
The Name of the Sphinx
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Back in 1997, when Albert Cowdrey retired from his government job and returned to writing fiction, his first stories were set on Azalea Place in New Orleans. "The Familiar" (March 1997) and then "White Magic" (March 1998) featured a roving Foo Dog and a Mafia widow by the name of Angela Barberino, plus a nosy neighbor and of course our redoubtable hero. Well, things have been quiet on Azalea Place for some time now, but that's about to change, as you'll soon see.

You, of all people, Angela, remember the bad old days of murders, hexes and golems here on Azalea Place. Such a quiet street! Only an occasional corpse or two!

I hope you remember just as clearly the happy years we've had since. Not that they've all been gravy. With two strikes against me—being male and getting pretty senior—I've had my share of health alarms. You remember those warning signs the old prostate was sending me, a year or two ago? I'm sure you could tell me (if you chose) exactly why the crisis passed. All I knew was watching my urologist study the lab results and mutter, "I could have sworn..."

He checked for himself, then—stripping off his latex glove—asked somewhat plaintively, "Haven't been to Lourdes, have you?"

I was tempted to say: there are advantages to living with a witch, provided she's the right kind.

After the alarm I went on as before, feeling younger and stronger and more active year by year. Sometimes I wondered if my internal clock had slowed down, maybe even gone into reverse. Of course that's impossible. But impossibility is the business of magic, right?

One of my bad habits lingered on: waking about four A.M. and finding I couldn't fall asleep again. Lying in the dark and listening to your slow breathing made me envious; brooding about the state of the world and/or universe made me miserable.

On the morning we both remember so well, the morning when the good times came to an end, I'd been lying there wide-eyed, wondering whether dark energy really is making the universe fly apart. At last I got up, padded into the hall, and felt my way down the stairs in the dark.

Opening the front door—in those days we had no reason to lock it—I saw a dense, shadowy shape slink into a clump of banana trees and vanish. Our sentry, our guardian, our resident demon was on patrol.

I sat down in one of our comfortable old rockers. The street lamp across the way shone through the bars of the gate. Tree frogs were piping and toads chirping in the bushes and in the sky, a mass of spun-glass clouds was dimly reflecting the city lights. A spring rain started to fall, making the amphibians shrill even louder than before. I was leaning back, eyes closed, inviting sleep, when I felt an odd sort of quiver in my bones.

The chair and the whole porch trembled a bit. Had an eighteen-wheeler gotten lost? No, I didn't hear the usual grunt and grind of a truck; except for the chorus and the rain, I didn't hear anything at all.

Then the lion-dog emerged from the trees and climbed onto the porch, the stout oak steps creaking and bending under his weight. Foo Manchu paused beside me, smelling like the big-cat section of Audubon Zoo, and I cautiously scratched his ears.

He made a rumbling grumbling noise, sat down, and subsided into his other mode. Under my fingers the stiff fur turned cool and smooth and hard; the smell faded out; and the great marble foo dog was sitting beside me, guarding me from...what?

The spring chorus fell silent. Whatever was in the street had stopped outside the gate, and it was big, because it blocked the light of the street lamp across the way. For a few seconds I and everything else imitated Foo Manchu—holding our breaths, turning to stone.

Then another tremor passed through the chair and porch and through my bones and even through Foo Manchu's marble body. The whatever-it-was moved on and the vibrations died away like a bell falling silent. Voice by voice the peepers resumed singing. The rain turned heavy; it sounded like a thousand sticks beating the garden.

Shaking my head, I got up, went inside, and locked the door behind me. Then came a real shock. Echoing in the stairwell was a sound I hadn't heard for almost forty years—not since 1967, when, after being blown up by a mine, I woke in the neurosurgical ward of a military hospital in Saigon.

I ran upstairs. You were lying in the fetal position and your breath made frightening noises—shorter and shorter gasps, then nothing, then sudden deep breaths that wound down again to the silence of apnea.

I flipped on a light, grabbed and shook you, and your eyes and mouth both opened wide. You drew a long shuddering gasp and began to hyperventilate.

I covered your mouth and nose with my hand and said, "Breathe and count to three. That's right. Breathe and count to four. Good. Breathe and count to five."

I moved my hand below the big soft mound of your left breast and felt your heart gradually stop drumming ragtime and shift to *andante*. Then followed a conversation I've played over many times in memory.

"God, that was scary."

Your voice sounded thick.

"What happened?"

"It was just a dream. Not even a nightmare. I mean, I wasn't being chased by the wolfman or anything. It was just kind of...awesome.

"I was sightseeing in Egypt with a bunch of tourists. We were all standing around,

shading our eyes in the desert sunlight and looking up at the Sphinx. Only the face wasn't all broken and worn down like the real one. It was smooth and dark like the face on a pharaoh's statue. It had a kind of... unearthly calm. Then somebody started to scream. Me, I think. The Sphinx was moving. It got up and stretched, just like a cat."

After a moment you added, "It was so *huge*. The shadow engulfed us all. And when it moved—"

"It shook the ground," I said.

"How did you know that?"

I wasn't disturbed that you'd have a vision; after all, you do that sort of thing. But I don't.

No, I didn't believe the literal tourist-attraction Sphinx had come to Azalea Place. But I was ready to swear that something had, and your very talented subconscious portrayed it that way for some reason that neither of us could fathom.

After breakfast I left the house in a thoughtful mood. The garden was glittering in warm sunlight after the night's rain. Foo Manchu had returned to his usual post near the gate, under the *datura* tree you planted after his long-ago fight with the golem uprooted and destroyed that part of the garden.

Of course it's poison, the whole tree is poison, full of atropine and hyoscine and God knows what, and I've always been intrigued by the haunting fragrance that so much lethality creates. I stopped to sniff the huge trumpet flowers, then set off to Loyola University to talk over the night's doings with my personal oracle.

Dmitri Chthonos was sitting at his desk, submerged in examination papers, his big round head spotty as an ostrich egg and his tinted glasses thick as the bottoms of two Coke bottles.

He said, "I'll be right with you. Just let me finish with this young man who thinks the Battle of Marathon was 'like an old time athaletic event between the Geeks and the Persons respectfully.'"

I moved a pile of stuff from a chair and sat down. I've always liked Dmitri's office: floor-to-ceiling books in languages most of the human race has forgotten; two tall dirty windows looking out on the sunlit campus and Holy Name church; the smell of bygone pipes. After all, he's the whole Classics Department rolled into one, so there ought to be something wonderfully archaic about his nest.

Dmitri bestowed a comparatively merciful D on his student, leaned back in his creaking swivel chair and said, "Only five people have signed up for Latin 101 next semester. Care to join us and brush up your *amo, amas, amat?*"

"*Non carborundum*. Tell me about the Sphinx," I said.

"Egyptian or Greek?"

"First the Egyptian."

"A remarkably ugly statue of a creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion. It's, I think, two hundred and fifty feet long and about as tall as a six-story building."

"And the Greek?"

"A monster with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle. Her function was to harass and obstruct Thebes's tourist trade by forcing visitors to answer a riddle. If they got it wrong, she killed them."

Somewhere I'd heard that story before—years ago, maybe when I was stationed in Athens. But I couldn't remember the point.

"What if they got it right?"

"Only one ever did. That was Oedipus. The Sphinx was so annoyed she threw herself into a chasm and died. Oedipus went sightseeing in Thebes, met the queen, and married her not realizing she was his mother. When he found out, he pleaded the abuse excuse and hired Johnnie Cochran, who got the gods to forgive him."

"If that's the way you teach, Dmitri, you owe the Marathon kid a better grade."

"No, I'm a real pedant when I lecture. Coffee?"

Unique among academics, he makes decent coffee. I had sipped most of a cup when he asked casually, "Why the Sphinx?"

"Angela had a nightmare."

He was disappointed. "Is that all?"

"It left her doing Cheyne-Stokes breathing. For a minute I thought she was going into cardiac arrest."

"Good Lord. That *is* a nightmare. She okay?"

I said yes, and thanks, and got up to go. Then stopped.

"Remind me. What was the Sphinx's riddle?"

"What walks on four legs at dawn, on two legs at noon, and on three legs at nightfall?"

"And the answer?"

"Try it yourself. You're in no danger of marrying your Mama, are you?"

While a senior moment ticked by, I stood there waiting for the memory to surface. Then it did.

"We are the answer," I told the prof. "As babies we crawl, as adults we walk upright, as old folks we hobble along with a cane."

Dmitri nodded. "A-plus for you. It's the riddle of human fate. Maybe that's why it was such bad luck for Oedipus to answer it."

Lunch that day was a grilled cheese sandwich and iced tea. I watched you chew mechanically, saying almost nothing.

"Still bothered by your, uh, episode last night?"

Your answer was typically concise. "No. Yes. I guess so. I'm feeling hungover. Been picking things up and dropping them all morning."

"How about just getting in the car and going someplace? Foo Manchu won't mind watching the house for us."

"Any place but Florida," you replied, obviously relieved. I deduced that you'd been secretly thinking of getting away. But from what?

We reviewed the options. If Disney World was out, we could go the other way to Cajunland, eat solid cholesterol in sundry delicious forms and dance it off to *fais-do-do* music. Or we could hit the Gulf Coast and get sand between our toes during the day and throw money at the casinos in the evening. Or—

"I've never been to Natchez," you said.

"It's just a bunch of mansions," I objected. "Kind of a southern Newport with water frontage on the Mississippi instead of the Atlantic Ocean. In the Old South the lords of creation used to loll there between bouts of whuppin' slaves and sellin' cotton."

"I'd like to see it anyway," you said, and your face set like poured stone, so I knew there was no use arguing.

Our comfortable old Volvo was, I think, as happy as we were when we got off the interstate after a couple of hours and turned onto a blacktop road winding through a budding woodland. In Natchez the motel room was okay, the fish restaurant likewise, and we strolled at sundown along the Father of Waters in that onetime haunt of hellraising flatboatmen called Natchez-under-the-Hill.

I was tired, and back in the motel I conked out instantly. But next morning when I woke you were smiling down at me in that certain way. So we had the pleasure of A.M. lovemaking and a shared shower, which in my opinion beats any alarm clock as a way to wake up. Then we spent the day the only way you can spend a day in Natchez: doing mansions.

Most of the houses were just plush stuffy mid-Victoriana, raised up high on bluffs above the malarial lowlands across the river where the slaves had labored to make the owners rich. But one place astonished us both—an enormous octagonal fantasy house, the upstairs never completed because the workmen building it were Yanks, and when war came in the spring of 1861 they just dropped their tools and went home.

The tools were still there, exactly where they fell—antique hammers and planes and chisels and wood rasps lying in the dust amid unopened crates filled with moldering luxuries from Europe. The soft-spoken lady showing us around explained that the owners had lost all their money in the war and never could finish the house. It gave me such a strange feeling, standing there and looking at a place where one day—just like that—time stopped.

That was when you whispered, "You see, there *was* something here we wanted to see."

You often say things like that, and I've given up making commonsense objections, such as: since we didn't know it was here, how could we have wanted to see it? Long experience has taught me that whatever may be true in other universes, this one doesn't run by common sense.

So I tucked away your baroque pearl of wisdom into a mental pocket and said, "You're right. There was."

Was it next day we visited the archeological dig at the Natchez Indian village? Once it

was a busy little principality with chiefs and priests and craftsmen and warriors and farmers and hunters. Time stopped for them, too, back in the 1740s when French soldiers arrived from New Orleans and wiped them out and erased their world.

We ate fried chicken at Popeye's and drove a way up the Natchez Trace. The woods were soft and pretty, caught in that springtime moment when the dogwoods come out and the new leaves on the oaks can't quite decide whether to be red or green. I told you stories about the bandits who used to infest the Trace, about the corpses they gutted like fish and stuffed with gravel and threw into the river. About the slave rebellions that were put down with fire and sword and noose and lash.

You were patient, listening to the garish local history, all the rage and pain that had gone quiet and turned into blossoming woods. I still remember your comment: "They lived in interesting times, the poor bastards."

Alas, my dear—so do we.

We spent one more night on the road, then headed home. We were relaxed, happy, no more exciting dreams, our ordinary lives waiting for us on Azalea Place and looking pretty good. So we were totally unprepared for the shock when I unlocked the garden gate and we saw that Foo Manchu had lost his head.

We both made astonished noises, but what exactly we said I don't remember.

I knelt down next to the head lying under the *datura* in dark emerald ground-cover—some twenty pounds of purple-veined marble with fangs displayed and bulging, furious blind eyes. I explored the stump of the neck with my fingertips, and the break was perfectly clean, as if he'd been guillotined. There was no chipping, which led me to a scary conclusion: flesh cuts like that—marble doesn't.

Something had passed through or over the locked gate and decapitated the lion-dog while he was in his mobile phase. No living thing I'd ever known could have gotten close enough or wielded the necessary power to do that.

I turned to say something to you, and got shock number two, because you weren't there. I had a moment of panic, jumped up, then spotted you entering the house.

I yelled, "Wait!" because who knew what might be inside? Obedient as ever, you ignored me. Okay, you grew up on the streets of Newark and you ain't timid.

When I found you inside, you were carrying a cleaver from the kitchen. Since my gun was locked up out of reach, I grabbed a poker and together we explored the downstairs room by room, closet by closet, cupboard by cupboard, then climbed the stairs—did the whole damn place, including the attic, and the only sign of an intruder was a few mouse droppings.

When you knew your house was safe, you remembered Foo Manchu and asked, "Do you think he's dead? I didn't think he could die."

When I said I didn't know, and you said in your bossy voice, "Well, why don't you go put him back together?"

How do you patch up a decapitated demon? Duct tape? Krazy Glue? But your words about him not being able to die made me think. Maybe he was self-healing and needed only

a helping hand.

"You stay here," I ordered, laid down the poker, and went outside. I hefted the head and set it as precisely as possible on his shoulders.

Instantly I felt the cold marble grow warm and quiver and bristle under my hands. I jumped back, ready to run, not knowing what he might do—he'd almost killed me once, and once was enough.

A dreadful stink poured off his body, his normal fiery odor combined with something I'd never have expected, the stench that a terrified dog gives off. His tail clamped down between his legs like a hasp and he slunk back into the shelter of the trees and cowered down, doing his inadequate best to look small.

I was standing there frozen, staring at our fearless guardian, when you—having obeyed in your usual fashion my order to wait—came up behind me and touched me on the arm. I must have jumped a foot straight up.

When I came down you whispered, "It's something really serious, isn't it?"

Not, of course, expecting an answer. The question *was* the answer.

When Dmitri came back from teaching his class in Homer, I was waiting at the door of his office. He greeted me with a line that I guessed was from the *Iliad*—the harsh archaic Greek sounds like the clash of bronze weapons, even if you've no idea what it means.

"Sorry," he said. "The Trojan War turns me on. Coffee?"

When we were settled, I said, "This time I want to ask *you* a riddle."

"Sure."

"First of all, forget the last three thousand years."

"Gladly."

"We're back in the Bronze Age, and any morning you may look out of your tent and see a god or a monster strolling by. Now, let's suppose one day the local seer gazes into the guts of a sacrificed bullock and says, 'Something immensely powerful is threatening you, but I can't see what it is.'"

"Uhhh...all right," he said dubiously.

"Here's a hint," I went on. "You live with a lady of, shall we say, unusual powers and rare insight, and the image her subconscious dredges up is—as I suggested the other day—a Sphinx. It has a face of unearthly calm and it's huge and casts a great shadow and it shakes the ground when it moves. And it scares hell out of her, though she doesn't scare easy."

The next line was harder to get out. "It's not just a dream. I didn't tell you this before, but...something passed by our house early that morning and I felt the earth shake. It stopped and then moved on—but later, when we were away, it came back. So what was it?"

Dmitri took off his glasses and peered at me with little naked eyes. Actually, they were normal size—it's just that I was used to seeing them enlarged. He blinked slowly, with a kind of deliberation, so I knew he was thinking hard. At last he said, "It's terrifying, yet it has a look of unearthly calm?"

Well, that's one reason I like to bounce things off Dmitri. The paradox seemed obvious once he said it, yet it hadn't occurred to me.

"So I'm told."

He sighed and knuckled his eyes. "Let's go back a lot further than the Bronze Age. It's sixty-five million years ago and the asteroid that's going to destroy the dinosaurs is heading for the Earth. You're there in a time machine watching it come, and you know what it means—a little light in the night sky that keeps getting bigger and bigger. It's silent and rather beautiful, like the bud of a white rose opening. Yet it's going to devastate the Earth and wipe out thousands of species."

"Unearthly calm," I muttered.

"Your Sphinx may be an image of nature. Nature's like that, you know. Always cool, even in a catastrophe."

He put his glasses back on and stared at me, owlishly.

That night you and I were sitting in our living room. The garden gate was locked and the front door was locked and Foo Manchu was on guard. We felt absolutely unsafe anyway.

I cleaned my nine millimeter handgun and packed the clip with a dozen fresh hollowpoints and slipped the weapon into a magazine stand, down among the *New Yorkers* and the *Southern Livings*, out of sight but ready if needed. Then I washed the oil off my hands and joined you on the couch.

We cuddled for a while. That's always nice, but especially so when the world outside is threatening. It's how we spent the night the last time a hurricane came through—remember? Cuddling, napping, getting up now and then to check the shutters. Sipping wine, playing chess by candlelight. And all the time the water was rising in the street outside, rain like surf was pounding the roof, and the wind was roaring in huge deep gusts.

Great powers were abroad then, too. But at least we knew what they were.

I whispered, "Tell me, *strega mia*"—I enjoy calling you *my witch* in your ancestral Italian—"what's your crystal ball picking up these days?"

"Nothing. In my latest dream I was sitting at the computer and all I got were error messages and spam written in some kind of signs I can't read—something like...western ranches...cattle brands..."

"*Cattle brands?*"

"Well, horseshoes. And lazy eights—you know, lying on their sides. And over and over, something that I didn't recognize at all: zeroes with a bar across the middle."

"I wish your goddamn subconscious would learn English. At least the spam I get on the computer makes a kind of loathsome sense—"

The doorbell rang. We looked at each other. It rang again.

I was thinking of an old cartoon: a Far Side lady with harlequin glasses opening the door to a hooded figure and demanding, "How do I know you're the *real* Angel of Death?"

While you were turning on the outside lights, I slipped the gun into my pocket and walked into the garden. Foo Manchu was in his usual spot under the *datura* and above him the white flowers hovered. Then Dmitri's large head and glinting glasses appeared on the other side of the iron bars.

As I unlocked, he said, "I thought I'd come see how things are going."

So we became a party of three. I broke out some decent Shiraz in a dusty bottle and three sturdy tumblers, the kind we use for serious drinking. We drank and gossiped for a while, and then he said, "I gather you've been feeling, ah, under siege?"

"Yes, and it's so infuriating," you told him. "So goddamn indefinite. We've had one piece of damage that could easily pass for vandalism, except we know it wasn't. It was an attack."

"You seem to be holding up pretty well."

"That's an illusion. We're acting brave because it's the only way we can act."

"Watch out. As Nazareth's most prominent citizen remarked, 'He who lives by chutzpah will perish by chutzpah.'"

"I'll drink to that," you said, having a witchlike taste for black humor, though you deny it. I went and fetched another bottle and returned to find you and Dmitri telling each other stories of mayhem and death.

Doesn't horror go well with wine, though? It's like a sharp cheese, like Reggiano, say. There's a perfect contrast of flavors. I popped the cork and joined in, and soon we were just like cub scouts around the old campfire.

Dmitri told about working his way through Yale's graduate school on the night shift at the New Haven morgue. One morning at two A.M. he raised his eyes from Plato's *Republic* just in time to see a newly arrived corpse sit up under its blue sheet.

"What did you do?" we chorused.

"Went back to Plato. Those post-mortem contractions never last long. After a while the dead guy settled down again on his own."

You countered with stories about life in Newark when you were growing up, saying with relish, "Oh, it was a jungle, a jungle!"

You told that story about the Italian Pride Day in the '70s whose organizer was shot dead with a *lupara*—or sawed-off shotgun—just as he was delivering a speech protesting the portrayal of Sicilians in *The Godfather*.

"So what happened?" asked Dmitri.

"We had the festival anyway. The food was delicious. I'll never forget the *gamberetti con gli spinaci*."

I countered with one of my tales of life in the CIA. How a colleague beat me out of the job as station chief in Bucharest—and very nearly got me arrested—by sliding an eyes-only document into my desk and filing an anonymous tip that I was a security risk.

"How'd you wiggle out of that one?" asked Dmitri.

"The Russians saved me. In Bulgaria the KGB kidnapped the miserable shit and he wound up in Moscow with his private parts attached to an old truck magneto. It's funny how talkative you become under those conditions. One of our moles at the KGB headquarters in Dzhherzhinsky Square slipped us the text of his interrogation, including how he got to be station chief.

"I don't generally approve of torture," I hastened to add. "But there are exceptions."

It was past two A.M. when Dmitri left for home. I walked him to his car—gun in pocket, of course, like any modern civilized American. Turned out to be completely needless.

After the recent carnival of horrors the quiet of the neighborhood was striking. There was something profoundly peaceable about the vacant walks, the glowing street lamps, the jut of darkened eaves, the dim little urban stars. Someplace a disembodied piano was playing a Chopin nocturne, and we found ourselves lowering our voices to say good night, as if we were in a concert hall.

Walking back, inhaling garlands of scent, I was thinking how many varied worlds there are on this one measly planet. Then I locked up and patted Foo Manchu and we went to bed. Aided by the wine, you and I slept deeply, profoundly, without dreams.

Next morning, sometime in the course of making love, you whispered in my ear, "I think it's over."

"Not yet," I panted.

"No, I mean the siege," you said.

Coming events *do* cast a shadow before them, of that I'm convinced. Trouble is, the shadow vanishes just before they strike. That's why, even with prophecy to aid you, you're never really prepared.

I stepped through the door that day expecting only the usual lukewarm soup that passes for an atmosphere in springtime. Instead I inhaled champagne. A surprise cool front had swept through, and the world was like October, only with flowers.

Foo Manchu was in his usual place, neither headless nor cowering. Out in the street I met something that's become rare, a real non-tourist jazz funeral. The musicians were mostly old men with cottony hair and dark leather skin; the tune was "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," heavy on the trombone. A flag identified them as the Pocahontas Brass Band. I'd put on an old straw hat before leaving the house and so was able to show respect by taking it off.

The march was so slow—it's on the return from the graveyard that the tempo of the music speeds up and the dancing starts—that for a minute the gleaming hearse came to a full stop in front of me. I found myself gazing at the curved image of a tall old guy holding a hat against his shirtfront. He raised his free hand—maybe saying hi, maybe farewell—and that startled me, because I wasn't saluting him.

I looked to left and right. There was no other tall old guy standing anywhere around.

The hearse moved on. In the distance, the band was playing some yeah-God gospel tune I didn't recognize. The mourners traipsed by, some silent, some chattering; a few carried open umbrellas, though the sun wasn't hot.

I started to walk again, mechanically, telling myself that I don't have visions, I don't have ESP, I don't do that sort of thing. I was headed someplace, maybe to Dmitri's cavern to seek advice, when on impulse I turned into Holy Name church.

Inside were cool pale stones, an empty pulpit, and a silent altar. In garish stained glass full of morning sunlight a neatly robed and coifed Jesus was healing the sick and raising the dead. When I was a kid, I believed the Gospel stories had really happened; as an angry young man I saw them as myths or worse. Maybe my maturity began when I realized that people have to put some kind of face on the Infinite, because it has none of its own.

Better the Nazarene carpenter than some others I could name, I thought, and sniffed the churchy atmosphere of old wax and burnt incense, and thought of many things long forgotten.

Then somebody depressed a key on the organ, a deep note far over to the left side of the keyboard. And held it. And held it. And held it.

I turned and climbed wooden steps carpeted in red to the choir loft. The droning note stopped. Nobody was there; the organ bench was empty. I walked to the rail and looked down into the church and—for the second time in half an hour—had a vision.

The altar had vanished, along with the brown pews and the unlit bronze lamps hanging on long chains. The stained glass had turned to something shiny and opaque, as if it was midnight outside.

Along the nave the Sphinx was lying full length, her paws stretched out and her face on my eye level. I can't say she was looking at me, because the dark, alert eyes outlined in kohl were looking through me—and through everything else, too. Like neutrinos, those particles that recognize nothing solid and stream through the Earth without noticing it's there.

Above the Sphinx the vaulted ceiling had opened its ribs like the petals of a flower to reveal an infinite depth of sequined galaxies. The great beast extended her wings lazily, like a resting eagle wanting a stretch, flapped once, and the wind burned my face like ice or fire.

I clutched the railing, my head whirled for a moment, and then I was down on my knees and hanging on.

I staggered out of the church deep in a bronze aura, with a devastating headache starting to throb. Somehow I got to Dmitri's office before passing out; he found me and called nine-one-one.

Two days later I woke up. You were sitting at my bedside in Judah Touro when that cheerful-looking young doctor in green scrubs bustled in and informed me that I'd had a stroke, and he didn't know why I was still alive.

I don't like to remember the next few months.

It's tough being helpless. Sensing parts of your own body—my right side, for instance—as mere weight to be carried or shifted. Pissing on myself and not even being aware of it until you or some other lucky devil had to clean me up.

I remember the damn machines, the CT scan, the arteriograms, the endless beeping of the heart monitor. The cheerful news that the cause of my stroke was a cerebral hemorrhage rather than thrombosis or an embolism, which was probably why I hadn't died on the spot.

I remember trying to relearn the art of speech, which I'd never even thought of as an art before. Sometimes the inside of my head was a jumble of words I couldn't articulate, and I'd lie there thinking: hospice, glacier, inoperative, smog, *krasnaya zvezda*—which is Russian for red star—and this nonsense would flow on and on, infuriating me, making the red star of helpless anger glow.

Worse were the times when I became completely clear-headed and knew exactly what had happened to me and what it meant. I began having those strange dialogues with you. Strange because I couldn't talk yet.

I'm going to die.

"No, you're not. I won't let you."

It's not up to you.

"Yes it is. I've got great power. I won't let it happen."

It'll happen anyway.

"We'll see about that."

Stop being a bitch.

"If I do, you'll die."

Back to Square One.

One day when you thought I was asleep, I saw you take a small wax figure out of your purse. Why'd we name him Sam, anyway? It's not my name, nor the name of anybody I ever knew well.

Sam was wearing—like a mask—my face, cut from a photograph. I remembered the very different kind of witch who'd made him, and after Foo Manchu killed her how you turned him into an instrument of healing.

Through the corner of my eye I watched you lay him in your lap, fold your hands under your chin and gaze at him for long tranced minutes. Soon I fell asleep and dreamed of Italian terraces and swaying poplars, and old farmhouses with red tile roofs and tawny stucco walls, and the smell of hot fields fertilized with dung and full of green stuff growing.

You did this often, and every time I woke with new connections forming in my brain.

But I still found existence pretty grim. When the doctor ordered no salt, no booze, and no sex for the rest of my life, I thought: Screw that. I've lived long enough, why can't people understand that? However good it's been, enough is enough. I yearned to see the Sphinx again.

Then, little by little, I changed my outlook. I found my strength returning, my tongue starting to form comprehensible words, my dead side beginning to itch, then to crawl as if covered with ants. A big strong black therapist hauled me out of bed and hung me on parallel rails like drying wash, and I began relearning how to totter, then to walk. The old brain was circumventing the damaged area—and doing it, I gathered, faster than anybody had expected.

The doc was delighted. He attributed my recovery to the wonders of medicine. Dmitri

said it was all *vis medicatrix naturae*, the healing power of nature. No doubt both had a point. But you and I knew it wasn't all science or nature, didn't we?

Getting home completed my journey. Here were the garden and my books and the curios I'd brought home from around the world—the accumulated junk that makes a life. Above all, here you were, holding Sam in your hands and making magic.

You have my gratitude for many things, Angela, but especially for the way you helped me cheat on the doctor's orders. A thimbleful of wine here, a dash of salt there. You reread Alex Comfort, M.D., and came up with those routines in sex that minimized stress—more stroking, less pumping—and we enjoyed long sessions of reptile ecstasy that turned whole rainy afternoons into what Tennessee Williams called "little portions of eternity, dropped in our laps."

I began to think—what with up-to-date drugs and the power of nature and witchcraft and the fact that my life was such as to make me want to live—maybe I'd had my crisis and more time lay ahead. I smiled, remembering Sean O'Casey's remark, "No man is ever too old not to believe he has another year in him."

Then came the night when the doorbell rang again.

You were in the utility room, loading the dryer or whatever, and I was in the living room reading something nicely irrelevant—a life of Boswell, I think—when the bell began to sound off. Then something roared, and though I'd never before heard a sound from his marble throat, I knew it was Foo Manchu.

Well, thinking gets short-circuited at such moments. I was halfway down the walk, gun in hand, before it occurred to me that I was still too fragile for such action. Foo Manchu was backing toward me, his mane bristling like a porcupine's quills, and suddenly that roar came again, this time rising at the end like a panther's into a kind of high ragged screech.

He backed into the banana trees and crouched. I passed him and reached the gate and something large and white was lying against the wall under the letterbox and the bell.

I had just realized it was Dmitri when something blocked the light. The glow of the street lamp outlined her shape and I shot at her, aiming up at the silhouette of her head, and the bullet just zipped through and headed for outer space.

Her wings spread and printed a black outline on the dim clouds. They beat once, and again I felt the wind of fire or ice plus an eddy of remote, sweet scent. If starlight had an odor, it would smell like *datura*.

The Sphinx moved, the earth trembled. I knew that she could come in, that she could go anywhere, that she passed through mere matter like the neutrino. I flashed on her true name, as I guess I should have from the very beginning. Then the ground shook again and she padded away, unhurried as ever.

I unlocked the gate and bent over Dmitri's plump form. Touched his throat and found it throbbing. The streetlight showed something black spreading over his right leg, but first things first. I turned his head and rested his face on his left hand and checked for obstructions to breathing.

I was wiping my spit-slick hand on my shirt when a cop car nosed up to the curb and

shone a light on me. The neighbors had heard the commotion and called them.

Well, you employ a demon, you learn to provide glib explanations. The bell had rung, I'd been cleaning the gun and thoughtlessly carried it with me. I'd seen Dmitri fall, spotted a menacing figure behind him, fired a warning shot and somebody took off with a screech of tires.

While one cop was writing this fantasy down in his notebook, his partner was calling for an ambulance. Then the partner climbed out of the growler and approached us.

"Hey," he said, "you say you seen a mugger?"

"I *thought* I did," I said carefully.

"Sumbitch musta been Bigfoot," he said.

I joined him. He was playing his flashlight on a wide indentation that had crumbled the edge of the sidewalk and left a deep, irregular mark in crushed groundcover just behind Dmitri's shoes. Of all the things I never expected to see in this life or any other, surely the footprint of the Sphinx leads the list.

You know, Angela, there's kind of a league of old men, because we're usually the ones who go first.

Your friends visit you in the hospital, and when it's their turn you visit them. You get used to seeing one another in PJ's or those dumb hospital nightgowns, with little plastic bracelets on your wrists.

This time it was Dmitri's turn to be visited. In the ambulance the EMTs had found a long jagged wound in his leg, almost severing the Achilles tendon. I found him resting in bed at Touro, his injury muffled in styrofoam or something similar.

"Congratulations," I told him, after shaking hands.

"For what?"

"Having the same problem as Achilles...Did you see her?"

"Yes. Actually, that was why I was coming over. I had an idea, and you'd made such wonderful progress I figured I'd lay my deep thoughts on you. I never expected to find her waiting at your gate. Not waiting for me, you know. Just...waiting."

"She can come in whenever she wants."

"I know. But she's not impatient. Nature's never impatient. Things happen in their own sweet time."

"I'm the one who's getting impatient. If she wants me, she ought to come take me."

"She doesn't want you."

"*What?*"

"May I lecture?" he asked, and went on without waiting for me to say yes. "See, I was wondering if Angela's, uh, powers—you've never told me exactly what they are, but you've

dropped a few hints—might have attracted some unwelcome attention."

"From what?"

"Ah, that's the question. The ancients had so many stories about the envy of the gods. Some human gets uppity—wins too much power, attains too much wisdom, grabs at eternal life, whatever—and the gods take the most savage vengeance. Think of poor old Prometheus. Because he gave humanity the gift of fire, Zeus chained him to a rock and sent an eagle to devour his liver."

I winced. That did sound grim.

"Not that I believe the old gods really exist," Dmitri added hastily. "*Something* in the cosmos sets us limits and we go beyond them at our peril. You can call it Zeus, Yahweh, Tao, or Satan, but there it is. That's why I think the Sphinx really wants Angela. Angela's the one who's trying to defeat time. And that's not allowed. Don't ask me what doesn't allow it, because I don't know. But it's not allowed."

I was thinking of a lot of things—the cancer I ought to have had, but didn't. The way my internal clock seemed to go into reverse. The sense I had of growing younger, when everything else grew older. The stroke that ought to have disabled or killed me, but didn't. The very fact that I was here in the world at all, walking and talking and making love and firing bullets at the Sphinx.

No, I wasn't all that important, just evidence. Just Exhibit A, the cloned sheep proving what the magician herself had been up to. Suddenly I resurrected a half-forgotten memory.

"Dmitri, tell me what these signs mean: a horseshoe; a figure eight lying on its side; a zero with a bar across it."

"Well, the horseshoe could be the Greek omega—you know, the last letter of the alphabet. The eight lying on its side is the mathematical sign of infinity. And the barred zero, well—"

"Come on, Dmitri. Spit it out."

"It sounds like the Greek theta. In classical times theta was used a lot in casting spells, because it's the initial letter of the word *thanatos*."

"Which means?"

He just looked at me. His coke-bottom glasses were steaming up.

"It means death," I said, and I only needed to look at him to see I'd earned myself another A-plus.

So, Angela, here I sit by your bedside, scribbling away. Sorry about the Mickey Finn I put in your last glass of wine. Hope it doesn't give you a headache in the morning.

The only thing I can do for you is to remove the evidence of your transgression, namely me. You may be the offender, but I'm the offense—so maybe if I go, that'll be enough. I was meant to go long ago, so weep no more, my lady.

Only after this, please recognize the limits of your power. Otherwise dark forces will be

set in motion, and they'll win every time. Trust me.

The Sphinx is waiting outside the gate. If I don't go out, she'll come in, and then I don't know what she may destroy. You, to begin with. Foo Manchu would fight, but he wouldn't win. Not even magic can prevail against time, and Time is the Sphinx's real name, isn't it?

I leave you our house and its guardian demon and the memory of our years together. *Ave atque vale*—hail and farewell, my last and best love. Tell Dmitri I went out to meet the Sphinx with an old, old language on my tongue.

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