

Sluggo

Written by Mike Resnick

He was born in the charity ward at 3:07 a.m. on March 5, 1931. There were two nurses in attendance.

The first took one look at him and fainted.

The other ran screaming from the room, raced out into the cold Chicago night, and refused ever to come back even to pick up her pay.

The doctor who delivered him wanted him destroyed, but as a practicing Catholic he could not bring himself to do so until the baby had been baptized. His parish priest looked at the baby in its incubator, crossed himself, and left. Three more priests refused to baptize the infant, and finally the doctor reluctantly decided to let him live.

His mother committed suicide two months later.

His father left town a month after that, never to return, and he became a ward of the state.

He was placed in an institution for the insane, though there was nothing wrong with his mind. Thirty-seven nurses were offered triple pay if they would care for him. Thirty-three decided that triple pay wasn't anywhere near enough. The four who agreed worked in six-hour shifts and found ways to cover for each other on the weekends.

He had no birth certificate, and hence no name. One of the nurses referred to him as a grotesque slug, and from that day on, Slug was what they called him, and Slug was what he answered to.

No other inmate was ever allowed to see him. He lived alone in his windowless room, unable to read, unable to interact with anyone but his nurses, who kept him at arm's length whenever possible. This was before the days of television, so his entire knowledge of the outside world came from the few picture books they allowed him to see. No one knew how strong he was, or what his abilities might be, so the pulps—and especially the horror pulps and comics—were forbidden to him. Gradually, despite the shape of his mouth, he learned to speak; after all, he had a lot of time on his hands.

It was assumed that he would remain in the institution for the duration of his life, but there was some graft, as there always is in Chicago, and one day the place had to close its doors for lack of funding. They tried to find another institute or asylum that would take the Slug, but after one look each refused, some cordially, some in terror.

What was to be done with a being—it was difficult to think of him as a twenty-two-year-old man, or indeed any kind of man at all—that no one wanted but could no longer be kept hidden?

Actually, the answer was really quite simple.

Remember Riverview?

For half a century it was the country's second-biggest amusement park, behind only Coney Island. (They weren't "theme parks" prior to Disneyland.) From early spring until late fall, its seventy-four acres were jammed from dawn until far into the night with thrillseekers from all across the country. People came from as far away as Paris and Buenos Aires just to ride the Bobs, which was the most famous roller coaster in the world. And when they were through with the Bobs, they'd test their courage and their stomachs with the Blue Streak, the Silver Flash, the Big Dipper, the Wild Mouse, and the Skyrocket.

Even by day you could spot the two-hundred-foot-high Pair-o-Chute tower from more than a mile away. And at night you could see Super Eli, the world's biggest Ferris wheel, lit up like a Christmas tree, from almost as far away.

There was the Rotor, which held you suspended in space, and the Flying Turns, which damned near sent you off into space, and on hot summer days people would wait for half an hour to take the long slide into the water on the Chute-the-Chutes. They'd play Skee-Ball and dozens of other games imported from the midway. There was the Ghost Train, a haunted house on wheels that drove through winding darkened tunnels, and the Tunnel of Love, for those who craved a different kind of excitement in the dark.

And there was the Congress of Oddities, although most people just called it the freak show. It was the one place in the whole of Chicago where it was felt that the Slug might earn his keep.

They put him on display there at noon on August 17, 1953.

People screamed, just like they were supposed to.

But then, like the nurses twenty-two years earlier, they fainted. And had hysterics. And vomited. And raced out of the tent, and didn't stop running until they were forcibly (and twice fatally) stopped by traffic beyond Riverview's front entrance. Even the 700-Pound Lady and the Four-Armed Boy refused to appear with the Slug.

They took him off display, permanently, at 1:22 p.m. on August 17, 1953.

But he had no place to go, and they couldn't just turn him loose and let him wander the streets of Chicago, not with the reactions his appearance caused. Then somebody came up with the bright idea of Aladdin's Castle.

The Castle was the biggest fun house in existence. It took better than a half hour to go through the whole thing. And there were some pitch-black winding corridors where hideous monsters popped into existence, scaring the hell out of the patrons. What if, it was suggested, they let the Slug wander around those darkened areas, never close enough for the public to see that he was anything more than an illusion. He'd frighten them a lot more than any of the stuff they had right now. And since there were a number of hidden storage areas, he could even live there.

The management was divided on the notion until it was pointed out that he'd be working for his room and board, which is to say: no money would change hands. That settled it. They closed the Congress of Oddities for the rest of the day, and then at midnight they had a couple of their braver maintenance men walk him over to Aladdin's Castle.

"I wonder what it eats?" said one of them as if the Slug weren't right alongside them.

"Little kids, probably," said the other. "Or maybe just mounds of dirt. Anyway, it ain't our problem."

The night watchman took one look at him and decided he had urgent business elsewhere for the next two or three lifetimes, but they found the room he'd set up. It had a cot, a chair, a radio (which could only be played after closing), a portable toilet, and a lamp. There was a flap at the bottom of the door where his meals could be shoved through so no one had to come into contact with him.

The Slug thought it was the most luxurious room he'd ever seen.

They showed him where he was supposed to loiter when the Castle was open, then got the hell out of there as fast as they could.

The Slug began exploring his new universe. He'd never had much chance to develop his muscles or practice his balance, so the vibrating room and rolling barrel both disoriented him and caused him to fall down painfully. Then he came to the Hall of Mirrors.

He knew what men and women looked like, because he'd seen pictures of them in books and magazines, but except for looking at his arms and legs, he had never seen himself before. Now he found he could stand in front of a row of near-magical mirrors that distorted reality: this one made him look, if not human, at least a little less grotesque than he'd been led to believe he was; that one gave him almost normal proportions, though of course it couldn't do much for his skin or features. Because he had never seen any kind of mirror, he thought for a moment that he had miraculously become less of whatever he was. Then he stepped back, and his image changed, and he realized that it was not a true image at all and he remained what he had always been. Still, it fascinated him, this room that made him seem not quite the monstrosity that he was, and he spent almost an hour there, staring at the various Slugs that were reflected back at him.

The next day the Slug began working at the only job he would ever have. Within a week Aladdin's Castle had passed the Bobs as Riverview's biggest moneymaker.

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In his first two years, he only met one employee, though "met" is the wrong word, because Andrew Varda never got near him, never said a word to him, always averted his eyes when the Slug chanced to be in his vicinity.

Andrew was the only person on display at the Castle. Ostensibly he was a guard, and he dressed the part—dark blue shirt and pants, phony badge, realistic-looking toy gun. But Andrew was there for one thing only. There was a slanted room where people got terribly disoriented and usually had to grab a railing just to make their way to the end of it—and the end of it was a small door leading to an outdoor staircase that in turn led up to the second level. Varda's job was to watch each person as they exited the slanted room and began climbing the stairs, and every time a pretty girl in a skirt emerged, he pressed a hidden button and an air hose embedded in the stairs would blow the girl's skirt up almost to her head. About once a month there'd be a girl who was wearing nothing underneath, and about once a year a girl would turn out to be a very mixed-up boy who was wearing nothing underneath, but usually it was done, and accepted, in good fun.

The Slug thought Varda had a fascinating job. He got to sit outside, in the fresh air, and to see and interact with people—the same people who screamed in terror or turned away in revulsion, even when they thought he was a wax figure or a projection.

Then, in the summer of 1955, while most of Chicago was rooting for the resurgent "Go-Go Sox" or awaiting the much-heralded Nashua-Swaps match race, the Slug, who had never spoken to anyone but a doctor or a nurse, had his very first real conversation. It didn't last long, which was just as well because he didn't know a lot of words, but that it took place at all was remarkable.

He was trudging from his room to one of the spots from which he would jump out and scare the customers when he heard a sound he had never heard before. Curious, he approached it, and found a small girl, perhaps eight or nine years old, crying softly. He knew he shouldn't stand where she could see him, that the sight of him would terrify her as it terrified everyone else, but he couldn't help himself. He had never been this close to anyone other than a doctor, a nurse, or, just for a few minutes, the two men who walked him over from the Congress of Oddities, and he was fascinated.

He must have made a sound—in fact, it was almost impossible for him to breathe silently—and the girl

looked up.

The Slug backed away, waiting for the inevitable scream of terror.

“Don’t be afraid,” said the girl. “I won’t hurt you.”

The Slug stopped and stared at her.

“My Daddy told me all about you,” she said. “You live here.”

The Slug remained motionless, unsure of what to do next.

“He’s the one who works the blowers and makes the girls’ skirts go up,” she continued. “Usually they laugh, but sometimes they cry. He said I was getting in everyone’s way, and that I should go backstage until Aladdin’s Castle closed.” She looked around. “I guess this is backstage. It must be, since you’re here.”

He had never heard the word “backstage” before. He didn’t know what to say.

“Can you talk?” she asked.

It had been a long time, but he remembered how to form the word. “Yes,” he grated.

“My name is Nancy. Do you have a name, or are you just a thing like Daddy says?”

“Slug.” Slowly he forced the words out. “I am Slug.”

She smiled happily. “Then we’re Nancy and Sluggo, just like in the comic strip. We’re a team.”

He tried to mouth the word. “Nancy.”

“You’re very ugly,” she noted. “But the world is full of ugly things. Today I saw birds pulling apart a dead cat in the alley behind our apartment, eating its insides, and it was much uglier than you. I don’t know why everyone is afraid of you.” She stared curiously at him. “You don’t really eat babies, do you?”

“Baby spiders,” he said. “And sometimes baby mice.”

“But not baby people?” she persisted.

“I have never seen a baby person,” said the Slug. “Until you.”

“I’m not a baby,” she explained seriously. “I’m a girl.”

“Girl,” he repeated.

Suddenly she looked around. “It’s not as crowded now. I think I should leave before Daddy comes looking for me. He’ll be very mad if he thinks I have been visiting with you.”

The Slug thought it was probably an understatement, but made no reply.

“May I come visit you again?” she asked.

The thought that anyone might want to see him again so surprised him that he was speechless.

“I’m sorry,” she said after a moment. “I didn’t mean to make you angry. I apologize.”

She turned to leave.

“Yes!” he yelled in his inhuman voice, and the few people in the Castle tried to figure out where the sound came from. He spoke more softly. “Please.”

“Tomorrow, when it’s busy,” she promised. “Good-bye, Sluggo.”

He tried to say “Good-bye,” but she was gone before he could form the words and push them out.

When he was through terrifying people for the night, he went back to his room and practiced saying “Hello, Nancy” for a whole hour until the words slid right out as if he were a normal human being. Then he went to sleep and dreamed of a world filled with little girls who were not afraid of him.

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She was back the next day, as promised.

“Hello, Sluggo,” she said. “How are you today?”

“Hello, Nancy,” he said without stumbling on the words.

“Isn’t it a lovely day?”

“I do not understand.”

“Oh, I forgot,” she said. “You’re not allowed to go out, are you?” She shrugged. “Oh, well—it doesn’t make any difference. We can play right here.”

“Play?” asked the Slug.

“You know—a game.”

He stared at her.

“Haven’t you ever played a game?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Well, then, I’ll teach you.”

And she did.

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A week later she asked if there was anything he wanted or needed, like perhaps an ice cream cone, and maybe a cotton candy.

“One thing,” said the Slug.

“What is it?”

“I am alone all day when you leave. Teach me to read.”

“I’ll teach you what they’ve taught me,” she said. “Every day I’ll stop by and give you a lesson. Well, almost every day.”

That began the Slug's education. She brought him Dick and Jane books, and then her second-grade reader, and before long he began asking her for other books.

"You're learning faster than I did," Nancy noted. "My Aunt Penny gave me a Nancy Drew book for my birthday. I'll bring it tomorrow."

It took him two nights to read it, and he spent another night thinking about it.

"Is the world like that?" he asked when he returned the book.

"I don't know," answered Nancy. "I've never been more than a few blocks from here. But maybe someday we will go exploring together."

He made no answer.

"No, I guess we won't, will we?" she said.

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They became friends, of course. Her mother was dead, and her father worked at his minimum-wage job every single day during high season, which lasted from early April until late September, and six days a week the rest of the year. She had other friends, to be sure, girls and even a few boys her own age, but every little girl wants a secret friend, and the Slug was hers.

Anytime someone was giving or throwing away a book, she appropriated it for him, and in the course of the next three years he read Shakespeare and Dickens, Twain and Melville, Kipling and Tolstoy. He didn't understand most of it, and he had only the haziest notion of geography and politics, but he devoured every volume she brought him, even those by Edgar Rice Burroughs and Clarence Mulford.

He asked her many questions about what he had read. She couldn't answer most of them, but she tried to find the answers in the library, and as a result her education continued apace with his.

And then one day, when he was certain that no one else would ever willingly associate with him, the Slug made another friend.

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He had more names than you could shake a stick at. Most recently he'd been Marko the Magnificent, and back in Ireland he'd been McNulty the Mage, and before that he'd just been plain McKeever, and sometimes MacNamara.

He stood three feet seven inches high, was perfectly proportioned, and wore a suit of green corduroy that had seen better days and probably better decades.

The Slug heard him before he saw him. First there was a thud! and then a thump! And then someone was cursing a blue streak. It was after midnight, so the Slug figured he might as well turn the light on, since the quickest way to get the intruder to leave the building was to let him see who he was sharing it with.

"Well, don't just stand there like a lump," said Marko. "Give a man a hand up."

He was lying flat on his back, where he'd fallen after bumping into a wall in the dark.

The Slug looked around, because he couldn't believe Marko was speaking to him. No one, not even Nancy, had ever willingly touched him before.

“Yes, you!” snapped Marko. “God, you’re as ugly as they say! Are you just going to stare at me all night?”

The Slug walked over and extended what passed for his hand. Marko grabbed it.

“Pull me up, damn it!” he snapped, and the Slug did as he was told. “Some house you’ve got yourself,” said Marko, brushing himself off. He reached a hand up and suddenly a lit cigarette appeared in it. “Want one?”

The Slug just looked at the cigarette in wonderment.

“I guess not, then,” said Marko. “Well, what have we got to eat around here?”

“Nothing,” rasped the Slug. “Breakfast is in the morning.”

“Do you always have so much trouble getting your words out?” asked Marko.

The Slug was about to explain that his mouth wasn’t really built for speech, but it would take too many words and too much effort, so he settled for nodding his head.

“Well, if we’re going to be neighbors for any length of time, you’re going to have to do better than that,” said Marko. He made a sign in the air with his right hand. “Presto! Try saying something now.”

“What do you want me to say?” asked the Slug, then stopped in surprise as he realized how easily the words tumbled out.

“You might say ‘Thank you, Marko.’”

“What did you do to me?”

“Magic.”

“Magic?” repeated the Slug.

“It’s too technical to explain to the layman, or the laything as the case may be. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Marko the Magnificent, late of Riverview’s midway.”

“Why are you here?” asked the Slug, amazed as the words raced out of his misshapen mouth.

“Ah, now that’s a story,” said Marko, making another sign. Suddenly a bottle of beer appeared in each of his tiny hands, and he passed one over to the Slug. “I am one of the Little People.”

“I can see you are little.”

“No,” said Marko impatiently, “I mean one of the Little People.” The Slug stared at him uncomprehendingly. “You would know us as leprechauns.” A pause. “No, I guess you wouldn’t. Well, no matter. No one believes in us anyway.” He took a swig of his beer. “I was seeking refuge after a diminutive lady of my acquaintance mistook a flight of poetic fancy for a proposal of marriage, so I hired on as the World’s Smallest Magician. They just wanted card tricks and the like. They had no idea who they were dealing with.” He smiled maliciously. “They tell me that you held the former record for the shortest term of employment in Riverview’s history. I have surpassed your mark by almost half an hour.”

“What happened?” asked the Slug.

“There was a heckler in the crowd.”

“What’s a heckler?”

“Don’t interrupt,” said Marko. “He catcalled, he berated, he insulted, and finally I lost my temper. Never,” he added confidentially, “cause a Little Person to lose his temper at you.” Another pause. “He had the manners of a pig, so that’s what I turned him into. The last time I saw him, he was grunting and oinking his way through the Skee-Ball area. At the rate he was going, I would imagine he’s made it to the Western Avenue entrance by now.” He finished his beer and tossed the bottle into the air, where it promptly vanished. “Of course, management was more than a little upset with me. I thought they were going to tear me limb from limb, so I uttered a little spell my grandfather taught me a couple of centuries ago, and sent all the ladies’ clothes where I just sent that bottle, and while everyone was screaming and ogling and cursing and running for cover, I walked right out. Well, I came here to give my small ladyfriend time to get over her disappointment, to say nothing of her fury, so I can’t go back out into the city, and this would probably be an inopportune time to show up and ask for my half hour’s pay, so I think I’ll stay here with you until everything blows over.”

“You are going to stay here?” said the Slug.

“Didn’t I just say that?” replied Marko irritably. “Now what do you want—a hot dog or a pizza?”

“I don’t know,” admitted the Slug. “I have never had either of them.”

“I’d ask what they feed you,” said Marko, “but you’d probably tell me, and it would ruin my appetite.” He made another gesture with his hand. “Abra cadabra!” A table and two chairs magically appeared, and on the table was a pizza. “Sit down and dig in.”

“Thank you,” said the Slug. He stared at the chair. “I don’t think . . . I mean . . .”

“Yeah, I see,” said Marko. Another gesture, and the chair suddenly changed its shape to accommodate the Slug’s misshapen body. “Better?”

“Yes.” Then: “How long will you stay?”

“I don’t know. It depends on how long Mary Macrea stays mad at me, and also whether she’s told her father what we did on top of the scoreboard at Wrigley Field.”

“Will I still be able to talk like this when you leave?”

“Well, I hope you’ll have something more interesting to say, but yes.”

“Thank you.”

“If you want to thank me, give me the chef’s tour when we’re done eating.”

“The chef’s tour?” repeated the Slug.

“Show me around.”

So they ate the pizza, and Marko magicked up two more beers, and then the Slug led him through Aladdin’s Castle, showing him which three of the hundred doors actually opened, where the Bumps in the Night would suddenly emerge from the floor and walls. He led him through the slanting room and the vibrating room and the rotating barrel, past the Chamber of Horrors and Ghost Central, and finally they came to the Hall of Mirrors.

“I love these things,” said Marko, standing first before one and then another. “Look at me!” he said,



pointing to a mirror. "I'm six feet tall!"

The Slug looked at each mirror in turn. He was still the Slug, and suddenly the night seemed less magical.

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Nancy showed up at her usual time, and was so full of news about school that she didn't even notice that he was suddenly speaking normally. He decided not to tell her about Marko, because he was sure Marko had broken a number of laws, and his reading had convinced him that lawbreakers, no matter how bright they might be, were always caught and usually executed.

They spoke for an hour—well, she spoke, he listened—then she was off to do her homework and watch the television set her father had finally bought.

"Who was that little girl?" asked Marko, when she had gone.

"Her name is Nancy," answered the Slug. "She's my friend. In fact, she was my only friend until I met you."

"She's been nice to you, has she?"

"She taught me to read, and she brings me books, and she talks to me almost every day."

"It's a shame she can only talk to you here."

"I can never leave," said the Slug. "You know that."

Marko looked at him thoughtfully for a long moment. "You gave me sanctuary when I needed it. Perhaps I can return the favor. Meet me right here after the Castle closes for the night."

The Slug went back to work, terrifying women and giving strong men nightmares. Then, at midnight, when the last lock clicked into place, he went looking for the leprechaun.

"In here," said Marko's voice.

The Slug followed it and found himself in the Hall of Mirrors.

"They say the Little People are selfish and ungrateful," Marko began, "and I won't argue the selfish part. But we know how to return a favor when it's freely given."

The Slug stared at him curiously.

"Take a look in that mirror," said Marko.

The Slug looked. He seemed to be eight feet tall and skinny as a rail. He glanced at the next mirror, where he was short, squat and rotund.

"I've seen these before," he said, unimpressed.

"Keep looking," said Marko.

The Slug looked into the closest mirror and slowly, ever so slowly, the creature he was staring at began to change. The oily, miscolored, repulsive flesh melted away, the facial features became regular, the hands and feet took on human shape—and, within a minute, he was looking at a handsome man in his early twenties. The elbows and knees were where they should be, there were the right number of fingers

and toes, the mouth no longer looked like it was fit only for sucking fluids.

Every mirror showed the same image.

“What do you think?” asked Marko, smiling.

“It is beautiful,” said the Slug.

“I think so.”

“And cruel.”

“Cruel?” asked Marko.

“To show me what I can never be,” said the Slug.

“I don’t suppose you can click your heels three times, and say ‘There’s no place like home,’” said Marko with a smile. When the Slug merely looked confused, he continued: “Of course not. So much for drama. Blink once.”

The Slug blinked—and when he opened his eyes, the image he knew so well was back in the mirrors.

“Thank you,” said the Slug.

“Don’t thank me yet,” said Marko. He reached into the air, and suddenly a mirror, a real mirror, appeared in his hand. “Take a look. Then you can thank me.”

The Slug looked, and saw the man he had seen in the mirrors a moment ago. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he held his hand up before his eyes, certain it would be the same hand he had seen all his life. But it wasn’t. It was the hand that belonged to the handsome young man.

Tears ran down the Slug’s cheeks.

Human tears.

For the first time ever.

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His euphoria lasted almost eighteen hours. He walked out of the Castle in the morning, mingled with the customers, reveled in the fresh air and the sunlight. He spent most of the day just being alive and happy, and then he returned to Aladdin’s Castle to share the news with Nancy.

“Who are you?” she demanded when she encountered him backstage. “And what have you done with my Sluggo?”

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” he said, smiling. “Concentrate. Does my voice sound familiar?”

“Where’s Sluggo?” she insisted.

“It’s me, Nancy,” he said. “I’m Sluggo.”

“If you’ve hurt him, I’ll do something bad to you.”

He spent the next ten minutes trying to convince her that he was the Slug. She was hysterical for the last five of them, and finally ran out of the Castle.

When they closed that night he found Marko sitting down, gnawing on a lamb shank.

“She doesn’t know me,” he said miserably.

“Nancy?”

The Slug nodded. “She doesn’t believe me. I can hardly blame her.”

“She’ll get over it.”

“She may never come back.”

“She’ll come back, if only to find out what happened to her hideous friend.”

“She’s going to find him,” said the Slug.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Change me back.”

“Are you crazy?”

“She’s my friend,” he said. “And now she’s crying.”

“You stay like this, you can make a thousand friends,” replied Marko.

“I don’t want a thousand friends. I want her. She was my friend when no one else would even look at me. I was grateful last night, but in retrospect you shouldn’t have changed me. It was against the laws of Nature.”

“Bullshit,” said Marko. “Looking the way you looked was against the laws of Nature.”

The Slug stared silently at him for a long moment, and then uttered a single word: “Please.”

“You’re a fool,” said Marco. He snapped his fingers, and the Slug, the real Slug, was suddenly back. “And now you’re spoiling my digestion, too.”

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She didn’t come back the next day, or the next week, or the next month.

It took her three months and seventeen days to return to the Castle, by which time Marko was long gone.

The Slug was going to ask what had happened, but then he saw the crutches. She had taken the streetcar from school to Riverview as she did almost every day, and had tripped on the three stairs leading down to the pavement and broken her leg. It was a bad break—the femur was fractured and the ankle was shattered—and they’d done two surgeries thus far with more to come.

She was half-convinced she’d dreamed or imagined the strange man who claimed to be Sluggo, and he did nothing to dissuade her. She was miserable, and not only from the pain. Her father, who always thought she was useless, took this as absolute proof of it; she’d fallen behind in school; and her classmates teased her mercilessly about her clumsiness.

They talked long into the night, the crippled little girl and the grotesque mockery of a man, and for the first time she willingly touched his hand.

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The next decade was not kind to Nancy. Unable to exercise, she became obese. Becoming obese, she was endlessly teased when she wasn't being avoided. Three more surgeries didn't quite fix the foot, and she acquired a permanent limp. Andrew Varda, a quiet alcoholic, became a noisy one and lost his job. They moved to another part of the city, but she still managed to visit the Slug two or three times a week.

As for the Slug, he kept reading everything he could get his hands on and imagining what it must be like to be out there in the world that was forever denied to him, and he continued to spend his days terrifying people who paid good money to be terrified.

And every now and then, usually when he lay alone on his cot late at night, he would remember the touch of a little girl's hand on his own.

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They closed Riverview in 1967. Sold it to a developer who put up stores and condos and parking garages on the ground made hallow by the Bobs and the Silver Flash.

The very last thing they tore down was Aladdin's Castle. They never found any trace of the creature that was said to live in it. The developer assumed it was just another urban myth.

But I'll tell you something interesting.

There's an old house out by the Fox River, just south of the Wisconsin border and maybe forty miles inland from Lake Michigan. It's occupied by a woman and her invalid father. The woman's in her sixties now. No one's ever seen her father, but he must be nearing ninety.

She seems friendly enough. Doesn't talk much about herself, doesn't socialize at all. She goes into town to shop once a week, and gets around pretty well for a fat old woman with a limp. Every once in a while she picks up a stack of new paperbacks for her father to read. Once, when paying for them, she even dropped his nickname: Sluggo.

Now, isn't that a funny name for a dignified old gentleman?

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