperor, after Trajanus's death, and ground my teeth, and bode my time. I would wait, I told myself. I would wait until he became old and decrepit and powerless. Until he was ready to beg for immortality. And then . . . and then I would deny it, I would laugh as he had laughed, I would give him death—slow unforgiving death.

Then one night, in a tavern, a coin was thrown at me, change for the drink I pretended swallowing while I lingered and heard living men talk of living things, and joke and sing, and discuss women and boys and the happiness of daily life.

The golden coin was small, bright, freshly minted. And from it Hadrianus's face smiled at me. Older than I had known him yet unmistakably Hadrianus. I turned the coin over. On the other side, an exquisitely beautiful profile greeted me. A boy, or a woman, with a high bridged nose, delicately drawn features, and a coiffure of elaborate curls pulled up and away from the face. I stared at it, uncomprehending. It looked like me. So much like me. And yet . . .

"The Emperor's boy," the tavern keeper told me, brightly.

"His son?" I asked, confused, scared. Not his son, no certainly not his son. A son would be a chance for immortality, a way for him to evade the fate I planned.

The man laughed, a short, significant laughter. "Oh, no, not his son. His friend, his companion.

"He is a Bithynian," the man said, taking my stare for a question. "His name is Antinous. His ancestors, the founders of his city, were from Athens. So we honor him. That, and he is the most beautiful—but there, you can see him for yourself, tonight at the festivals of Dionysus, at the forum."

I did see him. I wish I hadn't. Antinous. Antinous of the dark, dark midnight curls, the white skin, the violet blue eyes, the pomegranate lips. In the middle of the crowd, near the Emperor. The Emperor who had aged and gained weight, but looked contented as I'd never known him. The Emperor who hung

suspended from each of the boy's words and cared not if the boy's pronunciation of Greek was faulty and provincial.

Antinous. I hated and I loved him. All in the same instant, the same consuming moment. He was so much like myself, and yet as I had never been. Twin threads, the blind fates had spun for us, and mine had got dirty and frayed, and his remained free, clean, untouched.

I lingered at the edges of the crowd, with the anonymous peasants. I ignored the free food and wine distributed. And I listened to the talk around me, for anything that might pertain to this dark haired beauty who had replaced me.

He was from Bithynium, as the tavern keeper had told me. From Bithynium and fourteen, some said twelve. He looked closer to fourteen, but it was hard to tell. Maybe he, himself, didn't know. And some said he was a slave, and some that he was free, and some that he had lost his family in the earthquake three years ago, and some that his parents had willingly given him to Hadrianus for a suitable fee.

Whatever he was, whoever he was, his quiet grace entranced. And when, after many jugs of wine, instruments were brought out for music, he played the flute in pure, clean notes. And when, still later, poetry demanded he sang his own poems, of fields and sun and flowers and rivers, in perfect rhythm and images clear that made me want to see it all again and brought bitter salty tears to my eyes for the first time since my death. And when night threatened to slip into dawn and I should long since have immured myself in my darkened lodging, I remained, hypnotized by the dancing that had begun and by Antinous's body, vigorous and lively and graceful, oh so painfully graceful.

Once, in the flowing movements of the mad dance, he brushed by the circle of spectators to the imperial feast. He passed a scant hand's breadth away from me and I could smell him, I could almost taste him: sweat and blood, cinnamon and mint, dark hair falling down his back, heavy and fragrant, like the night that sheltered and hid me.

It was only the first light of dawn, painful on my eyes and skin, that drove me to my lair.

The following night I took my treasure, the money and jewels I had collected from my victims over countless years, and settled accounts. I found out where the Emperor and Antinous were going next and followed them. To Sicily, I followed them, where they scaled Mount Etna to watch the sunrise, the sunrise that was anathema to me. Then I followed them to Rome and then back out again, to Africa and Greece and then to the far eastern frontiers, and everywhere where there was an outpost of the legion. And everywhere they were welcomed and feasted and enjoyed themselves and each other, ignorant of my presence so near, oh, so near them.

One year, two, three, I followed them. I saw the shadow creep over them. The same shadow that had fallen on me years before. Antinous's voice deepened and his shoulders broadened, and yet . . . and yet Hadrianus's love for him faltered not. He was faithful, faithful as I'd never thought possible. No whores, no stray boys, not even the Empress whose expression soured more and more each passing year.

Unmindful of people's tongues and reproaches, their love continued. And I followed them. For this I braved dawn and twilight, covered myself tightly with a cloak and kept out of the sun only at the noonday hour. Four years, five, six, seven. I followed them along the northern coast of Africa, towards Alexandria. And when they hunted together I tracked them, as they their prey; and when they feasted, I watched the dance and listened to the music; and when, on horseback, they eluded their escort and stole forbidden hours for love amid native forests, I was there hiding, crouching, peering out from the underbrush, burning with jealousy for their love and with hatred for Antinous's beauty and Hadrianus's power, burning with love for their life and their warmth and Antinous's shining clarity.

Here and there, cracks opened between them and I hoped, I hoped that darkness would creep in. Eagerly I heard them argue, headily I drank in the injuries traded, the insults implied. Hungrily, I absorbed the servants' gossip about Hadrianus's bringing a courtesan into their bed Antinous's refusing her and the bitter argument that followed, with Hadrianus explaining to Antinous that he was growing, that he was changing, that all things must end. Expectantly, I saw Antinous come away from encampments, palaces and villas, in the darkness of night, and brood alone after quarrels. Pleasurably, painfully, I saw his eyes cloud with the despair I knew so well. And I was close by that day in Africa when the boy charged foolishly and then paused before the open throat of a cornered lion. If it weren't for Hadrianus's lance, deftly thrown, Antinous's life would have ended then.

My mind clouded by love and hatred and jealousy, I conceived my plan. I would wait. I would wait until the boy begged for death, and I would offer him that, and life everlasting. And then he would be mine. Mine forever, companion of my dark hours. And Hadrianus? Hadrianus would either be tormented with the knowledge of what this, his dearest dear, had become, or he too would beg me for life in death, or death in life.

I would win, I would be avenged. And I would have him. The coveted favorite of the ruler of half a world.

This plan took me after them to Alexandria where they rested for two months, and then to the banks of the Nile, where they planned a cruise upriver. It was the season of floods, a time when only Hadrianus, old and gray but impetuous still, would brave the ancient river. The oracles at departure foretold the river would claim a life from the party. This deterred them not.

I followed the barge from the banks. In full possession of my powers, I could run like no human ever had. I could be near them and watch torches and lanterns nightly transform the immense pleasure boat into a lighted feast; I could listen to songs and poems, the dances and the laughter, the musical laughter of Antinous.

I became obsessed, mindless. I longed for nothing but that spicy blood I had once smelled so near, for that touch of mint, that hint of cinnamon, that life so strong in his perfect body.

I forgot to feed. For nights on end, I forgot to feed, until I was nothing but thirst. Until thirst twisted my body, shriveled my throat. Until my body was heavy and dead and painful.

Then one night I saw the boy leave the barge. Alone and unattended, if you can believe it. He slipped off by himself long after a party where wine had flowed freely and lulled servants and retainers into dreamless sleep. He took one of the small boats and rowed ashore, then walked along the river, head down, hands at his belt, pensive. His hair fell, a soft, unruly mass down his shoulders. His tunic of fine silk thread moved in the night breeze, now delineating his body, now veiling it. His feet were laced into sturdy, thick-soled sandals. He carried no cloak.

I followed him. His steps took him to a small riverside shrine to Osiris. Ever pious, even to foreign divinities, Antinous knelt before the stone altar with its painted wood statue and bent his head in prayer.

I stepped out from behind the bushes that had hid me and greeted him, as a passerby might greet him, in the Greek I had learned in Athens.

He looked up, smiled, returned the greeting, surprised at finding a fellow countryman in this foreign land.

I told him I was in Egypt to study religion. He told me his friend, too, had come here in search of religion, of answers about death from these people who had so long been in love with it. I inquired after his friend and he smiled, a rueful smile that told me what I need not ask. Even if I didn't see a cooling to their love, he felt it cooling or imagined it so.

I told him the same tales that had lured me, oh so long ago. I promised him a changeless body, with never-fading, hairless skin, smooth enough to keep his lover's interest forever. I told him I, myself, was well over thirty now. I assured him of eternal life.

But he smiled and shook his head. Not, understand, that he didn't believe me, but—alas—he was not a boy from the Suburra but a Greek from the Eastern colonies, half in love with the idea of a tragic destiny, of a fate he couldn't avoid. And besides, surely this miracle would have a price. Too high a price for one who didn't own himself.

I told him the price and he recoiled, mistrusting. Hadrianus had told him of my death or my life, as you please. He didn't want it, he told me. Not at the expense of human life. Not if he would have to kill daily just to keep mere animation. He had seen mummies, he told me. Mockery of life, he called them. He would not become a living mummy.

He was strong, muscular, from hunting and riding and keeping up with Hadrianus's restless wandering. But I was hungry, I was starving, I was a beast howling in the wilderness, and we were alone and the night was deep and the sleeping people in the boat would not be roused by his screams.

I held him fast on Osiris' altar. Osiris who was dead and resurrected, a god like myself, in my image and semblance. I held him and pulled back his dark hair and tore at the white skin beneath with impatient teeth. His life, sweet and inebriating, poured out onto my tongue. Sweeter than honeyed wine, stronger

than the best spirits, spicy and warm and fine. Worth waiting for one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight years.

His eyes opened wide, terrified, his heart beat fast, fast, fast. His muscles twisted in futile protest, under my arm that pinned him to the altar.

His heart pounded more ardently than any music he ever played, than any dance to which he'd ever given himself. From now on, I thought, his blood on my tongue making me drunk, from now on he would dance for me in the clearings of the night, by the light of the moon. For me, for me alone.

Night stretched and shrunk. I knew the true meaning of euphoria. Drinking Antinous's life I no longer regretted anything, not my lost childhood, not my squandered fate. For that brief moment I was omnipotent, the lord of the world, the equal of gods.

"Antinous." This call, so gentle it was no more than a faint, surprised remark, startled us both long enough for the boy to fight free of me. He stood, uncertain, drawing breath in painful gasps.

I turned, my lips stained with his blood.

Adriano stood by in the moonlight, barefoot on the muddy river bank. Imprudently alone, thoughtlessly unguarded, wearing a short tunic that wasn't as becoming as it once had been. This way, awakened in the middle of the night, with none of his regalia, none of his insignias of power, without the subtle artifice of his hairdresser, he looked very little like an Emperor or even the virile hero I had loved. He had grown fat, with a protruding stomach; his red hair and beard had turned gray and his eyes were circled by small wrinkles and underlined by loose flesh folds, from too much drinking and living and loving.

"Antinous," he said again, concerned, surprised. He looked at me, a brief glance, and then back at his favorite. "I woke up and you weren't there. I saw the rowboat by the shore. I took one myself and I came to see--"

"You came too late!" I said. My voice was mad with triumph. Antinous's blood filled me with an intoxicating happiness. "You came too late. Now he can only live by becoming like me. And you're not a necrophiliac, you're not a necrophiliac, remember?"

Adriano's eyes didn't stray. They stared at the boy and filled with pain, slowly, slowly. And each drop was indefinable sweetness in my mouth, singing joy in my heart. "Child!" the Emperor said, in soft chiding. "Antinous."

"I didn't want it," the boy said, torpidly, painfully, through lips already growing stiff with death, with the poison of undying death I had put in his body. "I don't want it."

They stood there, I don't know how long. They stared at each other as lovers separated by an abyss.

"Antinous . . ." Adriano said.

"Only sun and water, I remember you told me," the boy whispered. "Only sun and water . . . Not age, not time . . . now I shall never change . . ." And he stared at the Emperor with hopeful eyes.

But all the Emperor said was, "Antinous," again, in that even, tender whisper, as one who reproaches a child for a minor folly.

That was the moment of my triumph, the sweet moment of my triumph, when I knew I had won and the boy was mine and Adriano would beg me

Then, abruptly, Antinous moved with a light quickness that should have been impossible to him, stepped closer to the torrential, rain swollen river. "A sacrifice," he said. And smiled impishly. "A sacrifice for your Imperial health, your Imperial life." For a moment, he lingered on the side of the river, then laughed, "May you live long, may your life be lengthened by the years that should have been mine."

"Antinous!" Adriano screamed, but did not move.

In my memory now it all happens in the slow motion of the cheap horror movies that would, centuries later, occupy my sleepless days: Antinous's jumping, his body hitting the water, his attempts at swimming, instinct against will. Each of these unnaturally prolonged, centuries in passing.

But I had drained him of life and strength and he could not have saved himself, even if he so wished. Slowly, slowly, he went under, was dragged under, until only his hair floated at the surface, seemingly for an eternity.

"I would accept him, even now," Adriano said, evenly, calmly in the tone of one who trades a greeting with a stranger at the baths.

I looked up at him. His gaze was on the river where nothing remained to be seen, nothing other than the dark waters that had swallowed his lover's body. His eyes were empty, vacant, equanimous.

Later, in the eight years he survived his lover, grief would come to him, scalding grief, and he would weep publicly like a woman, and he would build temples and monuments and force the senate to divinise this anonymous boy, and dot the empire with statues of this Bithynian and start a religion in Antinous's name.

Alas, I found no enjoyment in his delayed pain. Nor was his grief the mourning of a man, but the mere death baying of senseless beast. As my soul remained, pinned to my dead body, his soul had left his living body and followed his lover's somewhere—maybe Olympus. Somewhere beyond my reach.

And it was with cold, dreary detachment that he would write in his diary, "Antinous fell in the river and drowned."

I always think of that sentence, so unlike Adriano, as I see in my mind that last second when Antinous's hair opened and spread like a nocturnal flower blooming by the light of the moon on the waters of the Nile.

The moment I lost them both.

Dear John

I don't know if this happens to other writers, but I often dream I'm leafing through magazines that carry my stories. Normally, I just look at the magazine in the dream and say, "oh, yes, that's mine." In this dream I got smart and read it. It was Dear John. When I woke, I still found the idea that we would create human beings simply for our physical gratification interesting and repulsive in equal parts. So I had to write it.

The night was cool. A soft breeze blew from the ocean, bringing with it a taste of salt and a feel of humidity.

The humidity clung to my platinum blonde hair, making it sticky and messing the lustrous waves that took so long to arrange. Good thing the beauty mark on my face wasn't painted on; good thing my make up was permanent and couldn't blur.

I smiled, and walked back and forth along the cracked sidewalk. Smile, smile, wiggle of hips, smile, smile, I looked adoringly at the glide cars passing by, silently, their drivers hiding behind the safe anonymity of darkened windows.

Click, click, click, my high-heels beating a rhythmic, monotonous sound against the pavement. Click, click, click.

My ankles hurt, as did my feet, from their unnatural position.

Zoom, zoom, zoom, the cars gliding by, one after the other, all featureless ovoids in different colors, like someone had raided a giant Easter egg basket and sped each of the eggs out on the highway. Now and then, an egg stopped, the shell opened, and a John came out.

Just what every little girl wanted for Easter.

I've never seen an Easter basket. But I remembered the twentieth century vids and educational material that they'd made me watch in the crèche: Easter with the eggs, and Christmas with trees and lights. It must have been some time to live in, the early twentieth century.

For all I knew, so was the second. Surely the Johns in those Easter-egg cars seemed to be having a blast. They talked of colonies on Mars, of a robotics revolution, of life spans extended to twice what they were twenty years ago.

But it didn't matter to me. My lifespan was the same I'd been created with, and my life was this: click, click, click of heels across the pavement, back and forth, ignoring the other Marilyns. And the Racquels and the Elizabeths and all the others. Time to socialize with them at the dorm that night. Not now. Now it was time to smile, smile, smile and look sexy.

Now and then a John would stop and approach one of us, and extend his credgem, like a little clear marble, for approval. And then, if the authenticators disguised as golden bracelets on our wrists clicked their approval, then one of us would take the John to the office, and do what we'd been so well trained to do.

They'd trained us never to act tired, never to act bored. To take our clothes off. To take the Johns' clothes off. To exclaim over their bodies, their big muscles, their all-male square shoulder—seven if we saw none of those.

They trained us to lay down in the prepared bed—*sanitized for your protection*—and spread wide, as they bumped and ground.

They taught us to smile, smile, smile.

Sometimes the Johns wanted to talk to me as if I were her. The other. The Marilyn.

I indulged them and prattled about my films, my love life.

How Joe jilted me and Jack did me wrong and how no one ever understood my artistic soul. Until this

John.

Then the John would leave, and I used the cleaning spray down there—*sanitized for your protection*—and it was back to walking outside on the sidewalk.

* * *

"Hello," he said.

He stood five steps away from me, and there was no parked car in sight. Just this man, over six feet tall, with light brown curls and sparkling blue eyes and a disarming smile.

I smiled back, as I'd been taught to do, and practiced for so many hours in front of the mirror, making my lips just so, so that the Johns would find them irresistible.

"Well, hello there," I drawled, in my sexiest, breathiest voice.

He looked away, at the stream of cars, zooming by, then back at me, his smile not dimmed, but managing somehow to give the impression of shyness. "I was wondering," he says. "How much it would be for an hour."

I couldn't place his accent, which was strange enough, considering how many people I got through here everyday. "Thirty cred units for an hour," I said. "Sixty for the whole night." Hardly worth it now, with the night half gone. But I still had to say it, with the big smile, and the slight wiggle of the hips.

He grinned. "Not tonight. I don't have sixty. I'll see next time. Tonight it will have to be thirty." He handed me the credgem, an unembossed, clear one.

I popped it into the authenticator—the oval attachment dangling from what looked like a heavy gold bracelet on my wrist. I smiled while I waited.

He wore a well-cut suit, with an odd design, like the ones they wore in all those twentieth century vids that they'd made me watch in the crèche. It was black and emphasized his square shoulders, his narrow waist. But the cut was strange. It had to be a revival thing.

He smiled back at me as if he, too, had been to the crèche and practiced, a smile that would make your insides melt.

The gem cleared, and emptied. Thirty cred units was all he had.

I looked at him, surprised, because after all, a man like that exuded money, the feel of never having had to do anything he didn't want to.

I led him to the offices, a block away, in a tall, grey tower, put up expressly for the purpose. Inside were cubicles, barely large enough to accommodate a large, comfortable bed, its sheets pulled back invitingly, and a broad band set across the white linen. The band said *sanitized for your protection* and was put there by the robots who cleaned the room afterwards.

He laughed at it; laughed, laughed as if he'd never been to a doxy room before, never seen anything like that.

* * *

He undresses himself, with an impatient eagerness that gives me no time to do more than react—to his broad shoulders, his narrow waist, his golden skin.

Then he undresses me, and he takes his time: he takes his time to explore my skin, my heavy breasts, my curvaceous legs. He tastes, touches all of it, before bringing me down to the bed with him, before laying between my legs, before shouting with joy above me.

* * *

"What's your name?" I asked him, as he pulled his underwear and pants back on and fastened the buttons of his retro shirt.

I'd never asked them that. One doesn't. But this time had been different, different in a way I couldn't even say.

He looked at me, his eyes veiled and blue and mysterious, like the midnight sky over the ancient sea. "John," he says.

I should have known. They all were John.

After the shift, when I slid into my mercifully solitary bed in the dorm, I dreamed of John. John, with his broad shoulders, his golden brown hair, his blue eyes.

Why would a man like that go to a doxy?

For the dream, I supposed, the dream that I was her, the illusion of making love to a twentieth century sex goddess.

But he'd never asked. He'd never asked about them.

* * *

The next night was cooler, the breeze from the sea heavier, nearer a gale.

Fewer cars glided by.

The other Marylins and I—all twenty of us who worked this street—walked back and forth smiling, smiling, but not a car stopped for the first two hours.

I was jealous of the Marilyn who stood on the little square grate on the pavement, the warm air blowing from the grate blowing up her skirt while she pretended to try to hold it down and laughed. At least my legs would have been warm.

But that was not my beat, so I walked back and forth, wiggle, wiggle, click, click.

"Hello?" He stood a few steps away from me, as if he'd followed me from behind, for a while.

"Oh. Hi there," I said, and smiled. "John, isn't it?"

He nodded, and grinned, really big, and handed me the gem. There were sixty cred units in there, and I could have kissed him, and cried with relief, because he was taking me off the streets for the night.

* * *

He undresses me slowly; he undresses teasingly.

Like the children in those vids at the crèche, we explore each other's body like we're unwrapping Christmas gifts, savoring the suspense as much as the discovery of what's really inside.

And then we make love, slowly, slowly. We make love. Not screw and grunt, not pump and jerk. Love. Slow. In every permutation.

Afterwards we lay together, in each other's arms.

* * *

"I was hoping you'd get me again," I said, as I lean on his broad, sweat-slick shoulder, and smell the scent of worn out male, the scent of love making thick in the air.

He looked up at me, his eyebrows drawn together in confusion.

"Me and not one of the other Marilyns," I said, nuzzling his neck, at the edge where the soft skin became rough with closely shaven beard.

He blinked. "I was looking for you."

For me. I'd dreamed of that, but it was nonsense. "You couldn't have been," I said. "We're all alike. All the Marilyns."

He grinned. "No, you're not. I know the way you walk, your expressions. That's learned. Not what you get from being someone's clone."

I raised my eyebrows at him. No one who hadn't worked with clones knew we were different from each other at all. Or different from the originals. "You know a lot about clones. What are you? A genetic engineer at one of the fancy labs around here?"

He laughed. He laughed a long time, and then had trouble recovering his breath. When he did, he said, "No. No. I'm just visiting town. I'm not from around here."

Afterwards, I called myself several kinds of idiot. What genetic engineer would use a disposable credit gem with only what he must pay for a doxy service? Engineers were rolling in credits, had expense accounts on company credigems.

* * *

He didn't come back the next night, nor the next. It was just the regulars, the other Johns, who emerged from those egg-like multicolored cars, and bumped and ground by the hour.

Then one night, two months after, a dusty, travel-stained car stopped, near me, and as I turned, swaying my hips and smiling, he emerged.

"John" I said.

He smiled. "You remember me."

He had enough for the night.

* * *

We make love like castaways on an alien shore, who grasp each other in desperation. We cling and writhe in the sweaty bed, the sanitation band broken, the sheets wrinkled and thrown onto the floor in haphazard joy.

* * *

"Where did you go?" I asked him, laying spent beside his golden, sweaty body. "Where did you go?"

He laughed, a laughter that betrayed joy, not amusement. "Missed me, babe, did you?"

I nodded.

"I went To other places. I'm I lecture In schools," he said.

I thought that explained the retro suit, and I didn't say anything.

Later in the night, though, he asked me how old I was.

"Twelve," I said. "Seven years out of the crèche, two years to go."

He looked grave, serious. "How do they do it?" he asked. "How do they do it, when they choose to end you?"

"When senescence sets in, they give us a lethal injection," I said. "It saves us the pain of aging and the troubles of old age." Straight out of the book from the crèche.

"Bullshit," he said. "Bullshit. It saves them the trouble of feeding you, of looking after you in your old age. You make them all the money they want, and then they just put you down, when your tissues start degenerating, as the tissues of clones will."

I looked at him, surprised. Humans don't usually care that much.

He took a deep breath. He looked like a drowning man. "I am fourteen," he said. "They put us to death by shooting us. By recreating *his* assassination. Big to do in Dallas. Every year."

* * *

His features fall into place with an almost physical sound, an almost physical pain. That's who he

is, I think, Jack.

* * *

I blinked at him.

"Just another clone, you're right," he said. "Just another clone."

"But . . ." I said. "The credigems, the car . . ."

He grins. "I take them. I figured out how to glitch the system long ago. We sleep in these temporary buildings, while we're touring, and I have figured out how to tamper with the alarm.

How to tamper with the computer, too, so that the sensors on my bed tell them I'm still there."

"But . . ." I said. What company would put up with it? They paid big money for the tissues of the people they cloned. Probably a lot bigger money for his than for mine. They would have to get their money's worth, right?

He shrugged. "I've heard them talk once. They say its in the baseline personality that I'll break the rules. So they have to put up with it." His eyes filled with tears, as he turned to me—his eyes like the sea rising. "Do you still want me? Do you still want me now that you know what I am?"

I shrugged. "You're nothing I'm not." I buried my face in his hair and nibbled at his ear.

He sighed. "I don't have much time," he said. "I don't know if we'll come back to L.A. again. Another month, at most, and then they'll put me down. Before I show signs of aging."

* * *

He tells me he read about them, Marilyn and Jack. He, the original went by Jack, which is why John calls himself John. Or Johnny.

Like me, he doesn't know if it's true or not, about the originals; if they ever got together. But my Johnny is alone. He was the only one cloned of all of Jack's family. He didn't even have clone-twins. Jack is cloned at the rate of one a year. They move through the crèche system, through their appearance-tours one at a time, one succeeding the other. And he needed something, some human anchor.

He chose me because I looked older than the others.

He says there's a difference in the walk, a difference in the oh-so-practiced smile.

He tells me loves me.

* * *

"You don't need to go back," I said. It was close to dawn and we'd had sex countless times. Now we lay together in each other's arms. "You don't need to go back. You've stolen the car. We should run. My clients tell me there are still wilderness areas. We could get lost in one of those. No one would ever find us there. No one would. They wouldn't even look. Too expensive for two models near the end of their cycle."

"They get a lot of money from the to-do in Dallas," he said. He pulled gently away from me and sat at the edge of the bed, putting his shirt and pants on. "Lots of nuts get to dress up and reenact it all—to be assassins and policemen. I read about it. I cracked their system. The other one, the younger one of me is ready to leave the crèche."

He put his cuff links on. Cuff links. I'd only seen them in vids before. But for some reason, those little pieces of jewelry look incredibly sexy, very masculine. The embodiment of a by-gone era. He snapped them on, without looking, like he did that every day.

He probably did.

"Besides," he said. "The sensor I rigged will tell them if I'm gone after dawn. I couldn't rig it that far. They know my proclivities, and they work around them. And you'll be missed."

I looked at the dot on my finger. The dot indicated how many hours I had left on my shift. It pulsed, one, two. One, two. "We have two hours. I won't be missed for two hours. We could get lost in some wilderness in two hours. I know we could. There's a place called Death Valley. I'd rather die there, than you dying somewhere without me."

* * *

He laughs, and takes me in his arms, and twirls me around and around the small space in the room. "Let's. Let's. Life is short, and I'm tired of doing what I have to do. Let's. It might be doomed, but it's worth a try."

* * *

A try was all we got. They spotted us by the ID box of the car, before we even flew out of L.A.

They seemed to think our attempt was very funny.

They took Johnny with them, took me back to the offices and the dorms. They put an ankle marker on me, that will tell them if I leave the part of the street assigned to me.

Every night I walk, and I smile, and I wave.

Last week, I asked a client about the thing in Dallas—and he showed me the whole show on his pocket newsy.

Bullets tearing into the golden flesh, ripping into the soft brown curls.

It hurt me, as if they'd ripped into my heart, but I forced myself to watch it all, to watch it to the end.

I could run again, force them to kill me. But what's there to run to? Soon my own end will come, in less than two years. There will be the cold bite of the injection on my arm, and then nothing.

The church people say my kind has no souls.

Life is short, and then you die.

But for a couple of months I was alive. For a couple of months I had my dear John.

Johnny, Johnny, I hardly knew you.

Trafalgar Square

This story came while researching for a Chinese Fantasy novel which, of this writing, is still not finished. The misfortunes of China make interesting reading but in the situation just before the Mongol invasion—the ascension of a middle class, the falling in disuse of old ways, I caught a glimmer of the same type of situation before the French revolution. I wondered if the very concept of freedom as we hold it was an accident of history that might never have existed at all. Or might have existed in quite a different way. Since what I was reading was—of necessity—written in the nineteenth century, I started getting very tired of references to the mysterious oriental mind. Being convinced that human races have cultures but human individuals do not inherit these by birth, only by raising, this statement annoyed me. I wondered if, perhaps, things had gone differently, the Chinese might not be more like us than we might be like ourselves . . .

"Please, Mister." The girl slid up to Yu Lin, as he entered the London Liberation hotel. "Please Mister. May I read your paper?" She spoke awfully accented Mandarin and reached a small hand towards the Chinese newspaper that he carried, rolled, atop his briefcase.

Yu Lin stopped, his business-casual long green tunic rustling around him.

He'd heard it all in his year and a half as a business executive in London. Please Mister, do you have soap? Please Mister, have spare cash? Please Mister, I'll go up to your room and make you feel good.

He was sick and tired of London, the misery of London like a sore, infected wound upon the face of the world. He longed for home, with a near physical desire.

But that, May I read your paper? was a new one.

He forgot his last business meeting, the ever-present question of when he'd get to go home, and looked wearily at the girl.

She wore dark blue peasant style loose pants, and the type of tunic that used to be called a worker's tunic. Both had the uneven shine of polyester much in need of washing. Her lank blond hair fell to her shoulders in unwashed clumps.

Around them, the would-be sumptuous hotel bristled with early evening activity. Business men, mostly Chinese, but a few Russians also, walked past in groups or alone, talking loudly of new ventures, capital transactions amid the scraggly potted palms, the sagging plastic-looking sofas, the already-flaking faux marble columns.

Which explained how this English girl had managed to sneak in here. Doormen were usually better than that at keeping locals away.

Had to be, what with the skinheads and radicals forever ready to murder the businessmen they considered interlopers in their native homeland.

"You," One of the two doormen a too-thin, too pale Englishman in a too large grey uniform, approached running. "You." He pointed a finger at the girl. "You, get out of here. You don't belong here."

"No." Lin stood in front of the girl, conscious of her smell of rancid sweat and dirty clothes. "No. She's with me."

The guard stopped, confused. "With you?" he asked, in the very bad mandarin such people spoke.

"With me." Even as he said it, Lin wondered about his mental health. He'd never before tried to protect an Englishman. He didn't even like Englishmen.

He wanted to go home to China.

The girl looked startled, then smiled, showing crooked teeth.

"She's not registered to practice here," the doorman protested, at the same time casting Lin a puzzled glance, as if wondering what Lin could see in such a creature.

Prostitutes, like everything else in Europe, were registered, accounted for. And paid a fat fee to be allowed to practice in hotels where foreigners congregated.

Everyone else, the amateurs who offered themselves every ten steps, practiced in alleys, behind garden walls or in their own communal apartments, with all the neighbors looking on.

Lin sighed. He reached into the pocket inside his broad left sleeve and retrieved three copper cash, which he flung at the man. "She is now."

The imbalance of currencies was so great that such a meager tip made the man bow three times. "Certainly, certainly, mister, miss."

But, as he walked with the girl towards the elevators at the far end of the lobby, past the potted plants and strangely granitic sofas, Lin could feel the man's eyes on the back of his skull, analyzing him, wondering what a well-dressed, up and coming Chinese businessman could want with a scruffy, dirty piece of baggage such as that.

Lin wondered too.

* * *

It was the newspaper, he decided later.

Had she asked for soap, or money, or offered herself, Lin would not have given her a second thought. But her odd blue eyes—Lin still couldn't think of blue eyes but as being odd full of greedy speculation, while she asked for the newspaper that he carried folded atop his briefcase. That had disturbed his thoughts.

Later he sat in the restaurant of the hotel, across a grease-smearred table from the Englishwoman and watched her greedily turn the pages of the newspaper, while the steak he'd bought her lay forgotten in its chipped plate, at the side of the table.

"You're not eating," he said.

He himself had scant appetite. Beef in England always smelled spoiled and was a color only slightly lighter than gunmetal grey. The result of being imported over who knew what distances.

But he knew how scant meat of any kind was in England and what a treat the locals considered it.

Strange, he thought. He'd come in with Dragon Clouds Unlimited, a cigarette factory. Unable to sell cigarettes in the free world where doctors had made the ill effects of tobacco too well known, Chinese cigarette companies preyed on Europeans and, instead of the many things Europe needed, exported this one vice, this one bad habit, this added bit of pollution.

She looked up at him, glanced at her steak, cut a piece of it and ate it quickly, then returned to the paper.

"It says here," she said. "It says here that students have rebelled in France. That the government conceded and agreed to the right to free elections."

Lin nodded, fascinated at her reaction. "You didn't know?"

"One hears" She shook her head. "Rumors. But one can't be sure. Can never be sure. The news never mention it."

"But" Lin started. Oh, sure, Europe had been in the grip of communism for almost fifty years, and communications had been severely restricted. But now things were different. It was the 1990s, as the Europeans counted time, from the death of their crucified God. "It's been happening everywhere. Surely you know that? France, and Iberia, and Germany. One after the other, their governments have collapsed, and free elections"

"Free elections!" She looked like a child hearing mention of a forbidden sweet. Her eyes sparkled, and her mouth opened in wishful desire.

Her eyes looked the color of the sky over Hangchow, his native town, he thought. He smiled at her, though he fancied that at her words there had been a lull in the conversations around them, a stop in the chatter of businessmen and hookers at the other too-close together tables.

She laughed at his smile. "My name is Emily Dorset," she said. "I probably should have told you that before." She looked down at her steak, smiled at him. "Since you bought me dinner and everything. My friends call me Emma."

"Mine is Yu Lin," he said. "I come from Hangchow, a provincial city in central China."

Just the thought of home, the thought of houses not pressed together, the thought of houses that weren't rabbit warrens in the monolithic cement of totalitarian countries, brought with it a wave of longing. He thought of sailing on the reservoir of Hangchow, and sighed.

He'd given it all up to come to England. It had seemed such a good idea. Go to England. Introduce them to free enterprise.

Instead, he was working for a monolithic corporation in exile amid the barbarians.

And he smiled at that, because that was exactly what his ancestors had called the rest of the world. Barbarians. And Yu Lin who'd thought himself so modern had, over the last year, come to think of them just that way.

He'd thought Englishmen were just like Chinese, only with different customs, religion and politics. Now he wasn't so sure.

He wasn't so sure there wasn't something wrong, servile, subservient, at the bottom of the European soul.

Emma was smiling into his abstracted expression. "You're thinking of home, aren't you?"

He felt himself blush, a heat on his cheeks.

"It's all right," she said. "I often feel that way too, only I have no home to return to, except . . ."

"Except?" Lin prompted. Her sky-blue eyes had darkened, as though a cloud passed over them.

"Nothing. I was going to say if I had a home, it would be a home more like China, with human rights, with vote, with freedom."

Now Lin was sure of it, an almost palpable listening silence in the hotel.

England was supposed to be freer now. England couldn't touch him. But what would they do to Emma?

"What do you do?" he asked. "For a living." And immediately upon it, he kicked himself. Most English didn't do much for a living. A sentence often heard floated up through his mind: we pretend to work and they pretend to pay us.

But she grinned brightly up at him. "I'm a student," she said. "Art. Something other than the stiff icons of communism, which are no better than the stiff icons of Christianity before. I'd like to draw people as they really are." Her hands moved in the air, making drawing motions, and the clouds lifted from her sky-blue eyes.

* * *

At the door to the hotel, she handed him back his newspaper. "My family . . . We could get in trouble if they found this in our house."

Under the watchful eyes of the doorman, he bent closer to her and spoke in her ear, as if whispering sweet nothings, "I thought it was better now. I thought the BSS were"

But she shook her head. "Sometimes it is the bear's dying moments that are most dangerous," she said. She grinned brightly up at him.

She still smelled of rancid sweat, of unwashed flesh constricted within artificial clothes. But her eyes reminded him of the sky over his hometown, and when she smiled it was easy to forget how crooked her teeth were.

"Listen," she said. "Thanks for the newspaper."

She stepped away from him, turned to go.

"Wait," he called. "Wait. Tomorrow. For dinner. Same time."

Emma turned around, looking surprised, then grinned and nodded once.

Walking down the steps of the hotel, she broke into a little run. She wore ballerina shoes that appeared to be made of cardboard and falling apart.

Not looking either way, she crossed the street chances of any traffic were minimal and the all-plastic Morris suffered a greater chance of injury than any pedestrian they might strike.

On the other side, Emma turned again, and waved at him.

Lin watched her walk away, along the corrosion and pollution stained opposing wall. At one point the wall had been painted with a big, heroic socialist mural.

The words Iron Maggie were still visible and, from amid the grime and the dirt, stared the mock-heroic figure of Britain's former general secretary. A horse-faced woman, she'd come into the party echelons via the union of iron workers. Hence the name.

She'd been the most draconian of all the previous secretaries. While allowing foreign companies like the one Yu Lin worked for into the country, she'd cracked down on all and any political unrest or religious dissension.

When she'd died, her coterie of followers had taken over, and continued in the same direction.

Staring at her portrait on that wall was like staring at an ill-developed photograph, or a ghost of Britain's past.

* * *

"The problem is your religion," Yu Lin said. He'd known Emma for exactly two weeks. They'd seen each other every day and today, Lin's day off, they sat by a lake in what remained of a city park.

It wasn't a park like what he remembered from Hangchow, of course. For one, Europe had a much higher population density than China, and, besides, centuries of government-abetted pollution, centuries of no one caring what the people felt or wanted, had left every tree sooty grey and the grass stunted, moribund. The water in the lake, itself, was an angry grey and looked vaguely gelatinous.

Emma looked up from her sketch pad. "My religion?"

"Not yours exactly," Lin said. "The country's. Europe. The fatalism of Christianity shaped your beliefs, your way of seeing the world. You expect a reward after death, not here. You believe in the poor, the virtues of poverty. No wonder Europe took to communism like a duck to water."

Emma raised her eyebrows. She had golden eyebrows, very fair and yet dark enough to be seen against her pale skin. They looked like golden arcs over the blue sky of her eyes. "I doubt it," she said. "Russia is Christian. And it never took to communism. It wavered, perhaps, and tried mixed programs, but it never gave in."

Lin sighed. He was putting it badly. Or perhaps he was wrong. The more he talked to Emma the more he felt that,

indeed, she was more like him than not like him. So, why this vile submission? Why an history of aristocratic dictatorship, maintained until toppled only by the worse dictatorship of communism? How could a people live like that and never discover the rights of the individual, the value of a human life?

"Russia was near China," he said. "They didn't dare . . ."

"I don't think that's it," Emma said. "I think oh, I think something happened, somewhere, something that twisted us. I mean there was Rome, and Greece. They had democratic institutions at one time. By their lights, of course."

Yes, there had been Greece, and Rome, though little was known about them.

Lin sighed. "Let's not talk about that," he said. "Tell me about your dreams. What you think the future will bring."

Emma grinned. Her blue-sky eyes cleared. She talked of what she envisioned her generation, blessed with faster communications than ever before, would not be kept prisoner to a dying ideal. They would move forward. They would move on. They would acquire right to vote. Listening to her, it was almost easy to believe.

And all the while he kept pondering the question. Should he go back home? He wanted to go back home. And he had the chance now that his first term abroad was up. He could go home to a nice promotion and a whole lot of hardship pay. He could find a girl, get married.

But who would lend Emma the daily paper then?

* * *

"I've signed up for another year," Lin told Emma.

He sat on his bed in his hotel room. He'd been telling her all about the youth movements in his own city, the opposition to the war in France.

Sitting on the floor, cross-legged, she listened to him like a child drinking in a fairy tale.

It was raining outside, a dark, sooty rain. It left black stripes on the yellowed glass of the window, and it seemed to reverberate mournfully throughout the building.

"I thought you missed home," Emma said.

"I do," he said. "But I couldn't leave you. Who'd lend you his paper then?"

Emma laughed. Her eyes looked very blue like a slice of sky from a springtime London had never known.

* * *

They became lovers, almost incidentally.

Around lovemaking in his hotel room, they talked fervently. Of the rights of man. The hope for the new world that would belong to them. A world where Chinese companies started industries other than cigarette factories in blighted England.

A world where each English peasant had a small cottage.

"I think it was that you never formed colonies," Lin said. "I mean, China colonized a whole new continent, formed three countries in the Land of the West. And sent enough people to Africa too. But Europe just stayed within its tight confines, getting tighter and tighter in space."

They walked side by side down a darkened street. Emma had promised to take Lin to a nightclub run by people their age. A very secret nightclub, where you could only enter if you knew someone.

She looked back at him, surprised, almost shocked.

She was wearing a pair of harem pants and a short tunic that Lin had bought mail-order from home. Her clean hair sparkled. "Maybe," she said. "That and the fear of losing all your descendants. After the great invasion and the plague, when so many died, I think Europeans just got used to the idea that they must have a lot of children."

He asked how many brothers and sisters she had. She counted them on her fingers. "And there's Nigel, he works in a foundry in the north. And Arthur who was two years older than I . . ." she stopped. Her eyes filled with tears. "Arthur was killed in Poland. In the war . . ."

And there Lin was quiet too, because the war in Poland had been won by China. By the skin of their teeth, but Chinese had won the war. And Lin remembered how close they'd come to wavering.

* * *

"No, bloody hell, he's not like us," said the blond creep who guarded the door to the nightclub a dark doorway distinguishable only from other dark doorways around by the faint sound of a tinny tape player, and a small crowd of British teens. He looked Emma up and down. "He might give you what you need, sister, but he's an im-pe-ria-list. Running dog of capitalism."

He spit on the ground.

Lin tugged on Emma's sleeve. Emma looked like she'd fight, but he pulled her away.

They walked back, silently, to the hotel.

"I would have fought," she said, coming out of his hotel bathroom, stark naked, her hair dripping.

"Of course," he said. "Of course. And what would it have earned us? I wouldn't want to go somewhere I wasn't wanted."

He understood the young tug, even. He, himself, not so long ago, hadn't been sure the Englishmen were like him at all. And China had been exposed to more racial minorities what with trade with Africa and India and immigrants from both in China than any Briton in the last thousand years.

Emma's hair sparked under the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. It sparked with a red sheen.

Mongol red, it was called. Few people knew that the Mongols had started their pillaging looking much like the people from India, like other Indo-Europeans. But in Central Europe they'd lingered and intermarried, before descending on western Europe, arriving there pale and tall and, more often than not, red haired.

By the time they'd destroyed Iberia and moved on to decimate Britain, they weren't that much different from the Viking predators. Only they'd stayed. They'd destroyed the economy. They'd imposed their system of hierarchic rule and rigid obedience on all of Europe for a hundred years.

Europe had never got over it.

Lin folded Emma into his arms and kissed the little golden hairs at the back of her neck.

What if the Mongols had taken the other way around?

What if they had gone into China instead, just when Chinese culture was breaking out of its early, rigid mold? What if it had squashed China's democratic roots before they ever could develop?

"I'm sorry, Lin," Emma said. "I should have stood up to him better, anyway. I should have fought. But we need them their faction. They're racists, but they are willing to stand with us. We're going to have demonstrations and shame our government in the eyes of the world. They'll have to give us the right to vote then."

* * *

Students marched up and down in Trafalgar square. It was known as the heart of London. Though to Lin the place looked much like any other square around the older houses having long been demolished and immense, crumbling cement sky scrapers built in their place.

But it had been named after the battle in which the French had been stopped from taking over all of Europe, like new Mongols.

As such, it had symbolic value as the most English of all squares.

Students descended on it, with signs, with chants, with an improvised p.a. system. Day and night they marched up and down.

Emma was one of the leaders the leader of one of the two factions involved in this.

Lin brought her soap and food and, sometimes, stayed and listened to her, kept her company.

But never too long. Never long enough. They couldn't afford to have the cameras pick him up. The government would claim Chinese agitation.

And the cameras were coming: from Russia, from China, from the newly freed France, and Iberia, and Germany, even.

Filming the demonstrations, the yelling.

"Each day the government endures it," Emma said. "It's a sign that they're weakening. We will win, Lin. I can feel it. And then . . ." She smiled at him. "Maybe you won't need to go home."

He nodded, handing her a bag with onions and cucumbers, all he'd managed to buy in the hotel.

The entire city seemed to be under siege, troubled, and the influx of camera crews had stressed the already fragile supply lines. "There is hope," she said. "See, there is hope. We can win."

* * *

Maybe they could have. Maybe. But the government didn't relent. It talked of mercy to the students if they surrendered, but not of giving in to their demands. Government men explained to the foreign crews that this was all a misunderstanding.

"I don't know Lin," Emma told him, sounding exhausted. "Every day more and more students leave. They're tired. They thought it would be easy. Quick. Now . . ." Smudges of tears showed on her face. "I tried to convince them to retreat by May

25. Leave the square, having made our point. I think we could do that."

"And?" he asked.

"Mark," she said. Mark was the guy from the club, the leader of the nationalistic faction that wanted the vote so they could deny it to anyone else. "He says we can't retreat without having won some points."

Lin held her arm. It felt very thin after almost a month here, on the barricades. "Forget this," he said. "Forget all this. Come with me. Come home with me. Marry me."

"Oh," she looked at him, her sky-blue eyes filled with tears. "I can't Lin. It's my land. It's my battle. I can't run away." He walked away feeling defeated. He'd always thought Englishmen were like sheep. But Emma wasn't. More the pity. Emma wasn't.

* * *

He woke up with the phone ringing, and reached for it, without seeing.

"Pack up, Lin," his boss said. "Pack up. We're going home."

"Beg your pardon?" He couldn't go home. Not without Emma.

"We're going home. They've brought out the tanks, and Dragon Clouds Unlimited is pulling everyone back home. They don't want to risk the lives of Chinese nationals."

"Tanks?"

He turned on the light. He turned on the TV, but nothing was playing on any of the stations, nothing except a static pattern and a droning music.

Lin ran out of his room, to the elevator, down the darkened streets to Trafalgar square.

Two blocks away he heard screams, cannon booming and the staccato stuttering of machine guns.

He could swear he smelled the blood.

But a police cordon stopped him. Shock police, armed, though no one seemed to be trying to break through.

They identified Lin as a foreigner, as a Chinese, and escorted him meekly back to his embassy, from whence he was shipped home by the next plane.

* * *

He didn't manage to go back until two years later, when it had all calmed down.

Two years later working for a new employer.

The images of the massacre in his mind tanks advancing on unprotected Englishmen the images he'd seen on TV at home, he went to Trafalgar square.

There were no blood stains on the pavement. Britain's government, still holding on to the ideological remnants of communism, had become in all but name a free-trade society.

Dark cement giants still surrounded the square, but they'd been painted bright colors. Tourists ambled amid street vendors.

And yet, Britons still couldn't vote, and from the interior stories of brutality and dark prepotence leaked, now and then.

Lin wondered lost in the square, as if he were in a foreign world.

He'd had an agency looking for Emma, for any trace of her. They found nothing save that she was missing, presumed dead in the Trafalgar square massacre.

The detective had rescued one thing, though Emma's book of sketches. He'd sent it to Lin in Hangchow. It had arrived just before Lin left for London.

Opening it, Lin had been surprised. The pictures were unmistakably of England: there were the old monuments, the trees that seemed to hug the ground, the rolling hills.

But it was an England of cottages and pretty little towns.

An England as England could have been? As Europe could have been without the Mongols?

Lin didn't know. But he carried the notebook around with him as he set about establishing an office for the international organization that monitored human rights abuses.

To prevent the Mongols from continuing to destroy everything in their path a thousand years after their defeat.

He would work for this small agency against overwhelming evil.

This would be his gift to Emma.

The Green Bay Tree

While doing research for my novel Ill Met By Moonlight, I came across everything that was happening around the time this story is set. The biographer was sympathetic to Judith and her strange marriage, but I started wondering how all of it made her straight-laced sister Susannah feel. In fact, how would Susannah, married to the very religious Doctor Hall feel about her eccentric family life?

Susannah Hall stood in her spacious, oak lined front hall, and looked through the little, thick glass squares amid the lead panes.

Her husband, Dr. John Hall, was late from his round of visiting his patients around Stratford. Susannah had given dinner to their daughter, five year old Elizabeth, and sent her to bed, and she'd set the mutton joint in the kitchen, close enough to the fire to keep it warm. Jane, the kitchen wench, had gone to bed, also.

Blurred through the window, Susannah saw the square building of the Guild Chapel, stark and dark-looking, under the grey sky of late March. Just out of sight, out of the corner of her eye, to the left, she saw a glimmer of light, no doubt from the many tapers lighting up the hall of New Place and shining through the big windows onto the street.

When Susannah had been a child, she and her brother and sister had lived, with their mother, in a much more modest house, in Henley street, and made their own tapers of mutton grease. Her father had lived in London, and who knew how or in what conditions. The only joy the little house had known came with her father's sporadic visits, his stories of London, of the theater.

Now, Hall Croft, where Doctor Hall had brought Susannah when he married her was yet a different type of house—large and spacious, but sparsely ornamented. No painted cloths on the walls, such as had graced her parents' home. No colorful cushions. Only, everything cleaned and polished and right, beauty coming from a preservation of order and Spartan organization, rather than from that excess her father's house now displayed.

Susannah looked at the light, and thought why it must be so, that her father would only come back to Stratford when it was too late, when she'd already grown up fatherless. Now, he'd come and be the gentleman of New Place, and draw everyone's eyes in Stratford to his magnificence.

But Susannah remembered a childhood of much-mended skirts, of bare feet in cold weather, of scant food, of darkened rooms and, always, always, of longing for her father's visits, for his presence.

She took her hand to her hair, the hair so much like her father's had been—those thick, dark curls—only hers confined in a bun and worn beneath a proper bonnet, as befit a doctor's wife.

Her attire was also what a doctor's wife should wear—thick, clean, dark bodice and skirt over a high necked, long-sleeved shirt—and it molded her still-slender, spare figure gracefully enough, but modestly, bespeaking at once both her station in life and her husband's strong puritan beliefs.

Coming from a house where religion had never been underscored, Susannah had to learn her husband's ways, learn to accommodate to his manner of thinking. And perhaps that was right. Surely, that was why her father had encouraged her to marry doctor Hall, eight years her senior.

Her own parents were mismatched in age the other way, and where had that led? At least . . . Susannah wrinkled her brow at the pouring rain outside, at the deserted street. At least her mother didn't seem to mind his absences, but she was happy enough to have him near her now.

Just as Susannah was happy with John Hall. At that moment she caught a glimpse of him, the sound of hooves in the rainy street outside, and then of John dismounting by their garden gate up front, and John leading the horse around the side of the house to the stables and the stable boy who would attend to it.

Presently, John came in through the front door, into the dark-paneled hall of Hall Croft, where nothing but the well-made oak trunks and the two nicely crafted benches proclaimed the distinction of the inhabitants.

He removed his hat to reveal his short salt-and-pepper hair, that matched his chest-length beard, and hung from the wall peg the broad cloak that had protected his black suit.

Looking at Susannah, his blue eyes seemed to grow harder, more focused. This was ever the way, as he examined her, head to toe for a sign of the disarray, the madness, as John called it, that her family had carried and given to her. Drunk with her mother's milk, John said, that slovenliness, that natural untidiness.

Usually, after John inspected her that way, his eyes would soften, and he would say something kind. Not this time. Having looked Susannah over, head to toe, he turned in silence, and closed the door upon the pouring rain, before looking at her again and asking, "Have you dinner for me?"

Susannah, confused, scared, wondering what she could have done to displease, mentally reviewed her clothing. It was clean and new, and she'd put her hair back so that not the smallest corkscrew of curl escaped the dark bonnet. She didn't dare run her hands around the bonnet to verify its arrangement, and she didn't dare, likewise, examine her other clothing.

Instead, she bowed and said, "By the fire. Take you a seat by the table, and I'll serve you."

Serve him she did and sat down in the dining room, across the dark, polished oak table from John's patriarchal splendor. While he said grace upon his meal, he looked so like the gods depicted in the books her father probably shouldn't have shown her—it probably wasn't good for her soul—but had shown her, anyway, when she was just a child. Powerful, strong, protective. Like that god, it was with the thunderbolts.

He ate in silence, slicing his meat with his knife, and taking the ale when she refilled his cup.

He did not talk, until the food had been consumed and the table cleared, and then he sat, his broad, generous lips pursed in distaste.

"Have I done ought to displease?" Susannah asked, her voice trembling.

At that John sighed, and his eyes did soften for a moment. His strong, square hands clenched, one on the other, on the polished, dark oak table. "Your family," he said.

He was silent a while, while she waited for the word of condemnation or reprieve. She had been so lucky to marry John. Oh, her father had money, but no more. That a man like John should have condescended to marry the daughter of a lowly actor and play maker. And yet, sometimes she felt as if her family were like a sword hung upon her head, ever ready to fall and destroy her marriage.

"Your sister's unfortunate marriage," John said, the word echoing off Susannah's thoughts. "To a tavern keeper, and yet that isn't all . . ."

Susannah's heart clenched and she lowered her head to look at the pattern of the grain within the oak of the table. Judith's marriage had been a point of contention for the two weeks since Judith had taken the liberty of marrying a tavern keeper seven years her junior and marrying him during Lent with no special dispensation. Thomas, Judith's new husband, had got excommunicated for it, and would have had to fulfill painful penance indeed, safe his new father-in-law had intervened and paid a heavy fine on his behalf.

Such it always was, of course. Since Hamnet, the favored son, had died at eleven, Judith, his twin, had stepped into the void and received all of the affection. While Susannah, well-behaved Susannah got very little attention from her father, very little praise for her pains—as much, indeed, as the prodigal's brother had ever got from his stern father.

If Susannah had run off and married a tavern keeper, she'd have been disowned faster than thought could turn upon the word.

She saw John look at her clenched hands, and shook her head, then raised properly penitent eyes to her husband. "Is there worse?" she asked. "About my poor sister and her unfortunate match?" Susannah herself had avoided going out into the market for these two weeks, and her stern look had stopped any gossip on the serving wench's lips.

John nodded. "There's the babe."

"The babe?" Had Judith delivered herself of a babe only two weeks after marriage? Susannah felt her cheeks color. Well she knew that she, herself, had been born only five months after her parents marriage. Well she knew what was on John's mind, even when he didn't mention it. But must Judith bring it home to her, now, the shame of her birth? She stared at John feeling as if the house, with its broad architrave, its dark paneled walls, the clean rushes on the floor, the broad hearths, as if all of it might come crashing down around her head, any moment.

"Margaret Wheeler's babe. The poor wretch died giving birth to it, and she accused your new brother in law, Thomas, as the father."

"Oh," Susannah said, unable to say more. She felt cold, polluted. There had never been such dealings in the Hall family. Would John set her aside as unworthy, tainted with her sister's crime?

Susannah looked at John's blue eyes, his salt-and-pepper hair, his well-trimmed beard, his strong features. She didn't think she could bear it, if he left her.

"Well . . . Well . . ." John seemed to soften at her true horror. "Don't distress yourself with it, good wife. Your father is, even as we speak, changing his will, so that she will not get the equal portion of yours, rather a meager one. And his plate, that should have been hers, shall go to our Elizabeth." He looked up, his gaze disturbed. "Your father is not an ill man, despite his past sins. His very prosperity is a sign of God's favor, and God doesn't favor the wicked. But as for Judith . . . It's just that I find it hard, sometimes, to see the wicked prosper like the green bay tree."

Susannah nodded, feeling truly grateful for John's compassion and understanding.

But when she retired to her room, upstairs, John did not visit her, as she half expected.

He said something about being tired, and the cold, hard rain outside and left her alone, in her narrow bed, listening to the rain falling on the thatch and thinking, thinking.

At least her parents had shared one room. When her father came from London, he shared her mother's bed. Sometimes Susannah would hear them whisper and laugh late into the night.

But John said it wasn't seemly that he should share her bed year around, even through her monthly emissions. John was right. Order and proper behavior were needed, if she didn't want to recreate the riotous ways of her own family.

In the morning Susannah felt tired and barely got up in time to serve John his breakfast ale and mutton, and to accompany him to his store room, to help pack the bag with the remedies needed for the day's round of patients.

This was a work she'd gotten used to, and in which John used her familiarity with reading and the Latin that her father had made her learn. Though he always told her this knowledge ill befitted her sex and made her sign documents with her mark, yet her knowledge came in useful for reading labels of the many jars that—filled with oddly colored potions—lined the walls of his study.

"I'll need a small flask of that cough mixture—the green one there—for widow Tremly. And some of that Galene, from that jar there—No, not that one," he yelled, with unaccustomed alarm, as Susannah reached for a jar filled with yellow lumps in a greasy residue. "That's phosphorus," he said, more calmly, as she withdrew her hand, "and truly good for nothing but to poison rats when the vermin runs riot. Look you well on the label and give me the Galene from that—Yes, that jar."

Susannah read the label on the phosphorus, anyway, curious. It was soluble in grease and the symptoms the same as those that came upon elderly who caught a chill—an embarrassment of walk and speech, a looseness of the bowels, and death shortly after.

Thus they worked, till John left, with his full bag and his mind also full of prescriptions and decisions and ideas.

As for Susannah, having seen that Elizabeth was seated and practicing her sewing upon a piece of cloth under Jane's supervision, she put her cloak on and ventured forth, into the rain, the scant space along the road to her parents' house next door.

Her mother was resting, so one of the serving wenches told her, when Susannah entered the well-appointed parlor crowded with silken throws and damask pillows, but her father sat in the small room at the back, the one that overlooked the garden.

Susannah thought it made for sad contemplation, for such a day, but went to the back and there she found him, indeed, gazing out at the rain and the large tree he had planted so many years ago, when he'd bought the house and before he'd started to renovate it, much less had moved into it.

Every time she saw her father, Susannah felt a shock for in her mind he was still the younger man who came from London, in clothes unseen in the neighborhood, with his dark curls and his shining dark eyes, the man with the easy jest and the ready story.

This man was old, his hair almost completely white and so receded that the front part of his head was left uncovered. He sat on a chair in this small room, and, even so, leaned forward on his cane. Nearby him stood a brazier—a metal bucket full of glowing coals—that tried in vain to infuse heat into the aged body.

He looked up a little, at Susannah's entry, but soon his gaze returned to the falling rain outside.

"Father," Susannah said.

He looked at her, then, out of the corner of his eye, but only for a moment. "How fare you, daughter? Well?"

Susannah sighed. "My sister, father. How could she?"

Her sigh was echoed by her father, "Your poor sister, how she must suffer."

"She? She suffer?" Susannah asked. "How about what she makes us suffer, marrying against your will,

that creature . . ." She arrested her voice which had climbed to the shrewish tones she remembered hearing from her mother when she was very young. "You should never more permit her to your presence. Never allow her name spoken near you."

This time the once-dark, once-laughing eyes turned fully to give her the benefit of his still-shrewd gaze. "Why daughter? At your husband's council, haven't I already cut her of her portion? Why this further injury?"

"Because," Susannah felt her hands tighten on the dark stuff of her skirt. At John's council, her father said. At John's council. That meant that as soon as his rage passed, he would go over the will yet again and give Judith a bigger portion once more, as if she hadn't done anything, as if her sin shouldn't be punished. "Because she must know she did wrong. She must know you disapprove. You must show her you have authority."

"Ah. Authority. The poor woman. She's punished enough. I only hope her Tom makes her a decent enough husband when all is said and done. She's a sweet girl, you know. Always was a loving child." He looked at the rain again, and was silent for so long that Susannah thought he must have fallen asleep. But then he spoke, as if out of a dream, "Her voice was ever soft, an excellent thing in a woman."

It took Susannah a few moments to realize that this was a quotation from one of her father's plays—those tawdry plays that he'd made and that, in London, had led who knew how many to ruin? And he'd quote it now? And about Judith?

The wicked did indeed prosper like the green bay tree.

Flinging out of the house, Susannah made it back to her own house, where she went about her daily chores—cleaning and mending and cooking—with the quiet manner she always had. Inside, she seethed. Sentences from the Bible that John was wont to read to her in the evening, came to her mind.

Sweeping up the rushes from the kitchen floor, Susannah thought *I gave her space to repent of her fornication and she repented not.*

Judith would never repent, and, in time, her father would forgive her, and, more like than not, now that Judith was married she'd get New Place, and Susannah would have to watch it light up every night with tapers and the sound of parties. She'd have to watch Judith enjoy her evil marriage, her lewd fornication.

And yet Susannah's father did nothing. As ever, Judith was his favorite.

Susannah strewed new rushes about.

His favorite ever, and nothing to it, she thought, still, much later, as she set the table. And why should Judith not be his favorite? Were not both of them sinners? He had written his sinful plays and brought evil upon London and the minds of men. And Judith gave scandal onto the community.

Susannah dressed her daughter and combed her afresh to receive her father and for dinner. And she thought, were not the wages of sin death?

John came in brimming with good cheer, though not the good cheer that come from alcohol such as sinners consumed. He talked much to Elizabeth and Susannah, both, about his cases and the treatment thereof, then, in the middle of it paused, "I hear you disturbed your father today, Susannah."

"I?" Susannah said. Called out of her thoughts, she could only think that John would disapprove. For some reason John had always liked Susannah's father and stood by the old reprobate. He viewed his father in law's riches as a sign of God's favor and believed that obeying the old man would not taint his soul. If Susannah gave it time enough her father would surely turn John from his unswerving fidelity to the word.

"Oh, I know you probably didn't mean it," John said. "But he'd like to make his peace with you. He'll be coming by shortly, after his own supper. He's on his way to the Bear, to meet with Ben Jonson who's come from London. They'll be working on a new play together. Make you your peace with him before he goes. You know he's likely to be late and you to be abed long before he returns home."

Her peace with him. And yet, he'd be going to the tavern and drinking with his old play maker friends, and getting soused and rowdy and shameful. The old reprobate, who'd never loved Susannah.

She composed her face, in meek obedience and said, "I will try." If she hurried she could make it to the study without John's noticing. The phosphorus was soluble in grease, and her father was much too fond of her treacle cakes, which were greasy enough. She'd give him one, as a token of her good will.

And, since the symptoms would seem natural, everyone would say that William Shakespeare had tarried too long at the Bear, with his friend Ben Jonson, and drunk too much, and had died of his excesses.

Another George

I've always been fascinated by the idea of hidden events, of something going on just beyond the veil of mundane reality. Two forms of this are particularly appealing to me: the semi-immortal among us and the shape-changer. This story unites them both in an almost too-mundane setting in which extraordinary things are about to happen.

He'd slithered through snow and walked under scorching sunshine, minding neither the cold nor the heat. He'd crept on his belly through tropical forests, he'd climbed snow-capped mountains, he'd crawled through deserts.

He'd caught late night flights and early morning ones. When he couldn't find a plane, he'd clutched his clothes in an immense clawed fist, spread his leathery wings to the sky, and flown himself.

For days on end he'd forgotten to eat, only to fall, at last, ravenous, on whatever prey offered, animal or human, living or dead. It hadn't mattered which.

He'd made it. He'd arrived.

The drive that had impelled him thither receded, wave on wave, like a retreating tide.

Like a man wakening in a strange bed, George Drake looked around and took stock. He sat at the table of a commonplace tourist-trap bar, in a commonplace coastal town.

Men, sitting one to a table, populated this dimly lit bar. The only girl—young and beautiful—danced under the strobe light on the dance floor.

The hair at the back of George's neck rose in fear. He knew this set-up much too well, and he felt too small and tired for this.

A waiter, a spare middle-aged man, with brown hair and small features, wove through the tables from the bar, to clean George's table with a grayish rag.

Not enough meat on those bones for a decent meal, George thought, then shook his head, blinked, looked at the waiter again. Not food. Not prey. Human. A human amid humans. "Whiskey," George told the waiter. "Whiskey, please. Straight." His voice hissed and boomed like an instrument too long unused.

The man jumped. A tick pulled his left eyelid. "A . . .?"

George cleared his throat. He knew that the man couldn't possibly be intimidated by him as he looked now. In his human form, George was small and dark, with the Mediterranean features that must have been his father's, and green eyes like his mother's. He could have been a little Greek merchant, the owner of a corner grocery store or restaurant. The idea made him smile a little, as men smile at dreams they can't own. "A whiskey," he said.

Dropping his rag on the edge of the table, the waiter scurried away, as if his back brain felt something, knew something that his conscious brain willfully ignored.

George covered his face with his hands. If he had enough will power, he too would scurry away. The waiter's behavior made perfect sense for any simian whose instincts told him something was wrong, though his reason could think of no danger.

Half simian himself, George could feel the same panic surge through him, tightening his heart, closing his throat. But he'd been called here, and the magnet that had pulled him remained, strong. He looked at the dancing girl and shivered.

Unlike the waiter, George knew what he feared and his reason concurred with his instinctive panic. He feared death.

The death he'd hastened here to meet.

George counted the men that sat, each at his own table. Twenty. He groaned. Far too many of them, running the gamut of the types of mankind: Scandinavian giants, small oriental men, dark towering colossi. All of them stared through red-rimmed eyes at the female. All were bigger than George. And they'd be stronger too, since they were, presumably, full drake.

George had no chance. No chance at all to win this game. Not that it mattered. The outcome would be death, win or lose.

The female danced beneath the strobe light, seeming oblivious to them all.

She swayed hypnotically, her perfect figure encased in a tight silver sheath dress. Her long golden hair glistened with a metallic shimmer.

Staring at her, made George's head spin. A hungry need that he'd never known writhed to life in his belly. He clutched the edge of the table, glad of harsh wood against his palm. No. He wouldn't do it. He wouldn't fight for the female. Yet, he felt his lips pull back in a teeth-baring snarl. The drake wanted to do battle and conquer.

The waiter glided across the bar, carrying glasses on a tray, and slid a condensation-dewed glass onto George's table.

George breathed deeply, forced his lips down, made his mouth close.

The man looked even paler than he had before, though that should have been impossible. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed.

On an impulse born of empathy, of his own fear pulling his lips tight and making his hair stand on end, George pulled a handful of coins from his belt pouch, threw them on the man's tray. "Go home." His voice ground out with the ominous sound of gravel sliding down a ravine, the sound of claws scraping stone.

The man's mouth worked, opening and closing. "My—My job." His mouth closed with a snapping sound.

George shrugged. Even through his all too human empathy with the man, the sneering disdain of the drake came through. They were foolish, these apes, bound by stupid rules and codes of conduct that came not from the belly—like those of the drakes—but from the head. "Those coins are gold," he said. "And many collectors would give their eyeteeth for them. Go home." He looked away from the man, barely conscious that he still stood there, by his table, looking stunned.

George's gaze followed a blond barbarian type who'd got up from one of the tables and crossed the bar to stand at the edge of the dance floor, watching the dancing girl. The first challenge.

Seconds stretched into eternity.

The girl danced, as if she didn't know the ritual she'd initiated, the challenge she'd called.

From a table near the dance floor, a short oriental man in a jade-green business suit stood up. The two males looked at each other, nodded. Together, they walked out.

The waiter whimpered.

George drank his whiskey, savoring the caustic burn down his throat. The fights had begun. The fights and the madness. He did not want this. He wanted to be left alone to live his life.

From outside came a sound of wings, a sound of rushing, a heavy thud that shook the bar.

The waiter put his tray down on George's table and, clutching the handful of gold coins, and scurried away, knitting himself with the wall.

Soft happiness suffused the female's features.

The oriental man came back in, smelling of sulfur. He walked confidently to the edge of the dance floor.

Another man stood up. They glared at each other with open enmity.

The waiter keened and ran for the door.

The oriental man and his new challenger headed for the door, too, close behind the waiter, but at a more leisurely, stately pace.

George closed his eyes, gripped his glass tightly, tried to force drink past his tightened throat.

Images of his mother's dancing by candlelight in the sacred precinct of her temple, mingled with the image of this girl dancing beneath the strobe light.

In the untold centuries of his childhood, George had watched his mother lure lover after lover to his death.

Now, he, himself, had been lured, betrayed by a code ingrained in his loins; pulled by a need woven into his genes.

Fear and excitement coursed through him; dread and heat played his nerves like skilled fingertips drumming music out of a fine harp. His throat twisted and worked, seeking to shape a song the world hadn't heard for millennia.

If he could still the madness of his own desire, perhaps he could wander off into the night, unnoticed, like the waiter. He closed his eyes and groped in his mind for a memory of a safe time.

George remembered the blind worm he'd once been; the fledgling who had slumbered beneath the temple's floorboards, receiving tidbits from whatever his mother savaged—princes in their silk wrappings, merchants redolent of spices, priests perfumed with incense and fire.

He could almost feel the mattress of rubies, diamonds and coins of that first nest. But not quite. Reality pressed him on all sides. The metal chair held his body at an uncomfortable angle. The wood of the table felt too warm against his hands. He heard the soft music playing over the sound system of the bar, the steps of men coming and going. He knew that the challenges went on. From outside came the sounds of giant wings, the shaking booms of sudden falls.

He opened his eyes

Only the small oriental man in the jade green suit remained.

With his back to the girl, he stared at George. From beneath his heavy eyelids, his eyes shone an incongruous green.

Fear and excitement brought George upright. Hot in his belly, cold in his heart, he stood up to take the challenge.

He glanced at the girl, then back at the other male.

At this point, the female was irrelevant. What mattered was the fight and the surge of power and blood in your mouth, and strength in your minds. What mattered was siring the new generation.

This wasn't love; not human love. He'd longed for love, once.

Love, as humans knew it, with lifelong companionship. He'd been quite young, then, yet he still remembered his Elisha, his bride, dead centuries ago, killed by the drake who'd emerged from George and taken her sacrifice in his own way.

He'd tried love the human way, but drakes could not love humans.

The oriental man nodded to George.

George nodded back.

Outside, the warm air stank of burning flesh and scorched hair, mixed with briny sea and damp sand.

Waves whispered against the soft shore. Far in the horizon myriad lights glowed. Closer, giant, malformed corpses burned on the sand, their flickering light sputtering between orange and blue.

Moloch. The Phoenician word for burnt offering came unbidden to George's tongue. He'd first learnt human speech back in Tyre, and it still felt more true to his tongue than any other words it had shaped it the endless centuries since.

George's foe stopped and bowed, a neat bow. He undressed, folding each piece of clothing and setting

it down on the sand.

The smell, nerves and fear, spun George's stomach into a tight knot of nausea. Smoky air stung his nostrils and burned his lungs.

He didn't care about his suit or his appearance after the fight. His preparations were more urgent. He must change; he knew that. He must summon the drake. Not being fully drake, he couldn't simply command the transformation, but he must woo it, tempting it to him, like a distant lover.

He clenched his fists and tried to feel the surge of emotion that would trigger the shift.

But his muscles hurt from their long journey and his mind felt detached, much too human, strangely amused by this alien game of lust and death.

His opponent finished rolling his socks into a neat ball, and setting them on the sand, atop his patent leather shoes.

George tried to force his heart to beat faster, longed for the pulse of madness in his blood. Nothing happened. He willed his muscles to writhe and twist. They did not respond.

A slow panic, a useless horror paralyzed him.

As from a long distance, he watched as his opponent started coughing; his body writhed and twisted and changed.

George would die now. His centuries-long journey would end here, on this beach. His body would be only one more bundle of burning flesh on the sand.

His adversary's face twisted into a long, golden muzzle; his eyes flashed jade-green under their heavy lids; his arms distorted into heavy paws. Wings grew on his back as he tripled in size and essayed a lumbering leap on the verge of flight.

He was larger than George expected. Which explained how he managed to kill all the others. The true advantage in dragon fights was the difference between the human form and the dragon form. Only the spacing between atoms changed in the transforming, but the mass remained the same. A small man who became a large dragon would weigh less and therefore have the advantage of agility in aerial combat.

George had never compared himself to other dragons. He did not know how his size measured up. All his life, he'd been too busy avoiding drakes. His knowledge of them was only that which came through

the flesh, not the brain—the blurred sort of knowledge that filtered, imperfect and fractured, from his sinews into unformed thoughts.

The newly formed dragon must have thought that George didn't change because he was afraid. He gloated with triumph. In lumbering steps, half-man, half-beast, now biped, now four-legged, he advanced on George.

He's not even going to use fire, George thought. Why use fire on the halfling, the half-human one? I'll live as nothing but a pitiful joke in the racial memory of my people. He took a step back, another, trying to stop himself from running. If George ran, he would be seized. If George ran he would be rent limb from limb by the drake's diamond claws.

He should never have lived. His mother had told him so. Centuries ago, she'd let him know that he should have been killed at birth. Half human, half drake, he lived as an abomination to both races. But it had pleased his mother to let George live. As what? Her joke on the world?

In his memory, George heard his mother's silvery laughter.

His belly twisted, in mingled revulsion and need.

Staring at the maddened drake advancing on him, George wondered for the first time whether his mother had lured his human father with drake magic to her deadly embraces. Or had he come obediently in cold-blooded sobriety led by his family to the temple to become a victim to the sacrifice, great Ashtoreth's ephemeral lover?

George knew nothing of him, except his end. However he'd arrived, he had become a Moloch, a burnt offering.

George cringed and reared.

Something awoke in him and uncoiled. A blind emotion, half-rage, half-pity, flooded his mind at the thought of that human father he'd never known, who'd been killed for the pleasure of the drake.

He was his father's son and he would not be killed.

Cough shook him and pain ran through him like an electrical shock. His hands and arms spasmed. Bone grated on bone, as the bones changed shape. Muscle twisted and augmented and wrested from its own substance the alien. Wings grew from his back and spread, a lacework of blood vessels and intricately knotted skin and nerves.

George grew. And grew.

George's opponent backed up, one step, two, his gloating dance cut short.

The smaller golden dragon stepped back, abashed. Like a cornered cat, it hissed and spit. It hunched into itself seeking to appear bigger. It snarled impotent threats at its larger foe.

George advanced, preparing to fire.

The golden dragon lifted off, at a panicky tilted angle. He flew above George, darting tongues of flame downward.

Still shocked at finding himself at an advantage, George flapped his wings. Fistfuls of sand, caught in his claws, rose with him as he pursued his opponent.

He flamed once, and again. Red flame engulfed the golden dragon.

It screamed and fell from the sky; a flaming meteor.

Like Prometheus, George thought.

Human again, George sat on the ground, naked, trembling, sweat-soaked, cold.

His opponent's body burned, near the corpses of those he had defeated.

Sulfurous smoke stung George's nose. He looked at the clothes the man-dragon had so carefully folded before the fight. He looked down at his own naked body.

He'd survived the fight, but no male survived the mating. He willed his legs to run. They didn't obey. Drakes didn't run from their females. They presented themselves to the slaughter as meekly as the humans offered drakes sacrifice.

The awareness of her presence—smelled and felt and sensed—enveloped him.

She pulled him to her as inexorably as though she had him bound hand and foot with unbreakable chains.

No humans remained inside the bar.

No male drakes, either.

Only the girl who stood under the strobe light, staring expectantly at the door. When she saw George, she smiled. "I was hoping you'd be the one left," she said as she took his arm.

He shrugged. It was polite of her to lie. His was a polite executioner.

George escorted her outside.

She breathed in the sulfurous smoke. "Beautiful night, isn't it?" she asked.

George nodded.

Overhead, straggling bits of cloud veiled moon and stars.

These were the last clouds, the last stars George would ever see. He'd seen both stars and clouds for the first time from the tower of his mother's temple. Strange to human form then, he'd felt fragile and ridiculous and his silk robes had scratched his skin.

His mother had looked splendid in pure white silk, her black hair loose down her back.

"Those lights," he'd asked her. "Those lights there, what are they?"

And he remembered his mother's laughing voice as she answered, "Why, the mating fires, cub. The mating fires of the divine dragons, lit in the moment of passion, when the female flames the male, that only her progeny might live."

George closed his eyes and shook his head.

His beautiful, capricious mother had died when Alexander took Tyre. Her temple had been torn from its foundations. Scared into worm form, she'd been slain and thrown into the sea by Alexander who claimed to be half-serpent himself, and probably was.

Long before that, she'd sent George from her, to meet his destiny in the world of men. Over the

centuries he'd been sailor and soldier, dancer and teacher, priest and slave. Finally, he'd run from both humans and drakes and hid in the unpeopled wastes, where he could be himself.

Now, he'd die.

He clutched his companion's arm. Her skin felt colder than his, slick as finely woven satin.

This gilded female would flame him after he'd sired a new litter of dragons.

"Sit here," she said. "And rest a while. And you'll tell me of yourself, that I might tell the cubs about their father." She sat on the sand, leaned against the cliff.

"There's not much to tell," he said. "I was born in Tyre in Phoenicia, so long ago that I can't tell you the date."

She raised arched eyebrows in questioning surprise. "One of the ancient ones?" Her voice was all breath and awe. "One of the worshiped ones?"

He shook his head, sighed. "No. I was born at the twilight of gods, when men grew ill-disposed to worshipping us. There were too many of us by then, too few of them. Human sacrifice . . . it didn't happen that often. But my mother had a temple. Baalat, they called her."

The golden haired girl-dragon laughed. Her long-nail scraped his bare arm and slid along it, bleeding pain and an odd excitement from every pore. "There will be gods again." Her voice slid, honeyed, like silk upon velvet. "From you and I, there will be gods. New gods for humanity to worship in their temples. We'll usher in a new era."

George closed his eyes. "There are too many of us," he said.

She laughed again. "No," she said. "There are too many of them. They will be all too willing to sacrifice their fellows and mates. We're the last ones. Our cubs will be the only drakes in the world and all humans their herd."

"The only?"

She nodded. "The only. All of those were the only ones left of the males." She made a sweeping gesture towards the strewn corpses. "In all the world."

"But you're only supposed to summon the males in your province," he said. "You're only supposed" He'd been halfway across the world, he remembered, living the life of a hermit in a sparsely populated forest. She'd called him, through snow and scorching sun. That meant"—You're the only female?" he asked. "The only female left on Earth?"

She smiled. "We grew so few," she said, "that mating calls became difficult. Our females, born of those weakened matings, didn't have the power to summon males anymore. We dwindled. But I am one of the ancient ones. I went to sleep when Carthage burned, at Roman hands. I felt . . . had a premonition, so I hid. I've slept long beneath the sand of the desert. I knew one day I would be the only one left to keep our race alive. And I am. And I was powerful enough to call all of you, from all the Earth."

A wind started blowing from the East, sweeping the ragged remnants of cloud ahead of it, leaving nothing but the bright pinpoints of stars against the deep, dark sky. It scattered sand over the corpses.

The only female, he thought, as her gilded claws touched him here and there, drawing now blood, now pleasure, in caresses that ignited his body without disturbing his mind's ordered thought. The only female.

And George was the last male.

There might be just enough humans per dragon that humans would not resent them but worship them and set them up in temples, in the old way. They'd bring them victims to become burnt offerings to the drake's majesty.

His children would live in splendor.

Yet, George squirmed uncomfortably. His mother had told him that drakes had come from elsewhere. They were aliens who could change their shape and mingle with the ruling species of the worlds they colonized.

An alien species, they had been.

An alien species they remained.

They could only survive by deceit and murder, by greed and power, by making themselves the rulers of a civilization they hadn't built.

They didn't belong to Earth.

The caresses of the female taunted George into transformation. Spasmodic cough shook him. His body

changed.

His mind worked at fever pitch.

Maybe it was all for the best. The drakes were cunning. Maybe this time they would take good care of their human livestock. Maybe they'd even guide it into space travel, take it to the stars, to meet the celestial dragons George's mother had dreamed of.

"We're the last ones left, you know? From all the worlds and all the stars," the female said. She stood, in human form, next to his jade-green girth. Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"How do you know?" he asked, his voice was no longer human, but the sounds only another drake would understand.

"Because I am an *ancient* one. An ancient, ancient one." She smiled, the smile of the serpent bent on temptation. "I came here, with the last party of drakes, from the stars. We were the last ones left there." Her naked foot kicked derisively at the sand. "We brought civilization to this mud-ball. We dragged these pitiful apes up from their caves. They've been sorely remiss in their gratitude recently. But all that will change."

Even as she pronounced the last word, she metamorphosed. Her arms stretched till they became forepaws attached to a long, sinuous, silvery body that shone wetly under the moonlight.

She was beautiful. More beautiful, thought that part of George that was still George, than any human. She was a primordial female, a creature of stars and sky and elemental sea; the end of the beginning, the seed of the end.

She stretched her head, opened her mouth. From the sharp-fanged cavern a sound emerged that was not laughter and yet had the same feel as her laughter.

The challenge.

She flew up into the sky, straight up, laughing her drake laughter.

He flew after her, pulled by invisible strings. Heavier, sturdier, he flew slower. Yet, he'd catch her in the end, because she wished to be caught.

She gave him a run. Their sparkling bodies wove shining lines in the sky. Their afterimages drew the twenty secret symbols of the alphabet of Mu, the sacred alpha of lost Atlantis.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, he caught her. Their bodies pressed together, metallic scales against metallic scales, his foreclaws holding her still, their wings flapping in unison, to keep their combined weight aloft.

Pleasure blotted out his thoughts, spread through his nerves, tingled in his skin, inflamed his brain.

There was only the serpent and the serpent's joy, as the female's quiescent body allowed itself to be guided by his.

The sky turned the opaline color that precedes dawn.

His dream lasted until he heard her dragon-challenge and felt her pulling away from him.

Now they'd descend separately to the sandy beach that seemed so far below. On the way down she'd flame him. She'd gorge on his remains and on whatever humans she could catch, until—bloated and satiated—she'd crawl into some cave to spawn the litter that would one day rule the world.

George started opening his claws, ready to accept his fate and search Elisha's ghost in whatever Hades awaited dragons and their victims. He'd die like Elisha who'd been his bride and died a sacrifice to his dragon instincts.

But even as his heart gave up, his reason awakened.

Dragons had destroyed themselves before, in the stars. Despite the many worlds they'd lived in, they'd come to an end. How, but through their own voraciousness? And how many species had they killed in their wasteful savaging?

All for nothing.

Even on Earth, they'd been uncontrolled devourers and brought themselves to the brink of extinction. They'd do it again. They'd ride mankind to its grave.

If he tightened his claws

She was a quarter his weight

If he let his fangs sink into that sinuous silver neck

The thoughts never came to their logical conclusion because the worm in him twisted in revulsion at each of them.

Sacrilege, his instinct screamed. Sacrilege. It can't be done. It shouldn't be done. If you

But the human George had already lowered the drake's powerful jade head.

He felt his jaws clamp on her silver neck.

She struggled for only a second.

George tasted the bright poison of her blood burning a path down his throat, scorching him alive as he swallowed.

Tasting his own death, George let the inert weight of the female pull his dazed body downwards into the sea

Above, the bright stars glared in an indifferent sky. Below, the lights of the city twinkled paler and paler as the sun rose. To the west, the undisturbed sea stretched like molten silver.

Songs

I went to a workshop in the Oregon coast. One of the assignments was to write, in twenty four hours, a ghost story set in a particular room of a particular hotel assigned to us. I'd never written a story under that kind of deadline, with no time to think or research, and I felt as if I were staring down an abyss from which no idea emerged. Then I noticed the antique radio in the room. Phil and Nick came to life at that moment. Of all my characters they remain—no pun intended—two of the most haunting.

Phil rode the accelerator the two hours from Portland airport to the coast, fuming on single lane stretches behind eighteen wheelers, and speeding up around them as soon as opportunity offered.

He must find Nick; he must talk to Nick; he must explain.

The impossibly tall trees clustered together on either side of the road, forming a green tunnel that enclosed the road on either side, reinforcing Phil's impression that there was no turning back, no turning around. He was on a one-way road back to the past.

Twenty years back.

He lit one cigarette from the end of the other, the nicotine bitter on his tongue, soothing in his bloodstream. Clouds of smoke filled the small rental car.

Tobacco smoke on Phil's nostrils masked the chemical smell exuding from his every pore. Take enough medicine and you'll start smelling like a pharmacy.

It had been hell refraining from smoking all the way from Denver, in the plane.

Damn, oh, damn, they should have flights for the dying only; for those beyond risk of illness from passive smoke—great flocks of moribund, shuttled through the sky in a cloud of bitter, soothing smoke.

Cyanide or hemlock, sir? Will that be all?

If only it were that simple.

He chuckled, deep in his throat.

If that could be all.

To close one's eyes and end it all.

He longed for that nothingness like a tired child longed for bed after a long day.

If only he could be sure of that rest, that nothingness, he wouldn't submit to this nonsense of drug cocktails and the indignity of losing his senses and faculties one by one, of watching old age arrive prematurely and install itself in every mirror.

He could stand not seeing his nephew and niece grow up. He'd come to accept that chances were one-year-old Stacy would become a woman with no memory of him. Ian would learn baseball from someone else. It wasn't like his sister would ever mention him to the kids now. Not now.

But what if consciousness and memory subsisted after death?

He lit another cigarette and pushed the car, faster, faster, through the asphalt-paved tunnel amid towering trees.

His dreams, if dreams there were after death, would be of Nick. Even Nick's name, after all these years, still brought a reaction. Nick, Nicky, Nicholas Stevelanos. His heart went out to meet the syllables full of joy and winced away from them like a guilty child.

Giving up Nick had been Phil's greatest mistake ever. Abandoning Nick in that motel room, to face the cold morning alone, had been Phil's most egregious crime.

The one he didn't want to answer for eternally.

So now Phil would go back. He sucked in the bitter smoke, pressed the gas pedal and made himself think of finding Nick as a sure thing. He'd go back to the motel and Nick would be where Phil had left him twenty years ago.

Twenty years.

They'd been only twenty two. They'd just finished college. That last summer together, after four years as Nick's roommate—as Nick's lover—Phil had told himself over and over that he wasn't really gay; that he just happened to really like Nick; that anyone would like Nick.

At the threshold of adulthood, Phil couldn't bear the thought of telling his large Italian family that he was gay, that he had a lover, that they would be living together. Phil had run from Nick to avoid facing up to the family; to avoid facing up to the world.

Like it had helped. Like Phil's family hadn't found out. Like he hadn't ended up being shunned and given the cold shoulder anyway. By everyone except Tessie, his sister, who lived in Denver.

Even Tessie had turned remote and distant a year ago when he told her he'd tested HIV positive. She'd said something or other about not knowing he was promiscuous. As though he'd caught it from being promiscuous and not from sweet talking I'd-never-want-anyone-but-you Mike.

Though maybe Mike had a point when he'd said that Phil had been unfaithful first, that Phil had always closed his eyes and thought of Nick.

Phil made a face at his memory of the final argument with Mike, as he passed an eighteen wheeler.

Mike could never compare to Nick. Nick who had had the voice of an angel the mind of a guiltless imp. Nick, with his large black eyes, his pointed little chin and his just-a-little-too-long fur-fine black hair always disarrayed around his pale-skinned face.

That face would have been at home in an Elizabethan portrait, painted on a board, in an old fashioned inn, the background all black and only Nick's face staring out.

Only no portrait could capture Nick's voice. Nick's strong, clear voice that could lend depth to the most trivial of songs.

Phil had tried to find Nick, off and on, through the last twenty years. When regret shook him, when another relationship collapsed, Phil hired detectives to find Nick.

The detectives had traced Nick's family. No clues there. His parents, once solid denizens of Akron, Ohio, had divorced. His father had moved to Italy, or maybe France. No one seemed to know for sure. His mother had dropped off the face of the Earth. Nick's older sister had married an Australian and moved across the globe. Letters addressed to her came back unopened.

So it had come down to Phil personally looking for Nick. And he was looking for Nick where he'd left him; in the same place where they had parted. As though Nick were a piece of clothing Phil had misplaced or a book he'd left half-read on the kitchen table, face down, waiting to be picked up and resumed.

The arrogance of his action burned clear into Phil's mind, as he turned off the highway and up the little curving ridge towards Gateways motel.

It was where it should be and, thank God, didn't look so different. Someone had got the brilliant idea of painting the boxy structure white with a blue trim, and of sprinkling little Swedish folk-couple motifs all around. A little picket fence encircled the handkerchief-size garden. Twenty years ago, the house had been green, and the garden an overgrown patch.

Phil got out of the car, pulling his collar up against the chill wind from the sea. The houses around the motel looked as he remembered them: modest fifties cubes in Earth tones. Gold-port was not your most fashionable seaside resort.

His heart beat fast, in anticipation, though he couldn't say what he anticipated, not even to himself, without laughing.

Nick couldn't be inside this shabby motel, waiting for Phil. And yet, Phil's heart beat near his throat.

Okay, Nick, okay, last chance, he thought. He threw his cigarette butt down, stepped on it. Last chance to see me still looking more or less as you knew me. Last chance to see me grovel and beg your forgiveness. Last chance to hear me tell you I was an idiot and I should never have left. Last chance, Nicky. Oh, please, give me a last chance.

A blonde woman, walking her dog, shot Phil an odd look. He forced a smile in her direction and hurried down narrow cement steps into the motel.

The motel lobby looked just as Phil remembered—maybe large enough to hold three thin people. Mildew stained the wooden wall paneling. The receptionist's desk was a narrow, waist-high table. It all smelled of stale crackers, though no crackers were in sight.

A cheerful, matronly blonde smiled at him from behind the desk. "You'd be Mr. Cesari?" she asked. "Phillip Cesari?"

Phil nodded.

"I'm Joanna. I'm the manager here." She reached under the desk for a key, handed it to him. "Room three, right? Well, they're actually efficiencies, with a little kitchen, you know? Glad you requested it in advance, because normally it would be booked, with the weekend coming up." She pointed him out of the office. "It's out that door to your left as you go, down the sidewalk, and through the gate in the picket fence. Then straight ahead, down the five steps. If you find anything wrong, let me know."

Phil followed her instructions. Out and down to the left and through the garden gate, to a patio door that his key opened.

Inside the room, memories returned. Phil's mind showed him the suite as it had been superimposed on the suite as it now was. The violently green shag pile carpeting peeked through the ecru Berber of the nineties. The wide, wide brown couch trembled like a double exposure over today's three prim blue and pink armchairs.

On the couch, Nick reclined and smiled his cat smile. There was a pad of paper on his knees. He would be writing a song. Nick's long hand moved over the paper, holding the pen; Nick's black eyes stared straight into Phil's.

Phil stared and smiled at Nick, then swallowed, shook his head. Nothing there. His memory played tricks on him.

The living room smelled musty. The only pieces of furniture Phil remembered was the brown Formica dining room table and the four metallic chairs clustered around it. They sat in front of the counter that divided the kitchenette from the living room.

The small kitchenette had been painted white and decorated in blue Swedish motifs.

Incongruous for an Oregon coast motel. Or maybe not.

Phil knew little of the region and its ethnic composition. Twenty years ago, he and Nicky had come from Ohio for a month, because Nick's parents had paid for them to take a vacation. Twenty years ago, neither Nick nor Phil had been interested in anthropological studies.

Phil felt a vague discontent.

In the bedroom that formed a short leg of an L off the living room the four poster bed had endured a coat of pastel pink paint, but it was the same bed Phil remembered in its natural pine state. Teddy bears adorned the top of the built-in dresser, the built-in vanity and the bedside table. Phil dropped his suitcase on the bed and frowned.

He'd thought

Back in the living room, Phil looked around again, as if expecting Nick to materialize out of the pale yellow walls.

An old radio cabinet just inside the door called Phil's gaze. It was narrow and its domed top stood waist high. Its ivory buttons were almost as yellow as the horrible paint someone had slapped on the fine old wood. Worse, someone had nailed pieces of wood on either side of the dome, so as to balance a TV on top of the radio.

Nick's grandparents had owned a radio like this, but it had been kept, waxed and spotless, in a corner of Nick's grandmother's living room.

Phil's discontent remained.

A sense of let down set in, after his frantic race to get here. A feeling of emptiness made his throat close.

Some part of him, some deluded part that still believed in happy endings and premonitions, must really have expected to find Nick here, sleeping on the bed, as Phil had last left him.

Phil glared at the mirror on the wall, above the built-in chest of drawers. His sunken eyes glared back at him, from within dark circles.

So, he didn't have active AIDS. Something to be grateful for, these days, that the final illness could be kept away with drugs. But those same drugs robbed him of energy and strength, of desire to live and hope. Daily, almost hourly, they reminded him of the death sentence that hung suspended over his head.

He ran his hands back through his brown hair, trying to ignore the grey threads. If cancer came—when cancer came—then the hair would be gone and perhaps, before long-drawn death finished her invasion of his ravaged body, he would long for his hair back, grey and all.

For now Phil should sleep, recover from the journey. He needed his rest, a regular schedule. Dr. Michelopolis had been very specific about that. All the medicines in the world would not save him if he didn't eat and didn't sleep.

So first the medicines.

Phil pulled the first of his tablet case from his bag. The label, glued to the plastic cover of the giant daisy wheel, read "Six p.m." It was five local time, so it would be six in Denver. The compartment for today contained the fifteen pills he'd carefully sorted and counted into it this morning, before leaving home. He had five such cases, carefully labeled with the hour at which he should take the medicines.

Centuries from now, future archaeologists would open his grave and pry into his remains for clues into the twentieth century. They'd think they'd stumbled onto a new breed and he would be embalmed in some museum, displayed as the first Homo Chemicus.

He took his tablets to the kitchen, set them on the violently yellow counter. Same counter, twenty years later. Nick had liked the color. He had said it was cheerful.

Phil frowned at the counter.

Cheerful.

He got a glass from the overhead cabinets, filled it with tap water and started the endless job of swallowing tablets: one, two, three tablets.

At first, a year or so ago, when he'd been prescribed this mix to keep full blown AIDS away, he'd read the indications on each of the medicines prescribed for him. The cross-linking of side effects had given him nightmares and he'd given up.

He now took what Dr. Michelopolis told him to take. Two of the blue, three of the red, four of the light pink and half a dozen of the yellow.

Oh, and swallow his multivitamins, everyday, like a good little boy and take calcium to prevent the medicines leaching calcium from his bones. Four, five and six. Seven, eight and nine. The tiny pink one and the mammoth purple capsule were last.

He'd gotten so that he could swallow each pill dry, but he forced himself to drink a little water after each, and then drank a full glass afterwards.

Done, he noticed a thin phone book on the counter and a glimmer of not-quite-hope made him reach for it and turn to the s. He ran his finger down the Stev-column—from Steva to Stevenson and back up—but there were no Stevelanos listed and, therefore, no Nicholas Stevelanos.

Phil closed the book, pushed it away, set his empty glass down next to it.

He hadn't really expected it to be this easy. He couldn't expect it to be this easy.

To begin with, there was no reason for Nick to be in Gold-port. True, no one had picked up a trace of his leaving Goldport, but that could just be shoddy investigation. Surely, if finding Nick were as easy as looking in the phone book, one of the detectives would have managed it.

Of course, Nick might be living with someone and the phone under his partner's name. Gay men could be as hard to find as women who married and changed their names.

The thought of Nick's living with someone else hurt and Phil flinched from it, like a man favoring a twisted ankle, putting all his weight on the other. Even to himself, Phil couldn't pretend that it would be logical for Nick to have lived celibate for twenty years now. He couldn't hope that Nick had never found anyone to replace him; never found a love to compare to the sweaty groping and shaky promises of a twenty-two year old's crush—composed as much of lust and relief at finding someone who understood, as of friendship and confused admiration.

Phil made a face at his hollow eyed mental image of himself.

Sure, boy. Nick has never found anyone to compare to yourself as a clumsy virgin. *What about you? Didn't you find others? How many Phil? Can you count them? Should we make an accounting of every one-night-stand, every grope in the dark, every time you thought you'd fallen in love and crossed your fingers and believed, really believed in ever after?*

And yet, through it all, ups and downs, hopes and disappointments, he had remembered Nick, hadn't he?

Maybe Nick remembered him.

Maybe. Or maybe, maybe, just maybe, Nick only talked of him as a joke, a youthful mistake.

Nicky, with his sensitive fingers, so nimble on the guitar strings, his perfect voice, his renaissance features, his quick, quick mind. Nick had deserved better, even then. Maybe he'd found it.

Themaybe felt like a nail, driven into Phil's future coffin. A shiver went up Phil's spine. Tired. He was tired.

He stumbled to the bed, shoved his bag to the floor, pulled his jacket off, and fell, face down, on the mattress. Sleep overtook him immediately, as if a switch had been thrown.

Sleep brought a dream, a dream he could neither define nor describe when he woke on his back, in the dark room, staring at the ceiling and listening to the radio.

It played very low, just loud enough to be perceived as a whisper over the sound of the raging waves outside the window. But when the voice of the announcer came on, even low, what he said made Phil sit up, stark awake, trembling.

"That was Nicky Stevelanos, folks, with his latest ballad *The Songs I Wrote For You*. All the talking heads say he hasn't grown as a musician and that his songs need to develop some different rhythm and some different theme. Yeah, right. Bet you he's laughing all the way to the bank, uh? Now, let us listen to one of his older hits, *Saying Goodbye* and see if any of you agree with the talking heads, uh? Call me and give me your opinion, right? The phone is"

Phil repeated the phone number to himself—bemused—and got out of bed, and hung, speechless by the radio. Laughing all the way to the bank? Nicky was living off his song-writing? Off his singing? Was he well known? He must be a local phenomenon, or Phil would have heard of him in Denver. The detectives must truly be incompetent, not to have found Nick.

Would the radio announcer know Nick's address? Oh, please, please, please.

It would be some other Nick, though. Someone with the same name. Unlikely but possible . . .

The seconds before the song started stretched in Phil's perception, endless and barren. He licked lips that felt too dry.

Then the song started with a whisper of acoustic guitar, followed by Nick's voice. Unmistakably Nicky's voice, clear and pure and perfect, a voice that couldn't be forgotten if you tried to forget it.

Phil's emotion caught in a knot at his throat, a pulsing in his chest. The song Nick sang was something that Phil had never heard. And yet, Phil couldn't avoid thinking it had been written for him. The line about "My hand shall not hold yours ever again," wrung his heart and "Though I still want you, I don't expect your kiss, ever again," might as well have been an accusation aimed at Phil.

Closing his eyes, Phil could imagine that Nicky was right here, sitting in the living room, on the old brown couch, his guitar held like a lover, his eyes closed, his voice caressing every note as it dropped from his lips.

Nick sang for him, for him alone. Nicky had forgiven Phil's desertion, Phil's indefensible cowardice.

He wanted Phil back.

The song ended. The music stopped. Phil waited for the announcer's voice. Nothing. Not even static.

Slowly, Phil opened his eyes, glared at the yellow-painted radio, now as dead as the table or the yellow counter top.

He punched an ivory button, two. Nothing. He looked behind, to see if the thing was plugged in, but couldn't even see a cord. The only plug had one cord attached to it, and that was the cord for the television.

Well, Phil still knew the number to call. This was weird, but weird things happened.

Maybe the radio had been on next door. That must be it.

He found the phone behind a teddy bear on the bedside table, and dialed the number from memory.

It rang for a long time, before it was picked up. "Yes?" a woman's voice.

"Uh . . . Ah . . ." Phil had no idea what the station was, or if it was local. No, wait, the phone number had dialed local. But what information could they give him on Nick? They'd think he was a crank. "I—You

asked for opinions on Nick Stevelanos. I—I'm an old college friend and I've lost touch—Lost touch. I don't suppose you'd tell me what he's doing these days and the name of his albums? I'd love to"

"Who is this?" the woman's voice sounded alarmed, on the verge of hysteria.

Great, great. They really thought he was a crank. "I'm Phillip Cesari," he said. "I'm a—I teach history in a community college in Denver. I—I'm not a crank—I"

"Phil?" the woman's voice said. "Phil Cesari? Little Cesar? Nick's roommate?"

Now it was Phil's turn to be silent. Some woman in Goldport knew his college nick-name, his connection to Nick.

"Where are you?" The woman asked. "I mean, where are you calling from?"

"Uh . . . Gateways motel." Right after saying it, he repented. What if it really was some sort of joke? What if

"I'll come and see you. Don't go anywhere."

"Who are you?"

"Oh." The woman giggled. "I'm sorry, never thought you wouldn't recognize me. I'm Nicky's mother. Mrs. Stevelanos, I used be. When I came to town to look after Nicky's—Well—To wrap up things, I—damn." Her laugh turned to something that sounded remarkably like a sob. "Damn, I hadn't thought of all this in years. I have a letter for you. Nicky's" She drew in breath like a woman drowning. "How are you doing? What have you done with yourself?"

"We can talk when I see you," Phil said. She had a letter from him. A letter from Nicky. Even if it was a kiss-off letter, it would be closure. "If you'll come over."

Minutes that seemed like hours later, she knocked at his door. He opened it and there she stood, tall and limber as Nick had been, with the same pointed chin, the same huge eyes. Only hers were light brown, and her hair honey-blond. Nick's eyes and hair came from his Polish father.

Mrs. Stevelanos, whatever her name was now, stared at Phil. Her eyes filled with tears.

"You look younger," Phil said, and caught himself, and smiled. "I mean, younger than my memories of

you. I guess when I was a kid, you looked like this"

She giggled nervously. "Grandmother. Yes. I imagine. I was only forty. I had Madeleine when I was sixteen and Nick at eighteen. I never got" She shook her head.

She kept her hands firmly stuffed into the pockets of her short blue jacket, forming little protrusions on the side, as though she made fists in there. "You look older."

"So my mirror tells me," Phil said. He nodded. "Would you come in?"

"No." She looked past him into the living room, looked away quickly. She shook her head. "No. These rooms are all non-smoke, aren't they? I don't want to—Why don't you come out? We'll walk on the beach."

Her mention of smoking made Phil remember his own cigarettes. He hadn't smoked since he'd got here, probably the longest, other than plane trips, that he'd gone smoke-free in the last year, ever since he'd found out that no matter what happened he wouldn't live forever.

He got his jacket, felt the pocket to make sure his pack was in it, and followed Nick's mom out of the motel, to the road, and down the short stretch to Anchor Street, and from there to the beach access stairs.

"Imagine after all these years," she said.

They walked on the soft sand, well away from the sea that broke, heavily, against the sand a few feet away.

Here and there a gigantic log lay, that the waves had carried in. Felled giants they looked mournful, out of place.

Driftwood wasn't supposed to be this big.

When Phil and Nick had been here, it hadn't been. There had been very little driftwood, in fact, and the sea had looked like a mirror under the cloudless sky. Though they'd been warned not to swim—and didn't—they'd walked in the water, with their feet in the chill while the sun burned their bodies.

Just the thought of it, made middle-aged Phil's feet hurt, as if each of the little bones had been frozen.

He offered his cigarettes to Nick's mom and lit the one she picked, then lit one for himself.

"Thank you," she said. "Fancy you coming here, after all this time. Business?"

"No. No. I just—Nick—I was hoping to find some trace of where he is, what he's doing."

She stopped and looked at him. Her face, made very pale by the cold wind, looked like the face of one long drowned. "You don't know?" she asked. "Damn. No one ever told you?"

"Told me what?"

It didn't take very long to tell. She did it in gasping sentences, between breath intakes.

The morning after Phil had left, headed to his first job in Akron, which would be followed by the job in Denver and the yet better job, also in Denver, Nick had woken up, read the goodbye letter Phil had left behind.

That night they'd found Nick dead in the narrow bathtub, the walls splattered high with his blood.

"They had to put a plastic enclosure around the tub," Nick's mother said. "Because they couldn't get the stains off the walls. They called me. The reason—The reason Stan and I had paid for this vacation for you boys was that we wanted Nick out of the house while we negotiated our divorce. He was so sensitive and everything affected him so" She took her cigarette to her lips, inhaled deeply, blew the smoke out in an angry cloud. "Well, the fares to Goldport were good and we thought"

Phil stood. "You—You mean, he killed himself because of—because I left?" *And you're talking to me*, he thought. *And I'm standing here, alive. And I've survived Nick for twenty years*

and enjoyed life.

"Well . . . Probably not just because of that. You were the one stable thing in his life, see." She looked at Phil, winced, looked away. "I think he knew very well that Stan and I—That our marriage . . . And he was never that close to Madeleine. He—Well—You couldn't have known." She sucked in nicotine, sighed. Her eyes were focused behind Phil, on the grey waves. Her tennis-shoe beat a tap-tap on the sand. "Please don't. You were just a kid, yourself. And maybe it was all for the best." Her words had the singsong quality of a learned speech. "When my husband found out what—what you two had been up to—I knew but I had never—I thought—Well, Stan said he would have killed Nick, if Nick hadn't beat him to it, so you see." She flung the butt of her cigarette towards the sea and turned to face Phil. "Please, don't think I meant to accuse you. Nicky didn't accuse you. I got his letters out of Stan's hands. The one to us and the one to you. They were in the same envelope, so I read yours and besides, they had to be

read, you know by the police." She reached into her pocket and handed him a folded paper. "Here. Here, you see." She wiped her eyes to the sleeve of her coat. "I need to go. God, I need to go. Carl will be home from work any minute now and I met him when I came down to—Well, it doesn't matter. I—I'll talk to you later." She ran over the sand, up the beach access stairs, to the road.

Escaping her memories. Escaping her own guilt.

Phil stood in place, holding the paper. Nicky's letter. At length he unfolded it, read it. The beginning was clear, business like, strangely at odds with Nick, particularly a Nick crazy enough to kill himself moments after.

"Phil, I knew it couldn't last and I understand your letter perfectly. My family wouldn't take it so well, either, and maybe you're right, maybe it's nonsense, maybe there's a woman out there you can love. I don't know. I don't think I could ever love anyone else. But I know it's impossible and I don't want to be a millstone around your neck. Go, Phil. Go and be happy. You say you don't deserve me, but it is I who doesn't deserve you. Forget me. Get married and raise a dozen Italian brats. Just—if you can—keep a corner of your heart—if not for me—for the songs I wrote for you."

It was signed in a shaky hand, emotion at last betrayed.

Phil could see Nick sitting at the rickety kitchen table, perhaps with the letter Phil had left him, reading it.

That letter would have come like a thunderbolt out of a cloudless sky. Nick wouldn't have had any idea of Phil's doubts; Phil had hid them so well. Phil's letter, Phil's absence, must have been a pounding shock. And Nick had taken his life . . . while unsound of mind.

He wouldn't ever know that Phil himself had contemplated suicide rather than leaving; that it had taken all of Phil's self-control not to kill himself.

Phil stood in the whipping wind, holding the letter in one hand: the last letter Nick had ever written.

Phil should have killed himself. Then they could both be dead together. They could have departed, hand in hand, in search of whatever lay on the other side. They could have been together in their dreams.

Phil swallowed and swallowed again, to keep his emotion in check, but by the time he got back to the motel, there was a taste of salt and tears down his throat.

The songs I wrote for you.

The songs Nick wrote. God, the songs he wrote. The pure emotion in Nick's voice hadn't lied. Nor could it endure betrayal.

The radio program had been a dream. The phone number actually belonging to Nick's mother had to be a bizarre coincidence. Chance.

Phil sat on the bed and finished smoking his cigarette before realizing he'd brought it indoors, into the smoke free room. He threw the butt in the toilet and flushed, and stood staring at the little tub veiled by a pink shower curtain. Nick had died here. This small bathroom with its tiny built-in, triangular corner vanity, had been his last sight in this world. Nicky's large, expressive eyes had stared at that ceiling as he died. His blood had run down these drains.

Nicky was not middle aged, and fat, and happy elsewhere. He'd remained twenty-two. He'd never be older than twenty two.

Crap, oh crap. It didn't matter if Nick had committed suicide as much because of his parents' divorce as because of Phil's desertion. Phil had deserted Nick. Betrayed Nick. Made a mockery of the love they'd shared for four years.

He might as well have opened Nick's veins himself.

For a moment, Phil stood, with the letter in one hand, looking at the bathtub. If he had any courage at all, he'd splatter his own blood all over these same walls.

But then the dreams in his eternal sleep would be of Nick. They would always be of Nick, now.

Again and again, like Sisyphus pushing his rock up an endless slope, Phil would write that last letter to Nick. Again and again, Phil would catch a glimpse of Nick in his sleep, Nick's mobile face at rest, Nick's voice stilled. And Phil would leave, unable to do anything else, knowing fully well he was killing the only person he'd ever truly loved.

Phil dragged himself to bed and lay on it, fully dressed, with his jacket on.

In that island between waking and sleeping, a radio announcer's voice came to mingle with the sound of the waves roaring on the shore.

"And we have Nicky Stevelanos right here with us. So, how do you like Goldport?"

Nick's voice, maybe a little graver than Phil remembered it, answered, "Fine. It hasn't changed much in

twenty years."

"No, no. We don't change. It's a point of pride with us. So, you were here twenty years ago. May I ask"

"Just a vacation. With a friend."

"And I heard you actually had trouble finding a room here? Because everything was booked for your own beach concert?"

"It was in—I gave a concert, in London, and it was hard to get connecting flights, so yes, I got here just hours ago and everything was booked up."

Nick sounded embarrassed. He'd always hated public situations.

How could Nick live the life of a star?

"So you got into a little third class motel, didn't you?"

There was something to the way the announcer's voice lifted at the end that suggested that Nick had glared at him to prevent him giving out the motel's name.

God, Nick would hate celebrity.

"I'd stayed there before," he said. "It's a nice little place."

"Isn't it kind of an odd stopping place for a star, though?"

An odd, embarrassed laughter. "Probably. But then I'm an odd star."

"So, how come the tabloids have never got hold of anything about your love life?"

Sharp intake of breath. "My love life is in my songs. I have no love, outside my music."

"So we hear. Besides being the only folk star to survive and do well in the eighties, you're the only star to be celibate."

This time the laughter was genuine. "Just private."

Somehow, somewhere, Nicky's life had gone on. It had gone on without Phil.

"I had a great romance, long ago. And yes, all my songs are to that one person, though that person died. Many years ago," Nick said, from the radio. "I never—I could never love—All my love is in my music."

Phil fell asleep, lulled by the familiar voice, the comforting certainty that Nick still lived somewhere.

Later, he was half aware of Nicky coming in, closing the door behind himself.

* * *

Nick Stevelanos, internationally famous folk star, came into his rented motel room.

He couldn't believe that nit-wit announcer had almost told every crazed little fan out in Goldport where their idol hung out. And he couldn't believe luck had shunted him to this one room, of all the rooms in the world.

The room where Phil had died.

Nick took off his red jacket, dropped it on the floor, by the door; pulled off his leather boots, flexed his toes against the low-pile carpet. His jeans felt damp on his legs and his blue sweatshirt was the same he'd worn on the plane: rank with sweat and the peculiar smell of closed in spaces.

Tomorrow, he had to give the beach concert. If he could master the energy.

He was so tired.

He needed

He knew very well what he needed. He had it on hand, too, in the pill box inside his bag, on the bed.

But he had promised himself he wouldn't take pills again. Or, if he did take them, it would be the last time. He'd make sure he took enough to kill himself.

He had to make a decision.

Either give up the pills for good, or give up life.

Because they were robbing him of life.

At first drugs had been a way to dull the pain, to fade Nick's memory of Phil lying dead in that bathtub.

These many years later, Nick could still feel the heart-stopping shock; he could still smell blood and sudden death; and still recoil from that body he'd loved so long and so well and that had, suddenly, become a grotesque, grey thing.

That memory required ever more pills to quiet it, until the pills, and the unreality they bought, had taken over Nick's life. Little by little.

The arrest at JFK Airport, on his way back from London, had been the last straw, and damn hard to hush up.

If word of that got out, Nick's squeaky-clean performer's image would be gone forever; and likely his career with it.

He looked at his bag, then around at the room. It had changed, but not so that it didn't teem with memories of Phil.

He could remember Phil sitting at the cheap dining room table, looking at Nick with his pensive brown eyes.

Those eyes

How long had they been so sad? How long had Phil flirted with death, before throwing himself in her arms that night twenty years ago?

What luck that this would be the only room left in town for Nick Stevelanos. What madness to have booked a concert in Goldport.

Nick could remember feeling he had to come back to Gold-port. Even if the beach concert didn't net any money. Even against the advice of his promoter. But he couldn't remember why he'd felt that way. The pills could do that to you.

Perhaps it was a sign. Perhaps he was meant to end it all here, where Phil had ended it.

He walked towards the bed, towards the dark bulk of his suitcase on it. He'd take the pills. Take the pills and be damned.

Damnation had to be better than this half-life.

The pills were inside the lining of the suitcase, where only Nick and JFK security—would look for them. Nick felt for the hard round case—a large daisy-wheel medicine keeper—brought it out. It was full. He'd replenished in New York, after the airport.

Its contents would be enough to

Nick stopped. He could swear Phil lay on the bed. Phil's image wasn't quite solid, but solid enough for all details to be visible. He was fully dressed, in an unzipped blue jacket, dark pullover and black pants. Darker clothes than he'd ever worn. He was not Phil as Nick remembered him, either—the twenty-two year old, dead and grey in a puddle of his own blood—but an older Phil.

A living Phil, whose chest rose and fell with each regular breath.

Phil as he would have looked if he'd only been a little stronger. If he'd only dared

Fine lines etched Phil's features, adding character, but detracting none from his classical good looks. Even the white that had threaded itself through Phil's brown curls, didn't make him look old.

Nick stretched his fingers, tentatively, to touch Phil's curls. He remembered the soft tickle of Phil's hair against his palm.

His hand touched only air. Nothing was there. Nothing. It was just an image of Phil.

It was another sign, Nick thought Another sign that he was supposed to end it all that night. He opened his case. He'd need water with these many pills.

* * *

Half-asleep, as Phil was, it had seemed perfectly rational hearing Nick come in. He'd often go for walks after Phil had gone to bed.

Lying in bed, Phil had heard Nick come in, and drop his boots and jacket, as he'd done so many times during their vacation together, or even before, in the apartment they'd shared through their college years.

He heard Nick's walk across the floor, felt Nick standing by the bed.

What was he doing there, standing by the bed. Why didn't he undress and get in bed?

Phil managed to wake enough to half-open his eyes and stare at Nicky.

Nicky looked pale and tense; older and terrified.

What did Nicky have to be so scared about?

* * *

Nick stood by the bed, fumbling with the catch of the box. It was so difficult to open it, so difficult to do this with Phil looking at him.

Would Phil have killed himself, had Nick been awake and watching?

He frowned at the image of Phil.

Phil stared back at him, surprised, confused. He looked half-asleep, a state that always made him morose.

Ghosts didn't age. Yet Phil looked older—forty? forty-two?—as old as he would have been, if he'd stayed alive.

It was as if in some way Phil had gone on living.

In a world Nick couldn't reach, Phil still lived and breathed.

By some miracle, Nick could see him. Maybe even, could communicate with him. He smiled at Phil.

Phil smiled back, a soft smile, and closed his eyes.

Nick thought of the closing sentence in Phil's suicide letter, *We'll always be together in the songs you*

wrote for me.

They weren't together.

And yet, maybe, in a way, they still were. They could see each other. He looked at Phil, who looked asleep, but smiled still.

They obviously could see each other.

Nick grimaced at the case of pills in his hands. The catch gave under his fingers. Nick stared at the pills inside. Years of oblivion. Hours of escape. All of it in this circular plastic case.

He looked at Phil, on the bed.

Phil had settled back to sleep, the way he always did, with his arms wrapped around the pillow, his face resting sideways on the soft folds.

A wave of warmth washed over Nick. Phil hadn't left him forever.

If Nick killed himself, he'd be leaving Phil.

Nick couldn't do that.

He walked back to the bathroom, shook the pills from the case into the toilet, flushed. He wouldn't take these again. He wouldn't need the crutch again. He would keep his career. He would keep his music. The music he'd written for Phil.

In some other world, in some unknown way, Phil would know about those songs; Phil would hear them.

As Nick undressed, he looked at the vintage radio in the corner. It was a beauty, just like his grandmother's radio. Its wood case gleamed, waxed to a soft sheen.

Looking at it, Nick thought that maybe, just maybe

The music. Perhaps, the music could

Nick walked up to the radio, pushed the ivory buttons, changing stations, until his own voice, his own songs poured out. Advantages of being a star. Someone, somewhere, always played your music uninterrupted.

He set the volume to low, and went back to the bed, and lay down, and turned the lights off.

In the space between sleep and waking, he felt Phil's weight on the other side of the bed, heard Phil's regular breath, felt Phil's head come to rest on Nick's shoulder, Phil's soft brown curls tickling Nick's bare skin.

Thy Vain Worlds

This story was born of a—Brazilian—song about heartbreak and abandoned women. I started thinking how some women and men are more vulnerable, more likely to fall for someone who'll mistreat them or leave them behind. And then I thought that, even if we were masters of the universe, some of us would remain just as vulnerable.

At three p.m. the wind blew, lifting up the endless, red sands of the desert that surrounded the Earth-styled landscaped grounds of the recuperation home.

The ponderosa pines, planted eight deep in a ring around the gardens helped attempted in vain to protect the terran haven. But an attenuated breeze always made it past the trees, carrying sprays of sand that nestled on the manicured branches of the apple trees. Custodians at the home swept up buckets of the sand daily. Not even the tightly shut windows and magnetic screen doors could protect the shiny marble floors and the expensive wood furniture.

The custodians never complained. Gentle, faithful Sherzys, one of the first alien races discovered and contacted, they remained grateful to the humans who'd brought them civilization and science. They knew that every job, not matter how menial, brought them one rung closer to technology.

Kratrina Cryssa never complained, either. A high-strung blonde beauty of pure human extraction, she wore the exhausted look of one having her worst nightmares confirmed. Sitting under the apple tree outside the side door to the home, she pulled her yellow cotton dress away from her sweat-drenched body.

As the wind started and the sand fell like soft rain on the wicker table at which she sat and the three unoccupied chairs beside her, she wondered—not for the first time—why anyone would want to set a rest and recovery home in this desolate, nameless planet.

She swept the sand from her embroidery, held taut in a delicate wooden frame.

Why go through terraforming a useless piece of dirt to set on it a rest home for the emotionally fragile, when hundreds, thousands of habitable planets lay at the disposal of the few billion humans in the endless universe?

Other sentient races existed, but they didn't measure up to humans. Not in civilization, not in science, not even in administrative capacity. Humans were the Lords of the Universe, so why set their therapeutic facility here? It was an old question, and Kratrina didn't expect an answer. No one answered her questions any more. From the administrator of the home to her own father, every human she knew coddled Kratrina with comforting, meaningless pap.

Kratrina chose a pale pink embroidery floss and threaded her needle, squinting against the mirage caused by her sweat-soaked eyelashes against the glare of the merciless sun and the reddish tone of the sand-scourged air.

She remembered the history lessons her alien tutor had drummed into her, long ago and worlds away in her father's airy mansion. How he'd made her read all the literature of fear about what might await humans outside the atmosphere of Earth. Those fantasies, those childish nightmares had kept humans earthbound for centuries before they'd dared venture forth . . . only to discover that they were Lords and Masters of the endless galaxies, that the universe was their playground all habitable worlds their welcome mat.

So why, Kratrina asked herself, why put this home on a world that hadn't been habitable before humans had changed it? Why not in some pleasant, verdant paradise where restless feelings could be soothed and lackadaisical minds stimulated to work again?

She pulled her needle through the silk fabric held taut by her tambour embroidery frame. She worked at embroidering the bud of an almond blossom. Nothing to read here. They let her have no entertainment. No music, no sensies. Nothing. How could she recuperate when her mind walked, like a tiger jailed, the tight confines of one's own imprisonment?

"Evening, Lady Cryssa," a smooth, gentle voice said, behind her.

She turned and stifled a gasp of surprise at the man who stood behind her. He was a stranger to this place. Of that, she was sure, and not the type of man that ended in this home. Those tended to be pale, fragile, colorless creatures, as helpless-looking as she'd felt that day, almost ten years ago, when she'd been sent from her home and husband and packed away to her first rest home.

Her mind flinched away from the memory she couldn't quite pin beneath her conscious mind.

She put her embroidery frame down on the table in front of her chair, pulled at her sweat-soaked dress, and turned her best smile on the stranger.

A tall, broad shouldered, dark haired man, he looked powerful enough, well enough, not to be here at all. Except, perhaps, for his too-sensitive features, the pain etched in his expression, the haunted look in his dark grey eyes.

He walked towards her quickly, in easy strides of his long silk-encased legs.

She let go of the cotton and proffered her hand to him, the right hand, as she'd been taught by her nursemaid. She expected him to shake it, or perhaps to hold it.

Instead, he dropped to one knee, took her hand in his and rested his lips on her skin.

The tingle of it made her breathless. "Oh. And who are you . . . Sir?"

He stood up, a smooth movement that barely disturbed the glossy perfection of dark curls that framed his oval face and emphasized the haunted look in his eyes. His dark grey silk tunic, exactly matched to his eye color, fell smoothly, without a wrinkle, outlining the muscles on his broad chest. "I've just arrived. It's been ten years, but, surely you still remember me? Ryv Endall. We met in Miccar, was it not? At your debutante ball?"

Kratrina's mind skidded away from any memory of her debutante ball the brightly lit crystal halls, and flawlessly attired gentlemen who'd traveled there for the occasion. Beneath the thin ice of her forgetfulness something deep twisted within the icy waters of memory.

She sucked in breath, and turned her charming, social smile on the young man. "One forgets. I mean, it's been so long and one has been here and there and everywhere and seen so much." Mostly the interior of euphemistically named *rest and recuperation homes*, and the puzzled faces of doctors and nurses, and the shiny needles penetrating her clear white skin, and the screaming, screaming, screaming that overtook her when the memories broke through their barriers. But she wasn't about to tell handsome Ryv that. And never mind if he was a fellow sufferer.

Pulling back straight blonde hair, that she thought compared not unfavorably to his coal-black locks, she moistened her lips and gestured vaguely to one of the other chairs, beneath the tree. After he obeyed the gesture and sat down, a handbreadth from her, she asked, "A new arrival? But then, how come outside? I thought they only allowed outside those of us who are . . . composed?"

He tilted his head sideways. "Oh, but I've been elsewhere first," he said. "So many worlds. So many

different worlds." Tiredness veiled his grey eyes. His smooth white skin wrinkled over his perfect, broad forehead.

She reached for his hand, touched her fingertips to his in sympathy.

He looked up. His eyes cleared. An almost-smile tugged the corners of his lips upwards. "But let's not talk of that," he said. "Let's talk of pleasant things."

"Yes, let's." She allowed her mind to drift to her pleasant childhood, the adoration of her father, the unfailing attention of her nannies, the green meadows and shaded woods of her native Miccar.

He talked very little, but he was a good listener and watched with avid, hungry stare as she described the frock she'd worn for her sixth birthday party, and her little friends crowding around her. So many friends, none of them human, because human families were thinly spread through the universe.

Time went by quickly. Shadows of impending night surprised them in the garden.

He rose, hastily, bowed to her. "We should go in." He chuckled, the giggle of a child who has evaded too-strict a guardian. "Before we are sent for. Only . . ." He smiled. "Perhaps you should go in alone? You know how they are about patients fraternizing unsupervised."

Kratrina nodded. The medical personnel of the rest home, members of a stolid and empathetic but unimaginative humanoid race who called itself Kelter, were as obsessed with getting humans to fraternize under their benevolent eyes as they were about keeping humans away from each other when unsupervised.

"I was naughty, otherwise we wouldn't have met at all." He winked. "They put me in the side garden and I walked around."

"Around?" she said. "But you'd have to cross the desert, I mean, the non-terraformed area between" She thought of the area she had glimpsed on the few occasions she had ventured beyond the edge of the ponderosa pines. What looked like an endless stretch of scorched red sand, and the trees beyond it, in the distance. It would take at least ten minutes to cross between a small garden and the next and the sun would be intense, yet here he was, his suit unruffled, his hair innocent of red sand.

He bowed. "I had heard you were here. And the memory of your beauty made it worth to cross that island of hell." He reached for her hand and kissed it again.

She remained, with her hand pressed to her own lips, reliving the tingle of his touch, as he walked away amid the apple trees, until the glimmering, silk-clad shape vanished through the ponderosa pines.

* * *

"Well, dear," the nurse said, smiling, as she opened the curtains of the room. "You sure are looking better."

Colloquial Glaish sounded funny in the lips of the humanoid, with her perfect ovoid of a face and the features that were no features at all: expressionless black eyes, slits for nostrils, a lipless mouth that no doubt did what mouths were supposed to do but no more.

Kratrina turned her head away from that caricature of humanity, made all the more grotesque by the starched nurse's uniform on the limber, featureless body. Those smooth, rope-like limbs protruding from the sleeves and beneath the skirt didn't look at all like arms and legs, and could twist in any direction.

"I mean," the nurse said. "We can tell you're feeling better. You're getting up without the help of drugs and dressing by yourself. You do want to dress by yourself, right?"

A secret smile on her lips, Kratrina said, "Oh, yes. Of course. And then I want to go outside."

She almost ran away from the nurse and into the shower where bio-mechanic appliances showered and groomed her. Back again in her room, she selected a long white cotton lace dress and slipped it on, under the approving eyes of the nurse.

Breakfast was an ordeal gone through, as was the weighing and the clinical procedures of which these homes made a fetish.

But then she was in the garden, threading her pink floss through the silk, working still on the same almond blossom she'd started more than a month ago.

He came before she could complete three stitches.

She stood up, let go of the embroidery frame, turned to meet him, to be enveloped in his powerful arms, his strong body. His lips came down to cover her own and stifled her little cry of excitement and pleasure.

The nurses said she was better. She should hope so. She hadn't felt so alive, so vibrant since those days in her home world, those days she couldn't fully remember. After her honeymoon. Just as she and her new husband had settled in their home, started their life together.

She shook her head and turned her mind and body to her friend, her lover.

Later, after they'd made love, while their passion-warmed nude bodies lay side by side on the carefully groomed grass, he spun his dreams to her.

One day, he said, they'd both be released. They'd marry and have their home in some pleasant world. Perhaps they'd have children.

"Released?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, grey eyes laughing quietly. "Surely. My nurse says I'm improving. And I hear so are you . . ."

"How do you hear of me?" she asked, because she'd never heard his name and had assumed that since they let him out to another garden, he must be in the west wing, under different supervisors, in a separate meal and recreation group.

"I have my ways." He smiled, a beguiling smile that lit up his perhaps-too-delicate features.

She had to be contented with that, happy to let him have his secret, if it pleased him so.

But from that day on, and through another week of passionate meetings in the garden, she thought about being released. She thought about it day and night. She'd never before heard that it could happen, that the gates to the rest home could open to lead anywhere but to another rest home. Maybe it was because her mental health had remained fragile for so long. Now, she thought about it, about the many worlds out there, about their pleasures opening to her again. The canals of Tiddar, the flower domes of Minnus. She remembered them from her honeymoon. She thought of sharing them with Ryv. She saw them strolling together everywhere through New Paris, visiting the hallowed precincts of old Earth. In her dreams they strolled together the ageless ruins of Rome, the carefully preserved remnants of twenty-first century London.

Ryv must be wealthy. Very few humans were less than well to do, and none of those in these homes were less than fabulously rich. She thought their honeymoon would surpass her first, clouded marriage.

* * *

A week later, at her vanity table, she sat while the tentacles of the bio-mechanic groomer on the table top administered a facial. She inspected her smooth features. She'd been eighteen when they'd first sent her away to a rest home. Her twenty-eight-year-old features might be somewhat sharper, the outlines harder. But she retained her beautiful cheekbones, her straight nose. She'd still be an impressive wife to display at embassy parties in other worlds, for the admiration of natives. And perhaps she could resume the study of native languages that she'd started just before

She tried to reach for it. The memory squirmed and twisted away from her touch, writhed and crawled on dark nebulous tentacles, away from her rational mind.

Nothing left but a shiver down her back, and a feeling as of something cold and clammy that had dragged up the back of her neck.

She gave her blonde hair a last tug, looked at the flawless make-up applied by the groomer, turned the groomer off, hurried down the broad stairs to the garden.

However, all that day she waited in vain. She finished the almond blossom and several others, started on the brown of the embroidered tree trunk. She looked up at any small sound, always distracted, always waiting. Where could Ryv be?

She told herself that he must have been detained, somehow. Perhaps he had a visitor. She remembered a visit from her own parents, almost a year ago.

They couldn't visit more often, of course. Her father was an experienced ambassador, that being the polite term for the men who administered alien worlds and wrung from them their wealth for the benefit of Earth. Of course, they also brought the natives culture, civilization and science, so that was all right.

And her mother's duties as a linguist and a hostess kept her fully occupied. Even when Kratrina had lived in their home, she hadn't seen them more than twice a month. Not that she'd missed them. They'd made sure she was surrounded by a bevy of alien nurses and nannies, friends and teachers.

The wind started up at three, as always, but Ryv didn't come. She wondered if he was well, and for a frightening moment her throat tightened. She thought that perhaps he had been released before her, perhaps he had already forgotten her, perhaps

The cold shiver traveled up her back.

At nightfall, she folded her embroidery frame, went inside.

That night, she tossed and turned, unable to sleep in her comfortable, temperature controlled bed. When she fell asleep, close to dawn, she dreamed she was a child in her parents' home. She'd been left alone by the nannies and had gone in search of her mom. But, no matter how many doors she opened and how many rooms she searched, all she found was a likeness of Ryv, hastily drawn on the walls of a hall through which a red wind blew.

"Your emotional readings are up a little, dear," the nurse said, staring at a screen. "Anything wrong?"

Any . . . memories?"

Kratrina shook her head, hurried to the fresher.

Emerging groomed, she chose a figure-molding red dress. Today Ryv would come. She thought how he would appreciate the dress, the joy he would take in undressing her. She thought of his muscular body, his perfect, flawless features and, clutching her embroidery frame, she danced her way to the garden.

That day she finished the tree trunk and started on the other shadowy trunks behind it.

That night she cried into her soft pillow and dreamed of something cold and dark, something whose touch left you slimed.

"We should, perhaps, give you some relaxants?" the nurse asked the next morning.

But Kratrina forced a smile on her tired features and told the nurse that it was nothing. Just something having to do with her cycle, something mysterious and female and human.

If they gave her medication, she would have to stay inside. And then she wouldn't see Ryv. There would be no chance of seeing Ryv.

* * *

Kratrina sat up with a cry, as the lights in her room came on full force.

Her dream fled from the bright illumination. She'd dreamed of Ryv, but not Ryv. A Ryv that was something cold and dark, something alien that slithered upon its belly and left yellow slime in its trail. Something that came to you in the dark of night and—AndShe grasped for it, but couldn't find what scared her so. She shook her head.

She was letting herself feel this dream too much. After all, Ryv had only been absent for a week. Perhaps someone had caught him trying to walk between the gardens and he'd lost his outdoor privileges. Perhaps he had got worse and was being medicated. Perhaps he was trying to be good, attempting to defray attention from his activities, so he could continue seeing her.

Her pulse slowed. The fine sweat that covered her body dried, in a shiver of coolness.

Her link crackled. The hologram of the nurse's face floated above it, "Lady Cryssa? Is anything wrong? Do you wish me to schedule an appointment with a doctor?"

"No, no," she said, hurriedly. "Everything is fine. Just fine. I'm sure." An appointment with a doctor would mean drugs and drugs would mean no going outside and that would mean that perhaps just as Ryv managed to elude vigilance, he wouldn't find her. She didn't want to hurt him.

The next morning in the garden, she'd just completed the third trunk and started on the green leaves of the clustered trees, when she heard his step behind her.

Turning, she saw him, tall and muscular and perfect. She stood up, her heart beating fast, fast, fast, her breath coming in gasps, joy in seeing Ryv again joining with relief at his still being there, with curiosity about his absence, with pride at his still wanting her, all tied up with her dreams of release, her dreams of a future.

They didn't speak. Winged feet closed the distance between them.

She nestled in his arms, her head on his strong chest, against the black silk tunic he wore, feeling his warm, warm flesh, hearing his heart beat.

His mouth came down to meet hers.

She realized she heard three heart beats, three much-too fast hearts, beneath the fabric against which her face rested. That fabric changed, shifted, its pleasant coolness becoming cold, cold, colder, till the cold burned her skin, the cold penetrated her lips through those sensuous lips that rested on them.

Opening her eyes, she saw Ryv's eyes fill with unholy mirth, and she knew that if she could only pull back from that cold, cold mouth that devoured her, she would hear him laughing.

She pushed away with futile effort, against his powerful arms that suddenly appeared not to have any joints.

Memory shattered walls carefully built over the several years of her therapy and she remembered. She remembered that this had happened before.

Her heart thudding, her sight blurring, she remembered where she'd met Ryv. He was the young ambassador who'd come for a visit her father. His impeccable credentials and romantic appearance had won her heart, his obvious wealth had won her hand.

After their honeymoon, they'd set up a home near her father's house. Her father had promised to speed up Ryv's appointment to his own world.

But Ryv had disappeared for a month. And when he'd come back, he'd shifted in her welcoming arms. He'd become

The boneless, slug-like creature holding her contorted, so that more of its skin touched her body and held her in an impossibly tight embrace.

Yellow slime oozed from the grey skin, covering Kratrina's dress, freezing her.

She fought and screamed, as much against what held her as against the memories of its other appearances. She remembered the other homes, and how it had always managed to find her, and how it always came to this wrenching scene, and how this had happened before, so many times, so many other

* * *

Two hours later, when Kratrina didn't come in, two of the alien caretakers came and found her unconscious.

They knew, by the trail of yellowish slime around her, that their security had been breached. And they knew, too, upon interviewing Kratrina under deep hypnosis, that the creature had disappeared for a week. Long enough to lay its eggs. Somewhere.

When they found it, beneath the loose sand outside the ponderosa pines, and killed it, they knew they were too late.

Though Kratrina was kept sedated, but even that, they knew, was late. The creature's body, autospied, confirmed their suspicions that Kratrina's anguish during the week of the creature's apparent disappearance had caused it to spawn and her surge of emotion at the obscene embrace of the sluglike alien, had allowed the larvae to become spaceborn and to hatch in the cold void.

The administrator of the house took it upon himself to order the sponging of Kratrina's memories to prevent any residual emotion from seeping out, to feed those creatures. Or rather, that creature, since they were born by gemiparition each a replica of its parent.

The administrator also undertook to write to Kratrina's father. He wrote on old fashioned paper and with pen, communication between planets still depending on such messages carried by spaceships.

After an elaborate salutation, the Kelter elder who ran the home, gave the ambassador Cryssa bad news about his daughter, and proceeded to attempt to exculpate his establishment, "Though humans are undoubtedly the most advanced species in all the worlds," he wrote with slavish abandonment. "Yet, the Ortroden seem to have latched onto humans—or a certain type of emotionally needy human—as the perfect host. And, once latched, it is hard to prevent another contact, by the descendants/clones, of the

original Ortrode, that the emotional distress of the human subject has helped hatch. We, for all our wish to serve and help the human race, find ourselves unable to prevent the Ortroden approach. Being shape-changers, they always seem to get everywhere, somehow, and the best we can do is delay them. Their ability to make themselves invisible to surveillance equipment makes even that task arduous.

"This one, having got its fangs into your eminence's daughter, can, somehow, follow her everywhere and it is our opinion that only her death or human success in wiping out every Ortrode's litter will release your daughter from her emotional torture-chamber.

"Though we erased as much as possible of her memory, I fear that we were late and that the spawned larvae had already received enough emotional energy from her shock and horror, to survive to functional adulthood.

"This Ortrode came in disguised as a nurse, to be exact the nurse who was supposed to be watching your daughter secretly during her carefully controlled moments of solitude." The administrator sighed, looked ahead for a moment. "Nurses will, of course, be better examined from now on. However, it is too late for your daughter. For her security Lady Cryssa should not remain with us. She will be moved to the rest home in Drivas. Perhaps the icy climate will manage to keep the creature away as the heat didn't. But it is to be feared that with their shape-shifting ability, the Ortroden will adapt."

* * *

Kratrina sat in the little conservatory, shivering in her white fur cloak. Outside, a snow storm raged. She held her embroidery frame and worked on a detailed picture of a fairy-tale palace, done all in pastels and metallic thread.

"Lady, do you wish me to bring you a warm drink?" someone asked, just behind and to the side of her.

She turned. He didn't look like any of the male patients she'd met in this place.

Crawling Between Heaven and Earth

This story takes place in the time line of my Shakespearean novels entitled (as of this writing at least) Ill Met By Moonlight (published October 2001), and (upcoming) All Night Awake and Any Man So Daring. It would happen between the second and third novel. The fact that Shakespeare had a much younger brother who, emulating him, went to London to try to be an actor was too interesting a detail to pass up. One has to wonder if he had the same talent and what would have happened if he'd got to use it.

The winter of 1602 lay like cold death upon London, turning the great Thames into a frozen blue vein and putting waxen whiteness on the facades of the five-storied buildings.

St. Paul's yard, that great market of books and pamphlets, lay hushed under the great frost, its few customers hurried and harried, exchanging their few coins for the latest play by Master William Shakespeare, that sweet swan of the Avon, or the latest moral excoriation by puritan preachers.

Within St. Paul's Cathedral, the heart of London, less temple than meeting place and horse market and foreign currency exchange, street urchins urinated on the stone floor for to make it slick with ice and to watch the burgesses and bawds and dandies slip and fall.

Further down near the river, in the new, hastily built and dingy Liberty of the Clink, in the Theater, a wooden amphitheater open to the elements, the King's men rehearsed.

They wore their somber, black or brown everyday suits and cloaks.

Watching them say their lines and take their marks, Will Shakespeare, playwright and sometime actor, sighed. He felt too old now, too worn out, for the capers and acrobatics of the stage. At thirty-eight, he felt worn beyond his years.

But he missed the stage still, and he envied the actors.

This afternoon, for the performance proper, transformed, like tropical birds in this icy London, they'd wear their bright feathers: the satin and the silk, the shiny tinsel and brightly colored paste jewels of their art and craft.

Upon the stage, they'd be kings or noblemen, and figure in this place a distant city of spires and gold. And for a moment the audience would forget the cold and the bad harvests and the price of food, and laugh and cry and applaud the magic on the stage.

But for now the art was all craft, craft that must be polished and honed and sharpened against mistakes in the weaving of the illusion later.

And, watching, Will marked slips in craft and missteps in technique. But, most of all, he marked the absent one, his brother Edmund.

Where could the boy be?

Will Kemp and Ned Alleyn and all the other actors echoed their lines rigidly and made slow movements that would come fluid and tumbling in the play.

"Here comes the almanac of my true date." Will Kemp said. "What now? How chance thou are returned so soon?"

The line fell like a stone into a well of silence, no line answering it.

Kemp, who'd been reciting with his eyes closed, now opened them, startled, like a man who puts his foot down, in a dark night and finds not beneath it the solid ground he expects. ". . .so soon?" he repeated, and looked about, obviously trying to raise a response. ". . .So soon!" he said, this time peremptorily, as if the very force of the exclamation would force the reply.

Will Shakespeare sighed.

Edmund Shakespeare, who would play Dromio in the play, was not there. Kemp glared around himself and his mouth formed the words, "luckless boy." He took his hands to his waist, and looked towards Will Shakespeare.

"Will," he started.

Will answered not. He heard running footsteps outside, and guessed whose they were. He pursed his lips in a command for silence.

Will marked Kemp's exasperation and smiled. This was expected, this was normal. Edmund was but twenty and yet subject to those temptations and perils of the flesh that often turned young men's hearts to battle grounds.

Will thought back on his own youth with the soft smile that men reserve for folly survived.

Yet, as Edmund appeared on the stage, shouting the answer to the line that he'd half heard before, the smile vanished from Will's face. His heart turned sick, within him, at his brother's pallor, Edmund's halting speech, cut by struggles for breath.

"Returned so soon! Rather approach'd too late." Edmund stopped and rewrapped himself in his cloak. He shivered, despite the cloak and the sheltering wooden walls of the theater. "The capon burns, the pig falls from the pit. The clock hath strucken twelve upon the bell—My mistress made it one upon my cheek."

A young man of twenty, he gave Will the impression of seeing himself in a time-erasing glass, such the resemblance between the two brothers.

The hair that had receded from Will's forehead, leaving its domed expanse bare, still fell in lustrous curls framing Edmund's oval face and lending contrast to Edmund's intent golden eyes that reminded one of a bird of prey.

But Edmund's lips, that should have been soft and rounded and pink with youth and life, had become pinched, shrunk, blue as if with unknown pain.

He spoke Dromio's lines with no energy, each one pushed out flat and dead. And how pale he looked, Will thought. How deathly pale.

Hag ridden, Will thought. *Hag ridden*.

Once having thought it, he could not rid himself of it.

Will had reason to know that the old expressions, the folk sayings, the words and sentences that hinted at another world beyond this physical stage were more than mere parlance, mere weaving of tipsy tongues upon the scale of verb.

Born on a Sunday Will had ever been blessed with the seeing of that other world that, parallel to ours, runs like a golden thread upon the all too common fabric of existence.

In his youth, Will had consorted with elves in the nearby forest of Arden. And lived to know them neither so glittering, nor so benevolent as they looked, and yet neither so dark nor demonic as legend would have them.

Looking like angels, they were none—fallen nor whole.

And yet, elves were so powerful that to them mortals were like flies to wanton boys. They killed men for their sport.

Will looked hard at Edmund. Was he reading too much in the natural dissipation of his brother's youth? There was no reason for elf here.

Less than a year ago, Edmund had fallen in love—or professed himself so—with a girl, better than a

bawd and less than an honest woman. She'd proved with child, though both she and that child were now dead.

Did that not speak of Edmund's hot blood? Could his tired, wan paleness mean more than a few nights of dissipation?

Did that pale brow, those lackluster eyes, those lips tinged my bluish pallor, really mean more than the late nights, the drinking bouts, the easy ways of a twenty year old.

Will watched Edmund shiver and thought that his brother looked deadly tired.

"He'll never make it," Will Kemp said, from Shakespeare's right, making Shakespeare jump.

Like most men gifted in the art of clowning on stage, Kemp compensated for it with a ponderous gravity, a lugubrious seriousness of thought and deed at all other times.

Now his eyes, doleful and brown, met Will Shakespeare's inquiring glance with the forlorn look of a masterless hound. "He'll never make it, Will, you know it well. He has no energy to caper, no joy in his words. Were he not your brother, we would not let him play."

Will sighed. "Leave it be, Kemp. Leave it be. Let well enough serve its turn."

Perhaps Edmund was ill. He looked forlorn, true, but must that sadness mean that Edmund had brushed fingers against the icy diamonds of fairyland?

Will sighed. He must speak with the boy. Sure, he must.

Seventeen years older than Edmund, Will loved Edmund as a father loved his first son.

He'd been lavish with Edmund, in money and education, in help and friendship. But fathers owed their sons discipline as well as love, did they not? Did not the Bible say so?

Yet, in his mind, Will remembered his little brother as he'd been, three or four years old at most, with chubby cheeks and a toss of dark curls, chasing chickens and tumbling with dogs in the garden of their parents' house.

And he knew he could not be too hard with the boy.

* * *

Later, after the performance, Will sought Edmund out in the tiring room behind the stage.

Amid the smell of grease paint and in a confusion of discarded garments and hastily dropped tinsel crowns, every actor hurried and talked, each trying to wring from the other the praises that might lack from the audience.

"We've done well, think you not?" Ned Alleyn said.

And Will Kemp answered in his voice that ever, out of stage, sounded like the mournful tolling of a death bell. "Well at what, well? It did not go as it should. Not as it should, I say it. When young people lack the energy to . . ."

He stared at Edmund.

Edmund stood there, in the dark red velvet suit that had been Will's and that Will had given him barely worn. He had put on his left boot, but the right he held up to his eyes and frowned at the sole as though it had done him offense.

"Edmund," Will said, meaning to invite the youth to a tavern where, over mutton and wine, they might speak, like father to errant son and—with the medicine of Edmund's good repentance—minister the spreading blight that threatened to consume their friendship.

Edmund looked up. "Look here, Will," he said. In the shining pallor of his face, his golden eyes burned with something like fire. "Look here, Will. Look at this boot."

Speaking thus, he waved under Will's eyes the very worn sole of a boot, with a finger-thick hole starting at the center.

Will blinked. He pushed the boot away. "I gave you new boots, Edmund. Less than a fortnight ago," he said. "Why not wear those?"

Edmund cackled like a mad man, attracting the gazes of the nearest actors. "I am wearing them, brother. Your *finegift*. You never give me aught that's not near worn through, do you?"

"They were new." Will looked around at the staring actors, his gaze making each one avert his own gaze.

But he knew they looked back again, as Edmund yelled, "They looked new. I'll grant you that. But

unless they were rotten they would not have worn through in two weeks, would they Will? Not in two weeks, of walking home and to the Theater and nowhere else."

Will felt the pressure of the actors' gazes on his back. He could almost hear them begging Will to put the young pup in his place. The young pup who was an actor only on Will's fiat.

That pressure made Will speak. "But you walk elsewhere, do you not, brother?" Will asked, his voice severe. "To what brothels, what houses of assignation, what drinking holes do those boots carry you, brother, that you come in here late, always late, and always having forgotten your lines, and always looking like death tottering upon its own skeleton?"

Edmund opened his mouth. His golden eyes stared in surprised shock. He roared, an indistinct sound. "Curse your moralizing and your vanity," he said. He stomped his newly-shod foot upon the theater boards and trembled. "Now that your daughter is marrying a puritan, will you be a puritan too?"

I wasn't so young that I don't remember how big bellied your Nan was when she married you. You had your fun too, when you were young, did you not? Why must I be a saint? Wouldst you see me still in my tomb before my time?" He glowered at Will, who glowered back.

Will remembered his mad youth all too well. But remembering it, he remembered other things: his consorting with the elves in the forest of Arden hard by Stratford-upon-Avon.

Worse, Will remembered Kit Marlowe, that brittle genius who'd taught Will the ways of poetry.

Kit Marlowe had fallen in love with an elf, when little younger than Edmund. And that love, unrequited, for a creature who could requite lust but never warm human feelings, had been Marlowe's undoing. He'd pined in thought, and with a green and yellow melancholy he'd sat like patience on a monument, smiling at grief till his reason gave away and his mad plots killed him.

There was an air of Marlowe about Edmund, an impatience for joy which life did not give.

Will remembered Edmund as a little boy, with curls, playing in the backyard of their parents house.

Behind him the actors muttered of shame and lack of respect.

Will sighed. He must be firm. "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child! Away, away!"

Edmund looked astonished for a moment, hands on either side of him, slightly drawn, his whole body

tensed for a response, a gesture that would quell Will's responding words.

Then he laughed again. The cold ripple of his laughter shook the ice on the makeshift roofs over the best seats.

"You quote your own words at me, do you?" he said, and laughed. "Your own words that you got from the gospel? Ah, Will. You say my own poems are never good enough and that my poetry is trite. But I've never stolen so much from the commonplace, everyday prayers and psalms as you have." He trembled visibly, and a tide of color ascended to his cheeks, then receded again, leaving them paler. "Maybe that is why you always tell me my poetry is no good, Will. Maybe because it's better than yours."

Will could not answer that. Edmund's poetry, such as it was, had all the fire and power that Will's own words had possessed at twenty. But he lacked the calm of tutored thought, the quiet of reflected experience. Thus much had Will told him, ever. Thus much and naught more.

He'd always encouraged Edmund, had he not? Did he, in some corner of his being, fear this boy who reminded him so of Marlowe's greatness?

Before Will could reel in his thought, before he could respond to Edmund, Edmund smiled, a triumphant smile as if having proved his point, and turned on his heel, and headed for the door.

"You did well," Will Kemp said in a stage whisper. "You did well. Someone needs to rein in that boy, for his own good."

But Will watched his brother walk away in a stumbling, shambling walk, and thought he'd not done well at all.

The boy looked ill.

Will was at that age when his friends died, one after the other. Sometimes it seemed that all his acquaintance and everyone he remembered were mere ghosts, crowding around him with memoried affection but no living presence.

Old Mr. Pope, the actor, had died only two years ago. And this year Augustin Phillips, another actor, had died. Elizabeth, the great Queen in whose reign Will had been born, had died years ago, and before her brave, thundering Essex, her erstwhile favorite, who had for a while seemed to bestride the Earth and make the skies shake.

And Marlowe, great Marlowe whose words had taught Shakespeare's speech to sing, had lain ten years a-moldering in his anonymous grave in a Deptford cemetery.

It was as though Will had started a trip in this one coach, with coachmen and fellow-travelers, and one by one they'd all dropped off, leaving him alone and afraid.

But Edmund . . . Edmund had come into the coach long after the trip had started—he'd come into the world well enough after Will that he could have been Will's own son.

Will watched Edmund trip and right himself slowly, in the hesitant movements of the infirm or old.

Edmund could not be allowed to dissipate himself until he died of it.

Children should not die before their parents, Will thought, despite the daily evidence of his eyes, despite the example of his own family.

Will, himself, would die, sure, but he'd leave behind himself this brother who was like a son and who'd continue Will's own path.

Not knowing which he feared more: That Edmund's distracted mind betrayed illness or that the boy was consorting with fairyland, Will sighed.

He was an old man. Old men had sick fancies and turns of the spirit that bode no good. It meant nothing.

* * *

"Your brother is ill, Master Shakespeare," Edmund's landlady said.

She stood at the door to Will Shakespeare's Black Friar's house, a disreputable woman with a flying untidiness of hair. Her garments, rough homespun inexpertly dyed black, stood out in this upper middle class neighborhood. She spoke with a decided French accent.

"He's so ill he could not get up from his bed this morning." As she spoke, she twisted a disreputable, frayed handkerchief in her hand. "He told me to tell you that he'd not be at rehearsal."

And at this woman who, no doubt, consorted daily with actors and lived cheek to jowl with brothels, sniffed, a sniff of disapproval, at the theater and all the workings thereof.

Will nodded. What else could he do? He nodded and he searched the purse at his waist for two coins, which he handed the woman, and he spoke in the soft, cultivated voice he'd learned to use ever since his

wealth, his name had set him above the normal run of actors. "I will be along, shortly, madam."

Ill. Edmund was ill, after all.

He felt an odd relief.

Was this the coughing sickness that had claimed Edmund's Jenny and her illegitimate son by Edmund?

Will shook his head. It mattered not.

If Will's money could buy them, Edmund would have the best physicians, the most assured medicine.

If it was just this, just physical illness, then Edmund would survive.

And if not . . .

* * *

But all his hopes were dispelled as, after climbing Edmund's stairs two by two, faster than his own aging legs should carry him, Will entered his brother's shabby room.

Oh, sure, Edmund looked ill: parchment pale and drawn, he smelled of bitter sweat, of wasting illness. His breath left his lips like a howling wind, to be called back with groans of effort. The lustrous curls of youth lay matted and damp upon Edmund's yellowing pillow.

And yet none of this mattered. None of this.

A maiden stood between Edmund's small, rickety bed and the unsteady table that was meant to serve as Edmund's desk—where a ream of paper that Will had bought for Edmund sat, virgin of words, next to the untouched inkstone.

Solid as stone, unreal as ether, the beautiful stranger with the golden hair, stood and smiled at Edmund, and beckoned with wide smile, with enticing gaze.

She wore a white, semi-transparent gown, tight to her tiny waist and stopping short of the swelling roundness of her breasts, which peeked above the fabric with the creaminess of fresh butter and the sheen of fine silk.

"Come, Edmund, come," she said, her voice the soft whisper of a brook upon parched land. "Come with me to the plain of pleasure, Moy Mell, where Boadag is king for aye and where there's neither anger nor sorrow, nor pain."

Will stared. From the creature there came the heady scent of lilac flowering in a Summer night.

Hag ridden. He'd been right there. Edmund was prey of creatures like this, of creatures like onto the ones that Will had known in the far off days of his youth.

Standing at the door to that shabby room in the heart of London, Will ran his hand back over his domed forehead, through his thinning salt-and-pepper curls.

The smell of fairyland enveloped him. The creature's voice was soft temptation. She glimmered in the scant light coming through the thick lead-paneled window. She shone with her own vitality, her power, her magic.

Her golden hair flowed like molten metal, as she turned to smile at Will.

In his heart, at that moment, as its beats sped like a mad drum played by a drunken reveler at a fair, Will was again twenty and, again, stood in a forest and, artless, was made the dupe of a fairy princess.

It was a moment. A moment only.

The smell of Edmund's sour, bitter sweat mingled with the scent of lilacs. This smell of all too human mortality, the smell of the condition to which Will was born woke him from his dream.

Will had been right in that, too. Edmund was ill. And his illness might mean death. Or it might not.

Edmund was a healthy child, a happy boy, who had run happy and contented through the garden paths of his parents backyard, amid the vegetables and the roses, with never a sick day.

Edmund's vitality would count for him. He was young, he was strong, his life would continue.

The fear of death was nothing but a distant danger, Will told himself. For Edmund as for Will. Part and parcel of the fears to which man was heir.

And yet, in that land, Edmund would live on for sure. Will would live on for sure . . .

Will shook his head.

"My lady, what do you here? What call have you?" His voice caught on the words, as he spoke them, courteous and soft.

The creature, beautiful as moonlight and twice as cold, composed her milk-white features upon her little oval face, and smiled a little demure smile. "I came for to take your brother," she said. "To take him to the plains of ever-living, where the dance lasts forever and where his words, his fire and his youth shall serve us well."

Serve them.

Will's indecision stopped.

Oh, not serve them. Not Edmund who'd been protected from all debt, kept free and safe by his brother Will.

Free and safe.

He must be allowed to remain free. Even if he must risk death for it.

Will rounded on the thing, his hand going up to his forehead and retracing the papist sign of the cross, his lips falling, unawares, upon the words of the paternoster.

He should have known better. Of all people he. He knew these creatures neither angels nor demons—fled not from the holy signs, the holy words.

She laughed, a crystalline laugh. "What have we with your gods, Master Shakespeare? What have you with your crucified one? Leave it be. He has no rule over us."

Her voice was soft as velvet run over ice. Together with her smell, it made his hair stand on end at the back of his neck.

He thought of Quicksilver, king of elves. Once they'd been friends. Will heard Quicksilver's name upon his lips like a talisman.

"Aye," the woman said, and laughed again, the soft, mocking laughter. "Aye, you're of his well enough. I

see his power mark upon you. But that's naught to us. We are of Erin and not of this island. We care not for his rule. You are of Quicksilver's company, and you we cannot touch, but him" She smiled at him, silver and crystal, glittering and cold. "The boy will be ours, and fair enough. A bard for a bard and poetry to oppose to Quicksilver's spells, should it ever come to that."

The smile was a challenge.

"He's my blood," Will said. "He's my brother. You cannot"

"He is dying," she said, cold and precise. "Your medicine cannot save him. Here he will die. In our land he'll live. He'll live forever."

"In your land something shall live," Will said. "Something. One of you. Not my brother." He swallowed the words he wanted to say but knew not how to form—he, the master and spinner of so many words—that the creature there, in that glittering plain beyond pain and death would not be Edmund, not the child who'd run after chickens and played with dogs. There was no room for such things in fairyland, no room for the untidy mess of human feelings. "He might be ill, but he is young. He'll live. He'll live like the rest of us fellows who crawl thus, between heaven and Earth. He'll survive. He'll learn to take the bitter with the sweet."

But she laughed. "You know the rules, son of Adam. You know them well. Tonight is Winter solstice and tonight we ride. You hold on to him and he is yours. But once you let him go, once he joins us, he is of ours, he is none of yours." Before Will's eyes, she vanished.

The ride. Will knew the ride well. In Arden it had been a solstice dance. In his youth the elves had taken Will's wife, Will's Nan, captive. He'd held onto her through fire and ice while the fairies danced all about.

He could hold on to Edmund while the elves rode on. He could.

He looked at Edmund's pale face, Edmund's feverish, shining golden falcon eyes.

"In the tavern," Edmund was saying, as though he needed explaining. "I danced with her in a tavern. Oh, Will, it was the brightest place in the world, and their music the most wonderful."

The dance. There had been a dance, then, already, and Edmund had already taken part in it. He was marked by them then. Oh, Will must hold onto him and hold fast, or else was he gone forever.

"Worry not, Edmund," Will said. "Worry not brother. I'll hold onto you, and they'll never get you."

But Edmund's eyes were set and feverish, as if looking on landscapes that Will could not see.

"I am . . . ill . . ." he whispered. "Ill. The coughing sickness as took Jenny and the baby."

"You are young, brother, you are young, and I'll get you a doctor and medicine, the best, for my money, the best that can be got."

"The best," Edward echoed, and his voice rasped. "The best, for your money." His eyes, still fevered, seemed to lose their luster and their intensity. He looked at Will like a man who has wandered into a strange house and knows none of the inhabitants.

* * *

It started with a gentle pitter-patter, like rain against the window, like the far-off sound of walking feet.

Awake, by his brother's bed, Will looked at the candle markings by which he told the night's advancement. Midnight.

Deep night, dark night, the silent of the night. The time of night when Troy was set on fire. The time when screech-owls cried, and ban-dogs howled, and spirits walked, and ghosts broke up their graves.

Solstice night at midnight. That time that best fit for what was to come.

Will looked at Edmund who slept and in his sleep had regained some tint on his cheek, some look of innocence.

Thus had Will watched his brother sleep when his brother had been a very small child. And he'd watched Edmund awake for fresh joys and renewed life.

Let it be so again.

The sounds from the outer wall increased, till, of a sudden, it was thrown open like a door to let bright, silvery light through.

On that light, shapes formed.

Will jumped from his chair beside Edmund's bed, and, thrusting himself forward, grabbed his brother mid-body and held him tight, while Edmund woke and muttered a query.

But Edmund's query was stilled on a rasped breath, and Will himself took in breath suddenly, at the creatures entering the room.

There were two horses, one roan and one white. Upon the roan, on a saddle of hammered gold, rode a giant who resembled a man except for his too-fine features. He was in every part what a man should be—his hands strong, his eyes wide and green, his red hair a starburst of light around his happily-formed face.

He laughed like the coming of dawn, like the banishing of nightmares.

The white horse beside his had no rider. Or rather, its rider walked by its side, her hand upon the flower-decked reins, her golden hair for once caught up, and entwined also with flowers.

"We came for the pledge," she said.

Will shook his head and tightened his grip on Edmund.

But Edmund had awakened, and wriggled hard within his brother's hold.

"Let me go with them," he said. "For there I'm not sick. There is life grief-free, and it's forever."

"Their life is no life that you would want," Will said. "Their gold is only tinsel over leaves, their food so much air that has no flavor. Oh, there's grief aplenty in this world. But there's sweetness too, if you stay to taste of it."

"How would you know their life and their food?" Edmund screamed. With ineffective, weakened hands, he beat at his brother's chest.

Behind the King and Queen, other elves appeared—pages dressed in the gaudy color of the butterfly wing, maids who'd called on all the jewels of the earth for their adornment.

Many, many, many, they came in, crowding behind their sovereigns and pushing, till the room seemed alive with them and no space there was in which they weren't.

"How do you know who they are and what life would be like?" Edmund asked, his voice high and shrill. "Know you everything? Tried you everything ahead of me? Must I get my whole life as a stale thing, received second hand from my all-knowing brother?"

Will hardly felt Edmund's blows, but the words stung him as much as blows might have. Had he ever thus imposed on his brother? Had he ever told his brother how to live and what to do?

Try as he might, he could not recall a single instance. No, never, save maybe from that natural desire to safeguard his brother from the pitfalls Will had experienced.

"If it was done at all," he whispered. "It was done out of love."

"Love?" Edmund asked. His eyes, for once clear and bright and falcon-sharp, gazed up at his brother, as Edmund half turned. "Love? Oh, vile, servile submission. If this is love, brother, give me hate. You say their life is no life, and yet what have I had here? What but the pale shadow of the life you've lead, which like stale remains of another man's meal satisfy the hunger but not the palate?"

In the momentary pain of his surprise, Will trembled and Edmund all but wriggled free, crawling towards the light and the creatures in it.

"Let him come," the elf king boomed. "Let him come, Master Shakespeare. It is not your choice to make."

"No, never," Will said, holding tight. "No, I never will." And he held so tight, and he held so fierce that despite the lilac smell that made his head swim, despite Edmund's half-strangled cries for freedom and his pleading to be allowed to go, yet Will's grip was so strong, that the sovereign of elves quit laughing.

He looked to his wife and said, "Come my dear, for midnight passes nigh, and we must ride on."

The golden nymph climbed her white horse, and turned a saddened face towards Edmund, and seemed to mouth adieu through her tear-moistened lips.

Slowly moving, as if a road led them through the narrow space between wall and desk, the elves rode on, towards the far distant wall that now glimmered and which a bridge formed of rays of light now appeared, leading on to a land beyond—a land of golden fruits and virgin forest, a land such as no land in man's mortal world.

Edmund ceased his struggle, and his body went limp in Will's arms. "Is it fair my brother, that you keep me? Out of love, you say, but love or hate, why should you make the decision on my life? I would with them go, with them be happy."

"You'd not be yourself."

"And have I ever been myself?" Edmund asked. "Or a pale shadow that followed your glory where you went? I do not remember a single time in my life, where I wanted to be other but Will. Is that what you want me, then, brother, a pale puppet of your greater play?"

The King and Queen of elves were almost to the wall, almost to the entrance to the bridge and Will remembered Edmund following him down garden paths. Edmund learning to read that he might decipher the secrets of his brother's great genius. Edmund with great, adoring eyes, looking at his older brother and saying, "when I grow up, an' I shall be like you."

A pale puppet? What else had all this bought? Oh, it was flattering, and Will had dreamed that their paths would ever run parallel. He'd never thought that Edmund was not on a parallel path, but trailing him along a well beaten path, reluctantly trailing him like a boy who drags his book as he follows the schoolmaster.

Was that where this bitterness hailed from? The thrust of envy, the sting of discontent?

The faerie court was now mid-bridge, and the queen turned back to look at Edmund.

And yet Will knew that Edmund would be lost forever, if he let him go. And yet, hadn't Will lost Edmund already, by holding too tight?

Had he ever known Edmund, or just doted on a reflection of himself and, like Narcissus, almost died of such idolatry.

And Edmund with him.

Will forced his arms to open. It hurt as if he were doing it against the weight of years, the hopes of centuries.

But little by little, he made his arms open, as though they were the heavy door of a jail that must be defeated. Whose prison, he did not know.

He whispered, "Go then. Go, and be yourself."

Edmund hesitated but one moment. The space of a breath, he looked up at his brother, as if asking if he had indeed his consent.

And then he was gone, running nimble past most of the fairy court, to hold the flower-decked reins of

the queen's horse and smile, warmly, at him.

King Boadag laughed.

On the bed stayed something—who knows what? It looked like Edmund. Waxen, pale Edmund, dead as clay.

It must be a stock, Will thought, an enchantment left behind to prefigure the person taken by fairyland.

It must be a stock, for had Will not seen his brother run forward and, happy, join the fairy troop?

But the light was gone from the room, and the smell of lilac.

The walls had, once more, become solid.

From outside came the rustle of wind. A dog howled in the distance.

Will collapsed on his chair and covered his face with his hands, and found the accustomed words of confession coming to his lips in a trembling whisper, "for all we've done, and all we've failed to do . . ." And yet he knew not which had been the sin, and which the redemption.

THE END

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