

Immortal Forms by Albert E. Cowdrey

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We hope that the people in charge of reconstructing New Orleans won't disturb too many spirits in the process. Perhaps they should hire Albert Cowdrey as a consultant. Is there anyone who covers the many supernatural sides of the Crescent City as well as Mr. C?

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Okay, okay, thought Tommy Salvati. Maybe the neighbors were right when they said I should check things out.

Wearing the uniform of his profession—tasseled loafers and a three-piece charcoal suit—he slammed the door of his Acura and stood for a moment in the prickly blue dusk, frowning at the camelback cottage where he'd spent some of the happiest times of his childhood.

To left and right were the houses of neighbors who'd remembered his name from long ago and called to tell him that something was wrong at Hannah Loewe's. He could see why: in her front yard, high grass shrilled with insect life; wrinkled newspapers lay in the dust of the unswept gallery.

He rang the door bell. Nothing. He tried a gate set in the patio wall. Nailed shut. A streetlight flicked on across the street and shards of broken glass glistened atop the wall. A long black bough of a live oak reached across from the hidden garden; Tommy managed somehow to swing himself up. The branch gyrated, and he was clutching the rough bark to keep from falling when he spotted, just ahead in the dusky foliage, the face of a dead child.

As he stared, unbelieving, another face emerged, bland and simpering. Then a third and a fourth. Shadowy recesses freckled by gleams of light turned into a picture puzzle, one of those puzzles that ask how many snakes you can find—and the longer you look, the more you see.

Stretching out an unsteady hand, Tommy touched the nearest face. Cool pitted stone. Hannah collected stone angels. Why had she butchered them, set the heads up here as sentinels? He thought of the nailed gate, the daggers of glass just beneath his heels. *Oh Lord*, he thought. *Dementia*.

Slowly he worked his way across the wall and dropped from the oak into the patio. A thick mattress of vines broke his fall. He stood up, dusting abraded hands and gazing at an alien landscape. The beds and plantings he remembered had all vanished under thickets of cat's-claw and creeper. In the half-light some piles of vegetation looked like giant tortoises, some like crouching apes. A pond once shimmering with koi had turned to a marsh where a frog brayed like a child's tin

trumpet.

On a fancy iron table lay a broken teapot. How many times as a child he'd sat here, drinking iced tea and spooning in Hannah's homemade sorbet. He touched the teapot and a black rat jumped out and vanished into the jungle.

His heart was drumming as he waded through foliage to the kitchen door and knocked—expecting no answer, getting none. Overhead a lamp glowed in the window of Hannah's bedroom. He remembered it well, an antique with a painted glass shade. The red-bronze light showed a dark shape on the ceiling that Tommy thought must be a water stain. Until it began to move.

Suddenly he was back at his car. How did he get there? He couldn't remember. His pants were torn and he'd lost a loafer. Blood seeped through deepened abrasions on his soft lawyerly hands. He fumbled his cell phone to his ear and when the 911 operator answered, tried to explain why she ought to dispatch a cop car.

She said, "There's *what* all over the ceiling?"

He said, "Flies," and she said, "Oh. Okay. Hang on."

Since the condition of Hannah's body made most tests impossible, the coroner fell back on "cardiopulmonary arrest," which to Tommy meant that Hannah had stopped breathing and her heart had stopped beating and so she died.

Logical, he thought, but not enlightening. A week after finding the body, he made an appointment with a psychiatrist at St. Vincent's and told him about Hannah's garden—the glass-topped wall, the beheaded statues. Atypical for Alzheimer's, said the doctor, and suggested instead "polypharmacy," which turned out to be a four-dollar word for taking too many pills. So many lonely old people, the shrink explained, become addicts. Tommy shook his head. By then he'd been through the house, finding one dusty, half-empty bottle of cooking sherry in the kitchen, nothing stronger than aspirin in the bathroom cabinet. The psychiatrist shrugged: with no patient, he couldn't diagnose.

Yet Tommy kept looking for an explanation, and not only because Hannah had been a friend, or because the doctor's remark about lonely old people made him feel guilty for neglecting her. He had a more solid reason.

Technically at least, he'd been her lawyer, though years had passed since she'd given him any work to do. Her power of attorney still reposed in his office files, and he used it to open her bank box. There he found her will—hand-written, properly witnessed, and perfectly legal. He was not surprised at that. What did surprise him was discovering that Hannah had left him everything she owned. Including the duty of finding out what had happened to her.

Searching her address book, he came upon the name of Olivia Henderson, Nurse. He called on her one evening. She was a quiet, solid woman with caf-au-lait skin, living in a Creole cottage on Esplanade Ridge. Olivia said that she and Hannah had been friends for years. When she got sick, Olivia took care of her for a while. But then she got so strange that Olivia had to leave.

“She bit me,” said the nurse, showing Tommy a white scar on one wrist.

“She *bit* you?”

“I couldn’t believe it. She deliberately messed on herself, and when I went to clean her up she bit me with those big horsey teeth of hers. I couldn’t take it no more. She was a nice lady once, but she wasn’t no kin to me.”

So there it was again, the touch of madness. And still no reason why.

As executor of the will, one of Tommy’s duties was to inventory the estate. Night after night he made the trek to Hannah’s house, writing endless lists on long yellow legal pads, and in the process rediscovering a large part of his own past.

When his father developed prostate cancer, and later after he died when his mother went back to work, Hannah—though she was only a friend and neighbor—had stepped in as babysitter. Old maid though she was, she’d been superb at it.

Pictures tucked away in brown folders showed her in her prime, big and busty with a bronze-Indian profile and prominent teeth, looking more like a mountain woman than an art historian. Other pictures showed a laughing little boy getting a ride up the stairs to bed on her strong back. Tommy remembered how, when he was washed and jammied and tucked in, Hannah used to sit beside his cot, telling him stories about the great artists or teaching him to sing *Frre Jacques, dormez-vous?* until he fell asleep.

But there’d been many Hannahs besides his adopted Aunt Goody. Files labeled “Business” contained a sheaf of threatening letters, some of which Tommy had written for her. *I warn you that every civil and criminal resource will be explored unless you return the down payment within thirty days from this date*, one missive concluded. And she had meant every word.

She terrorized home-improvement racketeers with menaces she was always ready to carry out. When a mail-order outfit swindled her out of sixteen dollars, she spent weeks collecting evidence from other victims and harassed the postal inspectors into charging the chief crook with mail fraud. Ultimately he went to prison and Hannah remarked, with somewhat frightening relish, “The right man in the right place.”

Once Tommy asked his mother about Hannah's role—seemingly so out of character—as an avenging fury.

“She's an angry person, you know,” said Mama simply. The conversation took place after her own cancer had been diagnosed. Formerly an ample, pillowy woman with fine dark eyes, she'd changed, the bones of her face taking on the gaunt power of a Michelangelo sibyl. In a sickroom voice that faded and strengthened and faded again, she went on:

“Hannah has a terrible time making contact, I mean emotional contact, with other adults. There's something—I don't know—a little inhuman about her. She's wonderful with children. With her garden. With her students. Yet she's always alone and she doesn't know why. Something's missing in her and she doesn't know what it is. It's a good thing she's basically a fine person. Otherwise she'd probably kill somebody.”

That remark had made young Tommy shake his head. Hannah kill somebody? He wondered if his mother's mind was wandering. Especially since Hannah was all solicitude for her dying friend, aiding her like a sister and unobtrusively helping Tommy through his time of grief after she died.

The profoundest Hannah had been the teacher. In the files he found lecture notes for her course in Art Appreciation at Tulane. They were surprisingly dull—merely lists of slides with enigmatic asides like “Comp to Cez,” which probably meant “compare to Cezanne.” They gave no hint of what the course had really been like, or what it meant to Tommy and the other gaping undergrads who'd taken it with him.

To Hannah art was energy, was ecstasy, was the only real thing. For a while, aged nineteen, Tommy gave up *Playboy* centerfolds to dream over Botticelli angels, while his nightmares took on new and worse shapes from Goya's monsters. Listening to her voice—for all her bigness, her homeliness, her sheer physical force, she had a voice like an oboe—he sensed other worlds from which immortal forms, beautiful or terrible, wander into ours like unicorns into a suburban garden.

That had been a strange episode in the life of a prosaic young man, and it didn't last long. Tommy graduated and went to law school and the unicorns galloped away, never to return until he glimpsed them again, sitting at night under a reading lamp in the house of dead woman.

As he boxed Hannah's files for burning, Tommy felt he was seeing her at last as she really had been. A powerful, lonely personality that for lack of mature love had sought comfort in another woman's child and the exaltation of art. Nodding, wiping his eyes, Tommy would have closed Hannah's case then—except that he still didn't know what had happened to her, or why.

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The house wasn't only a treasury of nostalgia for its new owner. Getting it in shape to sell meant expense and some backbreaking work.

The most disgusting job was cleaning Hannah's bedroom. The mattress had to be hauled to a landfill along with the curtains and the rug and other things that harbored smells. He did that himself at night, loading a small truck owned by an odd-jobs man who worked beside him with a red bandanna tied around his face. As a bonus, Tommy gave him Hannah's mahogany bed frame and the painted lamp, whose peculiar red-bronze light he never wanted to see again.

Tommy cleaned out Hannah's handsome old French armoire and gave Goodwill the piles of clean, mended clothing and the desolate lineup of shoes he found there. He sprayed the room with an air freshener called Pert, turned on the air conditioner, and locked the door. The room stayed that way until the last faint tendrils of the odor of death had vanished. Meantime professional cleaners scoured the rest of the house. The odd-jobs man took the butchered angels to a landfill, and a lawn-and-garden service restored the plantings in the patio. All Tommy's cash went into repairs, but at the end he owned a solid, handsome house with a lovely garden and no mortgage. By then he'd put so much of himself into the place that he decided to live there. In 1998 he sold his condo and moved in. It was the first place he'd ever lived that he could fix up exactly as he pleased, and he soon became a confirmed putterer, often working past midnight and falling into bed in the small hours until his alarm brought him groggily to life again.

Defiantly almost, he decided against using Hannah's bedroom for storage: instead, he made it his law library. In many sessions of night work, he put down a rose carpet from the Sarouk Shop, installed bookcases and a comfortable old leather recliner, set up a desk for his computer, moved in an old brass floorlamp and a chiming Seth Thomas clock inherited from his mother. He bought second-hand lawbooks by the linear foot—Louisiana's *Civil Code*, the *U.S. Code*, up-to-date fat tomes on tax law—and lined them up in orderly array on the shelves, like soldiers in red uniforms or blue.

Lawyers, like roaches, feel most comfortable among piles of paper, so he began bringing work home from the office. Late at night he'd pick a lawbook off the shelves and settle down to read and take notes, until the Westminster chimes struck twelve or one. He became so comfortable in the room, despite its past, that he made it into his nest—bought a Bose sound system and an HD television, and began turning Hannah's old armoire into an entertainment center. That meant removing some of the shelves and boring a hole in the back for the TV cable.

He was working on this project one night when he discovered that the armoire, like many pieces of Victorian furniture, had a secret compartment. He slid back a

panel in the ornate base, and learned at last why Hannah had gone bonkers.

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Inside were one hundred and fifty-six pill bottles. The names were as plastic as the containers—Viorex, Sinkomar, Harpogil—uppers and downers: mood-altering at best, mind-bending if misused.

Tommy studied the dates on the labels. Hannah had been an addict for years. Over time the doses had become stronger, the refills closer together. Tench Armstrong, M.D., had been the prescribing physician. All by himself, Doctor Feel-Good had supplied Hannah enough pills to knock off a troop of old ladies. Going through her checkbook stubs, Tommy discovered that in the past three years alone she'd paid Armstrong some \$55,000 for "examinations" and "tests." She'd been buying the prescriptions. Not to put too fine a point on it, Doctor Armstrong had driven her mad for profit.

Okay, the law had an answer for people like that. But when Tommy consulted an attorney in his firm whose specialty was malpractice, he learned that nailing Armstrong wouldn't be easy.

What happened to the body? asked his colleague. Well, it had been cremated—for obvious reasons.

The colleague shrugged. There went any chance of proving Hannah had died from an overdose. Furthermore, Armstrong was a medical entrepreneur, a specialist in psychiatric gerontology with his own clinic and an income estimated at a couple of million a year. Socially and politically, his connections were terrific. Within a week, Tommy spotted him in the society pages of the *Times-Picayune*—an ample, broad-bellied guy with a moon face, a Vandyke beard, and a blonde trophy wife aged about twenty-five. The couple lived in a six-column mansion on St. Charles Avenue with manicured grounds, an Olympic pool, and tennis courts. Anderson belonged to four Carnival krewes; a philanthropist, he contributed to good causes, and made sure that everybody knew it.

Tommy filed a complaint with the state medical society anyway, and tried to interest the DA's office in the case. The only result was to convince him that nobody was touching Armstrong on the basis of the flimsy evidence he could produce. Against the word of the attending physician, who could prove the drugs weren't needed? And who in the medical community would testify against him?

Undeterred, Tommy began writing letters, aiming now at state agencies and charitable groups and politicians interested in the health and welfare of seniors. He phrased the letters carefully to avoid libel actions, but he put his point across. He wanted to plant suspicions, to make people aware that Armstrong wasn't all starched shirtfront and charity balls.

I wasn't born Italian for nothing, he thought. *I know that revenge is a dish best eaten cold*. So he fired off his letters, two or three a week, and waited for the chill to set in.

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The campaign against Armstrong took only a fraction of Tommy's busy days. His job obsessed him. In the office, in tax court, and in long night sessions at home he was billing eighty to ninety hours a week. He rarely saw his house by daylight.

He liked best the nights he worked at home—the ample space, the comfort, the quiet. A Guatemalan maid spent one day a week keeping the house clean, but Tommy locked her out of the library, where his papers were spread out in a controlled chaos only he understood.

From time to time he'd knock off work for an hour or two, eat a bite, relax, down a scotch. Sprawled in his chair beside the lawbooks, he'd exchange their strangulated prose for his favorite forms of trash literature—a Crichton thriller, a volume of King's canned horror, a local weekly called *Snide* that featured mean-spirited gossip and personals of the "ISO dwarf in a wetsuit" variety. Or he'd flick on the TV that now occupied the armoire and watch a few scenes from an old movie on TCM before returning to work.

Then one bright day in the spring of 1999, a bout of flu kept him home from the office. Sick or well, he had a brief to finish and just before noon, needing a citation, he lurched and wobbled—snuffling, a little woozy—into his library.

Without the slightest warning all his nerve ends started burning. He gasped and inhaled the stench of death. Insects buzzed like a transformer, and he had a sudden horrible feeling that his spinal cord was turning to a cold, viscous fluid.

He stumbled out of the room and fell flat on his back on the hall rug. Like a drunk he lay there for long minutes with the house revolving slowly around him. At last he pushed himself into a sitting position, and stared back into the bright empty room—a room bright as the March day, empty as an out-of-season swimming pool.

What in the *hell* had happened?

Slowly he stood up on rubbery legs, wobbled to his bedroom and fell down again, this time on his rumped bed. After an hour's recovery and a tasteless lunch, he phoned his office, got the citation from a clerk, and completed the brief. (The fact that it was full of absurd errors only became apparent the next day.)

Hours passed before he could bring himself to approach the library again. At supertime he spooned down a bowl of canned soup for warmth and courage, then

climbed the stairs a little after seven. Along the way he turned on every available light; at the library doorway, he tested the room like a nervous swimmer trying the water—first a toe, then a foot.

Trembling, he entered and switched on the lamp. Hey, no problem. The room was just a room; the books drowsed on their shelves, the clock ticked on its table, and the rose patterns of the carpet glowed gently, like the grille of a firescreen. The TV slept in the armoire. And that was all.

He returned to his bedroom and crashed. After a sick and stressful day, he slept without dreams—except that sometime near dawn he half awoke and heard a voice like an oboe singing *Frre Jacques, dormez-vous?* Next day he regained his health, and with it his professional ability to explain anything.

Flu does things to the nerves, right? So he'd had an episode of some kind. Seizing on his moment of weakness, his memories of Hannah's death scene had hit him with hallucinatory force. Something like that could *never* happen when he was well.

He demonstrated the truth of this analysis by sitting in the library all that evening—first working to repair the faulty brief, then relaxing. The rewritten brief was splendidly logical and massively footnoted, and when he turned it in, his supervising partner said it was “impossible to improve upon.”

So, see?

Feeling chipper, he decided to spend the whole of the following weekend working at home. On Saturday morning he walked into the library with firm, deliberate strides.

This time he was lucky to be able to crawl out. When he reached the bathroom and began to assess damage, his heart was behaving oddly—speeding up, slowing down, speeding up—like somebody in anaphylactic shock. Blood was gushing from his nose, probably because he'd landed face-first on the floor. His whole body had a ghastly invertebrate feeling, as if he'd turned into some creature made of cold, boneless jelly. Warmth and structure returned slowly, though he had fits of shivering for hours afterward. Recovering downstairs with a scotch—a strong one—he tried to come to terms with the most bizarre reality he'd ever faced: that Thomas Salvati, counselor at law, had a haunted room. Even more baffling, the damn place was haunted *only in the daytime*.

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He thought of selling the house but concluded that if he did, he'd be morally responsible for whatever happened to the buyers. He thought of emptying the room again, locking it, and abandoning that part of the house. But goddamn it, the room

was his nest—and anyway, it was unoccupied at night, when he really needed it.

Little by little he learned to live with his demon. He approached the library only at dusk. He learned to sense, by a kind of fingernails-across-the-blackboard keening of the nerves, the times when he was too early and the room still in its bad phase. He brought upstairs a plump stone angel that had escaped beheading and propped it against the door, so that no vagrant breeze could ever slam it with him inside. He also redoubled his efforts to get Armstrong, thinking *Maybe if I do that for her, she'll be content, she'll move on.*

So he wrote more and nastier letters. He spent an hour when he should have been billing a client \$175 at the local DEA field office, making a pitch to the agent in charge that if Armstrong had supplied lethal quantities and combinations of drugs to one elderly patient, he was probably still doing it to others. And how about that damned clinic of his? What was happening to the old people he treated there? The DEA man listened with a face as warm and expressive as the left buttock of a corpse and said he didn't think it was a federal problem.

Then—in an unexpected way—Tommy's campaign began to produce results. On the afternoon of a particularly featureless Monday, his office intercom cleared its throat and announced that Dr. Trench Barnstorm wanted to consult him professionally.

The doctor strode in on stout legs, expansive in every sense, wearing Brooks Brothers on his back. He was even bigger than Tommy had thought, with the top-heavy look of a linebacker run to seed. While Tommy was gesturing him to a chair, Armstrong's little pouchy eyes stole restless glances at him and everything else in the office.

"Mr. Salvati," he boomed. "I, ah, want you to understand that normally I'd have my legal advisors, Macready, Stern, and Bourgeois, contact you."

"About what?"

"They tell me you were attorney for Mrs. Loewe?"

"I was."

Armstrong nodded and drew a twelve-dollar cigar from an inside pocket. He didn't ask permission, just tucked it into his mouth and popped a gold lighter. Tommy sniffed appreciatively. The cigar was downright fragrant.

"I have become the object of a strange sort of persecution," Armstrong began. "It appears to have something to do with Mrs. Loewe."

"What sort of persecution?"

“Let’s just say that it takes forms which are both disgusting and illegal. Invading my home! That’s illegal!”

“Have you contacted the police?”

“Ah, no.”

“Why not?”

Armstrong stared at Tommy. Tommy stared back. The ash fell off the end of the long cigar.

“This business has got to stop,” Armstrong said too loudly. “You’ve been filing complaints against me.”

“What are you accusing me of?”

Suddenly Armstrong looked around wildly, like an animal in a trap. He sucked on the cigar again, like a big baby on a thumb. That seemed to quiet him down.

“Look,” he said finally, “we seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot.”

Tommy raised his dark eyebrows and waited.

“For some time,” his visitor began ponderously, apparently a rehearsed speech, “I’ve not been entirely satisfied with the quality of legal advice I’ve been getting on taxation. I believe that’s your specialty?”

“Yes.”

“Also, when you get to my age, you begin to appreciate youth, vigor, new ideas. Energy.”

Tommy glanced at his watch. Armstrong’s little darting eyes caught the movement. “I’m getting to the point,” he said irritably. “Fact is, I’d like to put you on retainer. Say a thousand a month, in addition, of course, to legitimate fees. I’ve got a case coming up—the IRS wants to hit my clinic for about 300K they claim I owe them—and I can tell you the business is likely to be pretty lucrative from your viewpoint.”

Groucho Marx, thought Tommy, you were a true philosopher when you said, “Time wounds all heels.”

Armstrong was trying to bribe him.

“I’m sorry,” he said in his smoothest voice. “I’m overwhelmed by work as it is, and I won’t be able to accommodate you.”

“Then,” Armstrong said, rising to his feet—encased, Tommy estimated, in \$500 shoes—“I have to tell you that I know how to defend myself. Got that? I’d rather do it like a gentleman, but if I have any further trouble I’ll take care of it another way.”

“I’ll certainly remember that.”

“See that you do,” he growled, jamming the cigar into his mouth and heading for the door. He had an impressive exit going when he spoiled the effect by running into the jamb.

“Try turning sideways, doctor,” Tommy suggested.

“Screw you, greaseball,” he said, and slammed the door behind him.

Tommy was still thinking over this curious interview that evening when he bought a bottle of White Horse scotch and the latest copy of *Snide* at his neighborhood watering hole. He was seated in his library, scotch at his elbow, when for the second time that day Dr. Armstrong put in an appearance. According to a smudgy, anonymous item in the gossip section,

Local Superdoc may need more than a Band-Aid for his bank account if his wife takes him to divorce court as she’s threatening to do. She claims he’s been bringing faisand body parts home from his clinic and hiding them in the bedroom in an effort to drive her out of the house. She’s charging extreme physical and mental cruelty and wants a few mil to make her feel better.

Tommy spilled his drink, ice and all, into his lap. Of *course* his haunted room was okay at night. The fury was elsewhere, obtaining justice in her own way.

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So, he thought over coffee next morning, the fat bastard, in his big bedroom in his six-columned house, smells the corpse he created.

Did he hear flies buzzing? Did his nerve ends burn?

Did his spine feel like it was dissolving? If so, Tommy really couldn’t blame him for being scared—or for trying to convince himself that his ordeal must have a natural explanation. *That Wop lawyer! Tried to get me for malpractice! He must be involved in this—somehow.*

When Tommy left the house, he spotted a gray Toyota parked across the street. Inside, reading a newspaper, sat a sharp-nosed little man in an outsized brown suit. Seeing him tickled Tommy, because his firm had employed the guy once or twice. Pete Exnicios was a private investigator with a second-floor office on Magazine Street over a coffee shop called (appropriately) Grounds for Divorce.

Tommy almost felt sorry for him, sitting there pretending to read the *Times-Picayune*'s sparkling prose. He thought of offering him a few back copies of *Snide*, but decided it was smarter not to get cute. So he ignored Pete and went to work, forgetting that daylight is by far the best time to burglarize the house of a working person who lives alone.

Tommy had long since pulled the nails out of the back gate. It was locked, but the lock was more for show than practical value. Pete might have taken a minute, two minutes at most, to get into the yard. Tommy's neighbors in back had a dog named Wilbur, and they heard him barking—but then, he did a lot of that.

Meanwhile, shielded from view by the patio wall, Pete Exnicios was picking the back door lock. And when Tommy's expensive alarm system started screaming, he punched in the code and shut it off. The police never found a clear explanation for that; maybe Pete had a friend or blackmailee at Delta Housegard. Anyway, he walked in and made himself at home.

When Tommy returned at seven, carrying a briefcase full of work, a box of freshly made sushi and a couple of Kirin beers, dark had arrived and faint urban stars were coming out. Wilbur was still demonstrating beyond the patio wall. Curious, Tommy went in through the gate to see what was wrong, and found his back door open and a professional-quality steel pick embedded in the Yale lock.

Pausing only to deposit his dinner on the kitchen counter and grab his 9-millimeter Glock from its hiding place in a magazine rack, Tommy began to explore the house, flicking on lights as he went. He followed a trail of minor disturbances—opened drawers, shuffled papers—from his desk downstairs to the library in the second floor rear.

He approached the room warily, like a veteran soldier entering a minefield. *It's always safe in the dark*, he reminded himself. He hesitated at the door, testing the air for vibrations. He sensed nothing. Entering, he stumbled, flicked on the lamp and stared down at Pete Exnicios who, though dead and cold, was staring back.

His face was blue and the eyes bulged out with enormous glistening black pupils. His right hand, frozen in rigor, had sunk deep into his throat. Aside from Pete, the room was quiet, comfy, inviting. No doubt that was how it looked when he entered it.

Later, while the detectives and crime scene techs were doing their thing upstairs and downstairs and all around, Tommy sat outside in the friendly dark. He threw the sushi over the wall to Wilbur and drank the Kirin, wondering what exactly Pete had been up to, and how exactly he had died.

A detective came out, asked him to make a statement, and gave him a ride to the Victorian castle that housed the Second District. En route, he mentioned that Pete had been carrying a pocketful of Serenac capsules—powerful tranquilizers, currently in the news because large quantities were seeping out of medical channels onto the street.

So maybe Pete had been intending to plant the stuff, then tip off the cops or the DEA. That might have struck Anderson as a neat, ironic revenge on his enemy.

How Pete died was less easy to answer. Seemingly he'd strangled himself, which was, of course, impossible. Next day his doctor came forward and revealed that he'd been taking anticonvulsive medication to control epilepsy. Now the coroner ruled that while burgling Tommy's house, Pete had somehow choked himself while in the throes of a grand mal seizure.

The verdict satisfied nobody. Even Tommy knew that an epileptic's most violent act was to swallow his tongue. Also, since Pete was taking medication, he shouldn't have had a fit at all. But the coroner and the cops had more important things to do than worry about the weirdsville death of a two-bit housebreaker, and from a practical standpoint, that was all that mattered.

Except to Tommy, who now knew that he was sharing his house with a killer.

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Despite his cool long-studied plans of revenge, he'd never really wanted to kill anybody. His campaign against Anderson had employed only words—the lawyer's weapon—to bring a criminal to book. The kind of demonic fury that could seize a man's own hand and use it to strangle him was something else, and it scared him badly.

While drinking his evening scotches—more and more of them every night—he told himself with tiresome repetition that Hannah had never been his enemy, had loved him, had left him everything she owned. He argued that in going after Pete, she'd been pursuing the unrighteous, just as she'd always done.

But he couldn't buy his own brief. Pete's fate struck him as profoundly wrong. Even in her most wrathful moods, Hannah had been Mrs. Jehovah, merciless but just. Death for housebreaking was not justice.

Once he'd admitted that, his internal trial of *The Singular Case of the Corpse*

in the Haunted Room moved inexorably to a terrifying conclusion: the Hannah Loewe who killed Pete was someone he'd never known.

During her last awful years, her splendid mind had been drugged and deformed into something else. The dweller in the back room was the kind of intruder who—after a devastating illness or addiction—takes the place of someone you love. A familiar face joined to an altered mind and a mysterious, vile soul.

The night he reached that verdict Tommy didn't exactly fall asleep; he passed out. Over the next couple of weeks, this became a pattern with him.

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And then—as usual, without the slightest warning—came relief.

One Sunday afternoon he was passing the door of the library when something stopped him—an astonishing sense of quietude within. The room looked exactly as it always did, yet he knew it was different.

He stood in the hall remembering a case of mumps he'd had as a child. During his days in a high fever, ordinary sunlight seared his eyeballs, ordinary colors pulsed, sounds either crashed against his ears or faded out entirely. To recover was to reenter the real world.

Well, the sickness that pervaded the haunted room in daylight was gone. That was all. Just gone.

Cautiously he stepped through the doorway and sniffed. He smelled only the dust of leather bindings. Something buzzed, but it was just a fat bumblebee exploring a windowpane.

Somewhat dazed, he sat down. Sunlight filled the green garden and the oak tree filtered the brightness before letting it in. A Good Humor truck passed in the distance, playing "Turkey in the Straw." Next door children were playing in a wading pool, and spray flew up mingled with shrieks of silvery laughter.

He spent a long moment thinking about possible whys and wherefores. Then he lifted a phone, called Armstrong's residence and asked to speak to him.

A maid's soft-slurred voice said he was taking a trip to Italy and wouldn't be back for a while. Tommy said he hoped the doctor was feeling better. The maid was evidently bored, and soon was gossiping freely.

"No, Honey, I don't think he is any better. He used to be such a big noisy man, but now he's considerable fell in, you know? I don't think he been sleepin' good neither. You ought to see his baidclose in the mornin'. Twisted up like

corkscrews, and—guess I shouldn't be sayin' this—his baid smell bad. Well, you know, when people be sick, oftentimes they smell bad. It's the sickness, is all.”

Tommy commiserated, said goodbye. The dish of revenge was chilled and ready, but he no longer wanted to eat it. He felt only pity for the fool of a man who, for mere money, had deserved and incurred such a fate.

His own destiny brightened as Armstrong's darkened. Free of his unspeakable housemate, Tommy's step grew lighter, his world purer and fresher. He cut back his drinking. He took fewer cases, worked more quickly and had time left for play. He joined the Uptown AC to swim and play racquetball; in the pool he met a woman, Jeanette Weiss, he'd known in law school, and they started to date in a casual, playful way.

One night he took Jeanette to the Saenger Theater, where a road company was doing *Cats* for about the twentieth time. Afterward they stopped at Casamento's for fried oysters. Humming the show-stopper “Memories,” she told him about seeing it the first time in New York when she was seventeen, about soaking a whole pack of Kleenex with her tears. About how young she felt, hearing it again.

“Well, that's what the show's about, isn't it?” he asked her. “Rebirth?”

Somehow, in the mood they were in, it seemed only natural for Jeanette to come home with him, drink a few glasses of wine, and spend the night. Their lovemaking might have been an exorcism—except that the house no longer needed it.

* * * *

A few weeks flickered by, magically swift, overfull with work and pleasure. But on the evening of October 6, 1999—the date stuck in his memory as September 11, 2001, would afterward—Tommy took Jeanette to Louis Armstrong to catch a flight to Japan, where she had a conference to attend.

He returned home, parked his Acura under the streetlight, and entered the house looking forward to nothing but an empty evening and a long night's rest. Seated at the kitchen table, he poured himself a minimal brandy, opened the latest copy of *Snide* and learned that Dr. Tench Armstrong, vacationing at Lake Garda, had received a summons to appear in court for what the paper clearly hoped would be a knockdown-dragout over the terms of his divorce.

Both parties (it smirked) have been hiring PIs and the gumshoes have found out a lot. How many of Dr. A's elderly patients have died under suspicious circumstances? Why is the DEA interested in his medical records? What Bourbon Street barker has his blonde Boopsie been balling?

Stay tuned.

Poor bastard, thought Tommy, with the cool and distant pity the redeemed feel for the lost.

He swallowed the last incandescent drops of brandy, turned out the downstairs lights, and climbed the stairs in the dark. Wasn't darkness his old friend? He was halfway up, humming "The Sounds of Silence," when the house shuddered.

He grabbed the banister and held on. Another tremor hit, followed by muffled knocking—not at the door, but in the walls, all around him. Earthquake? Explosion? Tommy took two full minutes to realize that the knocking meant the sash weights in the windows were swaying like pendulums.

Baffled, he looked down the stairwell, then up. The hallway above was suffused with a dim bronze-red glow. *Oh Christ*, he thought, *the house is on fire.*

He ran up the stairs. The glow of the lamp he'd given away fourteen months before filled the library door. Against the light the angel doorstop was clearly visible in dark profile.

A third tremor hit. The angel rocked, fell over, and cracked. Something came rolling toward Tommy with a low gritty sound, like a turning grindstone, and the angel's blindly smiling head tapped against his shoe.

The knocking resumed, loud and all around. Tommy turned to run, only to find that he wasn't alone in the stairwell. Something was climbing toward him out of the darkness, something big that towered over him from two steps down. Back from Italy, Dr. Armstrong had somehow broken into the house.

The light strengthened. The man looked like hell. His cheeks had the iridescence of meat going bad, and his eyes had sunk in so far that Tommy saw nothing in the sockets but an unpleasant moist glitter. Armstrong's suit hung on him like a gunny sack on a scarecrow. And he *did* smell bad.

Ignoring Tommy, he stalked past with the nerveless thud and shuffle of a dying syphilitic. A strange sound started in his throat like the rales of a dying man, then rose in cracked and grinding tones.

"Leave ... me ... alone!" he cried. *"Leave ... me ... alone!"*

Tommy reached out to grab his arm—so he hated the bastard, so what, he knew what was waiting for him down the hall. But the sleeve slipped greasily between his fingers and Armstrong stumbled into the library.

The door closed slowly. The hallway was dark again, and silent. The air felt dense and a foul smell lingered. Unable to retreat or advance, Tommy trembled like the last leaf on a bare tree. Then the door crashed open and Armstrong burst into the hallway.

Something clung to his back, arms around his neck, long teeth fastened in the side of his throat. Together they made a strange humpbacked being with too many legs and arms, lurching from side to side, caroming off one wall and then the other, narrowly missing Tommy and finally thundering down the stairs while the whole house knocked and shuddered.

Something hot was running down Tommy's right leg. For the first time since kindergarten, he'd wet his pants. In the library the Seth Thomas clock coolly began to chime eleven.

* * * *

Tommy spent the rest of the night in a motel. Unable to sleep, he sat up in bed with the lights and the TV on but the sound off, viewing but not really seeing the flickering procession of drivel and porn.

About four he dozed off, slept a couple of hours, and woke in time for the early-early local news. Turning on the sound—by now he needed to hear a voice, any voice—he contemplated the night's roundup of murders, experts predicting that the stock market bubble would expand forever, John Paul's Popemobile pushing through dense crowds in some nameless city.

Then Doctor Armstrong's face flicked onto the screen. Armstrong as he had been: moon-faced, confident, glowing with health and wealth and foul deeds. The anchorwoman, her voice muzzy with sleep, revealed that he had died the day before in Ravenna, Italy, and that the verdict of the medical examiner there had been cardiopulmonary arrest.

Maybe Tommy squeezed the channel-select button unconsciously. Anyway, a scene from a sword-and-sorcery movie appeared. A unicorn grazing in an enchanted forest raised its head, shook its shining mane, and stared through the screen with eyes of burning amber. Its long, twisted horn was dark and wet and running blood.

Tommy fainted. When he woke, the room was sunny and the screen was dead.

* * * *

That afternoon he returned to his house. He spent half an hour just sitting in the Acura, getting up his nerve. Then he ventured to climb the steps, unlock the front door, and creep inside.

Downstairs was bright and empty. Upstairs—except for the broken angel, whose head smiled blindly up at him from the floor—also seemed untouched. The library looked peaceful to the point of blandness. His work lay everywhere, spread out in piles, just as he'd left it.

His knees felt weak, and he sat down suddenly in the recliner. Gradually his breath slowed and his pulse began to beat normally as he realized that at last he was alone in the house. The real Hannah had died long ago—long before she stopped breathing—and now the false Hannah too was gone. Where she existed now, whether Armstrong was doomed like some sinner in Dante to carry his victim on his back forever, Tommy didn't know and didn't want to know. Let them stumble on, two more of the immortal forms of dread, in some land beyond the screen of the ordinary, beyond the mask of days.

He was curled up in his own bed early that night, when Jeanette called from Tokyo. Her voice was sodden with jet lag, his with exhaustion. They laughed at their own incoherence.

“We sound like two drunks,” she said, preparing to ring off.

“Jeanette,” he said.

“What, Honey?”

“Tell me something. Do you think I'm nuts?”

“Never met anybody saner.”

“Really? You're sure?”

“Totally. Look, I can't talk any more tonight. Be home Tuesday. Love you.”

“Love you,” he said, and—no longer alone in his house—fell at once into profound and peaceful slumber.