

A Very Special Girl

A Harry the Book Story

Mike Resnick

I am reading the Daily Racing Form in my temporary office, which is the third booth at Joey Chicago's 3-Star Tavern, and coming to the conclusion that six trillion to one on Flyaway in the fifth at Saratoga is a bit of an underlay, as there is no way this horse gets within twenty lengths of the winner on a fast track, a slow track, or a muddy track, and I have my doubts that even a rain of toads moves him up more than two lengths. I conclude that this horse cannot beat a blind sea slug at equal weights, even if he has the inside post position. Suddenly a strange odor strikes my nostrils, and without looking up I say, "Hi, Dead End," because one whiff tells me that it is Dead End Dugan, who simply cannot hide the fact that he is a zombie.

He also is an occasional employee that I use when some goniff does not wish to honor his marker, and indeed he has just returned from Longshot Lamont's, where I had sent him to collect the three large that Longshot Lamont bet on Auntie's Panties to come in first, and indeed the filly does come in first by seven lengths, but she comes in first in the eighth race after she goes to the post in the seventh race thirty minutes earlier.

"So do you pick up the three large that Harry the Book is owed?" asks Benny Fifth Street.

"Of course he picks it up," says Gently Gently Daw-kins. "After all, he is half as big as a mountain, and is covered by almost as much dirt, and how much can three large weigh anyway?"

They immediately get into one of their arguments, Gently Gently saying that a three-thousand-dollar diamond weighs less than a cigarette, and Benny replying that it all depends who is manning the scales, and that his cousin is the clerk of scales at Belmont and has been weighing Flyboy Billy Tuesday in at 120 pounds every day for years, even though the Flyboy has not topped 108 pounds since eating some bad chili three years ago. This drives Joey Chicago, who has been standing behind the bar, wild, because he has been betting against Flyboy Billy Tuesday's horses all year, and now he learns that they've been carrying twelve pounds less than they should, but Benny points out that it's okay, because 108 pounds of Billy Tuesday is more of a handicap to a horse than 130 pounds of most jockeys, and Joey Chicago has no answer for this, so he goes back to cleaning the bar around Dead End Dugan, which requires cleaning every time Dugan moves.

"So does Longshot Lamont pay with a smile?" I ask Dugan.

He gives me that puzzled expression—he doesn't think as clearly as he used to before he became a zombie—and says, "I thought you wanted money, Harry."

"Money is even better than smiles," I say to comfort him, and because it is also true. "I trust you have it with you?"

"Well, I had it," says Dugan. I was going to say "says Dugan uncomfortably," but the fact of the matter is that nothing makes him more uncomfortable than being dead, which is a permanent if not a stationary condition.

"If you do not have it anymore, you had better tell me where it is and why it is not in my hand right now," I say.

"I am in love," says Dugan. "I meet the most wonderful girl this afternoon on my way back from Longshot

Lamont's."

"Is this not a bit early in the relationship for an exchange of three-thousand-dollar gifts?" asks Gently Gently.

"Do not be so fast to misinterpret," replies Dugan. "This girl is just half a step short of perfection."

"Then she will understand that that was not your money to give, and she will be happy to hand it over to me," I say.

"Uh . . . that is the half a step I was referring to," says Dugan, brushing away flies that are starting to play field hockey on his face, as they always do when he stands in one place for a few minutes.

I decide to be the reasoning father figure, partially because I am a saint among men, and primarily because I have not yet figured out how to threaten a man who is already dead, and I say, "Tell us about this remarkable lady who has won your heart."

"She has left my heart right where it has always been," answers Dugan. "She is much more interested in my brain and my soul."

"I can't imagine why," says Benny. "You never use the one, and you are no longer in possession of the other."

"She is kind of a collector," explains Dugan, and it is the first time in my life I ever see a zombie swallow uneasily, or swallow at all, for that matter.

"What does she collect, brains or souls?" asks Benny, who has a healthy curiosity about such things.

"I get the impression that she is not all that choosy," answers Dugan.

"Where do you meet her?" I ask. "I am passing Creepy Conrad's Curiosity Shop, and I see her through the window, nibbling on a little snack in a feminine way, and it is love at first sight."

"What kind of snack?" asks Gently Gently, who at 350 pounds and counting has a serious interest in such things.

"I cannot see through the window," replies Dugan, "but it is wiggling its tail just before she swallows it."

"But she swallows it in a feminine way," I say, though my sarcasm is lost on Dugan.

"Yes," he says. "She is just beautiful. And very precise. Why, she drains an entire fifth of Comrade Terrorist vodka and does not spill so much as a drop."

"I figure the tail accompanies both ears of whatever it was as a prize for her feminine appetite," says Benny.

"She should skip the Olympics and go pro," adds Gently Gently.

"Does she eat anything else we should know about?" I ask.

"Like what?" asks Dugan.

"Like small children," I say. "Or even big ones."

"You are speaking of the woman I love!" says Dugan heatedly.

"I am speaking of the woman who is holding three large that belongs to me," I say. "Maybe you should introduce me to both of them."

"Both?" asks Dugan.

"Your girl and my money," I say. "I will take it from there."

"All right," says Dugan. "I am dying to see her again anyway."

"Poor choice of words," notes Joey Chicago from behind the bar.

"But you have to approach her gently, Harry," continues Dugan, ignoring Joey's unfeeling if accurate remark. "She is a sensitive thing and takes offense easily."

"I will approach her so gently she will hardly know I am there," I assure him.

"She will know," he assures me. "She is very perceptive." He pauses. "I think it is the extra pair of eyes."

"She has four eyes?" I say.

"At the very least," says Dugan.

"Has she got four of anything else important?" asks Benny, suddenly interested.

"She comes equipped with all kinds of extras," says Dugan. "This is why I have fallen in love with her. She is unique, even among women, who are all unique, each in their own alien way."

"What kinds of extras?" I ask.

"Teeth," says Dugan. "Claws. Eyes. Tails. Well, it is only one tail, but compared to everyone else it is extra." "I cannot argue with that," agrees Benny. "And how many women can lift an entire car?" says Dugan proudly.

"Six cylinders or eight?" asks Gently Gently. "Why would she lift a car?" chimes in Benny. "It is a very tight parking space, so she just walks out, picks up the car, driver and all, and sets it down in the empty space." Dugan smiles wistfully. "And she does not even break a sweat."

"I agree that she is unique among all the women of my acquaintance," I say. "Right up to the incident with the car, she is running neck and neck with a redhead named Thelma, but she has sprinted into the lead."

"That is nothing," says Dugan. "You should see her fly." "Probably I shouldn't," I say. "I have enough trouble falling asleep as it is."

"She just flaps her arms and flies away?" asks Benny. Dugan smiles. It is maybe the first smile anyone has seen on him since he came back from the grave. "Nobody can flap their arms and fly," he says. "She flaps her wings."

"Does she imbibe anything besides vodka while you are with her?" I ask suddenly. "Like what?" says Dugan. "Like blood," I say.

"I will not dignify such a crude question with a response," responds Dugan.

"I doubt that there can be more than one of her," I say, "but just in case God has been asleep at the switch and there are two or more, what is she wearing so I will be able to identify her?"

"I will be right alongside you, Harry," he replies. "True, but you are still a relative newcomer to the zombie trade, and what if you suddenly decide you don't like it? If I am to present a moldering corpse to the lady of your dreams, I at least should be sure I have the right lady. So what is she wearing?"

"I don't know," says Dugan. "I am so enraptured by her face, I never notice."

"Now I know for sure he's a zombie," says Benny. "All right," I say, trying to hide my annoyance. "What color is her hair?"

"That's kind of difficult to say." "How hard can it be?" I persist. "It is blonde, brunette, or possibly red."

"Well, it wriggles and hisses a lot, and it keeps changing colors under the lights," answers Dugan. "Sometimes it is red and sometimes it is green. I do not think it is ever blonde, but I could be wrong."

"Are you saying she is a Medusa?" I ask. "No, I am not saying any such a thing," answers Dugan. "For one thing, her hair is friendly."

"How can hair be friendly?" asks Gently Gently. "It chats with me, and it sings 'Ninety-nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall' while she is drinking the vodka." "You talk to her hair?" says Benny disbelievingly. "No," answers Dugan. "Then you just made that up?" says Benny.

"I made nothing up," says Dugan sharply. "Her hair chats with me, just like I say. But I do not talk to it, because I am shy and tongue-tied in her presence."

"So she has extra eyes and teeth, and comes equipped with wings and a cold-blooded hairdo," I say. "I hope you will not take it askance, Dugan, but I think I am going to bring a little protection along." "A gun?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I have a feeling that a hail of bullets would just annoy her," I say. "No, I will take Big-Hearted Milton."

"I do not see him," says Dugan, looking around. "That is because you are not looking in his office," I say. "I will go and fetch him."

And with that, I walk to the men's room and enter it, and there is Big-Hearted Milton, my personal mage, sitting in his usual spot on the tile floor, surrounded by five black candles, which have all burned down to nubs.

"Hi, Harry," he says. "Be with you in a minute." He mutters a spell that has very little melody and even fewer vowels. As he says the last word of it, all five candles go out. "That'll show her," he says with a satisfied smile. "What will show who?"

"Mitzi McSweeney," says Milton. "I take her to dinner last night, and just because I play a little itsy-bitsy spider on her thigh under the table she throws her soup in my face and walks out." He glowers furiously. "And I do not even like chicken gumbo."

"What have you done to the poor girl?" I ask. "When she steps on the scale this morning, vain creature that she is, she will find out that she is ten pounds heavier than last night, and nothing will take the weight off except an apologetic phone call to me."

I decide not to point out that Mitzi is bordering on anorexic anyway and an extra ten pounds will fill her out nicely. I especially decide not to mention that she can probably pack more of a wallop at 115 pounds than at 105.

"Okay, Milton," I say, "if you are done with your just and terrible vengeance, I have need of your services."

"I am the best there is at my trade," he says. "I put Morris the Mage in the shade. Spellsinger Sol cannot hold a candle to me. But I tell you up front, Harry, that even / cannot bring Flyaway home a winner at Saratoga tomorrow. I could put a saddle on you and you could spot him eight lengths and still beat him by daylight."

"That is not the particular service I need," I say. "It seems that Dead End Dugan has fallen in love, and has given his lady friend the three large that he picked up for me from Longshot Lamont. It is my intention to retrieve it."

"And you need my help taking your money back from a girl?" laughs Milton.

"Anything is possible," I say.

"Oh well, I have not been out of my office since I showed up to wash the soup off my face last night," he says. "A little fresh air will do me good. And getting your money back should be like taking candy from a baby."

I resist the urge to ask him a baby what, and a moment later we emerge from the men's room into the bar, and pick up Dead End Dugan, Benny Fifth Street, and Gently Gently Dawkins, and we are about to walk out the door when Milton asks Dugan what the name of the lady we are about to visit might be.

"Anna," he says.

"And her last name is Conda, right?" says Milton,

laughing at his own joke,

"How did you know?" asks Dugan.

Creepy Conrad's Curiosity Shop is easy to find. You just see where all the terrified women and children are running away from, and follow the screaming to its source. On the day we go there, Conrad is having a sale on shrunken heads, but these differ from every other shrunken head I have ever seen in that they are still alive and are attached to nonshrunken bodies. They spend most of their time eating, because their mouths are so small and their bodies are so big.

Because he is on the outskirts of an Italian neighborhood, Conrad also sells a lot of full-size wooden crosses, with or without hammers and nails. His vinyl record section—he has not yet made the jump to CDs—sells mood music, providing that your mood is either morbid or panic-stricken. He is also having a special on surplus dialysis machines, and three pale, lean gentlemen, each wearing a velvet cape, are examining them.

The rest of the merchandise is really esoteric, especially the part that is still alive, but we have not come to enjoy a pleasant afternoon browsing through Conrad's stock. We have come for Anna Conda and my three thousand dollars, but as I look around there is no morsel of femininity to be seen, nor is there anyone who matches Anna's description.

Finally Creepy Conrad emerges from a back room. He is missing one eye, and his left cheekbone protrudes through the skin, and those few teeth he still possesses are filed and discolored, and the nails on his hands are about an inch long and curve like those of a leopard, but aside from that he looks every bit as normal as Dead End Dugan, which is perhaps not really an apt comparison as Dugan still possesses his hair.

"Well, curse my soul if it isn't Harry the Book and his retainers," says Conrad. "What may I do for you fine gentlemen today? Could I perhaps interest the illustrious Mr. Dugan in a coffin?"

"You couldn't interest me no matter where you were," says Dugan. "We have come to see the delectable Anna Conda."

"Well, there is an Anna Conda on the premises," answers Conrad. "But a delectable one? Possibly you want Madame Bonne Ami's House of Exotic Comforts for the Recently Departed. They might have one."

"Watch your step, sir," says Dugan, drawing himself up to his full height. "You are speaking of the woman I love."

"Now, why would the woman you love be working for Madame Bonne Ami?" muses Conrad.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head," says Dugan ominously.

"I already have one," says Conrad, sticking his tongue out at us. "It belonged to a little old lady who only used it in church on Sundays."

"Where is she?" demands Dugan.

"The little old lady?" says Conrad. "She is long gone."

"Where is Anna Conda?" says Dugan.

"I heard you mention my name," says a voice that sounds kind of like a wirehaired terrier being combed against the grain, and a moment later Anna Conda steps out from one of the back rooms.

She is everything Dugan says she is, but Dugan does not say the half of it. He never mentions the cold reptilian eyes, the pointed ears, the reticulated greenish skin, or the four-inch dewclaws on each of her ankles. She offers us the kind of smile healthy cats offer to three-legged mice, and I can see that her tongue is black and forked.

"Hello, Mr. Dugan," she says, and her voice does not improve with proximity. "How nice to see you again."

"You are even more beautiful than before," replies Dugan, and Benny shoots me a look that says, My God, what does she look like earlier in the day?

"Who are your friends?" asks Anna.

"This is Harry the Book, my sometimes employer," says Dugan before I can whisper to him to make up a name, "and these are Benny Fifth Street, Gently Gently Dawkins, and Big-Hearted Milton."

"And what are you gentlemen here for?" she asks.

"It is Harry's fault," Dugan blurts out, so I figure I had better explain the situation.

"It would appear that Dugan, with the best will in the world, gives you a little keepsake that is not his to give," I say.

"I am just as happy to accept it from you, Harry," she says with a smile that makes me want to turn and race for the door and not stop running until I have reached Des Moines or Des Plaines or some other distant municipality beginning with "Des."

"I will handle this, Harry," says Milton, stepping forward. "Miss Conda, charming and beautiful as you are, I am afraid I must insist that you return the three large to Harry, though you can keep a couple of Ben Franklins for your trouble."

"It was given to me in all earnestness, and I am not inclined to give it back," she says, and I notice that blue vapor is starting to pour out of her nose, which means that either she is losing her temper or perhaps her spleen has spontaneously combusted, and I will give heavy odds on the former.

"Then I am afraid I shall have to resort to stringent means of recovering it," says Milton.

"You do that," says Anna.

"Very well," says Milton. "Do not say that you weren't warned."

And with that, Milton begins chanting something in a forgotten language, and making gestures in the air, and otherwise conjuring up all of the black arts at his command, and finally he ends it with a cry of "presto!"—and suddenly there are only four of us facing Anna Conda, and Big-Hearted Milton is nowhere to be seen.

"Where did he go?" asks Gently Gently.

"Beats me," I say.

"Get me the hell out of here!" says Milton's voice.

I look around, but there is no sign of him.

"Get you out of where?" I ask.

"This damned dimension that she hurls me into," says Milton's voice. "And hurry! It is cold and there is something very big sniffing at me and drooling on my face."

"I do not know how to magic you back," I say. "After all, you are the mage."

"Reach out and grab my hand, of course," says Milton.

"Reach where?" I say.

"Out!" yells Milton.

I reach my hand out, and sure enough a pudgy invisible hand takes hold of it. I give it a pull, and suddenly there is a pop! and then Milton is standing next to me, looking both relieved and annoyed.

He stares at Anna Conda with a combination of fear and awe. "Who does your protection?" he asks. "Whoever it is, he's good!"

"I need no protector," answers Anna.

"I can believe it," says Benny fervently.

"Enough of this chitchat," I say. "I still want my

money."

Dugan walks over and stands next to Anna. "Enough!" he says. "I will not stand idly by and let you pester the love of my life."

"Actually, she is more the love of your death," Gently Gently points out.

"Whatever she is," I say, "I am not inclined to supply her with a dowry one hour after collecting it from Long-shot Lamont." I turn to her. "I hope you and Dugan will be very happy, and can find a hotel that caters to both of whatever you are, and I will even pop for a flimsy nightgown if you are going to tie the knot, but I still want my three large."

"And if I do not agree to part with it, will you put a hit out on Dead End Dugan?" she asks with a cold reptilian smile, and I have to admit that the idea of putting out a hit on a dead man can best be called counterproductive.

"Milton," I say, "have you got any other tricks up your sleeve?"

"He has nothing up his sleeve except his arm," says Anna. "And if he tries anything, he will make me lose my temper. You will not be happy if I should lose my temper. The last time I lose it they blame what happens on Hurricane Katrina, and the time before that they invent Hurricane Andrew."

"Did you do Chernobyl, too?" asks Benny curiously. "No," she says. "That was my kid sister." "I am sure I will love her, too," says Dugan. No sooner do the words leave his mouth than Anna gets all red in the face and lets out a shriek. All the windows break, my fillings fall out of my teeth, a bus half a block away veers and plows into a fire hydrant, and every dog with a mile begins howling.

"I am sorry," says Anna a moment later. "I have a jealous and passionate nature."

"To say nothing of 'cataclysmic' and 'catastrophic' and a lot of other words that begin with 'cat,'" I agree.

"I see your friend is sprawled out on the floor," she says, indicating Gently Gently. "I hope I did not do him irreparable damage."

"If he can survive eighty-seven million calories," I say as Benny and I heave him to his feet, "he can survive a jealous scream."

"Where am I?" mumbles Gently Gently. "Are we at war? What day is it? Wait! I have it! Flyaway won and the world came to an end!"

"You'll be all right," I say. "Just stand there and try not to think."

"That should be very easy for him," says Benny. "Not thinking is one of the things Gently Gently does best."

Anna Conda turns to Dugan. "I am sorry I have upset your friends so much. I cherish our relationship, and to prove it I will return Harry the Book's money."

"While those are words I have been longing to hear," answers Dugan, "the part about cherishing our relationship, not the part about Harry's money, I am mildly surprised as our total time spent in each other's company has been only ten minutes, give or take."

"That is about seven minutes longer than most of my relationships last," says Anna. "I will be back with the money in a moment."



She goes into one of the back rooms, and Benny walks over to Dugan.

"I would be very careful with this girl," he says confidentially. "For example, when she suggests you go out for a bite, I will give plenty of eight-to-five that she is not talking about patronizing a restaurant."

Anna comes out and hands me a bag containing the three thousand dollars. "It is all there," she says. "You can count it, if you wish."

"That is not necessary," I tell her. "Dugan would never cheat me, and if you would I prefer not to know about it, because then I will not have to do anything about it."

She gives me another of those smiles that are more frightening than a Gorgon's grimace. "You are wise beyond your years, Harry the Book."

"And you are formidable beyond yours, Anna Conda," I say, bowing low, but not so low that I can't jump back if she changes her mind and reaches for the money, or maybe my neck.

As we are leaving, Benny whispers to me: "I know love is blind, but until this minute I do not realize he is on life support."

And that is the story of Dead End Dugan's very special girl. I suppose their relationship was doomed from the start. I know that opposites attract, but there is nothing in the rule book about anyone quite as opposite as Dugan and Anna. They decide to go away for a weekend in the mountains. Dugan never mentions exactly what happens, except that he makes a mistake by remarking that the tour bus driver is very pretty, but I am told that when the next edition of Rand McNally comes out Pikes Peak will now be Pikes Valley.

"I have learned a valuable lesson, Harry," Dugan tells me when it is all over. "From now on, I will stick to my own kind."

And so he does. The next afternoon I am sitting in the third booth at Joey Chicago's, reading the Form, and the smell of rotting flesh is twice as strong as ever. I look up and there is Dugan and his new girlfriend, sidling up to the bar.

"What can I get you and this beautiful young lady?" asks Joey Chicago, managing to string together three mis-statements in just three words.

"What will it be, my dear?" says Dugan.

"It's been so many decades since I've drunk anything at all, I can't remember," says his companion. "Why don't we let the bartender decide?"

"I've got just the thing," says Joey Chicago, pulling out a pair of tall glasses and little paper umbrellas.

"And what is that?" asks Dugan.

"A pair of Zombies," says Joey Chicago.