

**Litany**  
by Rand B. Lee

Rand B. Lee has lived in northern New Mexico for more than twenty years. He says that a week after he completed "Litany," he encountered a black and white dog with three legs. The dog went right up to Mr. Lee and began to lick his face. The dog's owner said "He's usually extremely reserved with men."

Coincidence, or evidence that there are forces at work we do not  
comprehend?

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1.

The sign on the door said "La Llorona Realty" in ornate gold scrollwork, and when the tall, gray-eyed man pushed the door open, a bell tinkled somewhere. The room he walked into was small, with a glass-topped coffee table at one end surrounded by overstuffed chairs in faux black leather. A neat stack of glossy real estate magazines stood on the table, centered precisely. A slim young Hispano was seated behind a reception desk, typing on a laptop. Behind him was a large glass window, against which had been parked a coffee trolley outfitted with a gleaming espresso machine. Through the window, the gray-eyed man could see another office: large wooden desk, several chairs, posters, filing cabinets, the back of the semitransparent pastel shell of a computer terminal. The receptionist looked up from his desk. "May I help you?" he asked.

"My name is Anderssen. I have a ten o'clock appointment to see Ms. Vigil." He pronounced it correctly: vee-HEEL. The slim young man smiled. His black hair was cut fashionably and lightly frosted, and his eyes flicked over the gray-eyed man's body with nearly imperceptible rapidity.

"Roberta's been delayed a couple of minutes, Mr. Anderssen. She's just on her way from showing a house out on Avenida La Llorona. She should be here any second. Please have a seat." The boy waved a languid hand toward the overstuffed chairs. "My name is David. I'm Roberta's personal assistant. Would you like some coffee while you wait?"

"That would be fine," said the gray-eyed man. The receptionist stood up and busied himself with the espresso machine. His pants were tailored, and just tight enough at the buttocks to advertise without offending. *Seventh Circle*, thought the man who called himself Anderssen. Seating

himself, he said to the boy's back, "This is a beautiful little town you've got here. The red hills, the pines, the brilliance of the sunlight." He had a rich tenor, an actor's voice, with a slight accent that the boy could not place.

"It has its points," said the receptionist without turning around.

"It reminds me a bit of Toscano."

"Oh? Where's that?"

"Tuscany. In Italy," the gray man added gently.

The back of the boy's slim neck reddened. He threw a chagrined grin at the gray-eyed man over his shoulder, his two black eyes bright and birdlike. "I knew that," he said. "Single or double?"

"Single is fine."

"Milk, cream, or soy milk?"

"Black, please."

"Flavorings? We have almond, orange, cinnamon, and chocolate."

"None for me, thanks. Your espresso bar comes very well equipped."

"It gets us through the day," said the boy cheerfully. "And our clients like it." He turned away again and busied himself with bottles and dials. The gray-eyed man let his gaze wander again around the office. It had the look of recent remodeling and painstaking care: the wainscoting was new, the heavy sunblocker curtains lining the storefront plate glass window free from the ubiquitous northern New Mexico dust. *Recent prosperity, then*, thought the gray-eyed man. Then he noticed that the beige lamb's-wool carpet was very slightly frayed along one edge, and he added, *Or a show of same*.

The espresso machine began to hiss. The gray-eyed man said, "I'm looking forward to moving into my rental as soon as possible."

"Which rental would that be?" asked the boy casually.

"Number Seven Avenida Corazón is the address your boss mentioned."

"Oh, yes. The old Schmidt place. Roberta said someone was taking

it.” The fragrance of coffee began leaking into the air. The gray-eyed man heard the clink of glass.

“Your tone suggests you don’t think much of it.”

The boy’s neck flushed again. “Oh, no! It’s a very nice older property.” When the receptionist turned around again, his face was carefully neutral. He came out from behind the desk carrying the steaming espresso cup in one hand and a ceramic trivet in the other. He placed the trivet before the man on the glass-topped table and set the coffee cup carefully upon it. “There you go.”

“Thank you.”

The office door opened suddenly, with a clash of bells, and a woman rushed in breathlessly, carrying a briefcase and a coat. She was short, a trifle plump, with a round pleasant face. The young man brightened. “There she is! Roberta, this is Mr. Anderssen. Your ten o’clock?”

“Hello, hello! I’m so sorry I’m late.” She had nearly olive skin, and high cheekbones inherited from some Indian ancestor. Her black hair, which fell to below her shoulders, was very slightly mussed, and one lapel of her conservative navy blue suit jacket was turned up. She hurried across the carpet toward the gray-eyed man, transferring her coat to her briefcase hand and extending the other. “Roberta Vigil, Mr. Anderssen. Welcome to La Llorona! So nice to meet you face to face at last! You’ve met David, I see. Did you have any trouble finding us?”

“None at all. Your directions were excellent.” The gray-eyed man had risen, and as he reached out his own long-fingered hand to meet hers he steeled himself for what he knew was to come. Their hands met, shook, and parted, two or three seconds of contact, no more; but in those few instants, everything she was flowed into him, and he knew her utterly, down to her tiniest mitochondrion. He knew her cancers, the ones the doctors had excised and the ones they had missed; he knew her pregnancies, the two that had miscarried and the secret third she had had, in an agony of guilt, aborted; he knew what her ex-husband had done to her the night before she had finally decided to press charges; he knew what the boys had done to her behind her fifth grade classroom; and he knew her true Name.

In the beginning, long before, such a transfer would have laid him out cold for three days at a stretch. Now he felt only a brief wave of dizziness, swiftly past. But she snatched her hand from his with a startled cry.

“Yikes!” She shook her wrist, grimacing ruefully. “This darn carpet! Come on in, Mr. Anderssen, and we’ll get you sorted out in a jiffy.” She led the way past the reception desk, unlocked her office door, and bustled in before him. The contrast between the state of her office and that of the reception area was marked. The desk was old, nicked and scarred; the cabinets secondhand; the chairs tubular aluminum with vinyl back and seat pads; the tops of the bookshelves gray with dust. There was a sofa covered in once-blonde pseudoleather. And there was clutter everywhere: books, papers, file folders, half-open boxes of color brochures. “Forgive the mess. Any order this office possesses is David’s doing, but he’s forbidden entry to my Fortress of Solitude.”

She slung her coat onto a rack-peg and plopped her case onto her desk, sending a sheaf of papers sliding to the floor. Crouching swiftly, she gathered them up, saying, “Please have a seat, Mr. Anderssen. You mentioned wanting to take possession immediately?”

“If that would be convenient.” The gray-eyed man sat down on one of the vinyl-covered chairs and placed his hands on his knees. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He was, she decided, handsome in a patrician way, with a long lean face to match his long lean body. She liked his gray eyes, and his hair, which was also gray, fine-textured and cut very short. He wore a light dove-colored linen suit of European cut, expensive, she thought, but no designer labels obviously showing, and no jewelry. So he wasn’t some insecure nouveau riche. His shirt was of some roughly woven fabric, hemp, maybe, or bamboo fiber, and its cuffs did not reach all the way to his wrists, which stuck out from his jacket sleeves, showing glinting golden hairs. *Beautiful hands*, she thought. An artist’s hands, or a surgeon’s. She was a sucker for nice hands.

She wondered what he did for a living. The rent she was charging him for the Schmidt place was twice what she would have charged a local, and he had accepted her terms without hesitation, transferring three months’ advance rent plus substantial damage deposit for the Schmidt place sight unseen to her company account from a bank in North Carolina. But his accent wasn’t East Coast, and his manner was restrained to the point of shyness. Trust-funder, maybe; the hills around Santa Fé were full of them, Anglo refugees from rich families or failed coastal marriages, seeking off the beaten track some El Dorado of peace and healing they imagined they couldn’t find elsewhere. Of course, he could also be Hollywood. The northern New Mexico film industry was burgeoning, offering substantial perks and savings to companies willing to employ local actors and techies. *That’s it*, she thought. *He’s here scouting locations*. Or maybe he was a writer finishing up a script. But what was a Hollywood type doing driving an

old Subaru?

What she said was, "I've got your keys right here." She unlocked a drawer of her desk, rummaged around, pulled out an envelope and handed it over. His beautiful fingers received it from her gracefully, but she noticed that he was careful not to make skin contact again. She added brightly, "Now are you certain you don't want to follow me over to the property? In case, you know, in case something isn't quite right, in case there's something you need moved, or changed in some way? It's furnished very simply, as you specified, but, you know, some of our clients are particular, and I'd like you to be happy with us." Amusement flitted across his features. She thought sourly, *Great going, Roberta. You just called him a fussbudget.*

"If the digitals you sent me were accurate, I'm sure everything will be just fine," said the gray-eyed man. "My own things will be arriving in a day or so. I'll let you know if there's a problem." He stood up and gazed down at her, and to her horror she found herself staring up at him with her mouth open. His eyes were not just pretty. There was something—not *compelling* about them, exactly; and certainly not at all seductive—something *big* about them. No, not big. What was the word? She was good at words, she was an ace at crossword puzzles; she did them in ink and won most every Scrabble game she played. *Spacious*. That was it. There was something *spacious* about his eyes, vast and safe at the same time. You could fall into their gray and not be scared for a moment. Then she was staring at his back as her office door closed behind him.

She had told him to cross the river, go up the hill to the four-way stop, make a right onto the County Road, go straight for half a mile ("Watch out for the dip"), make a left after the arroyo, and go on up past the turquoise Senior Center trailer till he saw the compound with all the barking dogs in it. The next right after that, she said, was Avenida Corazón. "Only sometimes the sign's there, sometimes it's not. The high school kids sometimes take it." The sign was there that day. Avenida Corazón turned out to be a deeply rutted red mud track, surfaced liberally with loose stones and gravel in many sizes, shapes, and colors. He eased the car around its many bends, wincing as the stones bumped against the undercarriage. He passed only one house, on the right, a characterless prefab surrounded by seven-foot chainlink barren of vines. There was a purple trampoline in the yard and three mismatched child's shoes.

Then the Subaru passed through a wired-open metal gate, and his new refuge stood before him. It looked exactly the way it had in the digitals:

small, part-trailer, part-house, with big front windows, brown louvered wooden blinds, and a tiny fenced yard. A small shed stood nearby, shaded by an ailing cottonwood; from one of the branches an empty plastic bird feeder hung forlornly. Beyond the circular drive, native clump grasses showed broad patches of raw red earth between them; there were a few old tires here and there, half-obscurd by weeds; and beyond that, dark fragrant hummocks of old piñons and taller junipers, widely interspaced.

He pulled the car into the gravel siding, turned off the motor, and got out. The afternoon was perfectly still. In the distance, the jagged hills showed purple. Along the river, he had seen pastures dotted with horses and cows, and on the highway up from Santa Fé there had been a fair amount of traffic. But out here there was nothing but stillness, and he took deep breaths of it, wondering.

He went up onto the lattice-covered porch. There were two doors: the outer, screened, and the inner, plate glass and metal. Holding the first door open with his left hand, with his right he fitted into the locks the key that the Vigil woman had given him. As he did, a swift shadow passed by outside overhead: a raven, chasing something. He tensed, preparing the Word; but it was just a raven, and it flew on without glancing in his direction. He relaxed, pulled open the inner door, and stepped up into the entry room.

It was full of windows and very sunny, the walls painted cream to match the oatmeal-colored carpet. The adjoining kitchen and breakfast room had more windows, more of the same carpeting, and a skylight. An open archway led two steps down into a sunken living room, also carpeted, where his office would be. There was a propane heater against one wall, and a little fireplace. A hard right brought him into a wood-floored hallway, with a door straight ahead leading him through a full bath into the bedroom at the back of the house. Another door, to the right of the hall, took him into the carpeted laundry room.

He began to relax. Nothing seemed amiss, nothing out of place, nothing out of the ordinary. *A good place*, he decided, and turned to walk back into the kitchen.

*And he is there once again on the burning plain, stars falling around him, the Terrible Word which he has just spoken spreading out from him in all directions. In the endless black sky, galaxies burn. He hears their screams of anguish in the radio frequencies, in the infrared, in the subquanta, and he feels no pity for them at all.*

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2.

When he came back to himself, he was lying on the floor in the middle of the entry room to the little brown house. Raising himself onto his elbows, he looked out of the window and saw two burly men with caps on their heads shading their eyes to peer in at him. Behind them stood a moving van. One of the men was tapping on the glass, which was the sound that had awakened him. He got to his feet unsteadily. His head ached. "Sorry, sorry," he said through the glass. "I'm coming."

Going to the door, he found it unlocked. He opened it, pushed the screen door outward, and nearly fell onto the porch. "Sorry," he said to the men. "I must have dozed off. Ah. You're my movers, of course. Sorry." The men exchanged oh-Christ-not-another-drunk looks.

"Mister Anderssen?" one of them said, reading from a shipping manifest.

"That's right. Sorry. I didn't hear you knocking."

"Your real estate agent told us where to find you. Sorry we're so late. We tried to call, but there was no answer at your number."

"Are you late?" the gray-eyed man asked in surprise. The men exchanged glances again.

"Only by about two days," drawled the one who had not yet spoken.

*Two days?* thought the gray-eyed man. *This was a bad one, then.* "No problem. Um, let's get to it, then."

"You sure you're okay?" asked the first man. "When we saw you on the floor, we thought you might be sick or something. We were going to call nine-one-one."

"Just give him the papers, Robert," said the other man.

"Okay, okay," said Robert, frowning. He handed the gray-eyed man a clipboard with a multipage carbon form attached. "This here lists what we got. We guarantee no breakage en route. If you wouldn't mind just checking stuff off as we bring it out."

“Yes. Thank you.” In fact there was not much to unload, considering that the truck’s contents constituted the gray-eyed man’s entire earthly possessions: his computer equipment; three boxes of books; some kitchen things; a folding modular wooden office table; an office chair on casters; two trunks of clothes. To have had a spell here, now, so soon after his arrival, meant he had chosen correctly. He was close to the Key, close to the end of his long search. Which meant that the Rabbi was near.

After the men had unloaded the van, and he had paid them, and they had fled (a bad moment when he had been forced to shake hands with the nice one, and the shock of contact had literally made the man’s hair stand on end), he dialed the real estate office. The young man, David, answered in a silky voice. “La Llorona Realty.”

“David, this is Anderssen on Corazón. May I speak to Roberta, please?”

“I’m so sorry; she’s out on call.”

“When do you expect her back?”

“Not until three, I’m afraid. Can I take a message? Everything all right at the house? The movers came by this morning. We were all a bit concerned when you didn’t answer the phone.” He did not sound as though he had been concerned.

“Everything’s fine here,” the gray-eyed man said. “Perhaps you can tell me: Does La Llorona have a historical society?”

“Historical society?” Someone giggled in the background.

“A formal or informal body,” said the gray-eyed man dryly, “the purpose of which is to collect, preserve, codify, and disseminate data related to the founding and history of the town.”

“Um,” said David. “There’s Mrs. Roybal on Loma Vista. People are always calling her up asking about the town. Stop that,” he added.

“Pardon?”

“Sorry. I wasn’t speaking to you.”

“Perhaps,” said the gray-eyed man slowly, “I’ve phoned at an inconvenient time.” There was a short silence. Then he said, “You don’t



happen to have Mrs. Roybal's telephone number, do you?"

"One moment." The line went dead, and stayed dead for a long time. He was just about to disconnect when the line came to life again. "Sorry to have kept you waiting," said David. He sounded breathless. "Do you have a pen?" The boy gave him the number and hung up. When the gray-eyed man dialed the number he had been given, a recording said the number he had reached was no longer in service, and that if he thought he had reached this recording in error to please hang up and try again.

Sighing, he dialed directory assistance, and they gave him the same number the boy had given him. When he told the operator about the recording, she dialed for him and got the recording, too. "Sorry about that. Is there anything else I can help you with?" she asked.

"No, thank you," he said. By that time he was already locking the house door behind him. He got into the car and set out to find Loma Vista Street.

The house of Adelina Roybal was set back from the lane, half-hidden behind a high wooden fence. The driveway held a small red Toyota, its visible fender slightly dented. He got out of his car. Dogs barked in the house. The street appeared empty—it was, after all, the middle of a working day—but experience had shown him that this did not mean he was not being observed. So he was careful to keep his movements slow and his bearing relaxed as he walked up to the fence. Above the fence's gate a bell hung, its clapper-cord dangling. He sounded the clapper three times and stepped back to wait.

The dogs stopped barking at once, but nothing else happened for a long time. Then he heard someone say, quite close by, "Coming," in a strong woman's voice. There was a clatter from the other side of the gate. It was pulled open suddenly to reveal the unlined oval face of a very short, very old woman. "Well, now," she said, looking him up and down. Her eyes were bright. "And what are *you* selling, young man?" She was dressed in a blue painter's smock and jeans. Her hair was long and silver, caught up in a ponytail; she had a smudge of red paint on the bridge of her long, narrow nose.

He said, "Mrs. Adelina Roybal? I'm Rafael Anderssen. I tried calling, but the phone company says your number is out of service."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Anderssen?" She was peering around him. "I don't see anybody else with you, so you can't be a Mormon or a J.

W. They always travel in pairs. Are you from Fuller Brush? I see no sample case. They always used to send around the nicest young men, and their goods were top quality, but of course that was many years ago.”

“I’m a writer, Mrs. Roybal. I’ve just moved to La Llorona, and I’m doing some research. You were recommended to me as someone who knew a lot about the history of the area. May I make an appointment to chat with you? I’d be happy to reimburse you for your time,” he added.

“A writer! My, my,” the old woman said. She smiled suddenly and blindingly, and he saw her as she had been when she was young. *They live such a short time*, he thought. “It’s been a while since one of you folks came to see me. This isn’t a book about La Llorona, is it?” she added, frowning.

“About the town? No, not exactly.”

“I didn’t mean the town. I meant the woman after whom the town is named.”

“The Weeping Woman,” he said. “Said to be seen on the side of the road late at night. A local version of the Irish banshee.”

“You scoff. But she’s real, Mr. Anderssen. I’ve seen her. My nephews have seen her.” She drew herself up. “You’re not *that* kind of writer, are you, Mr. Anderssen? What do they call themselves? Debunkers? Because if you are, I have no interest in further dealings with you. Stupid men—almost always men—pretentious, intellectually arrogant, angry with their religious fanatic mothers or the nuns who taught them when they were in grade school, frightened deep down that there *is* a spiritual reality, so they spend their lives attacking other people’s faith. Are you that kind of writer?”

“No, ma’am,” he said. “Far from it.” He could barely speak. For he knew he was standing in the presence of the Rabbi at last.

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3.

The old woman’s house was cluttered and cool and full of plants in pots. She took him into the kitchen, put a teapot on the stove, took a tin of cookies out of the refrigerator, and soon they were sitting together at her

kitchen table, chatting like old friends. “You going to tape this?” she asked him.

“I’ll remember,” he said, smiling. “I remember everything.”

“That could be a blessing,” she observed. “Or not.” And when he did not reply, she nodded, and began to talk.

The community had not been called La Llorona originally. Originally, it had not been a community at all. “Back in the 1850s and ‘60s, this whole area belonged to the Varelas,” the old woman told him. “It was part of their ranch. Old Man Varela was a bit of an eccentric. When the railroad came through, he wouldn’t let them build on his land; he thought trains were of the Devil. As a result, the railroad bypassed us, went around Glorieta and Pecos way up to Las Vegas. When Varela passed on, his sons tried to get the railroad to run a side rail out this way, but nothing doing. Those boys were fit to be tied, let me tell you. They saw how the communities around them were prospering, and they wanted in, Devil or no Devil.”

“What happened?” asked the gray-eyed man. The cookies were shortbread, dusted with powdered sugar, like the *kourabiedes* he had enjoyed in Athens.

“Nothing much till Doc Wilberforce and his wife Socorro moved up here in the 1880s. He was from Chicago originally. She was from Chalapa, México. He’d met her working as a domestic for a whiskey importer; fell in love with her. But interethnic marriages were pretty uncommon in those days, in the East at any rate, and she was lonesome for folks who spoke her language, I guess, so he decided to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Go West, young man, go West.”

“What was he doctor of?”

“Nothing much, as far as I can make out. Lots of people called themselves ‘doctor’ in those days. He *did* go to medical school for a few years—I ran across some documentation via the Internet just last summer that confirmed it. But he never graduated and certainly never practiced.” She shrugged. “That didn’t stop him from coming out here and proclaiming himself a *curandero*.”

“A folk healer?”

“Traditional medicine person,” she corrected him. “Herbs, charms, prayers, acts of contrition, patent remedies, some of which he brewed up

himself and bottled in recycled whiskey flasks.”

“How did the locals react?”

“Mostly ignored him,” she said cheerfully. “After all, they had their own *curandera*: my great-great-grandma, Esperanza. But Doña Varela, Old Man Varela’s widow, she’d had a falling out with my ancestor over something or other, and one day she sent for the new guy and told him to do his thing. Whatever he did, it worked, and she took him on as her regular physician.

“That did it. Lots of people in the villages around here heard and figured if he was good enough for Doña Rosaura, he should be good enough for them. In those days, remember, wealth was seen as a blessing from God; a holdover from feudal days, I suppose.

“And having Socorro there definitely helped. Socorro acted as his nurse. Her presence reassured folks that there would be no impropriety going on in Doc’s consulting room. And since his Spanish wasn’t so hot, at least at first, she was able to translate for customers, which helped business a lot. He started a regular route through the hills here, stopping at homesteads and such, selling his remedies and attending to people’s aches and pains and fears. Drove a wagon drawn by an albino burro.” To his laugh of disbelief, she nodded vigorously. “Truth of God, I swear! That burro lived to be eighty-seven years old. Got killed by a mountain lion in 1952.”

“Eighty-seven?”

“I swear. I have photocopies of the vet’s affidavit to prove it. Hell, my daddy remembered the old girl. Ornerly as all get out. I’ve always meant to do a study on the link between longevity and cussedness.”

The tall man laughed and took another cookie. “How did the town become a town?”

“Well, the only reason it *could* be a town at *all* was the Agua Azul. We call it a river, but it’s really just a big stream, a tributary of the Pecos. Still, it seldom dries up, and that’s one of the reasons Old Man Varela didn’t want the railroad coming through here. He was afraid it would poison the water somehow and harm his stock. Well, Doc Wilberforce got the idea there was some sort of healing property in that stream—it *is* very blue—and began bottling the water to sell to Easterners coming through. And the success of

*that* gave him the idea of building a spa on the Varela property. You got to take your hat off to him; the man had marketing savvy.

“Well, he approached Doña Varela and she said nothing doing; she was afraid he’d leave her, you see, for bigger and better things. She’d gotten completely dependent upon him emotionally, you see. And she was nearly ninety by that time, almost blind. You can’t blame her, really. Her sons, though, were a different matter. I don’t think they believed in Doc’s putative healing powers for one second. But they believed in his salesmanship. And they saw in his spa plan a way of augmenting their revenues from the family cattle business. So they agreed to finance the project with the help of their pals at the bank in Las Vegas. And they did.”

“They built the spa? Does it still exist?”

“No, no. It was torn down in the ‘40s. But for about thirty years it was a famous little place, almost as famous as that Kellogg sanitarium back East. Folks came from as far away as Fort Carson to take the waters. Part of the reason for its success, of course, was the timing. The nation as a whole was prospering. World War One was still some years off, most of the Indians had been cleared out of the area or parlayed into more or less peaceful coexistence; the Southwest was generally less dangerous to travel in.” She sipped her tea reflectively. “And with the fame of the spa came the railroad, and with the railroad came the town.”

“So they did finally run a side rail out here?”

“They finally did. And the night after they cut the golden cord proclaiming the opening of the spur, Eusebio, Old Man Varela’s eldest son, who’d been the main one pushing all these deals through, got drunk and went for a ride alone under the moon. When he came back the next morning, he was nearly incoherent. He’d seen her, of course.”

“Whom?” he asked, though he knew.

“La Llorona. Walking in her shawl and long dress along the bank of the Azul in the moonlight. Weeping and wailing like death to come.” She got up to refill the teapot.

“Let me,” he said. She sank back down in her chair. As he worked he said, “Do you think he really had a vision?”

“Aided and abetted by his guilt over betraying his daddy’s wishes, maybe. And fueled by his alcohol-induced altered state. But sure, why not?”

Sometimes you got to get drunk to open to God.” Watching his shoulders, she laughed. “Doesn’t sit well with you, what I just said?”

“It’s not that.” He set the refilled teapot back on the stove, lit the gas burner. “I wish I *could* get drunk.”

“You a teetotaler?”

“No. I just can’t get drunk.” He shrugged, smiling. “Alcohol doesn’t affect me. Pot doesn’t, either. My system refuses to shut down.” He thought of the vision of the burning plain. “Ordinarily,” he added.

She observed him for a moment, then said, “Whatever he saw, it changed him, old Eusebio. He was around sixty at the time, still something of a hellraiser, long lapsed from the Church, much to the despair of his extremely long-suffering wife, who had spent a small fortune on novenas trying to get him to come around. Well, he did come around, finally. Paid off his mistress of eighteen years, sent her packing to Lamy. Started paying the hands better wages. Acknowledged three bastard kids he’d insisted for years weren’t his; took ‘em on as hands, gave ‘em the opportunity to be part of a family again.”

“His wife couldn’t have liked *that* very much.”

“Actually, she was okay with it, I think. She’d never been able to have kids of her own. And the boys took to her. Two of ‘em ended up as priests, would you believe it? And the town—Doc Wilberforce had originally wanted to call it ‘Villa Varela,’ out of flattery to the family, but Eusebio put his foot down and said no, it’s La Llorona. So they drew up a charter and everything. And La Llorona it is to this day.”

The teapot started to sing. The tall man turned off the heat, went over to the table, poured hot water into their two empty cups, dropped in the teabags (“Lipton?” “Hey, don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, Mr. Anderssen. If Lipton was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for you.”), and sat back down at the table again. “What happened to him? Eusebio?”

“He died in 1919.”

“The flu epidemic?”

She nodded. His mind filled up with images: women in long dresses with masks on their faces; bodies piling up in carts; smoke at the edge of

town. “That couldn’t have been very good for spa business.”

“On the contrary, Mister Anderssen. Business took off as never before. And of course the war was done by that time. Fact is,” she said, removing the teabag from her cup and dipping it once, twice, three times, “fact is, Eusebio Varela was the only one.”

“The only one who what?”

“The only one in La Llorona,” she said, “who died of the flu.”

He stared at her. “You’re joking.”

“I don’t joke about things like this,” she said quietly. She put the teabag back on its saucer and looked him in the eye. “Call it coincidence. Maybe there really *is* something special in the water of the Agua Azul. Or maybe those New Agers we had come through here last spring were right, and there’s some kind of energy vortex that protects this place, you know, like the ones they’re supposed to have up in whatchahoozy. But whatever the explanation, while the epidemic hit all the major towns around here—Albuquerque, Santa Fé, Las Vegas, Española, Glorieta—it didn’t take hold in La Llorona. Except in one man, in one night.”

He nodded. “La Llorona’s curse.”

“La Llorona’s curse. Though why she’d have wanted to curse him when he’d gone to so much trouble to clean up his act, I sure couldn’t say. Spirits,” she added, “are notoriously inconsistent in their morals, don’t you find, Mister Anderssen? Sort of like people.”

He sighed and sipped his tea. “May I have just one more of those incredible cookies?” he asked. She laughed and pushed the plate over.

“Help yourself. You’re too skinny; need some meat on those bones.” Very quickly, before he could change his mind, he reached out and took her hand in his. She was surprised; she raised her eyebrows. But she did not try to pull away. In a moment he let her go.

For nothing had happened. No shock of information, no past-life replay, no cellular-level data-flooding, no precognitive waves. He could not read her at all.

He stood up. She remained sitting, following him with her calm eyes. He said, “Your family. They weren’t *conversos*, by any chance, were they?”

Way back when?"

"Now how in Heaven's name did you know that?" She was frankly staring now. "Yes, they were. Well, on my mother's side, at any rate. Back in Spain, Sephardic Jews. We converted to Catholicism, the alternative being unacceptably unpleasant. As it is, they confiscated our lands anyway." She cocked her head. "Is that what you're writing about? The crypto-Jews of the Southwest? You *are* writing a book, aren't you, Mister Anderssen?"

"No," he blurted. "No. And I—and I have to go now. You've been very kind."

"Are you all right?" she exclaimed, for as he moved toward her door, a wave of dizziness hit him, and he nearly stumbled. *Not now! Not here!* he thought, and, gathering his will, spoke a True Word. At once strength flowed back into him, and he straightened. "Are you all right?" she said again.

"Low blood sugar," he said.

"After all those cookies?"

"I've got to go. Mrs. Roybal, you've been enormously helpful. Oh, I forgot." He opened his wallet, took out some bills, set them on the tabletop. "I hope this is enough. And I hope I may come back again." He managed a smile. "I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed this conversation."

She did not glance at the money. She rose and came over to him. He closed his eyes, afraid the dizziness would strike again, but it did not. She did not touch him. She said, "I'm no *curandera*, Mister Anderssen, and it's none of my business. But whatever's really brought you to La Llorona, my advice, which you haven't asked for, is to take it slow." He opened his eyes, blinked at her through sudden tears. "Just take it slow. You've got time, all right? You've got time."

On the drive home he was conscious of being possessed by a powerful excitement, so as he piloted the old Subaru through the dusty La Llorona streets he concentrated upon controlling his breath to calm himself down. Too much excitement could be dangerous at this stage. If, as seemed the case, he had found the Rabbi in her current incarnation, then the others would not be far off either in space or time: the Lamp, who would illumine the Way to the Door; the Sacrifice, whose blood would purchase access to the Way; the Key to the Door, which could be a thing, an animal, or a human being; the Door itself. And of course the Enemy and the Traitor



would not be far behind, if indeed they were not here already.

He would have to be very careful from now on. It was so peaceful up here in the mountains, such a relief after the craziness of Paris and London and New York; and the countryside around La Llorona reminded him keenly of the region of Northern Italy where he had first dwelt after the Seven brought him through the veil into flesh. *Everything is a circle*, he thought. But he must remain alert. The Traitor would lead the Enemy to him, late or soon but inevitably; it was all part of the dance. And when that happened, he must be ready.

\* \* \* \*

4.

“So who was that?” asked the naked backpacker.

David yawned. He was sore all over, but Jesus! Nobody had ever made him feel this way before. Nobody. At first he had felt weird about using the office as a place to play with his exciting new friend, but there hadn't been any other place to go. David couldn't have taken him into the home of his *abuela*, his grandmother with whom he'd lived since he was a baby; she was a really strict Catholic, she didn't know he was gay, and he was sure if she ever found out she'd have a total heart attack on the spot. And his new friend didn't have a place; he was backpacking around the Southwest. So the office had seemed like the logical option.

And David had to confess to himself that the possibility, however remote, that Roberta might come back from her house-showing early—might walk in on them and catch them in the act—had added to the excitement of the afternoon's encounter.

It was strange how they'd connected, too. Almost as though it had been meant. David had been in the general store getting some stuff for his *abuela*, and he'd glanced over just in time to see the young blond backpacker take some Slim Jims and put them in the pocket of his Army jacket. The guy had seen him see him steal, too, and had the backpacker freaked? No way. Cool as could be he'd given David a long up-and-down appraisal, then *winked* at him, turned, gone up to the counter, paid for a Coke he'd grabbed from the cold case, and sauntered out with a glance over his shoulder in David's direction. His heart racing, David had followed as quickly as he had been able.

Outside he'd looked around for the youth. At first he hadn't seen him, and he'd felt keen disappointment. A new face in this butthole of a town, and he'd seemed interested, and now he was gone! Dejected, David had returned to his car, and was just unlocking the car doors when he heard a husky voice very close behind him say, "Thanks for not blowing the whistle on me back there."

Startled, David whirled and nearly collided with the guy. He was taller than David, his sun-bleached yellow hair worn shaggy; he had a hard broad chest and long arms and (David ascertained with a surreptitious glance) a pretty decent basket. "That's okay," David said.

"No, really; I appreciate it." The backpacker touched him, then, on the side of his neck of all places, and suddenly it was as though an electric shock went through David from top to bottom. He had to lean against the car door to keep from falling over. Concern showed in the blond youth's blue eyes. "Are you okay?" he'd said.

"I, yeah, sorry, I just—I'm fine." Fire was racing through his veins; his head had begun swimming; and he realized, to his mingled horror and delight, that he was in the middle of a lust attack more powerful than anything he'd experienced since that day at thirteen when he'd found his great-uncle's porn stash in the shed behind his *abuela's* house.

"Well, okay then," the backpacker said, and with a wave and a brilliant smile had begun to turn away. And David, desperate to prolong their contact, said the first thing that had come into his head.

"Um, are you—are you on foot? I mean, do you need a ride anywhere?"

The youth turned back, another, more knowing and somehow more calculated smile replacing the first, and they locked eyes. "Well, now," the blond guy said. He gave David another appraising look. "That depends on what you have in mind. You have a place we could go?"

"Where I work," David blurted. "My boss is out till three. We could go there."

"Sounds good to me," the blond guy replied. "You got any weed?" David shook his head. "Too bad," the backpacker said. "Still, I'm sure we could figure out some way to, you know, relax. Right, little David?"

"How—how do you know my name?"

“Earth to David! Duh! You, like, *told* me?” The guy had already begun to shift off his backpack and make his way around the car to the passenger side. David followed and opened the rear door for him. The guy stowed the backpack in the rear seat and closed the door on it. “If you don’t mind,” the youth said, “I’ll take the suicide seat.” And before David had a chance to object, the backpacker had opened the right front door and was swinging himself with athletic grace into the car.

Hurrying back to his side of the vehicle, David had joined him, and a moment later they peeled out of the parking lot of the grocery. “I’ve got to drop off some things at my grandma’s house first,” David managed to say through his brain-whirl.

“No problem,” the blond guy said. Casually he laid a hand on David’s thigh, and after that it had been all David could do to stay on the road. When they reached David’s grandmother’s house, David was relieved to see that her car was not in the driveway. “I’ll just be a second,” he said to the backpacker. David climbed onto the porch, unlocked the door, and went into the house. The sunroom was empty except for the ginger cat, Billy, who yawned at him. “Grandma?” David called, just to be on the safe side. There was no answer save the ticking of the old grandfather clock in the corner. The house smelled a little musty, *An old lady smell*, he thought.

Suddenly he couldn’t wait to get out of there. Rushing into the kitchen, he flung the groceries down on the kitchen table, put the perishables into the refrigerator, left the other stuff on the counter, and hurried out, nearly falling over Billy in his haste. “God damn you, Billy, *move!*” he yelled, aiming a kick at the cat, *his* cat, the cat he loved, the cat who slept on his bed every night, the cat he’d found shivering and starving one cold November day under the porch and brought inside and given a home. Dimly he was aware that something was terribly wrong with him, but all he could do was pray, *Don’t leave! Don’t leave!* to the backpacker in the car. He let the door slam behind him.

Back in the automobile, the young man had lit a cigarette and was leaning back in the seat, blowing smoke rings. David coughed. He hated cigarette smoke. “What took you so long?” asked the youth.

A half an hour later they were making out on the couch in Roberta’s office when the telephone rang.

“So who was that?” the backpacker asked after David hung up.

“One of Roberta’s clients. He’s renting the old Schmidt place up on Corazón.”

“Yeah? Is he cute?”

“Only if you like old.” David clambered back on the couch and put his head on the backpacker’s naked hairless chest. The blond youth pushed him away.

“So what’s his name?”

“What does it matter? Jesus.” David’s shoulder hurt where the young man had pushed him.

Then the backpacker reached out and clamped his fingers around David’s jaw. His grip was impossibly strong; it was like having his jaw caught in a steel vise. David tried to cry out, but he could only manage a squeak. The blond youth grinned, showing very white teeth, and tightened his grip. He pushed his face just inches from David’s and said, in a very calm, very controlled voice, “This is how it is, David. You are going to tell me the *name* under which this man travels. You are going to tell it to me *now*, of your own free will, as you let me into your car of your own free will, as you let me into this office of your own free will, as you let me fuck you of your own free will. You will not lie to me. If you lie, or refuse to tell me the renter’s name, I will go to your *abuela*’s house and I will gut your grandma from her piehole to her wrinkled old gash. I may or may not rape her first, depending on how I feel at the time. Understand me?” The backpacker relaxed his grip just enough to permit David to nod.

“Now let’s try this again. What name did the man give you? I’m letting go of your jaw now. Yell and I’ll kill you.” He let go of David’s face.

*Oh God oh God*, David thought. *Oh God oh God*. All his grandmother’s warnings had come back to him: Don’t talk to strangers. Never bring a stranger to the house. Never pick up hitchhikers. David’s jaw ached so badly he thought he was going to faint. But he managed to whisper, “Anderssen.”

“Louder, please,” said the backpacker cheerfully. “I didn’t *quite* hear you.”

“Anderssen. He said his name was Mister Anderssen.”

“First name?”

“I don’t—no, wait! *Wait!*” For the young man’s smile had vanished. Desperately David thought back to the rental document. He’d typed in a name. What had it been? *Mother of God help me remember please*, he thought. It had started with an R. “Ralph,” he said. “No, not Ralph—Rafael. With an ‘f,’ not a ‘ph.’ Rafael Anderssen.”

“Figures,” snorted the blond youth. “Good boy, David. Good little monkey. Now one last bit of info and I’ll be on my way and you’ll forget everything that happened here today. Where can I find the Schmidt place?”

Before David could answer, the backpacker stiffened, his nostrils dilated (*Like a wolf’s*, thought David, *like a wolf’s*) and cast a quick look toward the front of the office. “Make it quick, little David, because unless I miss my guess, your boss’s car is due to pull up in front of the shop in about sixty seconds. And I really don’t think she’d appreciate learning you’ve been entertaining gentleman callers in her private office. Do you?”

David stammered out directions to Avenida Corazón. “It’s a brown house at the very end of the lane. What—what are you going to do to him?” he added, panic in his voice, because the young man had leaped nimbly from the sofa and, more quickly than David could have thought possible, donned his clothing again.

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with, little David,” he said, with another terrifying grin. Then he spoke a word. David was never able to remember afterward what word the blond youth had spoken, but it had been a terrible word, that much he remembered; it soiled the air as it came out of the backpacker’s lips. The next thing David knew, Roberta Vigil’s concerned face was peering down at him.

“David?” she was saying. “David, are you all right?”

“What?” David said. He felt groggy and his jaw ached terribly. He had somehow fallen off the couch and was lying on the floor. “I don’t—what time is it?”

“Three-fifteen,” said his boss. Her eyes traveled down his body, and he realized with a shock that he was still naked. “Oh, my God,” Roberta Vigil said. Her hand flew to her mouth. “What *happened* to you, David?”

For running down the length of his torso, from the top of his smooth chest to the short hair of his pubic region, were five livid red clawmarks.

\* \* \* \*

5.

The tall man had nearly reached the turnoff to Corazón when his cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen. It was the number for the real estate office. “Yes, Ms. Vigil?” he said.

“I’m so sorry to bother you, Mister Anderssen,” came the woman’s voice. She sounded upset. “But I—but I didn’t know who else to call. I—my assistant, David, he—he’s been attacked; there are awful scratches all over his body; I found him in my office without—without any clothes on and there was nobody here in La Llorona I could call, you understand? Because it’s such a small town and people *talk* so, and—I’m so sorry, Mister Anderssen, I know this isn’t your problem, but I wondered if possibly you might—”

“I’ll be right over,” said the gray-eyed man, and he braked, backed, made a U-turn, and drove back toward the village.

When he reached the office, Roberta Vigil was waiting outside. “Thank you. Thank you for coming,” she said when he got out of the car. “He’s in here. He’s conscious; there’s no blood, I mean there’s blood in his wounds but he’s not bleeding, his bleeding stopped, I guess. This way,” she added, unnecessarily, and led him through the waiting room, past the espresso bar, and into her office. The young receptionist, David, was sitting up. He had put on trousers and a shirt, but the shirt was hanging open, and through the gap in the fabric the gray-eyed man could see his wounds.

But that was not what stopped him in his tracks. What made him halt halfway across the room, halt and cover his nostrils with his hand, was the stench. “Coyote,” he said at once.

“What did you say?” The real estate agent regarded him anxiously.

“Nothing.” He closed the distance between himself and the receptionist and knelt down beside him. “David? Can you hear me?” The boy was sitting, partially hunched, a look of desolation on his face, eyes slightly unfocused, staring into space. “He’s in shock,” said the man who called himself Anderssen. “You’d better call nine-one-one.”

"I did already," said the woman, wringing her hands. "They said it would be an hour before they could get here; there's been a big accident on I-25 and all their crews are tied up."

"Fetch me a little water in a cup, would you, please?" She nodded and fled. Steeling himself, Anderssen reached out and took hold of David's left wrist. Immediately his mind was flooded with sensations so intense he nearly gasped aloud. Shaking his head to clear it, he took David's pulse. It was strong; a good sign. The tall man placed his mouth close to boy's ear and whispered into it one of the Words of healing. David's scream brought Roberta running.

"What's the matter? What happened?" she cried. David was sobbing now, clinging to Anderssen like a child. "Oh my God, David!"

"There, now," the gray-eyed man was saying. "There, now. Shh. Shh," as though David were a little boy whom he was comforting. Anderssen glanced at the real estate agent. "The water, please." She handed him the espresso cup. His hand received it from her and brought it close to the sobbing receptionist. But instead of bringing the cup to David's lips, so that he might sip some of the water from it, the gray-eyed man dipped a finger into the cup, touched his wet fingertip to the boy's forehead, and wrote something with water on the boy's skin.

Immediately David's body relaxed. His sobs died away, his tortured face relaxed, and in the next moment Roberta realized that her assistant had fallen sound asleep. "What—how did you do that?" she asked, in a voice of wonder.

"Just a little trick I picked up in Mumbai," said Anderssen. He sounded tired. Gently he disengaged David's arms from their clutch of him and, holding the back of his head with one hand, laid him back on the couch. "He'll be out until the ambulance gets here. But those scratches will need to be seen to. And in the weeks to come he should be checked for evidence of sexually transmitted disease." He rose to his feet.

"Sexually transmitted disease?" said Roberta faintly. "Do you mean that whoever did this—that he was raped?" Her hands had formed into tight fists; her knuckles were white.

"In a manner of speaking," the gray-eyed man said. "I phoned for you earlier. Your assistant seemed very distracted, and I heard noises in the background. Whoever did this to him was here then." He knew he would have no trouble tracking the Coyote, now that he had the Coyote's scent.

*Then again*, he thought bitterly, *why bother?* There was only one possible reason why the creature should appear here, in La Llorona of all places, so soon following the gray-eyed man's arrival.

The descendants of the Seven had sent it. He wondered how they had found him. Through the Stone, probably, or the White Mask. However they had done it, they were too late to stop him. He was nearly home at last.

Roberta Vigil had sat down next to David. The boy, fast asleep, did not stir, but he had put his thumb in his mouth, and he looked impossibly young, lying there. "I was raped once," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It was in college," she went on, in a tone almost conversational, staring at nothing. "This guy I'd met at a party. I used to party a lot in those days. You know, Catholic girl away from home for the first time, free at last, ha ha." She glanced over at him. "He slipped something into my drink. The doctors said later it was that date-rape drug. I didn't remember a thing about it, not a thing." She shook her head, remembering. "Poor David. Do you think he'll remember?"

"I doubt it," said the gray-eyed man. "But the mind not remembering doesn't actually help, does it? Because the body has a memory, too."

"Yes, it does." She looked at him again. "Who are you, really?" she asked. And then, without waiting for him to answer, she said, "I dreamed about you last night."

"Oh?" said the gray-eyed man.

"I dreamed we were standing on a hilltop together, overlooking the sea. Below us a city was burning; you could see the fires here and there, and plumes of thick black smoke. People were shouting and screaming; horses were neighing; there were soldiers dressed in old-time clothing, like something out of Monty Python. You were trying to tell me something, something very important. I don't remember what it was you said, only that it made me feel very sad. You were going away, I think. And so was I. But you said we'd meet again someday. That's all I remember." She cocked her head at him. "Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"I'm afraid I do," he said.

"Me, too." She looked back down at the sleeping boy. "I think David



was my son in a past life. Or my daughter. I always thought so, from the day he was born, the way he looked at me through the viewing window at the hospital. He's my sister's kid, you know. She was a cokehead, got pregnant, carried David to term like the good Catholic girl she was, then dumped him on her boyfriend's mama and ran off with some jerk." She smiled. "It happens a lot out here. We're on the direct drug route from Mexico."

"So David's your nephew," said the gray-eyed man.

She nodded. "Yes. I knew he was gay from the time he was nine years old. I don't know how I knew; I just did. His grandma would just die if she found out." She stood up suddenly. "She mustn't find out, Mister Anderssen."

"Call me Rafael. Please."

"Rafael. Like the angel?" When he did not answer, she laughed softly. "Raphael, Angel of Happy Meetings. I read that in a tract once."

"It's going to be all right, Ms. Vigil," the gray-eyed man said. "I promise."

"Call me Roberta," she said, and sat back down again.

They waited together until the ambulance came to take the Traitor away.

\* \* \* \*

## 6.

When he got home that evening, the gray-eyed man looked for signs of the Coyote, but the creature was not in evidence, and it did not appear that night, or the next night, or the next night after that. *Lying low*, he thought. *Awaiting opportunity*, but he was not certain; perhaps it had taken his measure and decided against direct confrontation. He would have to be vigilant, but he refused to let the Coyote's presence—or lack of same—rule his thoughts. If it came back—when it came back—he would be ready for it.

In the meantime, there was the Door to consider.

It had to be in or around La Llorona. All signs pointed to that verity: the Rabbi was here, and the Enemy—the agent of the descendants of the Seven—was not far off. Now the task before him was to find the Lamp, who

would show him the Way to the Door, and lead him to the Key that would open it. Then the Sacrifice would present itself, and the Door would open, and he would go through it, and be Home at last.

He laughed to himself. *I think archetypally now*, he thought. *In capital letters*. It was a sign that he needed to relax and trust the One. So he set out to explore La Llorona and vicinity like any summer tourist.

He went hiking in the mountains. He rented fishing equipment at the general store and played live catch-and-release with lazy trout from the Agua Azul. He went to church on Sunday mornings, sitting in the back of the little chapel, not taking communion with the others, just enjoying the sound and scents of the Mass, which the little priest from Glorieta said in Spanish and English. On Saturdays he roamed the stalls at the Three Village Farmers' Market, where vendors from La Llorona, Pecos, and Glorieta pooled resources to compete for tourist money. He always looked forward to market day: the bustle of it, the excitement of the children, the flushed faces of lovers, the mounds of goods. It reminded him of the old days in Firenze, after he had escaped the Seven and begun to make his own way in the strange new world into which they had brought him.

One Saturday he was cruising the stalls when he came upon a playpen full of squirming puppies. Beside it, at a folding table covered with a cloth, sat two women wearing stick-on name tags. On the table lay Xeroxed brochures, lapel pins, a looseleaf binder paged with photographs of happy, smiling dogs of various sizes, shapes, and ages. A sign on the table said, open hearts sanctuary: a no-kill animal shelter. "Hello," said one of the women.

"Hello," he replied, with a smile; and he was about to move past them when a movement under the table caught the corner of his eye. Looking down, he saw a snout poking out from beneath the cloth. "And who is this?" he inquired.

The woman who had spoken laughed. "That's Dusty," she said. "Come on out, Dusty. Say hello to the gentleman." The tall man squatted and extended a hand, palm up. The snout, which was black and white, slowly emerged from its covering, revealing two bright black eyes behind it and pendulous, cocked ears. "Dusty's been with us forever," the woman said. "He's officially disabled, but you wouldn't know it; he gets around just fine. Still, people freak out when they see him."

"He looks fine to me." Dusty sniffed his hand, looked up at him, sniffed his hand again. A tail thumped somewhere out of sight.

“Oh. Well, hold on a sec. Come on out, Dusty. Show the man your whole self.” She ducked behind the tablecloth. A moment later Dusty’s head disappeared. When she emerged again, she had him on a short leather leash. Getting up, she led him around to the front of the table. He was a spaniel mix, the gray-eyed man guessed, black and white with black spots here and there, medium build but broad-shouldered; there was perhaps a touch of pit bull in his bloodline somewhere. His haunches and right foreleg were intact, but his left foreleg ended at the shoulder. “Hit by a car when he was a baby,” the woman said cheerfully. She was plump, caftaned, with one gold tooth. “They had to amputate the leg. Nobody wants a three-legged dog, do they, sweetie?” She kissed the air over the dog’s leg.

“How much?” asked the man who called himself Anderssen.

“Sorry?”

“How much do you want for the dog?” he asked patiently. He had taken out his wallet and was fingering some bills.

“One-fifty,” said the other woman, who had not spoken before. She was gaunt, unsmiling, with dark hair. The plump woman cast her an irritated glance.

“Our standard adoption fee is seventy-five dollars,” she said to the gray-eyed man. “Anything you can spare over that would be greatly appreciated. The Sanctuary depends entirely upon private donations for its operations, and all donations are tax deductible.” There was something sorrowful in her tone.

He said, “I promise I’ll bring him back to visit.” He counted out the money. The plump woman gave him papers to sign—“We’ll have to arrange for a home visit, to make sure your facility is a safe place for Dusty”—and she agreed to rendezvous with him the following Thursday at the house on Corazón. Then the gray-eyed man knelt down in the dust of the Market and placed his hand on the three-legged dog’s head. A moment later he withdrew his hand. Dusty’s tail was wagging fiercely. “Till Thursday, then,” he said to the plump woman, nodded at the dark-haired one, and walked off with his heart lighter than it had felt in weeks.

For he had found the Lamp. He was as certain of that fact as he was certain that the Coyote had been shadowing him, just out of sight, for the previous week and a half. He had found the Lamp, and somehow, in some

way, Dusty would show him the Way to the Door. All he had to do was wait and watch, and prepare himself for the attack that would surely come.

\* \* \* \*

7.

He took Dusty everywhere with him after that. The dog proved nimble, despite his three legs, moving with a kind of skipping hop that required no assistance to gain the car's back seat or his sofa's cushions. They explored the hills above La Llorona, sniffed mountain lion spoor, watched golden eagles nesting on the ridge. Once they surprised a mother bear with her cubs, and the gray-eyed man grimly readied a fierce Word, for he knew how dangerous such encounters could become. But he did not need to use the Word after all. Dusty, one twelfth the bear's size, faced her down snarling; and she turned tail, her cubs bouncing after her through the tufts of bunch grass.

One day he and the dog drove to the site of the old La Llorona spa. It was in the process of being restored by the County Parks Commission, said the uniformed attendant at the makeshift gate, "but you're welcome to go in and look around as long as you mind your step. You gotta leash the pooch, though," the man added, eyeing Dusty dubiously. Dusty eyed him dubiously back. Smiling, the gray-eyed man clipped the leash onto Dusty's collar, and together they walked through the chainlink gate.

The old woman he thought of as the Rabbi had told him that the spa had been torn down during the 1940s, but everywhere he could see the signs of the former complex: foundation stones, half-shattered pathways, piles of mortared rubble. They came upon the remnants of a large covered well, surrounded by bright orange plastic mesh stiffened with rebar and hung with a danger sign. Behind it ran the remains of a wall, and beyond that, a stony field littered with beer cans and old whiskey bottles. In the distance, an arm of the Agua Azul winked blue in the sunshine. "This was a courtyard back in the day," said a man's voice behind them. "Folks used to draw water from that well; drink it for what ailed them."

The tall man turned. The speaker emerged from the shadow of a huge old cottonwood where he had been sitting on a makeshift bench. He was Anglo, in his late sixties, the gray-eyed man guessed, with a round, open, friendly face. On his head he wore a wide-brimmed cloth hat with a neck-apron attached to the back of it. There was an opened thermos on the bench, and he was munching a half-eaten sandwich. Dusty's tail waved.

The old man stuck out a thick-fingered right hand. "Lloyd Thrush," he said. "Santa Fe Community College."

"Rafael Anderssen," said the gray-eyed man. Their hands touched, gripped. At once, a flood of imagery: a blonde woman, laughing; rain pouring through steaming jungle; gunfire spattering; the whistle-boom of mortar fire; a military funeral cortege. Their hands parted.

"Good God Almighty," Lloyd Thrush said. "What in hell just happened?"

"It's the lack of humidity out here, I expect," said the gray-eyed man easily. "Static charges out the wazoo." He had been studying the locals' English, learning idiom. "What brings you to the spa, Mister Thrush?"

The old man was still staring at the hand that the gray-eyed man had touched. "I'm an archaeologist," he said. He squinted up at the gray-eyed man. "State law requires any restoration of historic sites to be vetted by one of my stripe, and I drew the short straw. We are much loathed by construction crews, let me tell you. And you, sir? Nice dog."

"Thanks," said the gray-eyed man. They contemplated Dusty in silence. Dusty sat back on his haunches, tail still wagging, and contemplated them in return, looking first at one, then the other. The tall man said, "Tell me, Mister Thrush. Where do you think Eusebio Varela saw his vision of La Llorona? It had to be around here somewhere."

The old man grunted, turned, waved in the direction of the Azul. "That's the ten thousand dollar question," he said. "I'm *assuming* it was along there, where the watercourse bends in from the west. Used to be a cart-track through that way; brought grain from the Varela hacienda to the mill and back again."

"There was a mill here?"

The archaeologist looked surprised. "Well, sure. They tore it down to make room for the spa."

"I wouldn't have thought the Azul was deep and swift enough to power a waterwheel," said the gray-eyed man.

"It wasn't, originally. They dug out the bed upstream about a mile, graded it all along here, narrowed it, shored up the sides. You can see the original stonework. Used hand-tools, of course, and slave labor. Back in the

1830s, that was.”

“Slaves?”

“Yes, sir,” said the old man. “New Mexico had slaves, all right. Say, you never answered my question.”

“Which was?”

“What’s your interest in this old place?” He gave the gray-eyed man a shrewd look. “You wouldn’t by any chance be interested in investing in a public works project, would you?”

The tall man laughed. “I just like old places,” he said. “Mind if you show me that old cart-track?”

“Ah,” said the archaeologist. He took another bite of his sandwich, chewed, swallowed. “A vision seeker.”

“Pardon?”

“We get ‘em every month or so. Folks who read about the wailing ghost in some New Age magazine, come up here looking for God or whatever.” He shrugged. “Whatever floats your boat.” He took all but the final bite of his sandwich, bent down, offered the remnants to Dusty, who sniffed them delicately, then glanced up at the gray-eyed man for permission to proceed.

“Go ahead, boy,” said the gray-eyed man. Dusty wagged his tail and ate the last of the archaeologist’s sandwich.

“Polite dog,” said the old man. “Come on if you’re coming.” And he turned and picked his way across the ruined courtyard, the gray-eyed man and the three-legged dog following close behind.

At first the gray-eyed man could see no difference between the trash-littered field and the track the old man insisted they were following. Then his eyes began to pick out regularities in the red earth. “Wagon-wheel ruts,” the old man said. “See? There, and there, and there.” Suddenly he bent down, picked something out of the dirt, wiped it on his pants, held it up for the gray-eyed man to inspect. “Well, what do you know,” he said. He sounded surprised. “You’re good luck, Mister. I’ve been along this track a hundred times and never found anything like this before. Know what this is?” The object in his hand was roughly circular, about two inches across,

fashioned of some kind of metal, heavily tarnished. There were marks stamped into its face.

“Haven’t a clue,” said the gray-eyed man.

“It’s a slave I.D.,” said the archaeologist. “Certain slaves, ones the owners trusted, would get sent out on business, or loaned out now and again to slave owners’ friends. They made ‘em wear badges, stamped with their name and the name of their owner, so folks wouldn’t think they were runaways and steal ‘em or lynch ‘em. Can’t read this one; have to clean it up first. But it belonged to some poor sap, right enough.” He proffered the badge. The tall man took it from him gingerly, then relaxed. The object was dead, the spirit of the man or woman it had marked long departed. He handed it back and gestured toward the Azul.

“Can we go over there?”

“If you want,” the old man said. He pocketed the slave badge. They proceeded in silence. Dusty moved cautiously, navigating the broken glass. They came to a large patch of blackened earth. “Kids,” said the archaeologist sourly. “They come out here, light fires, have themselves a party, never mind the drought and the fire danger. That’s why we finally had to put chainlink around this whole area, hire a watchman. Not much else to do up here when you’re a kid, I guess.”

“I guess,” said the gray-eyed man, and that was when he smelled the Coyote.

It was standing under some Chinese elms at the bank of the Azul on the other side of the field, watching them. He saw at once that it was young, and that it was not alone: there were two others with it, lying half-hidden in the tall grass. They all looked human. The tall man wondered if this was the same creature who had seduced the real estate woman’s assistant, and he decided from the smell that it probably was. Dusty stopped in his tracks, hackles raised, and began to growl. “What’s the matter, boy?” said the archaeologist, curious. Then he spotted the figures on the bank, and began to shout. “Hey! You kids! Get out of there! This is private property!”

He started forward. The tall man reached out and gripped the old man’s shoulder, halting him. “Wait,” the gray-eyed man said.

“The hell I will. God *damn* these kids,” the archaeologist said, and tried to pull from the gray-eyed man’s grasp. “Hey! Let go of me!”

The tall man spoke the Word of entrancement. The old man stopped struggling and just stood there, face slack, mouth slightly open. "Sorry, Lloyd," said the gray-eyed man. "But you wouldn't have stood a chance." Dusty continued to growl, his eyes never leaving the figures on the streambank. Quickly the gray-eyed man walked around the archaeologist, drawing a circle with his foot in the dust of the field. When he had closed the circle, he spoke a second Word, one of warding, and though he could not see it, he could feel the protective barrier spring up around the old man. Then he reached down, unclipped the dog's collar from his leash, cast the leash aside into the field, spoke the Word that would initiate Dusty's change, and together they leaped forward, toward the watching creatures.

The moment the Coyotes saw them move, the two on the ground leaped up, and the three fanned out, getting ready, changing as they went. The young one dropped to his hands and knees, sprouted ears, tail, lupine muzzle. One of the other two, a big man, grew taller, wider, broader, ursine. The last was the gaunt dark-haired woman from the Pet Sanctuary table. She shook, writhing, in the weeds, then reared up, cobralike. Then they, too, rushed forward, growling and snarling and hissing, feral, joyful, murderous.

They did not get far. For Dusty grew: taller and taller, hair sloughing off him, scales gleaming beneath his corroding fur, whippet tail thickening, lengthening, slashing the air, narrow jaws broadening, filling up with teeth as sharp as razors and as long as a man's hand. Bounding forward on two strong hind legs, he reached the Coyotes first, and with a roar snapped up the snake thing, shook it, broke its spine, tossed it aside and went for the others. The wolf-creature, slavering in terror, dived for Dusty's leg.

The tall man faced the were-bear. It rose up before him, grandfather of all Kodiaks, mighty-shouldered, claws murderous. "Foolish child," said the man who called himself Anderssen. "Where wert thou when He laid the foundations of the Earth?" And spoke the Word.

It was not the Terrible Word, the Word of unmaking. That Word he had never permitted himself to speak, no matter the danger to himself or to those who had helped him down through the centuries, no matter how great the temptation to do good with it. For he had seen what the saying of that Word could do, and he had vowed, on the burning plain, never again to utter it, duty to the One or no duty. And for that rebellion the One had permitted him to be sucked into flesh, trapped in spacetime by the Seven seekers of power beneath the vaults of Rome; condemned him to centuries of wandering through mortal lands, experiencing firsthand the virtues of the small. And every century or so the One would come to him, in dream or



vision, and say, "Wilt thou speak it now?", and each time he would shake his borrowed mortal's head and say, "I will not."

And so he did not speak it now. But the Word he did speak, though not the most terrible, was terrible enough; and the bear-thing screamed its despair. At the same moment, Dusty gave a roar, and a voice half-wolf, half-man shrieked agony. Something large and heavy flumped to the red earth. Before him, the bear-thing tottered, wavered, crashed like an oak-tree, and lay still.

He rose from his half-crouch. Dusty's form was already beginning to dwindle, and in a moment the dog bounded up to him on his three legs, panting happily. They examined the corpses together. The were-bear had reverted to the form of the big man, his thick neck broken, blood on his goateed, earringed face. The one who had been the wolf-thing lay twisted, broad-chested, blond-haired, eyes open, staring in horror. But when the gray-eyed man bent over the body of the once-serpent, he saw her thin chest's rapid rise and fall.

He knelt beside her. Her back was broken; her limbs frozen. *Paralyzed*, he thought, but not so paralyzed that she could not breathe, and, breathing, suffer. He said, "What wouldst thou have me do, child?"

"Go to Hell," she whispered.

"I have been in Hell these past five hundred years," he replied, "for Earth is Hell, and always was," and then he spoke the Word of mercy, and the hate faded from her eyes.

Dusty whined, pawed her corpse, looked up at him. "I know," said the gray-eyed man. "Come on, boy. We've got some cleaning up to do."

The two males he carried to the burned place in the field, and spoke the Word that turned their bodies to ash. He had touched them, scanning, and determined they were foreign to this place; their supernal cremation did not take as long as it would have by conventional means, and he made sure that their bodies were entirely consumed, including the teeth and smallest bits of bone. But the woman was a local, so he left her body where it had fallen, and he and Dusty walked back to the spot where they had left the entranced archaeologist. He still stood, slack-jawed, weaving slightly, knees trembling with their long exertion. The tall man spoke the Word of release, and caught the old man as he fell.

"What happened?" he asked. "I must have fainted. Those kids—"

“Dusty and I ran them off,” the gray-eyed man said to him. “But we found something else. Brace yourself.” He led him to the gaunt woman’s body. Remnants of her blouse and slacks still clung to her.

“Holy Mother of God.” The old man went down on one knee. “Any idea who she was?”

“I saw her at the Farmer’s Market,” said the gray-eyed man. “She volunteers for the Pet Sanctuary. I bought Dusty here from her partner.”

“Those damn kids.” The old man’s voice was shaking. The man who called himself Anderssen helped him to rise. “Do you have a cell phone? I hate the damn things. But we can’t just leave her here. And those boys are still out there somewhere.”

“I’ve already called the police. They’re on their way.”

“A hell of a note,” said the archaeologist. He put a hand over his eyes, rubbed his temples. “You never get used to it, you know.”

“Used to what, Lloyd?”

“Used to death,” the old man said. He looked at the gray-eyed man, bleary-eyed. “I served in Vietnam. Saw a lot of my friends fragged. Got high a lot, just to stay sane enough to go out the next day and kill more gooks.” He shook his head. “You see friends die, yet you come out of it all still alive and kicking, and you feel, ‘Jeez! Death ain’t never gonna get me,’ but you know, deep down, that one day your time will come; your luck will run out; that door’ll rise up before you and you’ll have no choice but to walk right through it into the dark. Death’s always gonna win in the end. There’s no escaping it, ever.” He laughed suddenly. “Maybe that’s why I like old things, digging ‘em up. Makes me feel a connection, like there’s continuity, despite all Death can do. Ah, shit. I’m babbling.”

But the gray-eyed man was staring at him. *The Lamp shows the Way to the Door*, he thought. *And the Sacrifice opens the Door that the Key may be employed*. The Key, which could be anything: a person, a process, or a thing. He recalled how Dusty had sat back on his haunches in the ruined courtyard, looked at him, then at the old man, then back at him again. Showing the Way. *He is the Way*, the man who called himself Anderssen thought. *And she was the Sacrifice. She! The Coyote!* “Say that again,” he pleaded.

“Say what again?” demanded the old man. “Say, boy, you’re trembling.” For he was.

“About the door,” said the gray-eyed man. “Death as the Door.”

“You’re in shock, bud,” said the archaeologist gently. He put a thick hand on the gray-eyed man’s arm. “Come on. Let’s get back to the compound. The cops’ll be here pretty soon, I guess. She’ll keep,” he added, with a glance at the gaunt-bodied dead woman, “for a while longer.”

\* \* \* \*

## 8.

When he returned to his house many hours later, Roberta Vigil was waiting for him. She got out of the car as he pulled up. He parked, turned off the motor, sat there while she walked over. She was nervous, clutching her handbag, and he noticed her makeup was slightly smudged, as though she had been weeping. *La Llorona*, he thought. “Hello,” he said to her. Dusty, curled up next to him, wagged a sleepy tail.

“I heard,” she said. “About what happened, over at the spa site.” At his look of surprise she gave a wan smile. “Small town, you know? My God, what’s this world coming to?” She did not wait for him to answer. “Are you all right?”

“I’m pretty tired, Roberta,” he said.

“I won’t stay long,” she said. “I just came over to check on you, and—and to tell you about David.”

“How is David?” the gray-eyed man asked. The last he had heard, the agent’s assistant had made a full recovery and was back on the job, shaken but none the worse for wear.

“His AIDS test came back negative,” she said. “Thank God. And he remembered something, something to do with you. He said the—man who, who he’d—been with, the man had asked about you. Threatened to hurt his *abuela* if he didn’t tell him where you lived. He wanted—he wanted to warn you to watch out for yourself.”

“Tell him ‘thank you,’” said the gray-eyed man. “And that that danger has now passed.”

“How do you know?” asked the woman anxiously.

“I met with the young man in question,” he replied, “and we came to an understanding. He’s long gone, and he won’t be back. Tell David that.”

“All right, I will.” She hesitated, as though she were going to say something more; then she smiled and turned and got back into her car and drove away quickly.

He followed the dog into the house. He went into the room he used for his study and took out the box he had hidden there. Drawing forth the object nestled within, he brought it into the full light of the kitchen and laid it out on the table. It was a scrap of parchment, half-encased in red wax, very old. There was writing inside it; the parchment had worn so thin you could see the black traceries through the vellum, curling away in reverse. He looked down at the Terrible Word and thought, *Death is the Door. Yet I cannot die.*

They had tried to kill him many times. They had tried stoning him, drowning him, beating him bloody. They had tried drawing and quartering him. In Wien they had dragged him behind a horse over broken glass, then poured kerosene over his body and set him alight. No sooner had the stones struck, the waters closed over him, the hammerings buffeted him, the ropes pulled at his limbs, the flames licked his screaming skin, than the stones had flown back into their casters’ faces, the waters had carried him far from harm, his attackers’ blows had turned upon themselves, the ropes snapped, the flames snuffed themselves. They had tried poison, too: in Milano, Marseilles, Praha. But poison affected his body no more than alcohol or marijuana affected his mind. He was like Baldur, whom all things in Heaven and Earth had sworn never to harm, save that unlike Baldur, he had no mistletoe to fear, despite the best efforts of all the Lokis down the centuries whom the Seven and their descendants had sent in pursuit of him.

And now, at last, he understood. To be freed from space and time, he must seek that which had ever been denied him: Death, the Door through which all mortal kind must pass. Yet to him, who was no mortal, Death would never come, though the world spin from its orbit, though the seas boil away in thermonuclear joy, though mountain ranges rise and fall and the moon fall from the sky. That had been the curse of the One: that he would live among mortals, know them, learn to love them, ever watch them die while yet he lived *unless thou speakst the Terrible Word as We have bid. For thou*

*wert fashioned from Our wrath, and Our wrath is thy purpose, and only in thy purpose wilt thou find a true and lasting joy. And We would have thee joyful, child, for We are not Justice only, but also Love.*

The Angel of Death looked down at the Terrible Word. He had had the Key all along, and it was the one Key he had sworn never to use against any world ever again, no matter how just that world's demise might be, how fair the sentence of death passed by the One against its vile citizenry. And was it due to the depth of his soul's commitment, or to the limited creative imagination the theologians claimed angels possessed, that he had never once, in all those centuries, considered using it against himself?

At his feet, his dog whimpered softly. The man who called himself Anderssen smiled, placed the parchment back in its box, closed the box, and put it back in its hiding place. Then he stretched, picked up Dusty, carried him to the couch, and sat stroking him as they watched the sun go down. *Somewhere out there, he thought, La Llorona walks the roads, wailing her death-song. And someday, perhaps, when these fragile creatures have lived and loved and died their last, when I am alone on a sterile ball of mud, perhaps then I will tire and relent.* "But not today," he said. He kissed his dog on the snout. "Not today."

They lay on the couch together until the darkness swallowed them.