The Lone Star Stories Reader

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Marguerite Reed
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Edited by Eric T. Marin

The Lone Star Stories Reader is an anthology of fiction. All incidents, dialogue, and characters are products of the authors' imaginations and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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PERMISSIONS

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I am indebted to too many people to name for assisting, advising, and cheering me on in my work as editor and publisher of *Lone Star Stories*, but I would like to specifically thank Neil Clarke of Wyrm Publishing, Gavin J. Grant of Small Beer Press, Deborah Layne of Wheatland Press, and Sean Wallace of Prime Books for their excellent anthology-publishing advice and input.

Finally, a special thanks to my wife, Carol, for her love and support from the day I first considered becoming a small press publisher in late 2003 to today.

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Introduction

Sherwood Smith

The book you are holding in your hands is evidence of the tectonic shifts altering the landscape of publishing. Fifty years ago the stories in this anthology might have been culled from any of the numerous nickel magazines on the spin racks at drug stores and train stations and shoe shine benches.

Over the past fifty years, the print magazines have dwindled in number as Americans shifted to watching television during leisure time. Despite dire prognostications, however, reading has not vanished. Along with the rapidly developing nature of the Internet, electronic 'zines have begun to proliferate.

Lone Star Stories made its first appearance on the first of February, 2004. It is free to all readers, though authors are paid a good faith sum from the pocket of the editor, Eric Marin. The stories have always been speculative or fantastical, sometimes experimental, often edgy, and never predictable. The 'zine also contains poetry; Marin himself is a poet.

There being far fewer good markets than there are good writers, Marin can be choosy.

In the old days, you found new magazines by cruising the covers, by discourse in print, and of course by word of mouth. These days, we don't have cover art as an eye-catcher on the Internet. What we do have is an ever-growing network of people finding others with the same tastes and interests that can be readily shared with a single click. I first heard of *Lone Star Stories* when reading an online interview with Jay Lake:

he mentioned his latest story being published in *Lone Star Stories*. I thought, Hmmm, Lone Star? Stories by Texans, maybe? I'd go for that—a lot of excellent writers live in Texas, or came from there. Or stories about Texas? That would be a draw as well. The Lone Star State has some of the wildest history in the Wild West.

The zine's page was readably austere, no agglomeration of blinking lights or klunky photo clip art. There wasn't even an editorial, just three stories and three poems. In reading the issue I discovered that while a couple of the stories evoked the distinctive landscape and cultural mixes found in the Southwest, the common element was not regional but speculative.

When I asked what prompted him to put the time and energy into this venture, Marin said:

> I started *Lone Star Stories* for two reasons. First, I'd wanted to publish an SF/F magazine back in college but did not have the money to do so. Some eleven years later, I realized that the web allowed me to start an e-zine with very little capital and keep it going for a long period of time with a small amount of money (compared to a print publication). Second, as a writer and reader, I saw some cool online and electronic venues back in 2003, but I also saw a lot of badly run, low quality e-zines. I thought to myself, "Hey, I can do that, and I can do it well." I asked questions of other editors and publishers, did a lot of research and planning, and then started the webzine. I knew it would be tough. (I still remember someone taking bets on how long it would take for *Lone Star Stories* to fold after I announced the creation of the webzine.) However, I was determined to make it work. So far, it has.

Eric Marin has enough excellent material for several anthologies. After twenty-five issues, he decided to test the print medium with these stories. As I write (May of 2008), the United States has been in the throes of election madness and the prospect of ground-breaking change; the world is restless and troubled, with natural disasters in China and the Southeast of Asia; the summer movie season is kicking off with the fourth Indiana Jones film. I say this to pinpoint time and place because, while I believe the genesis of this anthology occupies a unique position in the rapidly changing landscape of publishing, the stories themselves will be both appealing and apposite to the human condition in ten years. In fifty.

The stories come under the heading of "fantasy," but you are going to find their voices, moods, characters, and fantastical elements as broad as the sky view from highway 40 across the Panhandle. Of the fifteen stories, six have a distinctive setting in the Southwest.

Three stories—Martha Wells' "Wolf Night," Josh Rountree's "When the Rain Comes," and Jay Lake's "The Hangman Isn't Hanging"—take place during the time some scholars are beginning to call the War for the West, in each case fantastical elements sharpen that sense of change and danger. Mentions of Chicago are brief in Catherynne M. Valente's "Thread: A Triptych;" its mail-order bride is bound heart and soul to Heraklion. Gavin J. Grant's "Janet, Meet Bob" (which is not tied to place, but to the present time), and Tim Pratt's "The Frozen One" (framed event within future within present) are told in distinctive voices that could make fantastic readings or podcasts.

There are two stories set vividly in the present-day Southwest: M. Thomas's "The Great Conviction of Tia Inez," and Marguerite Reed's cinematic "Angels of a Desert Heaven." Slightly in the future—and one universe over—Sarah Monette's "A Night in Electric Squidland" takes place in the South.

Contemporary big city forms the settings for Nina Kiriki Hoffman's short, deceptively quiet "Seasonal Work" and "The Disembowler" by Ekaterina Sedia—the latter setting a big city one universe over where mechanics take a 180 degree turn.

Two of the stories evoke familiar fairy tales, both turning the rules inside out: Sarah Prineas's "Dragon Hunt" and "Giant" by Stephanie Burgis. And there are two—Samantha Henderson's "Manuscript Found n the Paw Prints of a Stoat" and Patricia Russo's "The Oracle Opens One Eye"—that might be termed pure fantasy.

I will assume the concept of fantasy needs no introduction to the readership likely to be drawn to this book. We know that all literature is fantasy, that fantastical elements appear as far back as we can trace the history of story. We don't need to go into the internecine struggles between fabulists, New Weird, old Märchen, and the other iterations of Us against Them. Fantasy is a forgiving category, which is one of the reasons it has endured so long. The deeply comforting and even regenerative effect of wish-fulfillment is a big part of why kids resort to this type of story during the years they are bumping up against the limitations of the real world. And not just kids. At some time or other, everyone just needs the good guys to win—and the bad guys to be as easily defined as they are defeated.

However, none of the stories in this anthology are wish-fulfillment fantasies. The single element they all share is their transformative nature. Fantasy's true strength lies in its ability to redefine the limitations of reality by symbol or playful element or nightmare made real. By throwing all the understood rules into the air—rules binding personal relationships as well as social and cultural expectations—the reader of fantasy is given the chance to examine them. The recognition of rules we want to discard as opposed to what is worth striving for can be transformative, redemptive, regenerative. This is how we change the world—and we do it while having fun.

Read, think—and enjoy.

Wolf Night

Martha Wells

It was the dead end of winter and Parker was riding through the Little Sally pass, his saddlebags filled with a payroll he really oughtn't have, wearing every stitch of clothing he owned and wishing he was someplace warm, like Hell. Up in the highest notch, just before the canyon started to slope down, he saw an old Indian standing alongside the trail.

The old man was knee-deep in snow, a ragged hide robe wrapped around him, his head slumped down and stringy gray-white hair falling forward so Parker couldn't see his face. He looked as if he had come just so far and couldn't go a step more. At the moment, it wasn't hard for Parker to sympathize.

He reined in, leaned forward, and tipped his hat back. "Old man, do you need some help?" The horse couldn't carry two for long, but judging by the bony shoulders outlined by the shabby leather, the old man couldn't weigh much more than a child.

The Indian didn't answer. The horse stamped and snorted, uneasy. It was late afternoon, thick gray clouds overhead and the wind rustling the fir trees down the pass. Snow was falling, very gently, little flakes catching in the old man's hair. Parker wondered uneasily if the man had died like that, frozen stiff, standing up.

Then the Indian lifted his head.

His eyes were red, as if the vessels had burst and filled the whites with blood. The pupils were open slits of blazing light.

Parker's feet came out of the stirrups as he fell sideways off the horse, dragging the rifle out of the saddle sheath on the way down. As he landed hard, the startled horse leapt away like a deer and Parker had the gun aimed, all in one furious, heart-stopping, scared-witless moment.

The Indian hadn't moved. Parker expected him to be doing something by now: turning into a wendigo, growing horns and batwings or big teeth to eat the meal that had stupidly stopped to chat, but he hadn't moved. Parker kept the rifle trained on him but didn't fire. On the off chance that this was a shaman who hadn't decided to kill him yet, he didn't want to make this worse than it already was.

The eyes he didn't want to look at were fixed on midair. Very quietly, the old man started to speak. The voice was raspy and hollow, but human. Parker couldn't understand him; there were three tribes around these mountains, and the language could belong to any of them. Parker stayed where he was until the old man stopped speaking, and his head slumped again.

Cold was creeping through Parker's blood. He pushed to his feet, chilled from the snow. Nothing happened. He started to make a wide circle around the Indian, but when he got even with him, the figure disappeared. *Damn*, Parker thought, irony coloring his fear. *This is going to be a day.* He took an experimental step backward, and from that angle he could see the old man again. Someone coming up the trail from the other direction would never have noticed anything.

Clumsy in the deep snow, Parker went on up the trail and spent a while catching his wary horse, and another while calming her down. And calming himself down. It had to be a warning, but he had come this way last year, and he knew this wasn't anybody's sacred ground. So what was the warning for? It was undoubtedly clear as glass, if you understood whatever language the old Indian's chimera spoke. Common sense said to heed it anyway and turn right around and go back. "Can't do it," he told the nervous horse regretfully. The payroll in the saddlebags said he had to go forward.

Parker mounted again and urged the horse on, slowly picking a path through the snow. It was getting colder and there was no use looking for answers where there weren't any.

It took a long time getting out of sight of the place, and Parker didn't look back.

But he wanted to, the whole way.

A storm chased Parker down the mountain and into the deep pine of the valley. It was dark, and he was leading the horse by that time, battered by the wind and drenched by freezing rain.

The snow at the top of the pass was nothing but ice down here in the pines, just wet enough to find its way inside his coat and soak him to the skin.

There was a stage stopover and outpost a little way ahead, and he meant to stay the night there. It was far too early in the year for a stage to run through here, but there would probably be a caretaker. Unsure of what condition he would be in when he arrived, Parker had cached the saddlebags back along the trail, under a pile of flat rocks.

He hadn't encountered any man-and-horse-eating demons on the way down the pass, or anything to show what the chimera's warning meant. But maybe it was such a lousy night even the demons were tucked up in bed.

Then ahead in the dark he saw a flicker of light. He pushed toward it, stumbling over invisible rocks in the dark, thinking, *That better be the post.*

As he got closer he started to make out details. The light came from a couple of hurricane lamps, the muted glow illuminating a row of wooden posts that had to be a stockade wall. He could see a broad wagon gate standing open, two men looking down at something crumpled on the ground.

The light caught blood, bright against the muddy ice. The damage was mostly concealed by the dim light, but what Parker could see told him it had been a man.

"Oh, fine," Parker muttered. This was just about all he needed. His horse, finally catching the scent of blood in the freezing wind, jerked her head and sidled.

The men looked up, startled, and there was suddenly a rifle pointed at Parker's chest.

"Easy!" he said, lifting his hands, showing one was empty and the other held the horse's reins.

One of the men picked up a lamp and carried it over, staring hard at Parker. Parker tugged his scarf down from his face so they could see he was human and opened his coat. He didn't have a speck of blood on him and the gutted body was covered with it, steaming in the frigid air. "Who are you?" the man with the rifle demanded.

"I was coming down the pass when the storm started, wanted to take shelter here for the night," Parker told him. The cold rain was stinging his cheeks. "What happened?"

Nobody answered, and the one with the lamp withdrew.

"Hey, are you going to let me in?" Parker felt helpless, trying to pretend he could still feel his toes. He could hear they were arguing, but couldn't make out the words. If he had known he was going to end up like this, he would have let the army catch him and save the whole damn trip over the damn mountain.

"All right, come in!" someone shouted finally.

They had to throw a tarp over the body and drag it aside before he could get the horse through the gate. There was a sheltered lean-to just inside with another hurricane lamp; standing in the lee of it, out of the wind and rain, was like stepping into a warm parlor. Something short and wrapped up in furs started to talk to him, but Parker's attention was caught by the young man with the shotgun who was closing and bolting the gate.

The short, furry figure pointed past him, into the compound. "... Stable's that way, son. Got here at a bad time, you did. ..."

That was an understatement. Parker followed him out of the shelter. The freezing wind struck again, broken somewhat by the stockade. Parker staggered across muddy ground slick with ice patches. They blundered around the big dark shape of a stagecoach and into the stable, which was blessedly warm and far better than the lean-to. Parker waited until his guide got a lamp lit and then asked, "You had a little trouble tonight?"

"You might say that now. This is wolf country tonight." It chuckled, face still invisible under the fur hood. "It's bad too, real bad."

There was a team of matched grays and a couple of tired pack mules already stabled. Parker picked a stall without waiting for permission, unsaddled the horse, and started to rub her down. His hands were numb inside his gloves and clumsy, and his frozen ears were beginning to thaw, giving him a pounding headache. The fur-covered figure just stood there and watched. Parker guessed they were starved for entertainment around here. He decided to play naive, and asked, "So that fellow was killed by wolves?"

The figure laughed, shed the hood and a couple of knitted scarves, and turned into a little old man with a salt-and-pepper beard, small eyes, and big yellow teeth. He reminded Parker of a chipmunk, and not in a good way. "Not wolves, one wolf. We got wolf trouble. A werewolf."

Parker gave him a hard look. "A werewolf? It won't be a full moon for another two weeks." Besides, he didn't think an Indian shaman would bother with a chimera to warn about a werewolf.

"This one don't need a full moon, don't need nothing. He ain't under no curse. Likes it probably. Sinful." He shook his head, a sad chipmunk. "Killed two men, and a horse, earlier today. I saw him, took a couple of shots at him, but he just faded away into the snow." He grinned. "You don't have to look like I'm daft, young fella. You can ask the stage passengers—they believe."

Parker wished he could ask the mules; they probably had more sense. "Yes, I might do that."

"You'll see, we're gonna have wolf trouble tonight. That's for sure." The chipmunk laughed again and headed for the doors. "Come on into the post when you're done. Stabling is half-price for the night, 'cause of the storm."

Parker finished with the horse, swearing under his breath. He was trapped for the night with a stage full of other people's problems and townsmen who thought everybody they met was a werewolf. "Probably all on their way to Miller's Crossing for a witch burning," he said in disgust to the horse, who flicked an ear.

Outside again, he couldn't see much of the posthouse in the dark but got the impression of a long, rambling building. When he opened the heavy wooden door, what little conversation there was stopped. He stepped inside, letting the wind slam the door shut behind him. This was the long public room of the post, where passengers would wait while the horses were changed.

The lanterns were smoky, and most of the light came from the fire in the big, stone hearth. The place smelled musty, like it hadn't been opened up in some time, and the walls were patched with yellowed newspaper.

There were three men—one sitting at the plank table, one standing at the hearth, and one looking as if he had just stopped pacing and was anxious to get back to it.

Parker tipped his hat politely. He hadn't seen an unfriendlier set of expressions since the last time he and Harry had robbed a train. He wished Harry were here now, instead of waiting for him in Piscaro, but there was nothing to help that. He headed for the fireplace and put his back against it, dripping on the sooty stone as the ice caught in his coat melted. "Quite a night." From this angle, he saw there was a woman seated at the table too, gloved hands around a mug for warmth. She wore a long, black dress, and her hair under her bonnet was very straight and very dark. Her face was calm and still, like something from an old Spanish portrait, but her skin was pale.

"Who the hell are you?" That was the pacer, apparently not in a very genial mood.

"Easy, mister, I just came in out of the cold," Parker said, sounding sociable to save argument. In his career he had always been more interested in acquiring money with as little notice as possible, and not shooting people. He didn't like trouble for trouble's sake. The obviously overwrought man glaring at him was well-dressed, in his forties, graying, built stocky but going to fat.

He snarled, "How can we be sure of that?"

Parker's mouth quirked at the nonsensical question. "Guess we're just going to have to take my word for it."

The woman said quietly, "Mr. Abernathy, please." Parker liked her voice.

"Quite right, ma'am," the man standing at the other end of the mantle said. His coat was still dripping on the floorboards, and Parker figured he had been one of the two men at the gate. "No reason to be unfriendly." He looked at Parker. "I'm Gunderson. That's Preacher Johnson." He nodded to the dark-clothed man still sitting quietly at the table, "Mrs. Johnson," *Damn*, Parker thought, "and Mr. Abernathy. We were heading to Twin Rivers on the stage, but the ice storm hit, and we had to stop off here." Gunderson was about Parker's age, with a droopy mustache and a flashy red waistcoat.

"That was a mistake," Abernathy muttered, starting to pace again. That was going to get on Parker's nerves sooner rather than later.

"There wasn't a choice." The preacher stood to put a comforting hand on his wife's shoulder. He was droopy and mousey-looking, and seemed to need the comfort more than the composed figure of his wife.

"Kind of early in the season to run stages through this route, isn't it?" Half-assed was more like it, but Parker wanted them to talk about themselves and not ask him questions.

Abernathy shrugged. "The weather was clear at Chandler's Ford. I thought it would hold. I have to get to Twin Rivers—"

"It wasn't your fault, Mr. Abnernathy," the preacher interrupted kindly. "I have a position at a church further west. My wife is going to teach school there. We wanted to get there as soon as possible, so we took the risk of the weather."

Gunderson glanced at Parker, a little more pointedly. "And you're . . . ?"

"Heading to Miller's Crossing." He wasn't heading there, but it was a logical destination for anybody coming down the Little Sally pass. "So you think wolves killed that man out there?"

They stared at him, stricken, except for Mrs. Johnson, who lowered her head a little and lifted a hand to her mouth.

Gunderson shifted uneasily. "That was the stage driver. Two other men have been killed since we pulled in at dusk. Old Jim, the post caretaker, saw . . . something attack his helper outside the stockade. He fired at it, but by the time he got out there the boy was dead. It wasn't pretty. So the stage outrider went for help. He came back tied to his horse, tore up so much that Halday, our driver, hardly recognized him. The horse was bled so badly, it didn't last long either. Kind of left us trapped here, at least until morning." He smiled thinly. "You see why things are a little tense."

Parker frowned, trying to make sense of it. It sounded like whatever it was hadn't been stalking the area for long, or Jim and his helper would have been dead before this. It had to have been here at least long enough for some shaman to find out about it and put up the chimera to warn his people off. "You think it'll let you alone in the morning?

You aren't going to try to leave when the storm lets up?" From what they had said, the thing liked to pick victims off one at a time. A stageful of armed people should be safe, even moving slow in the dark.

"These things don't have any power in daylight," Abernathy said, taking out a handkerchief to wipe his face. "A Haunt got stirred up in Pines one night, frightened a couple of folks to death. But it lost its power in the morning and just drifted around. You could see right through it, like frosted glass, and it couldn't do a thing."

Yeah, but that was a Haunt, Parker thought. Haunts didn't eat you. It was probably a mistake to attempt to talk rationally to these people, but he tried, "Why are you all so sure it's a werewolf? They don't usually—"

The door banged open, letting in a blast of cold air, Old Jim, and the man who had let Parker into the post. He took a hard look at Parker and said evenly, "I'd like you to turn over your pistol."

Parker lifted his brows. "Considering what's happening here, that doesn't sound like too good an idea."

"We didn't have to let you in," the man countered, still eyeing Parker unkindly.

Jim chortled at him. "Halday, I run this place, and just 'cause you people jinxed it with a wolf-curse is no reason for me to turn folks away on a night like this."

Glad the chipmunk was on his side, Parker said, "Look, the thing he described isn't going to have to sneak in here. It'll just climb the stockade."

"That could be right," Halday agreed evenly. "It could also be that Jim's 'werewolf' is a crazy man playing games."

They stared each other down. Parker could see the man was afraid. Maybe frightened enough to do things he wouldn't ordinarily do. "What does that mean?" Parker asked him quietly. "You're going to run me out of here?"

Halday didn't answer and his expression didn't change. The others were watching like it was a stage drama; whatever happened, Parker didn't think they would interfere. Then Halday said slowly, "You can stay. But I want to keep your gun until you leave in the morning. I already took the rifle out of your gear in the stable." He added, suddenly a little self-conscious, "It was the only thing I touched."

Parker's eyes narrowed, but it was almost fair, under the circumstances. He debated being jumped by Halday and Abernathy and probably Gunderson and Johnson too, and ending up out in the cold with the thing the chimera had been left to warn about, versus being stuck in here unarmed with the thing the chimera had been left to warn about. Either way, it was better without the cold. "It's a deal." Smiling affably, he unbuckled his gunbelt and stepped up to hand it to Halday.

Somebody suggested food, and Jim said, "That's a good idea. Come on back to the kitchen and I'll get us some dinner."

But it was Mrs. Johnson who silently took charge, taking meat and bread out of Jim's larder. She turned the meat over on the table, studying it, nose wrinkled thoughtfully, before she cut it up for sandwiches, did the same for the bread, and sifted the

coffee like she was looking for weevils. Jim allowed her free rein, chuckling to himself about a woman's touch in the kitchen. Considering how bad Jim smelled at close range, Parker didn't think she was doing it out of a sense of duty at all, and he had never been so grateful in his life.

She took her gloves off to work, and when she handed him the plate he noticed her hands were pale and neat, the nails filed back nearly to the quick.

The kitchen was a smaller room, and the potbellied stove kept it almost warm. Nobody seemed to want to talk, but Parker still wanted to know more. "So what did you see?" he asked Chipmunk Jim. Jim stared at him blankly, and Parker clarified, "When the first man was killed. He was outside the stockade? What did he go out there for?"

He was trying to get Jim to tell the story from the beginning, knowing people always came out with details that you would never think to ask about. Or that you didn't want to ask about in front of the concerned parties. From what the others had said, it sounded like the coach had already been inside the stockade, and Parker would have liked to know who was stretching their legs out in the yard and in sight when the man had been killed, just to settle his own mind. But Jim shuddered in his bulky coat and skipped all that, saying only, "The light was failing early because of the storm. I just got a glimpse of it, running off into the trees. I heard it howl."

"That doesn't mean it's a werewolf," Preacher Johnson said quietly, making everyone look at him in surprise. He had his

hands wrapped around a mug of coffee for warmth, his eyes on the fire inside the stove's belly. Mrs. Johnson didn't look up at him. "There are creatures of darkness that could do this, that could curse this entire valley."

Ignoring the interruption, Jim continued, "Dark as pitch, running like a wolf but on two legs." He shuddered again, but Parker read malicious enjoyment in that, not fear.

Starved for entertainment, Parker thought again. "If it's not a werewolf, then it could be somebody using craft, making a chimera of himself to make it look like he was with the others. And if that's so, he could have killed your guard with a spell, and not his hands."

Abernathy snorted, but Halday and Gunderson stared at him. Gunderson said, "You ask questions like a lawman. Are you a lawman?"

"I was raised by Jesuits." It wasn't true, but it did tend to shut people up.

"Why do you think it's not a werewolf?" Halday asked, sounding more like he might be willing to listen to the answer. Parker chalked it up to the Jesuit thing.

"It's not a full moon," Parker pointed out. But it seemed like there was another reason, too. Parker's gut was telling him that even if everybody on the coach except Halday was a werewolf, he would have still bet the whole army payroll that something else had done this.

Parker never managed to get more sense out of Jim, and nobody else had seen anything to speak of. Finally Mrs. Johnson went

down the hall to one of the bunkrooms to retire. Parker thought the back of the house had to be nearly as cold as outside, but she seemed to want the privacy. Gunderson had gone out to take Halday's place guarding the gate. The others were in the kitchen.

Parker waited for the place to get quiet, then he went out on the porch.

The storm had died away earlier while they were eating, leaving the night still and frozen. There were lamps lit out in the yard now, several hanging from the porch roof and lighting the area around the gate. In the pools of yellow light, he couldn't see anybody moving, just the fine coating of ice. He had never been warm enough to take his coat off, and his clothes were still damp, but he stepped off the porch and walked toward the stable, ice crunching underfoot.

The sound was oddly loud in the quiet, and Gunderson stepped out of the lean-to beside the gate to stare at him. Parker, determined to maintain a friendly and innocent demeanor no matter what, waved. It was too dark to see the man's expression, but he didn't wave back.

Since Gunderson had seen him and it would be good to have a more obvious reason for walking around in the cold, Parker stopped and opened the stable door. He held it wide enough for the lamp light outside to penetrate the darkness. The horses and mules stared curiously at him.

Then a patch of ground a few feet away exploded from a shotgun blast.

Parker bolted for the corner of the stable almost before he realized Gunderson must have shot at him. In the dark patch between the two buildings, he flattened himself against the wall and called out, "What the hell?"

"I saw it! It went this way!" Gunderson was running across the compound, out of the lamplight, toward the outbuildings.

"Don't follow it!" Parker yelled. "That's what it—" wants. Oh, for God's sake. He ran after the man.

Past the barn, between two tumbledown outbuildings, Gunderson jolted to a halt, lifting the gun. Something moved in the shadows, a fast blob of darkness. Parker saw Gunderson go down and the gun go flying. He dived for it, landing in the frozen mud, and snatched it up. He rolled and fired the other barrel into the dark thing standing over Gunderson. It jerked, snarled, and tore away from the body, hunkering down only a few paces away.

Parker rolled to his feet, holding the empty gun like a club, thinking, *Back away slowly, then run—very, very fast.* Then the creature laughed, a high-pitched growl of amusement, and bolted off into the dark.

He took a step toward the body, but there was nothing to be done; Gunderson had been ripped open neck to groin, blood pooling dark on the frozen ground. *Saw that one coming*, Parker thought sourly. It could have gotten him, too. It obviously knew the gun was empty, having tricked Gunderson into firing the first barrel. But he figured it had done what it came to do; picked another one of them off. Then he felt a prickle along his hairline

and looked up. Mrs. Johnson was standing a few paces away on the other side of the body, a neat figure in her dark coat and bonnet.

"Mr. Parker," she said with perfect composure, drawing her skirts back from the blood.

"Mrs. Johnson," he said. She didn't look at all discomposed for a woman standing over steaming insides. *Yep*, Parker thought, *Just out for a walk on an icy winter night in an isolated outpost populated by strange men and murdering werewolves.* Of course, she might just be having an affair with Halday or Chipmunk Jim. He tossed the useless shotgun down next to the guard's body. "I don't have a gun."

"Neither do I."

"But I don't think you're unarmed." He circled to the right, trying to get a better view of the body without touching it, keeping one eye on her. She went left, keeping one eye on him. "Did you see it?"

"I saw what I was meant to see," she said, her voice as neat and precise as her movements. "Why did he shoot at you?"

It could have sounded like an accusation, but Parker knew it wasn't. "He didn't. He thought he saw it creeping up on me. But there was nothing there." He added, "He saw what he was meant to see."

Her fine mouth twisted in agreement. "It's unfortunate."

Then the door to the post banged open, and hurried footsteps crunched on the snow. Mrs. Johnson vanished into the dark with a flick of her skirts. Parker yelled, "Over here!"

Abernathy, Preacher Johnson, Halday and Chipmunk Jim were running toward him from the post.

Johnson moved up beside Halday, saying with grim fear, "So it's in here with us now."

"Maybe it always was." Abernathy looked white-eye scared. "This thing . . . it didn't start until we got here."

"That's what I said," Jim put in, not helpfully.

Ignoring him, Johnson was glaring at Abernathy. "What do you mean? You think it's one of us? Is that what you're saying?"

Abernathy flung his arms up in exasperation. "You heard the old man, none of this happened before we got here! It has to be one of us. I said we should all stay together, but Halday and I were alone in the bunkroom when the shots woke us. Where were you?"

"I was with my wife, where do you think?" Johnson said coldly.

Abernathy stomped back inside, but Halday held a lamp while Johnson and Parker got the body wrapped in a tarp and carried it out to a shed near the stockade wall, where the other three bundles were. If it hadn't been for the cold, the place would have smelled like a charnel house by now. "It can't be one of us," Halday said as they crossed the yard on the way back. He sounded as if he was mostly talking to himself. "No one was alone, except you." He threw a sidelong look at Parker. "And you don't have blood on your clothes."

"Thank you for noticing," Parker agreed.

Johnson said, stubbornly, "It must've climbed the stockade, then got back out again."

And he'll stick to that story 'til it kills us, Parker thought. He said, "I'll take the watch. If I can have some shells for the shotgun."

Halday stopped and eyed him. "It's my job, I'll do it."

Lack of blood only went so far, apparently. As the others went into the house, he said, "I'll check the horses, then," and headed toward the barn. He glanced back, making sure Halday's attention was on the gate, and stepped into the shadows between the two buildings.

He stood still a moment, feeling his feet freeze, waiting for his eyes to adjust. Now he could finally have a look for what he had originally come out here to see.

He made his way through the dark, past the rundown outbuildings. It was too dark to search without a lantern, but on this night that would be like traveling with a brass band.

He reached the stockade wall, and felt his way to the corner. He couldn't see a damn thing and reluctantly tugged his glove off. His fingers were mostly numb, but the marks carved into the post were wide enough to feel with the back of his hand. He stepped away, pulling his glove back on. Those were some kind of hex signs, and the carving wasn't new. They were pointing inward, meaning to protect whatever was in the compound. "Not doing such a great job at that," he said under his breath.

Unless they were. *It could be that,* Parker thought. He should have gone with first impressions.

He went back to the house, moving quietly, keeping to the dark patches. The floorboards of the back porch didn't creak, and somebody had left the latch lifted on the kitchen door.

But Chipmunk Jim had been awful careless for a man who was being stalked by a werewolf or whatever the hell. Parker had thought about trying to enlist Halday's help but had already discarded the notion. Appearances aside, Johnson would probably be the one most likely to keep his head. But explanations and proof would take too long, and they would all end up with their insides steaming on the ground. And he still wasn't certain where Mrs. Johnson fit into all this, if she was an innocent bystander or cheering from the grandstand.

He had to pass through the front room to get to rest of the house, and Johnson was in there with Abernathy, sitting on opposite sides of the room, both watching the door. Parker nodded to them as he went through to the back, down the dark hallways, past the locked doors that led to rooms for storage of supplies and beds for passengers, past the presumably locked door to the bedroom Mrs. Johnson had taken.

Halday had put the guns in a locked room in the back that did the duty of a safe for mail. Parker felt for the lock with a certain degree of confidence; he had been a safecracker before it got easier to just blow the things up. But the hasp was already broken.

Well, you should have seen this coming, he told himself wearily. He stepped back and pushed the door open with a finger.

Jim was standing inside, leaning against the cabinet where Halday had put the guns. He chuckled merrily to himself. The chipmunk teeth were now long and white and pointed on the ends. He said, "Now tell old Jim what gave him away."

"There was hex marks protecting whatever's inside the stockade. If you could do that, you could stop anybody with a wolf curse," Parker said, to give himself time to think. Jim had long dirty claws now, too—long sharp ones that hadn't been there an instant ago. His coat had fallen open to show nothing under it but a squat, muscular body covered with straggly, black fur soaked with blood. Jim had smelled pretty foul as it was, but the cold had disguised the worst of the odor. "But it's not a wolf curse, is it?"

"Oh, no. That was just a joke." Jim chuckled. "You weren't the only one I was teasin'. Funny, huh? What's the point of someone being a werewolf and smelling the witchery on me, and then not being able to tell anybody about it because you can't say how you know? Now that's funny."

"You used a chimera to make Johnson and Abernathy think you were with them when Gunderson was killed." Parker took a step backward, trying to think where the nearest weapon was, if he could make it all the way outside to Halday and the shotgun.

Jim shrugged. "Didn't have to. Just gave them a little nudge to make 'em fall asleep. I was in the yard with you the whole time, boy. When they come running up I just stepped up behind them like I'd been following them the whole time."

Harry had always said Parker liked to make things too complicated. He took another step backward. "So you thought you'd live in the woods, eat folks, for fun?"

Jim shook his head, grinning. "I came out here to get away from the witchcatchers back east, but the damn Indians sniffed me out. The local medicine man made one of my rituals backfire,

and I ended up like this. I haven't tried any since; they're dangerous stuff."

Parker took the last step and slammed the door, but Jim was damn fast. Parker was just turning to run when the door burst open, knocking him flat. He shoved to his feet and slammed his way about seven paces down the hall when claws caught in his coat and yanked him flat.

Parker twisted around and saw Jim leering down at him. Parker kicked at his kneecap, connecting hard and sending Jim falling forward, flailing. Parker rolled and scrambled up, lunging forward again, but a set of claws wrapped around his ankle and pulled him down.

Then the nearest door flew open. It startled Jim enough that he let go when Parker scraped at his hand with his bootheel. It gave Parker just enough time to get his feet under him and throw himself through the door and into the room.

He landed on the dusty floor and realized the dark figure looming over him was Mrs. Johnson, bonnet askew and furious, holding an ax.

Jim lunged in after Parker and got the first swing right in the face. He staggered back, yowling like a wounded bear, and Parker shoved to his feet, breathing hard.

A faint line of consternation between her perfect brows, Mrs. Johnson handed him the bloody ax, saying, "Better cut his head off to make certain."

There wasn't much else to do under the circumstances. Parker took the ax and said, "Yes, ma'am."

What with all the explanations of how Jim turned out to be a monster, Parker didn't get a chance to talk to Mrs. Johnson in private until the next morning, when Halday and the others were occupied with harnessing the horses and loading the coach. They were going to take Jim's poor packmules with them, since there was no telling when the stage company would be able to get someone to take over the post.

The sky was gray and overcast, but it didn't smell like more rain was on the way. Mrs. Johnson was standing primly on the porch, wrapped in her dark coat, her little hands gloved again. Without looking at him she said, "You knew. About me, I mean. When?"

Standing below her on the muddy ground, Parker leaned against the post. "When you took your gloves off in the kitchen." He thought that would have been a good moment to take her hand, but across the yard, Preacher Johnson was holding the horses for Halday and had one eye on him. It was a shame. He had never had a woman hit anybody with an ax for him before, and it had quite turned his head. He just explained, "You keep your fingernails cut back so you don't accidentally scratch anyone. What I didn't realize is that you were checking the food to make sure Jim didn't put any curses on it. He looked so unhealthy, I just thought you were checking it over for rot."

She nodded slightly, keeping her eyes on the other men across the yard. "He knew, as soon as I stepped off the coach. As I knew what he was." She folded her hands tightly. "You haven't said anything yet, so I assume you don't intend to."

"Oh no, ma'am," Parker assured her. "My friend Harry has the same condition."

She looked down at him then. Her face was still serious, but her dark eyes were smiling. "You haven't told me your name," she said, not making it a question.

Considering what he knew about her, Parker couldn't see why not. "It's Robert Parker, ma'am."

Parker managed to be the one to hand her into the coach, though Preacher Johnson gave him a dark look. Parker just tipped his hat and smiled.

Seasonal Work

Nina Kiriki Hoffman

I tied the last bow on the last package the woman had brought to my gift-wrapping station. "The present goes to . . . ?" I held my pen poised over the gift card.

"Excuse me?" she said.

"Who is it for?"

"I'll make out the card when I get the present home, thank you, young man."

"I have very nice handwriting," I said, "and this way you won't get any of them mixed up." I looked at the stack of presents. She had three this size and shape, and four others that resembled each other. Six assorted that she might be able to figure out for herself. I had my doubts.

"Oh, my. You're right." She stared at her stack of wrapped presents.

"This one's the powder blue terrycloth bathrobe," I said, patting the last wrapped.

She checked her list. "That's for Bob."

Bob, I wrote. "This one's a set of green bath towels."

"For Mother."

I wrote. "This one's a fuzzy blanket throw with a leopard pattern on it."

"For Misty, my sister." She stared at the rest of her packages in despair, until I told her what each one held. My memory for gifts was excellent. Always has been.

She gave me a five dollar tip.

The girl next in line stepped up to the counter but wouldn't look into my eyes. She set her heart down in front of me. Spun glass, beautiful, fragile—a typical teenage girl's heart. "For Josh," she whispered.

I gift-boxed the heart, wrapped it in red tissue paper, hesitated over the tag. Josh was already getting six hearts for Christmas. And he wasn't the type who knew how to take care of them. He'd probably break them all.

"Are you sure?" I murmured.

She nodded, gaze focused on the tips of her shoes.

"Look at me." I stared at her until she looked up. Amber-brown eyes, shy young beauty so fresh it had no idea of its future. She was perfect, the way a hundred young girls in the mall were perfect. I touched her face. Something quickened and flashed in her eyes. I knew she could see me now. "Moira. Give this to someone who knows what to do with it," I whispered.

"All right."

Stephen, I wrote on the gift tag, and handed the package to her.

The next girl in line was a little older. She stared me straight in the eye and set a lovely bile-colored curse down in front of me. "For Josh," she said.

I wrapped it in green paper and put a red bow on it. I smiled when I handed it back to her, and she smiled too, the smile of one who had been mortally wounded.

The rest of the week was easy because I knew what one of my presents would be.

It had been a long time since I got a heart for Christmas. The glass powders and stings as you take the first bite. It's the best taste in the world.

"Janet, Meet Bob"

Gavin J. Grant

Every story begins in the middle, ends too close to said middle, and describes not a jot of the real experience. When Bob is trying to kill Janet, where is her husband, Jerry? By all the dictates of convention, Jerry should run inside just in time to stop Janet from being horribly murdered. Or, conversely, he's having it off with his secretary—who is, of course, Bob's wife. Or sister, or mother, or aunt . . . and that's the poor, sad reason Janet is soon going to be little more than two lines in the Metro section of a newspaper that was bought out last year, was never much good, and is dying faster than Janet.

Our local friendly (to hoteliers and dirty cops) journalist is hoping that Bob is black (life, maybe death). Or at least Latino (20 to 30, out in 12). That's a story. Or, if the sad sack of shit is white (8 to 12, out in 5) maybe he'll at least do something ritualistic or even Satanic. Or maybe, and said journo settles his sweaty ass

further into the cheap office chair, Bob is short for Bobbie, Roberta, it's a "Lesbian Love and Lust," "Leather and Lace L . . . ," L, L, L. There must be something good beginning with L.

Life's too short to worry about the journalist. He'll find the thesaurus, and in years to come he'll cover so many of these "domestic disturbance" cases that he'll retire at fifty-two when he creates a very popular betting line that correlates repeated domestic disturbance calls to subsequent murders. It's not a scientific relationship, he tells Howard Stern and, somewhat later, Larry King, but it's close enough to be fun for journalists, cops, medics, and soon, everyone else. He's right. He's also divorced twice and can no longer pay for actual sex in his city. He will try in other cities. He will meet a woman, coincidentally named Janet, and try to convince her that his hands are the ones she would like to undo her bra at night. She'll listen to him and think about how since she had her arm surgery she always chooses bras that snap in the front, and if that's all he's good for, then he isn't good for much.

The original Janet—who may be the same woman, but this story ends before we'll find that out—this Janet with less and less oxygen in her blood, has realized that if she does not do something akin to poking Bob's (white, 33, not married, right-handed, medium-penised, one of the last of the old-time soda jerks) eyes out, she might die. She does what she has to do.

While the jury deliberates over Janet, Bob breathes through a tube in the local hospital. He is awake two hours of each day.

During those hours his muscles are worked by a physical therapist—who does not know anything about Bob, except that Bob hates everyone and hopes to die rather than keep having to do these exercises. Bob has been tried and convicted *in absentia* for the attempted murder of Janet. Should he ever be able to walk, or even move his head, he will be carefully transferred to the federal prison system. He would still not be married, but he might be someone's wife. Bob refuses (*grimly*, he thinks to himself, but *fearfully* would be much more accurate) to think about that and waits for the next needle to be pushed into the tube. He likes that one. It knocks him out.

In O'Leary's Bar, on Beacon Street in Boston, the debate rages over which prison Bob will be sent to. Throughout the fall, Sandy's position (last name, age, and gender withheld by request) has been that without male genitalia, Bob is no longer a man. On Sunday night, before the band came on, the person to Sandy's left had argued that that definition would not stand up in a playground, never mind a court. Sandy asked him outside to discuss it further, as each time a serious opponent appeared Sandy had done before. [This request may encourage the reader to consider Sandy as male. It should be kept in mind that on this Sunday evening, of the two people now outside, Sandy is the shorter, the one more redolent of self-applied scent, the more likely to do the laundry. You should realize that none of these identifying quirks mean anything.]

Janet is not convicted. Once the judge admits Bob's tape of his

and Janet's night together into evidence the jury goes from expecting her to be fried (even though Massachusetts has ceased revenge killings in return for previous crimes) to exonerating her and wondering if they can award damages. The judge strikes down the jury's multi-million dollar award, explaining that Janet will have to take Bob to court for a civil trial for that to happen. The jurors are disappointed, and a little angry at Janet. Janet's family and friends are haunted by attorneys for weeks on end.

Bob's unwitting co-conspirator's name was Arnold. He lived some miles from Bob, but they often fished together. He had seen Bob naked more than anyone else on the planet, although neither Bob nor Arnold ever talked about this, and both would have been horrified if the other had. Their success at fishing was limited by their tendency to talk for hours. Theirs was a friendship based on sentences with an infinite number of clauses.

Arnold had never met Janet, nor her sister, and was not married into the journalist's family, either. He had met Bob at a gas station. They had both complained about the lack of window-washing fluid. They complained long enough that Mike, the 19-year-old attendant had filled the trash-can-cum-fluid-dispenser, breaking a 13-month streak of non-filling that had thrilled all the other attendants. Mike soon quit the job, bitter about his failure to ignore Arnold and Bob. He realized that if he listened to the muzak at the station and had to deal with customers any longer, he'd either kill someone or become just like Bob. And he hated Bob. Bob filled his gas tank every Tuesday and Friday. On the third Friday of every month he changed his oil. Mike had

gone as far as paying off his shift boss so that he would never work on Tuesday and Friday. It killed his schedule, but he was happier. He could go to work, not looking forward to it, but no longer hating it. All that came back when Bob came in on a Saturday, met Arnold, and managed to make Mike refill the window-washing fluid. It made Mike so mad he couldn't think.

Later, when he retired from his advertising business, Mike found he missed the gas station more than his office. Hardly any gas stations survived. The shift to electric had killed them, and Mike had happily done his bit to change the national infrastructure. *The future is quiet*, had been one of his lines. Too, *You're cleaning the air she breathes* (above a picture of a very cute kid). His had been very hopeful slogans. They had taken him from local shops to margarine to cars and spacelines. He was closer to Bob there than he'd ever know. Neither would ever want to know.

That kid, the one in the ad, wasn't Janet's relation either. Not her long-lost child or a frozen embryo twin born long after her. She wasn't even Bob's relation.

Arnold moved to Boston while Bob was still in the hospital. Years later in bars and gas stations, queuing with the other slow-on-the-uptake drivers, he told people the girl was his nephew. "Which girl?" they'd ask.

Arnold was confused, he'd never really had a niece or nephew, he'd forgotten which was which. Nephew had that soft 'f' sound in the middle, it sounded feminine to him, so he'd say, "See her, on the side of the bus? That kid? That's my nephew, Alis."

He drank more, now that he didn't fish. Maybe Mike was Arnold's son. Maybe Arnold was just another married and divorced failing father figure. Maybe he was just in the sun a little too much. Drinking a little too much.

Bob hadn't meant to kill her, Janet, so perhaps he was fortunate when she caught at him, clawed at him, tore at his face. He pushed her back, and who could say what he meant to do then?

If he had been stopped, he would have shaken his head (knowing from books and films that that is how the head is cleared), and said, "W'at? Wassat?" When another moment or two had passed and a disembodied voice asked Bob what he had been doing, what he'd meant to do, he would have been unable to answer.

However, he wasn't interrupted. He was at home with a woman he had asked into his house to look it over. He had told her he wanted to sell it.

Janet had been in real estate for nineteen years. She owned her house and two small duplexes in the next town. She liked the renters in all but one of the units. They didn't know she was the owner, and so when she did her weekly driveby, they never waved, never stopped her and asked her in for a coffee. None of her other tenants did, either. She'd been thinking of stopping, saying hello.

While she was recovering from Bob's attack, Janet's house was broken into. The burglars did not treat the house too badly:

they rifled her papers, pulled pictures off walls while looking for her safe (it was in the kitchen, under a square of black linoleum), dumped her clothes out of the drawers. They did not eat a sandwich (leaving half on the table for DNA analysis), leave fingerprints, break the windows, or shit on the bed, as had happened to one of her coworkers.

Janet cried and cried when her friend Cheryl told her about the burglary. She cried easily now. She could no longer listen to 92.9, The Wave, once her favorite station. Every second song, tears would well up. Just thinking about some songs made her cry.

That thing about Bob and Arnold seeing each other naked, it sticks with you, makes you wonder. What can it mean? Did they meet at lonely lay-bys across the state? Perhaps they liked cards, but didn't like for money to come between them. So maybe they played strip poker, or blackjack?

That person in the bar, Sandy, remember him? (Or her.) Let's say him, then her, instead of them. Them is a bit odd when used for only one person. Sandy had another theory—Sandy had *so* many . . . but think of all the theories you don't have to listen to—relieved?

Sandy's theory about Bob and Arnold went like this, "They'd been probed by aliens, you see," Sandy said. There was a Red Sox game on, but they were losing 4-3 in the third inning. It was going to be a long game and people were willing to listen in the meantime. "It happens all the time," Sandy said, and the bartender grinned. Forget the bartender, sorry he was

brought up. We know him already. He's slick, Irish, likes his stout and his whisky, dances like the moon over the heather. Won't be here next year, but someone very like him will be.

"I had a friend who knew someone who got taken up, and not just once, maybe, um, at least a dozen times. See those guys probably don't even remember. They just know something's going on, but not what."

But the Sox were doing better, and no one was listening. "Probes," said Sandy. "Aliens?" Bob and Arnold weren't talking. Someone waved at Sandy, "Shh!"

Janet could hear someone running down the hospital corridor. She could imagine their heart, beating wildly, breathing in huge gulps, the hands of the security staff reaching for phones and guns—did they have guns in hospitals?—or stretched out just an inch behind the shirt of the runner. *It would be a bright pink shirt, with ugly green parrots, and a silly phrase on it*, she thought. "Go Bananas at Cabana's."

The door to her private room burst open, and a woman ran in. Janet struggled to sit up, but couldn't.

The woman looked at her, said, "You're not Andrew!" and ran out. Janet began to cry.

She cried because her husband, Jerry, had been screwing her sister, Melissa, while Bob had been lying on the floor wishing his genitals could be reattached.

Janet hadn't known about Melissa and Jerry until she was in the hospital. They came to visit her together. Jerry sat on one side of her leg cast, out of arm's reach. Melissa sat on the

other side, stroking it. Janet knew immediately and pushed the morphine button. She didn't want to cry in front of them, would rather drool in her sleep. Jerry moved in with Melissa so that no one was living in Janet's house when it was burgled. Or maybe her nephew was? She couldn't remember.

Bob had never been married. He figured that his twelve years at Joe's Juke Joint had shown him the best and worst of marriage. He thought men fools. Except Arnold, who was married to a world-class woman, Lettie, who Bob had never seen naked, despite more than one attempt.

How Arnold and Bob saw each other naked was one of those things that Bob, now that he had no genitalia, never thought about.

Bob had managed to sweet-talk a number of women into his apartment, especially ten years ago, straight out of the army, muscled and cute—his description—and working for the moment at his dad's friend's diner. None of the women had stuck around for any length of time. Nona had lasted the longest, but she had left her buyer's job at J.C. Penney's and moved to Pennsylvania to get an MBA.

Bob thought about her on Valentine's Day every year. He had once spent nearly $300 on dinner for her, the most he had ever spent. About a week's salary for some steak, some wine. He thought he must have been pretty stupid, then.

Janet never knew that she was so strong. She'd thought she was going to black out; she'd been convinced that of all the dumb things to have happened in her thirty-eight years,

this was the dumbest. Not even getting pregnant and dropping out of her women's college seemed so dumb, now.

That had been bad, though. Her father had wanted to kill her. She'd known that then, and, precisely this instant, she knew why.

How complex he had turned out to be, her father. He was dead now. Two years ago—was that all? The months went by so slowly. *It took a death like that*, Janet thought, scrabbling for something to hold onto, for time to slow down. Every year since she'd given her baby up for adoption had been faster and faster. She'd gone from Barnard back home to Virginia. Her hands found something to hold on to—something that if she had taken hold of earlier in the evening might have changed later events. But she had thought it was the very last thing on God's green earth that she would ever touch. She'd gone from Virginia to her uncle in Wisconsin and lived in the spare room for six long, horrid months. Bob loosened his grip for a moment. His face was so twisted Janet thought of her baby, that almost-triangular head it had had when her aunt delivered it. But now Bob breathed out again, maybe it was a laugh, and Janet moved her hand downward quite fast, quite hard.

There were twelve men and women on the jury, or rather seven women and five men. Janet's defense had tried to get more women, and Bob's more men. All five men sat through the trial with their legs crossed. If it had not been for the video, they would have argued for the death penalty. Allan Swenson was the most vocal of the men. He'd worked himself into a state of grace,

he thought—apoplexy, the other's thought—over Janet. He knew exactly what should be done with her and her Fascist kind. Allan was happily (on his side) married (his wife's position could only be remarked as "uncertain"). He knew a thing or two about women: the way they played men, the way they said one thing, and meant another. The way that intentions, he shook a finger at the other members of the jury, *intentions* were important! And what could Janet's intentions have been when she went into Bob's house? Allan laughed when someone pointed out that Janet was a Real Estate Agent. Everyone knew what she really wanted, said poor, simple Allan.

Hi-fi equipment had become Arnold's specialty. After fifteen years at Circuit City, he knew stereos. He'd therefore been at a loss to explain why his boss moved him to the video section. He feared he was on his way out. In audio he had stopped pushing the stuff in the weekly brochure, and started pushing what he knew was good. He thought his sell-through was still high enough to keep the boss happy, but the headscrews higher up probably didn't want people to work it like that. He knew which way was better for who, but it was a long way down to looking for a new job and a studio apartment in a bad part of town, so Arnold sucked it up and started learning cameras.

Mac, the fat guy says, and the journalist spins on his chair and it makes a lot of noise, which he thinks is good because his name isn't Mac, but his boss always calls him that.

Mac, I got a problem.

I'm on it, boss, the journalist says, with his hand in his pocket scratching his dick. He doesn't know what his boss is talking about yet, but it's good to be proactive.

Good. That cunt that tore the guy's nutsack off . . . .

Yeah.

I want a story, page two, maybe a two-page splash. Nutsack Woman Walks Free. Watch your Nuts, Boys, She's Loose.

Right. Photo?

Get Dave. Nah, use file, we've got enough. Now piss off.

Great. Just fucking great, thinks the journalist.

The judges in Janet's and Bob's cases meet once, about eight years after the trials wrapped up (so, what? Ten years after Janet went to look at Bob's house?). Neither Bob nor Janet appealed their cases, although some men thought Bob should. Neither Bob nor Janet thought to thank the judges, but the judges were used to that. They met while golfing at Hilton Head in South Carolina. Neither knew about their connection, the one night of opposing expectations and passion gone sadly awry that had brought them together. They found each other to be good company. They don't belong here in this part of the story: they did their job, listened to the arguments, and used precedent, the juries' instructions, and their own thoughts and reflections on the law to pronounce the sentences. Yet they met. They managed not to have sex, which pleased their spouses, and in future years, they probably kept right on managing not to consummate their relationship. Pre-agenitalic Bob could have learned a thing or two from the judges.

Janet never enjoyed her sudden fame, and was angry with Bob for forcing it on her. She wanted to know, she told her friend Cheryl, why the dumb bastard hadn't been happy jerking off at home. Why did he have to bring her into it? Cheryl had a story or two about men to tell Janet, but she didn't rush her. She'd being getting a manicure with Janet before lunch every Monday for almost ten years. At one point Cheryl urged Janet to use her fame and start a company selling something or other; Cheryl had some ideas what that something could be. The next week Janet left a message and told Cheryl she didn't need a manicure that week. Cheryl might have lived up to some stereotypes (dyed blonde, skinny, ready to party every Friday at 4.55 PM), but she wasn't dumb in the way that almost every dumb cluck thought she was. She called Janet and apologized, said, I shouldn't have said that. I know you didn't want any of this and you want it behind you. I owe you a tall one. This was smart—Janet secretly loved Tom Collinses. The next week they had a manicure and a pedicure.

Arnold had seen the ads on the Internet for the tiny cameras and thought they were pretty neat. He ordered half-a-dozen and set them up throughout his house. He wasn't sure why he needed them, but he just sat and watched them for hours, waiting for something to happen. If he could have applied this behavior to fishing, he would have caught many more fish. He didn't tell his wife, Lettie, about the cameras. She left him, before the trials, when she realized that the Bob on the news was the Bob that Arnold fished with. She knew about his cameras, and it took all

of a minute for her to make the leap from Bob's infamous self-incriminating videotape to Arnold's fascination with cameras. "I never showed him the tapes of you. Or us," Arnold said, as she packed. "I just showed him how to set them up." Lettie made more than Arnold did. The house was in her name.

It's the end of the story now, and there are a number of things we're still not sure about. Sandy's gender, for example. But we don't care about that. Or Bob's gender. One hundred people pulled from their beds at night, marched into cells, held for a month on bread and water, not allowed to sleep more than two hours at once, not allowed to read, kept apart—these people would probably still argue that gender is important. It is important, and it seems obvious there are more than two, but it's left to the daytime talk shows and the cartoon network to try and work it out. The newspapers and magazines don't touch it. How could they sell adverts if their ABC1 readership was non-gender-defined? Then, also, who gave Bob's tape to the jury? Bob didn't have a housecleaner, or a good friend to watch his place while he spent days in therapy and learning how to use a catheter. Could it have been his mother? Or Mike? How would that have come about?

Janet never wanted to hear the name Bob again. She also hated the term Boston Marriage. She'd heard it a couple of times behind her back after she moved in with Cheryl. Cheryl didn't mind, she had plenty of space. She'd always had roommates, she'd enjoyed it in college, all those years ago, she liked to say,

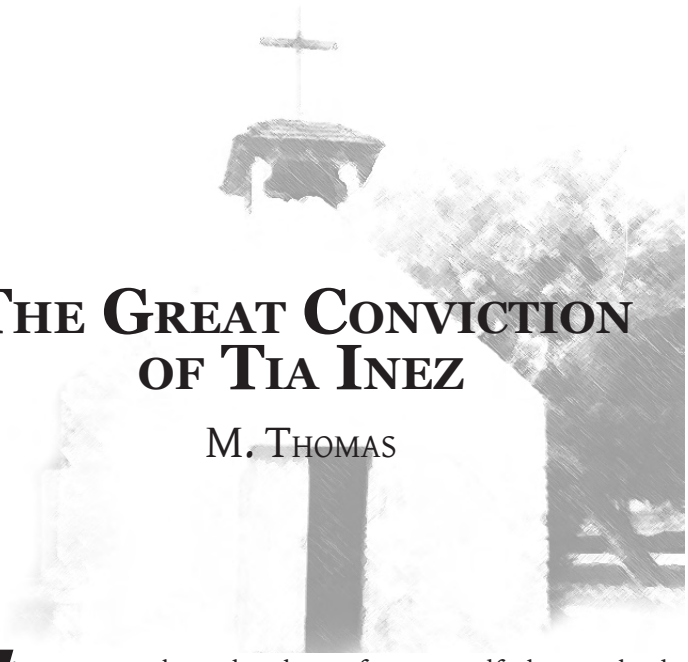
over a tall drink in a bar with Janet. Janet still sold houses. She was good at it, she knew, and she was nosey, and she was still looking for that dream house she'd thought she'd find if she was a real estate agent and got first look at houses coming on the market. She worked out more often, and she knew Aikido now. She listened obsessively to the weather, and carried an umbrella on cloudy days. She never fed Cheryl's cat, even when Cheryl visited her mother in Atlanta.

Mac!

The name's—

Do I give a fuck? Get in here.

It's probable that he went. At least for the next couple of years, until his betting line paid off, and he moved to Vegas. Later on, he tried writing a novel. But he couldn't stop using the inverted pyramid. Everything he wrote moved from big to small.



The Great Conviction of Tia Inez

M. Thomas

Tia Inez once beat the ghost of our grandfather at checkers. She did this to bring Tio Roberto back. You won't remember it. You were very little then, and you never paid attention to the important things.

We don't know why Grandfather came to haunt our porch in the States. He died in Mexico, and nobody cried for him because he was a bastard. Sometimes Mom said to Tia Inez, "Maybe he is trying to tell us about Roberto." She usually said this after you'd gone to bed, and I was hiding around the corner, listening.

We stopped going to the truck stop down south on Saturdays, because we heard about an old, abandoned gas station further outside the city where the men waited for work. Little Blanca told us about that place. She said her brother told her he'd once seen Tio Roberto there. There, they weren't as likely to be bothered

by police asking for green cards. But there was no electricity or plumbing.

The men sat in the back offices on old crates and blankets, going in and out through a broken door, waiting for the construction bosses to need more workers. They played cards, and drank those big milk jugs of water all day. They peed outside, where bullnettle crept up to the edges of the building with its razor-leaves and big, white, stinging blooms. That summer they sweated in the airless room, and stank and smoked, and learned to recognize us. They were teachers and a man who had owned a shop, a pharmacist and husbands and brothers. One man was an artist, and when he got bored he twisted all the old wire shelves into animal shapes in the back lot, then tried to get the bullnettle to grow on them like those ones at Disneyland. They liked to teach you card games. They asked us to mail letters for them, counted quarters out of their pockets for stamps.

But they did not know about our Tio.

One day we came, and there weren't very many of them. We'd noticed their numbers growing fewer. A man named Jorge followed us out to our car. He fidgeted with his cuffs and tugged on his shirt buttons, like this. I didn't like him.

"I seen that guy," he said. "Couple weeks ago near El Paso. We shared a hotel room, working construction up there. He said he'd been in California before that for a long time, and needed to get home. He left with a pocket full of money, but he was sick. Nail went through the bottom of his boot, his whole leg was red. When I first came here, I asked about him. Some people said he'd made it back."

Tia Inez said, "He did? He made it back?"

Jorge nodded. "You know why nobody hangs around the old truck stop no more? Lotsa guys weren't coming back. They got in these cars. Not construction trucks. Nice cars, small, with air conditioning. Big pay, lots of money. They say, those people in the cars, it's for construction. But I never seen a boss drive up in an air conditioned car."

"Inez," Mom said, hurrying you into the back seat. "Inez, let's go. He doesn't know anything."

But Tia Inez was frozen there, listening to Jorge, and so was I. You squished your face up against the door window and rolled your eyes at me, but I ignored you. You were like that a lot back then.

"They don't come back," Jorge said. "The bosses tell them they have to take a health test first." He shrugged. "Who's going to say no to a free check up?"

Mom started the car. "Inez, come on!"

"Where do they go?" Tia Inez asked.

Mom gunned the motor then, and I couldn't hear what Jorge said. You reached out and yanked at my arm, so I slid in beside you. Sometimes you were afraid Mom would drive off without me. I saw Tia Inez's hand go to her mouth. Then she ran from Jorge, slipped into the car, and slammed the door shut.

Mom said, "You shouldn't have listened to him."

Tia Inez said, "You knew about this before and didn't tell me."

They didn't talk for the rest of the ride.

Tia Inez believed her husband was alive somewhere in the States. She missed Tio Roberto so much she paid a coyote to get her through the desert to come looking for him, after he'd been missing two months. When you were little, you thought it was a real coyote, like the one on cartoons. Those scars on her leg are from when she ran into a cholla cactus in the dark and didn't get all the thorns out. When she got here, she put Tio Roberto's picture up on the fireplace. You didn't notice that either, how his picture covered up Dad's. Mom said we should put somebody's picture up who might actually come back. You know, each night Tia Inez still looks at his big face and says, "Berto, tell me where you are, and I will come to you." I guess if you can cross the desert with a leg full of cactus needles and two jugs of water in the middle of the night, you figure you can go anywhere.

When we were really small (I know you don't remember this) and visited Mexico at Christmas, Tio Roberto would take me and you into the bedroom where he and Tia Inez kept a box full of coins and bills, which they were saving for us. Saving Mexican coins for our United States education, because they had no children of their own. We would count them for hours, and make stacks of them, and small villages on the floor, and think we were going to be rich someday. Tio Roberto would tell me, "Listen, Celia, you study hard. To get a United States college degree would be best, so that you have something to defend yourself with in this life."

When she came looking for him, after there was no work in their town and Tio Roberto came to do day labor in the States,

Tia Inez brought all the coins with her that the coyote didn't take. Mom didn't say, but it was only enough for half a month's rent and a few tanks of gas to get them back and forth to the hotel where they cleaned rooms, before Mom got the nice job at the Wag-A-Bag.

Every Saturday we went together, three women and one small, pesky boy, to the truck stop. We showed his picture. "Have you seen him? He used to wait for work here." But the men shook their heads.

Tia Inez weathered it all very well, until the ghost of her father showed up. This was some time when you were six, I think. Then she became furious, especially when Mom said maybe he was there to tell us about Roberto being dead. She would stand on the porch watching his shade slip in and out of the dusk, glaring at him as he waved to people on the sidewalk.

He only showed up just before night, and he brought his own checkerboard with him. He made no sound, and you could move the checkers with your fingers, but not feel them. Your fingers would come away moist and cold, smelling of mold. You remember that? He tried to spank you once, when you made him angry, but he couldn't touch you. Your britches came away with wet hand prints on them. I don't know why wet. No, he didn't drown. Maybe that's just how ghosts are.

After a while Tia Inez forbade us from playing checkers with him, and she tried to make him move to the back porch, but he wouldn't go. She even got the next-door neighbor Remedios to come and make one of her special recipes for feeding the reluctant dead. Grandfather ate all the spirit mole she made for him,

then jumped two of Remedios' checkers. Remedios shrugged. "Sometimes, just feeding them isn't enough," she said. "The dead don't always keep themselves here."

I don't know what Remedios puts in the mole for the dead. She won't let anyone taste it.

I got up in the middle of the night because a sound kept nagging at me. Tia Inez wasn't in her bed, in the room we shared. I crept up to the door, opened just a crack, and saw candles glowing in the living room. Tia Inez and Mom were at the table, and they had big, black shadow-grooves on their faces that were their wrinkles, both of them no older than I am now.

"It's a stupid story," Mom said. "It's been going around for months. They tell it to scare each other."

"You should have told me," Tia Inez said.

"Why? You need one more horror story to add to your life? Crossing the desert wasn't enough? Your missing husband? You clean hotel rooms and have to worry someday they'll send you back, and it's not enough?" Mom said.

"But the cars," Tia Inez said. "If we could see one of the cars. We could read the license plate. Find out where they go, who they are—"

"And who would care?" Mom said. "Who would you go to, Inez, who would say, 'Oh, yes, we'll look into that for you, mysterious cars picking up Mexicans. Yes, we'll find your husband, because we care *that* much.'"

Tia Inez grabbed her hand. "He was so strong. He had good lungs, that he laughed with. His stomach—he could eat anything.

He never drank, so it was a good liver. He had such a good heart. A strong heart, so big, enough room for everyone, he used to say. Who wouldn't want his heart?" Then she started crying again, quietly into her own hand so you and I wouldn't hear, nearly strangling herself with her enormous grief.

"Inez, listen to me," Mom said. "If Roberto is still alive, then he is somewhere far away, working. But if he's dead—no, *listen*—if he's dead, and Papa's come back to tell us that, then he's been stabbed or shot somewhere for his money, or couldn't get help for his leg, not had his body parts sold. *And we will never find him.* And you have to accept that."

But she could not. Tia Inez's conviction was stronger than Mom's reality. It always has been.

That was when she began to watch cars. At the truckstops, at the gas station, outside our house. She and I sat on the porch in the evenings, ignoring Grandfather, who played checkers for us and always won.

"That one," she'd say, pointing to a shiny new Mazda passing by. "That one's gone around twice. You see?" She had a great fear of nice cars back then. Still does.

When she showed Tio Roberto's picture around, she would say, "He might have gotten in a car. A nice one, with air conditioning and tinted windows."

"Lady," one of the men said. "Nobody gets in those kinds of cars."

"Have you seen one?" she asked.

"Oh, sure," he said. "I got a big fancy one at home. I keep it in the garage of my mansion." And he and the other men chuckled,

and sweated, and smoked, and waited for work, and pissed out the back door on the wire animals the artist had made.

"I had a dream, Celia," she'd tell me, when we were alone. She'd begun talking to me more and more, Mom less and less. "I dreamed I was lying on a table, with a big light over me. A man came and cut me open, here." She drew a line down the front of her chest. "He pulled back my skin. He took out my stomach and put it in a dish. He took out my heart and weighed it, like in one of the scales at the grocery store for fruit. He said, 'Not as good as Roberto's.' But he took it anyway."

I looked up the thing about body parts on the school computer, but everything I read said those stories were just legends. For a while I stopped talking to Tia Inez, because I didn't like hearing the story. Then I found out she was telling the story to you, because you used to come to me in tears in the middle of the night from nightmares. So I went back to Tia Inez, and listened to that story over and over and over, and you were able to get through a night by yourself again.

Jorge disappeared. Tia Inez asked about him sometimes. Some of the men said he'd gotten in a car. But no, it wasn't a fancy car. Just an old pick-up.

That was when things got bad. She started approaching hotel guests at her job. Asking them about cars, and places where people sold body parts. Did they know where she could get a good heart? she asked them. She had money saved up. She needed an operation. Did they know anyone who could get her a heart, without having to go through a hospital?

Maybe a heart you could buy from someone else?

The hotel guests complained, and they fired her, and she sat on the porch all day, watching cars.

Then one night, she played checkers with Grandfather. You and Mom were out somewhere. I was alone, and I found her on the front porch, huddled over the board. She was talking to Grandfather. I watched from inside the screen door.

"I had the dream again," she told him. "They took out my intestines, attached them to a lightbulb, plugged them into the socket, and the light came on. The man cutting me open said, 'You know why Roberto won't come back? Because your bastard father is keeping him away. He got no right to that soul he haunts your porch with. That's Roberto's soul he's borrowing.'"

She moved her red checker forward a space. She had fewer pieces than he did. Grandfather had his eyes narrowed, studying the board, tapping one hazy finger against his chin, thinking.

"You listen to me, you old bastard," she said. "You listen to me. You never once gave thanks to God your whole life, not for Mom, not for your children, not for nothing good that ever happened to you. Now you want to come back here and sit between worlds like you have the right to a soul?"

He jumped one of her last two checkers. Now she only had one left, but it was a king.

She took her last piece and jumped. One, two, three, four, five times. She jumped all Grandfather's last checkers, she jumped from black squares to red, and when she was finished she kept

slamming her king down on the squares of the board, one after the other, faster and faster. Grandfather got angry, and jumped up and down, but neither he nor the checkers made any noise.

Then he stood very still, staring at her. He took his hand, reached into his stomach, and yanked out his intestines. Tia Inez made this sound, this little sound, but she didn't move. I think I started to cry. Grandfather waggled those intestines in front of her, and grinned, and stuck out his tongue and danced around. He put them around his neck like a shawl, and they dripped on his shirt. He reached back inside himself, and ripped out his liver. There was no noise, but you could see all the meaty parts of him straining, then snapping away. That part he just threw over his shoulder, and it disappeared off the edge of the porch. Then he grabbed his chest with both hands, ripped it open, and spread his ribs so they tore out of his skin and stuck out the sides and some fell out on the checkerboard. He took out his heart, but it was Tio Roberto's face, all twisted up, slick and purple in the dusk.

That part he ate, little by little, Tio Roberto's eyes and nose and big, broad chin.

Tia Inez didn't move, and I knew then that her conviction was stronger than any I had. She faced down her father and said, "That is my husband's soul, and you don't get to keep it anymore."

Finally, he turned away from her and went down the porch stairs still wearing his lumpy intestines around his neck, fading little by little into the dusk until, near the end of the sidewalk, he was gone.

Tia Inez turned and saw me watching from behind the screen door. She held up her hands, and water dripped from them, from the checkers. She said, "You'll see, Celia. Now Roberto will come back." From that day forward she's sat on the porch morning to night, counting fancy cars, waiting for Tio Roberto. Grandfather never returned. I'm telling you, she does it every day, even when you're not here. Look, things don't stop happening just because you're away at grad school.

No, I didn't sign up for those night classes with the money you sent. Mom needed to have a tooth pulled. I already told you what Tia Inez does out on the porch all day. She plays checkers with herself and scratches her cholla scars and waits for Tio Roberto.

Every now and then I have a dream about watching some men take out your insides and weigh them. Don't laugh. I don't have anybody to run to at night, so that's why I call a lot, just to make sure. Tio Roberto was a nice guy. You would have liked him, and he would have been proud of you. Okay, sure, I'm proud of you too.

Sometimes, in that dream, I'm one of the people taking out your insides. I always get to weigh your heart. And in the dream I say, "This one is heavy. It can defend us all."

Angels of a Desert Heaven

Marguerite Reed

Over Joshua Curtis dark wings unfurled. A bar of shadow filled one end of the room, angling against unearthly currents. Joshua himself couldn't see the wings. The journalist from *Rolling Stone* couldn't see them. Only Siwa, from her corner in the Hyatt VIP room, saw the gold-daubed feathers rising from the musician's back.

The injustice of it bruised her heart: this white man was adorned with such wings all unknowing, while Federal law allowed eagle feathers only to those who could prove on paper how Indian they were.

An acoustic guitar balanced on Joshua's lap; with every brush of his fingers against the strings, Siwa sensed his thought swelling like a blister: *Please, God, help me just a little longer.*

All the while deflecting comments about groupies, about MTV airplay, about last month's pot bust.

"Maybe you want to ask questions about *Bears Eat Monkey*?" he asked the journalist. "You know, the album we're doing this interview to support?" He kept his temper when asked about the lead singer's drug use, offering little further than a pinched frown.

"Come on," he said, the line between his brows deepening. "These guys are like my brothers. We catch each other if we slip. I don't see Brian slipping any time soon. This means too much. But seeing anybody slip brings in the readership, right? Nothing succeeds like *schadenfreude*." A sidelong look at Siwa, an amused twitch of those brows, and the frown disappeared.

The journalist followed his glance.

"Meet my bodyguard," Joshua said, grinning. "She's a psychic, and she'll kick your ass with her mind powers."

Some sort of AA bodyguard is more like it, Siwa caught from the journalist. *Maybe I could pump her for info later.*

Siwa thought of ten different responses at once. The journalist would build his own conclusions and plane them to whatever slant he'd chosen prior to the interview. Not her concern.

Those wings, unseen to everyone in the room save her, those were her concern. They'd been her concern since Joshua called her eight months ago.

Through the cacophony of a telenovela and her daughter Socorro washing dishes, Siwa almost missed the ring.

Vinyl siding, she thought. *I'll tell them I live in a seed pot.* "Hello?"

"Is this . . ." The pause of an Anglo trying to figure out her name. ". . . Ms. Santiago?"

Siwa rolled her eyes ceilingward. "May I help you?"

"This is Joshua Curtis."

Should she know Joshua Curtis? She focused: trying to pick up anything she could over the connection.

"You're a busy man, Mr. Curtis." It popped out of her. Sight unseen sometimes took her like that. A whirl of activity, of lights— the presence of a greater focus than hers upon him. "What can I do for you?" It'd be *find my girlfriend (no) find my mom (no) find my money (no) talk to my dead grampy (no) am I psychic too? (Maybe?)*

"Well, not real busy at the present. We're taking some down time here in Albuquerque—"

We?

"—and I started thinking about this—issue."

Young, Anglo, *rich*. "Mr. Curtis—if you don't mind my asking—who are you?"

A burst of chagrin through the line, alum on her tongue. "Um. This is really—"

"Embarrassing, yes. No one knows you're calling me."

"No, they don't."

"It's about the *why*, not the *what*, isn't it?" She was beginning to groove with the back and forth, getting more and more of him with every exchange.

"I was hoping I could find that out from you."

"It'd be bad—" something flashed "—for business."

"Just another stick they could beat me with. Hey, you *do* know who I am, don't you?"

Bring out the brochure. Damnit. "It's an art. Not a science. You can't measure the results in a laboratory. That's why scientists and the hyper-rational don't approve of us."

"The hyper-rational. Hey, I like that. Can you prove it? That you're psychic?"

It didn't take paranormal ability to predict the turns the conversation was about to take, and for once she decided not to dance. If she could lick the phone, she would, if she could somehow get his breath through the receiver, if she could push the phone into her ear, her vagina, her eyes, it would be easier. She closed her eyes and let everything within her *drop*.

"You're wearing boxers. No, shorts. You're not wearing any shoes and you haven't changed your socks since yesterday morning and what would your mother say but she's dead and you're worried about other people dying." She took a breath, still submerged. "You want me to go on?"

A little click in his throat. He got the words out, doing a fair job of impersonating cool. "Please do. Fascinating stuff."

"You didn't shave yesterday. Your hair is in a long ponytail tied with a broken shoelace because you couldn't find an elastic—" Input hit her in a current of physical sensation. That long hair. Her fingers caught in a silky skein, blonde strands across her eyes, her lips.

She opened her eyes, pulled her finger out of her ear. The red of the chili ristras in her kitchen shocked her to full

consciousness. Waves of nausea lapped at her. She crouched down in the middle of the kitchen, the soles of her feet flat on the tile.

"I have clients tomorrow," she said. She rode the billow of sickness, taking big, whole-body breaths. "But we can meet for lunch. Las Mañanitas. Open-air dining."

When the conversation was over, Siwa crawled to the trash-can by the door and vomited. A hell of a headache was coming. Served her right, for losing her temper and showing off.

Fortified some time later with orange juice and ibuprofen, Siwa went to the computer and pulled a search. One hand to her mouth in queasy amusement and wonder, she clicked through pages of references to Joshua Curtis. To the band he played in, Sugar Skull. To the two albums released, *Day of the Dead* and *Buffalo Child*. To the fan sites on Yahoo; the bootlegged videos on YouTube.

The pictures told her he was white and wealthy and did not eat enough. She could use that, perhaps, a little cheat on the cold reading. *Oh, Señor Curtis*, she'd say. *You've got something weighing you down. I see responsibility . . . I see a lot of people depend on you.*

Get him first on neutral ground, and then in her own territory. No velvet-draped rooms for her, no patchouli. No Carlos Casteneda either, and no pastel plains Indian dream catchers. Her office was a porch converted into a sunroom, done in clean, unassuming neutrals. Siwa was still paying the bank for the improvement loan.

She did not do a booming business. Enough to cover the

yellow pages advertising, enough to add to Socorro's college fund here and there. Surfing through Google, though, she felt as if all the quarters had started spraying out of the slot.

Las Mañanitas was a nineteenth-century stagecoach stop renovated into a restaurant. Lion-colored adobe, soft and stark as skin against the bright September sky. Siwa chose her seat on the patio twenty minutes before the agreed-on time. The smells of piñon smoke, cooking maza, and automobile exhaust vied with each other. Linda Ronstadt's "Canciones de mi Padre" trilled from a CD plugged into an outdoor extension.

Between a breath and the next, shadows inclined; light rattled against the surface of the cottonwood leaves, like the glitter of a flock of birds shifting course.

Joshua Curtis came sloping in through the adobe archway. hands shoved into the pockets of a suede jacket, a knit cap on his head, blonde horse-tail streaming down his back, he looked like an off-duty mechanic, or a baby biker. She saw the little crease between his brows as he took in the rough walkway to the patio, the blue painted door to the storage room, the press of customers.

Was he looking for a renaissance fair gypsy, all paisley scarves? She'd done that in her day. Was he looking for a clairvoyant Frida Kahlo, bedecked in braids and snakes? Taking pity on him—he wasn't the psychic, after all—she stood up. The motion and her lilac suit caught his eye. He shambled over to her like a good-natured, gangly hound, hand out to shake.

Siwa tried not to grit her teeth against that intimacy. Vulgar, sexual, male, with a dogged work ethic. She felt a little tired,

thinking of the bright hardness she would have to marshal. *Go on and get to it*, she told herself.

He topped her by a foot, and she felt better once he took his seat. "You wouldn't have called me if you didn't truly believe there was a problem. I mean, who the hell calls a psychic?"

"Looks like I did," he said. Uncertain, for all of his testosterone. Sneaking little sipping looks at her.

"Tell me why, and tell me what you want me to do, and we'll see how we go from there."

"Mind if I smoke?"

Siwa pulled a hardpack of Marlboros out of her purse and spun them across the table to him. "There's your brand."

A small jet of surprise from him. She let herself smile. "I read it in an interview last night. I did a little research on you, so you could start in the middle."

"We get to the hard stuff right off the bat, huh?" His fingernails were a little on the long side, all the better to slice through the plastic on the pack and pull out a cigarette.

"You wouldn't have it any other way."

"You get that from an interview too?"

"Nope." She settled back, inspecting him. He tried to return her stare, but gave it up after some seconds with the first plume of smoke. In that exhale she caught the scent of pain, bewilderment.

"But I feel you have a lot to say," she went on. Standard script. Theatrically she closed her eyes, lifted her palm, as if to feel the energies emanating from him. "A lot you want to say that you

haven't told anyone. Not friends, not girls, not family. . . ."

"Well, *duh*," he said.

She had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from snickering—it gave her that appropriate aesthetic expression. "So much anger! So much confusion for one so blessed. . . ."

Now she did open her eyes, ignoring the expression of skepticism on his face, and tapped the table next to his right hand. Broad, long-fingered, a silver ring with a yin-yang symbol etched on it. "There's a lot of power here. You're holding the reins of a lightning horse." She met his gaze. "Do you feel you're getting burned?"

"I'm six foot one, but I'm getting taller every second from you pulling my leg."

"You called *me*, Mr. Curtis."

He grinned. Wash of amusement tinged with a little shame. "I should shut up and listen, huh?" He put the cigarette in the ashtray and turned both palms up on the glass-top table. "So look at my life line, love line, whatever it is, and do some of that voodoo you did on the phone."

"What do you think was I doing just now, Mr. Curtis?"

"Jesus, I dunno—it wasn't what happened last night." He gave Siwa a sidelong look. "You know the saying 'you can't bullshit a bullshitter?' You weren't conning me last night, but you tried just now."

"So, you can just fly in here and tell me my business?"

He caught her hand, quick as a hawk on a mouse. "Why did you say that?"

Impression, sensation: of soaring. The world so small, wind ruffling through her feathers as she looked down, carrying a message to Heaven. . . .

The hairs on her arms were standing up.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," she heard him saying, as if through a high wind.

"Don't let go," she said, except he had broken contact, and the exaltation of flight ceased.

The waitress brought them coffee. Siwa knew there was no way she could eat, and Joshua seemed to have no inclination for food, only one beer after another, which he drank like water.

"Is it dreams?" Dizziness eradicated grammar.

"No," he said, and lit another cigarette.

"Is it drugs?"

"I don't think so. I don't get fucked up the way I used to. Definitely not before a show. No way."

"A show?"

His expression softened. "Yeah. I'll be up there—it's the greatest feeling in the world, man: you're plugged into this immense weather system of sound, like a fucking sonic chariot of the gods, and it's all you—and out there, thousands of people who're grooving on what you do and giving it back. It's better than sex." He smiled. "Lasts a lot longer, anyway. Then these feelings, pictures—I don't know what to call 'em—started."

Gazing out on the sea of faces, Joshua loved the crowd. He lived for it. He had never told anyone, but there had been times when, walking out on the stage, the roar of the fans hit him and

tears sprang to his eyes. How'd he, a punk kid from Durango, gotten to this? Did he deserve it?

In the middle of all of it, the worry and the worship, Joshua found himself pulled up out of his body. He felt himself playing, still saw the tits of the redhead in the front—at the same time he soared above the crowd, with all his fingers caressing the air, body rocking with the thermals. At first he suspected a flashback. Christ knew he'd ingested enough pharmaceuticals in his day. Yet it happened every show, blowing away all anxiety while he held his guitar. Even as he worried and wondered about it, he sought it—sprang upward with his whole soul.

Once he stopped playing, his body trapped him again.

"I feel like a junkie, man," he said, on his fifth beer. "As much as I want to play, that flying—it's purer than any shit I ever did. It's like being two Joshuas. One of them is making music that shakes the earth. The other—there I am, on the breath of God."

Red-faced, he fell quiet after that last admission. Siwa let him be silent, not wanting to wreck the ripples dancing out from him, as concrete to her as rings in water from a dropped stone.

"So there're two answers," he said, grinding out his cigarette. "One, I'm crazy. I don't like that answer. Two, I'm—*possessed*, or something."

"And you like that answer better?" Siwa asked.

"Being possessed is more interesting than being crazy. I've been crazy before."

"So why a psychic? Why not a doctor?"

"Hell, why not a priest? Am I gonna start spitting pea soup?"

Siwa tried to put as much soulful concern into her face as possible. "Do you think that's a possibility?" *Scare him a little more than he already is.*

"What do you think?" Beneath the cocky tone, genuine strain.

"I think you could benefit from a real reading." Siwa glanced at her watch. One of her more exasperating clients was scheduled at noon, a trophy wife of a local developer, who viewed psychic readings as a spiritual form of colonic. "Mysterious forces are surrounding you—" she could say this without a trace of irony "—and unless you find out what's going on, I foresee something negative happening."

Cynicism fought distress within Joshua, although he kept his features schooled. "That something else you read in my aura?"

She bit her tongue. "You and I both know this is really happening. No matter what others say. This is actual; this is real, and you need to find out what it is and what it means for your life."

"You don't fool around, do you?"

"Only fools fool around." Oh, he liked that, she felt. "And you would be a fool to ignore this."

I feel as if I've gone a few rounds with Oscar de la Hoya, Siwa thought.

She sprawled in her patio chair in her housedress and coat, a beer in her hand. High over Sandia Crest storm clouds gathered, a bruise on the limpid twilight. A storm was blowing in from the Gulf. Two hundred miles westward, in the Four Corners country, there had been no rain for weeks. At their last conversation,

Siwa's grandmother told her how yet another family had left the First Mesa due to drought. Perhaps the katsinam were angry, her grandmother said.

The spirits that visited the Hopi people every year between January and July were friends, teachers, counselors, who interceded between human people and the spirit world. Siwa's grandmother could list hundreds of them, and new ones appeared as the decades wore on. Whites who studied the Hopi (and some Hopi said that everyone should have a pet Bahana) seemed very interested in quantifying the katsinam. Siwa's grandmother, depending on her mood, either chuckled over that or grunted in irritation. Maybe Jesus would qualify as a katsina too, she'd say, with a mischievous glance, but he hadn't shown up in a while.

Deep within the blue, lightning flickered. Thunder rumbled far away, and a puff of cool air stirred the hem of Siwa's dress. To be able to soar so high, what would that be like? To be able to dance in the heart of a thundercloud?

Usually in her clients there was some prevarication that oozed off of them like the tang of road-kill skunk. With almost every truth divined, the clients compelled Siwa to create falsehood. Was Mrs. Clarendon's husband cheating? Yes, because she belittled him at every turn; toxicity billowed off of her in flares of acrid green—but she didn't pay to hear that. Was Mr. Jimenez's dead child trying to contact him? No—what haunted him was the cocoon of guilt at keeping her away from her mother's side of the family, who were not of the same race.

It was a rare customer who wanted to hear the truth.

Joshua Curtis, she suspected, was one.

"Okay," he said, sitting down, brushing at his jeans. "What do I do? Do you whip out the tarot cards, or—?"

Siwa smiled her third-kindest smile. "Actually, Mr. Curtis, I need to run your credit card."

"You take cash?"

Siwa allowed herself an inward purr at the sight of the fat leather wallet on its chain. *Don't get greedy.* "It's a hundred for today's session."

Joshua pulled out the bills with no hesitation, twenties, tens, a few wrinkled fives. The month's electric bill, plus a little left over.

"I don't know if I can solve this," Siwa said.

"I don't know if I want to solve it," he said. "You mean, make it go away? No . . . ." He flung himself up out of the chair and ranged around the room, thumbs hooked through his belt loops. Today he wore a t-shirt that read, as best as she could tell, *I'm the tokin' white guy*. A turquoise necklace looked out of place against the t-shirt's neck.

Very young. Very good-looking. For an Anglo. If she were ten years younger—

Stop it, woman; he's just a job.

Siwa let his essence drift to her like pollen on the breeze. He laid a finger on one blade of the Venetian blinds, bent it, peeked out. Dust motes formed paisleys in the air when he moved.

"Sit down. I want to tell you something. Right away, so you can lay this fear to rest: this—experience, vision, whatever you want to call it—it's not going to affect your musical ability."

He sagged back into the chair. "Well, that's one," he said after a moment. "But."

"If you get rid of it, that won't affect your musical ability either."

Fear and tension spouted up—and flowed away from him so vividly Siwa imagined she heard the gurgle of water swirling down the drain. Her smile became real. "If you like, I can do a traditional reading. This situation has already become a little unorthodox, as you may have guessed."

"And a traditional reading is what?"

"The cards, reading your palm—"

"Got a crystal ball?"

"Yes, I have one of those." Siwa liked the crystal ball because its lucent depths soothed her eyesight, helped her focus. Placing her hands over the client's as they both cupped the glass was the sole act that mattered.

"I don't want to know my *fortune*," he said. "I don't believe in that stuff. I don't get the good without the bad, right? I make my own future, right?"

Siwa knew her nod could be read as any answer he cared to receive. He was worried about something beyond his hallucination: she picked up the path and followed it inward.

Exasperation. Concern. Weary plodding love. She glimpsed a male Anglo face, dancing brown eyes, thick dark hair from beard to crown circling his head in a spiky corona. Hurt like a bruise—hurt like a burn, the tissue dead and dying at the surface.

"His name's Brian," she said. "You think your singer's dying."

Denial shot across like a steel gate. "He's not dying. He just needs some time. Shit, even Keith Richards got off smack, and he's in the South Pacific falling out of coconut trees. That's what I hate, man. Everyone always writes us off. Bunch of vultures. You know, it's never Joshua Curtis, musician, it's 'Josh'—I fucking *hate* 'Josh'—Curtis, guitar hero and cocksman extraordinaire—Jesus! And every single piece it's Brian Silver, junkie. Like that's gonna be on his fucking headstone."

The shock at what he'd just said flashed out on his face.

She knew she was treading on shale with her next question. "If—*If*!—Brian did die: what would the consequences be?"

He leaned forward, fingers steepled, pressed against his lips. Turbulence, devotion. Anger summoned to push down fear.

During their tour last year, Brian had started getting drug sick. Every show became a question mark. Could Brian pull off another two-hour gig? Get away from the needle long enough? Methadone treatment, sure. Bupe, even better; although if Brian was in buprenorphine treatment, they had to keep him away from the booze. It'd work for a while and then he'd be back on.

Please God don't let him fuck up. Please God let him be able to sing.

These prayers were always at the back of Joshua's mind as he played, while he attacked the changes on "Jailhouse Tattoo," worked the headbangers over with the riff on "Blow My Mind Blues." Brian and his bullthroat bellow made the music—Carlos might play killer bass, and Tag might have the deftest touch on drums since Neil Peart, but Brian made the connection between the music and the humanity.

Always in interviews the three of them backed Brian up. He's cool, man, they'd say, and distract the journalist from *Guitar World* or *Kerrang* with stories of their own outrages.

They never said anything about the frustration Brian might have caused them. No word about the missed appointments. The thousands of dollars down the toilet from delayed recording sessions. They made excuses for him and lied and stonewalled and never, ever considered getting rid of him. Other bands had done that with their members. The guitarist who was an alcoholic and behaved like an asshole got driven to the bus station. The bassist who got slapped with statutory rape because a groupie lied about her age—out the door, buddy.

Joshua sighed. "He comes in late, smelling like a fucking homeless person and he's got film on his teeth and he's not well enough to lay down a track in the studio—and do we show any kind of self-preservation and boot his ass out? We do not. We're not that hard, man." He shook his head. "We're not that hard."

Brian shoots up in his feet and won't wear flip-flops. Brian shoots up in his hands and has to wears gloves in public. They have a five-month tour scheduled starting in November, the first one they'd been able to do in a couple of years. Start out sunny, Laredo on November 2nd, Corpus Christi, New Iberia, Mobile, and down the coast of Florida. All over the country through the dreary months of winter ("Christmas in Omaha, can you dig it?"), winding up in Texas again doing the spring break circuit. "And I know he's gonna hose it up. We've got some crappy gigs, and it's a crappy time of year. All I want to do is play. I *want*

Christmas in Omaha, long as I'm playing. It's the only thing I don't screw up."

Would Brian get in the way of the music? And what would Joshua be capable of if that happened? The fear had an acrid, offal taste.

"We're playing a club this weekend. Just a practice—we're billed as The Amazing Steves. Why don't you come see us? I mean, so you can be there."

"When it happens?"

"Right. Maybe I grow eight arms. Maybe I've got demons crawling out of my asshole. It isn't something I'm scared of or that I want to stop. I just want to know *why*."

Keep on like this, Siwa thought, *and it'll be another hundred.*

"If he dies, the band dies," he said after a while. "And if the band dies, I don't know what will happen to me."

The young man at the club's entrance stamped Siwa's hand. She blocked out his boredom and borderline hostility, but once inside she wanted to flee home and take a hot bath with her sleep mask on and plugs in her ears.

The name *The Amazing Steves* had fooled no-one, she guessed; the current of people knocked her into the wall. They all seemed to be showing too much pale, pimply skin—the men too hairy and the women like sullen raccoons. In slacks and a blouse she was overdressed, as usual, for the Bahana world.

Smoke veiled her in grime. Grit and cigarette butts and bottle caps mashed beneath her feet. With clenched teeth she won

her way to the unfamiliar country at the end of the room where the stage reared up. It seemed to her all black boxes and flimsy microphone stalks. Swatches of tape anchored fat wires to the stage floor. At the back a drum kit, like a piece in an art gallery, glowed beneath a spotlight. Two electric guitars leaned against their stands.

She considered dropping down a little to see if she could sense anything, but so many people surrounded her, so many musicians before Joshua had been on that stage that it would be futile.

At the concession area she ordered ice water with lime and then found a seat at the edge of the floor, giving her what she hoped would be a clear line of sight. It demanded total diligence to block out the waves of sensation from all of the psyches gathered into such a small space. Watching more and more people jostle their way into the club, she relaxed her jaw repeatedly—and when the band appeared, the crowd's passion crested and spilled over her defenses.

So much want! So much hunger! For a moment, from her vantage point by the rail, she saw them no longer as humans, only as a swarming nest of gaping mouths. They cheered all through Brian's little speech—Siwa caught "thought we could fool ya" and "glad we didn't" but either the sound technician had been asleep on the job or the amplification was too much for her acoustic-accustomed ears.

She saw the drummer raise his sticks with a spin and bring them down.

The sound blared out, ugly, inexorable as the sun. A racketing cheer rose at the initial assault of those chords. Was this music? It rang her very fillings. No escape from it. She fought the impulse to clap her hands over her ears. God, Joshua was going to pay her for this.

The bass player was a chunky boy wearing a wife beater and a ball cap; the drummer was barely visible past the cymbals. Brian himself could not stay back from the edge of the stage. He wooed the crowd as he bellowed into his mike, leaning over the surging crowd, touching as many hands as he could reach.

And for the first time, she witnessed Joshua in his element. Shirtless, he looked all bones and sinew; but the necklace had found its place against his pale skin. He thrashed his head just as violently as the headbanging kids in front of him, blonde hair a froth.

How can he do that and play at the same time? Siwa wondered. She found herself hoping her client had a good chiropractor. When he bounced up to his microphone to wail his part in what Siwa assumed was the chorus, his grin suffused his whole face. Men and women yearned toward him.

Gradually the noise took shape for her: blocks of chugging melody folded themselves; electric geometries invaded her respiration. The intricacy of the guitar solos took her by surprise. No headbanging there, only sober immersion.

After the third song, Joshua's naked torso gleamed with sweat. Droplets caught the light like sparks every time he flung

back his hair. The area behind him, even in the spotlight, darkened, thickened. Siwa squinted, thinking it was the smoke. If she rubbed her eyes, it would ruin her make-up, so she blinked, shook her head. All that blonde hair, whipping back and forth—it was a wonder he didn't blind himself.

A pause came in the scald of notes. The relentless drum and bass ruled the crowd's pulse. Joshua's whole body marked time, side to side on the balls of his feet like a dancer. At Brian's beckon, he stepped to the fore and split the air with sound.

In a blossoming burst of air and darkness and illumination, a pair of giant wings unfurled from Joshua's back. Topaz light broke behind the massive feathered silhouette. The primaries extended in a seeking caress—brushing the stage floor as he leaned back, eyes closed, lost in creation.

Siwa dropped her drink. Heedless of the ice and lime and glass shards she fought her way out of the confines of chair and table, eyes focused entirely on this impossibility. Her temples pulsed with the beat. *I'm hallucinating. Somebody put a roofie in my drink. My eardrums broke, and I'm having a brain bleed.*

Too small to bull her way through the crowd on the floor, she had to squeeze her way past teenage girls and thrashing young men. Two helpful hulking boys caught her as she slipped on God-knew-what, and they guided her to the front, guarding her between and before them. Right next to a dreamy-eyed Latina girl who stared up at Joshua as if she would eat him alive. Like the other women Siwa found herself reaching out to touch—but not Joshua, not the man himself.

Those wings. She saw every fragile feather, the silky vanes, the gleaming shafts, as exquisite as if drawn in ink. They stretched overhead, immense. Soft blades with which to flense the air. Soaring.

After the set, Siwa stayed rooted to the floor until Joshua fought his way to her.

Bouncers were trying to herd him towards one of the side doors, imposing their bodies between Joshua and the more aggressive fans. "Later; he'll see you later, okay? Stay for the next set, okay, girls?"

"Don't worry about them," Joshua said. He pushed his hair back behind his ears. "Are you all right? Did you see anything?" He was breathing as if he'd run halfway up First Mesa; his hair hung rat-tailed with sweat about his face. When he took her hand his expectancy parched her.

Incomprehensible, Siwa thought. That a person like this could house such glory within him—The energy of the crowd left her feeling infected. Her psyche wanted to expel the toxins that had pooled for the last forty-five minutes. With no courtesy whatsoever she snatched her hand out of his grasp.

"Okay, let's talk somewhere else," he said, unruffled.

He showed her to "the band room," where the close air held the odors of sweat and pot, and half-stapled posters drooped from the walls. One corner boasted a tiny dorm fridge; along the left-hand wall an understuffed couch languished. A brick substituted for the couch's missing leg.

Cross-legged on the couch sat Brian. Joshua flinched, but to Siwa, Brian looked as peaceful as a yogi contemplating his navel.

On the scarred coffee table lay a belt. Next to it, a round-bowled spoon. A candle. A bottle of lemon juice. A dainty syringe and a snack-sized plastic bag. Siwa realized his anticipation, beyond thirst at the well's lip.

Brian looked up at the two of them with a smile, beatific but for the knowing cat's claw line at the corner of his mouth. "Don't start, brother," he said. "I'm not touching. Just looking."

"Promise me?" Joshua said. Brian held up his hands. Efficient as a nurse, Joshua peeled off the gloves, examined each hand palm-down. Scars wormed across the backs and down the pale inside of each arm.

Siwa made an involuntary sound of dismay. Both men looked at her, Joshua stony, Brian still possessed of that ghost's smile.

"It's all right, miss," he said. His hand squeezed Joshua's. "My bro here looks out for me. Don'tcha?"

Siwa felt the effort it took Joshua to lighten his voice. "Just get your works put away, ASAP. The only busts I'm interested in tonight come in a D cup." His gaze turned to Siwa. "Can we step outside a minute?"

Brian struggled to his feet and swept her a gallant bow. In the small space he nearly crashed into her. "Mademoiselle, it grieves me to intrude so rudely on your privacy. Pray tell your paramour were he to wax wroth with me, I find his choice estimable and enviable."

"That's why you write the lyrics, man." Joshua's grin was hollow. He took Brian's hand and folded it around the gloves. "Be good for me, huh?"

No moon showed; the cloud cover was black as iron.

"I saw something," she said, to disturb that graveyard dread that drained the joy she'd seen overflowing him. "Joshua . . . I want you to think about this, now. Or, don't think about it—feel it. What does the concept, the image of *eagle* mean to you?"

Siwa haltingly described for him what she'd seen: the wings unfolding from his naked back, like a griffin's, an angel's, a katsina's. The vision still shook her. She did not meet his eyes.

"You're saying I had bird wings growing out of me."

"*Eagle* wings—"

"Okay, *eagle* wings."

"That is what I saw when you were on stage. You picked up the guitar, you played, and the wings—" She swallowed, resisted the urge to pace. "The wings came out of you like a goddamn Christmas picture. You looked like you were about to yell, 'peace on earth.'"

Had any of her clients manifested visually before? The closest she'd gotten was an unnerving case of a girl with skinwriting, which she immediately turned over to the Catholic Church—at the relief of the girl's mother. Siwa wanted no part of that one.

"And what do you see for Brian?"

"He's not my client."

"Jesus, that's cold. . . . What if I paid for him as well?"

Siwa shook her head. "It doesn't take a psychic. You know it as well as I do. You're the one taking care of him."

"Well, shit. What do these wings mean, that I'm an angel? Brian's guardian angel?" He turned his gaze to the starless sky. "Come on, God! How about helping out your angel down here?" He looked at Siwa with a face come from generations of unemployment offices, buckled linoleum, duct tape home improvements; bitter against the grindings of an indifferent cosmos. "God doesn't make angels out of people like me."

Siwa had never dug so hard in such uncomfortable surroundings on behalf of a client. Even in Albuquerque, where almost all the shades of lovely brown were represented, her appearance at the University of New Mexico library provoked a few stares. It was her short stature, she knew; her severe features (*primitive*, she remembered one woman thinking, *how exotic!*), which made Anglos tell her to smile.

She knew what the eagle meant to her people but not to Joshua's. Thus she went to the *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore*. She brought home books on British Isles mythology, European mythology, a couple of naturalist's books.

The golden eagle, *aquila chrysaetos*, had been the emblem for the armies of countless European nations. The favorite of father gods and a guise of magicians and tricksters. Birds were the favorite spirit-forms of the Celtic bards. Shamans of ancient Europe of Asia wore cloaks of feathers. . . .

Yet Joshua had never defined himself in terms of his background, had he? The most he'd said was *a punk kid from Durango.* He never said whether he was Scots-Irish or Swiss-Slavic or

whatever endless combinations existed in this country. What muddle of spiritual tradition was visiting him? Was he possessed by a sixth century Scandinavian sorcerer? Channeling a manifestation of Celtic bardhood?

Siwa wanted to thump her head on the desk in frustration.

A huge poster from the Metropolitan Museum of Art depicting an Aztec calendar glowered in Socorro's bedroom. Some days Siwa's daughter identified as Mexican; other days she declared herself Pan-Indian. On the opposite wall, by her desk, a smaller image of Leonard Peltier watched over her mournfully.

No knobs were allowed on Socorro's door. In defiance, she left her door open at all times, no matter whether she was dressing or sleeping. Siwa spoke mostly English, so Socorro spoke whatever Spanish she'd picked up from her father and her friends. Rarely did she ask her mother for anything. So when Siwa heard her voice, she responded at once.

"Hey, *mija. ¿Que tal?*"

Socorro looked up from her book and answered her in a burst of Spanish.

"You're a smart girl, but I'm your mother, which makes me wiser than you," she replied in Hopi.

Defeated, Socorro switched to English. "Mom, am I going to spend Christmas with Great-Grandma?"

Siwa crossed the room and sat on the edge of her daughter's bed. "Halloween with your dad—"

"*Dia de los Muertos*, Mom—"

"Thanksgiving with your grandpa—"

"Ugh." Pure adolescent revulsion. "Subjugation and Appropriation of Indigenous Peoples Day."

"I thought that was Columbus Day." That won a wry smile. "You may not want to spend Christmas with Great-Grandma," Siwa went on. "No computer. No electricity, even. It'll be very tough."

"That's where you grew up."

Siwa nodded. Grew up with her grandmother as parent, her mother in prison, and her father landscaping for industrial parks in Phoenix.

"So *I* should be able to do it. Easy is for gringos."

"Don't say gringos."

Socorro heaved a ten-pound sigh. "Fine. Maybe Great-Grandma will let me bring my kachinas home this time."

"They're safer where they are. Can you imagine how you'd feel if someone broke in and stole them?"

"I'd kill them." Siwa caught the image of a blue-jeaned burglar breaking the glass of Socorro's window, Socorro herself stabbing him with a screwdriver, like something out of a Lifetime Movie. The burglar white, of course.

"My bloodthirsty child," she said and stroked the back of one knuckle across her daughter's cheek.

Socorro smiled indulgently. "Mom, can I ask a favor? Can I spend *Dia de los Muertos* with Great-Grandma too?"

"For someone who's so fascinated by her heritage, I should think you'd want to be with your dad as well. You're more Latina than Hopi, after all."

"Don't you get it? It's about place."

"Place?"

"Right. Yeah, I'm part Latina. But Latinas are kinda like Anglos. Transplanted. Believing in stuff dragged—" she waved a dismissive hand "—thousands of miles from another country." She looked at her mother from eyes that, Siwa thought with a shiver, saw further than she herself ever had. "I have to be where my feet are, Mom."

Siwa had heard Arizona described as alien, as a moonscape. Every time she heard that, she shook her head. The fragrance of sage, juniper, asphalt blew into the car. No headaches now, no matter how far down her consciousness dove. During the five-hour drive in the rental car she hurtled deeper into stillness, with every mile Albuquerque's protective carapace peeling away from her and her daughter.

Good fortune that Socorro understood. When she wasn't reading, she watched the October landscape enfold the two of them.

The drive from Polacca up the flank of the Mesa, at over a mile, was longer than the walk from Sichomovi to Walpi. Not good news for many of the tourists. The parking areas along the paved road up the Mesa held Yukons, Denalis, Tahoes, and a few RVs. Such large vehicles were not permitted to park on the Mesa. In her two-door rental Siwa rolled past small clots of tourists —fat whites from east of the hundredth meridian, who complained when it rained, who dressed in fifty-dollar tanktops and two-hundred dollar sandals. Some of them stared at her and her daughter, their boiled-ham faces set as if against a bad taste.

The parking lot by the new convenience store was half-full: only some with local plates. Dwellings that looked as if they had calved from the yellow rock shouldered for space alongside prefab steel buildings. Antennas and satellite dishes sprouted from the rooftops. Dogs trotted around, looking busy. When Siwa slammed her door, none of them paid her the slightest attention.

Socorro shouldered her backpack. "Mom," she murmured. "I know what I want to do for a living."

"I'm scared now," Siwa said.

"Tour guide. I'll take groups of Navajo and Zuni retirees on a bus and we'll go to the suburbs in Fort Worth and spend our time looking in people's windows."

As they walked through Sichomovi, they saw leathery white people clustered around doorways to homes that displayed signs: *Hopi Pottery for Sale. Authentic Kachinas for Sale.* Tourists watched—at a respectful distance, Siwa had to give them that—as a woman maneuvered smoldering patties of sheep dung from a firing pit. Someone's grandchild screeched "*Eeew*, is that *poop*?" Siwa wanted to smack him. *Wasn't too many decades ago your ancestors were combing the prairies for poop to burn too, sweetheart.*

At the town limits loomed the sign that notified tourists about the ban on any sort of media—cameras, camera phones, camcorders. Past the sign extended the projection of rock on which the thousand-year-old village of Walpi perched. As a tourist attraction, its dilapidation was permitted, to the point where

the jumble of rock houses reminded travel writers of nothing so much as a stone version of the shantytowns of South Africa. No electricity. No running water.

After Siwa convinced the handsome Hopi teenager by the sign that she and Socorro were related to Esther Sekaquaptewa, and did not need the tour's custody, they walked out on the tendon of rock that connected Walpi to the rest of First Mesa. Sun drenched the rock point, the streets of stone. Socorro tentatively waved to one septuagenarian sweeping dirt from her front step. The breeze picked it up and blew it back, and the woman swept on, with such calmness and economy of movement that Siwa knew she would outlast the wind.

She took Socorro's backpack, and gave her a nudge. "Go wander, sweetheart," she said. "But wander respectfully, okay? I've got to talk to Great-Grandma."

"Can I—"

"No."

"What about—"

"No. You know how to act. If anyone asks you who you are, tell them who you belong to."

Everywhere Siwa looked, the village ascended. Limestone dwellings piled on top of each other to an unrealized zenith. Railingless stairs climbed to second stories, to rooftops. From kivas, ladders pointed upward like the inquisitive antennae of mimbres insects.

Presence pressed close around her. She walked as warily as possible, trying to barrier herself against it, as she must every time she visited Walpi.

Her grandmother's house faced south-east. Uneven window jambs gave it a squint; the ancient vigas thrusting out from the walls lent it pugnacity. An array of plastic buckets stood by the doorstep. When Siwa knocked, the door swung open.

It was a little dark, a little dusty in the house. Sunlight poked through the gaps in the blinds and under the door where the weather stripping had pulled away. From the battery-powered radio turned to KUYI, reggae played tinnily.

"So, Miz Santiago." Sarcasm weighted her grandmother's voice. "You still calling yourself that these days? Or did you change your name again?"

"No, Grandma, it's still Santiago."

The broad figure stumped out of the shadows. "I never understood what was wrong with good old Sekaquaptewa."

"Grandma, the Anglos can't pronounce it. If they can't pronounce it, they ignore you. They couldn't pronounce Piestawa, so they say Jessica Lynch."

Her grandmother grunted, which meant she did not disagree. She waddled into her kitchen and rooted around in the cabinets and drawers like an absent-minded badger, snuffling to herself and shooting out her lower plate from time to time. There was a sore spot on her gums, Siwa knew, one that burned and itched like an ant sting.

"Grandma, go ahead and take 'em out."

Her grandmother eased out her teeth and set them on the table, not without darting a crabbed look at Siwa. "I told you not to do that around me."

"I know, Grandma. I'm sorry."

"You been eating? Look at you. I've got some lamb stew. I've got some watermelon pickle. Lois Gashweseoma got me some Wonderbread. You want a sandwich?"

Not eating would give offense. "How about some crackers?"

Siwa ate and listened to her grandmother talk about the corn crop, the Tribal Council, Lois Gashweseoma's daughter who had run off to Phoenix and gotten pregnant.

"That's not why you came to see me," her grandmother said at last, with a comfortable sigh.

"You see where I get it from?" Siwa reached across the table and patted her hand. "You could be pulling in the tourists too."

Her grandmother snorted. "I hear your mother talking. She ran off chasing the money just like you. And got mixed up with a non-Hopi, just like you."

Siwa could not fight the comfort these old arguments gave her grandmother. "Grandma. Will you please tell me about eagles?"

The old woman shook her head. "Questions. If you hadn't left, you'd know this. This is what I remember. It's what I know, not what other folks know. I don't know what they know, and I never asked."

"I know some of it. I know eagles are important to us. Every year our eagles are killed—sent home—on the last day of Niman. But I need to hear it from you, Grandmother."

"I'm not going to tell you the stories, because it's the wrong time of year for that, but I can tell you a little."

Eagles. A person holds or wears an eagle feather, that person has the attention of the spirit world. Esther thought that's the way it was with a lot of people, not just the Hopi, but she wouldn't talk about that—she didn't know; she wasn't one of them. Siwa'd have to go ask someone else about that. Maybe an anthropologist. That's what prayer sticks were made of, eagle feathers. Cedar, or cottonwood—Esther's father always used yarn from cottonwood cotton—and eagle feathers. Because eagles are the ones who carry prayers.

"FedEx," her grandmother said and chuckled.

Please God don't let him fuck up. Please God let him be able to sing. Joshua's voice came to her as if he'd whispered it in her ear.

"If someone prayed hard enough, could he become an eagle?"

The old woman's face clenched in thought. "That's a good question."

"I have a client. A white man."

"Most of yours are white. Does he live here?"

Siwa nodded. "Born in Four Corners country. He's haunted by an eagle spirit, I think. I've seen it. I don't know if it comes to him—or if he makes it." She stole a look at her grandmother, who was dabbing peanut butter on the rest of the crackers.

"Well, now that's an interesting idea." The crackers piled up. "Maybe when he dies he'll become a katsina."

"Grandma!"

The old woman shrugged. "Or he could be an angel. You like that better?"

"It's not his tradition. He's white." She felt like Socorro. "He's not invited."

"You're talking as if you had no grandparents to teach you." Esther Sekaquaptewa enfolded Siwa's hand within her own. Ninety years' worth of calluses, and a grip like rock. She drew her granddaughter to the door and pulled it open.

Over First Mesa clouds striped the evening, bands of turquoise and shell above the luminous horizon. If Siwa kicked the pail at her feet it would tumble six hundred feet down the puma-colored cliff, strewn with boulders like a litter of bones.

"Look around, Siwa. Do you think Jesus lives here? I don't. This is the world Masauwu guards, handsome Masauwu wearing his bloody animal hides. Your white man was born here. In Masauwu's world. That's who he talks to, that's who talks to him."

Was it possible that Joshua wasn't informed by a European framework? The soil, the water, the grain, the meat—though impure from pollution and hormonal tinkering and genetic hybridization, it was still the stuff of this place, still the flesh of the earth building his flesh, the blood of the continent pumping into his veins.

Her grandmother chuckled. "How do you like that for assimilation?"

So here was Siwa, watching over a white man who somehow had claimed the attention of her land's spirits, if her grandmother was right. The unfairness of it left her without footing. She had been irked at Joshua from the moment he asked her to attend the interview at the end of the Sugar Skull tour, and even more irritated when he said he'd pay for her time.

Siwa stood up—the journalist flinched. Joshua's wings vanished like vapor in sunlight. "I think we're going to call it a day," she said.

The man spluttered a bit, insisting they'd only had an hour. Let Joshua say whether he was finished. *Groupie bitch*, he was thinking.

A handshake from Joshua disseminated some of his anger. "Hey, just think—you've got the next part of your piece already written: 'The second time we meet, Joshua Curtis is daring me to strap on skates and knock elbows with the Doomsdames roller derby team.'"

"I'll do it if you do," the interviewer shot back.

That earned him a staccato laugh. "I'll set it up, man. I'll have my guy call you, okay?"

"Don't worry," Siwa said, indulging herself. "Mr. Curtis's pet psychic won't be there." She ignored the glance Joshua threw her and nodded politely to the journalist. Long practice kept her smile in place.

Joshua deflated once the door closed. He knelt by the edge of the bed and set the guitar in its case.

"I think this'll be the last time you'll need me," Siwa said.

No audible response. She tried to ignore the hurt and exhaustion simmering from him. "That'll be—"

"Yeah, I know. A hundred." Snap snap went the clasps on the case. His face was turned away from her. She set her lips together. Damn the man. Yet as a professional, she should tell him. "I consulted someone about those wings."

Now he looked around, his hope so clean and shapely, like an unpainted water jar, that her anger leached away somewhat.

She started to speak, hands lifted—and stopped. How could she tell him this?

"Every time those wings come up, that means you're talking to God."

"To God?" As if she'd switched to Spanish, or Hopi.

"The Supreme Being. The Creator. Powers That Be. Indian beliefs specify that the eagle carries prayers." She *tsked* at his expression. "You pray with your guitar."

He sat back on his heels, and Siwa felt the astonishment filling his hope. "So it's not—"

"No. It's nothing bad. Basically you're running around like a spiritual mailbox with the red flag up."

"You said 'Indian beliefs.' I'm not Native American. Not a drop."

Siwa bit her lip. She thought about answers she might offer him. "You were born here. Looks like the spirits of this place are the ones paying attention to you."

"And what do *you* think about that?" he shot back.

The anger returned despite her shock at his response. What kind of answer could she give this white man?

"I am terribly jealous of you," was what came out of her mouth. She sat limply on the edge of the bed, next to him.

Joshua took her hand. He placed it snug against his own, palm to palm, weaving his fingers through hers. "I'm sorry," he said.

An intimate gesture for anyone. For Siwa it was like being given the siphon to an endless aquifer of energy.

She gasped with it; her arms broke out in gooseflesh; her nipples hardened painfully.

"It's all right." Blind acknowledgment. They did not release each other.

"Would it help if I took you to bed?"

She had to laugh. "When did that ever help anything?"

"Can I take you to bed anyway?"

"I'm too old—"

She knew he was going to kiss her before he did it, but the touch of his mouth on hers was still a sweet shock to her body. A kiss that asked permission in a deferential caress of her lower lip. She surprised both of them by opening like a blossom on the vine, giving him liberty to slake her thirst, and he rose up between her knees and guided her hand to his face.

Joshua wasn't the best lover she'd ever slept with. But gentle, and greedy in a sweet, passionate way that kindled her own lust. Too lean, though she cherished the beautiful bones lying close beneath the layers of skin and muscle. As with many blonde men, his body hair was more ginger than gold. She liked to play with it, tugging, ruffling. She liked the way the stubble on his jaws and throat pricked her lips when she kissed his neck, ran her tongue over his adam's apple while he labored above her—his body bright with sweat, tasting of salt and lemons.

Afterwards he sat on the edge of the bed and played for her, slow songs that she liked much better than Sugar Skull's tortured densities. Gillian Welch's "Whiskey Girl,"

the Stones' "Wild Horses," Alison Krauss' "Restless."

Feather by feather the wings appeared. They bloomed out of the empty air, as if shadow had condensed above his shoulders. The wings spread until they seemed to fill the room, longer than Joshua was tall. "You're flying right now," she whispered.

Siwa felt no reservation at his touch now; she discerned him to the marrow of his bones, beginning and end, both his bright soul and the dark caul of fate that enveloped him. She did not tell his future when he reached for her, his hair falling down like a curtain, veiling them in silk and gold.

Joshua never came to her little house for sex. If he'd suggested it, Siwa would've refused him. When he was in town that early summer, she was content to visit him at the Hyatt, where the air conditioner never failed, where someone else washed the sheets. Unless he wanted Socorro to call him *Daddy*, there was no need for him to enter her home.

"So why did I get wings and not some rabbi in Flagstaff?" he asked during one of her visits. She was still giddy from her orgasm, and did not answer him immediately.

He nuzzled her ear. "I mean, you'd think somebody like that would get more tools to talk to God."

"When was the last time Brian did it?" She propped herself up on one elbow. The air-conditioning billowed across her skin, half delicious, half painful.

"When was the last time he fixed? . . . Corpus. Other than that I really haven't seen him rollin' hard since before the Amazing Steves gig."

She fit her hand over his side, appreciating how her fingers slipped in the shallow between each rib. Brown on cream as if painted with a yucca brush. "Maybe you just need it more than some rabbi in Flagstaff."

To let him leave had ached more than she had anticipated. Sugar Skull's contract demanded another album, and Joshua itched to record the music he'd written during the tour. Both Joshua and Tag had insisted on hardcore preparation before they went into the studio again. No slacking around in the studio paying inspiration's late fees. Off to Denver they went, to stay at Tag's house while they mapped the album.

She dreamed of Joshua from time to time. Fitful dreams, submerged in the canyons of sleep, that drifted like cloud wrack across her memories the next day. In those dreams she let Brian beat her in pool; she scribbled lyrics and played guitar endlessly. She would wake with the tips of her fingers sore, and a smile on her face.

A few funny notes came in the mail, one-page effusions bordered with stick figures with stick guitars, stick microphones; rectangles for buildings and triangles for mountains. The words he wrote were cheerful, but Siwa touched the paper and knew how hard he worked.

Siwa dreamed while Joshua escaped from a day of what he called "writing/fighting," meandering through Denver's nightlife. Cement sidewalks under her feet, neon like migraine flashers across the vitreous of her eyes. She heard Tag and Carlos arguing over every metal album released. Brian was running, leaping, pouncing—after a moment,

Siwa understood that he was playing a game of touch-the-awning. Her dream split between the conversation (so odd to hear herself say "If Megadeth had continued exploring those jazz influences they uncorked on *Rust in Peace*, they would've gone a lot further,") and trying to keep Brian from breaking his neck.

Cliffs of concrete and steel loomed against the paler night. The traffic flowed by, denser than Siwa was used to. Trucks, convertibles, Jeeps—incessant engines, pierced by the occasional horn; women leaning out of their windows to yell at men, men burning rubber at stoplights. It disoriented her, feeling her own timidity overlaid by Joshua's nonchalance.

A quarrel arose. Someone was trying to talk Brian out of jaywalking. Joshua's exasperation and concern bogged her down—then a geyser of fear as Brian stepped out into a clear patch in the street.

Arms lifted, the breeze plucking at the tails of his unbuttoned shirt, he bellowed into the night: "In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! Like Moses, baby!"

In terror Siwa felt herself plunging towards him, right into traffic. "Goddamnit, Brian, quit fucking around!"

Inhuman blare of an SUV's horn. The glare of headlights—her hands hard on Brian's shoulders, shoving him.

Impact. Pain. Kicked right out of the meat of her body to the dark place, where the sole sensation was the cradle of air and great distances. . . .

"Mom! Mom, are you okay?"

Why was Siwa so uncomfortable, curled up like a snail?

Was that her pillow, so scratchy? *Patpatpat* on her shoulder, which resolved into her daughter's hand, patting her, shaking her.

"Mom, *dios mio santo*, are you okay? Do I need to call 911?"

911.

Memory opened her eyes. Light from her bedside lamp reassured her. She was alive; her daughter was alive. She pushed herself up and realized with dismay that she was on the floor of her bedroom.

"Nightmare," she said thickly. "Get me a drink, please?" Headache as if she'd butted a cinderblock. If she hadn't already thrown up, she would soon.

Socorro brought her water from the bathroom, the cup smelling faintly of toothpaste. Images from the dream bloomed and swiveled in Siwa's brain. No need to make any phone calls to verify the accident.

Dull with acceptance, she brushed her teeth, reassured Socorro, and went back to bed, where after an hour of staring into the dark she drifted off. Her unconscious sorted through the detritus of the past day, but there were no more dreams of Joshua. How that scene had come to her, she did not guess, but it was her last vision of him, her last awareness of his intangible presence in the world. Each time she had taken him into her body she had known this moment would arrive; each time she kissed him good-bye she had known when Masauwu, walking in the dark, would take him.

In her sleep the tears slid out from beneath her eyelids and striped her skin with salt.

Joshua Curtis, almost a star, earned an inch of type in the *Albuquerque Tribune*. Siwa learned from the internet that Joshua wound up at Craig Hospital, which was touted as a center for spinal injury and severe brain trauma rehabilitation. A thirteen-, fourteen-hour round trip from Albuquerque. *No thanks*, Siwa thought—then made plans with her father to drop off Socorro on the way.

Craig Hospital, nearly its own little town, nestled in a landscape of crayon-green grass and deciduous trees. Non-stop sprinklers hissed impotently in the July heat. As Siwa walked up to the monolith entrance, she saw a groundskeeper cleaning the sidewalk with a jet of high-pressured water.

At Admissions, she requested Joshua Curtis's room number. The receptionist invoked the HIPAA privacy law, but Siwa tricked the answer out of the woman's mind and strode through the corridors as if she had every right to be there.

Her composure balanced on a needle's point. An anarchy of minds pummeled her. Some like a skipping CD. Some raving. Some locked within and unable to make connection by even so much as a meeting of eyes.

Pain, pain, pain.

Help me, she thought. *Help me*, trailing one hand along the wall. Passers-by took her for a patient as she trudged along the obscenely cheerful corridors. Her relief that Joshua's room was nowhere near Pediatrics was profound.

As she neared the room, whatever bravado she clutched dribbled away. *What are you afraid of?* she chided herself.

Some thoughtful person had cracked open the door. Like a little girl she tiptoed to it and put her eye to the space. Her heart buckled within her. She could no more enter that room than she could walk through the children's wing.

The single sound was the relentless suck and hiss of the respirator. Beyond the bulk of the pillow she saw the jut of his nose, a sallow cheek. An older woman sat in the vinyl-covered recliner by the window, peering at her cross-stitch. A stack of embroidery and craft magazines had fallen in a pastel slide by her feet. Another woman, a generation younger, hair in a tight roll, wore the defeated look of someone drained of weeping. In one hand she held a black-bound book, in the other she held Joshua's hand. Her lips moved ceaselessly.

It pierced Siwa through, realizing she had never brushed Joshua's hair. Medical staff had shaved his head. The bandages swathing his skull were somewhat less white than the sheets. No more Joshua there. At best she might be able to pick up a kind of mental static—at worst—she refused to imagine.

How warm of a reception would those pale blonde faces offer if she stepped in? Those women would brand her the interloper, the invader. *Not good enough for our boy.*

She failed. She turned and left the hospital, her heart on the ground.

Joshua died after sixteen days in a coma. His death earned a few squibs on the cable news networks. Conversely, the fan websites

wailed and wore sack cloth. !!JOSHUA 4EVR WE <3 U!! seemed to be the prevailing sentiment online. The alternative and hard rock stations played more Sugar Skull songs than usual.

Together Socorro and Siwa watched a cobbled-together VH-1 retrospective. Brian and Tag and Carlos were identified as funny, intelligent young men with a wild streak, with whom she felt no particular connection. But Joshua stood out for her in a curious doubling fashion: here was the celebrity, the focus of equal parts adulation and nonsense; here was the man with whom she'd been intimate, who got terrible ingrown toenails, who had to take a lint roller everywhere because of an inability to resist passing cats and dogs. She recognized the tobacco-and-cola stain on his right canine when he smiled during one clip. The bruise on his left bicep during that same clip—she and Joshua had been rough-housing in the hotel room and he'd fallen against a chair. The mark was forever caught on media, a vehicle devoid of meaning for her, while the body had been incinerated three days after death. She looked at that bruise, a clot of violet pixels on the television screen, and put her head in her hands.

Siwa had never visited the San Francisco Peaks, but as a Hopi she knew that they were the home of holy things. The Hopi, the Navajo, the Havasupai, the Zuni all believed them to be a sacred place. The Bahana and the various nations had fought long and bitter legal wrangles over the area as long as Siwa remembered, and before that.

North America's small mountains had always struck Siwa as inquisitive, and the San Francisco Peaks were as curious as cats.

On the edge of Flagstaff, the Peaks loomed above the grasslands. Sometimes they drifted in the distance, like rainbearing clouds struck by the sun. On the very few times Siwa had been through Flagstaff, the Peaks peered over her shoulder, leaned around the edges of buildings to see what she was doing, where she was going. They watched her through the windshield and through the rearview window.

"You'll take me there someday, right?" Socorro asked on the last visit to Walpi before the school year started. "Great-Grandma says that's where the katsinam live."

Siwa had dropped a kiss on her hair and left the girl to ponder those mountains, staring at each other across a hundred miles of magic country.

Now, as Siwa approached the exit that would take her back to Albuquerque, she wrenched her wheel to the right. West. She drove grimly, already missing Socorro's presence. The Peaks rose on the horizon, and she felt the bend of their regard toward her.

What are you doing? Albuquerque's the opposite direction.

Just want to see, she answered herself.

Want to see what?

She would not go up into the mountains—the thought of encountering hikers made her mouth curl in involuntary aversion. Should she met any of the Hopi elders come to sprinkle a little pollen and cornmeal, the embarrassment would be desiccating. No, she would just give herself a treat, spend the night in Flagstaff, drop in on Socorro's father. Get a little comfort there, perhaps.

And see the home of the katsinam.

Winslow, then Flagstaff. Even through the tangle of highways, the blaring signs for hotels and fast food, the Peaks soared. Bare, brown save where the snow lay like the clouds come down from the sky, they watched the city from their tumble of volcanic angles, all shoulders and cocked eyebrows. They grew too high, too wide, too intent on her. She should stop. Get some food at the next Wendy's, hit Ramón's apartment, get some sleep.

You chickened out at the hospital, rose the thought. *Go on and get to it.*

Siwa pulled into the next cross street. In disgust and grief, she let everything *drop* and ran up over the curb. Dimly she heard a shouted "*Jee*zus *Christ*, lady!"

Nothing dim about the plague of humanity. Everywhere. Like inhaling during a swarm.

Her brain felt like a sac of diseased meat that bristled with the city's larvae. She tasted blood: she had bitten her tongue. Trembling, she rolled down her window.

A nimbus of light bordered the mountains. She should squint to look at it, but her wide eyes drank it all in. Her brain might burst from pain and pressure, but as she stumbled out and went to her knees on the tarmac, she believed it would be worth it.

Out there, on the San Francisco Peaks, the spirits danced.

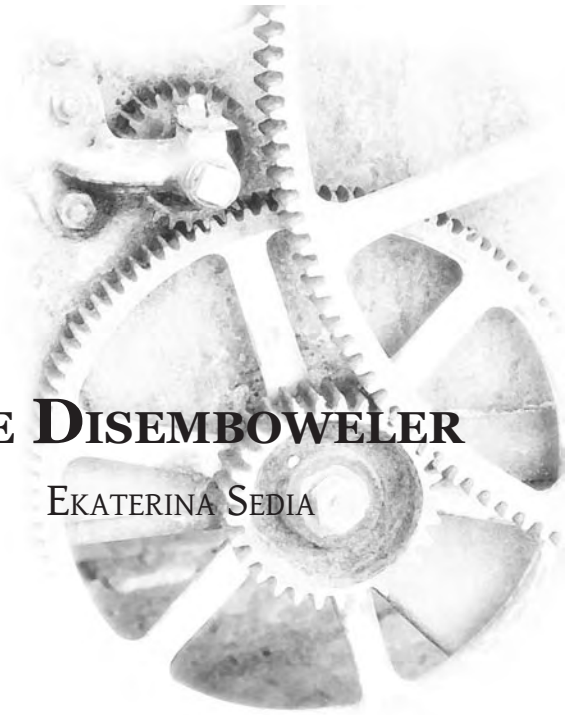
Hundreds of Katsinam shimmered like a heat mirage. They siphoned up into the terraced clouds and funneled back down, always dancing. Now huge, now tiny; forms so bright they stamped on her retinas one moment, the next moment melting

into the forest and the sun-blind snow. She saw beautiful Tsitoto, the flower katsina, carrying the sacred fir tree in his left hand. Crow Mother with her basket of bean sprouts and her whip. Two little Mudheads scampered among the taller Katsinam, one beating a drum, the other chasing the Eagle.

Kwahu, the Eagle, danced and swooped, the bells strapped just below his knees ringing. Siwa heard the silvery sound as an echo on the breeze. His white kilt gleamed. The impassive face shone blue against the blue sky.

Even through her rapture, Siwa noticed something about Kwahu that differed from the kachina dancers she remembered from her childhood. She squinted against the fabulous light—and she saw, framing the black-striped face, braids of blonde hair. And around his throat, the Eagle wore a striking single-strand turquoise necklace.

Tears like rain burst from her eyes. "You're right. God doesn't make angels out of people like you."



The Disemboweler

Ekaterina Sedia

Someone was killing the cars in the neighborhood. Glenn read about it in the papers—how the owners found their disemboweled vehicles, nuts and gaskets strewn on the ground hard with frost, their sinews and muscle frozen and dead. Nobody knew what was the point of this crime except cruelty, or why the perpetrators were targeting this particular neighborhood. In his secret heart, Glenn suspected it was about him.

One morning, he found his trusty Peugeot eviscerated. Its large red heart lay among glittering metal, the only time Glenn had seen it still. The faint steam hung over the parking lot grass stiff with frost, and the spirit of the car had not yet departed—over the violated engine, a small smoky shape coalesced.

"What happened?" Glenn whispered to the car spirit.

"Bad man," the spirit said, and faded, losing its form wisp by wisp, with nothing to hold it together. Glenn wondered briefly where spirits went when their vessels were destroyed, and kneeled among the broken parts and white metal. He poked some ball bearings with his finger and called the police on his cell. At least, the cell phone's spirit was all right and perky.

As the body was removed, Glenn watched, hurt and perplexed. He loved his car, and his throat tightened at the thought that he would never hear its heartbeat again, never see the lopsided grin of the open trunk.

He walked to work that day, to a large animated building that hissed at him when he approached—it was not used to him appearing on foot, without the car or anything. After a suspicious sniffing and creaking, the building swung its doors and admitted Glenn to its womb interior, where he worked as a bookstore manager. The bookstore huddled on the second floor, its shelves heavy with out-of-print books and other not-very-valuable rarities. Two fat Abyssinian cats greeted Glenn by yawning and opening one eye each.

He started a coffee maker (the one at home was broken, its spirit having left for some greener pastures—namely, Glenn's new vacuum cleaner)—and it gurgled and exhaled fragrant steam, and its spirit rattled inside, disposing of the coffee grounds and adding milk and sugar.

"Thank you," Glenn said to the coffeemaker. He settled by a bookshelf, back against a row of clothbound book spines, one cat in his lap and the other at his side, and thought of his car.

It wasn't just the murder, but the savagery of it. Why would someone spread the innards around like that, in the cold light of the glittering sun, for the world to see what should stay hidden? The sight of displaced, busted gaskets flooded his mouth with bitter saliva, the harbinger of sickness and despair, just like the sight of his own blood did. It was as if the murderer looked to shock and terrify; unless there was another meaning in scattering of the car's entrails. Maybe he was looking for something inside, and had to shake out every minute cog and spring and flywheel.

He read the paper to calm himself. The incident with his deceased Peugeot was reported already, and so was another one—last night, it seemed, the murderer, already nicknamed the Disemboweler, got his hands on, and vivisected, a microwave oven callously left at the curb by its owners. Glenn shook his head at people who just tossed out their appliances rather than finding them a new home. Small appliances belonged indoors, since their grasp on their spirits was often more tenuous than that of the larger things. Too windy a night, and one could kiss a microwave goodbye, its spirit blown away like so much smoke from overly vigorous cooking. The poor oven was cut up in much the same fashion, its tiny emitter elements scattered in the street like a child's bones.

Glenn rubbed the bridge of his nose and drank his coffee. He heard someone scrabble at the closed shop door but remained seated, confident that he was hidden from view. The customer soon gave up and left, abandoning Glenn to his solitude and quiet grief for the Peugeot. Cats purred.

Glenn hatched a plan. He would set a trap for the perpetrator, using his broken coffeemaker at home as bait. He doubted for a moment whether the dead appliance would attract the murderer but then decided that to ascertain the presence of life the criminal would have to get close to it. And then . . .

Then what? Glenn's shoulders jerked at the sudden cold draft that snuck under his clothes and ran down his back. He should call the police, call the neighborhood watch. Only then they would arrest the Disemboweler, haul him off, to be judged and probably eviscerated as a punishment. Glenn wanted to know why the Disemboweler disemboweled. What possible secret lurked in the shiny machine guts? He decided to watch first and consider how to act later.

Later that night he prepared the sacrificial coffee maker and left it by the curb, alone in the night. Glenn shivered; even though the thing was devoid of life, he felt bad abandoning it all alone in the night, with a crazy appliance killer lurking about. Cruelty was not easy for him.

Glenn placed the coffee maker not far from a streetlamp, just on the edge of its halo of light, where he could see it from his first-story room. He settled before the window, his room dark, his head making a barely perceptible silhouette on the windowpane. And he waited.

It didn't take the murderer long—just as Glenn's knees started to ache and his shoulders went stiff, a long, lank figure slid through the shadows, skirting around the circular pool of light, and squatted down by the coffeemaker. A long metal rod glinted

in the streetlight as the disemboweler brought it down upon the defenseless coffeemaker; its former spirit, secure inside the vacuum cleaner, wailed at the destruction of its first home—a lone, sad note like a breath caught in a flute. In the street, glass and metal and bone shattered and sprayed in the light cast by the streetlamp.

The murderer remained crouched, and contemplated the broken pieces for a time. As Glenn watched him, a suspicion started to form in his mind. This was what the murderer did—he just wanted to see the pattern, like the diviner of old. Glenn grunted with frustration; this morning, he saw a book on fortune-telling and hadn't thought to bring it home. Now he had to wait until tomorrow.

A shot rang out from the darkness, ricocheted off the lamppost and hit one of the larger pieces, displacing it. The Disemboweler jumped to his feet and rushed away, disappearing in the ink of the alley to the right of the house. Several policemen pooled into the light, and disappeared too, chasing the long silhouette of the Disemboweler.

Glenn rose, his knees popping, and stretched. It was time to go to bed anyway, and he only hoped that he would be able to sleep with all the danger and excitement. But before he reached his bedroom (the size of a handkerchief; apartments were expensive nowadays), he heard a sound coming from the outside. Scratching and dull thuds, directly on the wall of his apartment building. He listened, and the vacuum cleaner

wrapped its hose around Glenn's ankle, worried. There were more scratching sounds, and then the shattering of glass from the kitchen.

Glenn disentangled himself from the fearful appliance and walked cautiously toward the kitchen. His slippered feet made no sound, and the apartment was dark. There was more creaking and scratching coming from the kitchen, and Glenn peered through the doorway.

"Halt!" A metallic, awful voice, nothing like the normal cadence of human speech or gentle gurgling of the spirits. "Do not move."

The sound petrified Glenn like the gaze of a basilisk. He felt something dash past his knee in the darkness. It was the vacuum cleaner; its spirit recognized the one who destroyed its former vessel and charged. There was a muffled curse and a massive thud as the vacuum wrapped its hose around the stranger's legs and pulled him down. *What awful clanking*, Glenn thought, still unable to move.

The stranger shook off the vacuum even as it hissed and spat, and stood. In the struggle, his long coat came unbuttoned, and a soft glinting of old metal in the light from the streetlamp outside finally snapped Glenn out of his helpless terror. "You're an appliance," he said, as he took a cautious step into the kitchen.

"No!" The stranger clanked angrily across the kitchen, back and forth. "I'm not an appliance. I am a robot."

It was a good thing that Glenn was well read; he wouldn't have recognized the archaic word otherwise. These were soul-

less machines, built in the time before people learned to harness the power of nature spirits and infuse their appliances with souls of trees, rocks and small bodies of water. "Revenge, then," Glenn said. "You're angry that they're better than you."

"No." The robot stopped. "It's not that, not that at all."

"I didn't know there were any of you still around."

"Just me," the robot said. "Can I hide here for a while? I have survived far too long to be captured because of a coffee maker."

"Why would I let you?"

The robot stepped closer, its hot, oily breath singeing Glenn's face. "Because I am stronger than you. I've never killed a person, but there's a first time for everything, isn't there?"

"I'll scream. They'll hear me and come for you."

"Compassion?" the robot tried.

"Not after you killed my car."

"I'm sorry. Would you like to know what it is that I do?"

"Yes," Glenn said. "Tell me, and then I'll decide." Glenn edged to the kitchen counter and lit a candle. Glenn much preferred candles to incandescent bulbs.

"It is an ancient art," the robot said, its faceted eyes glinting in the candlelight.

The word was haruspex, not disemboweler, the robot told Glenn. From Hittites to Babylonians to Etruscans to Romans to robots it went. The robot's insectoid jaws clicked, and its long head glimmered in the buttery, yellow candlelight.

Robots do not have spirits, the robot continued. They are not like microwaves. Neither do they have the knowledge of right

and wrong, or any other reliable moral compass, like people do. They only have the desire to be ethical.

Haruspicy, the robot told him, unlike many other forms of divination, did not reveal future or any past secrets; it did not concern itself with knowledge. It told you only whether or not you were right.

The Etruscans and other ancients used it to know the will of gods, whether they supported an undertaking either completed or intended. Robots used haruspicy to know whether they were making a moral choice, a correct choice. There was just no way around it.

Robots never sacrificed animals—flesh being innocent of the mechanical concerns—and only mechanical guts were acceptable to them. The innards of the combustible engines and electronic devices were used to guide the robots' search for excellence.

The robots had disappeared, and the engines and electronics acquired souls and flesh. Still, the robot carried on as before, unsure of what else it could do.

Glenn listened with a dawning sense of sympathy. It all sounded so understandable, and yet . . . the robot had killed Glenn's Peugeot and threatened violence against Glenn himself.

"Please," the robot said. "Don't give me to the police. They will kill me."

"Probably," Glenn agreed. "But technically, it won't be murder. They'll just take you apart."

The robot's eyes watched him, dull and empty of expression. "You know it is the same thing."

"What choice do I have?" Glenn now paced the room, crossing the yellow circle of candlelight, stepping into corner shadows and pulling his foot back quickly, as if he just stepped into too-cold water. "They've seen you, they know you. It's only a matter of time. You hid for so long . . . isn't it time?"

"No," the robot said. "The signs are clear—I mustn't aid my own demise. Believe me, I think of it every day. I ask the machines and their entrails, was I right to survive another day? And they always say yes."

"What do you want me to do? You can't hold me captive forever. People will notice."

"I can hide here. If you permit."

"They'll look for you. They'll see the tracks you left climbing up the wall."

The robot contemplated its hands, ending in three sharp metal claws that left deep gouges on the outside stonework of the apartment building and Glenn's kitchen windowsill. "I must run then."

"Good idea," Glenn said.

"They will catch me."

"Probably." Glenn paced again, shadows slipping over him like a second skin.

The vacuum cleaner kept close to Glenn, mistrustful of the robot. It whistled and gurgled and purred. Looking at it gave Glenn an idea.

"Perhaps, I could find you a spirit."

The robot's multi-jointed arms folded over the carapace of its chest covered in patches of old mold. "I do not see why I would need one."

"You won't have to kill anything then."

The robot inclined its long head. "I suppose. What will happen then? Will you help me?"

"I have to think about it," Glenn said. "But first, I need to sleep. You can stay here for now."

The next morning, Glenn went shopping. The car insurance paid up, and he decided to get a new vehicle first, now that it wouldn't be threatened by the Disemboweler.

He went to the parking lot, located next to a crystal-clear, frozen pond and surrounded by a willow grove. The willow branches stood naked like wicker. Several of the willows were blackened and dead, and Glenn suspected that the car lot owners were not always paying for their spirits. He hoped that they would not plunder the grove into oblivion.

He picked out a small red Audi—the price tag listed a reasonable sum, right under the warning sign that read "Spirit Is Not Included."

He paid for the car and for the delivery, and then walked through the grove, wondering about how to solve the problem of the robot holed up in his apartment. He could just call the police and have it over with; forgiveness was not easy for him. However, cruelty was even harder.

He wandered away from the car lot and grove, passing by several stores that sold spirits. Perhaps he could find one that would suit the robot or the new car. He began browsing the shops. Tree and water spirits seemed too fluffy; rock spirits lacked vitality and spark—or so he thought until he found the spirit of an iron mine long since collapsed. The spirit bubbled in its bottle with subdued fire and brimstone, ancient anger and secret knowledge of gods so old even the Etruscans had no memory of them. It was perfect for both the car and the robot.

Glenn walked home, the bottle with the spirit stuffed into his coat pocket. He had the sidewalks all to himself, and the cars drove noiselessly past him, reflected in the glassy storefronts. He was looking forward to not having to walk, and imagined what it would be like, to drive a car animated by an ancient spirit that smelled of forges and molten metal.

At home, the robot crouched over the vacuum cleaner.

Glenn stifled a scream and rushed over to protect his appliance. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," the robot said, sullen, and rose to its feet. "Just petting."

The vacuum seemed unharmed.

"I'm sorry," Glenn said. "I just thought . . ."

The robot nodded. Its faceted eyes looked even more alien in the daylight. "Have you decided what you want to do?"

"Yes," Glenn said. "But you will have to help me."

The car arrived in the late afternoon, when the shadows started to grow long and blue. A large, green truck, its wheels

overgrown with emerald fur, carried Glenn's red Audi on its back.

Glenn went outside to say hello to the two mechanics who were unloading the lifeless car. "Got a spirit lined up yet?" the older of the two asked with mild disapproval in his voice.

"Sure," Glenn replied. "A good one, too."

"Where do you want it?" the other mechanic said.

"Here, around the corner. In the alley," Glenn said.

The second mechanic chuckled. "Afraid of the Disemboweler, eh? I read this morning the police had scared him off. Then again, better safe than sorry, right?"

The mechanics left the car in the alley, lifeless, motionless. Glenn and the robot waited for the mechanics to leave and for the darkness to descend. In the alley, away from the curious eyes, Glenn popped the hood and opened the engine compartment.

The robot went to work, busting open the engine and the drive train, tossing aside the gaskets and the caps, the gauges and the wheel bearings.

"How're the omens?" Glenn asked.

The robot stared at the heap of metal on the ground. "Good," it said. "The gods approve of the transformation."

Glenn nodded. He was not exactly sure of how the transformation would happen; he just knew that it had to. He trusted the robot, its knowledge of all things mechanical and their internal and secret workings, to figure out the way.

After most of the engine was gone, the robot set out to the reassembly. First, it folded its long body into the cavity,

and Glenn handed it the necessary parts—hoses to connect itself to the engine's remains, and gaskets to fit over its electronic brain. Its faceted eyes spat forth narrow light beams that illuminated the shining chrome of the car's and robot's intestines mingled together.

The robot connected its brain to the drive shaft and the brakes; multicolored wires spun out of its arms and legs, cocooning everything inside the car into the robot's neural net. The robot became the car's engine and navigation system, its operator and its heart. Only the spirit that would animate the robot-car was still missing.

These things demanded care. The spirit had to like its new vessel to bond with it properly; otherwise, it would just blow away with the wind. And the old spirit was sure to be persnickety; Glenn only hoped that the abundance of metal and wires, the crackling, humming energy of the old robot would be enough.

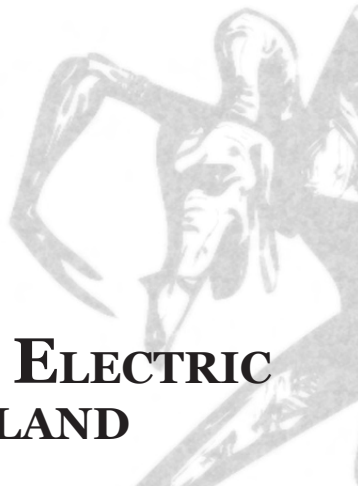
Glenn flung the bottle that housed the spirit into the very center of the engine, and prayed that it would take. The spirit, a faint ochre-colored cloud, hovered over the engine in hesitation, motes of dust dancing in the narrow beams of the robot's gaze. Slowly, the spirit gathered itself into a thin wisp, and the wisp twined around the beams of light, pulling itself deep into the robot's flat eyes.

The engine roared to life and thudded, the robot groaned in his metallic voice, and the innards of the car twisted, growing dark, knotted flesh and sulfurous deposits. A vein of marble bisected the vehicle's interior, splitting the back seat.

Stalactites sprouted from the roof, the exhaust pipe breathed out a pungent cloud of foundry fumes, and the pavement cracked under the wheels. The car engine and the robot snorted with a single breath smelling of oil and hot metal and howled in a single furious metal voice, nothing like the gentle gurgling of the regular spirits.

The robot spoke no longer, but it seemed content; Glenn guessed that haruspicy had finally paid off for it. Disemboweling of the engines was just the first step; one had to put something back in the resulting void, and if one had removed a heart, what was a better substitute than the heart of one's own? He wondered if the oracles of old knew that, if to them too the spilling of the entrails was only half of the story, if their hearts were somehow filling the empty spaces they had created.

The police never found the Disemboweler, and soon the memory faded into legend. Glenn supposed that it was a fitting fate for the haruspex, and he never told anyone that his car was made of the last robot on earth.



A Night in Electric Squidland

Sarah Monette

Some days, Mick Sharpton was almost normal. Those were the good days, the days when he did his job and went dancing after work, days when he enjoyed eating and slept well and sang in the shower. Days when flirting with a good-looking man was fun, even if it didn't lead to sex, and he didn't lose his temper with anyone unless they deserved it. Those were the days when he liked himself and liked his life, and some months there were more of them than others.

The bad days were when the world wouldn't stay out of his head, when everyone he looked at wore a swirling crown of color, and everything he touched carried the charge of someone else's life. Those days were all about maintaining his increasingly precarious control, snarling and snapping to keep anyone from getting too close. Trying not to drown. Sometimes he succeeded;

sometimes he didn't.

Today was a good day. He could almost pretend he wasn't clairvoyant. His head was clear, and he felt light, balanced. He had not remembered his dreams when he woke up, and that was always a positive sign.

Mick and his partner were wading through a backlog of paperwork that afternoon. The sheer monumental bureaucracy was the downside of working for a government agency like the Bureau of Paranormal Investigations; left to his own devices, Mick would have let it slide, as he had always done with schoolwork, but Jamie had a stern, Puritan attitude toward unfinished reports, and it was useless to argue with him.

It was always useless to argue with Jamie Keller.

But the perpetually renewed struggle to find the right words—where 'right' was a peculiar combination of 'accurate' and 'decorous' as applied to descriptions of interrupted Black Masses and the remains left on the subway lines by ghoul packs—was both tedious and frustrating, and Mick was positively grateful when the phone rang, summoning them to Jesperson's office. Jesperson would have something for them to *do*.

"It'll just be more paperwork later," Jamie warned.

"Oh, bite me, Keller."

"Not my thing," Jamie said placidly.

When they came into his office, Jesperson was leaning over a ley line map spread out on the big table and weighted down with a fist-sized chunk of the Tunguska meteorite,

two volumes of the *Directory of American Magic-Users*, and a lumpish pottery bowl with a deep green glaze, made for him by his daughter Ada and used for keeping paperclips and sticks of red chalk in. Ada lived with her mother in Seattle; Jesperson saw her for one week each year, at the Winter Solstice, and nothing was more sacred in the office than Jesperson's annual week of vacation, even if most of his employees politely pretended they had no idea why.

Jesperson looked up and said, "*There* you are," as if they should have known to be somewhere else, and waved at them impatiently to sit down.

They sat; Jesperson stalked over to stand between them and glowered at them both impartially. "What do you know about Electric Squidland?"

"It's a nightclub," Mick offered. "Goth scene. Lots of slumming yuppies."

"And?" Jesperson said, looking from one to the other of them.

Mick had told him all he knew—Electric Squidland had always been too trendy for his taste—and it was Jamie who finally said, reluctantly, "They get into some heavy shit on the lower levels."

"You've been to Electric Squidland?" Mick said.

"Used to work there," Jamie said and became unaccountably interested in the backs of his own hands.

"You *worked* at—"

"Sharpton."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Jamie said, not looking up, "This is about Shawna Lafayette, ain't it?"

"It might be."

"Who's Shawna Lafayette?"

"A young woman from Murfreesboro. Three years ago—just after the Carolyn Witt scandal, if you remember it—she disappeared off the face of the Earth."

"Just like that?"

"She went into Electric Squidland," Jamie said in a low voice, "and she never came out."

"Vanished without a trace," Jesperson said, "and now it's happened again. Maybe."

"Maybe?" Jamie said. "You mean somebody *sorta* disappeared?"

"Actually, yes," Jesperson said and allowed himself a small, crooked smile at their expressions. "What we have are the remains of half a person."

"Um, which half, sir? Top? Bottom?"

"The right half, I believe, Mr. Sharpton."

Mick and Jamie looked at each other. "Well, that's a new one," Mick managed after a moment.

"Quite," Jesperson said dryly. "We got a tip this morning. Anonymous, of course. Here."

He pressed the play button on the tape recorder that sat, as always, on the corner of his desk, and a woman's voice, drawling with a hard nasal edge, spoke into the quiet room:

"There's something y'all need to see. Right now it's out in the Sunny Creek Dump in a big black garbage bag, but I don't know how long it'll be there, so you better hurry. And if you wanna know more about it, go to Electric Squidland and ask 'em what happened to Brett Vincent." A solid clunk of metal and plastic as she hung up the phone, and Jesperson pushed the stop button.

And then both he and Mick were staring as Jamie lurched to his feet and said in a strangled voice, "I'll be right back." He almost fell against the door on his way out. Mick glanced at Jesperson for permission and followed him.

Jamie hadn't gone far; he was leaning against the wall next to the water fountain. Dark-skinned as he was, he couldn't go pale, but he was definitely gray around the edges. "Jamie?" Mick said, half-expecting his friend to slide to the floor in a dead faint.

"Sorry," Jamie said. His eyes were closed, and Mick thought he was doing one of the breathing exercises he'd learned from practicing yoga.

"About what, exactly? Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine. Just wasn't expecting . . ."

"Well, I wasn't expecting any of it, so I'm not sure how that gets you out here in the corridor looking like you're about to have a heart attack. You're not, are you?"

That got Jamie's eyes open. "Mick!"

"You look bad enough. And if you are, I want enough warning that I can call down for a gurney or something."

"Christ. No. I am *not* going to have a heart attack. I just wasn't ready for . . ."

"Oh," Mick said, feeling like an idiot. "You knew the guy, didn't you? Brett whatsisface?"

"Vincent. Yeah, I knew him." Jamie smiled, but there was neither mirth nor pleasure in it. "All too well."

After a moment, Mick said, "I didn't know you were bisexual."

"What I am is monogamous," Jamie said—mildly enough, but it was a clear warning to back off.

"We're going to have Jesperson out here in a minute," Mick said obediently.

"Yeah," Jamie said. "You go on. Lemme get a drink of water. And, yes, you can tell him about me and Brett."

"Okay," Mick said, touched Jamie's shoulder lightly, awkwardly, wanting to give comfort but knowing he was no good at it, and went back into Jesperson's office.

"Jamie, um, had a relationship with the deceased," he said to Jesperson's raised eyebrows.

"Did he?" Jesperson said, and added just as Jamie came through the door, "Then perhaps he can identify the body."

An hour ago, this had been a good day. Now, it was beginning to feel more like a nightmare.

Mick and Jamie were in the BPI morgue. Cold, echoing, the lights harsh on gray tile and metal, the psychic residue of death like dirt on every spotless surface. Mick hated it.

He hated it more today, watching Jamie's grim impersonation of a hard-as-nails, ice-cold BPI agent. He wasn't fooling his partner, and Mick doubted he was fooling himself, which meant

he was hanging onto the act because it was either that or go off in a corner and have a meltdown.

Mick spared some hate for Jesperson while he was at it.

He understood the logic, and Jesperson wouldn't have been competent to run the BPI's southeast hub if he didn't grab every advantage he could get and wring it bone-dry. But knowing that didn't make it any more bearable to watch the way Jamie's hands, carefully clasped behind his back, tightened and released against each other again and again, like the beating of some murderously overworked heart.

The morgue staffer seemed to catch the mood, for she was silent as she led them to the autopsy table, and remained silent as she pulled the sheet back.

Mick had to turn away. Even the mental images conjured up by the phrase 'half a body' had not prepared him for the reality: the raw, ragged edges of bone and skin; the way what remained of the internal organs spilled untidily out of the body onto the table; the way that one staring dead eye was somehow even worse than two.

Jamie regarded the body for a long time, perfectly silent, then said in a level, almost uninterested voice, "Yes. That's Brett Vincent. I recognize him, and he's got the tattoo."

"Tattoo?" Mick said; his voice, unlike Jamie's, was a wavering croak.

"We went and got 'em together," Jamie said, touching Mick's shoulder to get him to turn around. He did, carefully not looking at the table, and saw that Jamie had rolled his right sleeve up,

was indicating the bend of his elbow, where the Wild Hunt who rode in somber, frenetic glory the length of his arm broke like sea waves to either side of a design clearly the work of a different artist. For a moment, Mick couldn't make sense of the lines, and then it resolved into a circle made of two snakes, each biting the other's tail. Without knowing he was going to, Mick reached out and touched the tattoo gently, as if it might still be sore all these years later. His finger was shockingly white against Jamie's dark skin, and they both pretended they couldn't see how unsteady it was.

Jamie said, "Anyway, that body's got Brett's tattoo right where Brett had it. It's him."

"I'll write up the report," the morgue staffer said. "Thank you."

Jamie was unhurriedly rebuttoning his cuff. "And I guess we go see what Jesperson wants us to do now."

Jesperson wanted them to go to Electric Squidland.

"Never thought I'd see the day when the Old Man would send us clubbing," Jamie said when he picked Mick up that evening.

"Never thought I'd see the day when the Old Man would send us on a date," Mick countered, and was delighted when Jamie laughed.

They left the Skylark three blocks from the nightclub and walked the rest of the way, enjoying the mild night air. At 10:07 p.m. (Mick noted the exact time from force of habit) they walked into the Kaleidoscope, the first level of Electric Squidland, mirrors and colored lights everywhere, and were greeted with a loud cry of, "Jamie! Lover!"

Mick stared disbelievingly at Jamie, who winced visibly before turning to greet an extremely pretty young man who was making the most of his Hispanic heritage with a pair of pale blue satin toreador pants. Mick, observing the pretty young man with the eye of an expert, saw that he was not as young as he was trying to appear, and he would be prettier if he admitted it.

"Ex-lover, Carlos," Jamie corrected, but he let Carlos kiss him.

"Oh, nonsense, darling. Once I let a man into my heart, he *never* leaves. But who is your Marilyn Manson here? This your new flame, sweetie?"

Mick opened his mouth to say something withering about blue satin toreador pants, but Jamie's abashed, apologetic expression stopped him. He swallowed his venom, said, "Mick Sharpton," and endured Carlos's cold fish handshake. He and Carlos understood each other very well.

"Mick's never been to Electric Squidland," Jamie said, adroitly avoiding the issue of whether Mick was or was not a 'flame.' "So I said I'd show him around. Suzanne working tonight?"

"Is it Wednesday and is the Pope Catholic?" Someone across the room was trying vigorously to attract Carlos's attention. He said, "We'll catch up later, sweetie. When you're not so busy."

When you've ditched your gothboy, Mick translated and was not sorry to see the last of Carlos. "I'll assume Carlos has hidden qualities," he said in Jamie's ear.

"Me-*ow*," Jamie said, and Mick felt himself blush. "C'mon. We won't find what we're looking for up here."

"What *are* we looking for, exactly?"

"Gal who has the Wednesday night show in the Inferno."

"Oooo-kay."

Jamie grinned. "The two lower levels are Members Only. And I don't think Jesperson's going to let us put membership on our expense accounts. But Suzanne can get us badges, if she has a mind to."

"And will she?"

"Will she what?"

"Have a mind to?"

"Oh, I think so," Jamie said, and there was a private joke in there somewhere. Mick could feel it, and it made him a little uneasy. But only a little. He trusted Jamie, in a way he'd never been able to trust a partner before. He'd wondered sometimes, the first two years he was with the BPI, why he kept torturing himself, spending his days—and sometimes his nights—with a series of agents who disliked him, distrusted him—some of them had openly hated him, and Mick had hated them back, fiercely and with no quarter given.

He had expected Jamie to be more of the same, Jamie with his bulk and his heavy hands and his deceptive eyes. And he still didn't understand what was different about Jamie, massive, gentle Jamie with his night-dark skin and his tattoos like clouds—didn't understand why Jamie had decided to like him and made that decision stick. Mick was painfully aware that he didn't deserve Jamie's liking—ever a proponent of 'hit back first,' he had been unconscionably nasty to Jamie in the early days of

their partnership, until Jamie had proved, immutably, that he would not be nasty back. So whatever it was Jamie was waiting to spring on him, he knew it wouldn't be too bad.

He followed Jamie obediently from the Kaleidoscope down the open corkscrew staircase that was the centerpiece of Electric Squidland's second level, the Submarine. The Submarine was classier, the level for those who fancied themselves Beautiful People. No disco balls here, and the music was dark, very techno, very European. Mick bet the bar on this level went through a lot of synthetic absinthe.

Jamie used their descent of the staircase to reconnoiter, and at the bottom, he grabbed Mick's elbow and said, "This way."

"Your gal's here?"

"Yup."

"Is she drinking absinthe?"

"What?"

"Never mind." By then, he could see the woman Jamie was aiming for, a petite woman with long, plum-red hair, dressed in trailing, clinging black. The liquid in her glass was lurid green, and Mick moaned quietly to himself.

She looked up at their approach. Her eyes widened, and then she said, with apparently genuine delight, "Jamie! A very long time, and no see at all!" She gave Mick a once-over, seeming to take especial note of Jamie's hand on his elbow. "Are you attached to this delectable creature?"

"At the hip," Jamie muttered, only loud enough for Mick to hear, then said, "Sorta. I'm showing him around tonight."

"Well, you can just leave him to me." Suzanne extended a hand, the nails as long and black as Mick's own, and said, "Hi. I'm Suzanne."

"Mick." He did not let Suzanne's hand linger in his, although he knew he probably should have.

"Sit down, please," Suzanne said. "How have you been?"

"Oh, fine," Jamie said. "Listen, Suzanne, I really want Mick to see your act tonight."

It was hard to tell in the Submarine's dim lighting, but Mick thought Suzanne blushed. "Jamie, how sweet of you."

Jamie kicked Mick's ankle; resigned, Mick picked up his cue: "Jamie's told me the most amazing things."

She *was* blushing. "He's probably exaggerating. But . . ." She looked at them, an expression in her eyes that Mick couldn't read. But whatever she saw pleased her; she smiled and said, "I'd hate to let you down. Let me see what I can do."

She left with a generous sway of her hips, and Mick leaned over to hiss in Jamie's ear, "She *can't* think I'm straight."

"I'm sure she doesn't." He shifted guiltily. "Suzanne, um. She has a thing for . . ."

"She's a fag hag," Mick said, several things falling into place; Jamie winced, but did not dispute the term. So that was Jamie's private joke. Mick grinned. "You son of a bitch. And you want me to—"

"Jesperson wants information. Of the two of us, I'm the one who knows where to look, which means you get to play distraction."

"But do I have to distract *her*?"

"You *can* distract her. And if you're distracting her, I can tell the bouncer at the Inferno's side door I'm running an errand for her, and he's likely to believe me."

"Your plan sucks," Mick said.

"It's the only one we've got. And anyway, she's coming back, so it'll have to do."

"Your leadership technique *also* sucks," Mick said and forced himself to smile at Suzanne.

Suzanne had brought them two pin-on black badges, each saying *Inferno* in fiery letters. "I've got to run and get ready," she said. "Sit where I can see you, and I'll talk to you after, okay?" It was clear to both Mick and Jamie which one of them she was talking to, and Mick only barely managed not to sigh audibly.

"Be glad she brought two badges," Jamie said, then hesitated. "Suzanne's really not that bad. She's like a lot of the kids here—thinks it's exciting and sexy to work in a nightclub with a reputation. *She* doesn't know what goes on in the Neon Cthulhu."

"And you do? What did you do, when you worked here?"

"Chief bouncer for the Inferno. Adler called me Cerberus and thought he was being funny."

"You must've been good at it. Why'd you quit?"

Jamie smiled widely, mirthlessly, the same smile he'd had when he'd confessed to knowing Brett Vincent. "Because they were gonna give me a promotion."

"Most people," Mick said, cautious now because he didn't know this mood on Jamie, didn't know which way Jamie would jump, "don't find that offensive."

"They wanted to put me on the door of the Neon Cthulhu, the lowest level. And I wasn't stupid enough to be interested. Inferno's bad enough, and it's really just play-acting." He held up one broad palm, anticipating Mick's objection. "Nothing illegal in the Neon Cthulhu. Leastways not out in the open. It's all consensual, and they got a license for public occultism. But it is *nasty* shit. I was only down there once." And he shuddered, as if even the memory made him ill.

"Jamie?" Mick said uncertainly. "You okay?"

Jamie shook his head, a weary gesture like a bull goaded by flies. "Don't like it here," he said. "Lot of real crappy memories."

"I'm sorry," Mick said helplessly, and was relieved when Jamie smiled at him, even if the smile was thin and forced.

"Not your fault, blue eyes. C'mon. Let's go to Hell."

Suzanne, it turned out, was a class eight magician; her act was very good, very smooth. She had a rather pretty young man as her assistant, and looking at him, looking at Suzanne, Mick saw his own twenty-year-old self and understood what Jamie had been trying to say about Suzanne. So eager to be wicked, but with no clear idea of how to go about it, so ready to admire anyone who seemed to have the secret information she lacked. He was able to relax a little, though, more confident that she would not turn out to be the sort that would try to get him into bed.

After her curtain calls, Suzanne came and sat at Mick and Jamie's table, instantly making them the cynosure of all eyes; she preened herself, and Mick felt his patience with her slip another notch. Jamie, with his customary talent for evading the spotlight, went to get drinks, then muttered something about the restroom and disappeared.

Leaving Mick alone with Suzanne and several dozen interested spectators, including her seething pretty boy. Mick knocked back a generous swallow of his screwdriver, and offered the first conversational gambit, asking a simple question about how she accomplished one of the effects in her act.

An hour later, he was wishing Suzanne's pretty boy would just go ahead and slip strychnine in his glass, because it would be less excruciating than this. The boy was hovering, green with jealousy; Suzanne, well aware, was flirting with Mick in a way he could have put paid to with a few pithy words, except that he was supposed to keep Suzanne distracted until Jamie got back, and where the hell was Jamie anyway?

Shouldn't have let him go running off to play James Bond on his own, Mick thought, while acknowledging ruefully that there was nothing else he could have done. He smiled at Suzanne—a little too hard, but she wouldn't notice in the dim light—and choked on his screwdriver when she asked, a trifle too nonchalantly, "Have you been Jamie's partner long?"

The coughing fit was merciful; by the time he recovered, and Suzanne was saying, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you," he'd realized what she meant. She thought he and Jamie

were lovers; her curiosity was prurient, not professional.

"You just surprised me," he said. "I didn't realize you . . ." and as he hesitated, trying to decide what he ought to say, whether he ought to play along, or whether he ought to tell her about Jamie's girlfriend, the image crashed into his mind, brutal as an SUV through plate glass—blood, black in lurid green light, and the harsh scent of cedar incense.

"Shit!" he said, setting his glass down hard enough to slop orange juice and vodka onto the table. "Jamie's in trouble."

Suzanne looked as if she couldn't decide whether to be offended or alarmed. "What, are you psychic or something?"

"Yeah, actually. Three-latent-eight."

She and her pretty boy stared at him with identical wide-eyed expressions.

"And I mean it," Mick said. "Jamie is in serious trouble. Will you help me find him?"

"But where would he . . .?" She twisted around, and only then seemed to realize that Jamie was not lurking anywhere nearby.

"*Fuck*," Mick said between his teeth. But Jamie needed him, and he knew he'd never find his partner without help. He gambled on the truth. "We work for the BPI. We're investigating the death of Brett Vincent, who was found out in Sunny Creek this morning."

"BPI? Jamie Keller went to work for the *BPI*?"

Mick wondered tangentially what Jamie had been like when he had worked here, and if that was why he'd been so unhappy to come back. "Yeah."

"And Brett?" Her eyes had gone even wider, and under her makeup, she'd gone pale. "Brett disappeared a week ago. Adler said he'd taken vacation, but Brett hadn't said anything about it, and that's not like him."

"Jamie identified the body. It really was him."

Suzanne thought a moment, her teeth worrying her lower lip, then turned to her pretty boy and snapped, "Give him your Cthulhu badge."

"But, Suzanne—"

"Do it!"

Pouting, frightened, the boy unpinned the badge—black like the Inferno badge, but with *Cthulhu* written on it in lurid green black-letter.

"Trade," Suzanne said. "Nobody wears both."

Mick did so quickly, lucky to avoid stabbing himself to the bone with the pin.

"Good. Come on."

"You don't have a badge," Mick said, getting up to follow her.

"I've worked here for years. They won't stop me."

Neither the bouncer at the top of the stairs nor the bouncer at the bottom seemed at all inclined to argue with Suzanne. This was the job Jamie wouldn't take, Mick remembered and showed his Cthulhu badge. The bouncer waved him on with no further interest, and Mick felt a pang at how completely Jamie would have been wasted on this job.

He got out, he reminded himself fiercely. And you'll get him out again. Get him out and not come back.

Then he got his first good look at the Neon Cthulhu. Mick was no stranger to S&M, and although he was not himself a magic user—and had no desire to be—he had been trained to recognize the more esoteric byways of the various disciplines. But the Neon Cthulhu still rocked him back on his heels—almost literally—and it took him a moment to realize Suzanne looked as shocked as he felt. He remembered Jamie saying she didn't know about the Neon Cthulhu, and it appeared that had been the truth.

"Stop looking like you're about to puke," he said, low and fierce. "C'mon, Suzanne. Pull yourself together."

"God," she said. "I mean, I knew it was a heavy scene down here, but—"

"It doesn't matter," he said, resisting the urge to shake her. "Help me find Jamie, and then you can get the hell out of Dodge."

"Okay." She took a deep breath and said it again, more firmly, "Okay. But where . . ."

Mick looked around, a quick, comprehensive glance. "That door," he said, with a jerk of his head toward the only other door that had a man on guard. "Can you distract the bouncer for me?"

"Can I . . ."

"For Jamie," Mick amended hastily, and that seemed to steady her. She nodded. "Good. Then pretend like this is all part of your stage act, and let's go."

That got her spine straight and her face, finally, settled, and they stepped away from the door together.

Having gone through all the stages from raw newbie to elite inner circle at more than one goth club, Mick knew perfectly well that the second most obvious sign of a tyro—after the wide-eyed gape—was the overdone look of blasé nonchalance. The trick was to look appreciative but not shocked, and he could manage that if he pretended strenuously to himself that the occult signs and mutterings and bits of ritual were just exceptionally impressive window-dressing for the S&M scenes being enacted in cages and on altars at various points around the room. He also reminded himself that Jamie had said Electric Squidland had a license for public occultism, and thus nothing going on here was illegal.

They stopped by a cage in which an ecstatic young man was being flogged by an Asian woman whose long braids snapped around her like another set of whips, and Mick pretended interest while Suzanne sashayed over, all hips and sex appeal, and engaged the bouncer's attention. Mick ghosted forward, aided by a sudden rapturous scream from the man in the cage that turned everybody's head for a split-second. Then Mick was at the door, wrenching the knob with clammy fingers, and then he was through, the door closed behind him, feeling his way down a much darker staircase, the bite of the cedar incense almost enough to make him cough. And he knew Jamie was close.

He could hear voices; as he reached the bottom of the stairs, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, he realized that the stairs were masked from the room beyond by a curtain. Green-tinged light seeped around its edges, and he drew close enough to make the voices come clear.

". . . he must know something, or he wouldn't be here!"

"Could've been just listening to the rumors again. You always were a gossip, weren't you, Jamie boy?" A heavy thudding sound and a grunt: somebody had just kicked Jamie in the ribs. Mick's hands clenched.

"He's a threat, Adler," the first voice insisted.

"And I'm going to deal with him."

A beat of loaded silence, and the first voice said, appalled, "You're not going to give him to Brett's—!"

"I really don't think it will care." Adler sounded amused. "*He* certainly won't. At least not for long."

"We're not ready," the first voice said. "After last night . . ."

"Oh, Jamie will keep. No one's likely to come riding to *his* rescue."

Wrong, asshole, Mick thought with considerable satisfaction, listening as Adler and the other man, now discussing logistics and supplies for what sounded like a very complicated ritual, moved away from the stairs, growing distant and more muffled, until finally, with the click of a closing door, they became inaudible entirely.

Mick pushed the curtain aside only enough to slip through. The room beyond would have seemed ordinary enough—a waiting room with benches and chairs along the wall—if it had not been for the terrible greenness of the light, and Jamie Keller lying like a foundered ship in the middle of the floor, wrists bound, ankles bound, mouth stopped with a ball gag that could have been borrowed from any of the scenes going on in the Neon Cthulhu's main room.

There was blood on Jamie's face—it looked like it was from his nose, and Mick was cursing Adler viciously under his breath as he dropped to his knees beside Jamie and fumbled at the buckle of the gag, trying not to pull Jamie's already disordered braids, trying not to hurt him more than he'd already been hurt.

He eased the ball out of Jamie's mouth, and Jamie took a deep, shuddering breath, and then another; Mick hadn't been the only one with visions of asphyxiation. Then Jamie let his head roll back on the carpet as Mick started working on his wrists, and croaked, "How'd you find me?"

"Had a flash," that being Jamie's term for the times when Mick's latent 8 blindsided him.

"No shit?" Jamie sounded amazed and delighted, as if Mick had given him a birthday present he'd always wanted but never dared to ask for.

"Yeah," Mick said, and the leather thong around Jamie's wrists came loose. "But enough about me. What happened to you?"

"Being a Grade-A Prime fool, I walked slap into Mr. Henry Adler on my way back to the stairs."

"On your way back?" Mick said, untying Jamie's ankles. "Did you find out—"

"Yeah," Jamie said, his voice tight with the pain of returning circulation. "Only let's get out of here before we have Story Hour, if you don't mind."

"You could hardly have suggested anything I would mind less," Mick said and braced himself to help Jamie up. Jamie was perfectly steady on his feet, and Mick hoped that meant he had

not been hurt too badly, despite the blood. He was glad to let Jamie take the lead as they proceeded cautiously into a positive rabbit-warren of storerooms and access tunnels.

"You are in a maze of twisty little passages, all alike," Mick quoted uneasily. "Where the hell are we going?"

"Back door. Heck of a lot easier than trying to get out the way we came."

"And where's it gonna get us? Atlanta?"

Jamie laughed, and Mick was ridiculously glad to hear it. "Alley in back of the Kroeger's on Lichfield."

"That's three blocks away!"

"Halfway to Atlanta," Jamie said dryly.

"Adler can't own everything between here and there."

"Steam tunnels. Hell, Mick, you know how this city is. *Everything*'s connected underground."

"Fucking ghouls." Much of the undercity of Babylon had been constructed in the late nineteenth century by a series of Reconstruction mayors who had preferred the local necromancers' money—and at a choice between the necromancers and the carpetbaggers, Mick wasn't entirely sure he blamed them—to the safety of their citizens. It was the ghouls, though, who kept those tunnels clear, as patient and industrious as moles.

"Works in our favor this time," Jamie said, and a voice said in answer, "It might."

Mick and Jamie both whipped around, and then Mick shied back, right into Jamie's unyielding bulk. He might have screamed; later, he could not remember and could not bring himself to ask.

The thing that had crept into the corridor behind them had once been human. It might still be able to pass, to anyone except a clairvoyant, although the way Jamie's arms tightened around Mick for a breath-stealing moment before letting him go suggested otherwise. Mick could see the broken wings it dragged behind itself, black as tar and shadows, and the way its eyes glowed fitfully sodium orange in the dim light. But the way its voice blurred and doubled, as if it were neither one person nor two, but perhaps one and a half—that, he thought, registered on the material plane, where Jamie could hear it just as well as he could.

And then there was the way it crawled, like a spider or a crab, and the fact that its legs ended in stumps where the ankle bones should have been; even if it could have passed for human, it could never have passed for normal.

Jamie said, his voice unnaturally steady, "You used to be Shawna Lafayette, didn't you?"

"'Used to be'?" Mick said, hearing the shrillness of his own voice. "Then what the fuck is she now?"

"I am ifrit," the thing said, its eyes flaring brilliantly, its voice warping and splintering, and it raised itself up like a cobra preparing to strike. Then it sank back again, the light in its eyes dulled. "And I think that, yes, this shell was once called Shawna. Much is lost."

There were several thousand questions demanding to be asked, and Mick couldn't find the words for any of them. Jamie cut straight to the heart of the matter: "What do you want?"

"I am hungry," the ifrit said in a plaintive, unconvincing whine. "I am hungry, and I am tired, and I am starting to lose my grip on this shell. You carry pain with you. You could release it to me." It licked its lips, not like a human being, but with the darting, flickering motion of a snake.

"No, thank you," Jamie said. "I did figure out what they're doing with the Neon Cthulhu, you know. You got all the pain—and all the sex—you ever gonna need."

It hissed, again like a snake. "It would be better this way. Brighter."

Mick suddenly figured out what they were talking about and lurched back into Jamie again.

"He is eager," the ifrit said, its voice warbling with its own eagerness.

"*He* is scared out of his mind, thank you very much," Mick snapped. "Jamie, what—"

"Shut up, Mick," Jamie said, and very gently put him aside. "I have a better idea," he said to the ifrit, advancing slowly. "Why don't I help you let go of that body, before things get *really* ugly, and then you can go your way, and we can go ours?"

"Jamie—!"

"Shut *up*, Mick."

"You will not kill this shell," the ifrit said. "You know its name."

It sounded certain, but it had backed itself against the wall, and it was watching Jamie with wide, unblinking eyes, very orange now.

"And if you understood thing one about human beings, you'd know that's why I'm willing to kill you. That body's in misery, and it used to be someone I knew." He stopped, just out of arm's reach, and stared down at the ifrit. "It'll be quick, and then this whole clusterfuck will be over."

"I do not want . . ." But the ifrit's voice trailed off, as if it could no longer be certain what it did want, or didn't want; Mick remembered for no reason that mongooses were supposed to mesmerize their prey by dancing for them.

"Hold still, Shawna," Jamie said, his voice terribly kind, and then he moved.

Greased lightning had nothing on Jamie Keller, and Mick was still shocked at the idea that anyone so big could move so fast when he realized that small, dry noise he had heard, like a twig breaking, had been Shawna Lafayette's neck. The body was just a body now, slumped and broken. The ifrit was gone.

"Is it dead, too?" Mick said hoarsely.

"Fucked if I know," Jamie said, and it was clear he didn't care, either. "Shawna's better off, though. I'm sure of that."

They reached the Skylark half an hour later, without another word being exchanged; Jamie folded down into the driver's seat with a sigh of relief and reached for the handset.

Mick caught his wrist. "Tell me first—are you okay?"

"Yeah. Adler got me down with a hex, not a cosh. Hadn't gone face-first, I wouldn't even have the bloody nose." He sounded disgusted at his own clumsiness.

Mick hadn't really meant physically. "Jamie . . ."

"I'm fine, Mick. Let's report in and get this over with, okay?"

Mick couldn't argue with that, although he had a vague feeling he should. He listened as Jamie called in; neither of them was surprised when Jesperson's voice interrupted to pepper Jamie with questions. Jesperson really *didn't* sleep, and he almost never went home. The first was the result of being a class nine necromancer—a necromancer dux, they called it in Britain—even if officially nonpracticing; Mick often wondered if the second was as well.

"Did you find out what killed Brett Vincent?"

"Yes, sir. And Shawna Lafayette, too. Well, part of Shawna Lafayette, anyway."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"No, sir. Because Adler's hosting ifrits."

Jesperson's vocabulary became briefly unprintable. "Are you sure? Adler's only . . ."

"Class four, yessir. *That*'s what happened to Shawna Lafayette. And Brett Vincent."

"That . . . oh. Oh, bloody hell."

"Yessir. Adler and his boys, they're talking 'bout it like a ritual, and I know for a fact Henry Adler ain't got the math. He can't figure a tip without a calculator."

"I like this even less than I thought I would. How long do you think this has been going on?"

"Dunno, sir. But I know what happened to Brett Vincent's body was on account of them getting the phase wrong, and the stupid bastards didn't even know the word."

Becoming aware of Mick's goggle-eyed stare, he covered the mike with his palm and hissed, "*What*?"

Mick just shook his head, and Jesperson said, "'Brett Vincent's *body*.' You don't think—"

"I think Brett Vincent's been dead for a long time. Same way I would've been if Echo hadn't come and got me out."

"Yes, what *was* November Echo's part in this evening's escapade?"

"Echo was invaluable, sir," Jamie said, and elbowed Mick hard in the ribs to make him stop laughing.

"Good," Jesperson said. A pause, probably while he wrote something on one of the legal pads that littered his office like shed snakeskins. "How many ifrits do you think there are in Electric Squidland?"

"There can't be that many," Mick said, and now it was Jamie's turn to look goggle-eyed at him.

"How do you figure that, November Echo?"

"Yeah," Jamie said. "How *do* you figure that?"

"Well, you said it yourself—and how did you get to learn so much about necromancy, anyway?"

"*I* don't spend my off-hours fornicating like a bunny rabbit. Go on—what did I say?"

"That they didn't know what they were doing. I mean, I don't either, but if they had to repeat the spell every so often—?"

"Yeah. 'Bout once every five years. Ifrit starts losing its grip, and that ain't pretty. Well, you saw."

"Yeah. And they've fucked up twice *that we know about* in the last three years—they can't be maintaining an army of ifrits, or we'd be up to our asses in Missing Persons."

"They must've lost the person who knew what they were doing."

"Carolyn Witt," Jesperson said, startling them both badly. "She was part owner of Electric Squidland. Sold her share to Adler just before her arrest. And she was class seven. I think a word with Ms. Witt might clear up a great many questions."

"Yessir," Jamie said and yawned.

"Go home, November Foxtrot and Echo," Jesperson said, and for a moment the rasp in his voice sounded less like irritation and more like concern. "You can finish the paperwork when you've got some sleep."

The BPI raided Electric Squidland that same night, discovering things in the rooms beneath the Neon Cthulhu that would keep the state Office of Necromantic Regulation and Assessment busy for years. Suzanne Parker was not among those arrested; she had taken Mick's advice and gotten the hell out of Dodge.

At 11:34 the next morning, Mick set two cups of coffee on the desk he and Jamie shared, and sat down opposite his partner. Although his head was clear this morning, and the world was coloring within the lines, Mick had a gloomy feeling today was not going to be a good day at all. They were facing a mountainous stack of paperwork, including the closing of a file on a seventeen-year-old boy named Daniel McKendrick who had disappeared from a Nashville suburb in 1983. His fingerprints matched those of Brett Vincent.

Jamie pushed back from the desk, stretching until his spine popped.

"Lila going to forgive you?" Mick asked.

"Maybe," Jamie said dolefully. "She hates my schedule."

"That's because you don't have one."

"Bite me." Jamie took a generous swallow of coffee and said, "Do you think we're right to say that body is Daniel McKendrick?"

"It *is* Daniel McKendrick."

"Not like that. I mean, his family's gonna be notified, and they been thinking he's dead all this time, and now they get half a fucking body to bury? Aside from which, Daniel McKendrick *has* been dead all this time—or at least most of it. That body was . . . somebody else, if it was a person at all."

"You mean, you think when you were sleeping with him . . ."

"Oh, I'm sure of it. Because he didn't give a shit when Shawna Lafayette disappeared, and now I know why."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Mick asked, red-faced at his own stupid clumsiness.

"No, but I'm gonna have to put it in the report anyway." Jamie sighed, took another slug of coffee. "It's the reason I quit Electric Squidland. Well, one of the reasons. Shawna was a waitress in the Kaleidoscope. She caught Adler's eye, because she was pretty and not very bright, and I was worried about it—because she was pretty and not very bright. And then she disappeared, and nobody cared, and I asked

Brett if he didn't think there was something strange about it, and he essentially told me to mind my own business. And, you know, I'd seen him talking to Shawna before she disappeared. Talking to her *a lot*."

"Persuading her."

"Seducing her," Jamie corrected. "And I don't know how many other people he seduced like that, or why he didn't try it on with me."

"Jamie, you're not helping yourself—"

"You know, that's the worst part. He let me go."

"Sorry?"

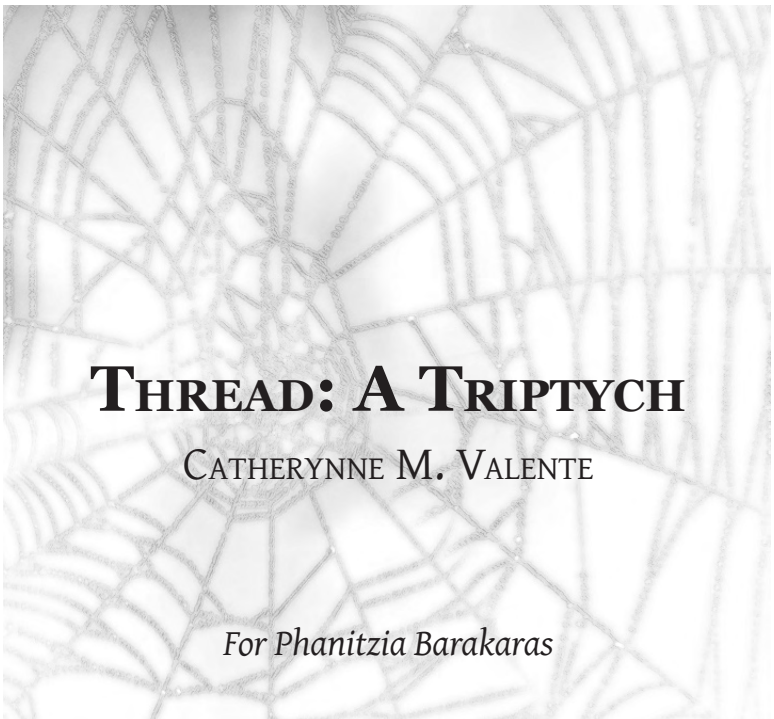
"*He let me go.* Oh, he tried to make me stay on, but when I wouldn't, he was okay with it. He never used magic on me, or tried to get me to play Adler's little games. Hell, he never even asked me to go down to the Neon Cthulhu with him, and he must have known I would have. I think about the shit he could have pulled on me and the fact he didn't pull it, and the fact that he fucking let me go, and . . . well, fuck it, Mick, I don't know. Was I just not worth it? Or do you think ifrits can love?"

"I don't know," Mick said, wanting desperately to give a better answer but simply not having one. "I really don't." And hesitantly, almost cringing, he reached out and put his hand over Jamie's, feeling the warmth and the strength and the roughness of Jamie's knuckles. And Jamie turned his hand over, folded his fingers around Mick's hand.

They sat that way for a moment, saying nothing. Jamie squeezed tighter, then let go and said briskly, "This ain't

getting the paperwork done." But his eyes were clearer, as if some of the pain knotting him up had been released, and Mick returned to his share of their report feeling better himself.

Today might turn out to be a good day after all.



Thread: A Triptych

Catherynne M. Valente

For Phanitzia Barakaras

I came, I came out of the red dirt of Heraklion like a golem licking dust from its finger-webbing; I came because he called me, he told me to come, he wrote my name on a crisp white form and I stepped over the water, over the purple foam, over the breakers like dogs' tails, I came with my feet still smelling of Cretan sand.

He ordered me like a suit: black hair, black eyes, slim hips, breasts fit to feed sons. Good blood, of course; he paid extra for the pedigree, for the fine nasal bones and the high chin that just would not sink into the chest, no matter how many rubbed-smooth coins passed under it for the purchase of a womb. *Dress her up*, he wrote to my mother, *I won't have my bride wander on the ship's decks in peasant filth*. And she dressed me, first of my siblings to be sold: a wide red belt and black stockings like sackcloth.

And she put the spindle into my hands, bulging with thread, with yarn, for my baby's clothes, for surely he'd get me with child before he got me home from harbor.

She patted my cheek.

The lines on her face were long and thin as the bristles of a bull.

The ship was so white, tablecloths covering wood like snow over stones, and all the silver, all the wax candles, all the delicate piles of carrot and leek, bright as sacrifices on the spotless plates. He made sure I was kept above the rabble, in the white and pure parts of the ship—his woman from the old country would arrive stunned and humbled by his wealth. And yet it all stank of sweat and fat flesh, it all stank of women's blood and stale whiskey, it all stank under the talcum and white. And I said nothing while the ship crossed the sea, the wine-dark sea, I said nothing through the three-week crossing, as though I was doing penance, as though I were a nun cast into the desert to starve into holiness. I spoke to no one until the man in the brass buttons stood behind his teak vestibule and recorded my name in his book as "Annie Smith."

Eipa Ariadne, I whispered, *kathariste ta autia sas.*

But he wrote me down as Annie anyway, wrote me in his great black book which must be a book of the dead, and he Charon on a raft of red wood, with a punting pole of ink, and he wrote my name in his book, he wrote my name among the other dead women crossing over the water, and I was Annie and not Ariadne, I was Annie now and some broad-shouldered man's wife in a city called Chicago, and not Ariadne at all.

His house was white, white and stone, and in it I stood like a smear, black on black, and my red belt gleaming. He had lemon-cake and black tea waiting. He looked at my teeth. He wanted a woman from home, he explained, as though it made perfect sense, one who would not trade an honest broom for gin. He pinched my cheek to see the color; he showed me clothes which were neither coarse nor black, lined up shoulder to shoulder like churchgoers.

"Give me that old thread, Annie," he said kindly. "It is Annie, isn't it? I will have a woman downtown make you a nice Sunday dress."

I clutched my wad of scarlet to my chest, bright as a heart. "Annie," I answered slowly, pulling words like beads from my own mouth, "my name is Annie, yes, but you cannot have my thread. It is for my baby, when it comes."

He shrugged. It didn't matter. Thread is nothing to a man, it is string, it is knots.

He let me finish the delicately iced cake before he took the rough-woven dress from my shoulders, before he took the wide red belt from my waist, and where there was no dress nor belt there were red lines from the rough fabric, red lines from the tightened sash: I wore the belt on my flesh long after the thing was gone from me.

Annie, he panted, and opened my legs on a long yellow couch before a cold furnace. The light slanted in like slabs of cake, and the room was full of sick and sweet—*Annie, you smell like Heraklion, you smell like red dust and bullhide, you smell like old walls spiraling in and in and in, oh, Annie, you spiral in—*

I put my arms around him, shyly, tentative as a girl my age ought to be, and he rocked over me like a pendulum, and I watched my hair fall down between us, and I whispered as he cried a son into me, whispered as the couch creaked beneath me:

Theseus, oh, Theseus. Don't you know me? Won't you say my name? What Cretan girl was ever called Annie?

He choked and the son spilled out of him, and I could feel little black eyes shuddering in me, and the light slanted still, and the clock hushed out the day.

He showed me the kitchen, and asked for coffee at eight.

When the boy was born, his cow-eyes blinked limpid up at me, and his hair was coarse as my dress, coarse as the tail of a bull. I rolled out my thread and rocked his crib with my foot; I rolled out my crimson thread, the thread that tumbled from me to him, a little path across the rug-strewn floor. I embroidered his little jacket and trousers with red flowers, red castles, red cows chewing cud in a red field. I embroidered old walls; I sewed seven youths and seven maidens; I pulled my needle through and through, and up came a red maze across the shoulders, and a thin path between its angles.

My son cried, and my body tightened, swollen with milk. The light slanted in like fingers, and the thread stuck in his sweaty scalp as he drank, gurgling, greedy.

In two months I was pregnant again, but I had no thread left for this second son, this other boy whose limbs were fat and pink, who had ten toes and ten fingers, and who wore the jacket

when his brother grew out of it, but the trousers never fit right, never fit over his plump little legs, legs which emerged from me already downed in dark hair.

He looked at me when they put the second child to my breast, looked at me sidelong, thoughtful, as if calculating a sum. He kissed my forehead and whispered, "What a good girl you are, Annie. What a good, sweet girl."

The man in the brass buttons stood behind his teak vestibule and recorded my name in his books.

Annie Smith.

He listened to my husband politely, and recorded his answers like names. Like names, yes, he invoked them solemnly, pantheon-names to be blazoned over my brow, fixed to my wrists, neurasthenic-gods thrown up into star-graves, constellations, networks of names which were not mine, but were strapped to me, corkscrewed into me. Annie-not-Ariadne, Chicago-not-Heraklion, post-partum schizoid break, anhedonia. But I knew the truth of it, I knew there was a woman waiting in his sleek black car, a woman with pale hair who did not smell of red dust and Heraklion, who had no gum-marks on her rosy breasts.

I bent my head and let them read out my new names just the same. Only once did I look up at him, did I make my eyes huge and pleading, did I murmur: *Parakalo. Parakalo me parte spiti.*

He rolled his eyes. He rolled his eyes and a new name was added: *Defiant. Refuses to speak English.* He rolled his eyes and left me with the man in the brass buttons, and my sons toddled after him, one in each hand. The younger one had outgrown his

jacket, and his brown wrists stuck through the tight sleeves. His little shoes squeaked on the white floor, and the man in the brass buttons closed a cool hand over my shoulder.

It is cool in these hundred rooms, cool as stones, cool as shoals. He left me here. He did not want me. He left me here and they put a needle in the shallow of my elbow and I slept, and I woke up in the water, oh, the water was lapping my toes, my fists, foaming between fingers like wicked white whispering tongues, like sheet-corners torn loose. My hair floated damp around me; a ruin of conch scoured my back. He did not want me and I woke up in the water—I woke up in the water and the sky was blank, blank and so close. It is cool in these hundred rooms and the walls are blank, the air-conditioners like zephyrs, and there are anemone waving in my veins, red and green, red and green, and everywhere I look the strand continues on, this bleak island without a single tree, with only conch-corpses grinding away at the tide to hammer at the silence.

He did not want me, and I woke up in the water.

I woke up with the thread tangled over my limbs, broken and splattered, thread spooling out of my navel, out of the labyrinth that was me, the fallopian-whorl that succored a hairy child whose head was too large, and another who snorted while he slept. He walked into me on a red thread, and I was always the labyrinth, the only labyrinth, and the thread wandered through me with a goat-grin, and saw the Minotaur inside me, saw my brother, or my sons, I cannot tell anymore—look, they all have horns! Yes, horned men all, and my mother strapped into the

cattle-machine, still screaming, still screaming, and all of them rooted in me, in my stomach, in me strapped into the thunder-machine, still screaming, still screaming, and they are all marching into me and out again, their boots on my bones are like syringes, plunging in and out and flooding me with morphine-minotaurs, gold-electric, thorazine-thread, flooding, flooding—he did not want me, Theseus did not want me, he wanted the bull-sons, and I woke up, I woke up, I woke up in the water.

I tried to follow it back out, out of myself, out of the miasma of flesh that these hundred rooms have made of me, maze within maze, woman within maze—and Annie is gone, fled, Ariadne is left, and she is the maze and she is in the maze, she is lost in the white and the water, and her cow-children are not playing in the surf but she can hear them lowing, she can hear them and Theseus trampling the kelp. I cannot follow the thread; it keeps coming out of me, like blood, like placenta, and it is all over my hands, and I cannot get it off, I cannot get it off—please, I don't want any of that. I don't want it; it maketh me to lie down in green pastures, it maketh me to lie under the too-close sky, it maketh me to lie down on the grey beach and the thread keeps coming out of me—ravel, unravel, ravel, ravel again—the sky is coming open at the edges—I don't want any of that, please, it makes me so sick.

He left me here, and, in Scythia, Hippolyta is holding a brand to her severed breast.

The sky, the sky too-close, and there are unraveled clouds watching me, watching my feet in the sand, and they are coming down to me, they saw me, they spied me with their moon-born

eye, and they are coming down, and they are the grape-spoked wheels of a chariot, and a fennel-whip slaps the grey flanks of cloud-mares, and a black beard blots out the sun and let me up—oh, please, take these things off me—he is coming and I cannot get away, tied to a bed, tied to a beach, he is coming and he smells of sweat and sons. He wants to fill me up with it, Dionysus out of the clouds, to fill me up with him, with glass phials full of catskin and grapes, phials full of wine-dark sea, phials of sleep and somber. He wants to hold me under the tide and tell me I will get better, I will get better, I will get well if I let him help me. He wants to put me in the machine and make me the vine-god's Pasiphaë, push all those leaves and roots into me, into the monster-making labyrinth, and when he is finished wine will gush out of me like an arterial spray, and he will lap it up, oh, he will gurgle and slurp at me—

Theseus did not want me, and in Knossos Phaedra is brushing her black hair.

I'm so thirsty, and the sea is full of salt. I can hear his wheels on the conch-shatter; I can hear his feet in the hundred rooms—when can I see my sons again?—I can hear him calling my name and with fennel on his breath he never calls me Annie, but I don't want him, I don't want to be a labyrinth, I don't want to smell of bulls and bronze and bactine, I just want to walk into the sea and let it cover my head, I just want to clutch my thread to my chest and walk past the breakers, but his beard is so black, and he holds my hips with hands of grass, and his cries are full trumpeted *ioioioio*, his voice is a spurt of wine, *ioioioio*, and he is violet and sour, so sour, and so close.

I cry and he does not care. The cats howl and the thyrsoi rattle and the grapes burst all around, but he does not stop, he never stops, and when will I see my boys again? Where are my boys? I am their mother, why don't they come?

He left me here and sailed away under black sails and I woke up in the water, in the water, and I have forgotten what the roofs of Heraklion looked like, whether they were white or red. Every night I am swollen up with wine, and every morning I am drained again, and the conches are crushed beneath my back as he leaps onto me—please. Please. I don't want any of that. I'll be good; I'll be quiet. I'll wake up in the quiet water and be a quiet girl, and when my boys come to see me tell them how quiet I was, how good and sweet—and when the vine-god came I didn't say no, because Cretan girls know their place.

The Frozen One

Tim Pratt

Wait, don't run away, really, it's okay. No, I don't come from the future. The future isn't a place. I know I look exactly like you, but there's a reason—well, hell, it's because my stupid bosses thought it would make things simpler, if we showed you something straight-up impossible right up front, it would save time trying to convince you I'm telling the truth. But it turns out seeing an identical twin, right down to the blemishes and nose-piercings, just freaks people out. We won't try that again next time. If there is a next time.

Sit down on that park bench. Don't give me that, you don't need to get back to class, you were planning to cut class all afternoon and hang out smoking in the park. Don't you want to hear what I have to say?

So it's pretty complicated. Like, ten semesters of intensive lecturing just to give you the background, and we don't have that kind of time. I've only got about ten minutes to talk to you. Nine minutes, now. I wish I could lay everything out, because I know when I was your age there was nothing I hated more than some bullshit declaration from on high, being told to do something a certain way just because. But the best I can do is try to give you some guidance, tilt the probabilities a little closer toward you doing the right thing if and when the time comes. And the people in charge, who know more about these things than I do, they did a bunch of tests and they say the best way for me to do this is to tell you a story. I'm not supposed to call it a parable, but I'm not going to mess around with you, here, you're a smart kid: it's a parable.

A parable is like a story about some little thing that's supposed to teach you something about a big thing. Yeah, like the good Samaritan, that's a great example. And you know you should take me seriously, right, because I just appeared out of nowhere by those bushes and I look just like you, right down to the pimple on your forehead and the weird hair? Good.

No, it's not a parable about God, it's got monsters and heroes and swords and shit, because we know you like that stuff, you play that fantasy computer game all the time.

Look, don't interrupt me, I've got this thing memorized, it's like a spiel, so just let me go. Okay:

Once upon the time there was a great city that had many names, but most of the people in this story just called it The City.

Nobody had ever seen the whole of The City, because you could start walking from one end to the other and die of old age before you explored every basement and tower. Inside some of the oldest buildings, space and time didn't work the way they did elsewhere, and you could get lost forever just walking down a dusty hallway. The City filled a valley, surrounded on all sides by mountains, and the mountains were inhabited by monsters that had lots of names, but most people called them the Halfway People. They looked like ordinary people, most of the time, except when they attacked you, and then they sort of grew extra arms and legs and wings and claws and sometimes even tentacles, and that's when you realized they *always* had those teeth and spines and stuff, you just hadn't been looking at them the right way before.

All the best craftspeople and artisans and engineers and magicians and thieves lived in the The City, because it had all the best schools and restaurants and great dusty warehouses full of ancient stuff, magic and technology and cursed things and treasure. The City did most of its trading with the rest of the world by airship, and the citizens didn't go out into the mountains much. They had good high walls and guards who were especially good at recognizing the Halfway People, and since those were pretty much the only kind of people who ever tried to enter The City on foot anyway, the Halfway People were kept out almost completely.

There were a bunch of heroes who lived in The City, swordsmen and fighting monks and necromancers and this one woman

with green skin who could shoot fire from her eyes and fly, but only for short distances. They'd all done lots of adventuring and pillaging and mercenary work, and they mostly hung out together and drank and told stories. This one bar they liked was called The Frozen One, because there was a giant block of magical ice right in the middle of the room—the bar had been built around it, because the owner realized having a giant block of magically unmelting ice meant he could keep his beer really cold for free. There was a guy frozen inside the ice, and even though the ice was kind of foggy, you could still make him out—he was about seven feet tall, big broad shoulders, face all scarred, marked with tattoos all over his body, draped with magical amulets, holding a huge axe with a blade shaped like a crescent moon. Nobody knew his name, just that he'd been some big-shot hero hundreds of years before, when The City was just a village, and that he got frozen in ice for some reason. People used to speculate about why the guy was frozen, but then one day the Mayor turned up holding some old scroll with a prophecy that said the guy was The Chosen One, and would remain frozen until The City was threatened, at which point the ice would melt and he would emerge, axe swinging, to kill the enemy. He would succeed when all the other heroes had fallen, been butchered and eaten, et cetera. The Mayor said the prophecy was certified genuine by the magical scholars, and he was pretty happy, because he was able to cut down the number of guards on the walls. Why worry so much about invasions when a legendary nameless hero was ready to kick invader ass?

But then a war started in a neighboring kingdom, and refugees started streaming in from that other country, way more refugees than the Halfway People could kill and eat in their mountain passes. Soon there were hundreds of refugees banging on the gates to The City, begging to be let in. But the guards didn't want to let them in, because they were afraid Halfway People were hiding among the refugees, pretending to be ordinary humans so they could get inside and kill and eat the fat, prosperous city folk. So the guards asked the city council if they should let the people in, and the council started polling citizens, and the citizens were kind of divided on the issue, so the mayor asked his advisors, and meanwhile days and days passed. Eventually the refugees became numerous enough that they just knocked down the gates and came pouring in by the hundreds, filling the streets, breaking windows, knocking over apple carts, what a mess.

The guards tried to get the gates back up, but by then it was too late—the refugees were hiding everywhere, deep in the deserted parts of The City. And in a couple of days it became apparent that lots of Halfway People had slipped in, too, because they were attacking citizens, even in the well-lit districts, approaching with smiles that turned into bites. In a few days, everything was chaos. The airships had been set on fire, so all communication with the outside was cut off, and burning wreckage littered the ground. The guards were overwhelmed, attacked by teams of Halfway People working in tandem. And then the Halfway People started stealing the guards' uniforms . . .

well, things got pretty bad. The Mayor stayed holed-up in his mansion, issuing proclamations and trying to direct the guards, trying to keep the populace calm, but it was a losing battle.

And all this time, the heroes stayed barricaded in the bar, watching through the slits in boarded-up windows, waiting for the hero in the block of ice to wake up and save The City. For a while they told themselves the guards must be winning, or that things weren't as bad as they seemed, because if they were, the hero would have burst from the ice to rescue The City. Every once in a while they thought about going out to help people fight, but they weren't sure what to do, exactly, and then there was the prophecy, nailed up on the wall in a place of honor, describing how all the heroes except the chosen, frozen one would be slaughtered and eaten if they tried to fight the invaders. They tried to chip away the ice with their daggers and hatchets, to speed up the process, and the green woman shot fire from her eyes at the ice to try to melt it, but none of that worked.

Then one day a man came in through a concealed side entrance none of the heroes had even known about. They recognized him instantly: long dirty gray hair, grimy clothes made of animal skins and strange leathers, and those incongruously clean magical boots. This was the legendary, infamous Howlaa, the walker over worlds. He stared at the heroes, and the heroes stared at him, and Howlaa shouted, "What are you idiots doing in here? I thought all The City's heroes were dead!"

They looked at each other, and coughed, and mumbled, and finally the green woman said, "We've just been waiting for this

guy in the block of ice to wake up and go fight. We were going to help him, once he did."

Howlaa scowled, and beckoned, and the heroes gathered around him, because the chance to hear Howlaa speak was a rare one. "You stupid bastards," he began. "Let me tell you a story. I was once walking through the many worlds of the sky, and I came to a great city—not so great as this one, but more impressive in some ways—called New York. There was a woman there, named Kitty something, and one night she came home very late and started toward her apartment. Before she reached her front door, she was attacked by a man, who stabbed her. The man went away and left her bleeding, but after a while he came back, and followed the trail of blood she'd left as she crawled away. Once he found her again, he did unspeakable things to her, and stabbed her to death. This woman Kitty had neighbors, and some of them heard her calling for help, and some others saw her get stabbed, but none of them called the city guards, and none of them came to her aid. For a long time, people thought this was proof of how horrible and jaded and uncaring the people of that city were, but the truth is more complicated. Some scholars performed experiments later, where they tricked people into thinking another person was in danger. They discovered that, when people are alone, they usually rush to help a person in distress. But when people are in groups, they don't rush—instead, they seem to expect that someone else will do the rescuing, or the calling for help. That's what Kitty's neighbors did—they waited for someone else to do the hard work, as if

there were some Chosen One waiting to swoop in and save the day. I've got a hard truth for you, sucklings—there is no Chosen One. There's just you, and the things you choose to do."

And the heroes sputtered, and protested, and pointed to the prophecy, and said, "Look, it's there, it's been certified, the frozen one is the chosen one."

So Howlaa took down the scroll, and turned it this way and that, and squinted at it, and snorted, and said, "No he's not, he's just some dead idiot who got frozen. This isn't an ancient prophecy. It's written on the back of a restaurant take-out menu." And he showed them the scroll, and now they could all see it, and couldn't imagine how they'd ever been fooled—except they knew it was some trick of the Halfway People, who were skilled at such illusions.

"The mayor must be told!" the green woman shouted, and the heroes set out, with Howlaa in the lead, toward the mayor's mansion. The streets were filled with Halfway People, who didn't bother to disguise themselves anymore. Many of the heroes died on the trip, including Howlaa, which was a shock, because in spite of themselves, they'd believed he was somehow truly the chosen one. Eventually the green woman and a couple of others made their way to the mansion, and inside. The Mayor was there, but to their horror they saw he was actually a Halfway Person too. He'd come into The City secretly years before, pretending to be human all that time, finally rising to a position of power, just waiting for his chance to let his fellow monsters in. The heroes hid in an adjoining room and listened to the Mayor talk to his

councilors, and discovered that he'd created the false prophecy, and that he was ordering the few remaining human guards into ambushes. The heroes despaired, but finally the green woman rallied them—they might die, but at the very least they could kill the Mayor, and hope that without his guidance the Halfway People would lose their grip on The City. And so they steeled themselves, and went into the office, and did battle.

No, that's it. That's the whole story.

No, for the last time, I'm not from the future, I'm not *you*. I'm from . . . someplace else. Sort of a kingdom next door. And there's some bad stuff happening there, way more complicated than heroes and Halfway People, but there might be some . . . refugees, you could say. Things might spill over here, to this world. And if they do, and if you're in the right place at the right time—you might be, but we're not sure, it's not like you've got a destiny, you're just some *guy*—we hope you'll try to do the right thing. Don't stand there. Don't wait around. Don't look at your buddies and wait to see what they'll do. There's no such thing as fate, but all kinds of tremendous shit seems to keep happening anyway.

I can't tell you exactly what you'll have to do, because I don't know what's going to happen. None of us do. So we're coming over, talking to as many of you as possible in the few moments we have. It's like, if you teach a kid to play chess, he doesn't just learn how to play chess, he learns how to think a certain way, how to look ahead, think of things in combination, and that's what we're trying to do, we're trying to *show* you.

Damn. Time's up. Here I go. Just remember—

Dragon Hunt

Sarah Prineas

I knew who I was, and I knew my place. I knew why the king's chattering courtiers cast me sly looks from the corners of their eyes when I walked past; I knew why the king's brave knights fingered their daggers when they looked my way.

I was an assistant to a junior deputy archivist in the moldy, dusty rooms full of books and maps the king called his library. I was sixteen years old. My mother died at my birth.

At dinner, the great hall of the king was always loud with talking and jests, the tables slick with grease and spilled wine, the rushes underfoot crawling with vermin. On the walls, smoke-clotted tapestries displayed the crimson-threaded death of the last dragon at the hands of the king.

At the highest table, King Kenneret sat surrounded by his bravest knights and most gentle nobles.

I sat at the lowest table, and I had already spilled a goblet of wine down the long, embroidered sleeve of the lady sitting next to me. She glared; I didn't bother apologizing. Amid the noise, I sat quiet, reading a pocket-sized copy of Volume XXXII of *The Encyclopedia Draconis*.

Looking up from the book, I noticed a peasant enter the hall, escorted by a guardsman. I squinted through the smoke to get a better look. The guard was half drunk, of course, but the peasant glanced around wildly, frightened—as he ought to be—stumbling over the rushes until he stood before the high table. He was ignored by His Royal Majesty, who was trading jests and toasts with his knights.

The drunken guard whispered to a servant, who scurried to a more senior servant, who in turn pulled the sleeve of the king's counselor, Prickett, who rose in white-bearded state from his place at the high table, went to the king, and bent to whisper into his ear. The king paused in the midst of a bellowing laugh. He listened. He nodded, then answered.

I found myself leaning forward, straining to hear. The lady beside me was laughing shrilly; I gave her a nudge. "Shhh." She shot me a venomous glance and edged away from me on the bench.

But silence was passing in waves over the great hall. The king shifted his bulk in his chair, then spoke to the waiting peasant, his deep voice rumbling through the growing quiet. "We are told you bring us news. Our counselor says it warrants interrupting our dinner. What say you?"

The peasant bowed, gripping a shapeless hat. "Y-your Majesty," he quavered, bowing again. "I am the headman of West Cornhold."

The king shrugged. "What news do you bring us from West Cornhold?"

The peasant fell to his knees on the rush-covered floor before the high table. "Your Majesty, it is a dragon!" He dropped his hat to gesture widely with his hands. "We-we've seen it, My Lord! Huge it is, breathing great gobs of fire, shining in the sun, flying over our fields and houses, sharp c-claws, teeth, and—"

"Silence!" Prickett shouted. In a sharp voice, he continued. "To talk of dragons, sirrah, living ones, in the court of King Kenneret Death-of-Dragons, is to talk treason. It cannot be a dragon."

The peasant stared. "It bloody well is a dragon," he shouted, climbing to his feet, spittle flying from his lips. "Claws! Wings, great wide wings, like sails! Stealing sheep, and—"

"That's enough," ordered the counselor.

"—And goats!" the headman added.

Well. There was going to be trouble. The court held its breath and stared at his Royal Majesty. Someone was for the headsman's axe.

The king, his face flushed from the wine he'd drunk with dinner, pushed himself to his feet and looked around the hall with a display of great good humor, as if selecting somebody to be the butt of an excellent joke. The court let out its breath in relief. The king had decided not to be offended. "Who shall slay me this Cornhold Dragon?" asked the king.

I leaned forward to see what the knights and nobles at the high table would do. My elbow hit the lady's wine-filled goblet and over it went. She leaped up, shrieking, brushing at a blood-red splash down the front of her embroidered dress.

The counselor's gaze fell upon me, sharpened. He leaned over to whisper to the king. After a moment of hesitation, the king nodded. "Your Majesty," Prickett said loudly, "a dragon of such doubtful provenance should be dealt with by the very least of your knights." He extended a long, bony finger.

At me. I was not a knight; I was a librarian. Slowly, I got to my feet.

The nobles at the high table tittered; the gentle knights fingered their daggers.

I offered a bow, and with typical grace knocked my book from the table into the rushes on the floor.

"Yes, very good," said Prickett. "You will go and slay for the king this Cornhold dragon."

Four days later, as a chill sun rose behind a veil of sober clouds, I readied myself to ride out from King Kenneret's castle on a swayback, piebald horse named Rosie, wearing a few bits of rusty armor, a helmet two sizes too large, and a sword newly sharpened by the castle blacksmith.

I didn't expect to use the sword. Not against a dragon, at any rate. I had read every book in the archive about dragons, and they all agreed that there were no dragons left in King Kenneret's lands.

As I fumbled with the straps of my saddlebags, the king's counselor crossed the courtyard to speak with me. Prickett's wrinkled face was pale in the early light. He wore a dusty grey robe and slippers, as if he'd come straight from his bed. "So you're going."

I looked at him over Rosie's back. Obviously I was going.

"Hmmm. Kim, is it? Your mother was Lady Darlyn, I believe."

I nodded. Rosie shifted, her hoofs scraping the cobblestones.

Prickett pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. "A great favorite of the king at one time, was your mother, as I recall."

So I had surmised. My waterskin had a leak; there was a wet patch on the saddlecloth.

"Hmmm," Prickett said. "Well, no matter. All that matters is this: There is no dragon."

"What?" I looked up.

"No matter what you find in West Cornhold, there is no dragon. To suggest otherwise would be treason against the crown. Do you understand?"

No. There was no dragon; the king had killed the last one twenty years ago, a fact verified by every book in the castle library. On the maps, *here be dragons* was crossed out.

"What am I supposed to do, then?" I asked.

"Ride out," the counselor said. "Come back when you've been away for long enough."

I watched Prickett make his way across the courtyard. He didn't actually think there *was* a dragon, did he? I shook my head and climbed onto Rosie's broad back.

After I gave her a few kicks in her ribs, the horse ambled toward the main gate of the castle. The guards sniggered as I passed. I'd just crossed the bridge onto the main road leading out of the city, when the castle's witch accosted me.

She was an ancient crone with a face like an apple with a bite taken out of it and then left to rot. I pulled Rosie to a halt as the witch scurried out into the middle of the road.

"Beware!" she shrieked. She looked over her shoulder and then laid her finger aside her nose, coming closer. "Beware, young knight!"

"Yes?" I asked. "Beware what, my lady?" Surely it was best to err on the side of politeness when speaking to a witch.

"Beware the compelling spells of the dragon," she replied with a cackle. "The dragon will spin around you a web of words. It will weave around you a tapestry of words until you see not the real world but a vision of gold thread and flying banners, knights a-horseback doing great deeds, fair princesses with white hands and welcoming smiles."

As I rode along the rutted roads that led away from Kenneret's castle, I considered the witch's words. *The compelling spells of the dragon*. Interesting. But I knew well enough that dragons and great deeds and welcoming smiles existed only in books, and not in the muddy, cold real world.

So I would ride to West Cornhold, identify the wolf or crafty poacher who had been stealing the farmers' sheep, and then ride back to the castle and my dusty books and maps.

In the meantime, I had plenty of mud and cold to deal with. The armor, rusty chain mail made for a bigger man than I, chafed, and it was heavy. The helmet kept slipping down over my eyes. The sword, scabbarded on my saddle, bumped against my knee every time Rosie took a lumbering step. And then the rain began.

I slopped into West Cornhold muddy to my eyebrows, planning to see the headman, to ask him where the depredations of sheep and goats had occurred. It was late afternoon, and the rain had brought on an early twilight. The village was quiet but for the squawking of chickens and the patter of raindrops on the thatched roofs. I knocked on the nearest door to ask my questions.

A dragon? No, young sir, we've seen no dragons here, certainly not, of course there are no dragons because the king killed 'em all. But if you were to seek one out, you might try the river where it runs through the Stalkfleet Forest.

And not one of the villagers offered me a place to stay for the night. I sighed and turned Rosie toward the Stalkfleet Forest.

I had read about forests like this. Moss grew on the trunks of trees that looked like hunched, ancient crones reaching out with gnarled, clutching fingers. Fog crept along the ground. The air smelled of swampwater. The forest was quiet but not peaceful. It was listening.

Rosie and I went on, her with her eyes rolling and ears twitching, me with my eyes wide and my hand on the pommel of my sword. The path was narrow, and moss-draped vines hung down across it and the bushes crowded in, brushing Rosie's flanks.

Then I saw, on the trail ahead, a wide, deep impression in the mud. I climbed out of the saddle and clattered to the ground, clinging to Rosie's bridle until I found my feet. Squelching through the mud, I went forward and knelt down to look closely. It was the length of my arm, with a deep well in the middle and four slashing gouge marks. A footprint of some kind—a claw-print, rather, of some strange beast.

I looked up, and quickly around. The forest kept absolutely still. Slowly, watching the undergrowth, I went back to Rosie and climbed into the saddle.

As the night drew on, the forest grew darker. I leaned forward, over Rosie's neck, peering through the gloom. At last, she stumbled to a halt.

I was tired, too. Fog rose from the ground and surrounded us.

"All right," I said, and my voice sounded quavery and thin. I climbed down out of the saddle. "Come on, Rosie." Pulling her by the reins, I led her along until we came to a place where the path widened into a clearing. I looped Rosie's reins around a bush and unsaddled her, and rubbed her down with a fistful of moss; then I wrapped myself in my holey blanket and, leaning against a tree, went to sleep.

In the morning, when I woke up, Rosie was gone, my blanket was gone, and I was pinned to the muddy ground by a huge, clawed foot. One talon was thrust through the shoulder of my over-large chain mail; another talon was plunged into the mud, right next to my neck. I blinked the sleep out of my eyes and, heart pounding, looked up. And up. I saw the claw itself, cracked and knobbled, then a muscled, dull-scaled leg, and up to a huge head: a narrow, gap-fanged muzzle, deep-set smoldering eyes, and a horned crest. A wisp of smoke trickled from one nostril.

A dragon.

The books and the tapestries and the maps were wrong. Kenneret hadn't killed them all, had he?

The dragon gazed down at me. I wriggled a little, to see if I could get free, and it leaned forward, its claw pressing me further into the mud.

"Keep still," said the dragon. Its voice was hollow and rumbly-deep, like a shout in a bottomless cave.

I kept still.

It brought its head down closer, looking me over, first with one eye, then tilting its head to look with the other eye.

"Well, well," it said. "Say they still *Childe* for Knight?"

I didn't answer. In the old poems, though, the knight was always called *Child*, or *Childe*.

"They do, I suppose," the dragon said.

I gathered my courage and cleared the fright out of my throat. "Where's my horse?" I asked.

The dragon blinked, first a membrane flicking across its deep eye, then an eyelid sliding down and up. "The horse has been eaten," it said. "You would be, too, Childe, were you a bit more plump."

My sword occurred to me. It was not far away, on Rosie's saddle—poor Rosie—where I'd left it.

The dragon huffed a foul-smelling breath down into my face. "But I shall not eat you today, Childe. For I have a curiosity about the world outside. What say you? Wish you to talk with me a while?"

I nodded.

"If you run away," the dragon said. "You will be caught, and you will be eaten."

"All right" I said. It was a fair deal.

The dragon leaned close again and put its eye up to my face. I gazed into it. The eye was like a still pool of water with a flame burning deep within. "It is a strange kind of knight you are," the dragon breathed.

I wasn't a knight at all, of course.

The dragon leaned back and took its foot off my chest, the claws pulling out of the mud with a sucking sound.

Slowly, I sat up, then inched back to lean against the tree. The dragon hunkered down, lowering its belly to the ground, folded its wings flat along its back, then rested its muzzle on a foreclaw. Its head alone was as big as a horse, and its flanks were like a muscular wall. Its spiked tail curled around behind me; I was encircled by the dragon.

"Well then," the dragon said. "Childe, from whence do you come?"

I considered lying. But somehow, lying was not appropriate. "From the court of King Kenneret."

The dragon lifted its head at that and stared intently at me. "Well. From the dragon slayer." Its voice stayed even; it didn't sound angry. "Were one to judge the state of Kenneret's court by the knight sent here by the king, one might draw certain conclusions."

I had no answer to that. The dragon was perfectly correct, after all.

"So, so, so," the dragon said, and snorted out a puff of grey smoke. "Dragons, Childe, are interested, above all things, in genealogy. So I begin with this. What is your name, Childe?"

"Kim," I said.

"Kimmmm," rumbled the dragon. It gave a slow double-lidded blink. "Kim. Is there more?"

I shook my head.

"There must be more," the dragon said. "What is the name of your mother?"

The early morning air was cold and clammy. To stay warm, I pulled up my legs and wrapped my arms around my knees. "Lady Darlyn. Her family was from Far Leaming."

"Ah." The dragon shifted, its belly scales scraping against the ground. "Her family but not yours. And the name of your father?"

I shrugged. I didn't actually want to answer that question, at least not for this particular questioner.

The dragon talked with me for the rest of the day. I grew stiff, sitting huddled by the tree, so I got up to walk along the dragon's massive haunches and its belly stretched out along the ground, then gingerly past its toothy snout, and past the tail and around again. I knew a lot about dragons, from my reading. This one was an Evetrix Gloriosa, the noblest of all dragons. Its scales, I noticed, were dull, and it had patches of moss growing on its back. Its claw and foot-joints were knobbled with age. Every now and then it shifted, as if in pain. On one of my circuits I paused and rested my hand against its leg; its scales felt cool and brittle.

In its compelling voice it told me stories of great kings and queens, and glorious waving flags, and ladies with white hands beckoning their knights home after battle.

The dragon, I realized, was very, very old.

At last, as the sun set and the grey clouds gathered overhead, it grew tired. My own voice was hoarse from asking questions, and answering them.

"Well," the dragon said. "I will sleep now, Childe." It cocked a bristled eyebrow at me. "And I do not think you will run away. For on the morrow I shall need you to do something for me."

"I won't run away," I said.

The dragon sighed and laid its head on the ground, closed its eyes, and went to sleep.

I was cold, and damp, and I hadn't had anything to eat since the day before, and my horse was dead. I leaned against the tree all night, thinking, wondering what the dragon wanted from me, exactly. Someone to listen to its stories?

They were wonderful stories; I would listen as long as it wanted to tell them. As the sky lightened, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, the forest around us was quiet and a light rain sifted down through the brown leaves, dropping from the ends of twisted branches.

The dragon was watching me through half-lidded eyes. "Know you, Kim," it said, "how Kenneret became king?"

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. My stomach growled. "I—Yes," I said. "He slew a dragon that had settled at the castle. The last dragon that ever lived."

"You know this how?"

"I read it in the *Encyclopedia Draconis*. 'And Kenneret brave, killed the foul beast, that clawed serpent, who ravaged the land.'"

"This is not how it happened," the dragon said.

No, I supposed not.

"Hmmm," the dragon hummed. It sighed and flexed a claw. "You did not run away during the night, Kim."

"I said I wouldn't," I said.

"You are very brave."

I shook my head. I wasn't brave; I was a librarian. I was just too tired and hungry to run away. And I wanted to hear more stories.

"An issue could be made of your paternity," the dragon said.

I blinked. "What would be the point?" I asked. I knew my place in the court of King Kenneret.

"Ah," said the dragon. "Brave, noble, knowledgeable, wise. A perfect knight you are. It is good that you were the one he sent."

I was none of those things. "You expected him to send a knight?" I asked.

The dragon flexed its claws. "Sheep I have killed, and goats, too. This would be noticed, I thought."

So the dragon had wanted me to come. Or, not me, but somebody.

"So now," the dragon said, and it stretched its neck along the ground before me. "The knight you are, sent by the king. You must slay me."

I stumbled back until I was pressed against the tree trunk. "No."

"I am old," the dragon said. "And tired. A knowledgeable Childe are you, Kim. How must dragons die?"

I knew the answer to this question. Dragons did not die naturally; they just grew older and slower and wracked with pain, and they died only when they were tracked and killed by knights. And the knights who killed dragons, often enough, became kings.

"Kenneret did not adequately slay me," the dragon said. "And you must finish it."

I shook my head. "But you're the last."

The dragon blinked. "Think you so? Kenneret's kingdom is small, Childe. Many are the dragons of the world."

Many? I thought of all the dragons I had read about in the *Dragon Chronicles*, and in the *Kingdoms of the Wyrm*, and in the *Encyclopedia Draconis*.

"And this dragon's time in the world is past," the dragon went on. "My fires are going out and I grow cold. You must release me."

I didn't want to do it. But the dragon's hollow voice compelled me. I stepped away from the tree and crossed the clearing to fetch my sword. Then I went back to stand before the dragon. Its neck was surprisingly slender, just a sapling of a neck; a sharp sword could cut through it in two, maybe three, blows.

I laid the bright edge of my blade against the dragon's neck.

"A little to the left, dear Childe," the dragon said.

I shifted the blade to the left.

I closed my eyes, and I saw myself lift my sword and bring it down on the dragon's neck, chopping off its head, and after the blood drained away and stood in great stinking pools on the ground, going back to the village for a wagon, then returning to the clearing with a few stout men and loading the head—after shooing off the carrion birds—into the wagon bed, then trekking four days back to Kenneret's castle, the head a stinking load, the flesh melting off the bone, the scales dull with death, the eyes sunken pits.

And at the court, what? Joy and welcome? Would the king mount the dragon's head on a spike over the castle gate? Would there be feasting? Would I go down on one knee to feel the blessing of the king's sword as it tapped first one shoulder, then the other, and rise a knight?

Opening my eyes, I lifted the blade and brought it down. The edge bit with a meaty *thunk* deep into the dragon's neck.

Carefully I raised the sword and struck again. This time, crunching through the neck bones. Black blood gushed out, splashing over my boots. I struck once more, and its head was freed from its body. Its tail twitched and its great hump of a body shifted, then settled into death.

After wiping the tears from my face, I took off my rusty chain mail and piled it on the ground; then I knelt and laid the bloodied sword before the dragon's head.

I walked out of the clearing. At its edge, I stopped to look back. In the dim light, the dragon had already become part of the forest, its moss-covered back blending with the undergrowth, its tail like a fallen tree. I bent and wiped my bloody hands against the mossy ground. Then I walked out of the Stalkfleet forest, and I walked away from King Kenneret and his castle and his brave knights, and instead I went out into the wider world, to find the places where the dragons lived.

Manuscript Found Written in the Paw Prints of a Stoat

Samantha Henderson

I. Stigma

When the last of her spines burst through the smooth, pearl-skin of her lower back, the Smallest Daughter of the House of Diamond decided it was time for her to leave her home and find her husband.

She told her Eldest Aunt of her intentions, as was only polite, and the older woman sucked in her breath and nodded, keeping her thoughts to herself.

Eldest Aunt told the Freckled Girls, whose twinned, variegated skins made them the most valued of their generation. The Girls told their pet stoat, and the stoat ran to tell Grandmother Time as she sat in her gazebo, watching the twilight fires of the Endless City spread out before her.

Which was, of course, Eldest Aunt's intention.

Grandmother Time licked her fangs, and nodded, and when morning came she sent for the Smallest Daughter.

"You'll travel far from the City you love. You'll cross waters that will not speak back to you. You will find places where you may forget who you are. You'll deny your House the profit of your company."

In answer, Smallest held out her hands. In the flesh of her forearms she had carved the Stigma. She'd chosen the sigils of the Angels of Dawn, Dusk, Waterfowl and Secret Things, and graven them with a kitchen knife by the light of the moon. Traces of mud were still on her petticoat: the mud she rubbed in the wounds to make them scar.

Grandmother Time told the stoat to bring a pouch of gold coin, and the throat-band of the House of Diamond.

"You should have waited for the blacksmith to do that," she said, nodding at the Stigma. She gave Smallest the gold and tied the velvet band around her neck. "And yet, crude as they are, they might prove stronger."

Smallest knelt at her Grandmother's mighty foot. She bowed to her Aunt. She gave a gold coin to the Freckled Girls, and another to the stoat, for luck.

And when day stretched into night and the birds brooded in the countless eves of the Endless City, she began her journey.

II. Dawn

The Smallest Daughter walked all night, the stars hard diamond overhead and the road soft underneath her feet. She walked through the hour of the Witches, the hour of the Dragons and the hour of the Mice. She walked until the lights of the Endless City grew dim behind her, and as she turned and watched it disappear behind the swell of the road, she felt her heart break.

So, she thought, with interest. *This is what heartbreak feels like.*

But the itching of her half-healed arms distracted her, and the bag of gold beat a bruise on her hip, and the curious cracking of her broken heart faded into dandelion fuzz. She walked through the hard black hours and the soft gray hours and at sunrise she stepped aside into a meadow by the side of the road and fell asleep.

She woke as the sun blazed the dewdrops to life, feeling the tickle of a hundred tiny strands binding her body to the earth. Small creatures the height of her shinbone prowled around her. Their bodies were furry and they sang in high squeaky voices:

We'll sell her to the Darkling Man
He'll sell her in the Market Square
He'll take her eyes for souvenirs
And when he's finished she won't care

They smelled; not foul, but sharp, like new sweat.

She found she could not break the tiny strands that pegged her to the ground, so she flexed her new spines and they sliced the gossamer ropes easily. The little creatures shrieked in

dismay as she swiveled to a sitting position and drew her long knife with one hand, snagging one of her captors with the other.

"Commerce! Commerce!" it squealed, and tried to bite her. She gripped it by the loose skin at the back of its neck, and laid her knife across her knees.

"I will not hurt you," she told the creature. "But likewise I will not be bound, and I will not be sold to your Darkling Man. I come from the Endless City, seeking my husband."

It stopped struggling, and the others drew close.

"You want a husband?" piped the nearest. "Then you must come see Auntie! She buys and sells husbands, wives and children all day long."

They all began to prance, shrieking "Auntie Thesis! Auntie Thesis!" and the one in her lap wiggled free.

"Come!" it said to her. "Auntie will find you a husband."

So the Smallest Daughter sheathed her knife carefully, made sure of her bag of gold, counted the pieces of her broken heart and followed the meadow-creatures as they ran before her.

Soon they came to the ragged trunk of an enormous, ancient, lightning-struck tree. Inside dwelt Auntie Thesis, the Oak-Witch.

At the prodding of the meadow-creatures, she ducked her head and entered the trunk. Knowing as she did the ways of witches, she was not surprised to see the inside was larger than the outside, with many doorways opening into dark halls.

Sitting at the table in the center of the tree-trunk was an old woman, older than Eldest Aunt, almost as old as Grandmother Time, bent and brown without a hair on her head.

Before her was a great bowl of broth, and she stared, spoon in hand, at her visitor.

"Smallest Daughter of the House of Diamond," she said, with mild surprise, "since I cannot sell you to the Darkling Man, or steal the gold at your hip, what may I do for you?"

"I am seeking my husband," said the Smallest Daughter. "But I do not think I will find him here."

"I can sell you none suitable," agreed the witch. "But I can offer you my nephew." She snapped her fingers, and from one of the hallways emerged a beautiful young man, barely older than a boy, with golden skin and sapphire eyes. His hair was black and curly, and there was no scar on him. He bowed to the Smallest Daughter, graceful as a dancer.

"See? He is already in love with you," said the Oak-Witch. "Take him for free."

"No," said the Smallest Daughter, and the boy's eyes blazed. "I cannot take one so unmarked. I fear I would break him."

She curtsied politely to Auntie Thesis and turned away.

She never saw the boy draw his wicked little blade and throw it lightning-quick at her back. Dawn still shone on the horizon: the first Stigma on her left arm blazed once, and the knife vanished before it could touch her.

"Ah, young love," said the Oak-Witch, spooning up her soup as the boy fled down the hallway, weeping.

Before she returned to the road, the Smallest Daughter gave each of the meadow-creatures a gold piece just in case, like the stoat, they were lucky.

III. Dusk

The Smallest Daughter walked on, and the meadows and oaks of the lowlands changed with the hills to maple woods, and twin seedpods helicoptered across the road to fall at her feet. Morning turned to noon, and as the sun began its true strong rhythm she glimpsed a figure walking far ahead of her, black as if someone had cut his silhouette from velvet. In the heat it rippled and vanished and reappeared as the road humped itself up and down, and it always seemed to stay exactly the same distance ahead of her.

She stopped sometimes, and turned aside to drink from a woodland stream, or chew a strip of dried meat, or admire the countryside with the new wisdom of a broken heart. Whenever she returned to the road, the figure was still there, ahead of her, never further away and never closer. And now she saw that it danced, long and lanky, and that tassels swung about its body. In the highest heat of day, she turned from the road and found herself a nest of leaves between two sheltering maples, where she napped through the hour of the Sparrow.

She woke refreshed, and stretched her body, and the Stigma ached pleasantly. The soft dirt of the road gave way to hard-pack, and she dug her claws further in to gain purchase. And still, at the crest of the next hill, the fantastical black figure shimmered and swayed like a walking black puddle, man-shaped.

The sun was low and the sky reddening when she came upon a boy, nine or ten years old, perhaps, sitting by the side

of the road and sobbing. She stopped beside him, and as he turned a tear-streaked face up to her, the pieces of heart in her breast jangled and jumped, and her stomach turned over, for she saw that the sides of his mouth had been sliced, twisted up, and left to heal, so that his mouth was always forced to smile.

He rubbed at his eyes and rose to his feet, but he didn't seem afraid to see a Scion of the Houses of the Endless City.

"What's the matter, boy?" she said, as kindly as she could. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm crying because there's nothing else I can do," he said. "I'm crying because the Darkling Man stole my sister to sell in the Market Square of Laketown. I tried to stop him, but he was too quick for me."

"I remember a song about this Darkling Man, and a mention that he might sell me, and my eyes as well," said the Smallest Daughter, as anger stirred the pieces of her heart. "And it begins to offend me that he dwells in this world. Tell me how to get to Laketown, and I will find your sister for you."

The boy forced up his terrible mouth, as if he would wrest a real smile from it. "Come with me, Lady," he said. "Come to my home, and let my family show you what poor hospitality we may. As for Laketown, it is easily found, for it lies at the end of the road you follow."

She stared down the road at the flickering figure, her eyes narrowing, and would have ran it as fast as she could and made the taunting silhouette give an accounting of himself, but the

boy tugged at her insistently, and she was forced, for courtesy's sake, to go with him.

His small clan lived in the side of a cliff, where the great fossilized ribs of a long-extinct lizard framed a cave big enough to engulf a house. The Smallest Daughter could see where the vertebrae curved up the rock face, to terminate in an absurdly small head. On the other side, it coiled down into a long, serpentine tail.

All of them, Ma and Pa and Auntie and Uncle and the cousins and the siblings had the same vicious slash at the corners of their mouths, the same false smirk, like the grin of a clean skull. All their eyes brimmed with tears. They invited her to sit at their humble table and share their meal of berries and acorn-bread, and shook their heads sadly over the loss of their girl and the perfidy of the Darkling Man.

"He plucks our children like ripe apples," they told her. "And when we mourned, he sliced our faces. He said, he wanted to leave smiles behind him."

The Smallest Daughter thought she heard a snort overhead, like the grunt of a cynical dinosaur, but the others ignored it, so she did too.

"I'll rescue your girl, and make this creature grovel for the harm he's done you," she said. "Tell me what manner of man he is, so I can prepare."

But the grinning clan didn't answer her, instead shrieking and rubbing dirt on their heads, mourning their losses.

"Indeed, you are greatly wronged," said the Smallest Daughter, trying to be patient. "But I need to know his strengths,

and his weapons. Claws and spines I have, but I am not yet old enough for fangs."

But still they howled and writhed in the dirt. "Hopeless, hopeless," Ma and Pa moaned. "Stay with us, for he will capture you too."

The younger siblings grasped at her feet, and she was afraid to free herself because her hind-claws might gut them. Auntie and Uncle embraced her about the waist, and she was afraid to raise her spines, for fear she might impale them. The noise of their wailing rose like the sea until she began to fear she would go mad.

The Stigma of Dusk flared on her arm, and the dinosaur's long neck flexed, and its head swooped down to knock her besiegers aside. One, two, three, four, five, they rolled away like ninepins and sprawled in the dust on the floor of the ribcage-cave.

The Smallest Daughter thought it best to depart, fearing they'd bury her alive with their sorrows. Night had fallen, and she could no longer see the dark figure before her. But she hurried ahead, not stopping to sleep, determined to catch the Darkling Man and make him pay for his sins.

IV. Waterfowl

The Smallest Daughter started to trot. She might have been chasing the man in front of her or fleeing the scarred family behind her—she did not know herself. The faster she went, the more the road stretched out in front of her. Darkness dropped down and she picked her way by starlight, although she seemed to be passing the same twisted trees and black knots of grass, again and again. She began to suspect a spell, and wished her cousins, the Freckled Girls, were with her, for they could always sniff out any witchcraft and send their stoat to chew it out at the root.

Exhausted, she slowed and stopped. Her eyelids drooped. Beside the road was the same tree that she had passed twenty times and more. She curled up at the base of its trunk and went to sleep.

She woke to the sound of water chuckling to itself, but not to her, which was so astonishing she ignored the fact that where she woke was not where she had laid down. Moving water always told her jokes, bad ones, and she laughed for the sake of politeness.

"Grandmother was right," she said, and sat bolt upright.

"Always," answered a nearby voice, a smooth voice, a voice like the dusk spices buried as treasure under the Eldest Aunt's house, and she rolled away from it and crouched, spines up and claws out, and wished for fangs. And he laughed at her, the Darkling Man, lanky and long and flaunting his tassels, with a pillowcase across his shoulder.

Beneath the fabric something moved, something the size and the shape of a girl.

Behind him was a vast lake like chopped blue glass.

Between them was three feet of sand and pebbles.

Not enough room to run.

His laughter whirled around her and she felt like she was on the swing again, barely out of her second skin, while Eldest Uncle pushed her higher, higher, until her feet were flat against the sky and she screamed with joy.

"Why does a daughter of the House of Diamond pursue a lonely traveler?" He gestured with his forefinger and she felt a phantom caress against the velvet of the House band around her throat. "Especially when she seeks her husband. Shall I find one for you, little ferret-feet?"

"You've kidnapped a girl and mutilated her family," she said bluntly. "I've come to take her home."

He tilted his head and frowned at her. "Did I, and did I? Then I am the wickedest man alive." And he swung the pillowcase off his shoulder, putting it carefully on the rocks between them.

It opened like an anemone and revealed a girl, old enough to start knifeplay, in Smallest's estimation, but not to begin jewel-weaving. She looked up at her with eyes like the boy's, the boy with the carved smile. But her face was whole.

She smiled at the Smallest Daughter, and didn't seem afraid.

She asked me to take her away," said the Darkling Man, folding his arms. The smell of cinnamon drifted from his clothes like dust, and made her slightly dizzy.

"Considering they would have slashed her face to look like theirs, I really couldn't refuse."

"You lie," Smallest snarled.

He didn't react. "I suppose they've told people I did it so many times that they believe it themselves. I avoid them when I can. They are a tribe that sits all day, in a cave of bones, mourning their lot and the tragedy of what-might-come. Their grief and self-pity destroys everything of beauty they have. They butcher their own souls."

Smallest remembered the smiling tribe clutching at her ankles and hesitated.

"She told me to sell her in the market square of Laketown, if I must," he continued.

"And will you?" she said, with what contempt she could muster.

The Darkling Man laughed and spread his arms out wide, the tassels bouncing on his sleeve. "Do you see a town?" he cried. "Do you see a market? This is all the Laketown you'll find: rocks and water and a couple of terns."

She looked around her and began to believe.

The girl pushed the pillowcase away and rose to her feet. She looked at both of them gravely, then walked to the edge of the water. Wavelets licked at her toes. Smallest found herself flexing her own claws in response.

"What is she doing?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said frankly. "After I bring them to the water's edge, they must rescue themselves."

The girl raised her arms, like the Freckled Girls invoking the Moon, and waited. They waited with her. Then, across the water, Smallest saw a white blur, a blob that whirled and came closer and broke into its separate parts, and joined together again, always spiraling. A flock of birds, hundreds of them, snowy white with wings as long as a man's outstretched arms.

The flock swirled towards the girl as if it would consume her, and she uttered her first sound: the harsh cry of a sea-bird. The vortex descended and surrounded her, and rose again, and she was gone.

Birds flew everywhere overhead, and Smallest stretched her neck to look at them. The Darkling Man saw the tight skin of her neck, and bent close to her.

"There is still the matter of your husband, Daughter of Diamond," he said. "I can find one for you. I can find one who will break down mountains for your love, destroy cities if you ask, wipe out nations to the last squalling child if that is your whim."

His voice was a warm trickle of honey. She backed away a handbreadth.

"Or one who will sing all day of his love for you, write poems to your beauty, live and die on your smiles."

His voice ran down the knobs of her spines. She backed away a foot.

"Or one who will bring you anything you desire, jewels and spices and clever birds, until you are buried in pretty things."

His voice cooled her like a breeze and she turned and ran to the edge of the water, where the birds still flew, and the third

Stigma burned like fire. The birds encircled her and she lifted from the ground, her arms stretching out and white feathers sprouting everywhere.

The flock swept over the lake, and beneath her, on the shore, she saw the dark figure watching until he dwindled out of sight.

Below them the smell of fresh water, before them the distant shore and a glimpse of towers.

V. Secret Things

Wisps of clouds crossed the sky, and the flock dabbled their black, webbed feet in them. The clouds had the tang of burnt carbon. The water below started to smell salty and turn ocean-grey. Cold fog rose from it, and the other waterfowl called to each other in a language Smallest did not know.

The towers before them grew to a city: tall buildings and squat, and a thousand, thousand pieces of glittering glass. The city filled an island and splashed across the mainland beside it. Like her Grandmother, the city was beautiful and terrible. On its breast was a great green emerald and across its shoulder a scar, the deep blackened stumps where two towers once stood.

Closer they flew, and the other birds cried "Haste!" for they knew a wind was coming. Smallest did not understand twisting her head on its long, feathered neck to see, so when the gust caught her she spun out of control, fell through the heavyside layer, and tumbled down the airstream. Head over winds over black, webbed feet, she slammed into the treetops of the peridot lozenge, and fell hard onto the grass below. Bile rose bitter in her throat at the impact, but she rolled with it, saving her bones.

When she got up her wings and feathers were gone. She felt for broken spines, retracted her claws, checked that her knife and her bag of gold were in place and stared at the green light around her.

It was a little grove of beeches, and soon she was blinking in the sunlight. People ran past her to the trees, shouting and pointing.

"It was a meteor!" she heard, then "No, it was a satellite!"

Some gave her an odd glace as she passed, but with her spines closed tightly down her back, she could almost pass for human, and she wasn't the strangest creature this side of the Brooklyn Bridge.

"It was a spaceship!" came the cry.

"No!" said a woman in a dirty white dress. "It was an angel. Didn't you see its wings?"

The Smallest Daughter thought it best to go, quickly and quietly. She bent her head and watched her feet as she crossed from the green grass to the pavement. But she looked up when she heard the familiar cry of "commerce, commerce!"

Running past her was a flock of the furry little creatures from Auntie Thesis' meadow, the ones that wanted to sell her to the Darkling Man. But they didn't seem to recognize her, and stranger still, nobody stared at them, or pointed, or acted as if they were anyway out of place.

Leaving the green swath behind, and walking between the tall buildings where a cold wind whipped, she looked into the faces around her. Human, mostly, but there—unmistakable, a young Oak-Witch, just rising into her powers. And there, in the distance, a flash of raised spines. And here, passing so close that his briefcase touched her thigh, a feather-faced man like those who lived north of the Endless City.

And there was a hide speckled like a Freckled Girl. There was a man with a tail, a panther's tail that lashed and postured, same as Eldest Aunt's favorite parrot seller.

But they walked and hurried same as the humans; like the humans, they began to stare at her, to stop and watch as she hurried by, spines down, claws tight.

There, an open shop where people sat around little tables, drinking from thick, white cups. Near the sidewalk was an Elder Scion of the Endless City, unmistakable with her full-grown spines, her claws casually extended over her shoes, and the fang-tips that lapped over her lower lip. She wore no throat-band, so the Smallest Daughter could not determine which House she belonged to. She paused beside the table and made the courtesy of near-relation.

"Service, Older Sister," she began.

The Scion raised her head and stared at her, astonished, and the Smallest Daughter almost jumped back in shock. The sides of the Scion's mouth had been slashed upwards into a twisted smile.

Smallest *did* jump when somebody touched her arm.

It was a young man, an ordinary man, a plain man. Still, he glowed in the gritty light of this place like amber in a stream.

"Sorry," he said to the Scion, in a voice as pleasant and bland as sugar. "She slipped out, and she hasn't had her meds."

The Scion nodded and dropped her gaze. Smallest let the young man take her arm and urge her away from the café, away from the street and into a small park, where children's swings hung quiescent.

"They don't know who they are," he explained. "They've forgotten, and until they remember, the natives of this place cannot see what they really are.

"Most never remember. Most never even try." He looked at the gray clouds overhead and sighed.

"And who are *you* when you're at home?" she said, trying to sound indignant.

He tilted his head at her. "How is your heart?"

"What?"

"Your heart. Is it still broken?"

She felt for it, astonished. "Why, no. It's in one piece again."

And she was a little sad, because she had rather liked it jangling.

And you should know me," he continued, "because I have followed you from the gates of the City of your Childhood down the great road to the shores of vanished Laketown. I followed you across the sky, although I am deadly afraid of heights."

She blinked at him, at his wry mouth, and bent closer, listening.

His voice was honey, and trickled down the knobs of her spine. His voice cooled her like a breeze. She felt warm inside, as if an eggshell of hot water had broken in her breast.

"But perhaps," she said, "*I* was following *you*."

He shrugged. "It's much the same thing. Do you know me now?"

"Why, no," she said, coyly. "I'm terribly sorry."

"And how," he said, "do the women of your house claim their husbands?"

"Usually we must fight," she said.

"The only other Scion within ten miles has forgotten who she is," he said. "After you fight, what do you do?"

"This," she said, and extended her two sharpest fore-claws, and carefully slashed two small parallel lines over his right cheek.

Later, in the velvet-dark of his chambers, she lay on her stomach while he stroked the nubs of her spines.

"Already the humans are beginning to see you," he said. "Soon they will know who you are, unless something is done to stop them. And then they will take you away to the zoo, or the cathedral, or burn you at the stake, and I shan't have that."

He fingered her throat-band and bent close. She could feel his breath on her ear.

"If I cut this loose, you will forget," he whispered. "Little by little, you'll forget and no one will recognize you. It will not hurt a bit."

Feeling his fingers on her neck, she shook her head.

The last Stigma, the sigil of Secret Things, glowed on her arm.

"Very well," he said.

He left her side, and she dozed a little, listening to him rummage through his tools. She woke, though, and held very still when she felt the sharp blades slice, one by one, each spine from her back. Then he began on the claws.

The alcohol was cold on her skin and sharp in her nostrils when he finished. He covered her with a soft blanket and left her to heal.

"How does it feel to be a Secret Thing?" he said, before he left.

She laughed, but was too sleepy to say it aloud: "Whatever will we do when the fangs grow in?"

Outside the window, feeling for purchase on the rough bricks and railing, a stoat turned away and began its long journey home.

Giant

Stephanie Burgis

I've hidden my heart in an egg, in a box, in a well at the end of the world. My father taught me that trick a long time ago. If I'd kept my heart, I would be in trouble now. This princess is too beautiful.

"Darling," she sighs into my ear. Her breath is warm and smells like lilacs; her tiny hands are feather-light as they stroke my cheek. "I worried about you today."

"Today? Why?" I shift position on the bed. I can't let myself enjoy her touch too much—after all, it was only a week ago that she stopped screaming whenever I stepped close to her. I hate it when they scream.

As I shift, again that terrible smell flits through my nostrils, the smell that's been bothering me since I got home. It smells like fear; it smells like dried sweat. "Are you sure that's just a dead bird in the chimney?"

"Of course it is. I heard it fluttering around in there for hours." Her voice tightens, and her fingers still for a moment on my cheek. "It couldn't get out. It was trapped."

"That's too bad."

It doesn't smell like a bird. It smells human, but I don't say so. I don't like the sound of her voice. It reminds me too much of the way she talked the first month after I took her from her parents' castle. The things she whispered as I pretended to sleep. She seems to have gotten over that by now. I hope so. She's my fourth princess, and my favorite so far. Something about her face reminds me of my mother, before my mother gave up and stopped eating and died.

She lets out a sigh, and starts stroking my cheek again. "The bird doesn't matter," she murmurs. "You do. You were late coming home tonight."

"You noticed?" I turn my head to look at her.

"Of course I noticed. I was frantic." She looks down, bites her lip. "What if you had been killed?"

If I had a heart, I would be in serious trouble. I feel my lips crack into a smile for the first time in—how long? Months?

"You don't have to worry about that." I reach out to stroke her soft brown hair, and for once, she doesn't flinch away. "I can't be killed in combat."

"But that's impossible. You must have some weakness!"

I shrug. "Only one, and nobody but me knows about it."

My father taught me that part, too.

"You can't trust anyone," he said. "They all lie, even the

princesses so pure you'd swear they wouldn't know how to. trust them and you're dead. You think your mother wouldn't kill me in an instant if she could?" He pointed to her across the room, and let out a shout of laughter. "She'd be telling my secret to the first idiot knight she came across."

I couldn't keep myself from looking at my mother to see her reaction. She'd stopped her work, and was staring at him. What was she thinking?

I loved my mother.

My father caught me looking. He laughed again. "Trust me, son. I know princesses. Isn't that right, sweetheart? Wouldn't you just love to know my weakness?"

She didn't answer. But the look on her face was the most frightening thing I'd ever seen.

That night was the night that she stopped eating.

Now, I shake my head, breathing hard. I have to get rid of those images. I can't let myself think about my mother. The way she looked at my father that day. The way she faded into a skeleton. The way I felt as I watched it all happen.

"Please," says my princess, breathing into my ear.

Her tiny fingers knead into my tight shoulder muscles. I feel a cool, dry kiss brush against my neck. I shiver.

My mother never kissed my father. Did she?

That strange smell seems to be getting stronger. Can it really just be floating in from the chimney?

My princess's lips move up my neck. They skirt my lips, tantalizingly close.

I hear a clinking sound, like metal, somewhere nearby. I ignore it, mesmerized by the warmth of my princess's breath against my mouth.

Did my mother ever kiss me, once I grew as big as her?

"Please," she whispers against my lips. "Can't you trust me?"

The smell is definitely stronger now. It's probably coming from underneath the bed, but I don't want to investigate it now. That's what my father would have done, but I'm not my father.

I'll wait until the morning, after I wake up from the best night of my life.

I take a deep breath, and look up into my princess's face, so much like my mother's.

"I trust you," I say. And I mean it.

When the Rain Comes

Josh Rountree

The Ice Witch sat backstage making baubles for Purdy. She dipped a ladle into the water bucket and emptied the contents into one hand. Cold blood rushed to her palm, and the familiar tickle settled in with it. The water froze into a misshapen ball, and she eased her opposite hand across the surface, drawing it though her fingers like clay, coaxing it into a more pleasing shape. The result was something resembling a bell, and when she held it up for Purdy's inspection, the girl clapped and giggled.

"Pur-dee!" It was the only thing Purdy ever said and the source of her name. The Ice Witch handed her the treasure, and Purdy received it with reverence. She flicked a finger at it as if hoping it would ring. She placed it on the floor next to the others then stared longingly at the Ice Witch. "Pur-dee! Pur-dee?"

"I'll make you some more later." The Ice Witch gave her a motherly pat on the back of her sack dress. "Show's about to begin." Purdy nodded and gave the Ice Witch a hug that made her flinch. Once she verified that their skin wasn't touching, she relaxed and returned the girl's affection. She reminded herself that this wasn't a little girl, that Purdy was most likely older than she was. But Purdy stood only three feet high, and the strings of hair pulled back from her oversized head were tied into pink bows. She was more child inside and out than the Ice Witch had ever been.

Other members of Purdy's act milled about just behind the ratty, red curtain, waiting for it to part. Purdy released the Ice Witch and joined them, taking her usual place between the Alligator Man and the Queen of Beards. The Ice Queen didn't want to pity these people—her lot in life was not much better than theirs, and they were her friends—yet she couldn't help it.

She knew what a kind soul Purdy had, and that the Queen of Beards cooked the best corn bread west of St. Louis. She knew the Alligator Man was not someone to be reviled. He was a quiet man who'd lost his family in a Baltimore house fire, yet he'd never lost his inherent kindness. When the Ice Witch had been nothing more than a runaway girl, more terrified of her home than the deadly uncertainty of the American West, he'd spoken to her about the human soul and the endless well of strength it contained for those willing to drink. Not her mother's religion, but the simple truths of the self.

The Alligator Man—Edgar—and all the rest were finer people than most of the *normal* folks she'd met. And thus it was hard to define their treatment and their billing as freaks as anything other than exploitation. But she owed the Wild West Show everything she had; where else would someone like her have found a surrogate family?

Beyond the curtain, Jim's voice barked at the crowd, welcoming them to the Freak Show, the Tent of Tortures, the Carnival of Foul Fascination. Those who had tired of the riding and roping shows, the shooting exhibitions, the Chinese acrobats and all the rest would be filing in to the strangest of the Wild West Show's attractions. With a terrible howl, Jim introduced the first performer—Pierre the Wolfman—and drew back the curtain. Pierre leaped through and onto the stage, eliciting gasps from the crowd, and the curtain fell back in place. The Alligator Man moved into position near the seam, and Purdy stepped up behind him. She waved excitedly at the Ice Witch and then returned her attention to the curtain, waiting for Jim to call out for the Goblin Girl.

The Ice Witch began work on another bauble, focusing her sadness on the shifting ice in her hand. She didn't have the heart for it, and she let her half-formed creation shatter against the ground. It wasn't a bell, no more than Purdy was the Goblin Girl, no more than she was the Ice Witch. Her name was Angeline Crawford, and she whispered the name aloud, afraid she might lose it if she wasn't ever mindful. The Wild West Show had a way of stealing a person's true self, and no matter how awful her real life had been, Angeline was not yet ready to lose it.

Angeline was the top of the bill.

Purdy and her group had delivered the desired level of shock and disgust. The Sensational Mr. Shadows had followed to make a lovely assistant disappear and with it any lingering guilt the audience might be feeling for enjoying the first act. Then it had been time for the knife juggler, the snake tamer, the mind reader. And now they'd all gone and it was time for the Ice Witch to make an appearance.

Jim's voice boomed from beyond the curtain.

"And now comes the crown jewel of Bill's Wild West Show! You've seen freaks, prestidigitators, true magic, and true horror! But I assure you, though you may travel from China to England . . . from Montana to the Jungles of Mexico . . . from darkest Africa to the frozen wastelands of northern Asia . . . you will never see another woman like . . ."

The curtain swept open, and Angeline stepped into place.

"The Ice Witch!"

The crowd greeted her with polite applause, but as usual they were getting antsy in their seats. Children in homespun rags pulled at their mothers' arms, desperate to escape the stuffy tent in search of candied apples and the genuine Indian chiefs with great feathered headdresses that Bill had roaming the grounds, faces painted with sideshow menace. A group of obviously drunk men hooted from the back, and several stoic Indian men watched intently from the first row, dressed in white man's pants and shirts.

Angeline smiled and stepped into the middle of the waiting campfire. Smoke filtered out through a large hole in the top of the tent, and the fire's kiss was a warm breeze blowing across her skin. Inside her came the cold blood and the tickle. She almost laughed in spite of herself. The audience gasped. One man fired a pistol appreciatively in the air, leaving a bullet hole in the tent's ceiling to match the others. The reaction was so expected that Angeline felt the audience must be as scripted as her act. She stood in the fire for a few more seconds, trying to remember what town they'd stopped in. Somewhere west of Fort Smith. Somewhere in reservation country. She smiled at the Indians in the front row and pity swelled inside her again. There didn't seem to be room for everyone in this newly minted century.

She stepped out of the fire, and now she had their attention. Jim tossed her a ball and it immediately froze in her hand. Once again, the audience responded with astonishment. She threw the ball back to Jim, and he held it out to demonstrate it had been frozen through. That wasn't the case of course. This was the Wild West Show. Real ability wasn't enough; you still needed a gimmick.

Since an early age, Angeline had been able to freeze water with a touch, whether she wanted to or not. Her body was cold enough at all times to drop the temperature in any room and make people around her uncomfortable, but she wasn't cold enough to freeze solid objects. Thus Bill, the show's proprietor and chief attraction, had devised a way to fake it. Cover an object in water and the ice would form around it, leaving every

appearance that she'd turned it to ice. Take the object off stage before it thawed and the illusion fooled everyone.

Angeline crossed to the wooded chair that waited center stage. She sat, hiking up her skirt in the back so her bare bottom pressed against the wet wood. She was cold enough that the chair would freeze through her clothes given time, but touching bare skin to the water made the effect immediate, and a sheath of ice formed around the chair with a whip-like crack.

The audience was stunned. Time to up the stakes.

"Are you hungry, Ice Witch?" asked Jim. He favored her with a sly smile, and Angeline's heart jumped. It was all part of the act, but every time he looked at her that way she got the impression that he was trying to tell her something. Something he couldn't say in the evenings when they sat around the campfires smoking cigarettes and trying to ignore what went unspoken between them.

"Why yes!" she said, reciting the lines Bill had written for her verbatim. "I had a bonfire for breakfast, but that was hours ago. I'm positively famished!"

"Well then," he said. "Let's see if we can rustle up some vittles."

Using a shovel, he scooped up a pile of burning wood and ash and held it in front of Angeline. She made a show of picking through the mess, like a fastidious society woman picking out just the right set of earrings, then settled on a still-flaming length of mesquite wood. She removed it from the shovel and bit off the end. She chewed at the wood, trying not to grimace.

She wasn't burned of course, but that fact didn't chase the taste of ash from her mouth. The rest of the wood still burned in her hands.

She finally choked down the small bite she'd taken and held the wood out to Jim. "All full! You care for a taste?"

Jim backed away with a comic wave of his arms and the crowd howled with laughter. "No, thanks, Ice Witch. I already ate."

She shrugged and winked.

Angeline and Jim worked through the rest of the act, exchanging staged smiles and artificial flirts, drawing laughter and shocked screams from the crowd. Angeline did not always like life with the Wild West Show, but she treasured the actual performances. The give and take with Jim. The way she could almost convince herself that that Jim's affections were something more than just the act.

Every night they danced.

But they never, ever touched.

The wagon bounced toward the next town, and Angeline lay awake on her back, staring up at a canvas sky. It was worn thin and torn open in places, and darkness was visible through a series of small holes. Stars winked on and off as the wagon passed beneath them, and Angeline shifted her weight, trying to find a comfortable position. The long wagon treks from town to town weren't pleasant, but she was thankful at least that she didn't have to share her tiny space with anyone else. The air in such an enclosed space was far too cold for anyone else to stand for long, and in this regard her curse became a blessing.

She entertained dreams of sharing her sanctuary with Jim, but banished them like always. Instead, she thought of them below the open sky, the moments shared after every show. Once he'd surprised her with a kiss on the lips, but the result had been an unpleasant few hours for him. Since then, he'd kept his distance, but he hadn't blamed her.

She tried not to remember how wonderful it had been.

This afternoon's show had been a particular success, and one of the drunk men had even slipped Jim a few coins worth of tip. He split it with Angeline after the show.

"It ain't much," he'd said. They stood together amid the chaos of a folding tents, mustered horsemen and circling wagons. "Might buy a little fresh tobacco if we ever reach another town big enough to support a store."

"Thanks, Jim," she said, noticing the way he made sure not to touch her when he dropped the coins in her hand.

"Speaking of tobacco." He handed her a cigarette from his pocket and took one out for himself. He struck a match on his boot heel and lit them both. She took it and smiled her thanks.

Jim stared out across the plains, watching the sun melt against the horizon. He was leaning against one of the wagons, and she stood beside him, smoking her cigarette so she'd have something to do with her hands. She stared at him and wondered what he thought about when they were together. Jim had never told her how he felt, either before or after the kiss, but she knew. It was there in the way he always had a wink for her. Or the way he was always on the verge of putting his arms around her

before remembering exactly what she was. He made excuses to be around her even on days when they didn't have a show, and sometimes he'd stare into her eyes without saying a word, as if he were trying to convey his love without admitting it aloud.

Jim turned away from the sunset and caught her staring at him. He grinned. "I can't wait to get rolling again. This place is too damned hot to linger."

Angeline took that as her queue to inch closer. She made sure her arm didn't touch his.

"What this place needs is some rain," said Jim. "I'm surprised the trees ain't burst into flames yet."

"I don't mind it being dry." Angeline cast a nervous glance at the cloudless sky.

"I do," said Jim. "We need one of them big plains thunderstorms to roll through here and wash this place clean. Maybe I need to do a rain dance."

Angeline chuckled in spite of herself. "A rain dance? Where'd you learn to do that?"

"I haven't learned it yet, but I've been thinking. Wouldn't that be a way to draw in the crowds? The Show rolls into a place like this where all the cattle are dying of thirst and the farmers can't get nothing to grow. Then I come out there in a big old Indian headdress and stomp around a while."

Jim flicked his cigarette at the ground and began dancing in a circle. His boots kicked up clouds of sand as he waved his arms and screamed a few words of Cherokee he'd picked up from the men who tended the snakes. Angeline laughed in spite of herself.

Finally, Jim stopped, tipped his hat and gave a bow.

"People won't pay to see you do that."

"No, but when I learn how to do it the right way they will. All of a sudden the sky will open up and they'll know I'm the genuine article. Hell, Bill will have to raise my pay."

"You can't really make it rain like that."

"Sure you can," said Jim. "The Indians have been doing it for generations. You reckon there's a Creek or a Kiowa left in these parts knows how to do it? What I've got to do is find someone like that to teach me how. You hear of anyone, you let me know."

Jim was given to fancy, and Angeline loved to hear him talk about the future and his wild plans. But she often had trouble telling if he was pulling her leg or being serious.

"That's just a tall tale," she said.

"No, that's Indian magic. You just have to believe in it."

"Well I don't."

"How can you say that?" asked Jim. He fixed her with a probing stare, and she realized this wasn't just one of his wild ideas. "If there isn't magic in the world, how do you explain what you can do?"

"That's not magic," she snapped. "That's science. There's something different about my body. Something they haven't found a cure for yet."

Jim scooted closer, until his shirtsleeve touched her bare arm. She flinched.

"There's nothing wrong with you, Angeline."

"The hell there isn't."

"You have a gift. And it is magic, whether you think of it that way or not. If it wasn't for that, you wouldn't be here at all."

No, she wouldn't. She'd be back East with her family. Probably married to one of the Easterman boys like her mother had always talked about. She'd be living a normal life among normal people. There hadn't been a day since she left Virginia that she hadn't cursed the gift that had driven her away.

"My Daddy didn't think it was magic," she said with a tremor in her speech.

Jim seemed to realize their conversation was drifting precariously close to subjects he wasn't ready to explore. He pushed away from the wagon and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Guess I need to help load up."

Angeline nodded, not trusting her voice.

"Don't believe everything you hear," said Jim, walking away. "Magic or not, what you got is damned sure a gift."

Now, huddled inside her lumbering wagon, she still wasn't sure if Jim believed his own talk about magic. This was the man who could spin tales about talking bears and traveling around the country with some giant named Paul Bunyan without cracking a smile. He was a showman. A professional liar. Fantasy was part of his business.

But he'd seemed so earnest this time, and Angeline prayed that it was just another of his jokes. She imagined Jim, dressed up like an Indian, feet stamping the ground, and she could almost hear the rumble of thunder in the distance.

Her Daddy had taught her to fear the rain.

Angeline could bathe by moving ice across her body a bit at a time. And she could work with small quantities of water, shaping it and controlling the ice formation as she did with Purdy's baubles. In fact, one of the things that made her so popular with the other attractions was her ability to produce ice for their drinking water on a hot day. Edgar often commented that he'd tasted more ice in Oklahoma than he ever had in Baltimore, and the fact that Angeline could repay her friends' kindness in this small way made her happy.

Water in manageable amounts posed no threats to Angeline. But she hadn't submerged herself in water since the day she'd grown cold as her Daddy called it, and she'd taken care to avoid the rain. She often had nightmares about being caught out on the plains without shelter. Ugly storm clouds erasing the blue sky, lightning bolts screaming to the ground, and rain coming down like a falling ocean, covering her, hardening, turning her into a frozen shell. Her screams cut short by suffocation. She'd wake up sweating. Wishing someone could hold her without getting frostbite. Wishing she'd have let her Daddy kill her like she knew he'd wanted to.

She'd always loved rainstorms. Before.

Angeline shut her eyes and tried not to dream.

Three weeks later, in another town that hardly warranted the name, Angeline waited behind the tent for Jim. She loved their cigarette dates, and when Jim missed them, it left her in a funk the rest of the day. The show that day had gone particularly well. The crowd had shown the appropriate degree of astonishment, and every effect had gone off without a hitch.

Gunshots and applause cracked in the distance. She waited a few more minutes, wondering if she should just go and watch the roping exhibition or one of the hatchet throwers for the thousandth time. Maybe help the Queen of Beards clean dishes. Then an Indian man appeared in front of her wearing a threadbare brown suit, removed his hat, and smiled. Age grooved his face, and his eyes were mismatched storms. One was the harsh gray of approaching menace, and the other the pale pink light that colors the clouds when the storm has passed. They were eyes that had seen more hardship than any human should have to bear. Angeline understood this, but didn't know why. She felt a shiver go through her as the man continued to stare, and it felt as if he was giving her a bit of his soul. And perhaps taking some of hers in return.

"Do you need something?" Angeline wasn't a rude person by nature, but the man made her nervous.

"No," he replied. "But perhaps you do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The old man reached into a hide bag that dangled from his waist and removed a misshapen block of amber about the size of his fist. He took one of Angeline's hands in his, placed the amber in her palm and closed her fingers around it. Pale lights flickered inside the stone, yet Angeline was more astonished by the man's touch. He continued to hold her hand around the amber. He hadn't pulled away. Hadn't even flinched.

"What's this?" she whispered. The Wild West Show swirled around them like a noisy, colorful maelstrom. But she and the

Indian were apart from it. In some other world where she could touch and be touched. Where she watched freaks from the audience, not milled with them backstage.

"This is a choice," he said. "This is warmth."

Those eyes fixed her again, and she understood.

"No more ice?" she asked.

"Release the warmth inside this stone, and you will be no different from anyone else. Keep it intact, and you will remain the Ice Witch."

Angeline shook off his stare and pulled her hands away. She still held the amber block. "I don't want to hear any more nonsense about magic. Why are you doing this?"

The man shook his head sternly. "This is not magic. This is nature. Just like your ability."

Ability? This man was one of the few who'd ever stopped to consider that what she did could be scientifically explained. Most folks believed she was an illusionist, and those given to fancy believed her a creature of magic. Angeline knew it was neither. Her father's voice howled from the past, calling her a witch. Cursing the ability she couldn't control. Calling from his pulpit for fire and a stake. Seemingly unaware that people were no longer burned for their differences. But Angeline was not a witch. Just a woman with a problem.

A problem this amber could solve?

No. That was impossible. That was magic.

"Your ability comes from the earth." The man knelt and sifted the soil through his finger. "Just as all gifts do. And curses.

When I was a boy, there was a woman in the tribe who could coax water from a dry stone. She was beloved of all. But there was another woman who drew fire from the earth, whether she willed it or not. Yet her abilities had positive uses as well, and she would not relinquish her ability. The men drove her into exile.

"Nature touches us for reasons unknown, yet we are not all equipped to bear the life we've been given. This is why the earth gives us a choice. You need not live with this ability any more, if you believe it a burden."

"It's not a burden." She didn't believe her own words.

The man stood and shrugged. "If this life is for you, then enjoy it. But if you would leave it behind, then you now have the ability. I'm only here because your spirit called."

Angeline was fairly certain the man was insane. And yet that didn't explain the way the world seemed to slow in his presence. Or the way he touched her. Light danced inside the stone, and she allowed herself to imagine what he said was true. Breaking open the stone. Feeling the warmth spread though her body for this first time in fifteen years. Leaving this place behind and seeing her mother again.

Seeing her father too.

Angeline grimaced as her thoughts turned to burning witches. She had no real desire to return to Virginia. Then she thought of the way Jim's lips felt against hers, and she thought of other things. She stared at the stone in her hand and considered every possibility. Someone tugged at her dress. Purdy grinned up at her and touched one tentative finger to the amber.

"Pur-dee."

"Yes it is," said Angeline.

The wind spun Purdy's hair into a nest of tangles. She swatted at the air and giggled. Angeline allowed her to touch the amber again, holding tight to it so it wouldn't fall and break. Wouldn't that be her luck? One more choice taken out of her hands. She realized that magic or not, she believed what the old man told her about the amber. A hundred questions popped in her mind, but when she looked up from Purdy's gleaming face the man was gone.

"Did you see where that man went?" she asked.

Purdy shook her head. Angeline couldn't tell if that meant she hadn't seen him leave or that she had no idea who Angeline was talking about.

"Listen, Purdy," she said. "Have you seen Jim around? I've got to talk to him."

Purdy nodded, tearing her gaze reluctantly away from the amber. She pointed across the show grounds.

"Show me where?"

Purdy nodded and set off into the crowds, dodging a herd of goats wearing beaded saddles. She led Angeline past the animal cages and sleeping tents and finally stopped short of the swaying grassland that surrounded them. Purdy pointed to a stand of trees on the outskirts of the show's temporary domain.

A woman in a romanticized version of a pioneer dress—probably one of the chorus members from the singing troupe— leaned against a tree, and Jim pressed against her. Their lips were joined

in a kiss, and when he pulled away, she laughed and kissed him again. Jim leaned closer and lifted one of her legs. It slid from beneath her skirt, and he ran one hand along it, letting it linger. His touch on the woman's skin. His lips moving to her neck.

Angeline's heartache came out in a ragged cough, and Purdy stared at her with a concerned expression. Those hands that had been so afraid to touch her seemed destined to touch every inch of this other woman, and Angeline suddenly fell victim to the realization that there could never be anything between her and Jim. All the futures she'd imagined with him were built on childish fantasies. Even if Jim did love her, and that seemed less likely than it had mere moments ago, she couldn't offer the same things other women could. Women who could be touched and women you could share a room with. A life with.

Anger coiled in her gut, and she bolted for the depths of the grassland. Purdy called out behind her, but Angeline kept moving, desperate to distance herself from Jim and from her whole miserable existence. Her hands held the amber against her breasts, and it filled her chest with a warmth she hadn't felt in years. Grass hissed against her legs, and the scent of rain rode in from the west on a sudden blast of wind. Fear momentarily chased away the anger, and she wondered if Jim had somehow managed to bring the rain. The thought of him stabbed at her heart, and she realized that she didn't care if it rained. She had her amber choice, and she intended to use it. And if the old man who'd given it to her was crazy, then she'd die encased in ice. Either way, she'd be better off.

A slab of rock protruded from the grass, and she fell to her knees in front of it. A raindrop slapped her face and became hail. Another followed. Angeline looked up and saw a swirl of gray clouds, one of those sudden, fearsome thunderstorms the region was known for. The horizon was a green haze, and a line of heavy showers marched closer. It was oddly beautiful, a sight she hadn't seen since her Daddy had taught her to fear the rain, and she allowed herself a few seconds to admire it.

The amber grew hot in Angeline's grip, as if understanding its time for usefulness had come. She tested it against the rock, giving it a sharp tap. It wouldn't take much to break the amber, and when she did she could forget about the freak show. Forget about everything but carving out some semblance of a normal life. She thought about Jim touching her the way he'd touched the chorus lady and dismissed the idea. She wasn't doing this for him; she was doing it for herself.

Purdy reached her side, gasping for breath. She pointed at the coming rain and whined, knowing Angeline's aversion.

"Don't worry, honey," said Angeline. "I'll be fine."

Tears streaked Purdy's face, and rain began to pelt down around them. Angeline flushed with new fear. A few drops wouldn't hurt, but imagining the ice cocoon that could form in seconds caused her heart to race. Purdy lunged forward and gave her a crushing hug. Her arms touched the back of Angeline's neck and Purdy jumped back with a yelp of pain.

"Honey!" said Angeline. "You know not to touch me. What are you doing?"

Purdy came at her again, and pulled her close. Angeline shoved her away, and Purdy stood crying in the wind. Lightning slammed into the ground just beyond the city of blowing tents, and the resultant thunder silenced Angeline's attempt at protest. Purdy shook her head violently, as if trying to deny what she must perceive as a suicide attempt. Angeline's name carried on the wind, Edgar calling out for her. She looked up, and he was approaching at a run through the tall grass. The Queen of Beards was behind him, and in her wake Seamus the Pincushion, Lady Starvation, and several of the others. They must have seen her flee the camp. And like Purdy, they wanted to save her from the rain.

Angeline fended off another of Purdy's hugs.

Then the sky broke open and released a torrent.

Angeline screamed as the rain hammered her, and the amber became so hot she almost dropped it. She hadn't felt true heat in so long the pain was almost a curiosity. Frozen raindrops rang like bits of broken glass as they struck her and bounced away. She looked at Purdy, knowing she had little time to break the amber if she hoped to save herself, yet not wishing to leave her friend alone in her misery. The others were close, though their shouts drowned in the downpour. Angeline scooted across the ground on her knees, feeling the water pooling against the soil begin to solidify beneath her. She stopped short of giving Purdy a hug, but drew as close to her as she possibly could without causing her further pain.

"I'm fine Purdy. See this?" She held the glowing block of amber up for inspection. "This is going to make everything better."

Purdy reached for the amber, and Angeline allowed her to take it. It continued to glow, but didn't seem to burn her hands. Together, they studied the stone, but when Angeline pulled her gaze away, she realized Purdy was laughing. A smile broke across her own face in response.

"What's funny?"

"Rain!" said Purdy.

The raindrops continued to bounce from Angeline's skin, and she realized the rain had grown even heavier. Surely this storm was enough to wrap her in ice forever, but it wasn't doing anything of the sort. Angeline rose tentatively to her feet and reached her arms out to the side. The rain was comfortably warm, and she felt the dust of days cleansed from her skin. Purdy continued to laugh as rain flew from Angeline like a shower of diamonds. Every drop tickled, and each one brought with it further confirmation that the rain wasn't going to kill her. Angeline spun beneath the spilling sky, and her laughter joined Purdy's.

Angeline lost track of how long she danced, but eventually she was on her knees again, the last of her laughter coming out in fits and starts. Her surrogate family surrounded her, and Edgar had wrapped his old fur-lined cape around her wet shoulders. Pink sunlight washed across the world, and the storm retreated like the defeated foe that it was. Frozen raindrops encircled them, and Purdy took up handfuls of the stuff and threw it in the air, giggling. Seamus laughed as it clattered against his head, and the Queen fretted over Angeline like a mother, seizing her through the cape and helping her to her feet.

"You'll catch your death from the rain, child," said the Queen.

Angeline grinned, shook her head. The forgotten piece of amber lay nestled in the ice, and Angeline picked it up. She brushed away a layer of frost from the surface, but the Indian's gift had lost its glow.

"Pur-dee!" Purdy stopped playing and put her hands on the amber. She seemed far more interested in it now that it was just another bauble for her amusement. Angeline let her have it.

"For you, honey." Angeline watched the joy spread across Purdy's face. It was the face of a friend. A face from this life. Not the one she'd left behind.

Angeline smiled as her family closed in around her. Not close enough to touch, and certainly not close enough to hug.

But close enough.

The Hangman Isn't Hanging

Jay Lake

The Dunes south of the San Luís Valley is a death trap for white man and red alike. Only the hardyest and wiliest Adventurers can trade across them sands. Not Mormon nor Texian nor even them Russian bastards can track a man there neither. Only a right smart Injun or a Chinee witch doctor can take you down there. And them monsters in the sky, what goes without saying. But cross La Veta pass and there's the Wet Mountain valley, prettiest country God ever laid His finger on.

—Journal of Jed "Spade" Wolters, mountain man, ca. 1850

Courtesy of the Founders' Collection of the Denver Temple Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

Red Eyes Parker was leading a string of pack ponies two days north of the Burrista trading post at the far south end of the Wet Mountain Valley when they began to spook. Loaded down with ironwork and kitchenware, the ponies were louder than mission bells.

Parker cursed inventively in a mixture of French, Spanish and Ute. He halted to calm them one by one, stroking the muzzle of each pony and whispering the names of their mothers. Then he scanned the scrubby pines that surrounded the trail. There wasn't much underbrush, but the lay of the land was sufficiently rough to hide an army of *Americanos, Mormonistas,* or worse.

Eyes closed and mouth open, he breathed deep. His ears brought him nothing. There should have been mountain bluebirds, scrub jays, woodpeckers—this was not a quiet forest. His nose brought him . . .

. . . a mix of rot and blood and cold bone. Something dead or dying.

Perhaps.

It was the "perhaps" that worried him.

Reluctantly, Parker hopped off of his horse, Poquito, telling the mount to watch over the ponies. He took his axe and his crutch and followed the odor. Faint stirrings of breeze led him stumping up an embankment away from the pony line to a point where the smell was much stronger. He looked down, studying a ravine that opened on the far side of the ridge.

An angel lay amid the stones at the bottom. The black

of its skin and wings blended with the shadows around it. Parker's hand flexed for his absent musket before he realized the creature was folded into an impossible position down there.

Angels could be slain. It had been done. But he'd never heard tell of someone fighting one of the white God's creatures to a standstill and then wedging it into a crack in the earth to die.

The angel's head tilted upward. Even in such terminal pain its face held an impossible beauty, dangerous as flame, sterile as stone. Its eyes were gold beneath a mountain stream. "*Attanaski-amie*," the angel said in the secret language of Parker's medicine lodge. *Slay me*.

He would have tried to do just that, except the asking made him suspicious. Not that he was sure he could have killed it regardless.

"*Esas palabras no son las suyas a utilizar*," Parker said. "*Usted los ha robado de mis pensamientos*." The angel had stolen the words of his secret language from his thoughts. They were said to have many fantastic powers.

It answered him in some rippling tongue Parker had never before heard. A cold gust came from downhill, snow-chilled air fleeing the towering *Sangre de Cristo* range just to the west, unseasonable but matching the feeling in Parker's heart.

He decided he would not kill it. "*Debo matarle, pero no*."

"Please." It spoke English now.

"You want to die?" Parker asked in the same language. He hated speaking the Americano tongue. "I take you to town, the whites kill you good." There was years' worth of vengeance to be

taken upon one of the feathered warriors.

The angel settled into the shadow it seemed to make for itself and glared at him. Parker figured someone had broken its back, because nothing below the neck seemed to move. Only that head and those glaring eyes now behind narrow lids.

He scrambled back down to his ponies and unloaded Little Dog. Little Dog was his sturdiest beast, an animal of small imagination even for a horse. Parker bent and whispered in her ear, saying the name of the pony's mother and grandmothers and promising sweet clover. "*Disculpo por esta carga que usted debe llevar*," he told the pony, apologizing for the burden.

Parker left his door hinges and handles in a pile under a tree blazed with his mark, then led Little Dog up the slope, carrying a rope in his crutch hand. Little Dog did not like the scent of the angel, but she was too lazy to bolt. He looped her lead on a pine branch, then rigged the rope around the tree's bole.

The angel's eyes did not flicker open again until Parker stood above it at the bottom of the ravine. It took all his courage to brace his legs wide above such a deadly enemy in repose, right foot on stone, left stump painful on mud. Not even an angel could fight with its back bent so far and wedged so deep in the earth. Parker stared into the cold gold of the angel's gaze for a moment before looping the rope awkwardly around one shoulder. He had to force the hemp between the arm muscles and the great black wing folded beneath them.

Parker would not dare to pass the rope behind the angel's head. Not while it still could move its jaws. They did not ex-

change a word the whole time he was down in the ravine.

After he'd finished tying off the rope, Parker scrambled back out and looped the other end around a set of branches to gain the leverage. Not trusting the pony to this work on the uncertain ground, he set his own back into it. The angel's weight combined with the grip of the earth where it had been thrust made for a terrible strain. Parker leaned into the rope and pulled harder.

The line began to crackle before the angel pulled loose. It sounded as if the earth herself had spat the creature out. Parker worked quickly to haul the angel up. It brought its dying stench with it, so strong once freed from the soil that he gagged. The angel continued to stare at him as he folded its body over Little Dog's blanketed back, until the golden eyes were lost to his sight beneath the curve of the pony's belly.

"May you have the joy of the view," Parker said savagely. Every word in English was like a curse—that was good enough for the angel.

Little Dog whimpered her small-minded fear but she did not throw the burden. The rest of the ponies shuffled away from her when Parker regained the trail, so he had to lengthen their lead considerably and kept Little Dog close to Poquito. The horse hated the smell too, but was more loyal and better-trained than the pack ponies.

"They will be glad of you at the mines," he told the angel.

Parker rode into Silvercliff with the rising moon. It was a white man's town, settled by veterans of Clark's Army leavened with assorted refugees from the surrounding white nations, but Silvercliff heeded the counsel of the people's lodges. They

dug holes in the ground no self-respecting man would enter and grubbed there for the silver that had lent the town its name.

Mines. Only a white man would imagine such a way to rape the earth, making a victim of both himself and his mother.

But white men paid well for the iron goods Parker brought. Their silver in turn served his lodge. A warrior could not fight on one foot, and he had not possessed the honor to die the day the other had been taken from him. This miserable tradesman's living was what was left to Red Eyes.

Silvercliff had only one saloon. The building's porch posts were marked with medicine bags warning warriors away from the white man's vices, and a notice from the regional adjutant of Clark's Army amounting to the same thing for those still under arms. Though he was no longer a warrior, Parker did not spend time within, either. He preferred a fire under the open stars and a pipe in his hand.

Tonight was different.

Parker left Poquito and the pack string hobbled in the meadow where he usually camped and led Little Dog to the saloon. He tied the pony out front, where the white man's horses shied and screamed at the angel's scent. His stump burned with pain. By the time Parker pushed through the saloon's batwing doors the strange, tinkling music had stopped and white men were on their feet with hands upon their pistols.

"Good evening, Red Eyes," said Matteo Bauchs, who happened to be close to the door. Bauchs ran the assay and sometimes traded Parker silver dust and nuggets for more portable

ingots. "Don't see one of yours in here often."

"Mister Bauchs," Parker replied. He tried to keep his voice polite.

"Don't see a lot of them Indians on the hop like that," shouted someone from the back.

"I reckon Red Eyes here could feed you your asshole, Barney, even with a foot gone missing," said Bauchs without turning around. "You might ought to shut up so's we can hear what the man came in here to say."

Parker looked around the room. He marked the loudmouth Barney for later. "I have someone outside needs hanging. White man's justice."

Bauchs' eyes narrowed. "With respect, since when have your folk come to us for justice? The people's lodges take care of their own."

"Come see," said Parker, then turned to limp down the three steps and stand by Little Dog.

Bauchs and the others followed him out in a roar of excited conversation that almost immediately vanished. There was a sort of shuffling noise from the group as each fought not to be the first down the steps, accompanied by the sharp, sweaty smell of fear. Bauchs pushed through and approached the angel. He bent down with his hands upon his knees.

"Damn, Red Eyes. You got quite a catch here. But I'm afraid justice has already been done on this feathered bastard."

White men had no more use than the people did for angels. God's great feathered demons hunted indiscriminately across

the West in pursuit of the Chosen Ones—or anything else that caught their eye. Like deadly magpies, they could be counted upon to raid small settlements or unprotected travelers. Even the Mormonistas, those great God-botherers, could not control their Lord's hosts.

"He is not dead yet," said Parker.

The angel opened its eyes and a brilliant radiance flooded the churned mud beneath Little Dog's belly. Smoke rose where the light touched the earth. Parker was very glad he had not been in the path of that gaze.

No one else would touch the angel so Parker and Bauchs cut it free and laid it out on the billiards table inside the saloon. Face down, for fear of the eyes. Leaving a few armed men in the saloon to watch over their prisoner, a town meeting convened in the street. Someone had the kindness to bring Parker a chair.

He hated them for it, and himself for needing the chair, but still he sat amid a milling crowd of angry white men. Somehow they expected him to speak for his lodge, his tribe and all the people, as if one raindrop could speak for the storm.

"I will not kill it," Parker repeated. He had said those words so often these past hours he'd lost count. Somehow the whites kept coming back to making the angel his problem. "It has stolen words from me already. It speaks the Americano tongue. The problem is yours."

"Got me a question," Barney shouted. He hadn't said much through the course of evening. Despite his feelings against the man, Parker hoped the talk would run down a new trail now.

"Go ahead," said Bauchs.

"Here we are all set on killing that thing. Now, I know it needs killing, angels are a plague upon the land, but who the damnation busted it up in the first place? You ever hear tell of anyone could do such a thing? I mean, it's one thing to shoot the hell out of one of them feathered rats. But break its spine and wedge it down into the ground. That's some powerful doing. Why ain't we afraid of whatever done that?"

That was a very good question. Parker wished he'd thought of it himself.

"Well, and who the hell did it?" said someone else.

Barney smiled. "Ask the damned angel."

"No," said Parker, surprising himself. "Just make an end to it."

"The hangman isn't hanging," Bauchs said. "No one here has the nerve to touch that thing." He put his hands up as the men of the town muttered angrily. "I ain't saying you all are cowards. It's just too much to ask. Who would put the rope around its neck?"

"The Indian there did it once," said Barney. "He can do it again."

Parker contemplated killing Barney in his bed later, but he didn't want to lose the Silvercliff trade. "No."

"So who hurt it?" Bauchs said to Parker.

Looking up from his chair Parker shrugged. It was a white man's gesture. He was beginning to regret his decision to bring the angel in to town. He should have killed it, or left it to die in that hole. "Perhaps your God punishes His own."

"He don't work that way."

"His angels do."

Bauchs thought about that a moment. "Alrightie," he announced. "Here's what we'll do. Me and Red Eyes and Barney here are going to question the angel. Then Barney can put a silver bullet in its head."

"Not on *my* billiards table!" roared a fat man Parker didn't know.

"You going to come move it for me, Otis?" asked Bauchs in a sweet voice.

Everybody else laughed, nervous and glad to be free of the problem. Except Barney, who stared at Parker with violence in his eyes, and Bauchs who stared at the sky as if expecting a flight of whole-bodied angels to come to the rescue of their stricken comrade-in-arms.

They should hang it with their prayer books in their hands, thought Parker. This is a messenger of their God.

The angel hadn't moved at all from where they'd left it on the billiards table. Parker wasn't sure how far it could bend its neck, but he distinctly recalled the creature looking up at him from the ravine. He was careful to pick a seat out of any possible line of sight. That didn't protect him from the butchering grounds smell, unfortunately.

"*Cuidado*," he told Bauchs. Then, "Have a care." Parker spared no portion of his thoughts for Barney.

Bauchs nodded at Parker. He spread his legs to bend down with his hands on his knees and study the side of the angel's head. "I know you can hear me," Bauchs said loudly after a few

moments. "What did this to you?"

The angel did not react at all, though the great black pinions fluttered slightly in an errant cool breeze that seemed to have no source.

The silver assayer tried again. "There's no love between your kind and us. But I can kill you quick and clean, or I can leave you on Otis' billiard table until you starve or die of thirst or whatever."

"I will not die unless you kill me," the angel said. Its voice was muffled by the table.

The true horror of the angel's fate dawned on Parker. Its tormentor had left it to rot out there in the forest. He could imagine an immortal creature broken beyond repair jammed down in a ravine until its vision was clouded by rotting pine needles. Then company with the worms and beetles for ever as the soil settled over it, season by endless season.

Parker shuddered.

"Trade me your death for the knowledge of who did this to you," Bauchs said.

"There were none of the Nephilim left in the land of the children of Israel," the angel said. Its voice was clearer, stronger. "He Is Who He Is has sent them back to the world."

"Nephilim?" asked Bauchs.

"A tribe in the Good Book," Barney snapped with another glare at Parker. "This Indian done brought us a crazy angel."

Parker palmed his throwing knife from the seam in his buckskin trousers. "The angel is no more crazy than anything else in

your Bible."

The angel groaned. "The Nephilim protect the Chosen. Now kill me."

Barney took a silver bullet from a pouch on his belt and loaded it into his revolver. Parker trusted the sullen white man even less than usual, but he wasn't sure what Barney would do with Bauchs watching.

"Are these here Nephilim coming for us?" the silver assayer asked.

The angel's breath shuddered—a rattle of fear and pain, perhaps. "All are marked."

Men were shouting outside, Parker realized.

Bauchs nodded at Barney then headed for the door. Parker stayed to see what Barney would do next. He needed to be there for the angel's end. Outside the shouting grew louder, changed to screaming punctuated by gunshots.

The Nephilim coming to finish their work on the angel, Parker figured.

Barney braced his pistol toward the angel's head. Parker waited, but the white man did not shoot. The saloon doors banged behind Bauchs as the horses began to scream. Barney swung the pistol to bear on Parker.

"It's a blasphemy, Red Eyes," he said. "What you done to this sweet messenger of the Lord." Sweat streamed down Barney's face. "Some day you Indians will know your place. Every angel's a revelation."

Parker began to nod slowly, then threw himself backward.

The throwing knife went high to stab Barney in the throat. Barney's pistol fired as he collapsed, but Parker did not feel the bullet.

A moment later he pulled himself to his foot. A full-scale battle raged outside. Parker spared a sad thought for Little Dog hobbled in the midst of the killing, then leaned close to the angel. "*Todavía los hombres se mueren alrededor de usted*," he whispered. Still men died around the angel. "*Asesino*." Killer.

"I am as God made me," the angel said. "You would not curse the wind for being cold."

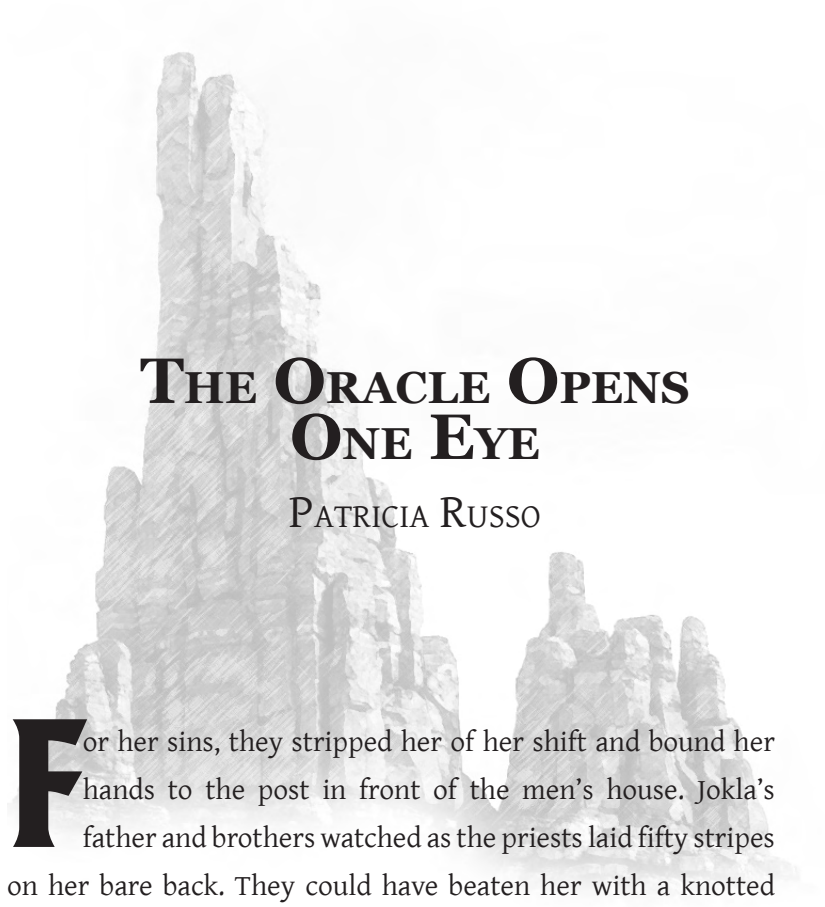
Parker took the pistol from Barney's spasming hands. The white man yet lived but was slowly choking to death from the blood pouring down the inside of his throat. Parker opened a pouch at Barney's belt and found two more silver bullets.

"Blessed by your priests, yes?" He smiled at Barney as he loaded the next two bullets into the pistol. "I am a stupid savage. What do I know of blessings?" Then Parker leaned close to the angel. "I do not do this for myself." He prodded the pistol to the back of its head just where the skull curved away from the neck. "I do not do this for Bauchs or this town. You should have justice, but their hangman is not hanging." He thought of the angel, interred motionless and living forever beneath the soil. "The white men will not give you justice. I give you mercy."

The angel's body slid forward with the shot. Parker watched as the black of its skin and feathers faded to gray. The gray in turn dissolved to motes. Then like fire ash on a summer wind the angel was gone. A flattened bullet lay atop a stain in the billiards

table. It had taken its reek with it.

Outside things had fallen quiet. Had the racket stopped with the death of the angel? Parker cocked the pistol and limped to the door to see who or what else he might need to kill. Nephilim, white men, his horse, or even himself, it did not matter so much to him.



The Oracle Opens One Eye

Patricia Russo

For her sins, they stripped her of her shift and bound her hands to the post in front of the men's house. Jokla's father and brothers watched as the priests laid fifty stripes on her bare back. They could have beaten her with a knotted cord or a barbed lash, and killed her, for Jokla was slight, with little flesh between skin and spine, but the boy who tended the oracle had died just a few days before, and another caretaker was needed. So they whipped her with a smooth rope, and when they were done, the three priests dragged her by her bound hands out of the village and up the steep gray path through the gray rocks to the oracle's black cave in the gray mountains. She had long since given up asking who had accused her, or what she was supposed to have done.

"You know your duty," one priest said as he cut her hands free. That was not true, but Jokla was too afraid to do anything except incline her head.

Another priest, the one who had grunted each time he lashed her, tossed her torn shift on the ground. Then all three turned to walk back down the dusty path.

"How long?" Jokla croaked.

The priests kept walking.

Her shoulders ached, but her arms were still in their sockets. Her back throbbed with bruises, but her skin was intact. Her stomach churned and her head spun, but she was alive.

The wind rose, hot and dry, swirling the dust. Within the cave, something stirred.

The oracle shuffled slowly out into the gray light. The wind cast loops of stench over Jokla, hot breaths from a mouth dark with decay. She flinched and shut her eyes, then forced herself to turn, and look.

That had been five years ago.

The supplicant, a grim man with a broken nose, waited in silence, his head bowed. His cloak, an old blanket pinned at the shoulder with an old bronze brooch, jumped with fleas. He had carried a waterskin up the path, made his libations outside the cave, prayed, then pierced his tongue with a thorn and spat the blood in offering to the spirits. For the oracle, he had brought a honeycomb, dry and crawling with ants, and wildflowers picked along the path, their petals gray with the dust of the mountain. Not that the oracle noticed or cared; she dozed in the back of the

cave, mumbling, shifting her old bones on the woven-reed mat, occasionally scratching her sores. Jokla, sitting crossed-legged and hunched near the mouth of the cave, watched the man, scowling. Scrapings of old honey, a few useless flowers. And his question: May I return home, has the penance sufficed?

Silently, Jokla crawled back to where the oracle slept. Curse the man, curse his foolish question, curse his meager offering. The other day, a woman had come, with two hares. Will my son come back from the sea? Ha, ha, the waves lap him with long, salty tongues, the oracle had said, rocking back and forth.

Jokla touched the old woman's ankle, then drew back. She wasn't quick enough. The slap caught her on the top of the head. Half blind, in the dark, the woman's arm was yet swift, and her aim true. "Supplicant," Jokla muttered.

The oracle grunted. She scratched her thigh.

"He wants to know—"

"Seven years more," the oracle said, and turned over and went back to sleep.

How Jokla hated her. When she had first been brought to the cave, the woman had shambled out, squinted at Jokla's reddened back, her bare breasts, and thrown back her head and laughed. "Another sinner to serve truth? About time. I hope you're better than the last one. Cover yourself, then fetch water from the spring. Then you can start gathering firewood."

She'd looked like the oldest woman in the world. Her wrinkles were so deep, gray dust collected in them. Her back was humped and bent, and her belly hung down like an empty

sack. Her eyes were filmed, her hair sparse, her teeth broken, decayed, and few. The muscles of her arms were wasted, gray skin covering bones like sticks, and her head shook with a slight but unrelenting tremor. Jokla felt pity. The woman stank; her body was filthy, and her clothing stiff with dirt. *She must be too weak to wash*, she thought.

The pity lasted until the first slap landed. "Go! You passed the spring on your way up here. Or did you climb with your eyes closed?"

Weak, the old woman was not, but swift as a serpent, and as spiteful.

In five years, the oracle had never asked Jokla her name. Perhaps she knew it, from a vision, from a dream. Or from a priest. If she did, she never used it. You. Sometimes You, girl. Or You, fool. You, idiot. When she was away from the old woman, gathering wood, picking herbs, hunting mushrooms, hauling water, Jokla murmured her own name to herself, under her breath, like a chant, so as not to forget it. The folk from her village who came to question the oracle never looked Jokla in the eye; strangers scarcely noticed her. No one from her family ever came.

Now, Jokla crawled back to the mouth of the cave, but remained within, out of sight. The supplicant still waited in silence, hands clasped and head bent. Pitching her voice low, Jokla cast her words so that they would be caught by the wind. "Seven years more," she called out. "Seven years, seven years."

The man's shoulders stiffened.

Above, gray birds wheeled and screamed. All was gray in this place, the stones, the soil, the water, the light, the life.

Eventually the man went away.

Jokla threw away the flowers, but brought the honeycomb into the cave.

Seven years. That was a reasonable span of time, a common span, accepted as fitting by everyone except the barbarians who counted by nines. Jokla kept track of the moon's changes, and with a stone she carved the passing of the years into the side of a tree stump close by the spring. When seven years have gone, the priests will return and release me, she told herself. Perhaps they might even tell me what sins I committed. Thus she endured, drinking gray water and chewing the scraps of sacrifices, and tending the oracle, washing her when she allowed herself to be touched, picking the lice from her robes, weaving fresh mats, listening to her nightmares, and suffering her blows. Sometimes Jokla climbed to the high peak that loomed above the cave. One jump, one strong leap to clear the ledge, and then the long fall, the wind in her ears like the roar of cataracts, and then an end to all of this.

But seven years of anything can be endured, she would tell herself. People have endured worse than this. And she would step away from the edge.

Soon after the beginning of Jokla's sixth year in servitude, the oracle fell ill.

It began with an aching in her joints and a mild fever that would not break. The old woman sat hunched over the fire,

coughing, and refused to let Jokla near. The first few days, the oracle's illness was merely an annoyance; two supplicants came, Jokla announced that the oracle was unwell, and the men left, disappointed. She herself did not fall ill, and believed the oracle would recover soon enough. The woman was old; old people were often ill.

Then her body began to waste away. Her pain increased. She could not sleep, nor could she find relief in any position, lying, sitting, or standing. Everything hurt her. Jokla coaxed her to eat, while nursing in her heart the fierce hope that the oracle would die.

Supplicants continued to come, and after a while, they refused to depart. They camped before the cave, and up and down the slope of the mountain, waiting for the oracle to receive them.

"What do I tell them? What do I do?" Jokla asked, again and again. Whenever she stepped out of the cave, to go for water, to gather herbs, to empty a chamber pot, the supplicants glared at her and muttered, as if it were Jokla's doing that the oracle was silent. The longer the silence lasted, the fiercer their resentment grew. Jokla could feel the hatred coming off their bodies like waves of heat, so intense that her skin burned, as if she had stood naked under the sun.

The oracle threw a bit of firewood at her, then sank back into her moaning and rocking. Though she ate almost nothing, a few sips of soup or tea in a whole day, her belly had swelled. She cradled it in her stick-thin arms, and whimpered.

The supplicants grew bolder. They came to the mouth of the cave and shouted their questions into the darkness, without bothering with libations, or sacrifices, or prayers. They cursed and shoved each other, battling for the best position before the cave; they argued over how long each supplicant should be allowed to keep his or her place at the front of the line. Blows fell, blood fell, and still they howled their questions: Will there be war with the Sea Folk? Should I marry the daughter of Rion the potter? Why does my mother's spirit return night after night to wail outside the sheepfold, when her funeral was conducted properly, with all the rites and ceremonies due her? Is it permitted to cut down the tree in the middle of my barley field, now that its dryad has not been seen for seven times seven years? Will my son recover the use of his legs? What shall I do to cleanse my pollution? Which of my neighbors has cursed me? Why do my chickens die? How do I find the treasure my great-grandfather buried before the gods took away his senses? Is my brother plotting to dishonor me? Is my wife's child of my seed? Should I buy Fia's olive grove? What sacrifice should I offer to propitiate my house's threshold spirit?

Once a day, Jokla would speak from the cave. "The oracle is silent," she would call out, or else, "The oracle sleeps."

Still the questions rushed on, endlessly, a roaring stream impossible to dam. The oracle, her eyes shut, rocked and moaned. Nothing intelligible came out of her mouth, nothing Jokla could even pretend to interpret. In desperation, Jokla crawled to her spot of concealment just inside the opening

of the cave, where the shadows from the overhanging crag and the curve of the cave wall made the darkness nearly impenetrable to eyes peering in from without. One supplicant, a woman, was screeching something about a dowry. Jokla waited until the woman paused to draw breath, then boomed out, "Woe, woe! The oracle weeps!"

Commotion and confusion erupted as people shouted to those farther below that the oracle had awakened. A man shoved aside the woman who had been answered, and screamed out his own question.

Jokla barely paid attention to the words; she waited for the third repetition, then called out, "Alas, alas, the oracle laments!" Let them make of that what they would; it was a true report. More questions came, and Jokla answered, "The oracle grieves," or else, "The oracle moans," or else, "The oracle tears at her belly and sobs." All true, but Jokla trembled. Surely the visitors to the cave would catch on; surely they would realize that the oracle was neither seeing nor speaking, and these brief reports that came booming and hollow out of the darkness were no true prophecies. But the people accepted them, bending their heads under the weight of the unhappy news, departing with their own groans and lamentations. The subterfuge sufficed. It cleared the squatters out, and those who toiled up the path once more approached with reverence, and made libation and sacrifice.

Time passed, one day dying into the next, but the old woman did not die. Her arms and legs grew thinner still,

her face skeletal, while her abdomen swelled up, the skin stretched tight as a drumhead. She lay on her side, and barely moved. She allowed Jokla to wash her now, and brush the flies away, and wet her lips with cold tea. She kept her eyes shut, and rarely even moaned. Each morning Jokla was certain the old woman would not live to sunset, and each night she was certain she would not survive to morning, and yet day followed day, and the oracle did not die.

Any pity Jokla had ever felt for the old woman had been extinguished long ago. Jokla tended her, as was her duty, but she would have suffered more sorrow for a dying cat. She could feel no compassion for the supplicants, either, for all their nervousness as they approached the cave, for all their sacrifices, richer now than ever before in hopes of eliciting a favorable response, for all their strained desperation. Ill-tidings were all she had to offer them. If they longed for something else, then let them go somewhere else.

She was standing in the sun, wiping the grit of a long, sleepless night from her eyes, when she spotted the family toiling up the path. The man was in the lead, a large wicker basket strapped to his back; its weight bent his shoulders, and he labored upwards with the help of two staffs. Two women, one bare-headed, her hair loose as that of a woman in mourning, and carrying nothing, the other older, her dress that of a debt-slave, followed him. The slave bore a harvest-basket on her head, and carried an earthenware jug in each hand.

Jokla retreated, anticipating a rich sacrifice. There might be a lamb in the man's basket, or even a young calf.

The woman with unbound hair walked the rugged, rocky path on bare feet, but the man wore boots, and the staffs he gripped were ringed with silver. Even the slave wore sturdy sandals, and an embroidered girdle. These were members of a wealthy household.

"Supplicants come," she told the oracle, as she always did. The only reaction was a slight change in the old woman's breathing; for a few seconds, it became a bit more rapid, a little raspier. Jokla expected nothing more.

The visitors halted, the man leaning on his sticks, panting. The mourning woman stood aside, her hair hanging over her face, while the slave set down her own burdens and helped the man lift the large basket off his back and place it, with great care, on the ground. The man laid down one of his staffs. Still leaning on the other, he unfastened the cord that bound the basket's latch, and raised the lid. Jokla expected to hear a bleat, or a grunt, when the sunlight fell on the animal's eyes. Instead there came a cry in a voice that sounded nearly human.

The slave bent over the basket. She began to sing, in a low, cracked voice, something that could have been a wordless lullaby. The man spread a blanket on the ground, while the mourning woman stood as still as a stone, her hands clenched at her side.

The man and the slave lifted a child out of the basket and laid her on the blanket, a child with bent limbs and a twisted neck, and large dark eyes that peered anxiously about her. She spoke, in broken, slurred words Jokla could not understand. The man looked away. The slave woman hummed soothingly.

The man performed the rites, while the mourning woman stood silent and the slave crouched by the blanket, humming. The child squirmed, but did not have enough control over her limbs to move off the blanket. Her eyes darted everywhere.

"O Wise One, deep in knowing and foreknowing, I come to ask a lawful way to put an end to the suffering of this wretched creature, daughter of my own body and the body of my wife, whose life is a misery to herself and a grief to all who must gaze upon her."

The slave woman winced.

Slowly, the mourning woman raised her head; her face was a mask of despair, her eyes black pits of hatred.

"For sixteen years she has suffered; for sixteen years we have borne both biting grief and bitter shame on her account. O Deep-seeing One, ask the gods how this burden may be lifted from us all." The man bent his head to await the answer, his hands loosely clasped in front of him, his shoulders as rigid as if awaiting the lash.

The child grunted and arched her back, but could not lift herself more than a finger's breadth from the blanket. No, not a child, Jokla thought, but a young woman, sixteen years old, though her body, even if imagined with its limbs unbent, its neck straight, its back uncrooked, was no larger than that of a girl of six. Jokla rubbed her eyes. She tried to think of what to say. The oracle gushes forth tears like a waterfall? Would that suffice, would the young woman's father take those words as permission to drown her?

Jokla looked again at the mourning woman. Her expression reminded her of something; it took a moment before the memory came clear. So her second-eldest brother had looked when the priests had dragged her before the men's house to be whipped, his expression one of raging helplessness, while her father turned his head and her other brothers stared at the ground. Her mother had not come to witness Jokla's punishment.

Drowning was an easy death, so it was said.

Jokla pressed her fingertips together, and drew a breath.

Behind her came a rustling. Jokla froze. It could not be, but the oracle was turning on her mat. Fear and wonder raced together in Jokla's blood; she looked over her shoulder. The oracle was rising, a skeleton with the belly of a glutton, one eye open and one eye shut, and her mouth as slack as an idiot's. Jokla scrambled to her feet. The oracle's open eye was clouded, but she reached out a bony hand and gripped Jokla's shoulder tightly. Her fingers were talons. "Lead me," she said, in a voice as dry as straw. She turned toward the mouth of the cave, supporting herself with Jokla's body.

It wasn't until the oracle took a step that Jokla realized she meant to go outside. If the priests had been there, they would not have allowed it. But the priests were not there, and slowly, leaning half her weight on Jokla's shoulder, the oracle emerged into the light.

The slave woman let out a shriek, then clapped her hands over her mouth. The man flinched back. Jokla glanced at the young woman; she was still wriggling, struggling to crawl off the

blanket. The mother stood still, at her distance, and something new appeared in her face.

The oracle blinked and blinked, her body trembling. *The sun must hurt her*, Jokla thought. Worse than standing, worse than walking, the sun must burn like fire. Tears spilled down the old woman's face from her one open eye.

"The oracle weeps . . ." whispered the father.

The old woman squeezed Jokla's shoulder hard, and Jokla said, "The oracle will speak."

Silently, all waited.

Though her grip was still tight, the oracle was shaking so violently that Jokla was afraid that the old woman's knees would give way. If she allowed the oracle to collapse in front of supplicants, the priests would rain down punishment on her for certain. She put her arm around the oracle's waist to lend her body more support. The old woman bit back a groan, but made no other protest. "This child," she said, then stopped, struggling for breath.

"This child," she continued, after a moment, and the man, and his wife, and the slave woman all gazed at her with fear, "has her destiny, given to her at birth. I see great deeds in her future, but my vision is clouded now by age. The gods are leaving me. You must return, when the next oracle is chosen, to learn more. Tend the child well, and your rewards will be many." Jokla felt the old woman's body sag, and moved closer, tightening her hold; she was keeping the oracle on her feet now, supporting almost all of the old woman's weight.

The slave woman's eyes shone. The mother folded her hands together; Jokla could see she was fighting not to cry. The father called out, "When shall the new oracle come? When shall we return?" But Jokla had already, gingerly, wincing at the pain radiating from the oracle's body, begun to turn, the old woman's weight heavy on her.

"The oracle has spoken," Jokla said.

The slave woman murmured something that might have been: *praise the oracle*.

Praise the oracle, Jokla thought. With slow, hitching steps, they made their way back into the coolness and the dark. Jokla was afraid the old woman would crumble as soon as they were out of sight of the suppliants, and indeed her body shook and swayed like a sapling in a storm. They had nearly made it to the oracle's bed when her strength gave out. She fell, and Jokla fell with her, her back twisting, her knee hitting the ground hard. Sparks danced in her eyes. The old woman lay over her, her breaths wheezing in and out in a raspy panting.

"It's all right," Jokla said, after a moment.

The oracle shuddered. "Idiot," she rasped.

Jokla had grown strong in her years of service, stronger than she knew. She managed to slide out from under the old woman's body, then, kneeling, to take the oracle into her arms and rise. She carried her to her bed of woven mats and laid her down as gently as she could. She poured a little water into a cup and helped the old woman down two swallows, then found an old rag and began to wipe the sweat from her limbs.

She could hear the thump of feet and the creaking of wicker; outside the suppliants were loading up their burden for the long trek down the mountainside.

"Do you know when you will die?" Jokla asked.

The old woman's breathing had eased a little. Both her eyes were shut. "No," she answered.

Jokla touched the wet rag to her face. "Do you know who the next oracle will be?"

"No."

Jokla wiped the old woman's forehead. Softly, she asked, "Do you know when I shall be set free?"

An eyelid fluttered, and the old woman let out a small sigh. "No," she said.

"Why did you go outside? Why did you call more pain on yourself?"

"I wanted . . ." She ran a dry tongue over cracked lips. She opened one eye, but Jokla did not think she could see anything. "I wanted to do something good."

Jokla sat motionless for a space, trying to control her rage. Her chest tightened; she could hardly breathe. So there was kindness in you, after all, hidden deep in some crevice of your withered, old soul.

But not for me.

Jokla had nearly lost the capacity to shed true tears. But her eyes stung, for there was courage in the old woman as well, courage to defy the priests, to defy the gods, perhaps, and Jokla wished she had even a scrap of that courage within her,

just enough to either smother the old woman where she lay and end her pain, or to simply stand up and walk away, out of the cave and the gray mountains, to freedom.

Perhaps it would take seven years of suffering to grow such strength, or seven and seven years, or seven times seven.

Jokla dipped her rag into the water jug again, and began to wash the old woman's feet.

About the Authors

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Nina's young adult novel *Spirits That Walk in Shadow* was published by Viking in 2006. Her short science fiction novel *Catalyst* was published by Tachyon in 2006.

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