

## One Thing about the Night

Terry Dowling

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"One Thing about the Night" was published in *The Dark*, edited by Ellen Datlow, a distinguished original anthology of horror and the supernatural. It is a polished and slickly told story of supernatural research, with rational scientific arguments and a finely tuned atmosphere that is the hallmark of the master craftsman. It somehow manages to be both authentically horrific and optimistic. It is an interesting comparison to the Neil Gaiman story, earlier in this book.

Like the good friend he was, Paul Vickrey had kept to our first rule. He'd told me nothing about the Janss place, hadn't dared mention that name in his e-mail, but what precious few words there were brought me halfway around the world nineteen hours after it reached me.

Access to hexagonal prime natural.

Owner missing. Come soonest.

Suitably vague, appropriately cautious in these spying, prying, hacker-cracker times, "prime natural" would have been enough to do it. But hexagonal! Paul had seen this six-sided mirror room firsthand, had verified as far as anyone reasonably could that it was probably someone's personal, private, secret creation, and not the work of fakers, frauds, or proven charlatans muddying the waters, salting the lode, exploiting both would-be experts and the gullible.

The complete professional, Paul had even arranged for an independent observer for us. Connie Peake stood with Paul Vickrey and me in the windy afternoon before 67 Ferry Street, the red-brick, suburban home overlooking the lawns and Moreton Bay Figs of Putney Park, which in turn looked out over the Parramatta River. She promised to be a natural in that other sense: someone with a healthy curiosity, an open and scientific mind, and a respected position in a local IT business, recommended to Paul by a mutual friend as someone

unfamiliar with the whole notion of psychomantiums and willing to help.

And now Paul was briefing her, giving her much of what he'd given me on our way from the airport. The Janss place would have been an ordinary enough, single-storied house except that its missing owner had bricked up his windows a year ago. At least a year, Paul was telling her, because it was all behind window frames and venetian blinds before then. Finally one of those venetians had fallen, revealing an inner wall of gray brickwork beyond, making 67 Ferry Street an eyesore and its reclusive owner an increasingly mysterious and unpopular neighbor.

"Seems Janss was a nice enough guy at one time," Paul was saying. "Friendly, always obliging. When he lost his wife and kids in the car accident, he went funny. He bricked up the windows, never answered the door. He abandoned the shed he was building in the yard, though he moved his bed out there and prepared meals and slept in the finished half. The neighbors still saw him around the place until two months ago."

"Surely local authorities did something," Connie Peake said. "Contravening building ordinances like this." We hadn't known her long, but Connie definitely seemed the sort of person who used words like "contravening."

"They never knew," Paul told her. "Not till the blinds in the living-room window there fell—in what used to be the living room anyway. Finally, neighbors did phone it in. The council investigated, and my contact arranged for me to be there soon afterward, as Janss's solicitor."

Which he wasn't, of course, but Paul was hardly going to tell Connie that. Who was to know that Janss hadn't had one since the inquest three years ago? Bringing me from the airport, Paul had explained that there was a sister in Perth who had come over for the funeral but seemed to have moved since then.

"A neighbor convinced them that they should break in, in case Janss had had a stroke or something and was lying there. He wasn't. The place was abandoned. So they fitted a new lock and stuck an inspection notice on the back door. My contact told me about the room."

"And now you have a key." His sangfroid had, quite frankly, astonished me.

"I do. If anyone challenges me on it, I'll say Janss and I had a verbal agreement. No paperwork yet."

"Provided he doesn't turn up."

"Provided that, though I'd just say someone phoned claiming to be him. Very thin, I know, but it's worth it. We have a window of opportunity here, Andy."

I could only agree. Hearing him talk to Connie now, I marveled yet again at how my only contact in this part of the world, a middle-aged former lawyer normally busy running his antique business, just happened to learn of this particular house halfway across the city, not through his usual antique-market channels but through an acquaintance who knew something about his interest in mirrored rooms.

"I'd like to see it," Connie Peake said, as if tracking my thoughts. "It's cool out here."

It was. A chill autumn wind was blowing across the river from the southwest. The big trees in the park across Ferry Street took most of the force, heaving and churning under a rapidly growing overcast, but screened off much of the

lowering sun as well.

"Of course," Paul said. "We have to go around back. There's no front door anymore."

Connie frowned. "But—oh, it's bricked up, too."

The comment brought a thrill. More than Paul's e-mail, more than seeing the dull-gray Besser bricks behind the window glass in the red-brick wall where the living room used to be. There was a prime hexagonal in there, in all likelihood a genuine psychomantium and more.

Eric Janss had let the trees and bushes in his driveway and backyard grow tall. No curious neighbors could peer over their fences at us. Anyone seeing us arrive would be left with impressions of three well-dressed, professional-looking people talking out front, obviously there in some official capacity and driven inside because of the deteriorating weather.

Paul unlocked the sturdy back door and we stepped into an ordinary enough combination laundry-bathroom. There was a washing machine, sink, drier, and water heater to one side, a toilet and a shower stall to the other. What looked like a closed sliding door at the end led deeper into the house.

"It gets stranger from here," Paul said for Connie's benefit, closing and locking the back door behind us. "I'll have to go first."

At one time, the sliding door would have led into a kitchen. Now, as Paul drew it aside, it revealed a short, dim passage of the same drab Besser brick we'd seen behind the front windows. At the end of its barely two-meter length was another door, made of wood, painted matte black. Paul switched on his torch, waited till we were all in the passage, and slid the first door shut behind us.

"So most of the house is dead space or solid?" I asked, again for Connie's benefit.

"We can't know without demolition or soundings, Andy. Janss probably brought in the mirrors through the French windows facing the yard, then bricked them up behind the frames. None of this is the original house plan. He pulled down interior load-bearing walls, pulled up flooring, and anchored the new construction in concrete."

"And the neighbors never knew?" I said. "Never saw him bringing in bricks or heard him doing renovations?"

"Apparently not. He was just the reclusive, recently bereaved neighbor. Maybe he brought in stuff late at night or waited till people went on holidays. Who would have known? You saw how overgrown the driveway and backyard are."

"Can we get on with this please, Mr. Vickrey...Paul?" Connie said. 'I'm supposed to be back at the office by five. You wanted me to see the room!'

She didn't mean it peevisly. She just had things to do; things no doubt set out very meticulously in a busily filled diary. In another life she might have been a relaxed, even pretty, woman. But not here, not now, not this Connie.

"Of course," Paul said, and moved past us to push on the inner door. It opened with a spring-loaded snick.

Other torches shone back at us immediately, dozens, hundreds of them, in a

sudden rush of stars. It was like walking onto a television set, that kind of dramatic, overlit intensity.

It was the single eye of Paul's torch, of course, thrown back at us a thousandfold from the mirror walls of Eric Janss's secret room.

"Oh my!" Connie said. "It's all mirrors!"

Paul, bless him, had been right. This was a prime and, with any luck, a true prime natural.

We stood inside a hexagonal room at least five meters in diameter but seeming larger because of the floor-to-ceiling mirror walls on all six sides. Even the wall behind us was mirrored, the door set flush in it as a hairline rectangle and barely visible, spring-latched to open at the slightest touch from either side. The floor was dark, varnished timber, but with little resilience to it; probably laid over concrete. The two-and-a-half-meter ceiling was matte black with a recessed light-fitting at its center. The only other features were an old-style bentwood chair and the reed-thin shaft of a candle stand next to it, a waist-high, wrought-iron affair and empty now. Whatever candle it had last held had burned right down. The chair and stand were at the room's midpoint.

Paul crossed to where two mirror walls came together and pressed a tiny switch concealed in the join. Soft yellow light from the ceiling fixture confirmed the reality, sent images of us curving away on all sides. What had already been a moderately large room now went on forever, every wall the wall of another room just like it, then another and another and another, on and on. It was as if you stood in, yes, a maze, or on a plain, or at the junction of promenades like those on the space station in Kubrick's 2001, arching and curving off. Very large array came to mind. It was startling, riveting, overwhelming, all those linked, hexagonal chambers, all those countless Pauls,Connies, and Andys sweeping away in an infinite regress. You knew the room ended right there, hard and cold at silvered glass, yet that was nonsense now, impossible. We were at the center of a universe.

"You see why I e-mailed you, Andy," Paul said.

Connie Peake had her notepad out, checking the word Paul had given her earlier. "And this is a...psychomantium?"

"Probably is," Paul answered. "There are other theories."

"Psychomantium covers it," I said, trying to cue Paul to hold back, but it only made Connie more curious.

"No. Please, Mr. Galt-Andy-you wanted me here as observer for this first entry. What is a psychomantium? What are these other theories?"

"It'll bias you, Connie. You're meant to report only on what you see today, what is actually here in case the site ever becomes--"

"I know. But you and Mr. Vickrey both know I'm going to do a Net search the minute I get back to the office. You might as well tell me."

"All right. But help us here, please. Just observe. You can go verify whatever you want and bring questions later. Paul, best guess, how long have we got?"

Paul shook his head. "Can't say. It's not being treated as a crime scene. Janss has disappeared, but there's no suggestion of foul play. He may have just gone off."

"But you don't think so," Connie said. "Look, I'm trying to be of use. Say I've done a Net search already. What's a psychomantium?"

Another time I might have resented the presence of this officious young woman, but not now. It was good to be challenged on the fundamentals, especially on the fundamentals. Instead of pleading jet lag and letting Paul deal with her questions, I kept my attention on the earnest face, not wanting her to see Paul and me exchange glances, and didn't hesitate.

"Okay. Psychomancy was originally telling fortunes by gazing into people's souls. Catoptromancy was scrying using mirrors. The Victorians were especially fond of combining the two: building mirrored rooms so they could contact spirits of the dead. Mirrors are traditionally meant to trap the souls of the departed and act as doorways to the other side; that's why they used to be covered or removed when someone died. A psychomantium is a mirrored room built for that purpose."

"You believe this?"

Again I didn't look at Paul. This was the way to go and I hoped he'd see that it was.

"That they existed and still exist today, yes. That they permit communication with the dead, no. But others believe it, and I've been collecting psychomantia, mainly the modern ones."

"What, as oddments? Curiosities?"

"As something humans habitually do, yes. As a constant; part of a fascinating social phenomenon."

"So not just as functioning psychomantiums," Connie Peake said. "You want the range of possibility behind them."

Now Paul and I did exchange looks. Where did you find this woman? mine said. I had no idea! said Paul's.

Again, I barely hesitated. Connie was surprising me, changing the preconceptions I had of her. "Exactly. It's the infinite regress that's the common factor, and Janss has created it here using a hexagon, what I consider the classic form. The reflections in the angling of two facing mirrors have to be as old as reflective surfaces: the first virtual reality. It must have always been profound, something people just naturally hooked things onto. The French have the perfect term for it—*mise-en-abîme*: plunged into the abyss."

We gazed into that abyss now, the endless rush of corridors taking the three of us off to infinity, doing it in long curves, sending us to the left in one mirror wall, to the right in the next, back to the left, and so on. The ceiling light had seemed kind at first, pleasantly free of glare. Now my eyes had adjusted, and it lent a hard, almost clinical quality to the unending rooms and hallways, making me think of the oppressive cubicles in George Tooker's *The Waiting Room*. I couldn't prevent it.

"Have you seen many?" Connie asked, almost in a whisper. The faux cathedral space seemed to demand it.

"Not dedicated ones like this. Mostly you get full-length mirrors set opposite each other in drawing rooms and parlors that give the regression effect, or batwing dressing tables with adjustable side mirrors set a certain way."

Sometimes it's hard proving they were intended as psychomantiums at all. There are a lot of hoaxes; descendants staging the effect for tourism purposes, claiming all sorts of things. Paul and I are looking for prime naturals, dedicated setups like this, with no trumped-up back-story to work through."

"And you've been lucky?"

"We've seen most of the famous ones," Paul said. "But it's the newer kind, the local ones, we're after. I've found four naturals, none as fine as this. Andy's located five, including a dodecagonal room—twelve mirror walls marked out according to the hours of the clock—a splendid octagonal, and two rather poor hexagonals."

"Using candlelight?" Connie indicated the candle stand.

"Almost always," Paul said. "It gives the most powerful—and traditional—effects."

"The most suggestive, I imagine. The most scary."

"No, powerful," I said, interrupting. "Look for yourself. This present lighting is effective. Janss knew to use a lowwattage, yellowish bulb, but it's like you get on mirror-wall escalators in malls and old department stores. It's not optimal, hence the candle stand. He wanted a controlled effect. So far as we can tell, all the naturals originally involved candles."

"Janss let his burn down," Connie said.

"And that's what we'll do," I said, letting Paul know that it was all right for Connie to know more. He'd accept the decision. "We'll sit here and let ours burn down."

"Turn about," Paul said.

"Turn about," I confirmed.

"You'll do it alone?" Connie actually gave a shudder. "It reminds me of that old skipping song we sang at school."

"I'm sorry. The what?" Paul asked.

"A skipping song." She gave an odd smile, part self-consciousness, part excitement, and recited it in the singsong rhythm of the schoolyard.

One thing about the night,

One thing about the day,

You turn around and meet yourself

And go the other way.

She gave another little smile. "The rope would be going really fast, and everyone kept singing it over and over till you had the nerve to turn around. If the rope was long enough, you'd either move back to where you started and duck out, or you'd keep changing directions on the word 'way' until you were out. The one who turned the most times won." She gazed off into the regress. "I guess Janss did his sittings mostly at night."

Now she had me. "Why do you say that? The room is completely sealed. It shouldn't make a difference."

"I think it completes the effect. He's got infinite night in here, but the sense of corridors leading off would be completed at night."

"It's less virtual."

"That's it." Connie checked her watch, but instead of reminding us she had to go, she surprised me again. "Can I stay for part of this? I won't intrude. I'd just like to...well, know more."

"We'll consider it, Connie," I said, the best refusal I could manage after a long flight and having been awake for twenty hours.

"You hope to find Janss."

"We're doing this irrespective of Janss," I said too quickly, too harshly. "Excuse me."

"Can you explain that?" she asked. "Before I go?" Connie Peake was proving to be a master at this, and her enthusiasm was infectious.

Paul came to my aid. "Janss left no journals, no papers, doesn't seem to have had a computer. We probably won't ever know what he was really doing. We'll have to go by what he made here."

"It's like archaeology," Connie said and turned to me again. "That other word you said about using mirrors. Catop-catop-something."

"Catoptromancy. Catoptrics is the branch of optics concerned with reflection, with forming images using mirrors. Catoptromancy is scrying by mirrors. A catoptromantium is an arrangement, sometimes a room, for doing this."

I hoped my tone would warn her off, remind her that I wanted to examine the room with Paul. She did begin to move to the door.

"So you can't know for certain if a room was meant as a psychomantium or not?"

"No, the distinction has been lost." My tone was even cooler. Please go, Connie, go. "It's more dramatic to talk of contacting the dead. It gets the media attention." Why was I encouraging her?

"I bet. And I guess you have lots of models at home. Miniature rooms made of mirror tiles."

She'd done it again. I had to laugh. "Yes, I do. It's a hobby."

"It's more than that," she said. "You're trying to know something. Look, Andy, can I see you? Can we go for a coffee or a meal?" She was so direct it stunned me. It was as if Paul wasn't even standing there.

"Connie, ask me another time. I've just arrived. I'm jetlagged and there's a lot to do."

"Of course. But another time. Please."

"Another time," I said, and we saw her out, to discover that the weather had turned. Rain squalls blew in across the river and the park, keeping farewells to a minimum. We watched Connie drive off, then hurried inside. Paul locked

the back door behind us.

"Sorry, Andy. She was more high-maintenance than I expected."

"But valuable, Paul. We don't have a pedigree for this one, and the chances of demolition are considerable. It's all we can do."

Another time, we'd have postponed our first session, allowing for my jet lag, or Paul would have done a solo sitting. But we really didn't know how long we'd have, and we'd been at so few sites together that we wanted to make a start, to log the room's properties and just enjoy being there. Tomorrow we'd alternate solo sittings, overlapping a half hour or so to share information, then try another joint sitting later in the week, if we had that long.

Paul brought in a chair from Janss's makeshift bedroom out back and we sat with our camcorders and Pentaxes, taking footage and snapping dozens of shots, first by the overhead light, then using the new candle fitted in the stand.

It didn't matter that it was windy and rainy outside. In Janss's mirror room, it was lit as if for night. There were no windows for the rain to beat against, just blind brick. In a real sense, time had ceased to matter. We could have been anywhere, and in day or night for all the difference it made.

Though Connie had been right. It did make a difference. Of course it did. Doing this at night would complete something when the candle burned away. When darkness was restored.

We measured the room's dimensions next—smiling as we always did at the play on words—dividing the space into a clock face for easy reference. The door in its mirror wall was at six o'clock; that wall's juncture with the next, going clockwise, was seven; the center of that face eight; the next juncture nine, and so on. Twelve o'clock was directly opposite the door; the concealed light switch was at eleven, a tiny, cunningly hidden press button, virtually invisible unless you knew where to look.

We didn't move the bentwood chair, of course. Its position to the left of the candle was as Janss had last had it, his back not to six o'clock but facing the full mirror wall at two, with the eight-o'clock mirror wall behind. It had to be significant.

Paul and I were enjoying ourselves. His long-suffering wife, Cindy, had sent along a "care package," as she called it: chicken sandwiches, blueberry muffins, and a thermos of coffee, complete with a note: Don't stay up too late.

When we were finally settled in our chairs, we shared a modest candlelit meal with our myriad selves out along the ever-dwindling boulevards, remarking on whatever details of construction or effect caught our attention, even beginning to work out a timetable for the next day. Paul would do a four-hour morning watch before going in to the office. I'd do the late afternoon and evening, and he'd pick me up around nine.

Connie was right. I wanted to be there at night. Night did make a difference.

Inevitably we fell silent, looking off into the regress. As in other dedicated mirror rooms we'd logged, all the familiar things were there: the certainty of valid distance and genuine form, the sense of being watched, the uncanny stillness in which the smallest actions—gestures, sudden turns of head or body—sent immediate and startling motion across the lines, set crowds of ourselves gesturing, mimicking, almost urging stillness again by their manic



imitation.

Paul and I knew the routine; nothing had to be said. We became utterly still, gazing into the deep, horizontal domains as Janss must have. In our sweaters and slacks, we made a dark knot at the heart of each chamber; faces and hands glowing in the candlelight like countless studies for Rembrandt's "Nightwatch." The corridors and mirror rooms took that calm as far as the eye could see, into the impossibility of dimensions that couldn't exist, yet did: space wrested from illusion, imposed on perception, demanding to be real.

We managed nearly two hours before jet-lag torpor made me call it quits. We hadn't let the candle burn away yet, but my journey across the world was already worth it. If Janss turned up right now, even if the police arrived and evicted us, we'd been in the Janss room at 67 Ferry Street. We were smiling as we went out into the rainy night and drove home.

I slept late, lulled by rain on the roof and wind around the eaves, and never saw Paul leave for his early sitting. An old friend of Cindy's dropped by and I didn't get to Ferry Street until after five. The rain had continued. The harsh autumn wind gusted in the trees, and the park and the river were reduced to so many inkwash veils in the chill afternoon.

I was glad to lock the back door behind me, to place my bag in the laundry and enter the mirror room again. Paul had left the ceiling light on, with a precisely measured candle in the stand so I could do a burn-down. It would take two hours. My mobile was off. My checklist and clipboard were on my lap, my tai-chi chime ball in my pocket. There was a penlight in case it was needed; my main torch, cam-corder, and camera were on the floor at my feet. Everything was ready.

At six sharp, I lit the candle, switched off the overhead light and returned to the chair, sitting with my eyes closed for maybe a minute so they could adjust. Finally, I opened them on the miracle of the mirror world.

I sat at the hub of an amazing wheel. Stretching away on all sides were corridors that existed only as reflection, arching off into replicated chambers of stars where other solitary watchers sat, eternally together, eternally alone. Each separate wall of the hexagon led into another hexagonal mirror room in which I was turned away, which then led into another where I was angled back, on and on, this way, that way, off to infinity, but with curves and archings according to counter-reflection and the imperfections and anomalies of the mirrors themselves.

In the ten-o'clock wall, lines of Andy Galt made an infinite corridor to the right. In the nine-o'clock wall, he arced to the left, then right, then left again in those puzzling alternations no one could satisfactorily explain. If I looked near where two mirrors joined, there was a boulevard, the sense of a shadowed avenue between infinite lines of Andy.

Mesmerizing didn't cover it. It was compelling, arresting, powerfully entrancing. I'd focus on a corridor, find myself staring at it, down it, across it, along all those curving lines of myself made into a string of honey-colored moons, party lanterns strung out forever along drained midnight canals and antique avenues. Yes, I was at the center of a universe. No other term came close. Janss had made himself a universe here, an orrery of realms in an arrangement few ever got to see, had brought endlessness into a red (and gray)-brick suburban home, put eternity into grains of sand and silvered

glass.

I logged the usual tricks when they came, the catoptric anomalies triggered in brains not intended to face things like infinite regress: the twelfth or seventeenth figure out behaving differently, the conviction of a light source not my own, the sense of rippling or of movements delayed or prefigured somewhere among the myriad forms, the constant game of "Simon Says" you played until you were sure one doppelganger was truly, even purposely, out of sync.

Complex mirror reflections like this had no precedent in nature, hadn't existed for the eye and brain to adapt to in the evolution equation. Perhaps mirrors were the most profound, the most dangerous, the very worst human invention. They suborned the integrity of the mind, couldn't do otherwise. We were never meant to have mirrors more elaborate than calm pools, clear ice walls, lightning-fused sandglass, and sandstorm-scoured sheets of metal of mica, dishes of water, blocks of obsidian, screens of iron pyrites, or oddities like Dr. Dee's lump of polished coal.

In the second hour, torpor took its toll, had me nodding off until—using the old Thomas Edison trick—I dropped the chime ball I was holding in my left hand and woke myself.

That was the cycle until 7:52, when the candle was barely a finger's width above the cup. The rooms were dimming on every side, readying themselves for night. It seemed as bright as ever, but that was an illusion. My eyes had adjusted to what light there was, had made an Indian-summer noon out of a generous twilight. It was like the heat death of the universe out there, all that warmth and life being drawn away in subtle shifts, like some pattern of entropy replicated in an insect's eye. Janss had seen this, had been in this chair, seeing these gradations of night come.

Absurdly, I recalled the title of a Giacometti sculpture: "The Palace at 4 A.M ." It felt like that dead hour now.

Connie's song was there, too, surprising me, the old schoolyard refrain about meeting yourself. That's what I'd been doing. Cued by the words, I turned, swung round in my chair. There I was on every side: flickering, faltering selves out in what was left of the vast, fading starwheel.

They trapped my eye, drew me image by image out into the regress. They were holding me there, fading, darkening. Be easy now, easy. Be with us. Let it come.

I felt a rush of dread, sudden and utter panic. The chime ball clanged against the floor; my clipboard clattered as I rushed for the switch, fumbled with it, brought up warm yellow light, saved us all.

Not tonight. No darkness tonight. I couldn't bear it. It was the jet lag, whatever. I'd do a burn-down at some other sitting. We would.

When Paul arrived at 8:53, he found me under the porch outside the bricked-up front door, sheltering from the rain.

Neither of us had managed a burn-down, it turned out. Perhaps it had to do with the room itself, the circumstances of Janss's disappearance, the unseasonal weather, even Connie's song. We agreed that it might be something best done together.

I did a nine-till-noon sitting the next day, taking dozens of photos and more video footage, this time using a tripod and automatic timer for PR shots, and adding a sporadic commentary, anything to keep me from pondering why I hadn't let the candle burn away. It had been a crazy thing last night; it was irrational now, but I couldn't help it.

When Paul arrived for his five-hour afternoon session, he brought a lunch invitation from Connie. There was a twinkle in his eye as he handed me the car keys and gave me directions. He knew how on-again, off-again my relationship with Pamela was back home. This would get me out of the loop, he said. It was good for me.

I felt trapped but pleased. I didn't try to consider motives. I'd keep it easy, light and professional, and with luck, get more of Connie's enthusiasm.

We met at a café in a rainy village court in Putney. Connie had her hair out and wore a shiny black raincoat too blatant to be calculated.

"I looked up the mancy words," she said as I sat across from her. Her smile utterly transformed her face.

"The what? Oh, the mancy words. Right."

"I never realized people took it so seriously. Lithomancy: scrying by the reflection of candlelight off precious stones. Macharomancy, for heaven's sake: reading swords, daggers, and knives. Imagine specializing in that. Clouds: nephelomancy. Things accidentally heard: transataumancy." She pronounced the word so carefully, as if relishing it. "It's like people made them up for the fun of it. Came up with wacky names like those collective nouns you get: a murder of crows, a parliament of owls."

"A loony of researchers!" I said. I wanted to see her laugh.

We ordered the lasagne with salad and coffee, then sat watching cars go by in the rain. I let Connie bring us back to it.

"Andy, if it's a natural like you say, Janss had probably never heard of catoptromancy. Never knew the word, never knew any variants."

"So the room is a psychomantium, and all he was trying to do was reach his family. Maybe voices told him to do it; maybe he went quietly nuts."

"Surrounded by ordinary households and normal lives," she said. "Sat there while candles burned down. Did it again and again. Then probably sat in darkness, for who knows how long, without the reflections."

I couldn't help myself; I'd had a bad scare the night before. "Without reflections, but with the sense of all those rooms still there, those avenues filled with night. You can't help it."

Connie gave a shudder. "That's a chilling thought."

"It's part of the effect. Both Paul and I have let candles burn away." Not this time, I didn't add, and wondered why I didn't, why it mattered. "You feel the...pressure...of the rooms still out there, going on and on. You know there's nothing there, that reflections need light—"

"But the brain registers images for so long it can't give them up," she said, going to the heart of it. "A retinal afterimage thing. Like a ghost arm

effect."

"And you can restore it all so easily. The little switch is right there, and your torch and your Bic lighter and matches. But the feeling is that they're still there."

"That's creepy, Andy. You're the master of all those rooms. They exist because of you."

"And the mirrors."

"No, you. It's your perception. Your conviction that they're still there. You're the activating factor."

The food arrived, but we let it sit a moment. "It gets stranger, Connie. Paul and I have confirmed it. When the candle finally does go out and you're in total darkness, it's as if your reflections, all the mirror versions you've been watching for hours, are pressing up against the glass. You even think you hear them moving in."

"That has to be hyperaesthesia. Anomalous perception. That's—"

"A mind thing, I know. It's exactly what it is. But it feels real."

We began eating, looking through the big window, again watching the cars in the rain.

"What if it's sciamancy?" she said between mouthfuls.

"It's what?"

"Sciamancy. What if it's a sciamantium: a place for making shadows, for reading shadows?"

I must have grinned in wonder, for she smiled back. "Andy, what?"

"You've been busy."

"I mean it. What if Janss made a shadow place? Not to contact spirits or read reflections—"

"To scry the darkness." It was so close to my own catoptromancy fixations that I felt alarm, genuine delight, true fascination. It was so good to share this. "Connie, maybe it is a...sciamantium."

"Night has to be psychoactive for us, doesn't it? You reach a point where a perception, even a misperception, triggers something in the psyche. You haunt yourselves. Janss, Paul, all of us. Everyone who tries it."

"I hope so. I hope that's what it is." All it is, I didn't add, didn't need to.

We finished eating. The plates were cleared and second coffees brought.

"It does have to do with light, doesn't it?" she said.

"Darkness."

"You know what I mean."

"It's an important distinction. Light running out, darkness being restored, what you were saying. We've always feared night, responded to it dynamically. We made use of that fear, and did pretty well, considering, but the primal response was to endure it, wait it out, worship and appease it."

"But mostly separate ourselves from it in sleep."

"Right. When we developed enough tribally, socially, to sleep safely. Then we modified the relationship over centuries, generations. Gas and electric light changed it, let night become romantic, a time for leisure and shift-work."

"The brain does learn."

"It has to. But only to a point. It's a dual thing: the adjustment and the remembering. My relationship with darkness was probably determined by how it was presented to me as a kid. Maybe Janss sussed it out, was taking the appropriate next step of embracing the night for all it is, revisiting it as a conditioned mind liberated from fearing it."

"The throwback fear thing hardwired in, but the framing culture telling us it's okay. Maybe the energy behind that fear can be directed differently. We don't do an ordinary lunch do we, Andy?"

"We didn't want one."

Connie smiled. "So Janss is a creature of his time, one more solitary watcher responding to what night has become for us. What else it has become. Something to inhabit and colonize, something to avoid. Have you ever tried infrared cameras?"

There she was, blindsiding me again. "What, and night-vision goggles?"

"Why not? It might give something."

"We've never been set up that way. We're more your boutique operation." Then it came out. "Connie, we haven't let candles burn down in the Janss room yet. Neither of us has."

There was kindness, instant understanding in her eyes. "So it might be sciamancy. The room could be a place for reading the form and nature of shadows, for creating intricate shadows, and both you and Paul sensed it."

It occurred to me then that if Connie was a natural, too, I should let her be one. "Make an argument."

"What?"

"Make an argument. It's a sciamantium. Convince me."

"All right. It's what we said. Janss was calling up the night. Humans have that ancient...an atavistic connection with darkness, and with the subtleties."

Subtleties. One word glossed it all. "He was creating an effect of night," I said, daring to believe it again.

"An effect of shadows and night that only the mirrors bring."

"Trying to reach his wife and son."

"You don't believe that any more than I do. It was accentuation. No,

intensification. It mightn't even be related to the deaths."

"Go on."

I expected her to say that she should accompany me.

"That's all. I just know that you have to be alone in there, Andy, like Janss was. It won't work with the two of you. It can't work. If it's psychoactive, it has to be just the individual enabling what happens with the mirrors, your mind reacting to the shadows. And keep Paul out of there. You should keep him out. He has a family."

"I'll do a burn-down tonight."

Despite what she'd said about being alone, I truly expected her to ask if she could be there. Part of me hoped.

"Just be careful," was all she said, and we returned to watching cars in the rain.

I napped from three till five. After enduring Cindy's jibes about going on a date with Connie, I relieved Paul just after five. We sat in the warm calm of the Janss room for a half hour or so, discussing everything but what Connie had suggested about sciamancy. One of us had to stay unbiased, and he didn't need to be burdened with additional labels and characteristics yet. That's what I told myself.

He finally left me to my evening shift, hurried out to the car and drove off through the bleak, wet evening. This time we'd agreed to leave our mobiles on. We didn't need to say why.

I filmed, I photographed, I did more commentary into the pocket recorder. I reached 7.00 P.M. without dropping my chime ball once. Everything was the same. Everything was different. Just the names: sciamantium and sciamancy took it from a familiar candlelight vigil to something new and unsettling: a night watch for shadowforms out in the marshes, the shadowlands, a warding off of unproven enemies in the backwaters of forever.

By 8:10 P.M. I was exhausted, ready to call it quits. It was all too still, too constant, too laden with immanence. No, not constant, I kept reminding myself. Now and then the hot blade of the candle did stir, perhaps from something as simple and immediate as my breathing or a microzephyr sneaking around the cracks and doorsills, finding a way in, and the lines of flames trembled, wavered, shook their points of light as if to catch my attention, as if to test me. Did you notice? Did you notice?

But mostly it was still, we were still, all of us in our articulated, nautilus chambers, our adjoining rooms.

The notion of a sciamantium kept me there, kept me resolved as the candle burned away, knowing that Janss had done this again and again, sat beside solitary flames made legion, watching himself parceled off into mirror chambers that gradually sank into night. He hadn't just been alone in a bricked-up suburban house, not merely in a fabulous mirror world, but at the focus of rooms destined for darkness. He'd made waiting rooms, filled them with light, then watched them empty out.

Waiting rooms, yes, where you waited for darkness to come, infinite, replicated darkness, growing, settling across all these real, unreal spaces. There could be no reflection, no possibility of rooms and boulevards when the flame died and the nautilus rooms emptied and slowly ceased to exist. Yet what if the opposite was true—if only in the mind? It was the old question of whether a tree falling in a forest made a sound if there was no one to hear it.

I kept wondering about defaults in the brain. How was mine dealing with the idea of all those darkening rooms out there, the prospect of what might use those boulevards when the light was snatched away? What was it devising even now to protect. Andy Galt from inconceivable, unprecedented threat?

Minutes felt like hours. I'd look at my watch to find the hands had barely moved. It was like being on detention at school, time cruelly stretched and distended. The thought sent Connie's schoolyard rhyme running through my mind. But I'd already turned, faced where I'd been, met as much of myself as I could, my selves, going this way, that way, mocking me, taunting shadowforms in the infinite regress. The song's words were an incantation, a maddening litany. What had Janss been doing?

Then something caught my attention.

Did I imagine it, or was there a shadowing off in the distance—the false distance at two o'clock, where the images blurred into uncertainty? I blinked, took off my glasses and rubbed my eyes. There did seem to be something, a dimming, a shadowing out there.

I quickly looked about me. Behind and to the sides, the infinite rooms were as bright as ever, star chambers arcing off like settings for outdoor recitals. Carols by candlelight. Madrigals by Mirrorlight. A Cappella, in the Waiting Rooms. Nothing had changed. It was only ahead, in the mirror wall at two, that there seemed to be a darkening, like a storm at the edge of the world, spilling a little to the sides, but only a little, and way out in those real, unreal, never-real distances.

It was impossible, of course. Physically impossible. Any shadowing had to be replicated, shared, made part of all the reflection corridors and boulevards on every side. It was basic catoptrics.

Or selective self-delusion. Something served up by fatigue and an over-stimulated mind.

My adrenaline rush was real. I went into automatic observer routines, questioning everything. If the candle flame had been down at the rim, close to guttering, I'd have accepted it more easily, but two centimeters of candle stood well clear of the cup.

It was me. It had to be. Some optical trickery, some effect of jet lag. I'd been sitting and staring too long. My bored brain was entertaining itself. Finding things. Making things.

Or it was the room!

I reminded myself that the imperfections of an average wall mirror enlarged to the size of the Gulf of Mexico became waves twenty meters high. Could it be the mirrors? Part of Janss's intended effect?

He had to have seen this, had to have been in this exact situation. That was why the chair was angled so. Checking the anomaly at two o'clock.

And he hadn't survived it.

Or he had simply gone away, seen something that drove him off.

Again I removed my glasses, rubbed my eyes. Again I checked the image field. It was there, definitely there, something was, something like swelling, burgeoning night, or perceptual trickery in the glass or in the vision centers of the brain. Defaults, yes, that was the word. What were the defaults set there?

Enough. I'd give it up for tonight.

As a way of withdrawing, anchoring myself in the reality of 67 Ferry Street once more, I located the tiniest black dot of the light switch where it sat in the join at eleven o'clock, looked over my right shoulder to confirm the barest hairline of the door in the mirror wall at six.

One more glimpse, one more try, I decided, as Janss must have.

The shadowing was there—the spreading “darklands,” whatever they were. I smiled at the fancy, a hopeless victim of autosuggestion now. It was crazy. Too much peering off into distances, making eyes track vistas rarely, if ever, seen in nature, never meant for eyes with a such a highly developed, reactive brain behind them. I simply wasn't sure what I was seeing.

I had my mobile. Now was the time to call Paul, to have him join me and verify what was happening.

Connie's words stopped me. I had to be alone with this, had to allow that the eye-brain link was overwhelmed, set to doing the only thing it could: imposing order, treating this as something real, even as crisis, but rigorously dealing with it. Of course there were shadows, optical tricks. Of course there was fear, feelings of disquiet and alarm. What we'd said about the night related to eyes and mirrors, too. Just as we were completing our connection with night, so too we were changing what eyes, what brains, needed to do.

The darklands seemed to be growing, pushing from the two-o'clock focus into the mirror rooms at one and three. Behind, everything remained as bright and steady as ever. It was in that two-o'clock spread that it was happening.

“Let it come!” I spoke the words to hear myself say them, aware of what an ominous line they would make on the audio track. I took more video footage, more photographs. I filled the time with deeds, filled with the dying of the light.

The flame sank closer to the rim.

My mobile rang. Thank God! Paul offering a reprieve!

But it was Connie.

“Andy, do you know what sciamachy is?”

Not now, not now, I wanted to tell her, but the word held me.

“Say again, Connie. What what is?”

“Sciamachy. Not mancy, machy!”



"Not offhand. Something to do with shadows."

"Fighting shadows, Andy. The act of fighting shadows. Imagined enemies."

"Okay. Look, I'm nearly done—"

"Andy, what if it's a sciamachium?"

"Hey, look, thanks." I wanted her to go. I didn't want her to go. "Connie?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks. I mean it. I'm doing it. Alone. I'm doing it."

"I know. I know, Andy. But a sciamachium. Just call me when you're done, okay?"

"Promise."

She had known, I realized as I put the phone away. She was a natural and she had known.

The shadowing beckoned, teased at two, flexed dark fingers. Look at me, look at me! Everywhere else the rooms were bright and constant, seemed to be. I sat watching the darklands, wondering how they could exist, finally convinced myself that they spread only when I glanced away. It was using my mind, my eyes, to build itself.

I held the darkness with my eyes, daring it to slip into new rooms, consume new Andys. With all the bright rooms at my back, I held it at bay with my eyes and Connie's words, Connie's skipping song running through my mind.

Urging me. Connie the natural urging me to turn around.

I did so, looked over my shoulder at the eight-o'clock wall.

And there was dead-black night filling the glass, night the hunter pressed to it like a face at a window. The shadowing at two had been the bait.

I tipped forward in shock, slammed hard against the floor, reached for the first thing I could find—the candle stand—meaning to angle it up, to fling it at the dead-black wall of glass.

But stopped in time. Barely managed. Do that and I'd be in darkness when it shattered. Night would be everywhere, flowing out.

I scrambled to the eleven-o'clock corner, reached for the tiny button.

Yellow light filled the rooms. Most of the rooms. The black wall held at eight like onyx, obsidian, a membrane about to burst. The darklands shadowed off at two, but just the lure, just the distraction.

Now I flung the candle stand. Now it struck the glass, crazed and shattered the wall. The pieces clashed down, left dead-gray Besser brick beyond. At two o'clock, the darklands were no more.

When Paul arrived fifteen minutes later, Connie was with him. They found me

standing by the front gate in the wind and rain, cold and shivering.

"Janss didn't know he had to turn around," I told them as I climbed into the back seat. "He never turned around."