

A Diorama of the Infernal Regions, or The Devil's Ninth Question

ANDY DUNCAN

Here's as vivid an adventure as you're ever likely to meet, funny, folksy, scary, and wise, about a girl who runs from magic of one sort only to run headlong into sinister magic of another kind, make friends with ghosts, live in a house of mystery, and compete with the Devil Himself...

Andy Duncan made his first sale, to Asimov's Science Fiction, in 1995, and quickly made others, to Starlight, Sci Fiction, Dying For It, Realms of Fantasy, and Weird Tales, as well as several more sales to Asimov's. By the beginning of the new century, he was widely recognized as one of the most individual, quirky, and flavor-ful new voices on the scene today. In 2001 he won two World Fantasy Awards, one for his story "The Pottawatomie Giant," and one for his landmark first collection, Beluthahatchie and Other Stories; in 2002 his story "The Chief Designer" won a Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. His most recent books are a fiction anthology coedited with F. Brett Cox, Crossroads: Tales of the Southern Literary Fantastic; and a non-fiction book, Alabama Curiosities. A graduate of the Clarion West writers' workshop in Seattle, he was raised in Batesburg, South Carolina, and now lives in Frostburg, Maryland, with his wife, Sydney, where he edits Overdrive magazine, "The Voice of the American Trucker."

* * * *

M

Y name is Pearleen Sunday, though I was always called Pearl, and this is the story of how I met the widow of Flatland House and her 473 dead friends and sang a duet with the Devil's son-in-law and earned a wizard's anger by setting that wizard free.

At the time I did these things, I was neither child nor woman, neither

hay nor grass. I was like a cat with the door disease. She scratches to be let in or scratches to be let out, but when you open the door she only stands halfway and cocks her head and thinks deep cat thoughts till you could drown her. Had I been on either side of the door that summer, things might have turned out differently, but I could not decide, and so the door stood open to cold winds and marvels.

I grew up in Chattanooga in Professor Van Der Ast's Mammoth Cosmopolitan Musée and Pavilion of Science and Art. Musée is the French word for museum, and cosmopolitan means citified, and Professor Van Der Ast was born Hasil Bowersox in Rising Fawn, Georgia. Whether his were the quality Bowersoxes, who pronounce "Bower" to rhyme with "lower," or the common Bowersoxes, who pronounce "Bower" to rhyme with "scour," I cannot say, for Professor Van Der Ast never answered to either. The rest of the name of Professor Van Der Ast's Mammoth Cosmopolitan Musée and Pavilion of Science and Art is self-explanatory, although the nature of science and art is subject to debate, and it was not a pavilion but a three-story brickfront, and I would not call it mammoth either, though it did hold a right smart of things.

You would not find the museum if you looked today. It sat in the shadow of the downtown end of the new Walnut Street Bridge across the Tennessee River. Years before, General Sherman had built a bridge there that did not last any time before God washed it away, but He seemed to be tolerating the new one for now.

I was told my parents left me in a hatbox in the alley between the museum and the tobacco warehouse. Two Fiji cannibals on their smoke break took pity and took me inside to the Professor, who made me a paying attraction before I was two years of age. The sign, I was told, read TRANS-PARENT HUMAN HEAD! ALL LIVE AND ON THE INSIDE! What was inside was me, sucking a sugar tit with a bright lamp behind my head so my little brain and blood vessels could be seen. Every word on the sign was true.

A young girl like myself with no mother, father, or schooling could do worse in those days than work in an educational museum, which offered many career opportunities even for girls with no tattoos or beards and all their limbs. Jobs for girls at Professor Van Der Ast's included Neptuna the Living Mermaid, who combed her hair and switched her tail in a pool all day, and the Invisible Girl, who hid behind a sheet and spoke fortunes into a trumpet, and Zaiumma Agra the Circassian Princess, Purest Example of the White Race, who when snatched from the slave traders of Constan-tinople had left behind most of her clothes, though not enough to

shut us down. Our Purest Example of the White Race in summer 1895 was my friend Sally Ann Rummage of Mobile, Alabama, whose mother had been a slave, though not in Constantinople. Sally Ann was ashamed of the mu-seum and wrote her parents that she had become a teacher, which I sup-pose she had.

I had none of those jobs that summer because I was in that in-between age, and the Circassian Princess in particular was no in-between sort of job. No, I was so out of sorts with myself and the world that Professor Van Der Ast cast me entirely from the sight of the paying public, behind our Diorama of the Infernal Regions.

Now a diorama in those days was only a painting, but a painting so immense that no one ever would see it all at once. It was painted on a long strip of canvas ten feet high, and to see it, you rolled it out of a great spool, like a bolt of cloth in a dressmaker's shop for giants, and as it rolled out of the first spool it rolled back up in a second spool about twenty feet away. In between the spools the customers stood shoulder to shoulder and admired the sights that trundled past.

The spools were turned by an engine, but someone in the back had to keep the engine running and make sure the canvas threaded smooth, without snagging and tearing—for your town may have had a fine new Hell, but Chattanooga's was as ragged and patched as a family Bible. That someone in the back was me. I also had to work the effects. As the diorama moved past, and as Professor Van Der Ast stood on the public side and narrated the spiel, I opened and closed a bank of lanterns that beamed light through parts of the canvas—to make the flames of Hell flicker, and bats wheel through the air, and imps and satyrs wink in and out of existence like my evil thoughts as I sweated and strained like a fireman in a furnace room. Every day in the spotty mirror over my washstand upstairs, I rubbed my arms and shoulders and wondered what man would ever want a woman with muscles, and what man she might want in return.

Ours was the only diorama I ever saw, but Professor Van Der Ast said that one famous diorama in New York City was a view of the riverbank along the entire length of the Mississippi, from Minnesota to New Orleans. Park Avenue swells in boater hats could lounge in air-cooled comfort and watch it all slide past: eagle-haunted bluffs, woodlands a-creep with Indi-ans, spindly piers that stopped at the overalled butts of barefoot younguns, brawling river towns that bled filth for miles downstream. Professor Van Der Ast himself had been no farther north than Cleveland, Tennessee, but he described New York's Mississippi just as well as he described Chat-tanooga's Infernal Regions. You felt like you were there.

“Observe, my friends, from your safe vantage point this side of the veil, the ghastly wonders of the Infernal as they pass before you. I say, as *they pass before you!*” (The machinery was old and froze up sometimes.) “First on this ancient scroll, bequeathed us by the Chaldean martyrs, witness the sulfurous vapors of Lake Avernus, over which no sane bird will fly. Here is Briareus with his hundred arms, laboring to drag a chain the width of a stout man’s waist, and at the end of that mighty leash snaps the hound Cer-berus, with his fifty heads, each of his fifty necks a-coil with snakes. Here is the stern ferryman who turns away all wretches who die without Chris-tian burial. Next are the weeping lovers wringing their hands in groves of myrtle, never to be reunited with their soulmates. Madame, my handker-chief. Your pity does you honor. Next is the whip of scorpions that flays those who believed their sins concealed in life. Here is the nine-acre giant Tityus, chained at the bottom of the abyssal gulf. Here are sufferers chin deep in water they are doomed never to drink, while others are doomed to bail the water with sieves.”

A weeping schoolmarm might ask: “But what about the realms of the blessed? the Elysian fields? the laurel groves?”

“For such consolations, madam, one must consult canvases other than mine. And here we have the writhing Pandaemonium of pleasure, where all noble and spiritual aims are forgotten in the base fog of sensation and lust. Next is the great—”

“Hey, buddy, could we have a little more light on that there Pandaemonium of pleasure?”

“This is the family show, friend, come back at ten. Here is the great winepress in which hundreds of the damned are crushed together until they burst. Here are the filthy, verminous infants of ingratitude, which spit venom even as they are hoisted with tongs over the fire. Note, ladies and gentlemen, that throughout this dreadful panorama, the plants in view are all thorny and rank, the creatures all fanged and poisonous, the very stones misshapen and worthless, the men and women all sick, feeble, wracked, and forgotten, their only music Hell’s Unutterable Lament! Where all suffer horrid tor-ments not for one minute, not for one day, not for one age, not for two ages, not for a hundred ages, not for ten thousand millions of ages, but for-ever and ever without end, and never to be delivered! Mind your step at the door, next show two thirty, gratuities welcome.”

That was Professor Van Der Ast’s side of the canvas, the public side. I told no one what I saw on my side: the patches and the stains, the

back-ward paintings, the different tricks played by the light. I could see pictures, too, but only half-glimpsed, like those in clouds and treetops in leafy summertime. The pictures on my side were not horrible. I saw a man wrestling a lightning rod in a storm; and a great river catfish that sang to the crew in the gondola of a low-flying balloon; and a bespectacled woman pushing a single wheel down the road; and a ballroom full of dancing ghosts; and a man with a hand of iron who beckoned me with hinged fingers; and a farmer who waved good-bye to his happy family on the porch before vanishing, then, reappearing, waved hello to them again; and an angry face looking out of a boot; and a giant woman with a mus-tache throwing a man over the side of a riverboat; and a smiling man going over Niagara Falls in a barrel while around him bobbed a hundred hoodoo bottles, each with a rolled-up message for Marie Laveaux; and a hound dog with a pistol who was robbing a train; and a one-eyed man who lived in a gator hole; and a beggar presenting a peepshow to the Queen of Sheba; and a gorilla in a boater hat sitting in a deck chair watch-ing a diorama of the Mississippi scroll past; and a thousand other wonders to behold. My Infernal Regions were a lot more interesting than Professor Van Der Ast's, and sometimes they lighted up and moved without my hav-ing to do a thing.

My only other knowledge of magic at the time was thanks to Wendell Farethewell, the Wizard of the Blue Ridge, a magician from Yandro Moun-tain, North Carolina, who performed at Professor Van Der Ast's for three weeks each summer. I never had the chance to see his act because, as the Professor liked to remind us, we were being paid to entertain and not to be entertained, but I was told that at the climax he caught in his teeth a bullet fired through a crystal pitcher of lemonade, and I believe it was so because sometimes when a pinhead was not available, the Professor asked me to go onstage after the show and mop up the lemonade and pick up the sharp splinters of glass.

The tricks I saw the wizard Farethewell perform were done after hours, when all the residents of the museum went to the basement for drinks and cold-meat sandwiches and more drinks. I squirmed my way into the front of the crowd around a wobbly table made of splinters and watched as he pulled the Queen of Hearts out of the air and walked coins across his knuckles and floated dollar bills. "Just like the government," he always said when he floated a dollar bill, and we always laughed. He showed us fifty-seven ways to shuffle a deck of cards and seventeen of the ways to draw an ace off the top whenever one was needed, even five times in a row. "Do this in a gambling hall," he said, "and you'll get yourself shot. Do it among you good people, and it's just a pleasant diversion, something to make Little Britches smile."

That was what Farethewell called me, Little Britches. He was the only one who called me that. Big Fred, who played our What-Is-It?, tried it once, and I busted his nose.

If the night wore on and Farethewell drank too much, he got moody and talked about the war, and about his friend, an older man he never named. "The 26th North Carolina mustered up in Raleigh, and I couldn't sleep that first night, without no mountains around to hold me, so I mashed my face into my bedroll and cried. I ain't ashamed of it, neither. The others laughed or told me to hush, but this man, he said, 'Boy, you want to see a trick?' Now, what boy don't want to see a trick? And after he's seen it, what boy don't want to know how it's done?" As he talked he stared into space, but his hands kept doing tricks, as if they were independent of the rest of him. "At New Bern he taught me the back palm, the finger palm, the thumb palm; at the Wilderness the Hindu Shuffle and the Stodart Egg; at Spotsylvania the Biseaute flourish, the Miser's Dream, the Torn and Re-stored. I learned the Scotch and Soda and the Gin and Tonic before I drank either one; and all through the war, every day, I worked on the Three Ma-jor Vanishes: take, put, and pinch." As he said that, three coins disappeared from his hand, one by one. "So that was our war. It kept my mind off things, and maybe kept his mind off things, too. He had the tuberculosis pretty bad, toward the end. The last thing he taught me was the bullet catch, in the stockade at Appomattox, just before he died. I got one of his boots. The rest, they burned. When they turned out his pockets, it was just coins and cards and flash paper. It didn't look like magic no more. It just looked ... It looked like trash. The magic went when he went, except the little he left to me."

Someone asked, "What'd you learn at Gettysburg?" and Farethewell replied:

"What I learned at Gettysburg, I will teach no man. But one day, living or dead, I will hold the Devil to account for what I learned."

Then he began doing tricks with a knife, and I went upstairs to bed.

My in-between summer came to an end after the last viewing of a Saturday night. As I cranked the diorama back into place, I heard the Profes-sor talking to someone, a customer? Then the other voice got louder: "You ain't nothing but an old woman. She'll do just fine, you watch."

I could hear no more over the winding spool, and I did not want to stop it for fear of being caught eavesdropping. Then the Professor and the wiz-ard Farethewell were behind the diorama with me.

“Shut off that engine, Little Britches. You can do that later. Right now, you got to help me.” He had something in his hand, a tangle that glittered in the lamplight. He thrust it at me. “Go on, take it. Showtime was five minutes ago.”

“What are you talking about?” It was a little sparkly dress with feathers, and a hat, and slippers with heels. I looked at Farethewell, who was drinking from a flask, and at the Professor, who was stroking his silver beard.

“Pearl, please mind Mr. Farethewell, that’s a good girl. Just run along and put that on, and meet us in the theater, backstage.” I held the costume up to the light: what there was of the light, and what there was of the costume. “Sukie can’t help Mr. Farethewell with the ten o’clock show. She’s sick.”

“Dead drunk, you mean,” Farethewell roared, and lifted his flask. The Professor snatched it away. Something spattered my cheek and burned.

“Get as drunk as you like at eleven,” the Professor said. “Pearl, it’ll be easy. All you have to do is wave to the crowd, climb into the box, and lie there. Mr. Farethewell will do the rest.”

“The blades won’t come nowhere near you, Little Britches. The box is rigged, and besides, you ain’t no bigger’n nothing. You won’t even have to twist.”

“But,” I said.

“Pearl,” said the Professor, like there were fifteen R’s in my name. So I ran upstairs.

“What’s wrong with you?” Sally Ann cried when I burst in.

I told her while she helped me out of my coveralls and my blue denims and into the turkey suit. “What in the world are they thinking?” Sally Ann said. “Hold still, Pearl, if I don’t cinch this, you’ll walk plumb out of it.”

“My legs are cold!” I yelled.

The hat was nothing I would have called a hat. In a rainstorm it would have been no cover at all. I finally snuggled it down over my hair and got the ostrich plume out of my face. Sally Ann was looking at me funny.

“Oh, my,” she said.

“What?”

“Nothing. Come on, let’s go. I want to see this. Clothes do make a difference, don’t they?”

“Not to me,” I said, and would have fallen down the stairs if she hadn’t grabbed me. “Who can walk in any such shoes as this?”

There’s no dark like the dark backstage in a theater, but Sally Ann managed to guide me through all the ropes and sandbags without disaster. I carried the shoes. Just inside the backdrop curtain, the Professor made a hurry-up motion. I hopped one-legged to get the shoes back on and peered through the slit in the curtain, but was blinded by the lamps shining onto the stage.

Farethewell was yelling to make himself heard over what sounded like a theater full of drunken men. “And now, my lovely assistant will demon-strate that no cutlass ever forged can cut her, that she can dodge the blade of any cavalryman, whether he be a veteran of the Grand Army of the Republic—”

The crowd booed and hissed.

“—or whether he fought for Tennessee under the great Nathan Bedford Forrest!”

The crowd whooped and stomped its approval.

“Here she is,” muttered the Professor, as he held the curtain open.

I blinked in the light, still blinded. Farethewell’s big callused hand grabbed mine and led me forward. “Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Aphrodite, the Pearl of the Cumberland!”

I stood frozen.

The crowd continued to roar.

Lying on a table in front of us was a long box like a coffin, open at the top. A pile of swords lay beside it.

“Lie down in the box, honey,” Farethewell murmured. He wore a long blue robe and a pointed hat, and his face was slick with sweat.

I walked to the box like a puppet and looked down at the dirty pillow, the tatty blanket inside.

“And if you don’t believe me when I tell you how amazingly nimble Aphrodite is, why when I am done shoving cutlasses into the box, those of you willing to pay an additional fifty cents can line up here, on the stage, and look down into the box and see for yourself that this young woman has suffered no injury whatsoever, save perhaps to her costume.”

The crowd screamed with laughter. Blinking back tears, I leaned over the box, stepped out of the shoes: first left, then right. I looked up and into the face of a fat man in the front row. He winked.

In my head I heard the Professor say: “This is the family show, friend, come back at ten.”

I turned and ran.

The noise of the crowd pushed me through the curtains, past Sally Ann and the Professor. In the sudden darkness I tripped over a sandbag, fell and skinned my knees, then stood and flailed my way to the door and into the corridor beyond.

“Pearl! Come back!”

My cheeks burned with shame and anger at myself and the crowd and Farethewell and the Professor and Sally Ann and those stupid, stupid shoes; I vowed as I ran barefoot like a monkey through the back corridors that I would never wear their like again. I ran as fast as I could—not upstairs, not to the room I slept in, but to the one place in the museum I felt was mine.

I slammed the door behind me and stood, panting, behind the Diorama of the Infernal Regions.

Someone, probably the Professor, had done part of my job for me, and shut down all the lamps. It was the job I liked least, snuffing the lights one by one like candles on a cake. But the Professor had not finished rolling up the canvas. It was backstage dark, but up there on the canvas, at eye level, was a little patch of light, flickering.

I'm sure that when I went missing, my friends thought I had run away, but they were wrong. I was running *away* from nothing. I was running *to* something, though I did not know what it was. Running to *what* is the rest of my story—is all my story, I reckon.

I walked right up to the flickering spot on my side of the canvas. The tip of my nose was an inch from the paint. When I breathed in, I smelled sawdust and walnuts. When I breathed out, the bright patch brightened just a little. If you blow gently on a flame, it does not go out, but flares up; that's how the canvas was. I almost could see a room through the canvas, a pan-eled room. Behind me, a woman's voice called my name, but in front of me, I almost heard music, organ music.

I closed my eyes and focused not on the canvas, but on the room beyond.

I stepped forward.

Have you ever stepped through a cobweb? That's how I stepped out of Professor Van Der Ast's Mammoth Cosmopolitan Musée and Pavilion of Science and Art and into a place without a ticket booth, into my own can-vas, my own Infernal Regions.

* * * *

NOT a funeral, a ball. The organist was playing a waltz.

I opened my eyes.

I was in a ballroom full of ghosts.

I reached behind to feel the canvas, to feel anything familiar and cer-tain. Instead I felt a cold hard surface: a magnificent stained-glass window that ran the length of the wall, depicting mermaids and magicians and a girl at the lever of an infernal engine. Window and room spun around me. My knees buckled, and I sank onto a beautifully inlaid wooden floor.

The room wasn't spinning, but the dancers were. Fifty couples whirled through the room, the silver chandeliers and mahogany paneling and gold-leaf wallpaper visible through their transparent bodies. I never had seen such a beautiful room. The dancers were old and young, richly and poorly dressed, white and black and Indian. Some wore wigs and knee breeches, others buckskins and fur caps, others evening gowns or tailcoats. They didn't look like show people. All moved faster than their

actual steps. No feet quite touched the floor. The dancers were waltzing in the air.

Against the far wall was a pump organ, and sitting at the bench with her back to me was a tiny gray-haired lady, shoulders swaying with the force of her fingers on the keys, her feet on the pedals. I tried to see the sheet music through her but could not. She was no ghost; she was substantial. I looked at my hand and saw through it the interlocking diamond pattern of the floor. That's when I screamed.

The music stopped.

The dancing stopped.

The old lady spun on her bench and stared at me.

Everyone stared at me.

Then the dancers gasped and stepped—no, floated—backward in the air, away from me. There was movement beside me. I looked up to see a skinny girl in a feathered costume step out of the stained-glass window. I screamed again, and she jumped and screamed, too.

She was me, and she also was becoming transparent.

“Five minutes break, please, everyone,” trilled a little-old-lady voice. “When we return, we'll do the Virginia Reel.”

The second Pearl had slumped onto the floor beside me. A third Pearl stepped out of the stained glass just as the old lady reached us. She wore an elaborate black mourning-dress, with the veil thrown back to reveal chubby, ruddy cheeks and big gray eyes. “There, there,” she said. “This won't do at all. The first rule of psychic transport is to maintain integrity, to hold oneself together.” A fourth Pearl stepped from the glass as the old lady seized my hand and the second Pearl's hand and brought them together, palm to palm. It was like pressing my hand into butter; my hand began to sink into hers, and hers into mine. We both screamed and tried to pull back, but the old lady held our wrists in a grip like iron.

“Best to close your eyes, dear,” the old lady said.

My eyes immediately shut tight not of my own doing but as if some unseen hand had yanked them down like window shades. The old lady's grip tightened, and I feared my wrist would break. My whole body got

warmer, from the wrist onward, and I began to feel better—not just calmer, but somehow fuller, more complete.

Finally, the old lady released my wrist, and said, “You can open your eyes now, dear.”

I did, and it was my own doing this time. I stared at my hands, with their lines and calluses and gnawed-to-the-quick nails, and they were so familiar and so *solid* that I started to cry.

The ballroom was empty but for me—*one* of me—and the old lady kneeling beside me, and a single ghost bobbing just behind her, a little ferret-faced mustached man in a bowler hat and a checked waistcoat that might have been colorful once, but now was gray checked with gray.

“Beautifully done,” said the floater. “You have the hands of a sur-geon.”

“The hands are the least of it, Mr. Dellafave, but you are too kind. Goodness, child, you gave me a fright. Six of you stranded in the glass. Good thing I was here to set things right. But I forget my manners. My name is Sarah Pardee Winchester, widow of the late William Wirt Winchester, and this is my friend Mr. Dellafave.” She eyed my costume, reached over, and tugged on my ostrich plume. “Too young to be a showgirl,” she said, “al-most.”

I shuddered and wiped my nose with the back of my wonderful old-friend hand and asked: “Am I . . . Are you . . . Please, is this Heaven or Hell?”

The old lady and the bowler-hatted man both laughed. His laugh sounded like steam escaping, but hers was throaty and loud, like a much younger, much larger woman.

“Opinions differ,” the old lady said. “We think of it simply as Cali-fornia.”

* * * *

SHE called the place Llanada Villa, which she said was Spanish for “Flat-land House.” I had never lived in a house before the widow took me in, so you might call Flatland House my introduction to the whole principle of houses. And what an introduction it was! No house I’ve seen since has been a patch on it.

There was the size, to start with. The house covered six acres. Counting the rooms that had been walled off and made unreachable except by ghosts, but not counting the rooms that had been demolished or merged into larger spaces, the house had 150 rooms, mostly bedrooms, give or take a dozen. "I've slept in only seventy or eighty of them myself," the widow told me, "but that's enough to get the general idea."

Still the place was not finished. Workmen were always in the process of adding rooms, balconies, porches, turrets, whole wings; or in the process of dismantling or renovating what they had built just the month before. The construction had moved far away from the front of the house, where the widow mostly lived, but the distant sounds of saws and hammers and the men's voices calling to one another—"Steady! Steady! Move it just a hair to the right, please, Bill"—could be heard day and night. They worked in shifts around the clock. Once a week the foremen took off their hats and gathered in the carriage entrance for payday. The widow towed from the house a child's wagon full of heavy sacks, each full of enough gold pieces to pay each foreman's workers the equivalent of three dollars a day. The foremen were all beefy men, but even they strained to heft the bags and tote them away. They never complained, though.

"Aren't you afraid?" I asked the widow, that first payday.

"Of what, dear?"

"Of one of those men breaking into the house, and robbing you."

"Oh, Pearl, you are a caution! You don't need to worry about robbers, oh, no. Not in *this* house."

I suppose intruders would have quickly gotten lost, for many parts of the house simply did not make sense. Staircases led to ceilings and stopped. Doorways opened onto brick walls, or onto nothing, not even a balcony, just the outside air. Secret passageways no taller than the widow criss-crossed the house, so that she could pop in and out of sight without warn-ing, as if she herself were a ghost. The widow told me the front door had never been opened, never even unlocked, since its hinges were hung.

I found the outside of the house even more confusing. If I walked around any corner, I found arched windows, recessed balconies, turrets and witch's caps and cupolas with red tile roofs, and miles of gingerbread trim. If I walked around the next corner, I found the same thing, only more of it. Many houses, I'm told, have only four corners to walk around, but

Flatland House had dozens. Looking away from the house was no help, because no matter what direction I looked, I saw the same high cypress hedge, and beyond that, rolling hills of apricot, plum, and walnut trees stretching to the horizon. I never made it all the way around the place, but would give up and go back inside, and where I went inside always seemed to be the break-fast room, with the widow knitting in the wicker chair just where I left her. She always asked, “Did you have a good trip, dear?”

In all those 150 rooms was not a single mirror. Which suited me just fine.

I did get lonely sometimes. Most of the ghosts had little to say—to the living, anyway—beyond “Lovely day, isn’t it?” The few indoor servants seemed afraid of me, and none stayed in the house past sundown. The workmen I was forbidden to speak to at all.

“Do you never have any visitors,” I asked the widow, “other than the workmen, and the ghosts, and the servants, and me?”

“Goodness, that’s enough, wouldn’t you say? I know there are 473 ghosts, not counting the cats, and Lord only knows how many workmen coming and going. And don’t ever think of yourself as a visitor, Pearl dear. Consider this your home, for as long as you wish to stay.”

The only ghost willing to spend time with me, other than the cats, was Mr. Dellafave. Three weeks into my stay at Flatland House, during a stroll around the monkey-puzzle tree, I asked him:

“Mr. Dellafave, what did you do before ...”

His face had the look of someone expecting his feelings to be hurt but game not to let on.

“... before you came here?” I finished.

“Ah,” he said, smiling. “I worked for a bank, in Sacramento. I was a figure man. I added, mostly, and subtracted twice a week, and, on red—letter days, multiplied. Long division was wholly out of my jurisdiction, that was another floor altogether—but make no mistake, I could have done it. I was ready to serve. Had the third floor been swept away by fire or flood, the long division would have proceeded without interruption, for I’d had the training. But the crisis, like most crises, never came. I arrived at the bank every morning at eight. I went across the street to the saloon every day at noon for two eggs and a pickle and a sarsaparilla and the afternoon papers.

I left the bank every day at five, and got back to the boardinghouse for supper at six. Oh, I was a clockwork, I was. ‘You can set your watch by Dellaface,’ that’s what they said at the bank and the saloon and the boardinghouse and, well, those are the only places they said it, really, be-cause those are the only places where anyone took any notice of me at all. Certainly that streetcar driver did not. He would have rung his bell if he had; it’s in their manual. That was a sloppy business all around, frankly, a harsh thing to say, but there it is. I know the time had to have been 12:47 precisely, because I walked out of the saloon at 12:46, and the streetcar was not due to pass until 12:49. I was on schedule, but the streetcar was not. I looked up, and there it was, and I flung up my arms—as if that would have helped, flinging up my arms. When I lowered them, I was standing in what I now know as Mrs. Winchester’s potting shed. I was never an especially spiritual man, Pearl dear, but I considered myself fairly well versed on all the major theories of the afterlife . . . none of which quite prepared me for Mrs. Winchester’s potting shed. I didn’t even bring my newspaper.”

“But why—”

He held up a hand, like a serene police officer at an intersection. “I have no idea, Pearl, why I came here. None of us does. And I don’t mean to imply that we’re unhappy, for it is a pleasant place, and Mrs. Winchester is quite good to us, but our leaving here seems rather out of the question. If I were to pass through that cypress hedge over there, I would find myself en-tering the grounds through the hedge on the other side. It’s the same front to back, or even up and down.”

“I guess Mrs. Winchester is the magnet, and you and the others are . . .”

“The filings, yes. The tacks pulled from the carpet. I stand in the tower sometimes—if you can call it standing—and I look over all these rooftops and chimneys, all connected to the same house, and I’m forced to admit that this is more room than I allowed myself in life. If the boardinghouse were the front door of Llanada Villa, the bank would be at the carriage en-trance, and the saloon would be at the third sunporch, the one that’s been walled in and gets no sun. Which is such a small fraction of the house, re-ally. And yet the whole house feels such a small part of the Earth, and I find myself wishing that I had ventured a bit farther, when I could.”

We walked together in silence—well, I walked, anyway—while I reflected that the owner of the house seemed quite unable to leave it herself. And what about me? Could I leave Flatland House, and were I to

leave it, where would I go? Professor Van Der Ast's seemed much farther away than a single continent.

"You'd best get inside, Pearl. The breeze from the bay is quite damp today."

I moved my face toward Mr. Dellafave's cheek, and when he began to blur, I figured I was close enough, and kissed the air.

"Shucks," he said, and dissipated entirely.

I felt no bay breeze, but as I ran back to the house I clutched my shawl more tightly anyway.

* * * *

THE next day, the earthquake struck.

The chandeliers swayed. The organ sighed and moaned. The crystal chattered in the cabinets. One nail worked its way free and rolled across the thrumming floorboards. A rumble welled up, not from below the house, but from above and around the house, as if the sound were pressing in from all sides. The ghosts were in a mad whirl, coursing through the house like a current of smoke overhead, blended and featureless but for the occasional startled face. I lurched along the walls, trying to keep my balance as I sought the exit nearest me, the front door. Once I fell and yelped as my palms touched the hot parquet.

Plaster sifted into my eyes as I stumbled through the entrance hall. I knew my mistake when I saw that massive front door, surely locked, the key long since thrown away or hidden in a far scullery drawer of this lu-natic house. If the entire edifice were to shake down and crush me, this slab of swirling dark oak would be the last thing standing, a memorial to Pearl.

The grandfather clock toppled and fell just behind me, with the crash of a hundred heavy bells. I flung myself at the door and wrenched the knob. It turned easily, as if oiled every day, and I pulled the door open with no trouble at all. Suddenly all was silent and still. A robin sang in the crepe myrtle as the door opened on a lovely spring day. A tall black man in a charcoal tailcoat stood on the porch, top hat in hand, and smiled down at me.

"Good morning," he said. "I was beginning to fear that no one was at home. I hope my knock didn't bring you too dreadfully far. I know this house

is harder to cross than the Oklahoma Territory.”

“Your knock?” I was too flabbergasted to be polite. “All that was your knock?”

He laughed as he stepped inside, so softly that it was just an open-mouthed smile and a hint of a cough. “That? Oh, my, no. That was just my reputation preceding me. Tell me, pray, might the mistress of the house be at home?”

“Where else would I be, Wheatstraw?” asked the widow, suddenly at my elbow and every hair in place.

“Hello, Winchester,” the visitor said.

They looked at each other without moving or speaking. I heard behind me a heaving sound and a muffled clang. I turned just as the grandfather clock resettled itself in the corner.

Then the widow and the visitor laughed and embraced. She kicked up one foot behind. Her head did not reach his chin.

“Pearl,” the widow said, “this is Mr. Petey Wheatstraw.”

“Pet-ER,” he corrected, with a little bow.

“Mr. Wheatstraw,” the widow continued, “is a rogue. My goodness,” she added, as if something had just occurred to her. “How did you get in?”

We all looked at the front door. It was closed again, its bolts thrown, its hinges caked with rust. No force short of dynamite could have opened it.

The man Wheatstraw nodded toward me.

“Well, I’ll be,” the widow said. “She makes as free with my house as a termite, this one does. Well, you haven’t come to see me, anyway, you old good-for-nothing,” she said, swatting him as she bustled past. “It’s a half hour early, but you might as well join us for tea.”

Wheatstraw offered me an arm and winked. This was far too fresh for my taste, but I was too shaken by the not-quite-earthquake to care. As I took hold of his arm (oak-strong beneath the finery), I felt my muscles complain, as if I had done hard work. I looked over my shoulder at the seized-up door as Wheatstraw swept me down the hallway.

“I heard you were here,” Wheatstraw said.

“How?”

“Oh, you’re a loud one, Miss Big Feet, clomp clomp clomp.” He winked again. “Or is that just your reputation I heard?”

Something was wrong with the corridor, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Then I realized that it was empty. Everything in the house was back to normal—paintings returned to their nails, plaster returned to the walls—except the ghosts, which were nowhere to be seen. I was so used to them flitting past me and over me and through me, even gliding through my bedroom wall, then retreating with apologies, like someone who didn’t realize the train compartment was occupied, that their presence hardly bothered me at all. Their absence gave me a shiver.

“They’ll be back after I’m gone,” Wheatstraw said.

I laughed. “You telling me you scared off the haints? I mean, are you saying that Mrs. Winchester’s, uh, guests don’t like you?”

“I’m sure they have nothing against me personally. How could they? Once you get to know me, I’m really a fine fellow, full of learning and grace and wit, a decent dancer, a welcome partner at whist. I never snort when I laugh or drag my shirtsleeves in the soup. No, it must be my business affiliation. The company I represent. The Old Concern. My father-in-law’s firm, actually, and my inheriting is out of the question. But these days we all must work for somebody, mustn’t we?”

I thought of Sally Ann the Circassian Princess, and of Farethewell’s hand on mine. “True enough,” I said.

* * * *

WHEATSTRAW set down his teacup and saucer with a clatter, and said, “Well, enough chitchat. It’s question time.”

“Oh, Petey,” the widow said. “Must you? We were having such a nice visit. Surely that can wait till later.”

“I am in no hurry whatsoever, Winchester, but my father-in-law is another story. You might say that impatience rather defines my father-in-law. It is the cause of his, uh, present career. Pearl, please pay close attention.”

I said nothing, having just shoved another chocolate cookie lengthwise into my mouth. I never quite realized that I was always a little hungry at Professor Van Der Ast's, until I came to Flatland House.

Wheatstraw rummaged in the inside pocket of his jacket and produced an atomizer. He opened his mouth and sprayed the back of his throat. "La la la la la," he said. "La la la la laaaaa. Pitch-perfect, as ever. Winchester?" He offered her the atomizer. "Don't, then. Now: Pearl."

He began to sing, in a lovely baritone:

*Oh, you must answer my questions nine
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
Or you're not God's, you're one of mine
And you are the weaver's bonny.*

"Now, Pearl, when I say, 'one of mine,' please understand that I speak not for myself but for the firm that I represent."

"And when you say 'God,'" I said, speaking carefully, "you speak of the firm that you do *not* represent."

"In a clamshell, yes. Now, if you're quite done interrupting—"

"I didn't interrupt!" I interrupted. "You interrupted yourself."

He slapped the table. "The idea! As if a speaker could interrupt him-self. Why, you might as well say that a river could ford itself, or a fence jump itself."

"Or a bore bore himself," the widow said.

"You're not helping," Wheatstraw said.

"And I'm not the weaver's bonny," I said, becoming peevish now, "whatever a weaver's bonny is."

"Well," Wheatstraw said, "a weaver is a maker of cloth, such as aprons are made with, and gags, and a bonny is a beauty, a lovely creature, a pre-cious thing."

"I don't know any weavers," I said, "except my friend Sally Ann taught

me to sew a button. And I'm not beautiful, or lovely, or precious."

"Granted, that does seem a stretch at the moment," Wheatstraw said. "But we mustn't always take things so literally. When you say, 'I'm a silly goose,' you don't mean you expect to be plucked and roasted, and when you say, 'I'm fit to be tied,' you aren't asking to be roped and trussed, and when you say, 'Well, I'm damned,' you don't mean ..."

His voice trailed off. A chill crept into the room. The sunlight through the bay window dimmed, as if a cloud were passing.

"... anything, really," Wheatstraw continued, and he smiled as the sun came out. "So, for purposes of this song, *if no other*, who are you?"

I folded my arms and forced my shoulders as far as I could into the padding of the love seat and glared at Wheatstraw, determined to frown down his oh-so-satisfied smile.

"I'm the weaver's bonny," I mumbled.

Am not, I thought.

"Fine and dandy," Wheatstraw said. "Now, where was I? I'll have to go back to Genesis, as Meemaw would say." He cleared his throat.

*Oh, you must answer my questions nine
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
Or you're not God's, you're one of mine
And you are the weaver's bonny.*

Ninety-nine and ninety *what?*, I wondered, but I kept my mouth shut.

*What is whiter than the milk?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
And what is softer than the silk?
Oh, you are the weaver's bonny
What is higher than a tree?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
And what is deeper than the sea?
Oh, you are the weaver's bonny
What is louder than a horn?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
And what is sharper than a thorn?*

*Oh, you are the weaver's bonny
What's more innocent than a lamb?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
And what is meaner than womankind?
Oh, you are the weaver's bonny.*

It was a short song, but it seemed to last a long time; as I sat there determined to resist, to be defiant and unamused, I realized I wasn't so much listening to it as being surrounded by it, filled by it, submerged in it. I was both sleepy and alert, and the pattern in the parquet floor was full of faces, and the love seat pushed back and kneaded my shoulders, and the laces of my high-topped shoes led into the darkness like tracks in the Lookout Mountain tunnel. I could not vouch for Wheatstraw being a decent dancer as he claimed (though I suspected *decent* was hardly the word), but the man sure could sing. And somewhere in the second hour of the song (surely, I think now upon telling this, some lines were repeated, or ex-tended, or elaborated upon), Wheatstraw's voice was joined by a woman's, his voice and hers twined together like fine rope. That voice was the widow Winchester's: *And you are the weaver's bonny.*

I sucked air and sat up as if startled from a dream, but felt less alert than a second before. The song was over. The widow pretended to gather up the tea things, and Wheatstraw pretended to study his fingernails.

"That part about womankind is insulting," the widow said.

"I didn't write it," he said. "The *folk* wrote it."

"Menfolk," she said.

"Eight," I said, and only after I said it did I realize why I had said it.

"Hm?" Wheatstraw asked, without looking up.

The widow held a tipped teacup, looking at nothing, as a thread of tea like a spider's descended to the saucer.

"Eight," I repeated. "Milk, silk, two; tree, sea, four; horn, thorn, six; lamb, kind, eight." I sang, rather than spoke, in surprise at my voice: "*Oh, you must answer my questions nine ... It ain't questions nine, it's ques-tions eight. What's the ninth question?*"

Wheatstraw looked at the widow, and the widow looked at

Wheat-straw. "Maybe that's it," Wheatstraw murmured. "'What's the ninth ques-tion,' maybe that's the ninth question."

"No," I said.

"Why no?" Wheatstraw cooed.

"Because," I said. "Because that would be stupid."

Wheatstraw laughed and slapped his thigh with his hat. The widow slammed two plates together.

"Indeed it would be," she snapped. "Petey, take these plates. Take them, I say. Do a lick of work for once in your lazy son-in-law of a life."

"So what's the ninth question?" I asked again.

"That's for you to tell us," Wheatstraw said.

"To tell *you*, you mean," the widow said, driving him from the room beneath a stack of dishes. "Don't drag *me* into this."

"Oh, excuse me, Lady Astor, whose house is it? The girl's a wizard, Sarah, and you can't stow a wizard in the china cupboard like a play-pretty, like one of your ghosts, like Mr. Dellafave in there," he shouted as he passed a china cupboard. Its door trembled, and someone inside squeaked.

"You know the rules," Wheatstraw continued as we all entered the kitchen in a clump. He dumped the dishes into the sink with a crash and whirled to face us. I tried to hide behind the widow, though she was a foot shorter. Wheatstraw pointed at her like he wanted to poke a hole in the air. His gentleman's fingernail was now long and ragged, with something crusted beneath, and his eyes were red as a drunkard's. "Just look at her," he said. "Just stand near her, for pity's sake! She's stoked with magic like a furnace with coal, and the wide world is full of matches. She's in a different world now, and she has got to learn." He turned to me. "Tea party's over, my dear. From now on, it's test after test, and you have your first assignment, your first nine questions."

"Eight," I said.

He threw back his head and roared like a bull. I clapped my hands over my ears and shrieked. Our dresses billowed as if in a strong wind. The

cords stood out on Wheatstraw's neck. His hot breath filled the room. Then he closed his mouth, and the roar was gone. "All righty then," he said. "Eight it is. You owe the Old Concern eight answers—and one question." He jammed his hat two-handed onto his head down to his eyebrows, then sprang into the sink. He crouched there, winked, and vanished down the drain with a gurgle. His hat dropped to the porcelain and wobbled in place until it, too, was snatched into the depths. Wheatstraw's voice chuckled through the pipes, and ghosts flowed keening from the faucet.

"Showoff," the widow said. She squeezed my arm. "He's a liar, too. Absolutely terrible at whist."

"When he said I had to answer those questions, was that a lie, too?"

"Ah, no, that part was true enough."

"And the part about me being ... a wizard?"

The widow smiled. "Truest of all," she said.

* * * *

"ALL wizards have much the same talents," said the widow, as she washed the unbroken dishes, and I dried them, "just as all carpenters, all painters, all landscapers do. But each wizard also has a specialty, some talent she is especially good at. Some work at the craft for decades before realizing what their specialty is. Some realize what it was only in hindsight, only on their deathbeds, if they ever realize it at all. But other wizards have their talents handed to them, almost from birth, the way we all are granted the earth and the sky.

"I myself was no taller than a turnip when I realized that many of the little friends I played with every day, in the attic and beneath the grape arbor and in the bottom of the garden, were children that others could not see, and I realized, too, that my parents did not like for me to speak of them, to say, 'Oh, Papa, how funny! Little Merry just passed through your waistcoat, as you were stirring your tea.' How cross he became that day."

She wrung dry a dishcloth in her tiny fists. I blew soap bubbles from my palm into the face of a sleeping tabby as it floated past. The bubbles bobbed through the cat, or was it the other way around? The widow had been scrubbing dishes with pumice, so the bubbles were reddish in color and seemed more substantial than the wholly transparent cat. Then the bubbles vanished, and the tabby remained.

The widow continued: “And so I began keeping my talent secret, and once you start keeping your talents secret, why, you’re well along the path of the wizard.”

“My talents are a secret even from me,” I said.

“There now, you see how wrong you can be?” said the widow. She popped my shoulder with the dish towel. “You play with dead cats. You converse with all my boarders. You unbind the front door and then bind it again without half-trying. You come here from Tennessee in a single step, as if the world were a map you could fold. My goodness, that’s a step even Paul Bunyan couldn’t take, and Paul is a big, big man.” After a moment’s reverie, she shook her head and with a great splash yanked free the plug. “Well, that’s done!” she cried over the rush of the emptying sink. “May it all go down Wheatstraw’s gullet.” She stood on tiptoe and kissed my cheek. Her kiss was quick, dry, and powdery, like the dab of a cotton swab. “Never you fret, child,” she said, taking my arm and leading me down the steps into the garden. “You’ve got talent to burn, as Mr. Winchester would have said. And now that you’ve begun to focus, well, you’ll tumble across a specialty or three very soon, I daresay.”

“Mr. Wheatstraw said I’m in a different world now.”

The widow snorted. “Different world, indeed! You can’t change worlds like garters, my dear. This is the same world you were born into, the same world you are stuck with, all the days of your life. Never forget that. But the older you get, and the more traveling you do, why, the more of this world you inevitably will see—and inevitably be *able* to see, I daresay.”

“Because I walked through the diorama, you mean?”

“That was a powerful bit of traveling, indeed it was. Doubtless it broadened your mind a bit. Who knows? A few weeks ago you might have been as ignorant of the spirit world as my carpenters, might have looked right through Mr. Dellafave without even seeing him, much less being able to converse with him. And what a shame that would have been,” she said, not sounding quite convinced.

I considered telling her that Mr. Dellafave was in love with her, but decided she knew that already. Instead, I finally dared to ask a question.

“Mrs. Winchester. In all these years since Mr. Winchester died, has he ever, well . . . visited?”

“Ah, that’s sweet of you to ask, child,” said the widow, with a sniff and a toss of her head. “No, not yet, though early on I looked for him and listened for him, by day and by night. Especially by night. I confess I even hired a medium or two to conduct a séance—for those were all the rage, a few years ago.” She waved absently as we passed a headless brakeman, who raised his lantern to her. “A phantom herd of buffalo might have stampeded through the parlor without those frauds noticing. And the mess! We mopped up ecto-plasm for days.” She leaned against the trunk of an English yew and stared, not unhappily, into the sky. “I finally concluded that Mr. Winchester—like my mama and papa, and my old nurse, and my little dog, Zip, that I had when we were first wed, and my poor child Annie—that I will be reunited with none of them until I’m as insubstantial as that lady in the pond over there.”

In silence, we watched the woman as she rose from the water, stood a few moments on the surface, then sank out of sight amid the lily pads, her face unreadable. Her dress was from an earlier time. Where had all her lovers got to, I wondered, and what did she remember of them?

“I’ll tell you the puzzle that worries me,” the widow Winchester abruptly said, “and it’s not Mr. Winchester, and it’s not where all the dogs go. What worries me is that in all these years of receiving the dear departed in my home, I have met not one—not one—who was, in life, a wizard.”

* * * *

“SARAH!” the man yelled. “Sarah!”

The widow and I ran to the bay window in the parlor. I knew that voice.

A two-horse wagon had pulled up in front of the house, and a big man in a black suit and black hat was climbing out of it. It was a warm fall day, but his hat and shoulders were dusted with snow, and ice clung to the spokes of the wheels. The wagon was faded blue and covered with painted stars and crescent moons. The side read:

WIZARD OF THE BLUE RIDGE
MAGICIAN OF THE OLD SOUTH
PURVEYOR OF MAGIC AND MIRTH

He removed his hat and called again: “Sarah! I got him! I finally got him!”

It was Mr. Farethewell.

By the time we reached the front door—which the widow opened with a wave of her hand—a horse and rider had galloped up. It was Petey Wheatstraw, dressed like a fox hunter in red coat, white breeches, and high boots.

“Winchester, do something!” he yelled as he dismounted.
“Farethewell’s gone crazy.”

“Crazy, nothing,” Farethewell said. “He’s trapped like a bug in a jar.”

“Who is?” the widow asked.

“Old Scratch himself!” Farethewell replied. “Here’s your Devil.”

He went to the back of the wagon and began dragging out something heavy, something we couldn’t yet see.

The widow looked to Wheatstraw. “Is this true?”

He threw up his hands. “Who knows? No one’s seen the Old Man in days.”

Farethewell dragged the whatever-it-was a little closer to the end of the wagon, and an old boot thumped to the gravel. I stepped closer, out of the shadow of the porch.

“Well, hello, Little Britches,” said Farethewell. “Sarah told me you were here. So you decided to pull some magic after all?” He pulled a flask from his jacket, looked at it, then laughed and flung it across the yard. It landed in the rosebushes with a clank.

“She told you?” I cried. I got behind a pillar. Just the sight of Farethewell made me feel flushed and angry. “You *know* each other?”

“Well, he *is* a wizard,” Wheatstraw said.

Farethewell stood there, hands on hips, and looked pleased with himself. The widow peered into the wagon.

“Where is he? Is that his boot?”

Farethewell snatched her up and hugged her and spun her around.

“That ain’t his boot. That’s him! He’s in the boot! Come look, Little Britches!”

“Don’t you call me that,” I yelled, but I stepped off the porch anyway. Farethewell took hold of the boot with both rough hands and walked backward, hunched over, dragging the boot toward the house as if he dragged a big man’s corpse. The boot tore a rut in the gravel.

“Couldn’t be,” Wheatstraw said.

“It is!” Farethewell said.

“Blasphemy,” the widow said.

“Bad for business, anyway,” Wheatstraw said.

Farethewell let go of the boot and stepped back, gasping, rubbing the small of his back with his hands. “I run him down in the Sierras,” he said. “He’d a got away from me, if he had just let go of that chicken. Seven days and seven nights we fought up and down them slopes. The avalanches made all the papers. I’ve had this boot since Appomattox. It’s my teacher’s boot, hexed with his magic and with his blood. On our eighth day of wrestling, I got this jammed down over the Devil’s head, and just kept on jamming till he was all inside, and now the Devil will pay!”

We all gathered around the boot.

“It’s empty,” the widow said.

Wheatstraw cackled. “Sure is. Farethewell, you are crazier than a moonstruck rat.”

I did not laugh. Peering out through the laces of the boot was a face. The two blue eyes got wider when they saw me. The face moved back a little, so that I could see more of it.

It was Farethewell in the boot.

I looked over my shoulder. Yes, big Farethewell stood behind me, grinning. But the tiny man in the boot was Farethewell also, wearing a robe and pointed hat, as I last had seen him at Professor Van Der Ast’s.

The little Farethewell hugged himself as if he were cold and began silently to cry.

“What’s the matter, child?” the widow asked. I shrugged off her little spindly hand of comfort. It was like twitching free of a spider.

“What you see in there?” Wheatstraw asked.

“Tell them, Little Britches!”

“Don’t take on so, dear. What could you possibly see? This has noth-ing to do with you.”

“Maybe it does,” said Farethewell. “Who you see in there, girl? What’s this varmint to you?”

“What’s his name this time?” Wheatstraw asked. “The Old Man an-swers to more names than the Sears and Roebuck catalog.”

I didn’t answer. Little Farethewell was backing up, pressing himself flat against the heel of that old floppy boot. I stepped forward to see him better, and he shook so the whole boot trembled.

“He’s scared,” I said, more loud and fierce than I meant to sound, for in fact this scared me worse than anything—not that I was faced with a second Farethewell the size of a doll you could win with a ball toss, but that I was more fearsome to him than his larger self was. What kind of booger did he take me for? This scared me but made me mad, too. I snarled and made my fingers into claws like Book the Panther Boy and lunged.

“Yah!”

Little Farethewell twitched so hard the boot fell over. The sole was so worn you could see through it nearly, and a gummy spot at the toe trea-sured a cigarette butt and a tangle of hair.

“He’s ours,” big Farethewell hissed into my ear. “Whatever face he’s showing you, girl, whoever he once was to you, he is ours now and no mis-take. All the way here, off the slopes and down the river and through the groves, it was all I could do to keep him booted and not kicking the boards out of the wagon, but now you got him broken like a pony. And a girl loves a pony. He’s mine and yours together now.”

“Don’t listen,” the widow said.

“Sarah. You forgetting what we got in there? You forgetting

Gettys-burg, Cold Harbor, Petersburg? The tuberculosis that carried off your William, the marasmus that stole Annie from the cradle? Don't you care what this *thing* has done to the world, what it still could do? Ain't you learned nothing?"

"Some things ain't fit to be learned," the widow said, "and some wiz-ards breathing God's free air are cooped up worse than this creature is. Petey, tell him. You've seen worse than Cold Harbor, worse than any of us."

Wheatstraw did not answer at once. He did not seem to be listening. He was in the act of dusting a metal bench with his handkerchief. He slowly refolded the handkerchief, then flicked off one last spot of dust and sighed and settled himself on the bench, perched on the edge as if delicacy alone could keep his breeches away from the iron. The moment he sat, a transparent cat jumped onto his lap and settled itself. Wheatstraw scratched between its ears as it sank out of sight, purring, until Wheatstraw was scratching only his leg.

"What I see," Wheatstraw finally said, "is that whatever half-dead thing you dragged in, Farethewell, it ain't yours anymore. It's Pearl's."

"Pearl's!" said Farethewell and the widow, together.

"Pearl's," Wheatstraw repeated. "Otherwise, she couldn't see it, could she? So it's hers to do with as she will. And there ain't no need in y'all look-ing like you just sucked down the same oyster. Folks making up their own minds—why, that's the basic principle of the Old Concern, the foundation of our industry. And besides," he added, as he leaned back and tipped his felt hat over his eyes and crossed his legs at the ankles, "she's done made it up anyhow."

When he said that, I realized that I had.

"No," Farethewell said.

I picked up the boot. It was no heavier for me than a dead foot. The thought made me shiver.

"Wheatstraw," said Farethewell. "What have you done to me, you wretch? I can't move."

"It ain't my doing."

"Nor mine," said the widow.

“Pearl. Listen to me.”

I held up the boot and looked at it, eye to eyelet. The trembling shape no longer looked much like Farethewell—more like a bad memory of him, or a bad likeness of him, or just a stain on a canvas that put you in mind of him, if you squinted just right. To whatever it was, I said, “Go home.”

Then I swung the boot three times over my head and let it fly.

“*Nooooo!*” Farethewell yelled.

The boot sailed over the fence and past the point where it ought to have fallen back to earth and kept on going, a tumbling black dot against the pale sky like a star in reverse, until what I thought was the boot was just a floater darting across my eye. I blinked it away, and the boot was gone.

Mr. Farethewell stared into the sky, his jaw working. A tear slid down his cheek. He began to moan.

“Whoo! Don’t reckon we need wait supper on him tonight,” Wheatstraw said.

“I knew it,” the widow said. She snapped her fingers in Wheatstraw’s face. “I knew it the moment she and her fetches stepped out of the ball-room window. Her arrival was foretold by the spirits.”

“Foretold by the spirits, my eye,” Wheatstraw said. “She’s a wizard, not the three-fifty to Los Angeles.”

Farethewell’s moan became a howl.

I suddenly felt dizzy and sick and my breath was gone, like something had hit me in the gut. I tried to run, without quite knowing why, but Farethewell already had lunged across the distance between us. He seized my shoulders, shook me like a rag, howled into my face.

“I’m sorry!” I cried. “I had to do it. I had to!”

He hit me then, and I fell to the grass, sobbing. I waited for him to hit me again, to kill me. Instead the widow and Wheatstraw were kneeling be-side me, stroking my hair and murmuring words I did not understand. Farethewell was walking jerkily across the yard, like a scarecrow would walk. He fell to his knees in the rosebushes and scrabbled in the dirt for his

flask, the thorns tearing his face.

* * * *

I stayed in bed a few days, snug beneath layers of goose down. The widow left the room only to fetch and carry for me. Mr. Dellafave settled into a corner of the ceiling and never left the room at all.

When she felt I was able, the widow showed me the note Mr. Farethewell had left.

I never should have hit you, Little Britches, and I am sorry for it, but you never should have got between me and the Devil. Many women and children in Virginia got between the armies and died. Hear me. Farethewell.

“His fist didn’t hurt you,” the widow said.

“I know,” I said. “Doing what I did with the boot, that’s what hurt me. I need to find out what I did and how to do it right. Mrs. Winchester?”

“Yes, child.”

“When I am better, I believe I shall take a trip.”

“Where, child?”

“All over,” I said. “It was Mr. Dellafave’s idea, in a way. I need to see some of the other things in the diorama, and I need to meet some other wizards. As many as I can. I have a lot to learn from all of them.”

She pulled a handkerchief out of her sleeve and dabbed her eyes. “I can’t go with you,” she said.

“But I’ll always come back,” I said. “And you mustn’t worry about me. I won’t be alone.”

* * * *

I considered walking back through the ballroom window, but I had been there before. I ran my finger over the pebbled face of the stained-glass girl to say good-bye.

When I walked out the front gate of Flatland House, toting an over-stuffed carpetbag, I half expected to find myself walking in at the back, like Mr. Dellafave. But no, there were the orchards, and the lane leading over the hill to San Jose, and Petey Wheatstraw sitting cross-legged on a tall stump like a Hindu fakir.

I waved. He waved and jumped down. He was dressed like a vagabond, in rough cloth breeches and a coarse shirt, and his belongings were tied up in a kerchief on the end of a stick.

“You’re a sight,” I said.

“In the future,” he replied, “they’ll call it *slumming*. Which way?”

“That way, to the top of the hill, then sideways.”

We set off.

“Also, Mr. Wheatstraw, I have some answers for you.”

“Are you prepared to sing them? Anything worth saying is worth singing.”

“I am.”

“You’re so agreeable this morning. It can’t last.” He sang:

*Oh, you must answer my questions nine
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
Or you’re not God’s, you’re one of mine
And you are the weaver’s bonny.*

I sang back:

*Snow is whiter than the milk
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
And down is softer than the silk
And I am the weaver’s bonny.
Heaven s higher than a tree
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
And Hell is deeper than the sea
And I am the weaver’s bonny
Thunder’s louder than a horn
Sing ninety-nine and ninety*

*And death is sharper than a thorn
And I am the weaver's bonny
A babe's more innocent than a lamb
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
And the Devil is meaner than womankind*

—"And MANkind, too," I said, interrupting myself—

And I am the weaver's bonny.

Wheatstraw gave me a half-mocking salute and sang:

*You have answered my questions nine
Sing ninety-nine and ninety
And you are God's, you're none of mine
And you are the weaver's bonny.*

Then I asked him the ninth question, and he agreed that it was the right question to ask, so right that he did not know the answer, and together we reached the top of the hill and walked sideways, right off the edge of the world.

* * * *

JUST this year I made it back to Chattanooga. The town was so changed I hardly recognized it, except for the bend in the river and the tracks through the tunnel and Lookout Mountain over everything.

The new bridge is still hanging on, though it's no longer new and carries no proper traffic anymore, just visitors who stroll along it and admire the view and take photographs. Can you call them photographs anymore? They need no plates and no paper, and you hardly have to stand still any time to make one.

At the end of my visit I spent a good hour on the bridge, looking at the river and at the people, and enjoying walking my home city on older, stronger legs and seeing it with better eyes and feeling more myself than I had as a girl—though I'm still not as old-looking as you'd expect, thanks to my travels and the talents I've picked up along the way.

How you'd *expect* me to look at my age, I reckon, is *dead*, but I am not that, not by a long shot.

I wondered how many of these young-old people creeping along with the help of canes, and candy-faced children ripping and roaring past me, and men and women rushing along in short pants, my goodness, their stuck-out elbows going up and down like pistons—how many of them dreamed of the world that I knew. But what had I known myself of the invisible country all around, before I passed into the Infernal Regions?

Up ahead, sitting on one of the benches along the bridge, was a girl who put me in mind of my old Chattanooga friend Sally Ann Rummage, with her red hair and her long neck and her high forehead like a thinker. Probably about sixteen, this girl was, though it's hard to tell; they stay younger so much longer now, thank goodness. She didn't look very happy to be sixteen, or to be anything. A boy was standing over her, with one big foot on the bench like he was planting a flag, and he was pointing his fin-ger in her face like Petey Wheatstraw was known to do, and his other hand was twisting her pretty brown jacket and twisting her shoulder, too, inside it, and she looked cried-out and miserable. He was telling her about her-self, or presuming to, and when he glanced my way—no more seeing me than he would a post or a bird or a food wrapper blowing past—I saw that he was Farethewell. He was high-cheeked and eighteen and muscled, where Farethewell was old and jowly, and had a sharp nose unlike Farethewell, and had nothing of Farethewell's shape or face or complex-ion, but I recognized him just the same. I would recognize Farethewell anywhere.

I stood behind him, looking at her, until she looked up and met my gaze. This is a good trick, and one that even nonwizards can accomplish.

The boy said to me something foul that I will not lower myself to re-peat, and I said, "Hush," and he hushed. Of all the talents I've learned since I left Flatland House, that may be the handiest.

The girl frowned, puzzled, her arms crossed tight to hold herself in like a girl I once knew in a California parlor long ago. I smiled at her and put in her head the Devil's ninth question:

Who am I?

And while I was in there, in a thousand places, I strewed an answer like mustard seeds: *I am the weaver's bonny.*

Then I walked on down the bridge. The sun was low, the breeze was sharp, and a mist was forming at the river bend, a mist only I could see. The mist thickened and began to swirl. The surface of the water roiled. In the center of the oncoming cloud, twin smokestacks cleaved the water, then

the wheelhouse, then the upper deck. The entire riverboat surfaced, water sluic-ing down the bulkheads, paddle wheel churning. I could read the boat's bright red markings. It was the *Sultana*, which blew up in 1865 just north of Memphis, at the islands called the Hen and Chickens, with the loss of seventeen hundred men. And my, did she look grand!

At the head of the steps to the riverfront, I looked back—for wizards always look back. Have I not been looking back since I began this story, and have you not been looking back with me, to learn the ways of a wiz-ard? I saw the girl striding away from the boy, head held high. He just stood there, like one of Professor Van Der Ast's blockheads with a railroad spike up his nose. The girl whirled once, to shout something at him. The wind snatched away all but one word: "—ever!" Then she kept on walking. The mustard was beginning to sprout. I laughed as loudly as the widow Win-chester, and I ran down the slick steps to the river, as giddy as a girl of ninety-nine and ninety.

* * * *