



Selections from
FRAGILE THINGS

VOLUME 3

Neil Gaiman

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF ANANSI BOYS

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VOLUME 3

NEIL GAIMAN

For Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison,
and the late Robert Sheckley,
masters of the craft

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OTHER PEOPLE

“Time is fluid here,” said the demon.

He knew it was a demon the moment he saw it. He knew it, just as he knew the place was Hell. There was nothing else that either of them could have been.

The room was long, and the demon waited by a smoking brazier at the far end. A multitude of objects hung on the rock-gray walls, of the kind that it would not have been wise or reassuring to inspect too closely. The ceiling was low, the floor oddly insubstantial.

“Come close,” said the demon, and he did.

The demon was rake thin and naked. It was deeply scarred, and it appeared to have been flayed at some time in the distant past. It had no ears, no sex. Its lips were thin and ascetic, and its eyes were a demon’s eyes: they had seen too much and gone too far, and under their gaze he felt less important than a fly.

“What happens now?” he asked.

“Now,” said the demon, in a voice that carried with it no sorrow, no relish, only a dreadful flat resignation, “you will be tortured.”

“For how long?”

But the demon shook its head and made no reply. It walked slowly along the wall, eyeing first one of the devices that hung there, then another. At the far end of the wall, by the closed door, was a cat-o’-nine-tails made of frayed wire. The demon took it down

with one three-fingered hand and walked back, carrying it reverently. It placed the wire tines onto the brazier, and stared at them as they began to heat up.

“That’s inhuman.”

“Yes.”

The tips of the cat’s tails were glowing a dead orange.

As the demon raised its arm to deliver the first blow, it said, “In time you will remember even this moment with fondness.”

“You are a liar.”

“No,” said the demon. “The next part,” it explained, in the moment before it brought down the cat, “is worse.”

Then the tines of the cat landed on the man’s back with a crack and a hiss, tearing through the expensive clothes, burning and rending and shredding as they struck, and, not for the last time in that place, he screamed.

There were two hundred and eleven implements on the walls of that room, and in time he was to experience each of them.

When, finally, the Lazarene’s Daughter, which he had grown to know intimately, had been cleaned and replaced on the wall in the two hundred and eleventh position, then, through wrecked lips, he gasped, “Now what?”

“Now,” said the demon, “the true pain begins.”

It did.

Everything he had ever done that had been better left undone. Every lie he had told—told to himself, or told to others. Every little hurt, and all the great hurts. Each one was pulled out of him, detail by detail, inch by inch. The demon stripped away the cover of forgetfulness, stripped everything down to truth, and it hurt more than anything.

“Tell me what you thought as she walked out the door,” said the demon.

“I thought my heart was broken.”

“No,” said the demon, without hate, “you didn’t.” It stared at him with expressionless eyes, and he was forced to look away.

“I thought, now she’ll never know I’ve been sleeping with her sister.”

The demon took apart his life, moment by moment, instant to awful instant. It lasted a hundred years, perhaps, or a thousand—they had all the time there ever was, in that gray room—and toward the end he realized that the demon had been right. The physical torture had been kinder.

And it ended.

And once it had ended, it began again. There was a self-knowledge there he had not had the first time, which somehow made everything worse.

Now, as he spoke, he hated himself. There were no lies, no evasions, no room for anything except the pain and the anger.

He spoke. He no longer wept. And when he finished, a thousand years later, he prayed that now the demon would go to the wall, and bring down the skinning knife, or the choke-pear, or the screws.

“Again,” said the demon.

He began to scream. He screamed for a long time.

“Again,” said the demon, when he was done, as if nothing had been said.

It was like peeling an onion. This time through his life he learned about consequences. He learned the results of things he had done; things he had been blind to as he did them; the ways he had hurt the world; the damage he had done to people he had never known, or met, or encountered. It was the hardest lesson yet.

“Again,” said the demon, a thousand years later.

He crouched on the floor, beside the brazier, rocking gently, his eyes closed, and he told the story of his life, re-experiencing it as he told it, from birth to death, changing nothing, leaving nothing out, facing everything. He opened his heart.

When he was done, he sat there, eyes closed, waiting for the voice to say, “Again,” but nothing was said. He opened his eyes.

Slowly, he stood up. He was alone.

At the far end of the room, there was a door, and as he watched, it opened.

A man stepped through the door. There was terror in the man’s face, and arrogance, and pride. The man, who wore expensive clothes, took several hesitant steps into the room, and then stopped.

When he saw the man, he understood.

“Time is fluid here,” he told the new arrival.

KEEPSAKES AND TREASURES

I am his Highness' dog at Kew

Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

ALEXANDER POPE,

On the Collar of a Dog Which I

Gave to His Royal Highness

You can call me a bastard if you like. It's true, whichever way you want to cut it. My mum had me two years after being locked up "for her own protection"; this was back in 1952, when a couple of wild nights out with the local lads could be diagnosed as *clinical nymphomania*, and you could be put away "to protect yourself and society" on the say-so of any two doctors. One of whom was her father, my grandfather, the other was his partner in the north London medical practice they shared.

So I know who my grandfather was. But my father was just somebody who shagged my mother somewhere in the building or grounds of St. Andrews Asylum. That's a nice word, isn't it? *Asylum*. With all its implications of a place of safety: somewhere that shelters you from the bitter and dangerous old world outside. Nothing like the reality of that hole. I went to see it, before they knocked it down in the late seventies. It still reeked of piss and pine-scented disinfectant floor wash. Long, dark badly lit corridors with clusters

of tiny, cell-like rooms off them. If you were looking for Hell and you found St. Andrews you'd not have been disappointed.

It says on her medical records that she'd spread her legs for anyone, but I doubt it. She was locked up back then. Anyone who wanted to stick his cock into her would have needed a key to her cell.

When I was eighteen I spent my last summer holiday before I went up to university hunting down the four men who were most likely to have been my father: two psychiatric nurses, the secure ward doctor, and the governor of the asylum.

My mum was only seventeen when she went inside. I've got a little black-and-white wallet photograph of her from just before she was put away. She's leaning against the side of a Morgan sports car parked in a country lane. She's smiling, sort of flirtily, at the photographer. She was a looker, my mum.

I didn't know which one of the four was my dad, so I killed all of them. They had each fucked her, after all: I got them to admit to it, before I did them in. The best was the governor, a red-faced fleshy old lech with an honest-to-goodness handlebar mustache, like I haven't seen for twenty years now. I garotted him with his Guards tie. Spit bubbles came from his mouth, and he went blue as an unboiled lobster.

There were other men around St. Andrews who might have been my father, but after those four the joy went out of it. I told myself that I'd killed the four likeliest candidates, and if I knocked off everyone who might have knocked up my mother it would have turned into a massacre. So I stopped.

I was handed over to the local orphanage to bring up. According to her medical records, they sterilized my mum immediately after I was born. Didn't want any more nasty little incidents like me coming along to spoil anybody's fun.

I was ten when she killed herself. This was 1964. I was ten years old, and I was still playing conkers and knocking off sweet shops

while she was sitting on the linoleum floor of her cell sawing at her wrists with a bit of broken glass she'd got from heaven-knows-where. Cut her fingers up, too, but she did it all right. They found her in the morning, sticky, red, and cold.

Mr. Alice's people ran into me when I was twelve. The deputy head of the orphanage had been using us kids as his personal harem of scabby-kneed love slaves. Go along with him and you got a sore bum and a Bounty bar. Fight back and you got locked down for a couple of days, a really sore bum and concussion. Old Bogey we used to call him, because he picked his nose whenever he thought we weren't looking.

He was found in his blue Morris Minor in his garage, with the doors shut and a length of bright green hosepipe going from the exhaust into the front window. The coroner said it was a suicide and seventy-five young boys breathed a little easier.

But Old Bogey had done a few favors for Mr. Alice over the years, when there was a chief constable or a foreign politician with a penchant for little boys to be taken care of, and he sent a couple of investigators out to make sure everything was on the up-and-up. When they figured out the only possible culprit was a twelve-year-old boy, they almost pissed themselves laughing.

Mr. Alice was intrigued, so he sent for me. This was back when he was a lot more hands-on than today. I suppose he hoped I'd be pretty, but he was in for a sad disappointment. I looked then like I do now: too thin, with a profile like a hatchet blade and ears like someone left the car doors open. What I remember of him mostly then is how big he was. Corpulent. I suppose he was still a fairly young man back then, although I didn't see it that way: he was an adult, and so he was the enemy.

A couple of goons came and took me after school, on my way back to the home. I was shitting myself, at first, but the goons didn't smell like the law—I'd had four years of dodging the Old Bill by

then, and I could spot a plainclothes copper a hundred yards away. They took me to a little gray office, sparsely furnished, just off the Edgware Road.

It was winter, and it was almost dark outside, but the lights were dim, except for a little desk lamp casting a pool of yellow light on the desk. An enormous man sat at the desk, scribbling something in ballpoint pen on the bottom of a telex sheet. Then, when he was done, he looked up at me. He looked me over from head to toe.

“Cigarette?”

I nodded. He extended a Peter Stuyvesant soft pack, and I took a cigarette. He lit it for me with a gold-and-black cigarette lighter. “You killed Ronnie Palmerstone,” he told me. There was no question in his voice.

I said nothing.

“Well? Aren’t you going to say anything?”

“Got nothing to say,” I told him.

“I only sussed it when I heard he was in the passenger seat. He wouldn’t have been in the passenger seat, if he was going to kill himself. He would have been in the driver’s seat. My guess is, you slipped him a mickey, then you got him into the Mini—can’t have been easy, he wasn’t a little bloke—here, mickey and Mini, that’s rich—then you drove him home, drove into the garage, by which point he was sleeping soundly, and you rigged up the suicide. Weren’t you scared someone would see you driving? A twelve-year-old boy?”

“It gets dark early,” I said. “And I took the back way.”

He chuckled. Asked me a few more questions, about school, and the home, and what I was interested in, things like that. Then the goons came and took me back to the orphanage.

Next week I was adopted by a couple named Jackson. He was an international business-law specialist. She was a self-defense expert. I don’t think either of them had ever met before Mr. Alice got them together to bring me up.

I wonder what he saw in me at that meeting. It must have been some kind of potential, I suppose. The potential for loyalty. And I'm loyal. Make no mistake about that. I'm Mr. Alice's man, body and soul.

Of course, his name isn't really Mr. Alice, but I could use his real name here just as easily. Doesn't matter. You'd not have heard of him. Mr. Alice is one of the ten richest men in the world. I'll tell you something: you haven't heard of the other nine, either. Their names aren't going to turn up on any lists of the hundred richest men in the world. None of your Bill Gateses, or your Sultans of Brunei. I'm talking *real* money here. There are people out there who are being paid more than you will ever see in your life to make sure you never hear a breath about Mr. Alice on the telly or in the papers.

Mr. Alice likes to own things. And, as I've told you, one of the things he owns is me. He's the father I didn't have. It was him that got me the medical files on my mum and the information on the various candidates for my dad.

When I graduated (first class degrees in business studies and international law), as my graduation present to myself, I went and found my-grandfather-the-doctor. I'd held off on seeing him until then. It had been a sort of incentive.

He was a year away from retirement, a hatchet-faced old man with a tweed jacket. This was in 1978, and a few doctors still made house calls. I followed him to a tower block in Maida Vale. Waited while he dispensed his medical wisdom, and stopped him as he came out, black bag swinging by his side.

"Hullo Grandpa," I said. Not much point in trying to pretend to be someone else, really. Not with my looks. He was me, forty years on. Same fucking ugly face, but with his hair thinning and sandy gray, not thick and mousy brown like mine. He asked what I wanted.

“Locking Mum away like that,” I told him. “It wasn’t very nice, was it?”

He told me to get away from him, or something like that.

“I’ve just got my degree.” I told him. “You should be proud of me.”

He said that he knew who I was, and I had better be off at once, or he would have the police down on me, and have me locked away.

I put the knife through his left eye and back into his brain, and while he made little choking noises I took his old calfskin wallet—as a keepsake, really, and to make it look more like a robbery. That was where I found the photo of my mum, in black-and-white, smiling and flirting with the camera, twenty-five years before. I wonder who owned the Morgan.

I had someone who didn’t know me pawn the wallet. I bought it from the pawnshop when it wasn’t redeemed. Nice clean trail. There’s many a smart man who’s been brought down by a keepsake. Sometimes I wonder if I killed my father that day, as well as my grandfather. I don’t expect he’d have told me, even if I’d asked. And it doesn’t really matter, does it?

After that I went to work full-time for Mr. Alice. I ran the Sri Lanka end of things for a couple of years, then spent a year in Bogotá on import-export, working as a glorified travel agent. I came back home to London as soon as I could. For the last fifteen years I’ve been working mainly as a troubleshooter, and as a smoother-over of problem areas. Troubleshooter. That’s rich.

Like I said, it takes real money to make sure nobody’s ever heard of you. None of that Rupert Murdoch cap-in-hand-to-the-merchant-bankers rubbish. You’ll never see Mr. Alice in a glossy magazine, showing a photographer around his glossy new house.

Outside of business, Mr. Alice’s main interest is sex, which is why I was standing outside Earl’s Court station with forty million U.S. dollars’ worth of blue-white diamonds in the inside pockets of my macintosh. Specifically, and to be exact, Mr. Alice’s interest in

sex is confined to relations with attractive young men. Now don't get me wrong, here: I don't want you thinking Mr. Alice is some kind of woofter. He's not a nancy or anything. He's a proper man, Mr. Alice. He's just a proper man who likes to fuck other men, that's all. Takes all sorts to make a world, I say, and leaves a lot more of what I like for me. Like at restaurants, where everyone gets to order something different from the menu. *Chacun à son goût*, if you'll pardon my French. So everybody's happy.

This was a couple of years ago, in July. I remember that I was standing in the Earls Court Road, in Earls Court, looking up at the Earl's Court Tube Station sign and wondering why the apostrophe was there in the station when it wasn't in the place, and then staring at the junkies and the winos who hang around on the pavement, and all the time keeping an eye out for Mr. Alice's Jag.

I wasn't worried about having the diamonds in my inside pocket. I don't look like the sort of bloke who's got anything you'd want to mug him for, and I can take care of myself. So I stared at the junkies and winos, killing time till the Jag arrived (stuck behind the road works in Kensington High Street, at a guess) and wondering why junkies and winos congregate on the pavement outside Earl's Court station.

I suppose I can sort of understand the junkies: they're waiting for a fix. But what the fuck are the winos doing there? Nobody has to slip you a pint of Guinness or a bottle of rubbing alcohol in a plain brown bag. It's not comfortable, sitting on the paving stones or leaning against the wall. If I were a wino, on a lovely day like this, I decided, I'd go down to the park.

Near me a little Pakistani lad in his late teens or early twenties was papering the inside of a glass phone box with hooker cards—CURVY TRANSEXUAL and REAL BLONDE NURSE, BUSTY SCHOOLGIRL and STERN TEACHER NEEDS BOY TO DISCIPLINE. He glared at me when he noticed I was watching him. Then he finished up and went on to the next booth.

Mr. Alice's Jag drew up at the curb and I walked over to it and got in the back. It's a good car, a couple of years old. Classy, but not something you'd look twice at.

The chauffeur and Mr. Alice sat in the front. Sitting in the back-seat with me was a pudgy man with a crew cut and a loud check suit. He made me think of the frustrated fiancé in a fifties film; the one who gets dumped for Rock Hudson in the final reel. I nodded at him. He extended his hand, and then, when I didn't seem to notice, he put it away.

Mr. Alice did not introduce us, which was fine by me, as I knew exactly who the man was. I'd found him, and reeled him in, in fact, although he'd never know that. He was a professor of ancient languages at a North Carolina university. He thought he was on loan to British Intelligence from the U.S. State Department. He thought this, because this was what he had been told by someone at the U.S. State Department. The professor had told his wife that he was presenting a paper to a conference on Hittite studies in London. And there was such a conference. I'd organized it myself.

"Why do you take the bloody tube?" asked Mr. Alice. "It can't be to save money."

"I would have thought the fact I've been standing on that corner waiting for you for the last twenty minutes demonstrates exactly why I didn't drive," I told him. He likes it that I don't just roll over and wag my tail. I'm a dog with spirit. "The average daytime speed of a vehicle through the streets of Central London has not changed in four hundred years. It's still under ten miles an hour. If the tubes are running, I'll take the tube, thanks."

"You don't drive in London?" asked the professor in the loud suit. Heavens protect us from the dress sense of American academics. Let's call him Macleod.

"I'll drive at night, when the roads are empty," I told him. "After midnight. I like driving at night."

Mr. Alice wound down the window and lit a small cigar. I could not help noticing that his hands were trembling. With anticipation, I guessed.

And we drove through Earls Court, past a hundred tall red-brick houses that claimed to be hotels, a hundred tattier buildings that housed guest-houses and bed-and-breakfasts, down good streets and bad. Sometimes Earls Court reminds me of one of those old women you meet from time to time who's painfully proper and prissy and prim until she's got a few drinks into her, when she starts dancing on the tables and telling everybody within earshot about her days as a pretty young thing, sucking cock for money in Australia or Kenya or somewhere.

Actually, that makes it sound like I like the place and, frankly, I don't. It's too transient. Things come and go and people come and go too damn fast. I'm not a romantic man, but give me South of the River, or the East End, any day. The East End is a proper place: it's where things begin, good and bad. It's the cunt and the arsehole of London; they're always close together. Whereas Earls Court is—I don't know what. The body analogy breaks down completely when you get out to there. I think that's because London is mad. Multiple personality problems. All these little towns and villages that grew and crashed into each other to make one big city, but never forget their old borders.

So the chauffeur pulled up in a road like any other, in front of a high, terraced house that might have been a hotel at one time. A couple of the windows were boarded over. "That's the house," said the chauffeur.

"Right," said Mr. Alice.

The chauffeur walked around the car and opened the door for Mr. Alice. Professor Macleod and I got out on our own. I looked up and down the pavement. Nothing to worry about.

I knocked on the door, and we waited. I nodded and smiled at the spyhole in the door. Mr. Alice's cheeks were flushed, and he held his

hands folded in front of his crotch, to avoid embarrassing himself. Horny old bugger.

Well, I've been there, too. We all have. Only Mr. Alice, he can afford to indulge himself.

The way I look at it, some people need love, and some people don't. I think Mr. Alice is really a bit of a *don't*, all things considered. I'm a *don't* as well. You learn to recognize the type.

And Mr. Alice is, first and foremost, a connoisseur.

There was a bang from the door, as a bolt was drawn back, and the door was opened by an old woman of what they used to describe as "repulsive aspect." She was dressed in a baggy black one-piece robe. Her face was wrinkled and pouched. I'll tell you what she looked like. Did you ever see a picture of one of those cinnamon buns they said looked like Mother Teresa? She looked like that, like a cinnamon roll, with two brown raisin eyes peering out of her cinnamon roll face.

She said something to me in a language I did not recognize, and Professor Macleod replied, haltingly. She stared at the three of us, suspiciously, then she made a face and beckoned us in. She slammed the door behind us. I closed first one eye, then the other, encouraging them to adjust to the gloom inside the house.

The building smelled like a damp spice rack. I didn't like anything about the whole business; there's something about foreigners, when they're that foreign, that makes my skin crawl. As the old bat who'd let us in, whom I had begun to think of as the Mother Superior, led us up flight after flight of stairs, I could see more of the black-robed women, peering at us out of doorways and down the corridor. The stair carpet was frayed and the soles of my shoes made sticking noises as they pulled up from it; the plaster hung in crumbling chunks from the walls. It was a warren, and it drove me nuts. Mr. Alice shouldn't have to come to places like that, places he couldn't be protected properly.

More and more shadowy crones peered at us in silence as we climbed our way through the house. The old witch with the cinnamon bun face talked to Professor Macleod as we went, a few words here, a few words there; and he in return panted and puffed at her, from the effort of climbing the stairs, and answered her as best he could.

“She wants to know if you brought the diamonds,” he gasped.

“Tell her we’ll talk about that once we’ve seen the merchandise,” said Mr. Alice. He wasn’t panting, and if there was the faintest tremble in his voice, it was from anticipation.

Mr. Alice has fucked, to my personal knowledge, half a brat-pack of the leading male movie stars of the last two decades, and more male models than you could shake your kit at; he’s had the prettiest boys on five continents; none of them knew precisely who they were being fucked by, and all of them were very well paid for their trouble.

At the top of the house, up a final flight of uncarpeted wooden stairs, was the door to the attic, and flanking each side of the door, like twin tree trunks, was a huge woman in a black gown. Each of them looked like she could have held her own against a sumo wrestler. Each of them held, I kid you not, a scimitar: they were guarding the Treasure of the Shahinai. And they stank like old horses. Even in the gloom, I could see that their robes were patched and stained.

The Mother Superior strode up to them, a squirrel facing up to a couple of pit-bulls, and I looked at their impassive faces and wondered where they originally came from. They could have been Samoan or Mongolian, could have been pulled from a freak farm in Turkey or India or Iran.

On a word from the old woman they stood aside from the door, and I pushed it open. It wasn’t locked. I looked inside, in case of trouble, walked in, looked around, and gave the all-clear. So I was

the first male in this generation to gaze upon the Treasure of the Shahinai.

He was kneeling beside a camp bed, his head bowed.

Legendary is a good word to use for the Shahinai. It means I'd never heard of them and didn't know anyone who had, and once I started looking for them even the people who had heard of them didn't believe in them.

"After all, my good friend," my pet Russian academic said, handing over his report, "you're talking about a race of people the sole evidence for the existence of which is half a dozen lines in Herodotus, a poem in the *Thousand and One Nights*, and a speech in the *Manuscrit Trouvé à Saragosse*. Not what we call reliable sources."

But rumors had reached Mr. Alice and he got interested. And what Mr. Alice wants, I make damned sure that Mr. Alice gets. Right now, looking at the Treasure of the Shahinai, Mr. Alice looked so happy I thought his face would break in two.

The boy stood up. There was a chamber pot half-sticking out from beneath the bed, with a cupful of vivid yellow piss in the bottom of it. His robe was white cotton, thin and very clean. He wore blue silk slippers.

It was so hot in that room. Two gas fires were burning, one on each side of the attic, with a low hissing sound. The boy didn't seem to feel the heat. Professor Macleod began to sweat profusely.

According to legend, the boy in the white robe—he was seventeen at a guess, no more than eighteen—was the most beautiful man in the world. I could easily believe it.

Mr. Alice walked over to the boy, and he inspected him like a farmer checking out a calf at a market, peering into his mouth, tasting the boy, and looking at the lad's eyes and his ears; taking his hands and examining his fingers and fingernails; and then, matter-of-factly, lifting up his white robe and inspecting his uncircumcised cock before turning him around and checking out the state of his arse.

And through it all the boy's eyes and teeth shone white and joyous in his face.

Finally Mr. Alice pulled the boy toward him and kissed him, slowly and gently, on the lips. He pulled back, ran his tongue around his mouth, nodded. Turned to Macleod. "Tell her we'll take him," said Mr. Alice.

Professor Macleod said something to the Mother Superior, and her face broke into wrinkles of cinnamon happiness. Then she put out her hands.

"She wants to be paid now," said Macleod.

I put my hands, slowly, into the inside pockets of my mac and pulled out first one, then two black velvet pouches. I handed them both to her. Each bag contained fifty flawless D or E grade diamonds, perfectly cut, each in excess of five carats. Most of them picked up cheaply from Russia in the mid-nineties. One hundred diamonds: forty million dollars. The old woman tipped a few into her palm and prodded at them with her finger. Then she put the diamonds back into the bag, and she nodded.

The bags vanished into her robes, and she went to the top of the stairs and as loud as she could, she shouted something in her strange language.

From all through the house below us there came a wailing, like from a horde of banshees. The wailing continued as we walked downstairs through that gloomy labyrinth, with the young man in the white robe in the lead. It honestly made the hairs on the back of my neck prickle, that wailing, and the stink of wet-rot and spices made me gag. I fucking hate foreigners.

The woman wrapped him up in a couple of blankets, before they would let him out of the house, worried that he'd catch some kind of a chill despite the blazing July sunshine. We bundled him into the car.

I got a ride with them as far as the tube, and I went on from there.

I spent the next day, which was Wednesday, dealing with a mess in Moscow. Too many fucking cowboys. I was praying I could sort things out without having to personally go over there: the food gives me constipation.

As I get older, I like to travel less and less, and I was never keen on it in the first place. But I can still be hands-on whenever I need to be. I remember when Mr. Alice said that he was afraid that Maxwell was going to have to be removed from the playing field. I told him I was doing it myself, and I didn't want to hear another word about it. Maxwell had always been a loose cannon. Little fish with a big mouth and a rotten attitude.

Most satisfying splash I've ever heard.

By Wednesday night I was tense as a couple of wigwams, so I called a bloke I know, and they brought Jenny over to my flat in the Barbican. That put me in a better mood. She's a good girl, Jenny. Nothing sluttish about her at all. Minds her *Ps* and *Qs*.

I was very gentle with her, that night, and afterward I slipped her a twenty-pound note.

"But you don't need to," she said. "It's all taken care of."

"Buy yourself something mad," I told her. "It's mad money." And I ruffled her hair, and she smiled like a schoolgirl.

Thursday I got a call from Mr. Alice's secretary to say that everything was satisfactory, and I should pay off Professor Macleod.

We were putting him up in the Savoy. Now, most people would have taken the tube to Charing Cross, or to Embankment, and walked up the Strand to the Savoy. Not me. I took the tube to Waterloo station and walked north over Waterloo Bridge. It's a couple of minutes longer, but you can't beat the view.

When I was a kid, one of the kids in the dorm told me that if you held your breath all the way to the middle of a bridge over the Thames and you made a wish there, the wish would always come

true. I've never had anything to wish for, so I do it as a breathing exercise.

I stopped at the call box at the bottom of Waterloo Bridge (BUSTY SCHOOLGIRLS NEED DISCIPLINE. TIE ME UP TIE ME DOWN. NEW BLONDE IN TOWN). I phoned Macleod's room at the Savoy. Told him to come and meet me on the bridge.

His suit was, if anything, a louder check than the one he'd worn on Tuesday. He gave me a buff envelope filled with word-processed pages: a sort of homemade Shahinai-English phrase book. "*Are you hungry?*" "*You must bathe now.*" "*Open your mouth.*" Anything Mr. Alice might need to communicate.

I put the envelope in the pocket of my mac.

"Fancy a spot of sightseeing?" I asked, and Professor Macleod said it was always good to see a city with a native.

"This work is a philological oddity and a linguistic delight," said Macleod, as we walked along the Embankment. "The Shahinai speak a language that has points in common with both the Aramaic and the Finno-Ugric families of languages. It's the language that Christ might have spoken if he'd written the epistle to the primitive Estonians. Very few loanwords, for that matter. I have a theory that they must have been forced to make quite a few abrupt departures in their time. Do you have my payment on you?"

I nodded. Took out my old calfskin wallet from my jacket pocket, and pulled out a slip of brightly colored card. "Here you go."

We were coming up to Blackfriars Bridge. "It's real?"

"Sure. New York State Lottery. You bought it on a whim, in the airport, on your way to England. The numbers'll be picked on Saturday night. Should be a pretty good week, too. It's over twenty million dollars already."

He put the lottery ticket in his own wallet, black and shiny and bulging with plastic, and he put the wallet into the inside pocket of

his suit. His hands kept straying to it, brushing it, absently making sure it was still there. He'd have been the perfect mark for any dip who wanted to know where he kept his valuables.

"This calls for a drink," he said. I agreed that it did but, as I pointed out to him, a day like today, with the sun shining and a fresh breeze coming in from the sea, was too good to waste in a pub. So we went into an off-licence. I bought him a bottle of Stoli, a carton of orange juice, and a plastic cup, and I got myself a couple of cans of Guinness.

"It's the men, you see," said the professor. We were sitting on a wooden bench looking at the South Bank across the Thames. "Apparently there aren't many of them. One or two in a generation. The Treasure of the Shahinai. The women are the guardians of the men. They nurture them and keep them safe.

"Alexander the Great is said to have bought a lover from the Shahinai. So did Tiberius, and at least two popes. Catherine the Great was rumored to have had one, but I think that's just a rumor."

I told him I thought it was like something in a storybook. "I mean, think about it. A race of people whose only asset is the beauty of their men. So every century they sell one of their men for enough money to keep the tribe going for another hundred years." I took a swig of the Guinness. "Do you think that was all of the tribe, the women in that house?"

"I rather doubt it."

He poured another slug of vodka into the plastic cup, splashed some orange juice into it, raised his glass to me. "Mr. Alice," he said. "He must be very rich."

"He does all right."

"I'm straight," said Macleod, drunker than he thought he was, his forehead prickling with sweat, "but I'd fuck that boy like a shot. He was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"He was all right, I suppose."

“You wouldn’t fuck him?”

“Not my cup of tea,” I told him.

A black cab went down the road behind us. Its orange “For Hire” light was turned off, although there was nobody sitting in the back.

“So what is your cup of tea, then?” asked Professor Macleod.

“Little girls,” I told him.

He swallowed. “How little?”

“Nine. Ten. Eleven or twelve, maybe. Once they’ve got real tits and pubes I can’t get it up anymore. Just doesn’t do it for me.”

He looked at me as if I’d told him I liked to fuck dead dogs, and he didn’t say anything for a bit. He drank his Stoli. “You know,” he said, “back where I come from, that sort of thing would be illegal.”

“Well, they aren’t too keen on it over here.”

“I think maybe I ought to be getting back to the hotel,” he said.

A black cab came around the corner, its light on this time. I waved it down, and helped Professor Macleod into the back. It was one of our Particular Cabs. The kind you get into and you don’t get out of.

“The Savoy, please,” I told the cabbie.

“Righto, governor,” he said, and took Professor Macleod away.

Mr. Alice took good care of the Shahinai boy. Whenever I went over for meetings or briefings the boy would be sitting at Mr. Alice’s feet, and Mr. Alice would be twining and stroking and fiddling with his black-black hair. They doted on each other, you could tell. It was soppy and, I have to admit, even for a cold-hearted bastard like myself, it was touching.

Sometimes, at night, I’d have dreams about the Shahinai women—these ghastly, batlike, hag things, fluttering and roosting through this huge rotting old house, which was, at the same time, both human history and St. Andrews Asylum. Some of them were carrying men between them, as they flapped and flew. The men shone like the sun, and their faces were too beautiful to look upon.

I hated those dreams. One of them, and the next day was a write-off, and you can take that to the fucking bank.

The most beautiful man in the world, the Treasure of the Shahinai, lasted for eight months. Then he caught the flu.

His temperature went up to 106 degrees, his lungs filled with water and he was drowning on dry land. Mr. Alice brought in some of the best doctors in the world, but the lad flickered and went out like an old lightbulb, and that was that.

I suppose they just aren't very strong. Bred for something else, after all, not strength.

Mr. Alice took it really hard. He was inconsolable—wept like a baby all the way through the funeral, tears running down his face, like a mother who had just lost her only son. It was pissing with rain, so if you weren't standing next to him, you'd not have known. I ruined a perfectly good pair of shoes in that graveyard, and it put me in a rotten mood.

I sat around in the Barbican flat, practiced knife-throwing, cooked a spaghetti Bolognese, watched some football on the telly.

That night I had Alison. It wasn't pleasant.

The next day I took a few good men and we went down to the house in Earls Court, to see if any of the Shahinai were still about. There had to be more Shahinai young men somewhere. It stood to reason.

But the plaster on the rotting walls had been covered up with stolen rock posters, and the place smelled of dope, not spice.

The warren of rooms was filled with Australians and New Zealanders. Squatters, at a guess. We surprised a dozen of them in the kitchen, sucking narcotic smoke from the mouth of a broken R. White's Lemonade bottle.

We searched the house from cellar to attic, looking for some trace of the Shahinai women, something that they had left behind, some kind of clue, anything that would make Mr. Alice happy.

We found nothing at all.

And all I took away from the house in Earl's Court was the memory of the breast of a girl, stoned and oblivious, sleeping naked in an upper room. There were no curtains on the window.

I stood in the doorway, and I looked at her for too long, and it painted itself on my mind: a full, black-nippled breast, which curved disturbingly in the sodium yellow light of the street.

GOOD BOYS DESERVE FAVORS

My own children delight in hearing true tales from my childhood: The Time My Father Threatened to Arrest the Traffic Cop, How I Broke My Sister's Front Teeth Twice, When I Pretended to Be Twins, and even The Day I Accidentally Killed the Gerbil.

I have never told them this story. I would be hard put to tell you quite why not.

When I was nine the school told us that we could pick any musical instrument we wanted. Some boys chose the violin, the clarinet, the oboe. Some chose the timpani, the pianoforte, the viola.

I was not big for my age, and I, alone in the Junior School, elected to play the double bass, chiefly because I loved the incongruity of the idea. I loved the idea of being a small boy, playing, delighting in, carrying around an instrument much taller than I was.

The double bass belonged to the school, and I was deeply impressed by it. I learned to bow, although I had little interest in bowing technique, preferring to pluck the huge metal strings by hand. My right index finger was permanently puffed with white blisters until the blisters eventually became calluses.

I delighted in discovering the history of the double bass: that it was no part of the sharp, scraping family of the violin, the viola, the 'cello; its curves were gentler, softer, more sloping; it was, in fact, the

final survivor of an extinct family of instruments, the viol family, and was, more correctly, the bass viol.

I learned this from the double bass teacher, an elderly musician imported by the school to teach me, and also to teach a couple of senior boys, for a few hours each week. He was a clean-shaven man, balding and intense, with long, callused fingers. I would do all I could to make him tell me about the bass, tell me of his experiences as a session musician, of his life cycling around the country. He had a contraption attached to the back of his bicycle, on which his bass rested, and he pedaled sedately through the countryside with the bass behind him.

He had never married. Good double bass players, he told me, were men who made poor husbands. He had many such observations. There were no great male cellists—that's one I remember. And his opinion of viola players, of either sex, was scarcely repeatable.

He called the school double bass *she*. "She could do with a good coat of varnish," he'd say. And "You take care of her, she'll take care of you."

I was not a particularly good double bass player. There was little enough that I could do with the instrument on my own, and all I remember of my enforced membership in the school orchestra was getting lost in the score and sneaking glances at the 'cellos beside me, waiting for them to turn the page, so I could start playing once more, punctuating the orchestral schoolboy cacophony with low, uncomplicated bass notes.

It has been too many years, and I have almost forgotten how to read music; but when I dream of reading music, I still dream in the bass clef. *All Cows Eat Grass. Good Boys Deserve Favors Always.*

After lunch each day, the boys who played instruments walked down to the music school and had music practice, while the boys who didn't lay on their beds and read their books and their comics.

I rarely practiced. Instead I would take a book down to the music school and read it, surreptitiously, perched on my high stool, holding on to the smooth brown wood of the bass, the bow in one hand, the better to fool the casual observer. I was lazy and uninspired. My bowing scrubbed and scratched where it should have glided and boomed, my fingering was hesitant and clumsy. Other boys worked at their instruments. I did not. As long as I was sitting at the bass for half an hour each day, no one cared. I had the nicest, largest room to practice in, too, as the double bass was kept in a cupboard in the master music room.

Our school, I should tell you, had only one Famous Old Boy. It was part of school legend—how the Famous Old Boy had been expelled from the school after driving a sports car across the cricket pitch, while drunk, how he had gone on to fame and fortune—first as a minor actor in Ealing Comedies, then as the token English cad in any number of Hollywood pictures. He was never a true star but, during the Sunday afternoon film screening, we would cheer if ever he appeared.

When the door handle to the practice room clicked and turned, I put my book down on the piano and leaned forward, turning the page of the dog-eared *52 Musical Exercises for the Double Bass*, and I heard the headmaster say, “The music school was purpose-built of course. This is the master practice room . . .” and they came in.

They were the headmaster and the head of the music department (a faded, bespectacled man whom I rather liked) and the deputy head of the music department (who conducted the school orchestra, and disliked me cordially) and, there could be no mistaking it, the Famous Old Boy himself, in company with a fragrant fair woman who held his arm and looked as if she might also be a movie star.

I stopped pretending to play, and slipped off my high stool and stood up respectfully, holding the bass by the neck.

The headmaster told them about the soundproofing and the carpets and the fund-raising drive to raise the money to build the music school, and he stressed that the next stage of rebuilding would need significant further donations, and he was just beginning to expound upon the cost of double glazing when the fragrant woman said, “Just look at him. Is that cute or what?” and they all looked at me.

“That’s a big violin—be hard to get it under your chin,” said the Famous Old Boy, and everyone chortled dutifully.

“It’s so big,” said the woman. “And he’s so small. Hey, but we’re stopping you practicing. You carry on. Play us something.”

The headmaster and the head of the music department beamed at me, expectantly. The deputy head of the music department, who was under no illusions as to my musical skills, started to explain that the first violin was practicing next door and would be delighted to play for them and—

“I want to hear *him*,” she said. “How old are you, kid?”

“Eleven, Miss,” I said.

She nudged the Famous Old Boy in the ribs. “He called me ‘Miss,’ ” she said. This amused her. “Go on. Play us something.” The Famous Old Boy nodded, and they stood there and they looked at me.

The double bass is not a solo instrument, really, not even for the competent, and I was far from competent. But I slid my bottom up onto the stool again and crooked my fingers around the neck and picked up my bow, heart pounding like a timpani in my chest, and prepared to embarrass myself.

Even twenty years later, I remember.

I did not even look at *52 Musical Exercises for the Double Bass*. I played... *something*. It arched and boomed and sang and reverberated. The bow glided over strange and confident arpeggios, and then I put down the bow and plucked a complex and intricate piz-

zicato melody out of the bass. I did things with the bass that an experienced jazz bass player with hands as big as my head would not have done. I played, and I played, and I played, tumbling down into the four taut metal strings, clutching the instrument as I had never clutched a human being. And, in the end, breathless and elated, I stopped.

The blonde woman led the applause, but they all clapped, even, with a strange expression on his face, the deputy head of music.

“I didn’t know it was such a versatile instrument,” said the headmaster. “Very lovely piece. Modern, yet classical. Very fine. Bravo.” And then he shepherded the four of them from the room, and I sat there, utterly drained, the fingers of my left hand stroking the neck of the bass, the fingers of my right caressing her strings.

Like any true story, the end of the affair is messy and unsatisfactory: the following day, carrying the huge instrument across the courtyard to the school chapel, for orchestra practice, in a light rain, I slipped on the wet bricks and fell forward. The wooden bridge of the bass was smashed, and the front was cracked.

It was sent away to be repaired, but when it returned it was not the same. The strings were higher, harder to pluck, the new bridge seemed to have been installed at the wrong angle. There was, even to my untutored ear, a change in the timbre. I had not taken care of her; she would no longer take care of me.

When, the following year, I changed schools, I did not continue with the double bass. The thought of changing to a new instrument seemed vaguely disloyal, while the dusty black bass that sat in a cupboard in my new school’s music rooms seemed to have taken a dislike to me. I was marked another’s. And I was tall enough now that there would be nothing incongruous about my standing behind the double bass.

And, soon enough, I knew, there would be girls.

THE FACTS IN THE CASE OF THE DEPARTURE OF MISS FINCH

To begin at the end: I arranged the thin slice of pickled ginger, pink and translucent, on top of the pale yellowtail flesh, and dipped the whole arrangement—ginger, fish, and vinegared rice—into the soy sauce, flesh-side down; then I devoured it in a couple of bites.

“I think we ought to go to the police,” I said.

“And tell them what, exactly?” asked Jane.

“Well, we could file a missing persons report, or something. I don’t know.”

“And where did you last see the young lady?” asked Jonathan, in his most policemanlike tones. “Ah, I see. Did you know that wasting police time is normally considered an offense, sir?”

“But the whole circus . . .”

“These are transient persons, sir, of legal age. They come and go. If you have their names, I suppose I can take a report . . .”

I gloomily ate a salmon skin roll. “Well, then,” I said, “why don’t we go to the papers?”

“Brilliant idea,” said Jonathan, in the sort of tone of voice which indicates that the person talking doesn’t think it’s a brilliant idea at all.

“Jonathan’s right,” said Jane. “They won’t listen to us.”

“Why wouldn’t they believe us? We’re reliable. Honest citizens. All that.”

“You’re a fantasy writer,” she said. “You make up stuff like this for a living. No one’s going to believe you.”

“But you two saw it all as well. You’d back me up.”

“Jonathan’s got a new series on cult horror movies coming out in the autumn. They’ll say he’s just trying to get cheap publicity for the show. And I’ve got another book coming out. Same thing.”

“So you’re saying that we can’t tell anyone?” I sipped my green tea.

“No,” Jane said, reasonably, “we can tell anyone we want. It’s making them believe us that’s problematic. Or, if you ask me, impossible.”

The pickled ginger was sharp on my tongue. “You may be right,” I said. “And Miss Finch is probably much happier wherever she is right now than she would be here.”

“But her name isn’t Miss Finch,” said Jane, “it’s——” and she said our former companion’s real name.

“I know. But it’s what I thought when I first saw her,” I explained. “Like in one of those movies. You know. When they take off their glasses and put down their hair. ‘Why, Miss Finch. You’re beautiful.’ ”

“She certainly was that,” said Jonathan, “in the end, anyway.” And he shivered at the memory.

There. So now you know: that’s how it all ended, and how the three of us left it, several years ago. All that remains is the beginning, and the details.

For the record, I don’t expect you to believe any of this. Not really. I’m a liar by trade, after all; albeit, I like to think, an honest liar. If I belonged to a gentlemen’s club I’d recount it over a glass or two of port late in the evening as the fire burned low, but I am a member

of no such club, and I'll write it better than ever I'd tell it. So here you will learn of Miss Finch (whose name, as you already know, was not Finch, nor anything like it, since I'm changing names here to disguise the guilty) and how it came about that she was unable to join us for sushi. Believe it or not, just as you wish. I am not even certain that I believe it anymore. It all seems such a long way away.

I could find a dozen beginnings. Perhaps it might be best to begin in a hotel room, in London, a few years ago. It was 11:00 AM. The phone began to ring, which surprised me. I hurried over to answer it.

"Hello?" It was too early in the morning for anyone in America to be phoning me, and there was no one in England who was meant to know that I was even in the country.

"Hi," said a familiar voice, adopting an American accent of monumentally unconvincing proportions. "This is Hiram P. Muzzle-dexter of Colossal Pictures. We're working on a film that's a remake of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* but instead of Nazis it has women with enormous knockers in it. We've heard that you were astonishingly well supplied in the trouser department and might be willing to take on the part of our male lead, Minnesota Jones . . ."

"Jonathan?" I said. "How on earth did you find me here?"

"You knew it was me," he said, aggrieved, his voice losing all trace of the improbable accent and returning to his native London.

"Well, it sounded like you," I pointed out. "Anyway, you didn't answer my question. No one's meant to know that I was here."

"I have my ways," he said, not very mysteriously. "Listen, if Jane and I were to offer to feed you sushi—something I recall you eating in quantities that put me in mind of feeding time at London Zoo's Walrus House—and if we offered to take you to the theater before we fed you, what would you say?"

"Not sure. I'd say 'Yes' I suppose. Or 'What's the catch?' I might say that."

“Not exactly a catch,” said Jonathan. “I wouldn’t exactly call it a *catch*. Not a real catch. Not really.”

“You’re lying, aren’t you?”

Somebody said something near the phone, and then Jonathan said, “Hang on, Jane wants a word.” Jane is Jonathan’s wife.

“How are you?” she said.

“Fine, thanks.”

“Look,” she said, “you’d be doing us a tremendous favor—not that we wouldn’t love to see you, because we would, but you see, there’s someone . . .”

“She’s your friend,” said Jonathan, in the background.

“She’s *not* my friend. I hardly know her,” she said, away from the phone, and then, to me, “Um, look, there’s someone we’re sort of lumbered with. She’s not in the country for very long, and I wound up agreeing to entertain her and look after her tomorrow night. She’s pretty frightful, actually. And Jonathan heard that you were in town from someone at your film company, and we thought you might be perfect to make it all less awful, so please say yes.”

So I said yes.

In retrospect, I think the whole thing might have been the fault of the late Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond. I had read an article the previous month, in which Ian Fleming had advised any would-be writer who had a book to get done that wasn’t getting written to go to a hotel to write it. I had, not a novel, but a film script that wasn’t getting written; so I bought a plane ticket to London, promised the film company that they’d have a finished script in three weeks’ time, and took a room in an eccentric hotel in Little Venice.

I told no one in England that I was there. Had people known, my days and nights would have been spent seeing them, not staring at a computer screen and, sometimes, writing.

Truth to tell, I was bored half out of my mind and ready to welcome any interruption.

Early the next evening I arrived at Jonathan and Jane's house, which was more or less in Hampstead. There was a small green sports car parked outside. Up the stairs, and I knocked at the door. Jonathan answered it; he wore an impressive suit. His light brown hair was longer than I remembered it from the last time I had seen him, in life or on television.

"Hello," said Jonathan. "The show we were going to take you to has been canceled. But we can go to something else, if that's okay with you."

I was about to point out that I didn't know what we were originally going to see, so a change of plans would make no difference to me, but Jonathan was already leading me into the living room, establishing that I wanted fizzy water to drink, assuring me that we'd still be eating sushi and that Jane would be coming downstairs as soon as she had put the children to bed.

They had just redecorated the living room, in a style Jonathan described as Moorish brothel. "It didn't set out to be a Moorish brothel," he explained. "Or any kind of a brothel really. It was just where we ended up. The brothel look."

"Has he told you all about Miss Finch?" asked Jane. Her hair had been red the last time I had seen her. Now it was dark brown; and she curved like a Raymond Chandler simile.

"Who?"

"We were talking about Ditko's inking style," apologized Jonathan. "And the Neal Adams issues of *Jerry Lewis*."

"But she'll be here any moment. And he has to know about her before she gets here."

Jane is, by profession, a journalist, but had become a best-selling author almost by accident. She had written a companion volume to accompany a television series about two paranormal investigators, which had risen to the top of the best-seller lists and stayed there.

Jonathan had originally become famous hosting an evening talk

show, and had since parlayed his gonzo charm into a variety of fields. He's the same person whether the camera is on or off, which is not always true of television folk.

"It's a kind of family obligation," Jane explained. "Well, not exactly *family*."

"She's Jane's friend," said her husband, cheerfully.

"She is *not* my friend. But I couldn't exactly say no to them, could I? And she's only in the country for a couple of days."

And who Jane could not say no to, and what the obligation was, I never was to learn, for at the moment the doorbell rang, and I found myself being introduced to Miss Finch. Which, as I have mentioned, was not her name.

She wore a black leather cap, and a black leather coat, and had black, black hair, pulled tightly back into a small bun, done up with a pottery tie. She wore makeup, expertly applied to give an impression of severity that a professional dominatrix might have envied. Her lips were tight together, and she glared at the world through a pair of definite black-rimmed spectacles—they punctuated her face much too definitely to ever be mere glasses.

"So," she said, as if she were pronouncing a death sentence, "we're going to the theater, then."

"Well, yes and no," said Jonathan. "I mean, yes, we are still going out, but we're not going to be able to see *The Romans in Britain*."

"Good," said Miss Finch. "In poor taste anyway. Why anyone would have thought that nonsense would make a musical I do not know."

"So we're going to a circus," said Jane, reassuringly. "And then we're going to eat sushi."

Miss Finch's lips tightened. "I do not approve of circuses," she said.

"There aren't any animals in this circus," said Jane.

“Good,” said Miss Finch, and she sniffed. I was beginning to understand why Jane and Jonathan had wanted me along.

The rain was pattering down as we left the house, and the street was dark. We squeezed ourselves into the sports car and headed out into London. Miss Finch and I were in the backseat of the car, pressed uncomfortably close together.

Jane told Miss Finch that I was a writer, and told me that Miss Finch was a biologist.

“Biogeologist actually,” Miss Finch corrected her. “Were you serious about eating sushi, Jonathan?”

“Er, yes. Why? Don’t you like sushi?”

“Oh, I’ll eat *my* food cooked,” she said, and began to list for us all the various flukes, worms, and parasites that lurk in the flesh of fish and which are only killed by cooking. She told us of their life cycles while the rain pelted down, slicking night-time London into garish neon colors. Jane shot me a sympathetic glance from the passenger seat, then she and Jonathan went back to scrutinizing a handwritten set of directions to wherever we were going. We crossed the Thames at London Bridge while Miss Finch lectured us about blindness, madness, and liver failure; and she was just elaborating on the symptoms of elephantiasis as proudly as if she had invented them herself when we pulled up in a small back street in the neighborhood of Southwark Cathedral.

“So where’s the circus?” I asked.

“Somewhere around here,” said Jonathan. “They contacted us about being on the Christmas special. I tried to pay for tonight’s show, but they insisted on comping us in.”

“I’m sure it will be fun,” said Jane, hopefully.

Miss Finch sniffed.

A fat, bald man, dressed as a monk, ran down the pavement toward us. “There you are!” he said. “I’ve been keeping an eye out

for you. You're late. It'll be starting in a moment." He turned around and scampered back the way he had come, and we followed him. The rain splashed on his bald head and ran down his face, turning his Fester Addams makeup into streaks of white and brown. He pushed open a door in the side of a wall.

"In here."

We went in. There were about fifty people in there already, dripping and steaming, while a tall woman in bad vampire makeup holding a flashlight walked around checking tickets, tearing off stubs, selling tickets to anyone who didn't have one. A small, stocky woman immediately in front of us shook the rain from her umbrella and glowered about her fiercely. "This'd better be gud," she told the young man with her—her son, I suppose. She paid for tickets for both of them.

The vampire woman reached us, recognized Jonathan and said, "Is this your party? Four people? Yes? You're on the guest list," which provoked another suspicious stare from the stocky woman.

A recording of a clock ticking began to play. A clock struck twelve (it was barely eight by my watch), and the wooden double doors at the far end of the room creaked open. "Enter . . . of your own free will!" boomed a voice, and it laughed maniacally. We walked through the door into darkness.

It smelled of wet bricks and of decay. I knew then where we were: there are networks of old cellars that run beneath some of the overground train tracks—vast, empty, linked rooms of various sizes and shapes. Some of them are used for storage by wine merchants and used-car sellers; some are squatted in, until the lack of light and facilities drives the squatters back into the daylight; most of them stand empty, waiting for the inevitable arrival of the wrecking ball and the open air and the time when all their secrets and mysteries will be no more.

A train rattled by above us.

We shuffled forward, led by Uncle Fester and the vampire woman, into a sort of a holding pen where we stood and waited.

“I hope we’re going to be able to sit down after this,” said Miss Finch.

When we were all settled the flashlights went out, and the spotlights went on.

The people came out. Some of them rode motorbikes and dune buggies. They ran and they laughed and they swung and they cackled. Whoever had dressed them had been reading too many comics, I thought, or watched *Mad Max* too many times. There were punks and nuns and vampires and monsters and strippers and the living dead.

They danced and capered around us while the ringmaster—identifiable by his top hat—sang Alice Cooper’s song “Welcome to My Nightmare,” and sang it very badly.

“I know Alice Cooper,” I muttered to myself, misquoting something half-remembered, “and you, sir, are no Alice Cooper.”

“It’s pretty naff,” agreed Jonathan.

Jane shushed us. As the last notes faded away the ringmaster was left alone in the spotlight. He walked around our enclosure while he talked.

“Welcome, welcome, one and all, to the Theater of Night’s Dreaming,” he said.

“Fan of yours,” whispered Jonathan.

“I think it’s a *Rocky Horror Show* line,” I whispered back.

“Tonight you will all be witnesses to monsters undreamed-of, freaks and creatures of the night, to displays of ability to make you shriek with fear—and laugh with joy. We shall travel,” he told us, “from room to room—and in each of these subterranean caverns another nightmare, another delight, another display of wonder awaits you! Please—for your own safety—I must reiterate this!—Do not leave the spectating area marked out for you in each room—on

pain of doom, bodily injury, and the loss of your immortal soul! Also, I must stress that the use of flash photography or of any recording devices is utterly forbidden.”

And with that, several young women holding pencil flashlights led us into the next room.

“No seats then,” said Miss Finch, unimpressed.

The First Room

In the first room a smiling blonde woman wearing a spangled bikini, with needle tracks down her arms, was chained by a hunchback and Uncle Fester to a large wheel.

The wheel spun slowly around, and a fat man in a red cardinal’s costume threw knives at the woman, outlining her body. Then the hunchback blindfolded the cardinal, who threw the last three knives straight and true to outline the woman’s head. He removed his blindfold. The woman was untied and lifted down from the wheel. They took a bow. We clapped.

Then the cardinal took a trick knife from his belt and pretended to cut the woman’s throat with it. Blood spilled down from the knife blade. A few members of the audience gasped, and one excitable girl gave a small scream, while her friends giggled.

The cardinal and the spangled woman took their final bow. The lights went down. We followed the flashlights down a brick-lined corridor.

The Second Room

The smell of damp was worse in here; it smelled like a cellar, musty and forgotten. I could hear somewhere the drip of rain. The ringmaster introduced the Creature—“Stitched together in the laboratories of the night, the Creature is capable of astonishing feats of strength.” The Frankenstein’s monster makeup was less than convincing, but the Creature lifted a stone block with fat Uncle Fester

sitting on it, and he held back the dune buggy (driven by the vampire woman) at full throttle. For his *pièce de résistance* he blew up a hot-water bottle, then popped it.

“Roll on the sushi,” I muttered to Jonathan.

Miss Finch pointed out, quietly, that in addition to the danger of parasites, it was also the case that bluefin tuna, swordfish, and Chilean sea bass were all being overfished and could soon be rendered extinct, since they were not reproducing fast enough to catch up.

The Third Room

went up for a long way into the darkness. The original ceiling had been removed at some time in the past, and the new ceiling was the roof of the empty warehouse far above us. The room buzzed at the corners of vision with the blue-purple of ultraviolet light. Teeth and shirts and flecks of lint began to glow in the darkness. A low, throbbing music began. We looked up to see, high above us, a skeleton, an alien, a werewolf, and an angel. Their costumes fluoresced in the UV, and they glowed like old dreams high above us, on trapezes. They swung back and forth, in time with the music, and then, as one, they let go and tumbled down toward us.

We gasped, but before they reached us they bounced on the air, and rose up again, like yo-yos, and clambered back on their trapezes. We realized that they were attached to the roof by rubber cords, invisible in the darkness, and they bounced and dove and swam through the air above us while we clapped and gasped and watched them in happy silence.

The Fourth Room

was little more than a corridor: the ceiling was low, and the ringmaster strutted into the audience and picked two people out of the crowd—the stocky woman and a tall black man wearing a sheepskin coat and tan gloves—pulling them up in front of us. He announced

that he would be demonstrating his hypnotic powers. He made a couple of passes in the air and rejected the stocky woman. Then he asked the man to step up onto a box.

“It’s a setup,” muttered Jane. “He’s a plant.”

A guillotine was wheeled on. The ringmaster cut a watermelon in half, to demonstrate how sharp the blade was. Then he made the man put his hand under the guillotine, and dropped the blade. The gloved hand dropped into the basket, and blood spurted from the open cuff.

Miss Finch squeaked.

Then the man picked his hand out of the basket and chased the Ringmaster around us, while the *Benny Hill Show* music played.

“Artificial hand,” said Jonathan.

“I saw it coming,” said Jane.

Miss Finch blew her nose into a tissue. “I think it’s all in very questionable taste,” she said. Then they led us to

The Fifth Room

and all the lights went on. There was a makeshift wooden table along one wall, with a young bald man selling beer and orange juice and bottles of water, and signs showed the way to the toilets in the room next door. Jane went to get the drinks, and Jonathan went to use the toilets, which left me to make awkward conversation with Miss Finch.

“So,” I said, “I understand you’ve not been back in England long.”

“I’ve been in Komodo,” she told me. “Studying the dragons. Do you know why they grew so big?”

“Er . . .”

“They adapted to prey upon the pygmy elephants.”

“There were pygmy elephants?” I was interested. This was much more fun than being lectured on sushi flukes.

“Oh yes. It’s basic island biogeology—animals will naturally tend toward either gigantism or pygmyism. There are equations, you see . . .” As Miss Finch talked her face became more animated, and I found myself warming to her as she explained why and how some animals grew while others shrank.

Jane brought us our drinks; Jonathan came back from the toilet, cheered and bemused by having been asked to sign an autograph while he was pissing.

“Tell me,” said Jane, “I’ve been reading a lot of cryptozoological journals for the next of the *Guides to the Unexplained* I’m doing. As a biologist—”

“Biogeologist,” interjected Miss Finch.

“Yes. What do you think the chances are of prehistoric animals being alive today, in secret, unknown to science?”

“It’s very unlikely,” said Miss Finch, as if she were telling us off. “There is, at any rate, no ‘Lost World’ off on some island, filled with mammoths and Smilodons and aepyornis. . . .”

“Sounds a bit rude,” said Jonathan. “A what?”

“Aepyornis. A giant flightless prehistoric bird,” said Jane.

“I knew that really,” he told her.

“Although of course, they’re *not* prehistoric,” said Miss Finch. “The last aepyornises were killed off by Portuguese sailors on Madagascar about three hundred years ago. And there are fairly reliable accounts of a pygmy mammoth being presented at the Russian court in the sixteenth century, and a band of something which from the descriptions we have were almost definitely some kind of saber-tooth—the Smilodon—brought in from North Africa by Vespasian to die in the circus. So these things aren’t all prehistoric. Often, they’re historic.”

“I wonder what the point of the saber teeth would be,” I said. “You’d think they’d get in the way.”

“Nonsense,” said Miss Finch. “Smilodon was a most efficient hunter. Must have been—the saber teeth are repeated a number of

times in the fossil record. I wish with all my heart that there were some left today. But there aren't. We know the world too well."

"It's a big place," said Jane, doubtfully, and then the lights were flickered on and off, and a ghastly, disembodied voice told us to walk into the next room, that the latter half of the show was not for the faint of heart, and that later tonight, for one night only, the Theater of Night's Dreaming would be proud to present the Cabinet of Wishes Fulfill'd.

We threw away our plastic glasses, and we shuffled into

The Sixth Room

"Presenting," announced the ringmaster, "The Painmaker!"

The spotlight swung up to reveal an abnormally thin young man in bathing trunks, hanging from hooks through his nipples. Two of the punk girls helped him down to the ground, and handed him his props. He hammered a six-inch nail into his nose, lifted weights with a piercing through his tongue, put several ferrets into his bathing trunks, and, for his final trick, allowed the taller of the punk girls to use his stomach as a dartboard for accurately flung hypodermic needles.

"Wasn't he on the show, years ago?" asked Jane.

"Yeah," said Jonathan. "Really nice guy. He lit a firework held in his teeth."

"I thought you said there were no animals," said Miss Finch. "How do you think those poor ferrets feel about being stuffed into that young man's nether regions?"

"I suppose it depends mostly on whether they're boy ferrets or girl ferrets," said Jonathan, cheerfully.

The Seventh Room

contained a rock-and-roll comedy act, with some clumsy slapstick. A nun's breasts were revealed, and the hunchback lost his trousers.

The Eighth Room

was dark. We waited in the darkness for something to happen. I wanted to sit down. My legs ached, I was tired and cold, and I'd had enough.

Then someone started to shine a light at us. We blinked and squinted and covered our eyes.

"Tonight," an odd voice said, cracked and dusty. Not the ring-master, I was sure of that. "Tonight, one of you shall get a wish. One of you will gain all that you desire, in the Cabinet of Wishes Fulfill'd. Who shall it be?"

"Ooh. At a guess, another plant in the audience," I whispered, remembering the one-handed man in the fourth room.

"Shush," said Jane.

"Who will it be? You sir? You madam?" A figure came out of the darkness and shambled toward us. It was hard to see him properly, for he held a portable spotlight. I wondered if he were wearing some kind of ape costume, for his outline seemed inhuman, and he moved as gorillas move. Perhaps it was the man who played the Creature. "Who shall it be, eh?" We squinted at him, edged out of his way.

And then he pounced. "Aha! I think we have our volunteer," he said, leaping over the rope barrier that separated the audience from the show area around us. Then he grabbed Miss Finch by the hand.

"I really don't think so," said Miss Finch, but she was being dragged away from us, too nervous, too polite, fundamentally too English to make a scene. She was pulled into the darkness, and she was gone to us.

Jonathan swore. "I don't think she's going to let us forget this in a hurry," he said.

The lights went on. A man dressed as a giant fish then proceeded to ride a motorbike around the room several times. Then he stood up on the seat as it went around. Then he sat down and drove the bike

up and down the walls of the room, and then he hit a brick and skidded and fell over, and the bike landed on top of him.

The hunchback and the topless nun ran on and pulled the bike off the man in the fish-suit and hauled him away.

“I just broke my sodding leg,” he was saying, in a dull, numb voice. “It’s sodding broken. My sodding leg,” as they carried him out.

“Do you think that was meant to happen?” asked a girl in the crowd near to us.

“No,” said the man beside her.

Slightly shaken, Uncle Fester and the vampire woman ushered us forward, into

The Ninth Room

where Miss Finch awaited us.

It was a huge room. I knew that, even in the thick darkness. Perhaps the dark intensifies the other senses; perhaps it’s simply that we are always processing more information than we imagine. Echoes of our shuffling and coughing came back to us from walls hundreds of feet away.

And then I became convinced, with a certainty bordering upon madness, that there were great beasts in the darkness, and that they were watching us with hunger.

Slowly the lights came on, and we saw Miss Finch. I wonder to this day where they got the costume.

Her black hair was down. The spectacles were gone. The costume, what little there was of it, fitted her perfectly. She held a spear, and she stared at us without emotion. Then the great cats padded into the light next to her. One of them threw its head back and roared.

Someone began to wail. I could smell the sharp animal stench of urine.

The animals were the size of tigers, but unstriped; they were the color of a sandy beach at evening. Their eyes were topaz, and their breath smelled of fresh meat and of blood.

I stared at their jaws: the saber teeth were indeed teeth, not tusks: huge, overgrown fangs, made for rending, for tearing, for ripping meat from the bone.

The great cats began to pad around us, circling slowly. We huddled together, closing ranks, each of us remembering in our guts what it was like in the old times, when we hid in our caves when the night came and the beasts went on the prowl; remembering when we were prey.

The Smilodons, if that was what they were, seemed uneasy, wary. Their tails switched whiplike from side to side impatiently. Miss Finch said nothing. She just stared at her animals.

Then the stocky woman raised her umbrella and waved it at one of the great cats. "Keep back, you ugly brute," she told it.

It growled at her and tensed back, like a cat about to spring.

The stocky woman went pale, but she kept her umbrella pointed out like a sword. She made no move to run in the torchlit darkness beneath the city.

And then it sprang, batting her to the ground with one huge velvet paw. It stood over her, triumphantly, and roared so deeply that I could feel it in the pit of my stomach. The stocky woman seemed to have passed out, which was, I felt, a mercy: with luck, she would not know when the bladelike fangs tore at her old flesh like twin daggers.

I looked around for some way out, but the other tiger was prowling around us, keeping us herded within the rope enclosure, like frightened sheep.

I could hear Jonathan muttering the same three dirty words, over and over and over.

"We're going to die, aren't we?" I heard myself say.

"I think so," said Jane.

Then Miss Finch pushed her way through the rope barrier, and she took the great cat by the scruff of its neck and pulled it back. It resisted, and she thwacked it on the nose with the end of her spear. Its tail went down between its legs, and it backed away from the fallen woman, cowed and obedient.

There was no blood, that I could see, and I hoped that she was only unconscious.

In the back of the cellar room light was slowly coming up. It seemed as if dawn were breaking. I could see a jungle mist wreathing about huge ferns and hostas; and I could hear, as if from a great way off, the chirp of crickets and the call of strange birds awaking to greet the new day.

And part of me—the writer part of me, the bit that has noted the particular way the light hit the broken glass in the puddle of blood even as I staggered out from a car crash, and has observed in exquisite detail the way that my heart was broken, or did not break, in moments of real, profound, personal tragedy—it was that part of me that thought, *You could get that effect with a smoke machine, some plants, and a tape track. You'd need a really good lighting guy, of course.*

Miss Finch scratched her left breast, unselfconsciously, then she turned her back on us and walked toward the dawn and the jungle underneath the world, flanked by two padding saber-toothed tigers.

A bird screeched and chattered.

Then the dawn light faded back into darkness, and the mists shifted, and the woman and the animals were gone.

The stocky woman's son helped her to her feet. She opened her eyes. She looked shocked but unhurt. And when we knew that she was not hurt, for she picked up her umbrella, and leaned on it, and glared at us all, why then we began to applaud.

No one came to get us. I could not see Uncle Fester or the vampire woman anywhere. So unescorted we all walked on into

The Tenth Room

It was all set up for what would obviously have been the grand finale. There were even plastic seats arranged, for us to watch the show. We sat down on the seats and we waited, but nobody from the circus came on, and, it became apparent to us all after some time, no one was going to come.

People began to shuffle into the next room. I heard a door open, and the noise of traffic and the rain.

I looked at Jane and Jonathan, and we got up and walked out. In the last room was an unmanned table upon which were laid out souvenirs of the circus: posters and CDs and badges, and an open cash box. Sodium yellow light spilled in from the street outside, through an open door, and the wind gusted at the unsold posters, flapping the corners up and down impatiently.

“Should we wait for her?” one of us said, and I wish I could say that it was me. But the others shook their heads, and we walked out into the rain, which had by now subsided to a low and gusty drizzle.

After a short walk down narrow roads, in the rain and the wind, we found our way to the car. I stood on the pavement, waiting for the back door to be unlocked to let me in, and over the rain and the noise of the city I thought I heard a tiger, for, somewhere close by, there was a low roar that made the whole world shake. But perhaps it was only the passage of a train.

STRANGE LITTLE GIRLS

THE GIRLS

New Age

She seems so cool, so focused, so quiet, yet her eyes remain fixed upon the horizon.

You think you know all there is to know about her immediately upon meeting her, but everything you think you know is wrong. Passion flows through her like a river of blood.

She only looked away for a moment, and the mask slipped, and you fell. All your tomorrows start here.

Bonnie's Mother

You know how it is when you love someone?

And the hard part, the bad part, the *Jerry Springer Show* part is that you never stop loving someone. There's always a piece of them in your heart.

Now that she is dead, she tries to remember only the love. She imagines every blow a kiss, the makeup that inexpertly covers the bruises, the cigarette burn on her thigh—all these things, she decides, were gestures of love.

She wonders what her daughter will do.

She wonders what her daughter will be.

She is holding a cake, in her death. It is the cake she was always

going to bake for her little one. Maybe they would have mixed it together.

They would have sat and eaten it and smiled, all three of them, and the apartment would have slowly filled with laughter and with love.

Strange

There are a hundred things she has tried to chase away the things she won't remember and that she can't even let herself think about because that's when the birds scream and the worms crawl and somewhere in her mind it's always raining a slow and endless drizzle.

You will hear that she has left the country, that there was a gift she wanted you to have, but it is lost before it reaches you. Late one night the telephone will sing, and a voice that might be hers will say something that you cannot interpret before the connection crackles and is broken.

Several years later, from a taxi, you will see someone in a doorway who looks like her, but she will be gone by the time you persuade the driver to stop. You will never see her again.

Whenever it rains you will think of her.

Silence

Thirty-five years a showgirl that she admits to, and her feet hurt, day in, day out, from the high heels, but she can walk down steps with a forty-pound headdress in high heels, she's walked across a stage with a lion in high heels, she could walk through goddamn Hell in high heels if it came to that.

These are the things that have helped, that kept her walking and her head high: her daughter; a man from Chicago who loved her, although not enough; the national news anchor who paid her rent for a decade and didn't come to Vegas more than once a month; two bags of silicone gel; and staying out of the desert sun.

She will be a grandmother soon, very soon.

Love

And then there was the time that one of them simply wouldn't return her calls to his office. So she called the number he did not know that she had, and she said to the woman who answered that this was so embarrassing but as he was no longer talking to her could he be told that she was still waiting for the return of her lacy black underthings, which he had taken because, he said, they smelled of her, of both of them. Oh, and that reminded her, she said, as the woman on the other end of the phone said nothing, could they be laundered first, and then simply posted back to her. He has her address. And then, her business joyfully concluded, she forgets him utterly and forever, and she turns her attention to the next.

One day she won't love you, too. It will break your heart.

Time

She is not waiting. Not quite. It is more that the years mean nothing to her anymore, that the dreams and the street cannot touch her.

She remains on the edges of time, implacable, unhurt, beyond, and one day you will open your eyes and see her; and after that, the dark.

It is not a reaping. Instead, she will pluck you, gently, like a feather, or a flower for her hair.

Rattlesnake

She doesn't know who owned the jacket originally. Nobody claimed it after a party, and she figured it looked good on her.

It says KISS, and she does not like to kiss. People, men and women, have told her that she is beautiful, and she has no idea what they mean. When she looks in the mirror she does not see beauty looking back at her. Only her face.

She does not read, watch TV, or make love. She listens to music. She goes places with her friends. She rides roller coasters but never screams when they plummet or twist and plunge upside down.

If you told her the jacket was yours she'd just shrug and give it back to you. It's not like she cares, not one way or the other.

Heart of Gold

—sentences.

Sisters, maybe twins, possibly cousins. We won't know unless we see their birth certificates, the real ones, not the ones they use to get ID.

This is what they do for a living. They walk in, take what they need, walk out again.

It's not glamorous. It's just business. It may not always be strictly legal. It's just business.

They are too smart for this, and too tired.

They share clothes, wigs, makeup, cigarettes. Restless and hunting, they move on. Two minds. One heart.

Sometimes they even finish each other's—

Monday's Child

Standing in the shower, letting the water run over her, washing it away, washing everything away, she realizes that what made it hardest was that it had smelled just like her own high school.

She had walked through the corridors, heart beating raggedly in her chest, smelling that school smell, and it all came back to her.

It was only, what, six years, maybe less, since it had been her running from locker to classroom, since she had watched her friends crying and raging and brooding over the taunts and the names and the thousand hurts that plague the powerless. None of them had ever gone this far.

She found the first body in a stairwell.

That night, after the shower, which could not wash what she had had to do away, not really, she said to her husband, "I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"That this job is making me hard. That it's making me someone else. Someone I don't know anymore."

He pulled her close and held her, and they stayed touching, skin to skin, until dawn.

Happiness

She feels at home on the range; ear protectors in position, man-shaped paper target up and waiting for her.

She imagines, a little, she remembers, a little and she sights and squeezes and as her time on the range begins she feels rather than sees the head and the heart obliterate. The smell of cordite always makes her think of the Fourth of July.

You use the gifts God gave you. That was what her mother had said, which makes their falling-out even harder, somehow.

Nobody will ever hurt her. She'll just smile her faint vague wonderful smile and walk away.

It's not about the money. It's never about the money.

Raining Blood

Here: an exercise in choice. Your choice. One of these tales is true.

She lived through the war. In 1959 she came to America. She now lives in a condo in Miami, a tiny Frenchwoman with white hair, with a daughter and a granddaughter. She keeps herself to herself and smiles rarely, as if the weight of memory keeps her from finding joy.

Or that's a lie. Actually the Gestapo picked her up during a border crossing in 1943, and they left her in a meadow. First she dug her own grave, then a single bullet to the back of the skull.

Her last thought, before that bullet, was that she was four

months' pregnant, and that if we do not fight to create a future there will be no future for any of us.

There is an old woman in Miami who wakes, confused, from a dream of the wind blowing the wildflowers in a meadow.

There are bones untouched beneath the warm French earth which dream of a daughter's wedding. Good wine is drunk. The only tears shed are happy ones.

Real Men

Some of the girls were boys.

The view changes from where you are standing.

Words can wound, and wounds can heal.

All of these things are true.

About the Author

NEIL GAIMAN is the critically acclaimed and award winning creator of the Sandman series of graphic novels, author of the novels *Anansi Boys*, *American Gods*, *Coraline*, *Stardust*, and *Neverwhere*, the short-fiction collection *Smoke and Mirrors*, and the bestselling children's books *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish* and *The Wolves in the Walls* (both illustrated by Dave McKean). Originally from England, Gaiman now lives in the United States.

www.neilgaiman.com

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