

Heavy Lifting

by Suzy McKee Charnas

I'd be lying awake watching some late-night game on my bedroom TV and I'd hear Mom pacing. She paced when she thought she was going to see Richie, and she hoped she'd see him every night. After six years, she still said she saw Richie a couple of times a month.

So I'd get up and go sit with her for an hour or so (or the whole night, if it was a bad one) while she drank cup after cup of Lapsang souchong, strong and smoky, to help her stay awake so she wouldn't miss him. I said I'd seen Richie too, but only so that she'd let me keep on living at home. Dad was long gone, so she was holed up alone in that big house. Sometimes I thought that my being around helped keep her from seeing the ghost even more often. She probably thought the opposite, which was why she let me stay.

It wasn't easy, living there. Mom talked about Richie, all Richie, all the time. What could I say? "Let's not talk about him anymore. I know the story as well as you do"?

Mostly I said, "It's okay, Mom; I can't sleep either."

She was a wreck. Dad was also a wreck, out in California. At least he'd stopped nagging yours truly, Preston Marshall Bridge Jr., about following his CEO-sized footsteps (Harvard, and then Harvard Business School, and then a lifetime of dazzling financial wizardry to make the old man proud).

Just the idea of a board room turned my brain off. I've always been at my best when my muscles did the thinking. This doesn't mean I'm stupid. Miss Rooney explained this to me in ninth grade. But she didn't convince Dad, and I wasn't smart *enough* to explain it to him without setting off a fire in the living room every time I tried. Now he spent his time traveling with his girlfriend (No-Nose Diana, Valley Princess of Cosmetic Surgery), and I hardly ever heard from him.

Fine with me. Sufficient unto the day is the shitstorm thereof, as Coach Waters used to say.

Meanwhile Mom jumped from one grief-counseling group to another, fought public-policy battles over child safety, and, between skirmishes, worked on a manuscript about—what else?—Richie. We lived off investment income from the divorce settlement, so her time was her own. She gave it all to Richie.

As for me, she was still trying to persuade me that I shouldn't feel any guilt over what had happened. The guilt was all hers, hers and Dad's, as "the responsible adults."

Wasted breath, but no point of saying so.

Besides, she'd have personally rammed a kitchen knife right through my heart if she'd thought for one minute that I really *didn't* feel guilty.

That Tuesday she'd gone to Albany to see a cousin of hers who was also her lawyer. Mom would never stay away for more than an afternoon. She was terrified that Richie's ghost might drop by and then take

off for good, insulted that she wasn't waiting up as usual. But there was a lawsuit that she needed to strategize about in person, so she'd planned a rare overnighiter out of town—a welcome break for me.

After my last class I drove home and got some beer from my stash out in the garage (where Mom never went because Richie had never gone there). The house felt comfortably empty. I settled down in the living room and laid out my comic book collection beside me on the couch. I'd been clearing my comics out of the basement to make room for Mom's lawsuit files.

What was I supposed to do with these *Sandman* comics in their protective plastic bags? Selling them seemed like too much work. I'd been burned offloading sports equipment over the internet. But I never looked at my collection anymore, and I knew that somebody ought to be enjoying it.

I was too old for comics, in my sophomore year at college.

Yep, sophomore year, and still living at home.

I could have gone away to school; I *wanted* to. But I couldn't just duck out. I enrolled in a small local college so I could commute to class. I spent my spare time lying around at home, eating leftover pizza and channel surfing. I was getting flabby the way you do when you don't have the energy to do the sports you used to be fanatical about.

Coming to no decision about my collection (what a surprise), I finished the second beer and stacked the comics on the floor. The wall screen showed a classic World Cup game from the nineties. I turned off the sound and slept.

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I'm awake in the dark. My first thought is, *Good, Mom's not home to hear whatever I heard just now*. She'd think it was Richie and go rushing out into the night, with me and the housekeeper, Josie, scrambling after her to make sure she didn't hurt herself in the dark—but of course Josie was long gone, with the rest of the house staff.

I can't remember the sound that woke me. It's dead quiet now. I stand up, and the living room melts away, darkness and all. I must still be sleeping; *Oh shit, that means dreams*.

My dreams are not good. This one starts out kind of sweet, though.

I'm standing in an unfurnished room watching my Aunt Phil, who's perched on a ladder painting the ceiling white with slow, even strokes of a roller (*thank God I went to sleep with some clothes on*). She's wearing beige shorts and a green polo shirt. Her legs are long and tan. You could drink those legs like two tall glasses of iced coffee and never be thirsty again.

Hey, this might not be such a bad dream after all.

"Hello, Preston," she says, glancing down at me. "What's going on with you, Hon? I hate to say it, but you look a bit seedy."

I wince. I didn't bother shaving this morning, and I could barely button my chinos—too much pizza, too

many beers. My face feels hot.

A blob of paint drops onto one of the forward legs of the ladder, a folding aluminum job, very unsafe. What's she doing up there? She never did this kind of thing when Uncle Walt was around. She lays another slurpy stripe of paint across the ceiling. Her voice is the same, husky from "smoking like a stevedore," which is what my mom used to say. Lung cancer killed Aunt Phil.

"Have any trouble finding your way here?" my dead aunt says, studying the ceiling with a critical frown.

I try to recall whether I had trouble or not. Nothing seems real enough for my thoughts to get any traction, except for Aunt Phil painting the ceiling. The yellow walls have dark, varnished baseboards and white picture moldings above—her style: *definite*. Coral-colored polish on her toenails glows bright and soft against the gray aluminum step under her bare foot. It's the selective seeing of dreams.

With it comes a throbbing hard-on, which I hope she won't notice. As if.

"No trouble," I say, casually clasping my hands in front of me. "So, where *is* here?"

"My place," she says, "though the traffic can be fierce. Sometimes ghosts flicker through here like morning commuters after their train."

I laugh; it just barks out of me. "C'mon, Aunt Phil; you're dead. *You're* the ghost."

She twists her wrist to keep another blob of paint from falling off the roller. "We're in my reality, not yours. In my reality I'm fine and dandy, thanks. Maybe the ghost here is you."

The paint drips anyway. "Damn," she says mildly. She sets the roller down in the tray and unties a rag from one of the ladder struts. "You're not trying to haunt me, are you, Preston? A college boy should have better things to do. I think you're asleep and just visiting in spirit. The alternative is that I've made you up, for company. What do you think?"

My aunt was always interested in strange things, flying off to a seminar on "Native American Spirituality" or a class in Tuvan throat-singing. She wrote articles about elections and wars and riots, but in her downtime she'd be off talking to witches and dowzers, saints and psychic surgeons, in bush villages and shantytowns. She used to say she learned more in those places than she ever had at the university or even in the newsroom.

Who knows what she can do here, in a dream place that she says is hers—where would that be? Do they paint ceilings in Heaven? If they did, would the paint drip?

Am I dead, like her? No, not like her—she knows all about where we are, but I don't. I must be asleep, like she says, clothes in a twist, eyelids twitching, dick jumping all on its own.

Aunt Phil turns around on the ladder so she's facing me. She grins a little wolfishly, teeth glinting. I always knew she was dangerous; that was part of the pull.

"I was attracted to you too, Preston," she says, "so don't worry about where to put your hands, all right? But I don't like the spare tire you're carrying where you used to have six-pack abs. I don't like to see you let yourself go like this. You know you were always special to me."

Her comment makes me feel surly and sorry for myself. My hard-on melts away.

"Sure, special," I mutter. "The guy who came home late one afternoon and found his little brother dead in the family swimming pool. I wouldn't mind being less *special*, if that was a choice."

I should be past whining by now, but I'm rattled.

"That's not the kind of specialness that I meant," she says, "but I can see how you might feel a little put-upon. Is that why you've quit everything? No more judo, no more swimming competitions? No more friends? What about the comic book you were working on with Andy Bratton, what was it, *Genetic Gypsy and the Robot Gods*? I thought it had promise. Andy's a talented artist."

"He's crewing for Skeet McCardle in Bermuda. They asked me to go, but I've got classes."

And I've got Mom; and Richie.

She studies me in silence. A lapse in a conversation never bothered her. Even dead, Aunt Phil is cool. I want to be cool. Maybe I'd have learned how by now, if not for Richie dying.

"Preston," my aunt says, "do you remember those dreams you used to have?" She laughs. "Not *those* dreams." It's sympathetic laughter. "The dreams about your Robot Gods' Mount Olympus. They were the basis of the first comic you ever tried to draw, remember? Your mom showed it to me. She was so proud of you."

What? If she mentions Mom, this is not just chat, it's a serious conversation. Suddenly it hits me: *Oh shit, she wants something from me; that's why I'm here.*

Then she does one of those gear shifts that used to leave me scrambling: "What did you call that mechanical dog you used to have?"

"Huh? Oh. Chockablock." The name comes with a picture of a shiny, beagle-sized robot, stretched low in a play-crouch on the front lawn. That was all the dog I could have, because of Richie's allergies.

"From Shanghai," she says. "I brought it home for you."

Now she's walking next to me, dressed in the same shirt and shorts but with narrow-strapped sandals on her feet. She wore sandals to show off her high arches, at least when she wasn't on some roughneck assignment with her camera crew, all dusty boots and khaki shorts with lots of pockets.

Her sandals go pat pat on the marble floor.

My bare feet make no sound at all; big feet, a little pigeon-toed. I taught myself to walk that way when I was a kid, pretending to be an Indian brave padding through the forest. Now I walk as quietly as I meant to then, in my aunt's ghost world. The room we walk through is long and narrow, like a museum gallery. Instead of paintings it has different-sized windows running along both sides at staggered levels, like something from a German Expressionist movie.

"Why ask about an old toy?" I stick my hands in my pockets and amble. I can't manage cool, but I can do casual, to underline the distance between college-guy me and the child who loved Chocky. "That was a long time ago."

"Yes," she says, "but we're going to need him for what we have to do."

My mouth feels so dry. "Aunt Phil, am I dead too?"

"Nope," she says. "Good thing too. You wouldn't be any use here if you were." She pauses, patting at her pockets for smokes. Mom always said Aunt Phil picked up the tobacco habit from living so much in places where everybody smokes to make their shitty lives bearable.

Aunt Phil lights up. "You don't smoke, do you, Preston? Then you'll just have to learn."

I stop walking: *what?* Smoking *killed* her, for Chrissake!

She waves coiling smoke away from her narrowed eyes. "Let's get a move on."

It's like when my parents started taking Richie and me to Europe in the summer. He was too young to care and I was too much of a wiseass to contribute any positive opinions as they dragged us from one palace, park, museum, or cold stone church to another. Richie and I trailed along, picking on each other and hoping the grown-ups would fade before we did.

"Where are we going?" I ask Aunt Phil.

"Someplace we need to be," she says, smoke leaking out between her lips. "Trust me, Preston."

Do I trust her? Not completely, but what choice do I have?

Suddenly a change of scene clicks into focus around us: tile floor, blue-white walls, and bright slits of windows.

"Greece," Aunt Phil says. Her hair is darker, spilling down her shoulders in coils that echo the curls of smoke from the corners of her mouth. "Didn't your parents take you to Athens?"

Jesus, can she read my mind now, about those European tours?

"Are you kidding?" I say. "I got heat stroke at the Parthenon. I'm never going back there, not even in the dead of winter."

She chuckles. "Barbarian."

I look down at my feet, stepping out in front of me. Square, dumb, freckly feet; barbarian feet next to her slim, aristocratic ones. Am I turning into a foot fetishist?

"Here we are," she says.

We're standing in afternoon light on the wooden dock at the lake house, as it was before the Schellenbergers pissed off my parents by building right across the water. I didn't mind. They had two daughters, twins, who came up every summer. I only get to one dizzying memory spike of how sexy those girls were, because—

In the water alongside the creaky old dock, I see my little brother Richie. *Under* the water. *Under* it.

He's squatting on the floor of the lake (I remember the sinking, slimy feel of that fine silt between my toes). Wearing shorts and rubber flip-flops, he's trying to grab a fish that's hanging around him. It darts

away and back again, teasing.

Richie looks up and laughs, from two feet down under the sun-dappled surface. Bubbles come up, which is impossible. He can't be breathing water. Maybe he's playing that he's a fish, too, blowing bubbles but not breathing air. He looks great for a boy who's been dead for years.

"Oh shit," I gasp. "I don't want to see Richie!"

"Maybe not," says Aunt Phil, waving at my brother, who waves energetically back at her (he doesn't seem to notice me). "But he needs to see *you*, Preston. How long is it now?"

"Years." Six. And four months and ten days.

I've tried lucid dreaming, hoping to get rid of my nightmares. But this isn't *that* kind of dream either. I can't shape it the way I want. If I could, I sure wouldn't be seeing Richie. Maybe I've been roped into *Richie's* dream? No, there'd be dogs and birds and bears and all the animals he loved, not just one pet fish (that's perfect, though—you can't be allergic to a fish).

And anyway, can dead people dream?

"He's been there too long," my aunt says, pointing with her cigarette held between two fingers. "Much too long for somebody who only lived seven years of his life."

The light bulb goes on above my head: *She wants me to jump in and get him out!* This idea makes my skin crawl. He looks fine, but if I actually touch him he might be cold and rubbery, the way he was that day (he was also unbelievably heavy for someone so small).

But he drowned in the pool behind our house, not in the lake.

I flash on a movie where Captain Nemo's submarine submerges in a Venetian canal and surfaces later in a frozen Mongolian lake, as if all the bodies of water in the world were connected under Earth's tectonic plates.

Our pool has a tiled cement floor. No way out but up, alive and laughing. Or else dead and dripping, like a sack of wet cement.

"Maybe he's happy down there." I edge back, away from the water.

"Of course he's happy!" my aunt snaps. "He's completely mired in happiness and making no progress at all!"

"What kind of progress is he supposed to make? He's *dead*." I let out another bark of nervous laughter; very suave, Preston.

"Everything doesn't come to a halt just because you die, you know," Aunt Phil says. I can't argue, under the circumstances.

Now two deck chairs face each other on the dock. I'm sitting in one of them. Aunt Phil lounges in the other, long legs crossed at the knee, head tilted back against the faded green canvas. She glows with that bone-deep cool of hers.

"Preston," she says, "your little brother really does need to move on. This, what you see"—her cigarette stabs at the lake, the boathouse, the trees and the darkening sky—"it's an abstract plane of existence sculpted and colored by memory. You get that, right? It's like your parents' real house at the real lake—a resort, a vacation retreat, not a livable home. Nobody should hang around here forever."

I say, "You're here, and you've been dead for over a year now."

She tips her head back and lets smoke plume out of her nostrils, like some slinky movie villain. "I've been waiting for you, Hon. I want to help with this. It's complicated, and you haven't had any preparation to speak of. So here I am, although I'm overdue to move on myself. Not that I mind." She smiles. "When you've gone around as often as I have, hanging out on the astral is like wearing your favorite bathrobe; you do not want to get dressed, put on your goddamned makeup, go downstairs, and *mingle* again.

"But mingling is the only way to get through the game. Richie's stalled because he doesn't know that. He doesn't remember that he's got work to do next time around, so he's dawdling and dreaming here instead. He needs a boost."

"Then somebody who knows what you're talking about should boost him," I mutter.

I hate having to talk about Richie. I don't have many good thoughts about him anymore. For a while I hated my parents for not keeping him safe, the way parents are supposed to. Then I hated Richie. He brought death into our family, and nothing could get it back out again.

And I miss him. I got cheated out of being a big brother. That didn't mean much at first, but the older I get the more I feel it. My brother was a whiny nuisance a lot of the time, but he was also the only one besides me who knew things like what eating humidity-soggy cornflakes at the lake on a hot summer morning was like. I have so many mental snapshots of us growing up together. Then only one of us went on growing.

Now Aunt Phil and I are sitting with our feet dangling over the water. "Chockablock," she says.

And Chocky's there, dull silver with a brass ruff and a pink enameled tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth. He sits on the dock with one hind leg stuck out to the side (a vacuum cleaner tried to swallow him one time). He barks his cheery bark (it comes out of his nose—he was an early model). He jumps up and gimps around in a little circle, chasing his tail. Then he flops down again, the bent leg scratching madly at the air.

Unlike Richie, there was nothing special about Chocky's exit. His energy-pack decayed from long neglect and wouldn't charge up again.

I'm kneeling, holding Chock's squarish, clunky body up in my two hands, and I'm singing to the sun as it sinks behind our roof: "O Sun, take Chockablock with you. He lived because you gave him power. Now he's giving the power back. He was a good dog; he made me laugh."

It sounds like a lame-ass, white-boy version of a tribal medicine man's funeral prayer, which it was: embarrassing as hell now.

I'm up in the big maple tree at home, my back braced against the trunk as I wedge Chock into a narrow crotch. I'd wrapped him in a moth-eaten scarf from the "donation" shelf in Mom's closet. Richie, standing on the lake bottom, watches just like the day I climbed down from the big old maple tree that day and saw him on the back porch, staring at me.

"Is Chockablock going to fly?" he asked me then.

"He went up there to be invisible, Richie. Only you and I can see him, but if you tell anybody you won't be able to see him anymore."

I felt like a dork, caught by this little kid in butt-flap pajamas with feet, for God's sake, while I was doing something so childish and dangerous. I think I'd had in mind the funeral platforms of the Plains tribes—faded rags fluttering dramatically against the Big Sky. I told Richie that if he kept quiet about it no matter who asked, then one day Chock would transform into a winged dog and fly off to join his own robot family.

Richie was a little kid; he forgot. I never saw him even look up into the old maple after that. By the time a winter storm tore through, flinging a tangle of rotted fabric, metal parts, and broken branches down onto the cellar door, Richie was gone. I took the wreckage to the lake house that summer in my old school backpack. Early on the first morning, I rowed out and dropped it in the deepest part of the water.

But now here's Chockablock on the dock, wagging his tail, a ghost dog at a ghost lake. I should have just put him on the "donations" shelf, to be taken to Goodwill.

Should have, would have; if I'd come home when I was supposed to instead of going to a fancy martial arts demonstration with my friends, Richie wouldn't have been alone by the pool. If I'd known what to say to help Mom stop freaking and belting down the vodka, Dad might have stayed. If I'd done this, if I'd done that ... The therapists all said it wasn't my fault. That made sense in the real world. In my head, the "should haves" tramped around in circles for fucking ever.

I blink and shake my head, clicking back into the present: sitting on the dock with Aunt Phil. "So what's my old toy here for?"

"It can help us, because Richie loved it."

I wince. I put Chocky up that tree to keep him out of Richie's sticky hands, even though I hadn't touched the dog myself in years; just a big-brother power play. "It's just an old piece of junk," I mumble.

She says, "Preston, don't you trust me?"

"Well, it's not as if I can be sure of your intentions, exactly," I say. "You are dead, after all."

Aunt Phil laughs. "Good point," she says.

"Why can't *you* get Richie out of the lake? You said we're in your reality. It sure isn't mine."

"This particular bit of it is Richie's, and you're his brother." Aunt Phil knocks ash into the water, tapping her cigarette firmly, one, two, three.

Instantly I'm on the lake bottom with my arms around Richie. The water is warm, but Richie's skin is warmer. He arches back, laughing, his hands on my shoulders.

I can't lift him. He might as well be a marble statue.

"Richie, come *on*," I pant, shifting my grip lower to get more leverage.

"You can't make me, you can't make me!" he sings.

I tug and strain, but I can't budge him. At least under water nobody can see you sweat.

I'm thoroughly frustrated and humiliated by the time Aunt Phil reaches down and somehow just *twitches* me free of Richie. She yanks me back up onto the dock as lightly as if I were one of the sticks Chocky fetched. I stand there weaving a little on my feet, blinking at the imprint of her fingers on my biceps. *Holy shit.*

"Well," she says, "Bruno was right. We're going to have to do this the hard way."

"Bruno? Who's Bruno?"

"An associate of mine," says Aunt Phil, pointing with a tilt of her chin.

Out on the end of the dock a man is feeding branches into a small fire; that must be where all the sticks have gone. He's a little bowlegged and very solid-looking, like a wrestler. He ignores me, bending over some tools that he's laid out on the dock.

"What kind of 'associate'?" I'm jittery now.

"He's my smith," she says. "We'll do our introductions later. I wish you'd stayed with your swimming." She looks me up and down. "Not to worry, we'll fit you out so you'll be strong enough to fetch Richie up out of the water."

Suddenly I'm thinking of Mom, and bringing Richie back: "Will he be alive again? Will he still be just seven?"

"He'll be seven," says Aunt Phil, "but he won't be alive."

"Then what's the point?" I yelp. "What am I even doing in a place for ghosts!"

She reaches out to smooth the hair off my forehead. I almost jerk away, though what I really want to do is to grab her in a bear hug and hang on for dear life. I can't seem to get my chest to relax and let in a good lungful of air.

Aunt Phil sighs. "You could come here because Death breathed its breath into you. Once that happens, you don't breathe it back out again. It's in you for good."

"What?" Now I do step back. "What kind of a thing is that to say?"

"When you tried to give Richie mouth-to-mouth," she goes on, "you breathed in some of his death."

"Don't be ridiculous." My heart pounds. "So everybody who gives mouth-to-mouth has a ticket to this place? Funny, I don't see a bunch of lifeguards loafing around." I bleat one of those stupid laughs. "Too bad, we could use one."

"You knew he was dead, you were sure you were to blame, and you wanted to go with him. It was perfectly natural."

"You don't know that!"

"I do," she says gently. "Look at your wrists."

I feel heat spread like a stain on my face as I turn my hands to hide the scars. There are treatments for scar tissue. I wouldn't take them when they were offered. Now I wish I had.

"And I see proof in the way you've been living your life. I see proof in your being here with Richie now."

"I think there's a tautology in there somewhere." I smile weakly, feeling slightly nauseous. All my secrets are an open book. Next thing you know she'll tell me how many times I've jerked off in the last six months.

My aunt studies the glowing end of her cigarette. "Listen, Preston: in bringing Richie out of his lake and sending him on, you'll be doing him a favor too big to measure. You'll be acting as his psychopomp. It's a great service that people used to—"

"What?" I hoot. "A psycho *what*? Sounds like 'arrogant nutcase' to me. Thanks for the compliment."

"It means, one who conducts—leads—the dead. A guide. A helper."

A sudden, hard shiver whips up from the backs of my legs and makes my teeth clack together.

"Ow," I gasp. "I thought one advantage of being dead was not needing any more help. Don't you get your orientation session as soon as you come in the door? I've never heard of guides for the dead."

Aunt Phil takes me by both shoulders and gives me a sharp little shake. "Yes, you have. You've never heard of Charon, or Hermes, or Thoth?"

"Hermes was a god, wasn't he?"

"Come on, Preston, use that fancy prep-school education of yours!" She stares at me, sober as a judge, and I do mean a judge. "Look: Richie needs your help. You owe him."

"Finally, a plain old guilt trip, straight-up." I'm thinking about that "death-breath" (which is something I keep wincingly trying to taste in my mouth. I can't taste anything, thank God). My brain veers into satire, showing me "The Monkey's Paw" via *The Vault of Horror*. I see Mom's face turned eagerly toward the front hall while outside in the dark a very short, shambling zombie knocks with sharp white knuckles.

"Preston?" Aunt Phil says, and I fold, but not gracefully.

"All right, I'll do it; but I already tried once. He doesn't *want* to come out. He's made himself weigh a ton down there."

"Let me worry about that," says my aunt.

"Fine, whatever you say." I glare at her. "So how do we start?"

"With a smoke-cleanse. You'll have to learn to do this for yourself eventually, but for now—" She turns and starts walking around me in a little circle, humming and blowing smoke *at me*.

I jump back, coughing. "Hey, don't do that! I'm allergic!"

"You'll learn to handle it." She waves smoke at me. "You think Batman would let a little rose fever keep him from fighting crime in the park?" She flashes me a grin that melts me, and then she leans in and kisses my cheek. Her perfume is sweet under the tobacco stink.

"Relax, Preston," she murmurs. "You're *in*."

Like a bombshell, I understand, and it's a hell of a thrill. She's bringing me into The Club, Aunt Phil's club, the only club that matters.

It's the secret society of adventurers, the people who've earned the right to live outside the rules because they've done great, dangerous, necessary things—flying in the vaccine that saved the isolated tribe, going undercover to rescue a hostage from the Triads, or (in Aunt Phil's case) raising the kind of hell that prevents a massacre in a refugee camp. Who wouldn't take that kind of life over joining some stupid fraternity of horny bullies and ending up in a bunch of Country Club silverbacks talking up their golf games and making lousy jokes about Arabs over their scotch-and-sodas?

Now, *that's* death.

Aunt Phil's people are the ones whose deeds have marked them forever, so you just look at them and you know they are cool in the only ways that matter: they have guts, and they're effective. Like Aunt Phil.

I catch my breath. "How's being smoked like a ham going to help?"

"Don't fight. Breathe it in, Preston."

I'm starting to get a buzz; what kind of smoke is this, anyway? Never mind, doesn't matter. I love Aunt Phil for keeping on at me until I accepted my invitation into The Club, as if I was worth waiting for. I close my eyes and suck the smoke down in as deep as I can, hoping I won't suffocate.

"Good," Aunt Phil says in my ear. She claps me on the back, hard; so hard that I have to take a step to keep my balance, and—

I'm standing close to the fire (I feel the heat on my shins). I had forgotten all about Bruno.

He stands sideways to me, using a pair of iron tongs to draw a dull red ribbon of metal from the fire. Goggles, buckled on with a frayed leather strap, hide his eyes. His gray hair sticks to his cheeks and forehead in flat, sweaty curls. He's shorter than I am, but he has shoulders like a buffalo. I catch a tang of sweat off him, sharp as seaweed on a sun-cooked rock.

Reaching past me, he hands the tongs to Aunt Phil, who now wears stained leather gauntlets with cuffs to the elbows. She takes over teasing the metal strip from the flames and feeding it slowly onto a tall, flat-topped rock set beside the fire.

Bruno stoops and takes a hammer in each hand. He swings hard and beats down, clang, clang, with fast, alternating blows. The blackened hammerheads flatten and widen the metal ribbon, driving it across the stone bit by bit. Bruno kicks the beaten length aside with one boot heel, building a slithering coil alongside the stone anvil.

"Somebody will hear," I yell to Aunt Phil over the racket. *Somebody will come and save me?* The sympathy in her eyes scares me, and I remember that she said something before about "the hard way."

Bruno glances at me with a cold glint that I do not like at all. "Smith" must come from "smite"—*smiting* is exactly what he's doing with those hammers. He's wearing a long leather vest. The sleeves are torn out of the shirt underneath, so flying sparks have nothing to ignite on his arms. He hits like a pile driver, and the ringing sound rolls across the water in one continuous, pulsing vibration. This guy could smite me to powder if he wanted to.

Aunt Phil, still working the tongs, looks over at me. "Strip," she yells.

If there isn't a pact between Aunt Phil and me at this point, I'm a goner. I pull off my clothes and drop them in a heap on the dock.

"In olden days," she says, leaning the tongs against the stone anvil and stepping nearer to me, "we'd have had to tear off your flesh, every bloody scrap, and disjoin your limbs before we could rebuild you."

"Whoa! *What?*" Only no sound comes out of my mouth. I can't move; something is holding me in place. I stand there naked as a fence post, frozen in the firelight.

The flattened ribbon of silvery metal—which Bruno is forging out of the remains of Chockablock, I realize—slides over and coils smoothly around me, climbing, like a boa constrictor. It's already up to my ribs, warm and soothing, and I feel it slither up my back and shoulders, over my scalp, and down my forehead like the visor of a helmet.

"We used to use iron," Aunt Phil goes on. "Modern alloys are much stronger and more flexible. Think of it as armor, Preston."

She moves in close, cigarette clenched between her teeth, and pushes warm clods of metal, as soft as clay, onto my body, even in places she shouldn't be touching; this is my mom's sister, here.

"A diving suit—very old-fashioned," I quip idiotically, cringing. I'm happy and excited, but confused; this can't be some weird form of child abuse, because I'm no child. Anyway it's just my Aunt Phil, and I've already decided to trust her, haven't I? And I do, don't I? Yes, no; yes. No ...

Too late now. I'm encased in a metallic wet suit, like some superhero costume, that Bruno and Aunt Phil have hammered out of Chocky's remains. Bruno puts his hammers down with a double *thunk* on the planking and swipes at his forehead with the back of his sooty wrist. I can see his eyes shine, squinted against the sting of sweat. The silence rings.

I'm starting to sweat too. The metal encasing me isn't cooling. It's heating up.

"Now," Aunt Phil says, "I'm afraid it's going to hurt."

"Wait!" I squawk, as the warm metal presses my eyelids shut.

"No waiting, Hon," my aunt says. "Better to just get it over with." Her regretful tone panics me—but I can't move.

My fresh coughing fit—there's more smoke now, lots of it—is deafening inside the helmet that encloses my head and the upper half of my face. Some kind of song starts: it's the high, smoke-rough voice of

Aunt Phil, and Bruno's grating bass, singing to a rhythm of explosive handclaps. I can't make out the words, if there are any.

Meanwhile the body-cast is tightening, and it's *hot*. As soon as I admit to myself that I'm not imagining this, it gets worse.

I squirm, yelling in protest. Scorching metal burns the skin and meat and nerves of my arms and legs, my stomach and my chest and my back—burning everything, with searing heat that I can't get away from because I'm trapped inside of it. My mind hurtles frantically around inside my skull: if I can somehow throw myself into the water, that will cool the metal—but I'll sink. I'll drown. Like Richie.

Is that what this really is—some kind of karmic payback?

Over my own howling I hear Aunt Phil: "This is the fast way, believe it or not. I'm sorry, Hon; you're not prepared, but you really are needed. We have to do everything in one heavy-duty make-up session. It'll be hard on you, though. I'm sorry."

"Help!" I bawl. "Help me, I'm burning, it hurts! Help, please!"

"We're taking your old, weak body so we can give you a new, more powerful one. You have to be strong enough to lift Richie."

"I don't want to lift Richie!" I screech. "I've changed my mind! Get me out of here!"

"You don't mean that, Preston," Aunt Phil says, close to my ear. "It's what you came here to do, and what you agreed to do, and what it's needed that you do."

I can't struggle anymore—there's no muscle and nerve left to struggle with—so it all goes into my voice, blaring in my own ears: *Make it stop!* But my throat is seared silent, so my desperation floods out of me as raw feeling; which I know my two torturers understand perfectly and accept as a necessary part of their process, goddamn them both to hell, because nothing stops. Red-hot rods sink into my bones, sizzling out the marrow and taking its place. Impact shakes me from head to foot as molten slabs are slammed all over me by hands I can't see, packing my roasted bones with dense, scorching weight.

I must be in hell. I've died somehow on the living room couch, and I'm in hell. *God, I'm sorry for everything, I'm sorry, I'll do anything you want, just please please forgive me and get me out of here—*

I'm shoved, hard. I topple, and icy water closes over my head.

I saw a show once on how fine steel swords are finished, by oiling the fresh-forged blade and plunging it into cold water. So I know what's happening: they are *tempering* me. I'm whirling downward, mute, blind, and breathless, in a sea of scalding steam.

Then they grab me by the armpits and haul me back out of the lake. The two of them talk low and short to each other, like any team doing a demanding job, as they lay me out on my back on the dock. The heat's gone. Lake water trickles merrily off me. I open my heavy-lidded eyes with an effort.

The sky overhead is dark and empty. Big-shouldered Bruno, kneeling next to me, pries open the fingers of my right fist one by one. His breath hisses between his bared teeth (*good, work for it, you bastard*). Aunt Phil stands behind him, wringing water out of her skirt.

"What?" I moan. "What did you do to me?"

"Made something useful of you," grunts Bruno.

"Leave me alone, you crazy son of a bitch!" My breath heaves in and out with a tearing sound.

Aunt Phil bends over me. "It's all done, Preston."

Bruno says, "Up you come now."

He grips both my hands and heaves me up onto my feet. I stand, solid and steady as a statue, blinking my steely eyelids against moonlight gleaming off the lake's calm surface.

I'm truly cooled at last; cold as a Samurai sword, oh yes.

Aunt Phil says, "Richie's waiting." The cigarette between her fingers goes oddly with the leather shirt she's wearing, which reaches almost down to her knees and has little metal tags sewn all over it, like something a tribal witch doctor might wear. *We've got some kind of deadline*, she means. *Better get going*.

Why should I trust her? Look what she's done so far with my trust!

But, what exactly? It's all different now.

I remember agony, crushing pressure, and terror that should have killed me. But remembering isn't the same as being in the middle of it.

In fact, I feel *wonderful*. I wear hand-forged armor on the inside of my body—I can feel it tingling in my quads, buzzing down my arms, fizzing and sparking in my forehead and cheekbones. Nothing can take it away: my protection, my strength, sealed into me, and which I've goddamn-well earned.

Superman, the Man of Steel!

But I'm still *Preston*, the jerk who was busy watching guys pretend to fight while back home across town his little brother slipped under the surface of the swimming pool—

No; I'm what they've turned that Preston into, with fire and pain. I see the whole process as the panels of a two-page spread by the great Dave McKean: black, white, warm dove gray, and flaring scarlet splashed across the pages like blood from a beheading.

Only I'm not art. They've made me for *action*, and action is what I want. It's what I'm for.

I tense myself and leap, springing up off the worn wooden boards and turning in the air in a diver's tuck. I uncoil and shoot down into the dark water like a steel spear.

Richie is still squatting on the muddy lake floor, digging at something imbedded in the silt. He looks up at me with widened eyes. I slow, flip again, and settle softly next to him, my legs crossed, as if I've been sitting there all along.

"Hey, Richie. How you doing?"

Look at those long blond lashes of his! He'd have been a babe-magnet if he'd lived.

"Wow, Preston," he says. He touches my arm. "How'd you get all shiny like that?"

"Come on up with me," I say, "and I'll show you."

He pulls back. "I like it here."

"Richie," I coax. "Come on, kiddo. It's time."

He sticks out his lower lip, ready to put up a fight. I don't want to drag him to the surface kicking and yelling. That's not how we should say our good-byes, because good-bye is what I know it's going to be—finally.

He knows it too. Maybe that's why he doesn't want to go.

"Hey, sport, how about a ride?" I say.

He looks wary. "What kind of ride?"

I drop to all fours on the soft lake silt. I picture Chockablock and send that image rippling from my scalp to the soles of my feet. My body bucks and rings inside like a bell, and I can feel my skeleton and my dense new muscles shifting and reshaping. It hurts, but nothing even close to what I've already been through.

"Climb on," I tell Richie. "Come on, quick, before I take off without you!"

I brace against the tug of his hands as he struggles to haul himself up. His heaviness holds him back. Finally he scrambles up, legs gripping my ribs, thin arms around my neck. He giggles—he's suddenly younger, maybe five or six—and drums his heels on my sides: "Giddyap, let's go!"

I leap, straight up this time, toward the surface of the water. My metal hands press the water down, and I have to kick hard, because Richie is so heavy. But nothing can stop me as I power us upward with my space-age muscle and bone.

My head breaks the surface, and I'm blinded by startling brilliance. I gulp water and thrash water, disoriented.

Richie squeals excitedly, "Look, Preston, look over there!"

His feet push off from me, one bare and one still in its rubber flip-flop, and the weight is gone. I turn, squinting, and I see him run over the surface of the water as if across a lawn. He runs right into the bright oval that stands on the water, waiting for him. The shape of my dead little brother hangs there, turning dull red and then yellow and then white; gone.... He's dissolved like an iron bolt in a blast furnace, all without one backward glance.

The light folds into itself and goes out, taking Richie with it.

I roll onto my back and float with my eyes closed. My metal-cored bones hold me up. The lake water laps at my temples and cheeks; it sips at my tears.

Aunt Phil's hand gives my knee a warm squeeze.

I'm sitting in one of the deck chairs in my chinos and T-shirt, dry just like before, and barefoot, with her across from me. Stars vibrate overhead in the deep, black sky.

Bruno stands behind her chair, in a sport shirt and faded, pressed jeans, and sandals. His hair is a clean silver mane, expensively cut. Even in country casuals, he's every inch the suave, world-weary heartthrob of a certain age from an Italian movie.

He looks at his wrist—at his *watch*? Oh, man, you've got to be kidding me.

"Philida," he says, "you were right. He can do the job." He knows her name, her real name that she always hated. She doesn't even frown.

"The job?" I repeat, catching up with what else he said. "Wait a minute! I did what you wanted. I moved Richie along. It's over."

Aunt Phil gives me that sympathetic look. Bruno shakes his head slightly: *No, it's not over.*

"Who are you people?" I'm yelling now, standing up with my chair kicked over behind me. "Stop fucking with me! What do you *want* from me, for Christ's sake? Tell me who you really are!"

"We're your elders." Bruno stares down his nose at me with hooded eyes that look as if they've seen everything: *Want to make something of it, sonny-boy?*

"Oh, *Bruno*," Aunt Phil says.

He shrugs and turns to look out over the lake, tapping his watch and holding it up to his ear.

Aunt Phil stands up, steps close, and turns alongside me. She hooks her arm through mine, placing my hand so that my fingers curve over her forearm.

I feel choked. I could crush her with my metal-reinforced bones; I could smash her to jello. We stroll toward the landward end of the dock, where the old boathouse lists northward under dark trees. I used to hide out in the boathouse when I'd had enough of my family. The sound of our footsteps clunks out over the water, one set a beat behind the other.

"Bruno and I have to go," she says. "Don't worry, it's not such a tough job once you get used to it."

"Bruno talks like it's a whole career. Kind of late to clarify that, isn't it?"

"We don't always play fair, Preston," she answers dryly. "The game is too important for that."

This shuts me up: hearing my aunt, the champion of justice for underdogs everywhere, talk like this. I can smell her skin, sweet and stirring, but things are different now. It's like I'm on a level with her, even though she's older than I am. Some of the attraction, the part that was about wanting to close an age gap that couldn't ever be closed, is gone.

"Richie is only your first," she's telling me, synching her steps to mine with a little hitch of her hip. "Lots of transiting souls get hung up around here, stalled in mirages of the familiar and the comforting that they make for themselves to help cope with dying. But they can't progress. They have to be helped out of their

rut so they can complete their journey."

"You're kidding," I say; but I know she's not. "I went through all that just to become some kind of undertaker?"

She snorts smoke dismissively. "The undertaker is a pale shadow of what once was a high calling. The dead still need help, though: people's expectations trap them, just as they can in life. Visions of Heaven or visions of hell, they don't realize that they're frozen in a dream."

I can feel the soft curve of her breast, warm against my arm. Was she ever a real woman, in the real world?

"Are you a witch?"

"When I have to be."

She sounds so reasonable that I laugh. "So now you're going to disappear in a puff of smoke and leave me here to—to herd souls that are dead but too high on their memories to know it?"

She steps away and looks at me, head to one side. "Think you can handle it, Nephew?"

"Why not?" I snap back. "If your recipe really took. That was the point of putting me through all that torture, wasn't it?"

We're on a path now that runs, gleaming pale, along the top of a high, grassy bluff overlooking a moonlit sea. She blows smoke away from me, politely, as she gazes out over the water shifting and slapping rock down below.

"I hoped we wouldn't have to run you through the whole process. But Bruno was right: there are no shortcuts, especially when the job is so much more demanding than it used to be. You'll be handling so many, Preston."

"I guess there's always a war somewhere," I say.

"Oh, Baby," Aunt Phil says, taking my arm again. "If that were all ... Right now there's a mutated bird-flu brewing in Taiwan that's going to be a regular humdinger, and that's just the curtain-raiser. We are in for it. With our rate of population growth, a natural correction is inevitable. Meanwhile the old cultures that understood the needs of death are dying themselves, or they've gone so Christian that they've forgotten it all. Very few true shamans are being trained anymore, let alone taught the tough stuff, the death work that's needed when it's too late for healing. So Bruno and I are recruiting, wherever we find a hint of talent or predisposing experience. That last one is you."

"Not talent? Oh, great; you mean I don't even have the natural chops for the job?"

"Preston, you're qualified, and that's enough. If you'd had innate talent too, you'd have found your way on your own. Never mind; we've given you our best, which is pretty damned good, and I know you'll make the most of it." She turns my hand palm up, exposing the scars on my wrist—scars that will keep me out of the armies that fight the future's wars.

So I can do this death-work instead.

"Bruno would do it himself if he could you know," she says. "But neither he nor I is cut out for it. We're armorers, not warriors. You, now; you were already headed this way, because of Richie."

I sigh out my anger at her. What's done is done: now I know what that means. "Will they all be as heavy as Richie was?"

"Some will. Anguish is a kind of heaviness. We hurt you enough so you'll be able to understand that and not be too judgmental. Most souls will be a lot less—composed than your brother was. They'll be torn, traumatized, trying to get away, trying to go back ..."

She sighs. We walk, ancient shell fragments crunching faintly underfoot.

"You make it sound like Armageddon," I say. "Like what the fundies preach."

"Oh, that," she says. "Baloney. They end up here, same as anyone else. You'll spot them by the versions of heavenly splendor or hellfire that they lock themselves into. The real future will be bad enough."

Bruno, striding alongside us now, grunts. "Bad? 'Bad' was the Black Death, Philida."

She waves off his comment with the bright ember of her cigarette-end. "At least the dead of those days believed what the Church told them. They arrived hoping for Heaven but prepared for hell."

"Not all of them," he rumbles. "I'll never forget the hysteria. You'd have thought it was the end of the world."

"Bruno, when it's happening to you, it *is* the end of the world."

That shuts him up. He's walking alongside us on the turf. His long black coat makes him just a shadow to the eye. I hear the swish of the walking stick he carries as it slices through the grass. Why is he still here; what does he want?

What *I* want, in case anyone cares, is to wake up on the living-room couch with my comic books and empty beer bottles, knowing that none of this ever happened, that I'm not a "psychopomp" (and a talentless one at that, thank you very much) after all. That the dead are dead, left safely behind by the living.

Aunt Phil pats my arm consolingly. "At least there's something you can *do* now, instead of just watching disasters happen."

She must mean this to be reassuring.

We're walking on a stony beach below the cliff now, out of step with each other because there's no way to stay in step on footing like this. The sky is a dim, cold gray. Out over the water, where Bruno suddenly points with his stick, I see movement.

Squinting, I can make out a seething mob of shapes, or almost-shapes, dissolving almost as fast as they form. They tumble and billow over the ocean's surface like speed-motion film of boiling storm clouds. The wind brings us the sound of faint voices, gabbling and shouting and crying.

My scalp prickles.

"Tide's coming in," Bruno says. He's not talking about water.

He stalks away, out to the end of a low, rocky spit where he stands leaning on his stick, looking like a broody old crow watching rough weather that he's going to have to launch out into pretty soon.

Aunt Phil's arm is heavy on mine. She's even leaning on me a little. I'm the one who's fresh. I'm the one whose muscles hum with energy.

Her breath warms my cheek. "Be discreet, Preston. No one wants to hear about this. Even a hint will make people recoil. That's not good. You'll need people around you. You can go crazy with this in your life and no company, no friends. Socialize as much as you can, but keep your private life private."

"Oh, rats; you mean I don't even get to boast that I'm a psychopomp?"

I hear the smile in her voice, but she doesn't laugh. "We don't want you locked up, Hon. Being drugged to the mental level of a turtle would interfere drastically with your work."

"My work?" The unfairness of it hits me again. She'll waltz off with Bruno and leave me here alone with my armor and my "job" that I didn't apply for (and have no special aptitude for, and can't tell anyone about) and my million questions that I haven't even thought to ask yet.

I pull my arm away. "What if I just quit?"

"And do what instead?"

"Flip burgers."

She concentrates on cupping her hands around the flare of a match held to the end of the fresh cigarette. She's in painter-pants and a baggy gray sweater now, with flat sandals on her feet for the stony footing.

I try again. "I could go into journalism, like you; travel all over writing about war and ruin."

"You could," she says, nodding, which surprises me. I'm sure she knows that I never did well in English. "It suited me, and you will have to find some way to earn your living."

My "living"; am I still, strictly speaking, living? *Among* the living, yes—or at any rate apparently I will be again. But what kind of life can it be? I'm starting to feel pissed off and rebellious. I could run into that dark surf and try a long swim with my new, powered-up body. If it weren't for the clouds of souls hovering out there, I'd do it, but I don't want to swim out toward *them*.

"Maybe I just don't feel like doing what I'm told," I say. "Something to do with not being a kid anymore. Richie's okay now, and thanks for your help with that, but why I should give a good goddamn about a lot of other stalled-out ghosts, and complete strangers besides?"

"They have to be moved on," she says, hard-voiced. "Souls don't have the luxury of lingering between lives, not with the current birthrate. The dead have to get ready very quickly to be born back into all those new little bodies."

"Why?"

Aunt Phil turns to look seaward too, a halo of moonlit smoke drifting around her head. "Preston, you do

not want to encounter people without souls. Do you hear me? You do *not* want to see the world taken over by clever, tool-using creatures that might as well be turkey vultures for all the human awareness looking out of their eyes. Take my word for it: I have seen them and their works. You don't want to."

Pictures pop into my head: a sort of man-dozer rolling over a house, a swooping steel bird-man with laser guns glinting in its wing feathers—cartoon figures from computer games.

But my rational mind serves up something else: people getting up one morning and slicing up their neighbors; jungle soldiers taking turns with the women after a busy day of killing; a bandit chief who seals his captives into empty oil drums and leaves them out in the sun, like so many cans of lunch meat, to cook. Just the news; I don't have to dream any of it up.

"People acting like monsters, you mean?" I say.

She grimaces. "Not really people, in the sense of normal, socialized human beings. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"So, what—demons?"

"In effect," she says.

I look at the dark water shuffling up and down the stony shore.

What if Richie had had no soul, no humanity? Where would he have gone after I brought him out of his lake? What if *I* had no soul? What would I do with my unbreakable bones, my muscles as tough as the frame of a space station? Who could stop me from running amok, tearing everything to bits, whenever I felt like it? It's a comic-book fantasy.

"I guess you win. " I shiver—just a plain old shiver, from the cold. I'm wearing deck shoes now, without socks, and my toes are starting to go numb.

"Here, you should start getting used to this." She puts her cigarette, still damp from her lips, to my mouth. "Don't inhale, just sip and let the smoke flow back out. Use tobacco this way, for this work only, and you won't have any trouble from it."

"Like you didn't have any trouble?"

She shrugs and smiles, rueful over her own lost life. "I started smoking a long time before I got into all this. I had to learn how to use tobacco all over again, how to fill it with intention instead of just drugging myself with it, and by then ... Everything responds to intention, Preston. Use smoke only to carry you here, to this gate."

I don't have to ask what "gate" she means. We're standing in it. "How do I find it again?"

"It'll call you," Aunt Phil says. "Go off by yourself when that happens, settle your mind, and let the smoke bring you. Better learn to roll your own, and use good-quality tobacco. No pot, it slows you down."

"Pot? If Mom catches me smoking *anything*, there'll be hell to pay!"

"Don't let her catch you," she says. "Shower afterward. Water carries away all kinds of grime if you instruct it to."

"You can 'instruct' a shower?" I hate feeling ignorant and helpless. And a tad panicky again, to tell the truth.

"Pay attention, try to avoid snap judgments, and you'll pick up what you need to know. It's been good to see you, Preston. Sorry about the *Sturm und Drang*. I'd like to stay and talk some more, but Bruno and I have to get on with our part of the job."

"Who *is* he? To you, I mean."

"A soul mate." Aunt Phil smiles. "My other half. Don't glower. You'll find your own eventually, I'm sure. You want to be worth their attention when the time comes. Generosity is a big plus, meaning not clutching at things, at people. You understand?"

She leans forward and kisses me, smoke coiling from her mouth into mine. I close my eyes, warmth flooding through me, but she's already drawing it away with her. I open my eyes to start after her, but all I see is the glowing end of her cigarette, flicked up in a high curve, blazing against the storm clouds with a comet-like brightness so that I step back with my hands in front of my face—

.....

"Preston!"

My eyes snapped open.

My mother was standing by the couch, silhouetted by the glowing wallscreen. The air in the living room was cold. I had a stiff neck.

"Mom?" I croaked. "I thought you went to Albany."

She flung her coat down on the arm of the couch and then she just stood there. Maybe she was staring at the armor embedded in my bones, seeing it shining with a soft, silver glow. After all, she "saw" Richie.

"I had to come back," she said in a hurried whisper. "I felt him leaving. I'm too late, aren't I? He's gone. My Richie."

I sat up. My heart was slamming in my chest like Bruno's hammers.

"How can he be gone?" She pounded her fists down on her thighs and sank down on the couch, next to me. "I was only away a few hours!"

I took a deep breath and told her the truth. "Even if you'd never left the house, you couldn't have kept him, Mom. He couldn't stay forever, even for you."

That felt good, though the message could have used more finesse.

The whites of her eyes shone bluish in the TV glow. "What do you mean? How do you know?"

"I just know."

She was already moving on in her mind: circling, always circling Richie. "How can he be gone? Oh my God, what will I do?"

I felt distant, as if I were much taller and seeing her from above. There she sat, boxed in by her one subject, and I wasn't feeling fed up, or guilty, or bored. I put my arm around her shoulders and drew her gingerly against my side. She was shaking like window glass in a hurricane. She needed to be steadied so she wouldn't shatter.

"He had to go," I said. This was nonnegotiable.

"I know, I know!" she wailed. "But he can't be gone, he *can't!*"

.....

He was gone. He still is.

I saw her watching for him—keeping her eyes open wide so as not to miss the slightest flicker, or else squinting to try to filter out ordinary reality so Richie would be visible instead. But no matter how long or how still she sat watching, like a hunter in a duck blind, he wasn't there anymore. She kept poring over the photo albums. She was losing the images she had of him, the way you do over time. This was happening to me too (and I'd seen Richie, *really* seen him, more recently than she had).

One morning about a month after my "initiation," she barged into my bedroom, grabbed my ankles (my feet hung out over the bottom of the mattress I'd outgrown), and twisted so hard that I flipped over and crashed onto the floor. She stood there in her robe and nightgown, glaring down at me, all tangle-haired like the Medusa.

"You did something, didn't you," she screamed at me. "Goddamn you, Preston, you did something! What did you do? Did you tell him I wasn't coming back? I can't see him anymore. What did you say to him?"

I should have realized that we couldn't just pick up where we'd left off.

She went on about how I was always jealous of Richie because he was the baby, and how I had no right to get between her and her little boy. I lay on the floor and let her rage, though I was hungry and my elbow hurt where it had whacked against the bed frame.

I hadn't told her anything about the night she went to Albany, but her intuition was laser-sharp. My sending Richie on, completely and finally out of her reach, was only slightly less horrible for my mother than losing him had been in the first place. That's not something I'd considered at the time. I've thought a lot about it since.

After that morning I was afraid she might really try to hurt me, or hurt herself to punish me. I had to face it: my staying in the house with her wasn't helping, maybe never had helped. It was time for the Bad Son to leave home.

So that's how I finally came to move out of my own bubble of attachment to the past—my mother's big,

empty house. It's amazing how hard that was to do, and how free and light I felt once I'd done it.

I think she'll talk to me again someday. For now, I appreciate this distance between us. Mom pays my tuition; regular allowance checks come to me from the bank, which she must have authorized. So she doesn't want me gone, but she doesn't want me around either. There's no night-watch to keep any more.

I hear from one of my profs who's a neighbor that Mom is talking more to people, and not always about Richie. I'll take that to mean that she's starting to get better.

Meantime, I'm trying to work out what to do with my own life, the part where I need to make some friends, eat dinner hot sometimes, follow my teams, and find a job. The comics collection didn't bring as much as I thought it would (funny how that high valuation just melts away when you want to sell a collection instead of buying). I've thought about dropping out of school. After all, pretty much any kind of work will do; it's not as if I'll have to depend on my day-job for excitement. But you need a degree to run an ice-cream parlor, and I don't want war with both parents over my education.

So I'm hanging in, trying out courses in comparative religion and anthropology. The reading sometimes explores the world of myth where I spend so much of my time now. I don't talk to my profs about that, not even Dr. Murphy, who seems to have gone a little native during his field work in the Outback. A little wouldn't be nearly enough for what I'd have to say to him, so I just listen instead. It's pretty easy to fly under the radar of people with no radar to speak of. So far, nobody's run away from me gibbering about the Grim Reaper and "the other side."

Physically, I look the same: solid Preston, with ginger hair and those damned babyish freckles. I use the pool at school a lot, trying to bring my daily self more into line with the other Preston, the one with the space-age bones. I can manage life as a sort of superhero pretending to be a mild-mannered student, but I don't have to look like a wad of chewed bubble gum while I'm doing it.

The college gym is fine, though I like slicing through the water better than pumping iron. I get my heavy lifting in somewhere else.

It's hard work, this psychopomping. I get called several times a month, with increasingly severe flurries of action. The latest flare-up on the India-Pakistan border kept me going. Invasion, epidemic, terrorist attack? Preston to the rescue, or anyway to the aid of the suddenly disembodied and deeply disoriented.

Sometimes they're like Richie, drifting in a happy dream, but it can also be pretty raw. I've seen souls stuck inside the experience of drowning in a sunken submarine, burning up in a stovetop grease fire, or plunging like a wet, screaming bomb toward a sidewalk twenty stories below.

They don't all appreciate a helping hand either. Some of them think I'm a ghost or a devil. They try to run, or they call up imaginary allies to fight me—monsters, angels, aliens, it's amazing what people come up with. That's what my Chokablock-chassis is for: I need the extra strength to handle all the fear, guilt, and rage powering their panic—and the special, thick inertia of perfect contentment, fixed outside of time.

I never know beforehand when the call will come, but usually it's at night, which is a good thing. If there was ever work that needed privacy, this is it.

When I lay my head down on my new pillow in my new apartment, if I hear a faint, pounding rhythm and a ringing in my ears, that's my signal (from Bruno I guess, though I haven't actually seen him since that night). I jump out of bed and get ready to travel. I'm using dried sage, tied up into a smudge stick, though; just can't deal with tobacco.

Where my smoke takes me (usually that stony beach, but not always), I find the new dead, or even old ones. Sometimes I run across somebody who's been marking time for decades. That can be *really* strange. No, it's all strange: my dead have lived everywhere from the Aleutians to Patagonia and Shanghai, so the bubbles that they make for themselves sometimes feel like an alien universe to me.

But no matter how detailed or how beautiful they've made their little piece of limbo (and some feel more like art than memory), I'm there to break the spell. I take whatever shape I think will coax the person out. This can be frustrating sometimes; it feels like playing charades with no hands. What keeps me coming back is what happens when we get to the light. However crazed they started out, their faces relax and they say, "Oh, I see," or, "Well, of course."

Then they walk into the light, and that's when I know it's not just okay, it's *good*, this thing that I do.

I always look away just before they melt into the brightness; that's such a private thing. It's their light, not mine, and I can't say that I really get to know any of them in the short time that we have together. Not that I wouldn't like to sometimes. I've met some *unbelievably* hot girls on that stony shore. But they're not there for volleyball and margaritas. It's not a date no matter how you slice it.

Meeting live girls isn't exactly a walk in the park either. It was hard enough when I was just a jock struggling with my academic subjects. Now I have this sinister secret throwing a chill over everything. You'd think that my night job would give me the dangerous edge that draws women to broody, bad-boy types, but it's not working that way. Something tells me that the freckles don't help.

But I'm optimistic. Aunt Phil never said you have to be a monk to do this work. I bet that sometimes after a hard night on the River Styx, even old Charon went home to a hot meal and a hotter girl.

And you can be goddamned sure he'd earned them.

The End

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