

THE MANY FACES OF FANTASY • The 22nd World Fantasy Convention





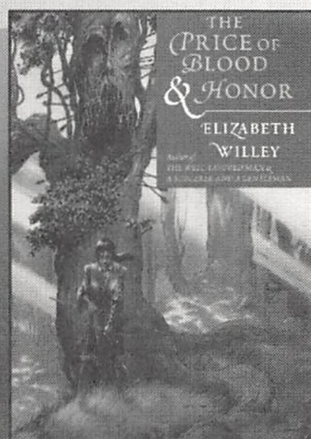
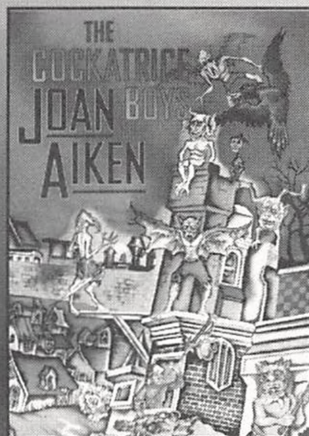
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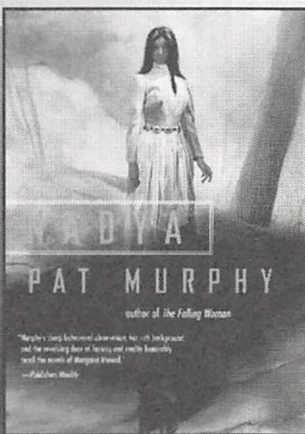
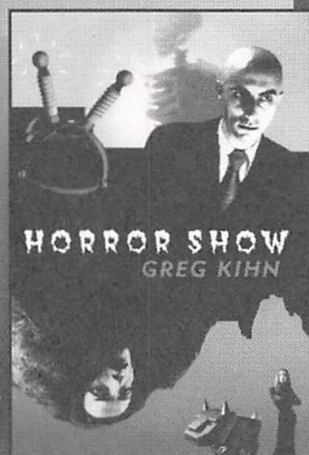
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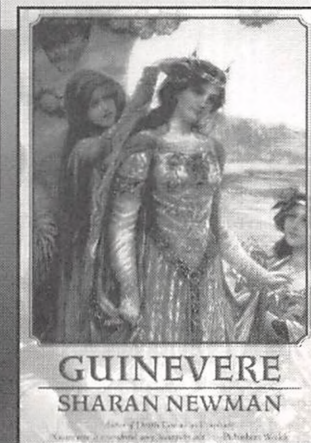
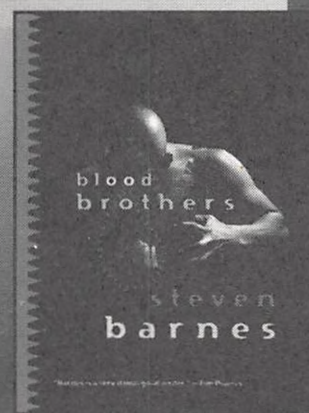
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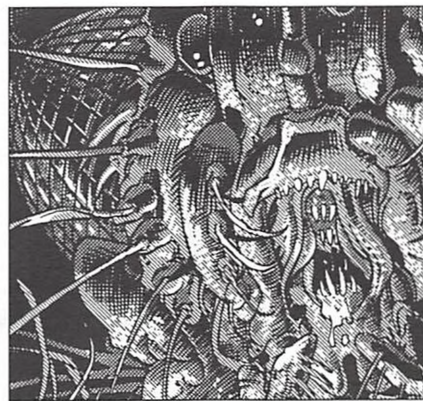


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# THE MANY FACES OF FANTASY





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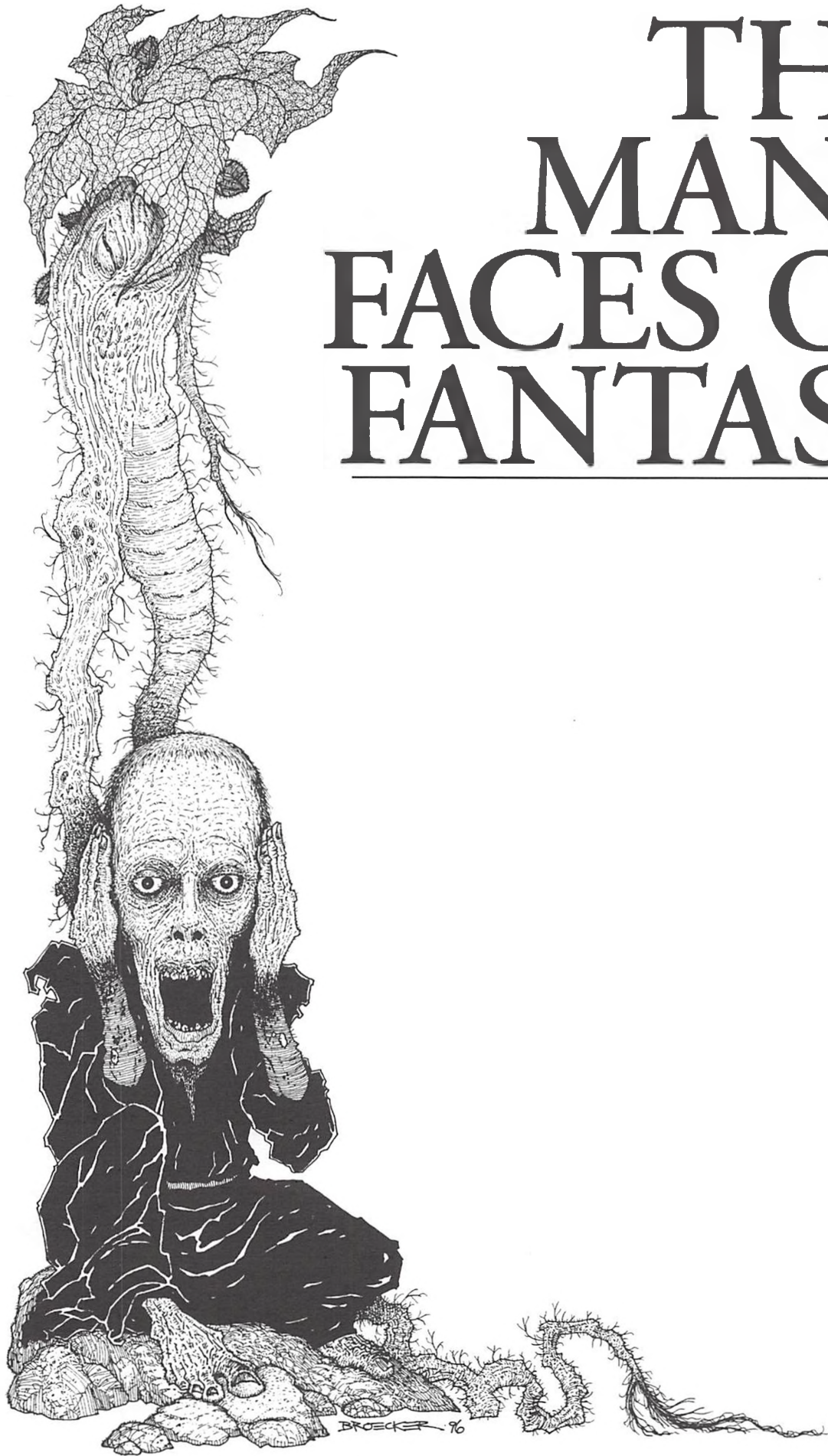


Illustration for Brian Lumley's "Mandraki" by Randall Broecker. Page 35.



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THE TWENTY-SECOND WORLD FANTASY CONVENTION

OCTOBER 31, 1996-NOVEMBER 3, 1996  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

GUESTS OF HONOR  
Katherine Kurtz  
Joe R. Lansdale  
Ron Walotsky  
Ellen Asher

TOASTMASTER  
Brian Lumley



## 1996 World Fantasy Convention Committee

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Editor: Richard Gilliam  
Design & Production: Garcia Publishing Services  
Production Assistance: JDA Typesetting, Inc.  
Printing: K.C. Printing Services, Inc.

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# CONTENTS

## Introduction

---

Welcome to Chicago by Nancy Ford, Tina Jens, Phyllis Weinberg	7
World Fantasy Award Nominees	8

## Our Guests of Honor

---

The Many Facets of Katherine Kurtz by Christie Golden	11
The Ghosts of Hollybrooke by Katherine Kurtz	13
Four on the Floor: or Joe R. Lansdale Shifts Gears by Norman Partridge	23
Billie Sue by Joe R. Lansdale	29
John Wayne Meets the Pink Panther (AKA Brian Lumley) by Robert Weinberg	33
Mandraki by Brian Lumley	35
Ellen Asher: Life at the Science Fiction Book Club by Richard Gilliam	45
Ron Walotsky-An Appreciation (No Haiku) by Alan Dean Foster	50

## The Many Faces of Fantasy, Chicago Style

---

To The Seventh by Gene Wolfe	59
One-Two-Three For Me by Gene Wolfe	69
Sidhe Who Must Be Obeyed by Jody Lynn Nye	73
Grandpa's Secret by Jay Bonansinga	79
Luck of the City by Mary Frances Zambreno	87
Run Down West by Rick Wilber	97
One Among Millions by Yvonne Navarro	105
Elevator Girls by Robert Weinberg	111
Tracks of a Hellhound by Tina Jens	125





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# WELCOME TO CHICAGO

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WELCOME TO CHICAGO! Home of the White Sox, Bulls, Cubs and Bears, Proud owner of two zoos, an elegant but controversial Picasso statue (what is that thing, anyway?) and Woodfield Mall, the nation's largest retail space. Where a mayor named Daley is an institution, and the Era of the Gangsters is just around the corner. It's a city where "Lake Effect Snow" means put away the snow shovel, you're going to need heavy machinery for this one. Where Deep Dish is the pizza of choice, Hot Dogs on the plaza are an executive's lunch, and a late night snack has to be Italian Beef. Where Second City is second to none in turning out world-class comedians, and Hollywood steals away the actor we just saw in the afternoon theater matinee. It's a city where Jazz is hot, but Blues are King.

For those of us who live here, or in the suburbs that stretch from the borders of Milwaukee deep into the heart of Indiana, Chicago isn't really a big city. It's a bunch of little ethnic neighborhoods all bunched together. And like all neighbors, we tend to borrow from those around us. So it's not unusual to see a Greek woman borrowing a recipe for Pad Thai with Chicken Satay and a Spicy Peanut Sauce on the side; or a Vietnamese woman riding the 22 Clark Street Bus to Andersonville to eat at a Swedish restaurant, or a good Irish Catholic boy from the Northwest Side to wander down to a South Side Baptist Church for an old fashioned Gospel Revival, (seen only in THE BLUES BROTHERS, if you live outside the city).

Thing is, Chicago reminds us of the field of fantasy. It's a lot of little sub-genre neighborhoods living side by side, borrowing from each other, as it suits the dish we're preparing for dinner, or the book we're writing for next month's deadline. And so, it seems appropriate that the theme of WFC-96 is The Many Faces of Fantasy. Where we celebrate the traditions of our own sub-genre. But, with our ethnic neighbors so close by, it just makes sense to try out the taste, try on the styles, adopt and adapt the fiction techniques of the sub-genre just next door.

Just like Chicago, where the memory of the Mob is a historical fantasy for some, and a daily reality for others, the field of fantasy spreads its arms to encompass a vast and rich array of universes and realities.

And so, at World Fantasy 1996 we celebrate The Many Faces of Fantasy, in our Programming, which looks at everything from Epic Fantasy to New Directions, Historical Fantasy to Alternative Media, Real Horror to our Personal Nightmares, How to Compete With Goosebumps to Sex For Money: Erotica Sells. You'll see our theme of diversity reflected in the Souvenir Program Book, where we've asked Chicagoland authors to pen examples of the various sub-genres of the fantastic. And, perhaps best of all, you'll find The Many Faces of Fantasy reflected in the members who are attending this year's World Fantasy Convention.

We celebrate the field's rich diversity. By cherishing our traditions, and embracing our neighbors, we become better writers with more exciting tales to tell.

Welcome to Chicago!  
Nancy Ford  
Tina Jens  
Phyllis Weinberg



# 1996 WORLD FANTASY AWARD NOMINEES

## NOVELS

James P. Blaylock  
*All The Bells of Earth* (Ace Books)

Vikram Chandra  
*Red Earth Pouring Rain* (Little, Brown)

Nina Kiriki Hoffman  
*The Silent Strength of Stones* (AvoNova)

Graham Joyce  
*Requiem* (Michael Joseph UK/Signet Creed)

Tim Powers  
*Expiration Date* (HarperCollins UK/Tor Books)

Christopher Priest  
*The Prestige* (S&S Touchstone UK)

## NOVELLA

Nina Kiriki Hoffman for "Home for Christman"  
*The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* Jan. 1995

Ursula K. LeGuin for "EtherOR",  
*Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* Nov. 1995

Jonathan Lethem for "The Insipid Profession of Jonathan Hornebom"  
*Full Spectrum* 5

Tim Powers for "Where They Are Hid"  
Charnel House

Michael Marshall Smith for "More Tomorrow"  
*Dark Terrors*

Michael Swanwick for "Radio Waves"  
*Omni* Winter 1995

## SHORT FICTION

Gwyneth Jones for "The Grass Princess"  
*Seven Tales and A Fable*

Kit Reed for "The Singing Marine"  
*The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* Oct./Nov. 1995

Petrina Smith for "Angel Thing"  
*She's Fantastical*

S. P. Somtow for "Dragon's Fin Soup"  
*The Ultimate Dragon*

Robert Charles Wilson for "The Perseids"  
*Northern Frights* 3

Douglas Winter for "Loop"  
*Dark Love*

## ANTHOLOGY

Nancy A. Collins, Edward E. Kramer & Martin H. Greenberg, Editors  
*Dark Love* (Roc Books)

Stephen Jones & David Sutton, Editors  
*Dark Terrors* (Victor Gollancz)

Lucy Sussex and Judith Raphael Buckrich, Editors  
*She's Fantastical* (Sybylla Feminist Press, Melbourne, Aus.)

Steve Rasnic Tem, Editor  
*High Fantastic* (Ocean View Books)

A. Susan Williams & Richard Glyn Jones, Editors  
*The Penguin Book of Modern Fantasy by Women* (Viking)

## COLLECTION

Brian Aldiss  
*The Secret of the Book* (HarperCollins UK)  
(Published in the US as *Common Clay*, or *20,000 Tales* by St. Martin's Press)

Jonathan Carroll  
*The Panic Hand* (HarperCollins UK)

Hugh B. Cave  
*Death Stalks The Night* (Fedogan & Bremer)

Charles de Lint  
*The Ivory and The Horn* (Tor Books)

Gwyneth Jones  
*Seven Tales and A Fable* (Edgewood Press)

## ARTIST

Tom Canty  
Alan Clark  
Bob Eggleton  
J. K. Potter  
Gahan Wilson

## SPECIAL AWARD—PROFESSIONAL

Richard Evans  
For Contributions to the genre

Stephen Jones  
For Editing and Anthologies

Kristine Kathryn Rusch  
For editing *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*

Gordon Van Gelder  
For Editing

Paul Williams  
For editing *The Microcosmic God* by Theodore Sturgeon  
Estate of Theodore Sturgeon

## SPECIAL AWARD—NON-PROFESSIONAL

Fedogan & Bremer  
For Book Publishing

Robert J. K. Rilleffer, Meg Hamel and Jenna Felice  
For *Century Magazine*

Marc Michaud  
For *Necronomicon Press*

Steve Pasechnick  
For Edgewood Press

Robert Weinberg  
For contributions to the genre



# OUR GUESTS OF HONOR

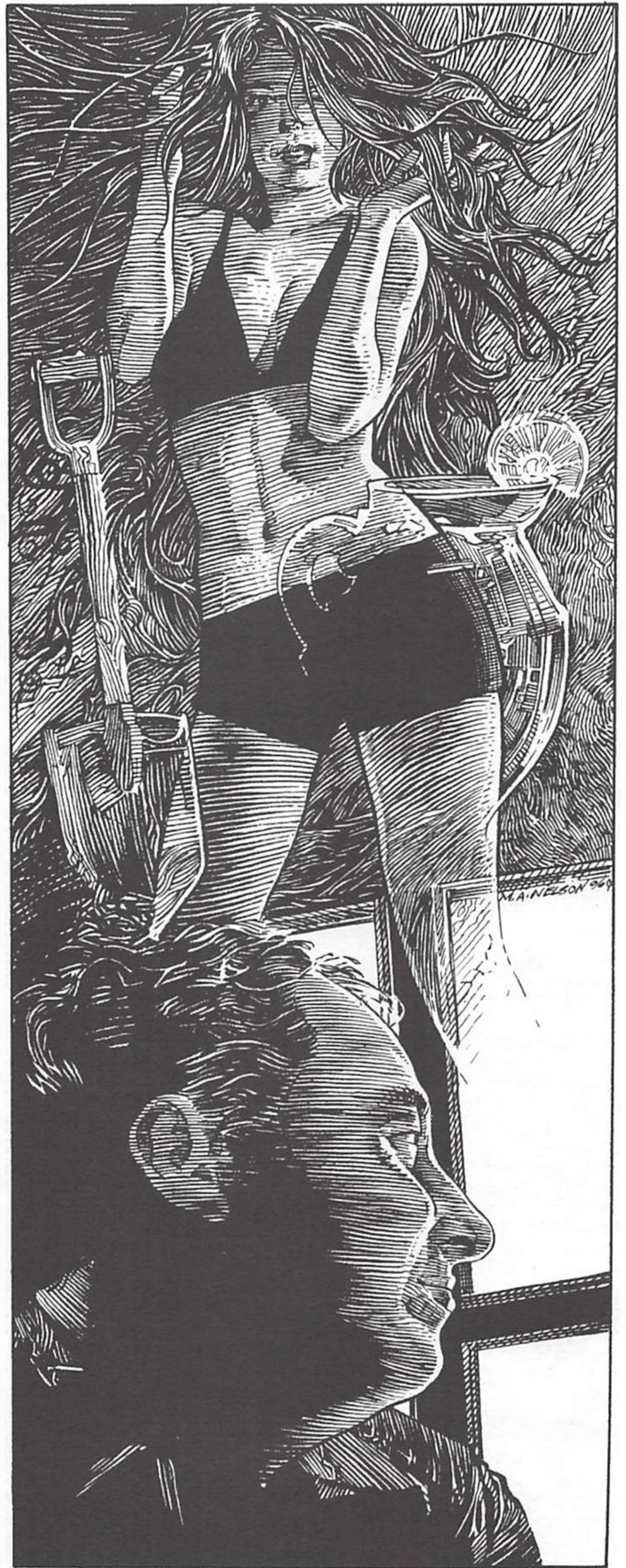


Illustration by Mark Nelson for Joe R. Lansdale's "Billie Sue."  
Page 29.



Roc Books Congratulates Its  
1996 World Fantasy Award  
Nominees!

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BEST ANTHOLOGY

**DARK LOVE**

edited by Nancy A. Collins, Edward E. Kramer,  
and Martin H. Greenberg

---

BEST SHORT FICTION

**“Loop”**

by Douglas E. Winter  
as featured in the anthology **DARK LOVE**





# THE MANY FACETS OF KATHERINE KURTZ

by Christie Golden

MY FIRST ORIGINAL NOVEL, *Instrument of Fate*, bears the following dedication: *To Katherine Kurtz—Inspiration, Mentor, Friend*. It has been my great good fortune that I am able to say this about this gifted author of over twenty books.

Like most of those here at the 22nd World Fantasy Convention, I came to know Katherine through her writing, in the summer of my sixteenth year. When a friend, knowing how much I enjoyed fantasy novels, handed me the three books that comprised “The Chronicles of the Deryni” (*Deryni Rising*, *Deryni Checkmate*, and *High Deryni*) with the comment, “I think you’ll enjoy these,” neither of us could possibly have known that this series would, without exaggeration, literally change my life.

By the time I’d finished *High Deryni*, I was no longer content just to read wonderful stories of exciting people in fabulous lands. I wanted to make other people feel the way I did when I read Katherine’s books. Reading the tales was not enough; I wanted to craft them, too.

I’ve often wondered just what it was in particular about Katherine’s work that roused the slumbering writer within me. The richness of the worlds she creates, whether pure fantasy or reality-based, perhaps. Certainly Gwynedd, in which the Deryni books are set, is as real as any other fantasy world into which I’ve ventured. Katherine is an accomplished historian, and you can tell it right away. You’re in the hands of a master, and nothing in her worlds rings false. She has an equally sure hand with more contemporary fiction. *Lammas Night* puts you smack in the middle of WWII Britain, and the “Adept” series, which she writes with collaborator Deborah Turner Harris, can all but substitute for an actual visit to Scotland and England.

Maybe it’s the stories themselves that did it. Breathless plotting, exciting and unpredictable—but never unbelievable—turns of events, events and situations that really matter. You can count on finding all of these in any Kurtz work. Katherine has written everything from “traditional” fantasy stories to a science-fiction murder mystery (*The Legacy of Lebr*) to historicals (*Two Crowns for America*) and thrillers (*Lammas Night*, the “Adept” series)—and made every one of these genres her own.

But I personally think it’s the characters, and the fact that nobody—but nobody—is ever really “safe” in the books. Sometimes the good guys die. sometimes the bad guys don’t. Katherine owes me for a lot of boxes of Kleenex, she does, for her characters become your friends. They truly come to life as you, the reader, give them a chance to perform their heroics or their villainies; witness their pettiness and their unexpected greatness of spirit. I remember sobbing over Rhys and William, biting my nails over Adam Sinclair and Camber, and, yes, getting a little dreamy with a sixteen-year-old girl’s crush on first Kelson, then Morgan.

And even with a sixteen-year-old’s ego, I never thought I could do these things as well as Katherine did. But I sure wanted to try,

It took twelve years after that momentous summer, but finally my first book was published—the TSR novel *Vampire of the Mists*, which launched the Ravenloft

line. I'd heard that Katherine was going to be at a local convention, so I went. Clutching my copy of *Lammis Night*—perhaps my favorite of all her works—I timidly approached.

Katherine is a tall, attractive, quietly self-confident blonde woman, and frankly, I was somewhat in awe. I handed her the book for her to sign and told her shyly that her writing inspired me to become a writer myself, and that when my book came out, I wanted to give her a copy. The rest of the meeting is a blur, I was that nervous. I mean—this was *Katherine Kurtz!*

Later, I summoned my courage again, and the next chance I got, true to my word I gave her a copy of *Vampire*. That would be the end of it. I didn't really think she'd read it. I'd given her the book to say "thank you" for all those hours of pleasure that her work had given me. That was enough.

When the letter came, I just about expired on the spot.

She had not only read *Vampire*, she'd really enjoyed it. She wanted to know what else I was doing. She urged me to work on original material, offered a cover quote and then wrote the words that rang like bells to my young author ears, "I think Kurtz readers would like your work."

Talk about the ultimate compliment!

That was when Katherine became not only an inspiration to me, but a mentor as well. Over the next couple of years, Katherine graciously read everything I wrote, published or not, despite her own very busy schedule. She coached me not only with the writing itself, but even more important, in the oft-untaught and under-appreciated skill of how to write a powerful sales outline. She was quick with genuine praise, but just as quick to point out problem spots. She was and continues to be the best kind of mentor—one who demands your very best efforts and will settle for nothing less. One who has the wisdom to let you forge your own path and sometimes make mistakes, knowing the final victory will be the sweeter for the struggle. And one who will always be among the first to applaud your successes.

Somewhere along those years, I'm honored to say that Katherine became a friend. There's a lot of distance between Ireland and Colorado, so we don't see one another often. And even then, so many others want to share her time that I consider myself lucky if we can grab a quick meal and catch up at a convention. But I know the distance isn't a real barrier, not with someone as genuine and kind as Katherine.

Sometimes, when we finally get to meet artists whose work we admire, we find ourselves disillusioned. Our gods seem all too often to have feet of clay. It is a real joy, then, to discover that the lady—and I chose the word deliberately, for if there are still true ladies in the world, Katherine Kurtz is one—who gave all of us lucky readers such a great gift of her talents, worlds, stories and characters, has another gift to share with those of us fortunate enough to get to meet this year's Guest of Honor: the gift of simply being her own gracious self.



# THE GHOSTS OF HOLYBROOKE

by Katherine Kurtz

THOUGH SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF IS the fiction writer's stock in trade, most of us do not expect that we will need to engage this particular ability in our own lives. It could be argued that fantasy writers perhaps live closer to the edge of reality—whatever that is—than most writers in other genres; but I doubt that most of us seriously anticipate having to contend with honest-to-God ghosts. But then, again, as Somerville and Ross were wont to remind us, in *THE IRISH R.M.*, "Things are different in Ireland." We learned, shortly after we moved into Holybrooke Hall, that they were absolutely right.

To look at Holybrooke, one might decide that it's a cross between a fairy-tale castle and Toad Hall, with perhaps a dash of Castle Dracula thrown in—but only because the great hall can be rather dark on stormy nights, and occasionally inclined to bats. (We'll come back to the bats.) In architectural terms, Holybrooke Hall is part of the legacy of William Vitruvius Morrison, last in a line of three generations of Irish architects who left an indelible mark on the Irish building in the 18th and 19th centuries. Begun in 1832, during the reign of William IV, and finished the year Queen Victoria came to the throne, in 1837, the house was designed as a miniature jewel of a baronial country estate, incorporating such delights as gothic arches, Tudor chimney stacks (12 of them!), crenelated battlements, a vaulted Tudoresque great hall, and a large stained glass window—said to be one of the finest examples of heraldic glass in Ireland.

The man who commissioned Holybrooke was Sir George Hodson, 3rd Baronet, a portrait painter of note, member of the Hibernian Academy of Art, and

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**“To look at Holybrooke, one might decide it's a cross between a fairy-tale castle and Toad Hall, with perhaps a dash of Castle Dracula thrown in—but only because the great hall can be dark on stormy nights.”**

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also an amateur architect. While the design of the main house undoubtedly was Morrison's—perhaps his finest achievement in the gothic revival idiom—it was Sir George who designed the service wing, the gate lodge, and much of the internal decor of the house. (We have copies of his drawings for the redecoration of the library in 1875.) Indeed, Sir George himself apparently accounts for our most distinctive ghostly presence. Or maybe it's the house. Or the house *and* Sir George. Or. . . .

But, I digress. Whatever the truth of the matter—and I doubt we'll ever know—my husband and I should have been alerted the day we took possession of the house, one sunny day in May of 1987. We'd been to the solicitor's office to sign the final papers and pick up the keys, we'd had a celebratory lunch, and we came back to Holybrooke to walk

through it for the first time as its new owners. Imagine our amazement when, while looking into a small room designated as a future bathroom but not yet plumbed or even electrified, we spotted a grubby dime-sized object lying on the edge of a salvaged bathtub, looking for all the world like one of those anodized slugs that come out of electrical conduit boxes. You know: the ones that most of us used as play-money, when we were kids.

Except that under the dust, this one wasn't silvery, as Scott, my husband, discovered when he picked it up and rubbed it between thumb and forefinger.

"There are only two things this color," he said, gently biting at it. "And it isn't brass."

Indeed, not. It was a mint-condition gold half-sovereign dated 1886, exactly one hundred years before—an interesting find, because the previous

owner had confided that he'd torn up floor boards and baseboards and even dug up the garden looking for "treasure" allegedly left in the house, but he'd never found even a penny.

Since he'd also intended to subdivide the house into flats, we decided—somewhat whimsically at the time, we *thought*—that maybe the house was somehow aware that we'd saved it from such a fate, and that therefore the gold coin was a welcome gift and a thank-you token. In any case, we had it mounted on a gold chain, and I began to wear my "Holybrooke half-sovereign." We then began the process of getting the house ready to occupy, not yet dreaming that, even once the previous owners finished moving out, the house was already occupied. There were more clues before we could even move in. While we were working in the house, cleaning and organizing, both of us independently heard someone singing "It's a Long Way to Tipperary."

Now, since Tipperary is both a county and a town in Ireland, one might reasonably conclude that this is not an entirely inappropriate song to hear in that country. However, there was no mechanical or electrical apparatus in the house at the time to account for any such rendering of any song, much less "It's a Long Way to Tipperary." No radio or TV, no stereo, no tape player. Nothing. Furthermore, the version we both heard had the tinny quality of an old gramophone recording. We do own an old gramophone, roughly contemporaneous with the heyday of the house (if from another continent), and we occasionally crank it up in the great hall, where it sounds right at home; but it was still in our rented house, several miles away.

"Hmmm," we said. "Curious."

The plot thickened as we worked on getting the central heat up and running. It hadn't, for at least six years; and as a result, you could see your breath in the great hall, even in May!

A heating engineer came and looked at the furnace system, pronounced it easily adequate but in need of a new pump and a new burner, and added, "Oh, and by the way, this has been set up to burn coal instead of oil at some time in the past. I assume you'll want to go back to oil. That takes a different kind of furnace door, but I expect the original door is around here somewhere. You don't throw away something like that—just in case you want to switch back. A new door will set you back about £50, so it's worth looking for the old one."

Indeed. And we did look. Several days of inter-

mittent hunting in the dungeon-like cellar produced many dead wine bottles, a large accumulation of Chinese take-away containers, and other miscellaneous debris, but no door—and we were looking for something bright orange and about the size of a trade paperback. We'd about decided we were going to have to bite the bullet and order up a new one when Scott decided to have one last look. There it was—our missing door—bright orange leaning against the white-washed wall at the bottom of the stairs. No one else had been in the cellar; there's no way we could have missed it, in the midst of clearing out debris and actively looking for it. It was just—*there*.

"Well," we decided. "Maybe the house is giving us a hand. It understands that we need that door so we can make it warm again." We laughed as we said it, but by now there was a somewhat uncertain edge to our laughter.

It was after we'd moved in that we began noticing more traditional ghostly phenomena—mostly sounds, though my husband and Lucy our housekeeper (who has worked in the house for nearly fifty years) have actually seen things, as have occasional guests who stay in the back bedroom. The cats sometimes see things, too; but cats do.

Apropos of cats, I should mention here the night that Edgar, a strapping black-and-white moggie, took wild-eyed exception to something that spooked him off my desk chair to cower trembling between me and a friend while we were watching a video, his little heart pounding and paws sweating. That was one scared cat. As I tried to calm him, I asked my friend whether she saw anything—because I sure didn't.

Wide-eyed, she shook her head. "But *he* does!" she said, pointing at Edgar.

Now, I had absolutely no sense of personal fear. But when it became clear, from Edgar's staring, that whatever it was, was approaching, about to pass between us and the TV, I told "it" that it was perfectly welcome if it was friendly, but please not to scare my cat! At which point, it simply wasn't there anymore—much to Edgar's amazement and lasting suspicion. I think it took him half an hour to stop looking for it, whatever "it" was. And then there was the night when our now-departed Hero, an even bigger black-and white cat, imperiously summoned Scott to follow him downstairs, growling and muttering cat-imprecations under his breath—Hero, not Scott. Tail lashing, and now snarling and snarling, Hero then stalked *something* across the great hall, into the entrance





lobby, out the front door (which Scott dutifully opened), and bounded across the forecourt to disappear into the bushes, in spitting hot pursuit of an invisible “something” that only he could see. And never, before or since, had Hero demanded to be let out the front door. You tell me . . .

But, back to the occurrences that humans can perceive. (Anymore, we largely ignore what the cats see, if we can't see anything.) The back bedroom seems to be a focus, whether it's for footsteps, whistling, or the sound of a door opening and closing, even when the door is closed and locked. When a young friend was staying in the house for us before we actually moved in—for security reasons, one tries never to leave a big house unoccupied overnight—he would hear such distinctive sounds of the door opening and closing that he'd tip-toe down the corridor from the master bedroom where he was sleeping, with hockey-stick at the ready, convinced that he had an intruder; but there was never anything to be seen except that the door was still firmly closed and locked. After a while, he wouldn't even bother to investigate; he'd just pull the covers over his head and try to go to sleep. We've now become accustomed to having guests report the impression of someone standing in the corner in that room and watching them while they sleep. If you know Bill Fawcett, you might ask him about Holybrooke, the next time you see him; he's slept in that room.

One of the visible manifestations elsewhere in the house is a tall, elegant woman in a long grey or fawn-colored skirt, a white blouse with leg-o-mutton sleeves, and her hair done up in a Gibson-type coiffure. She's been seen by both Scott and Lucy, our housekeeper. Scott's sighting was a classic one. He was on the phone to America one night, sitting in the library with a clear view into the great hall, where the stair crosses the end of the hall from the first half-landing to the second. (Somewhat creepily, this kind of staircase is sometimes called a “coffin stair,” because it's wide enough for three pairs of men to carry a coffin down the stairs on their shoulders. Once they'd brought the body downstairs, it would be placed on a hunt table or “coffin table,” a long oval that's just the right size to hold a coffin when the drop-leaves are folded down—another piece of period trivia for your next gothic horror novel!)

Anyway, Scott's ghostly lady simply walked up the stairs and disappeared from sight as she turned the angle. He stopped talking, the entire time she was in sight—to increasingly urgent queries of, “Scott? Scott, are you there?” To which he finally answered, when she had disappeared, “That's the damndest thing I ever saw!” and proceeded to tell them about it.

It doesn't end here. A week or so later—and we hadn't mentioned Scott's sighting—Lucy was hovering on the upstairs landing just outside my office when she saw the lady pass the doorway arch that

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leads from the landing to the bedroom corridor, heading from the direction of *that* bedroom into the master bedroom. Since she only caught a glimpse of the woman (though her later description pretty much tallied with what Scott had seen), she initially mistook the woman for me.

Now, Lucy is one of those people who is Good with a capital *G*—and she loves Holybrooke. Though she never finished school, coming to Holybrooke to enter service as an orphan of fifteen, she made sure both her children got a proper education—in Irish as well as English, no less. (One now has an M.A., and the other is working on a Ph.D. in biology while raising three small boys and helping her husband, who's just about finished *his* Ph.D.) With a formal education, Lucy might have helped bring Ireland along as a world power or—who knows? As it is, she married the head gardener at Holybrooke—a match encouraged by the Lady Hodson of the time—brought up two happy and successful children, she's a demon at crosswords, and she's forever asking questions, always eager to learn something new. In a half-day on Wednesdays, she somehow manages to restore order out of chaos that Scott and I create, so that the two of us can get on with our writing.

That's what I was doing that day: writing. And when Lucy suddenly realized that's what I'd been doing all along, she wasn't at all fazed. After all, she's known the ghosts of Holybrooke for nearly fifty years. She just came into my office and told me what she'd seen—and hardly batted an eye when I only listened with growing interest and then nodded and told her about Scott's sighting.

At least for *her* sighting, a possible explanation occurred to me while we were comparing notes—as logical as such things are likely to be. I realized that we'd had some furniture delivered the day before, purchased at auction the previous weekend. One of the items was an antique dressing table positioned in the master bedroom, with its three-way mirror pointing out the door and down the corridor, where the lady had come from. Maybe, I said, she was a former lady of Holybrooke, who had come to see the pretty new mirror that the new lady of Holybrooke had put in *her* bedroom. It's said that ghosts *are* sometimes attracted to mirrors . . .

Or it's possible that the woman in one or both instances is a former nurse who used to take care of an invalid who stayed in the back bedroom. We'd heard of such a woman from several sources. A very elderly

Hodson cousin who came calling one afternoon told us that he'd grown up in the house between the wars and when he was a child, he and the other children of the household would never play on the upstairs landing after dark, because "the nurse" would stand in the corner and watch them. Whether this is the same person who watches people sleep in the back bedroom, I couldn't say. But Scott has occasionally heard whistling sounds coming from that bedroom, perhaps like someone whistling to call a servant.

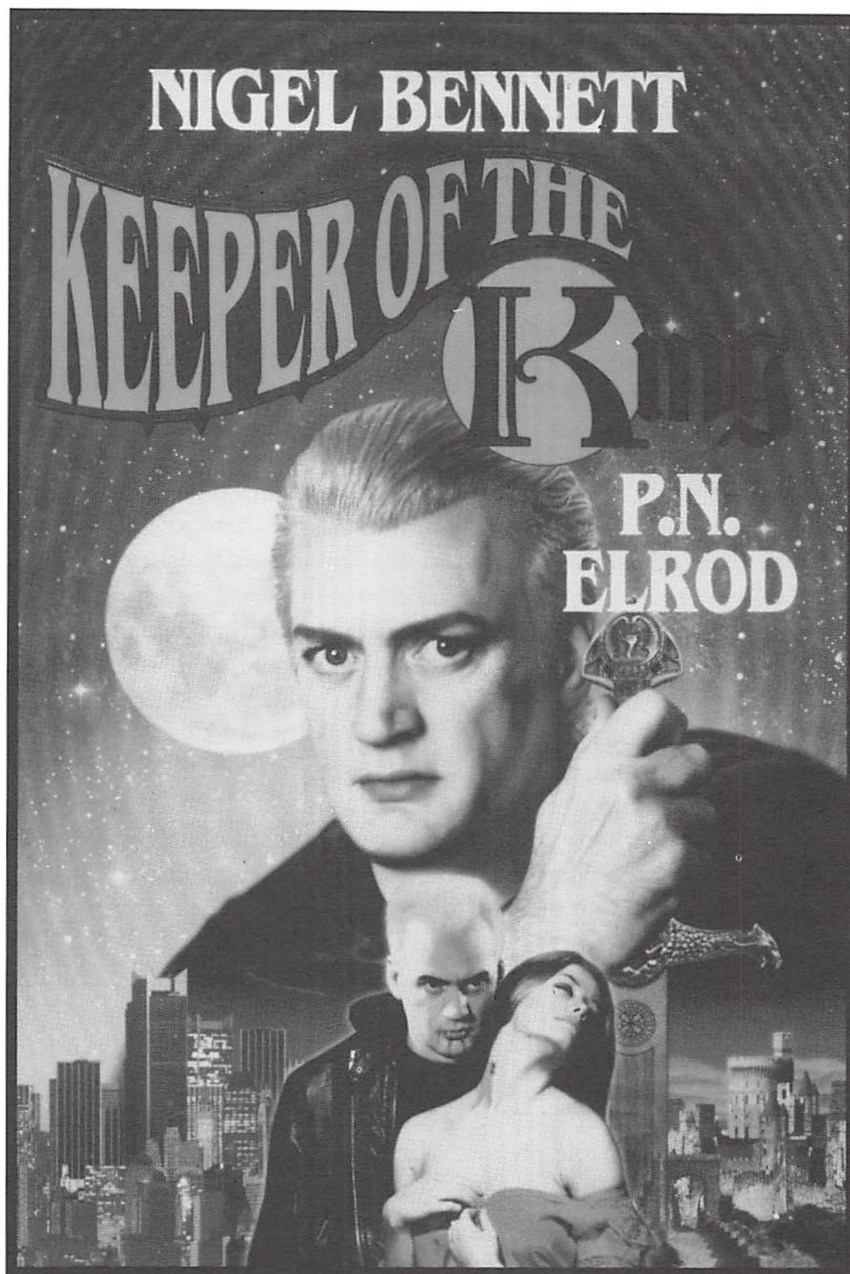
The most distinctive presence around Holybrooke, however, is the one we think is Sir George, who has shown up several times for Scott, usually when he was fixing something in the house. The first time it happened, he was grappling with a loose electrical outlet on a baseboard, and had the sudden impression he was being watched. When he glanced over his shoulder, he caught just a glimpse of a little bearded man in antique clothing and with hands clasped behind his back, who rocked up and down on the balls of his feet, nodding and smiling approvingly—and disappeared.

We're told that a man of similar description has been seen walking in the stableyard of the adjacent riding school, which used to be the stables for the house. (We haven't yet located a photo or portrait of Sir George, to see if the likenesses match.) But, what better candidate than Sir George, who built the house and put so much of his own creativity into it? If strong emotion can tie a spirit to a place, perhaps an artist's passion for his creation brings him back periodically to check on things.

In any case, we're reasonably convinced that Sir George was responsible for one of the more startling episodes that Scott and I both experienced, at the same time—this one an auditory rather than a visual phenomenon. (I never see them, drat it all; I just hear them. Scott sees them. But then, he can make dogs stop barking in the middle of the night—and resume barking. That, however, is another story.)

This one happened late one night about six years ago. That afternoon, we'd hung a Hodson painting on the upstairs landing: a lovely portrait of a young woman, similar to the lady who used to be on the Irish one-pound note. (Local folk know we're restoring the house and assembling Holybrooke memorabilia, so a chap had offered us the painting—which we bought for one another for our anniversary that year, and had cleaned and framed—though we didn't make the connection between painting and incident at the time.) I

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was already in bed, reading, and Scott was brushing his teeth in the adjacent bathroom, when we heard heavy footsteps approach from the far end of the bedroom corridor, clump past our bathroom and bedroom doors, and turn onto the upstairs landing. After walking back and forth several times on the landing, the footsteps receded back down the bedroom corridor.

"Scott, was that Cameron?" I asked. (Cameron is our heavy-footed son, and his room is next to the one at the far end of the bedroom corridor—the one that's so active—but this hadn't sounded like his footsteps.)

"I don't think so," Scott said, somewhat warily.

He went and looked in Cameron's room, but the son and heir was dead asleep as only fifteen-year-olds can be dead to the world, and obviously hadn't moved.

At this point, we were seriously concerned that we might have an intruder in the house—so much so that Scott took a hockey stick (does this sound familiar?) and made a room-to-room search of the entire house, doubling back randomly in proper police search procedures learned during his years as a reserve deputy sheriff. There was no one else in the house.

"Hmmm," we both said, as he resumed brushing his teeth.

At this point, the footsteps came again from the far end of the bedroom corridor and onto the landing, again moving back and forth several times. But this time, when they came adjacent to the bathroom's corridor door, Scott yanked open the door—to nothing. The footsteps simply ceased in mid-stride, and there was no further activity that night.

We speculated about the incident, of course. But though we surmised that *someone* was agitated about *something*, it wasn't until we were telling a friend of this strange occurrence, perhaps a week later, that the penny dropped. The Hodson painting had come back, and its creator had shown up to inspect its new resting place, pacing up and down in front of it and probably thinking, *Good Lord, what's that doing there? I sold that years ago! Nicely framed, but I'm not sure I like that location . . .*

Fortunately, he did apparently decide it was okay for the painting to remain there, because there's been no more nocturnal pacing, and the painting hasn't fallen down or anything. (An occasional ceiling-boss does pop off its pins and clatter to the great hall floor, startling the bejeebers out of us, but that's just from temperature changes or vibration—isn't it?!)

Are we being fanciful? Perhaps. But added to the other phenomena we've witnessed at Holybrooke, in our nine years here, these aren't inconsistent speculations. People sometimes ask us if we aren't afraid to live here, if there really are ghosts. Clergy friends of various denominations have even offered to exorcise the house.

We reply that we've never had any cause to be afraid, that whatever occasionally makes itself known at Holybrooke seems reassuringly benign and even cooperative—and we certainly don't want to upset the status quo by anything as drastic as an exorcism. Peaceful coexistence is just fine with us!

So anxious clergy are always put on notice that they're not to do anything that might distress our mysterious co-tenants. After all, whatever's here was here long before we came, and undoubtedly will be here long after we're gone. (One can only hope to be a benevolent caretaker or custodian of a house with a history like Holybrooke; you can never really own it, in the sense that one can own the mere bricks and mortar of a more modern and less individualized building.) Besides, one gets no sense of tormented souls being trapped here, or of anything awful having happened—though we've visited the odd house that does feel that way, and sometimes have been able to verify certain events to account for it.

No, Holybrooke apparently has had a serene and happy history, despite some of the troubled past of this part of the world. Though construction was still in progress on the service wing and out-buildings at the start of the great potato famine of 1845-48, Sir George was a benevolent landlord, who served on several local relief committees and even mortgaged several of his fields during the worst of the famine so that he could keep his estate workers and builders paid and employed.

Here, one should understand that the real crisis of the potato famine, which occurred in England and on the Continent as well as in Ireland, was caused not so much by a shortage of food as by the skyrocketing *price* of other food available. The repeated failure of the potato crop for four years running required a reversion to other sources of food—which spelled utter devastation for subsistence farmers and their families totally dependent on the potato, with no cash resources to fall back on. The problem was compounded by outbreaks of typhus and cholera worldwide. In Ireland alone, more than half a million peo-

ple died directly of starvation or disease, and many tens of thousands more emigrated, many of them to America.

Fortunately, the famine was never as severe in County Wicklow as it was in many other parts of the country, especially in the West; and Wicklow seems to have had a far larger share of benevolent landlords like Sir George. We're told that at Holybrooke (and at Kilruddery, the Earl of Meath's estate on the other side of the hill, also built by Morrison), a bell would ring every afternoon at two o'clock, and anyone within hearing could show up and be assured of a bowl of thick soup, a large chunk of bread, and (for the men) a mug of ale. Besides mortgaging the fields, Sir George also switched from stone to stucco as construction continued along the service wing of the house, in a further economizing measure; you can see the line, where the material changes. No one starved at Holybrooke.

This sort of kindness paid off, because after the famine was finally over, the local folk are said to have clubbed together and paid off the mortgage on Sir George's upper field—which had been mortgaged for them, after all. It's even said that the little folly tower in that field, built to be seen only from the house, was a thank-you gift from the local folk—though we've not been able to verify that.

An even better story relates how, during the Troubles, when many great houses were being burnt out, would-be marauders and their torches were met at Holybrooke (and Kilruddery) by local men brandishing shotguns, who declared, "Back off! These are good landlords. They took care of us when times were tough, and now we're taking care of them. Go burn out someone else!"

And they did—but they didn't touch Holybrooke or Kilruddery. Positive Anglo-Irish relations—and hence, no grumpy ghosts to linger because of injustices never resolved.

So, what *are* ghosts? (You don't really think I know, do you?) We speculate that some "ghostly" phenomena may be akin to a video-loop that somehow gets triggered and played back under certain conditions—which would account for sightings like the lady on the stairs, in which there's no interaction or apparent awareness by the apparition that anyone else is there. But that doesn't explain the rest of ours—especially the ones that do interact. Fortunately, ours are all benign!

Only once has the house (or its ghostly inhabi-

tants) been less than helpful—and even then, we were dealing with momentary agitation rather than any real resistance. It was 1988, our first summer in residence, when we were having the roof redone and the chimneys repointed. (As an architectural aside, for the next time you write about a castle and take its structure for granted, you should be aware that repointing involves replacing deteriorated mortar between stones. The effects of wind and frost, over the years, can scour out the pointing in a stone or brick building, especially in areas regularly exposed to gale-force storms—and our little valley is like a wind tunnel in the winter.)

The Tudor-style chimneys at Holybrooke, each with its own decoration of spiral or lozenge-shapes or checkerboard squares or fluting, are like stacks of five or six granite doughnuts about two feet across and nearly a foot thick, each doughnut made of two half-doughnuts clamped together with lead. (The roof is slate, with lead ridge-caps and gutters, and it's all three stories up, because of the sixteen-foot ceilings on the ground floor. Slate roofs used to be bonded from underneath with sarking, a layer of plaster mixed with horsehair—far better insulation than the modern felt that nowadays replaces it when a roof is redone. It isn't the sarking that perishes, but the roofing nails, which suffer from "nail disease"—read, "rust." But replacing the nails still necessitates removing all the sarking and starting from scratch—though you *can* salvage most of the slates and reuse them, if you're careful. The above is yet another brief lesson in castle-construction practicalities, for the next time you need such info in a story!)

But this is about chimneys, and our ghosts' reaction to temporary dismantling of same. By the time our work began, stability of the stacks probably owed more to gravity than to mortar. To make the chimneys good, it was necessary to take them down, layer by layer and stack by stack, then reassemble them with new clamps, new mortar, and stainless-steel liners to make them more fire-resistant. We also replaced several missing chimney-tops. (I have no idea how the originals came to be missing, from that high up, but I do know that during the preceding winter, I had occasionally lain awake at night as the wind whistled and howled through the chimney stacks—it sucked a skylight out of the roof one evening!—and found myself wondering whether, if a stack came down, it would stop at bedroom level or go all the way through to the ground. Fortunately, nothing moved—or at least not far enough to fall!)



So, stabilizing the chimneys was necessarily the first priority in our summer roofing adventure. Our intrepid roofers—the surviving team, after two previous crews had taken one look at the height of our roof and said, “No way!”—had begun disassembling the first cluster of three chimneys, carefully lowering each section to the ground with ropes and pulleys. (The overall project would turn out to be a five-month proposition involving five men, five days a week; the numbers are easy to remember.) We were getting ready to go on our first holiday since moving to Ireland two years before and moving into the house the previous autumn. As we packed, I can only describe the feeling in the house as one of growing agitation.

Well, by now, we had become accustomed to the nocturnal bumpings and Scott’s occasional sightings in the great hall. But in all, the house had always felt very peaceful. The agitation was not typical. We discussed possible reasons, given the unique background of the house, and wondered whether, perhaps, the house was agitated because strange men were swarming all over it, literally taking it apart. And here we were, its supposed rescuers, packing up to leave, just like the last Hodsons did when they sold up and went back to England, in 1970. Maybe it thought we weren’t coming back, and were leaving it to the mercies of those strange men! Betrayal, after saving it from being knocked into flats!

(Humor me. What would *you* have done?)

What *I* did was to go downstairs and stand in the middle of the great hall, setting one hand on the center post that supports the upstairs landing. And I had a talk with the house. Or rather, I delivered a monologue—words to the effect of, “Hey, guys, not to worry. We aren’t abandoning you. We’re just going on holiday for a couple of weeks. And meanwhile, those nice men on the roof, who really like you and think you’re beautiful, are going to be working on the roof, so the rain won’t come in anymore.” (It had run down one great hall wall in torrents during the previous winter.) “And they’re only taking the chimneys apart so they can cement them back together, with stainless-steel liners, so you won’t get chimney fires like poor old Powerscourt, across the road.” (Powerscourt House, a far grander edifice, burned spectacularly in around 1967 or 1968, and is only now being rebuilt.)

“So, please don’t be anxious. We’ll be back in a couple of weeks. And soon your roof will be all snug and weather-tight again. Then we can start restoring

your insides to their former glory—which we really want to do, because you’re a wonderful house, and you deserve to be saved! You’ll have to be patient with us, because we aren’t very rich, and it’s going to take a while.” (It’s going to take a lot of books!) “But eventually, we hope you’ll be even more beautiful than you were in the old days. Okay?”

If you think I felt rather silly, talking to a house, you’re absolutely right. And yet, it somehow felt right—and it did do the trick. By the time I could get back to the top of the stairs, the feeling of agitation had died away. I can best describe the feeling as something akin to the way a dynamo winds down when you cut the power, or as if someone had heaved a heavy sigh of relief.

It? They? The scientist in me hasn’t a clue. Nor does the romantic or the mystic. I simply report what happened, and make no claim to any causal connection. Whatever the reason, we had no repeats of the agitation, and the workmen reported no incidents during our absence or thereafter.

Nor have there ever been any other inklings that our co-inhabitants have any objection to our presence at Holybrooke. It’s still a friendly and peaceful house; and the play of light coming through the stained glass window each morning, as I head downstairs for breakfast, is always subtly different, the mood changing gently with the weather outside. People sometimes ask whether we aren’t afraid to stay alone in such a big old house, when one or the other of us is away for a few days—especially if we have ghosts. But I’ve never known a moment’s fear.

I will admit, however, that we were somewhat startled the first time our Sophie cat brought in a live bat and released it to flap around in the great hall. (Yes, she does this fairly regularly during the summer, and yes, we’ve told her that they’re a protected species.) Fortunately, she rarely damages them; and we reckon we save probably three out of four, by coaxing them into my office and then hooshing them out the window. (“Hoosh”—what a marvellous Irish verb!)

I do occasionally wonder, however, what the neighbors think, if they’ve ever seen us hooshing a bat out my office window. Of course, the neighborhood kids all know that those neat American writers have ghosts to go with the bats...and a monster in the cellar, as well!

—Katherine Kurtz  
 Holybrooke Hall, Co. Wicklow, Ireland  
 30 August 1996

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# FOUR ON THE FLOOR: OR, JOE R. LANSDALE SHIFT GEARS

by Norman Partridge

## PART ONE: BORN TO RUN

SUMMER OF '63. A small town in East Texas. A modest house in a neighborhood of houses just like it. There's a water-fan whirring in a bedroom window, making a noise not unlike that of a Japanese Zero on a kamikaze mission.

Operating instructions? Well, there's a straw panel on the outside of the fan. If you're Mister Fixit with lots of time on your hands, you connect a dripline from the outdoor spigot that'll keep the straw wet. If not, you haul your butt outdoors every morning and wet that sucker down with a hose. Then you flip the fan on and blow cool moisture into the house. That's the theory, anyway. In practice, the device ain't exactly something that's going to send the least little shiver climbing the hot spine of a Texas afternoon.

But that doesn't bother the kid on the other side of the fan. He's stretched out on the bedroom floor, working his way through an Edgar Rice Burrough's Mars novel. He doesn't much notice the weather. Hot in the room? Hell, it's hot on Mars, too, and you don't hear old John Carter crawfishing about it,

Fact is, Burrough's hero is just an appetizer on the summertime reading menu. Scattered around the floor are more paperbacks—Jack London's *The Sea Wolf*, Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, a collection of Robert Bloch short stories, a couple of Ace Double science fiction novels—and there's a stack of comics, too. Thick DC Giants, fresh off the rack. Seventy-two pages each. Lots of bang for the buck when a kid slaps down his pocket change. Soon as John Carter gets through this Martian fix, Batman and Superman are on deck.

The kid doesn't know it yet, but he's filling up the gas tank, creatively speaking. And it's a high-octane mix. Those hot Texas summers, John Carter and Tars Tarkas, Humphrey Van Weyden and Wolf Larsen. The old man's stories when he relaxes in the evening after a hard day working as an auto mechanic—tales of wrestling on the carnival circuit during the Depression, and older tales passed down through the family about gunslinging Texans who have long since shuffled off this mortal coil. Old Southern stories too—not-so-urban legends of babies tossed down wells and ghosts lurking in the piney woods, stuff that would keep an imaginative kid awake at night. Add superheroes, Saturday matinees, and gun-fighters who slap leather every night in prime time on the old black & white TV in the living room,

Give the world several real serious spins.

Get some size on that boy.

And give him a typewriter.

## PART TWO: AIN'T BUILT FOR COMFORT I'M BUILT FOR SPEED

The kid takes a couple of detours on his way to said typewriter. Vietnam, a

frequent destination for members of his generation, isn't one of them. Surprisingly, Berkeley, California is. And if you can imagine this good ol' boy in-the-making walking Telegraph Avenue with hair long enough to brush his backside, you're way ahead of me.

But California doesn't have a hold on him. Fact is, it's kind of a disappointment. On the streets of Berkeley, he sees the same old social problems he saw back home, only here they're covered up a little better with a pre-PC era sheen that strikes him as hypocritical.

It's Texas that has a hold on him. He knows that's where he belongs. He goes home. Returns to college, but doesn't quite make the full trip. Gets married. Wants to have kids, knows they'll be coming along, but can't get himself started on any kind of career path that looks like it'll go anywhere.

It's one blue collar job after another.

But he knows damn well that he doesn't want to be a janitor all his life. Doesn't want to spend his days working in the rose fields either.

He's *always* wanted to be a writer. He's even been published, A little non-fiction here and there, how-to stuff mostly, articles on wood stoves, rural life, even a piece on plowing with mules which, with dubious ecological sensibility, was bumped by *Mother Earth News* in favor of an article on plowing with *tractors*.

So he starts submitting the short stories he's been working on. Science fiction stories, a genre he's always loved. Only problem is he doesn't know squat about science. Manuscripts go out in the mail, come back with rejection slips. Pretty soon he realizes that he's not going to be the next Heinlein. He cuts his loses, moves on. It seems like the smart thing to do. Because, just as he's always liked to read a wide variety of fiction, he's finding he likes to write that way, too.

He tries his hand at some hard-boiled stuff. Pretty soon he sells a couple stories to *Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine*. Hey, not too shabby, especially for a guy who only made a "B" in his college course on Mickey Spillaine.

Slowly but surely, he makes a few contacts in the business. Soon as he hears about a new market, he turns out a story for it. He springboards from the hard-boiled stuff into horror stories, because these days (yes, folks, the eighties are now upon us) Stephen King has kicked the door for that particular market wide open.

But the writer in question is not just another King clone. If you haven't figured it out by now, this boy's byline reads Joe R. Lansdale. And in a couple years his byline is everywhere, on all kinds of stories. Monster stories in Bill Pronzini anthologies, spy stories in *Espionage Magazine*, absurdist short-shorts in *Twilight Zone Magazine*, undefinable strangeness in small press magazines, Westerns with mainstream sensibilities in literary magazines, too.

He's got a couple of typewriters around the house, and he keeps a story going in each one. When he's not putting in time as a work beast (as Jack London would have put it), that's where you'll usually find him, *You want to make it as a writer* he's liable to say, *just put ass to chair in front of typewriter*.

And in the heat of more than a few Texas summers, he takes his own advice. At one point, he gets a wild hair up his ass and decides to turn out a story a day. Some of those stories turn out all right. Some are downright good. Some are awful (ask him about the awful ones today, those tales of Nazi-worshiping primitives and hitman baseball players, and he'll *still* groan at the memory of them). But more than a few sell, and the checks that he receives make him feel that he'll surely get somewhere if he just keeps pushing ahead.



He's working on longer stuff, too. Pretty soon he sells a Western novel. And just that quick he learns his first hard lessons about the publishing world. Payment is slow to come. And by the time the book itself finally appears a few years later (under a pseudonym), the writer has already published his first suspense novel, *Act of Love*.

It's an entertaining novel with lots of twists and turns, more of a "puzzle" book than he'll ever write again, and he's happy with it, but he knows it's just the first step on a long road.

What he doesn't know is that step number two's gonna be a long time coming.

### PART THREE: TAC IT UP TAC IT UP BUDDY GONNA SHUT YOU DOWN

Not that our guy slows his pace. He's working all the time. More short stories. More than a few pseudonymous work-for-hire projects in the men's action-adventure genre. Novels where protagonists "grunt" and "growl" their dialogue . . . after the series' creator rewrites our guy's ghost work, that is. But our guy doesn't worry about that too much. Not as long as the check clears, With a blue-collar sensibility that would make his old man proud, he says, "I was hired to dig a ditch, and I dug it as well as I could."

He does more than dig ditches, though. Somehow, between the blue-collar jobs and the short stories and the work-for-hire, he edits a couple of anthologies for the Western Writers of America. He also turns out two memorable Western novels of his own, both with fantastic sensibilities. One is *Dead in the West*, a charge-ahead smoker grilled up rare and bloody in an imaginative hinterland where John Wayne takes direction from George Romero with less antagonism than one might expect.

The other novel is a flat-out masterpiece. It's a little something called *The Magic Wagon*, about a kid who joins up with a Wild West Medicine Show which features a wrestling ape and the not-so-dead-as-you-might-think corpse of Wild Bill Hickok. Of course, the setting is East Texas. And the novel hits on all cylinders. The creative mix that's been percolating in the writer's brain since those days in front of the water-fan comes to a boil. *The Magic Wagon* is told with his father's voice, and it is by turns a tall tale in the grand Texas tradition and a startling slice of original fantasy that's in its own way as American as apple pie.

A savvy publisher might have got hold of that sucker, marketed it as "American magic realism," and made some noise with it. Instead, it appeared as a Double D Western.

Which received uniformly positive reviews.

And made a few people sit up and take notice.

But not nearly enough.

That's okay. Because our guy's got another novel, a crackerjack balls-to-the-wall crime/suspense tale with supernatural overtones called *Night of the Goblins*. He knows the book is something special, because it's got a voice of its own. Different, but just as distinctive as the voice in *The Magic Wagon*.

And he knows it's *his* voice. His new novel is not the same as the work of those meat 'n' potatoes writers who are turning out pale imitations of Stephen King's stronger works. *Night of the Goblins* doesn't have anything to do with prepubescent telekinetics. It isn't an apocalyptic thriller that can double as a doorstep. And it

doesn't feature a small town populated by vampires.

It's graphic. It's brutal. It's straight-ahead, comin' at ya with bad intentions. A tale of good versus evil played out in the belly of Texas. The style is as much Texas as the writer, as distinctive as Buddy Holly's plaintive wail, with shotgun prose that thumps on you like Big George Foreman's jab,

It's the work of Joe R. Lansdale, *hisownself*.

His agent sends the book around. Editors don't seem to get it. Either they can't figure out what "goblins" are doing in a crime novel, or they think the book is "too dark." But the writer's agent keeps on pitching. Finally, the book lands at Dark Harvest, a small publisher that produces a limited edition.

This time, readers, critics, and publishers begin to take notice. But if *The Nightrunners* (which is the published title of the work) is the jab that finally sets up the KO the writer has been looking for, then a trio of short stories form the flurry that ultimately produce that knockout.

They appear in short order, showing that our guy's taken firm charge of his material, There's "Night They Missed the Horror Show," "The Pit," and "On the Far Side of the Cadillac with the Dead Folks." Each piece is Joe R. Lansdale through and through, throat-grabbers all that don't let go. These tales are pure Southern gothics told with drive-in sensibilities (well, call "On the Far Side . . ." a Southwestern gothic if you must . . .). The point is, not one of them flinches for a second.

Pretty soon, the writer's phone starts to ring with greater frequency. He's been playing Mr. Mom for a few years now, taking care of the kids while his wife Karen works as a police dispatcher, but now he begins to see that his work is paying off. Publishers, editors, anthologists . . . they all want *more*.

He grabs the ball and runs with it. Because he hasn't been sitting on his hands since finishing *The Nightrunners*. Soon a novel appears under his byline with the surprising words "Science Fiction" on the spine, and that has to make him smile after all the rejects he received early on from editors in that particular genre.

But this is science fiction done his way, with the same kind of gonzo sensibility that turned the Western on its ear in *Dead in the West*. It's called *The Drive-In*, and it features several fifties B-movie cliches dusted off and jumped up for an eighties audience. With a Lansdale spin on isolationism, mutation, and not-so-brotherly love. Pick up this one, and pretty soon you realize that what you have right here, friends and neighbors, it's something, but it sure ain't Asimov.

What you have is this—there's this drive-in movie theater, see, and this meteor streaks by overhead one evening, and the attendees are suddenly trapped inside by a mysterious force, and as time passes they begin to turn on one another and . . . Well, imagine *Lord of the Flies* deep in the heart of Texas, told by a narrator who can make you laugh out loud one second and cringe the next.

And that's what carries the tale. The narrator. Because he's real. We empathize with him almost immediately. And Joe R., hisownself, is right behind that good ol' boy, pulling the reader through the most outrageous events with a skill and surety that makes other novelists who work in the first person want to bust their pencils.

But our guy doesn't stop there. Soon enough he produces a sequel to *The Drive-In*. And a landmark short story collection called *By Bizarre Hands*. And a couple of new suspense novels.

Both are strong novels. But one, *Savage Season*, introduces a pair of protago-



nists who seem destined for bigger things. Their names are Hap and Leonard, and they're not really too far off from the Hardy Boys—well, if one of the brothers Hardy was black and gay, and the other was an introspective good ol' boy who notched a little low on the personal ambition meter, and they both existed in a hardscrabble blue-collar world where a chainsaw massacre might just amount to an interesting afternoon diversion.

**PART FOUR:  
AND THERE WAS THUNDER . . . THUNDER . . .  
OVER THUNDER ROAD**

Pay-off time. Our guy's up to speed now, and he ain't down- shifting for anyone.

Mysterious Press lines up Hap and Leonard for a series of suspense novels (*Mucho Mojo*, *The Two-Bear Mambo*, and the forthcoming *Bad Chili*). Hollywood comes knocking at his door. Options are taken and screenplays are written . . . and rewritten . . . and hopefully one day one of the damn things will be produced. But our guy doesn't waste time waiting for others to get their asses in gear. He keeps on working. He even gets a chance to take a crack at some favorite characters from his youth—Jonah Hex in comics, Batman (in short stories, novels, and scripts for the animated television series), and Tarzan, who he revives in a posthumous collaborative novel with one the writers he set out to emulate, Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Just as that kid who lay on the floor under the water-fan liked to read a wide variety of fiction, the writer he becomes was destined to cover a spectrum just as broad. Since the start, he's always jumped from one genre to the next, ignoring the age-old advice for prospective writers that trumpets, "Thou shalt pick one genre and stick to it."

But that's never been the way our guy has played the game. Every one of his novels, in its own way, is a genre-buster. The science fiction stories come heavy on the horror, the Westerns are layered with fantasy, the plot threads of the suspense novels are sewn with gothic elements. He's always done it this way. As much as he's moved around, he's never stuck strictly to one genre. And he's not going to change his ways now, (Or as his wife Karen is wont to comment—with wry smile no doubt thoroughly engaged—"We're almost famous now. About time for you to do something else, isn't it?")

But, hey, what's that they say about variety, and the spice of life, and all that good stuff?

Because the agents and publishers and other self-appointed wags who said our guy was shifting gears much too often were wrong. They saw the different genres as gears, and not the progression of the writer and his voice. In reality, each project in turn—regardless of genre—drove the writer's internal creative tachometer a little higher, and each time he shifted gears his range as a writer widened, and his audience became a little larger.

It's not a suspense novel that audience is looking for, or a science fiction novel, or a horror novel. It's a *Lansdale* novel (or graphic novel . . . or short story . . . or screenplay). Because ultimately, with a writer like Joe R. Lansdale, it's his voice that carries us along from one project to the next. It's his voice that brings us back time and time again. The writer behind that voice, the guy on the other side of that page.

So here he is, folks. That damn near twenty-year overnight success, Joe R. Lansdale. Hisownself. A guy who'd be right at home at a convention of Western

writers...or mystery writers...or comic book creators...or science fiction writers.

Fact is, Joe would probably be right at home among a group of folks who join together annually to discuss the intricacies of plowing with mules, Fact is, he's even got an unpublished article kicking around somewhere that he could dust off for their program book. Hell, these days, I'll bet he'd even spring for a case of Co-Cola to wet the whistles of all concerned when the talk turns to the finer points of sod-busting.

But Joe's not spending his time with any of those folks. Not this weekend, anyway. Because for the next few days he's here, among us, the lovers of the fantastic. The readers and writers and fellow fritterers of time beneath the good ol' waterfan of days gone by.

And we're damn lucky to have him, don't you think?

—*Norman Partridge*  
*Lafayette, CA*  
*June 21, 1996*



# BILLIE SUE

by Joe R. Lansdale

ABOUT A WEEK BEFORE THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR SOLD TO THE YOUNG COUPLE, Billie Sue and I broke up. It was painful and my choice. Some stupid argument we'd had, but I tried to tell myself I had made the right decision.

And in the light of day, it seemed I had. But come night when the darkness set in and the king size bed was like a great raft on which I floated, I missed Billie Sue. I missed her being next to me, holding her. The comfort she had afforded me had been greater than I imagined, and now that she was gone, I felt empty, as if I had been drained from head to toe and that my body was a husk and nothing more.

But the kids next door changed that. For a time.

I was off for the summer. I teach math during the high school term, and since Billie Sue and I had broken up, I had begun to wish that I had signed on to teach summer school. It would have been some kind of diversion. Something to fill my days with besides thinking of Billie Sue.

About the second day the kids moved in, the boy was out mowing their yard, and I watched him from the window for a while, then made up some lemonade and took it out on the patio and went over and stood by where he was mowing.

He stopped and killed the engine and smiled at me. He was a nice looking kid, if a little bony. He had very blond hair and was shirtless and was just starting to get hair on his chest. It looked like down, and the thought of that made me feel ill at ease, because, bizarrely enough, the down like hair made me think of Billie Sue, how soft she was, and that in turn made me think of the empty house and the empty bed and

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**I missed Billie Sue. I missed her being next to me, holding her. The comfort she afforded me had been greater than I imagined, and now that she was gone. I felt empty, as if I had been drained from head to toe....**

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the nights that went on and on.

"Hey," the boy said. "You're our neighbor?"

"That's right. Kevin Pierce."

"Jim Howel. Glad to meet you." We shook hands. I judged him to be about twenty. Half my age.

"Come on and meet my wife," he said, "you married?"

"No," I said, but I felt strange saying it. It wasn't that Billie Sue and I were married, but it had seemed like it. The way I felt about her, a marriage license wasn't necessary. But now she was gone, and the fact that we had never officially been hitched meant nothing.

I walked with him to the front door, and about the time we got there, a young woman, his wife, of course, opened the screen and looked out. She wore a tight green halter top that exposed a beautiful

brown belly and a belly button that looked as if it had been made for licking. She had on white shorts and thongs. Her black hair was tied back, and some of it had slipped out of the tie and was falling over her forehead and around her ears, and it looked soft and sensual. In fact, she was quite the looker.

It wasn't that her face was all that perfect, but it was soft and filled with big brown eyes, and she had those kind of lips that look as if they've been bruised and swollen. But not too much. Just enough to make you want to put your lips on them, to maybe soothe the pain.

"Oh, hi," she said.

"Hi," I said.

Jim introduced us. Her name was Sharon.

"I've got some lemonade next door, if you two would like to come over and share it," I said. "Just made it."

"Well, yeah," said Jim. "I'd like that. I'm hot as a pistol."

"I guess so," said the girl, and I saw Jim throw her a look. A sort of, hey, don't be rude kind of look. If she saw the look, she gave no sign of it.

As we walked over to my house, I said, "You folks been married long?"

"Not long," James said. "How long, honey?"

"Eighteen months."

"Well, congratulations," I said. "Newly weds."

We sat out on the patio and drank the lemonade, and James did most of the talking. He wanted to be a lawyer, and Sharon was working at some cafe in town putting him through. He tried to talk like he was really complimenting her, and I think he was, but I could tell Sharon wasn't feeling complimented. There was something about her silence that said a lot. It said, Look what I've got myself into. Married this chatterbox who wants to be a lawyer and can't make a dollar cause he's got to study, so I've got to work, and law school isn't any hop, skip and a jump. We're talking years of tips and pinches on the ass, and is this guy worth it anyhow?

She said all that and more without so much as opening her mouth. When we finished off the lemonade, James got up and said he had to finish the lawn.

"I'll sit here a while," Sharon said. "You go on and mow."

Kevin looked at her, then he looked at me and made a smile. "Sure," he said to her; "We'll eat some lunch after while."

"I ate already," she said. "Get you a sandwich, something out of the box."

"Sure," he said, and went back to mow.

As he went, I noticed his back was red from the sun. I said, "You ought to tell him to get some lotion on. Look at his back."

She swiveled in her chair and looked, turned back to me, said, "He'll find out soon enough he ought to wear lotion. You got anything stronger than lemonade?"

I went in the house, got a couple of beers and a bottle of Jack Daniels, and some glasses. We drank the beers out on the veranda, then, as it turned hotter, we came inside and sat on the couch and drank the whisky. While James's mower droned on, we talked about this and that, but not really about anything. You know what I mean. Just small talk that's so

small it's hardly talk.

After about an hour, I finally decided what we were really talking about, and I put my hand out and touched her hand on the couch and she didn't move it. "Maybe you ought to go on back."

"You want me to."

"That's the problem, I don't want you to."

"I just met you."

"I know. That's another reason you ought to go back to your husband."

"He's a boring sonofabitch. You know that. I thought he was all right when we met. Good looking and all, but he's as dull as a cheap china plate, and twice as shallow. I'm nineteen years old. I don't want to work in any goddamn cafe for years while he gets a job where he can wear a suit and get people divorces. I want to get my divorce now."

She slid over and we kissed. She was soft and pliant, and there were things about her that were better than Billie Sue, and for a moment I didn't think of Billie at all. I kissed her for a long time and touched her, and finally the mower stopped.

"Goddamn it," she said. "That figures."

She touched me again, and in the right place. She got up and retied her halter top, which I had just managed to loosen.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I let this get out of hand."

"Hell, I'm the one sorry it didn't get completely out of hand. But it will. We're neighbors."

I tried to avoid Sharon after that, and managed to do so for a couple days. I even thought about trying to patch things up with Billie Sue, but just couldn't. My goddamn pride.

On the fourth night after they'd moved in, I woke up to the sound of dishes breaking. I got out of bed and went into the living room and looked out the window at my neighbor's house, the source of the noise. It was Sharon yelling and tossing things that had awakened me. The yelling went on for a time. I got a beer out of the box and sat down with a chair pulled up at the window and watched. There was a light on in their living room window, and now and then their shadows would go across the light, then move away.

Finally, I heard the front door slam, and Kevin went out, got in their car and drove away. He hadn't so much as departed when Sharon came out of the house and started across the yard toward my place.



I moved the chair back to its position and sat down on the couch and waited. She knocked on the door. Hard. I let her knock for awhile, then I got up and answered the door. I was in my underwear when I answered, but of course, I didn't care. She was in a short black nightie, no shoes, and she didn't care either.

I let her in. She said, "We had a fight. I hope the sonofabitch doesn't come back."

She took hold of me then, and we kissed, and then we made our way to the bedroom, and it was sweet, the way she loved me, and finally, near morning, we fell asleep.

When I awoke it was to Kevin's voice. In our haste, we had left the front door open, and I guess he'd seen the writing on the wall all along, and now he was in the house, standing over the bed yelling.

Sharon sat up in bed, and the sheet fell off her naked breast and she yelled back. I sat up amazed, more than embarrassed. I had to learn to lock my doors, no matter what.

This yelling went on for a time, lots of cussing, then Kevin grabbed her by the wrist and jerked her out of the bed and onto the floor.

I jumped up then and hit him, hit him hard enough to knock him down. He sat up and opened his mouth and a tooth fell out,

"Oh my god, Kevin," Sharon said. She slid across the floor and took his head in her hands and kissed his cheek. "Oh, baby, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm all right," he said.

I couldn't believe it. "What the hell?" I said.

"You didn't have to hit him," Sharon said. "You're older, stronger. You hurt him."

I started to argue, but by that time Kevin was up and Sharon had her arm around him. She said, "I'm sorry, baby. I'm so sorry. Let's go home."

Sharon pulled on her nightie, and away they went. I picked up the panties she'd left and put them over my head, trying to look as foolish as I felt. They smelled good though.

Dumb asshole, I said to myself. How many times have they done this? There are strange people in this world, Some get their kicks from wearing leather,

being tied down and pissed on, you name it, but this pair has a simpler method of courtship. They fight with each other, break up, then Sharon flirts and sleeps around until James discovers her, then they yell at each other and he forgives her, and he's all excited to think she's been in bed with another man, and she's all excited to have been there, and they're both turned on and happy.

Whatever. I didn't want any part of it.

That night, I decided to make up with Billie Sue. I got my shovel out of the garage and went out and dug her up from under the rose bushes. I got her out of there and brushed the dirt off and carried her inside. I washed her yellow body off in the sink. I fondled her bill and told her I was sorry. I was so sorry I began to cry. I just couldn't help myself. I told her I'd never bury her in the dirt again.

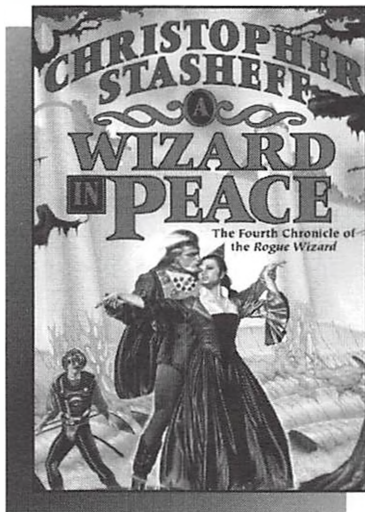
I filled the bath tub with water and put Billie Sue in there and watched her float. I turned her in the water so that she could watch me undress. I stripped off my clothes slowly, and got in the tub with her. She floated and bobbed toward me, and I picked her up and squeezed her and dirt puffed from the noise maker in her beak and the sound she made was not quite a squeak or a quack.

I laughed. I squeezed her hard, the way she likes it, the way she's always liked it since the first time my mother gave her to me when I was a child. I squeezed her many times. I floated her in the tub with me, moved her around my erection, which stuck up out of the water like a stick in a pond, and I knew then what I should have always known. Billie Sue was the love of my life,

Perhaps we were not too unlike that silly couple next door. We fought too. We fought often. We had broken up before. I had buried her under the rose bushes before, though never for this long. But now, holding her, squeezing her hard, listening to her quack, I knew never again. I began to laugh and laugh and laugh at what she was saying. She could be like that when she wanted. So funny. So forgiving.

Oh, Billie Sue. Billie Sue. My little rubber duckie poo.

# TOR



## A WIZARD IN PEACE

**Christopher Stasheff**

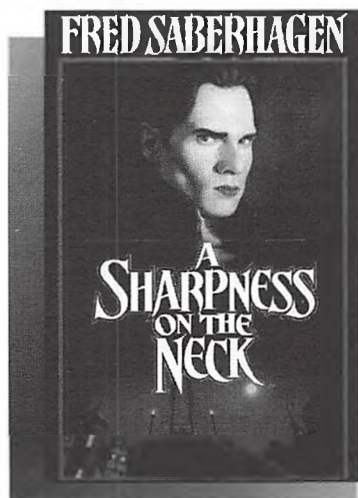
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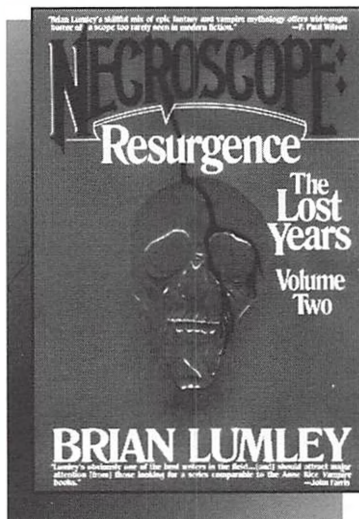


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# JOHN WAYNE MEETS THE PINK PANTHER (AKA BRIAN LUMLEY)

by Robert Weinberg

CONSIDER THIS WRITING EXERCISE: Describe a unique individual, in a manner other than listing the usual facts and figures associated with his work or his career. Paint an honest word picture of him as seen through your eyes. Do it in a way to inform and entertain an audience of writers and editors, people who are not easily impressed.

Sound challenging? Like most assignments, it depends entirely on the person in question. In the fantasy field, few individuals are both colorful and talented enough to make it easy. Brian Lumley leads that list. Let me tell you a little about him. Done strictly first person view point and colored somewhat by years of friendship.

First and foremost, there's Brian's appearance. Most authors just don't look tough. We are by and large a very plain lot. Decedent and Goth are terms used to describe a small enclave of our community, but a vast majority of us blend in with the crowds at the supermarket. Despite the hundreds of skulls we've crushed beneath our jeweled sandals, the scores of arms we've ripped from their sockets, the dozens of bellies we've sliced open with one slash of our scimitar, we do not fair well dealing with used car salesmen. With one notable exception. Brian Lumley.

Brian does more than walk the walk and talk the talk. When you shake his hand, all of the clichés from those old detective pulp magazines pop into your head. This guy's got the goods. There's no need for him to mention his military background. You sense it right away. Meeting Brian Lumley, you suddenly realize here's Harry Keogh and Titus Crow and a bunch of other Lumley heroes rolled into one. Brian's a walking advertisement for his books. He's the real McCoy, the genuine article. When he casually states he knows seventeen ways to kill you with the rolled-up newspaper you are holding in your hand, you believe him. Though Brian is always the perfect gentleman, there's that certain glint in his eye that informs you that if you're going to a book signing in Iran, this is the writer you want at your side.

Brian favors western string ties—the kind with black woven straps and silver and turquoise slides. One possible explanation for this fondness is that they can easily double as a strangler's noose. However, the more probable reason is that they are the type of neckwear favored by John Wayne. And Brian Lumley is the world's greatest John Wayne fan.

Wonder what's the most memorable line spoken by Wayne in the movie version of *True Grit*? Can't recall the best fight scene in Wayne's many westerns? Need a reminder of the Duke's big break in *Stagecoach*? Ask Brian. But be prepared to be overwhelmed.

Not only does Brian Lumley know everything about Wayne's roles, his dialogue, and his characters, but he can imitate the Duke's voice with the skill of a trained impersonator. Brian does his impression with such verve and good humor

that you'd swear he's John Wayne's long-lost brother who was raised in England, which would probably be worth investigating if it wasn't for his other favorites.

For, Brian isn't just a John Wayne fan. His tastes in films are broad and varied. He has an astonishing memory for film history and dialogue. And what he likes, he can mimic with astonishing skill. Brian does a great Humphrey Bogart. In fact, he does pretty good impressions of all of the male leads in *Casablanca*! But, writers, even ones who lovingly describe unholy vampiric monsters from another dimension, don't thrive on action alone. Along with the Duke, Brian's other favorite actor is Peter Sellers, The sillier the better. In other words, in the Pink Panther films.

Brian doesn't imitate Sellers. No one can. But, he does know the Pink Panther movies inside out. He remembers every gag, every joke, every pratfall. And, if you let him, he will describe them to you with boundless enthusiasm while pouring you glass after glass of his special punch.

That punch deserves a paragraph in itself. The elixir, as concocted by Brian from an ancient secret recipe (handed down from Bran Mak Morn I suspect or perhaps even Cthulhu itself), is right out of the films. It's the stuff that Bob Hope drank and then passed out. Miners used it to numb the cold, and race car drivers poured into their fuel tanks to get an extra kick in their engine. It's the stuff that turned Casper into a ghost.

Might I mention Brian's fiction? Over the past few years, he's gained world-wide fame for his Necroscope series, which blend vampires and fast action in a wild brew that is incredibly addictive. But, the Necroscope novels, while among Brian's very finest work, aren't his only claim to literary fame.

His H.P. Lovecraft pastiches are highly entertaining and definitely not the same old stuff. His tales of Titus Crow feature a psychic investigator who is pleasingly competent and quite dangerous when the necessity arises. And in those stories it always does.

Plus Brian also writes contemporary horror belonging to no particular series. Remember "Big C?" Or the award-winning, and particularly frightening, "Fruiting Bodies?"

Brian Lumley is an author of astonishing skills. And he is a gentleman of equally amazing talents. I've known him for more than a decade and I'm proud to be numbered among his friends.

Remember what I said about some assignments being easier than others, depending on the subject? Writing this one was a pleasure.

Class dismissed.



# MANDRAKI

by Brian Lumley

THERE IS NO SENSIBLE EXPLANATION FOR ALL OF THIS—no sensible or scientific explanation—or if there is I've failed to find it. Not that I've really looked. But then again, where would I start? I feel that I'm in a nightmare and can't wake up. But I know that in fact it's real, for I've seen it all before. I've seen it before and didn't believe it then, and now it's happening again and I would definitely prefer not to believe it now. It was like the Lorelei, I know: a myth or legend, but it lured me. The weird mystery of it. And anyway, it's too late now for I'm wrecked on the rocks. Or wrecked in the pebbles, the dirt. What a jumble!

So let me start again, at the beginning. That way I won't be jumping any fences before I come to them....

Unlike other children, I wasn't a believer in... well, things. Even Santa Claus only lasted until I was three or four. Maybe I lacked imagination, but as a youngster I never considered myths and legends as anything other than old fireside yarns translated into books to amuse and entertain; they were without foundation. Or maybe someone had explained it to me that way early on in life; my father, perhaps, who was a very much down-to-earth type. Whichever, to my young and perhaps unimaginative mind old-wives tales, adages and slogans, catch-words and phrases, they all fell within the same category: I knew that akin to folklore and fairy-tales, they had been created to suit situations.

My mother, from Yorkshire, was full of these things: "Red sky at night, shepherd's delight; red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning. Where there's muck there's brass. The grass is always greener on the other side..." etc. Imparted as words of wisdom—or

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**Do you know the story of Pandora's Box? Of course you do. And haven't we created a box of our own—a "sarcophagus"—in Chernobyl? And isn't the African jungle such a box, where mutant viruses... may be waiting to leap off monkeys onto us?**

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maybe in a cautionary context prior to my putting some seemingly shaky plan or other into action—or delivered with a sad slow shake of the head when things didn't work out; or with a smile broad as sunshine on those occasions when she was able to correct something before it went wrong—"a stitch in time saves nine." In this way my mother, like most mothers, could be wise before and after the fact.

Nowadays, however, I'm more inclined to look for sources—for the meaning behind the myth—or maybe just for answers. And for all that I've discovered that "there's no smoke without fire," still I have failed to "let sleeping dogs lie." With the result, of course, that I've been bitten.

Do you know the story of Pandora's Box? Of course you do. And haven't we created a box of our

own—a "sarcophagus"—in Chernobyl And isn't the African jungle just such a box, where mutant viruses we haven't even heard of may be waiting to leap off monkeys onto us? That last is simply Nature in one of her ugliest guises, I agree, but surely the real boxes are in the laboratories where scientists study, store, and even *make* such lethal imps. "Back to Nature!" people cry. But is that really the answer?

Diseases that transfer from animal to animal to people. An awful *thing* that moves from sheep to cows and mutates along the way, and won't die when you cook it, so that eating a hamburger you risk turning your brain to a sponge. Poisons in the air and the soil and the sea, and in all manner of creatures—*natural* poisons, that is. A jellyfish whose living sting causes convulsions and death, bats that carry rabies, brightly coloured Amazonian frogs whose sweat is a poison as

deadly as any we know. And these are only a few of the things that we *do know* about. But what about those we don't know about? And those we've forgotten or that we ignore, that came down to us as myths and legends?

What about the green things? Poison ivy and stinging nettles, and mushrooms taken in small measure that will cause you to hallucinate (and eaten freely kill you in a minute) sprouting in harmless earth; and indeed *all* of the green things that flourish in mire and decay. The ingredients for witches' brews. I remember my mother had a beautiful scented rose bush—that sprang up where my pet kitten was buried...

People complain (rightly, I suppose) about the destruction of the rain forests, but I can't help wondering. Oh, I know: we seem to delight in taking out species that aren't even catalogued as yet, and there may be rare cures in some of them to balm the ills of the world. But what of those that aren't so beneficial? Are there potential ills in the earth and in the forests that are beyond Man's cures? For it seems to me there's always a balance: for day there's night, for black there's white, and for good there's evil. So what about penicillin...?

Ebola? Or is that just for starters?

Myths and legends. What *really* happened to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah? Some prehistoric form of AIDS? Something they got from their animals and passed on to each other! Whatever it was, it sucked all the moisture out of them and turned them to pillars of salt. And vampirism and lycanthropy? Superstitions and nothing more?—Or were these the olden names for rabies before we knew what hydrophobia really was? Hydrophobia is *that* why the monstrous blood-suckers of so many worldwide legends were, or are, afraid of running water?

Premature babies die from fungal infections in hospital units—and the cause is found to be wooden spatulas used as tongue depressants in throat examinations. Say "Ah!" and die. Other babies suffer amputations where spatulas have been used as splints on their tiny limbs. And these... these *lollipop sticks* are just dead wood! But the fungus in the wood wasn't nearly dead, obviously.

*Poisons, Catalysts, and Other Biologically Transmissible Hazards: Animal-to-Man, Plant-to-Man. Or: Flora, Fauna, and Associated Fears: the Biological Interface. (Are We Returning to Our Roots!)* I could write a book on it. For God knows I've read enough about it....

What I'm saying is, things that would have been put down to witchcraft or demonology three hundred years ago—things that rheumatic old ladies would have been burned at the stake for—now have scientific explanations. Some of them.

And so might this. But I doubt it.

The witches of the Old World knew of these things, and so did its priests. They had to, to fight fire with fire. And I'm sure that a handful of them, in certain places, still do.

But God, what a jumble! And my story still untold. Because I've been putting it off....

A few minutes ago the Greek Orthodox priest noticed me scribbling in my book. I saw him yesterday down on the beach, well away from the salt flats and marshy margin. He seemed unusual, I thought. But he was friendly to a girl who must be the skimpiest-clad Greek female I have ever seen in the Mediterranean. Or maybe it's simply that the place was isolated from the more touristy areas; or she could be from the mainland, Athens perhaps, which is cosmopolitan and far more tolerant.

Anyway, the girl had been swimming around the rocks of a reef close in to shore and she'd brought back a wire basket of large black spiny sea-urchins, echinoderms. I didn't know they were edible, but she in her tiny bikini and the priest or monk in his tall black capstan of a hat and ankle-length black robe sat on a slab of rock cracking them into a basin and squeezing lemons onto them, eating them raw and with great relish, washing them down with weak, local retsina.

As I passed close to them, between the narrow dark strip of sand that passed as a high-water mark and the pitted white rock where they sat, the priest squinted at me and cocked his head on one side. Smiling, he said, "Guten Tag?" His greeting was also a question.

I shook my head but agreed, "Pleasant, isn't it? Not too, er... *zesti*?"

"English!" he grinned, and his teeth were extremely rotten. The girl, stunningly beautiful, glanced at his teeth and tried not to shrink away. And I couldn't help thinking—with teeth as bad as that his breath has to be bad too.

There was something about him; I couldn't smell him like the girl *must* be able to, and so didn't mind, well, looking at him—I was somehow *drawn* to look at him. And I saw how old he was: a grandfather,



definitely. Wrinkled as an olive that fails to fall from the tree. And I remember asking of myself: *why do they wear black? What, in all this heat?* For even on a relatively cool day it must have been hell under that black sheet.

But by then his smile had fallen away and he was frowning. As if he believed he knew me from somewhere but couldn't remember. And as I made off along the beach, kicking at the shingle to uncover a few bleached shells, his yellowish gaze had followed me. I could feel his eyes on me...

In the shade of an olive tree whose hanging branches made a tent and hid me at least partially from view, I seated myself on a gnarly root, looked back at the beach, and wondered at the paradox of this apparently incompatible pair. And after a while a sleek white motorboat came speeding into view from behind the jagged headland and sliced towards the beach, unzipping the sea like a pair of blue jeans. The girl waved, and wonderful bronze creatures lounging behind the rail of the sundeck waved lazily back. They had come to pick her up.

A moment later, she was saying her goodbyes to the old man and running for the water. A dive took her from shallow to deep water as the boat slowed to a crawl inside the reef and settled on its bow wave. Swimming with easy, practiced strokes the girl reached the boat; hands that glittered with gold and doubtless expensive watches reached down for her; her lithe body streamed water as she was drawn from the sea. And I was jealous of whomever it was who patted her backside as her feet found the deck.

Then the boat revved up and leaned over a little as it turned for the open sea, and I saw that the old priest was already heading my way. He was still a way off, however, and I managed to avoid him—managed not to notice him—and returned to the town. I avoided him *then* at least, but may not be so lucky now; though why I should want to avoid him is anybody's guess.

Or maybe not...

Later. Two days later—

—I'm writing this back in my room in town. It's not yet noon, so I can calculate how early it must have been when I saw the priest *again*, in that place this morning. Maybe that's why he came to talk to me: because he wondered why I was there, in that place, so early.

That place. I seem to emphasize it without even

trying to. But I'd better explain *what* place. And try to explain why I was there. Why it is important that I've found the place, Mandraki, and why the old Greek Orthodox priest thought it was important that I shouldn't have found it, and bad that I should be there so early in the morning.

My father had been there, too, as a Special Forces Commando in World War II, when the islands were crawling with Nazis. To this day many of the Greeks despise the Germans, despite the fact that they live off their tourism. As to which island *exactly*... it doesn't matter. You really don't want to know. Or if you do, I'm not telling. Unlike my father, I don't intend leaving any clues. Curiosity killed the cat.

So why am I writing this down, if not for posterity? Maybe it's for the old Greek priest. Maybe I'm telling him about this Pandora's Box of his, or of theirs, whoever the other guardians are. But I suspect there's nothing much I can tell him that he, or they, don't already know. For the box was opened during the war. Opened again, that is.

And it was then that my father was here.

He was a young man then, only twenty-four or -five. Me, I wasn't even born, wouldn't be for another ten years. But when he started to come back here—oh, years later, when I was in my early teens—he had to bring me with him because my mother believed he was seeing another woman out here. This was after she had developed her photophobia; the Mediterranean sun would have killed her. And why else would my father, knowing her condition, insist on spending his holidays in the Greek Islands if not for another woman! Anyway, it was only a year or two after he'd started on this Greek thing of his—this odyssey?—that Ma died of cancer. And I remember he said it was a mercy. But what was a mercy? What did he mean? The fact that her cancer had taken her so quickly, or that she had been spared what was still to come?

An odyssey: we wandered from island to island, visiting all the places he still remembered from the war. As a spy, in the guise of a Greek, he had served in a lot of places, and we revisited them. This was during my holidays from school, these being the only times he could bring me with him, therefore the only times Ma would let him come. And she stayed home in England, in her dark glasses, in her shady room. And she probably fretted about his fidelity, while he was fretting about something else entirely. Fretting, and stiffening up.

I'm stiffening, too. I tell myself it's the Greek Islands: the heat. But it isn't. Or if I drank ouzo maybe I could blame it on that. The owner of a taverna saw me easing my neck, slowly cranking my shoulders—my pained movements generally—and asked if I drink much ouzo. I asked why? He told me if you don't drink it with water it drains the oil out of your joints. Then he pointed out the old men: their rheumatic joints; their shuffling about wearing gnarled, weathered-leather, pained and patient expressions. And: "Ouzo!" he declared, with the emphasis on the "z". "When they were young, they dring it too much. They dring thee ouzo without thee water." Well maybe they did, but I don't.

This island was the last one we came to. I suspect because he was avoiding it. I suspect because he knew—as I now know—that this was the one. And he was putting off the inevitable...

He had taken to drink (not ouzo, but just about everything else) soon after we lost my mother. I know now that it was just to ease the pain, the stiffness in his joints... or mainly so. His room was next to mine, and one night I woke up to the sound of his moaning. Thinking he was nightmaring about Ma, I went in and sat on his bed.

He had been drinking and didn't wake up, but I heard him say, "Don't sleep with the mandrakes, John." That's me, John. I stayed a little while but eventually, as I left him and tip-toed to the door, he said it again. "Don't sleep with the mandrakes. They whisper their warnings, John, but even they don't understand. They have forgotten, as I shall soon forget. They would scream, but they've forgotten who to scream at. So don't sleep with the mandrakes..." His voice was full of shudders.

And in his study all sorts of botanical books, clip-pings, photocopies from rare library sources, vegetable vagaries. But this was a man who loathed gardening! And there were maps, too, all of Mediterranean shores and islands.

But: "Not a single Mandraki," he said to me one time. "Oh, the locals know the name—the term?—well enough. There are Mandrakis every-bloody-where, as frequent as St. Paul's-bloody-Bays—except on the map! The closest we get to acknowledging it is in Rhodes: Mandraccio Harbour, where stood the Colossus. The rest of it is all myth and legend—like vampires on Santorin, the volcano island. You know our saying, John: don't take coals to Newcastle? You

know its meaning? That it's pointless taking coals to Newcastle because Newcastle has enough of its own? Well of Santorin they say don't take vampires! And of mandrakes they won't speak at all!"

I scarcely knew what he was talking about, not then. But I did know that he was a down-to-earth man who had never had a lot of time for myths and legends. Never *used* to have, anyway. "It's as if," he said, sighing his frustration, "I wasn't supposed to remember. But I do, and I know that it's important."

There I go, jumping about again. It's not easy to remain lucid. My bones ache...

"Important!" said the old priest, puffing and panting where he clambered towards me over a heap of weathered stones that might at one time have been a wall.

...But I was going to explain about the place. If not its actual location, an idea of its topography. Little or no use as a guide; there are a million places just like it.

Inland, a range of low but jagged mountains. Green but by no means lush. Scrubby, let's say. And a white dot way up there that could be a monastery. Closer, vague grey foothills falling down from the mountains, their spurs reaching out to the aching blue Mediterranean. A quarter-mile away, above the beach, something of a church. Oh, very well, a church... but some of the Greek Island churches are little more than shrines, tiny little things. And this is one of them. Four walls with a high frontal facade bearing a white cross. Inside, a whitewashed room no bigger than your living room, with arched niches or recesses in the walls that house icons. And medieval paintings on the walls depicting Jesus, angels, one or two saints with haloes, demons, and sea-beasts. When priests come down from the monastery, they probably pray there. Or they use it to keep watch...

Then the land sloping down to the sea, and in between this jumble of rock-piles and a few scattered ruins, not ancient but just primitive fishermen's houses; I'm told there was a village here before the earthquake. But which one? The islands have had lots of earthquakes. Finally there's a handful of untended, ancient olives that might even have been a grove at one time, and a path leading through them to the deserted shingle beach. Obviously it's off the beaten track.

At one end of the beach where the ground dips and the sand turns to mud there's a boggy place, a swampy margin that smells bad when the wind is



from that direction. The ground behind is flattish, only gradually rising, and between the marsh and the church the vegetation thickens up a little. A few gnarly olives and spiky bushes, spitefully sharp grasses, some flowers, various weeds, and a lot of Greek pod-plants—squirting cucumbers?—that *pop!* and spit weak acid at you if you brush by them too close. And mandrakes: *Mandragora officinarum*.

“Or perhaps thee differen, er, sapecies?—ah, yes, *species!*—thee differen *species* altogether, but mandraki anyway, yes,” the old priest told me, with a decisive nod. Then asked, “Was you father German, perhaps?”

“You don’t like them, do you?” I said.

“Thee mandrakes? Thee Germans?” He cocked his head on one side in that way of his.

“Either... both,” I said with a stiff shrug, from where I had chosen a flat rock upon which to seat myself, I was surrounded by mandrakes, sprouting in the rich, swamp-fed soil.

“Thee Germans,” he answered me shrug for thoughtful shrug. “Now is too late not to like them. I not believe in this thing, thee sins of thee fathers. You know? I not *want* believe...”

“And thee mandrakes?” (I was picking up this peculiar person’s manner of expression. “Thee mandrakes,”—and this “sapecies” in particular).

“Thee necessary evil,” he answered, almost without thinking. But then he *did* think, and quickly corrected himself: “Er, Thee *samell*—thee stink. Thee flowers are sickly when is too many of them, like here. Nasty samell, yes?”

“You keep watch over them.” I was direct.

He chose not to understand, frowned and looked back at the church. Between the church and the scrubby ground, a few leaning stone crosses and headstones within a low-walled area spoke mutely of an ancient graveyard. “Over *them*,” he said, “yes. Men who died in thee war. Local men. Thee resistance.”

“In England there would be some kind of memorial,” I said. “A monument. And every year people would come to remember. Here the people seem to have gone away.”

“Some come,” he said, looking at me curiously.

“And then you are here, to *keep* them away,” I said. “Or to make sure they are simply visiting the beach. Like the girl you talked to the other day.”

“Thee girl?” And then he remembered. “Ah, thee girl! With thee, er, thee black, er—”

“—The sea urchins. Echinoderms?” I prompted

him.

“Thee *echini*, yes. She has thee lover. She want be alone a little moments, for thee thinking.”

“But it’s a bad place to do your thinking, eh? Your dreaming?” I said. “I mean, too close to the mandraki?”

Then he knew that I knew. His eyes went wide, and leaning closer he said, “You know of me, of us, thee brotherhood—but do you know *me*, myself?”

“The sins of the fathers,” I said. “No, I don’t know you, but I think my father might have.”

And then he knew for sure. “You father!” he gasped. “So, I was right. But not thee Germans. Thee *English* captain! Thee soldier! You are looking so much like him—*ab!*” Followed by silence for a long while. And I took the opportunity to think back, back.

My father, the English captain. He had been one of several officers who organized the islands’ underground resistance. Loners mainly, they spoke Greek—looked Greek, under a Mediterranean suntan—fished during the long summer days, and created mayhem at night. So he’d told me, on one of those rare occasions when he told me anything.

...After Ma died, he had refurbished her old greenhouse to cultivate them. Mandrakes, I mean. Do you know the old myth, the old legend of the mandrake? Oh, I know *you* do, old priest, or monk, or whatever you are ... but I’ll tell you what I know anyway. See if I get it right, okay?

They were well known in Biblical times... well of course they were! As long as there have been shamans, witches, witch-doctors, alchemists, occultists—as long as there have been myths and legends—there have been mandrakes. They are said to have aphrodisiac properties. Maybe that explains Solomon in Song 7: 13—“The mandrakes give a smell, and at our gates are all manner of pleasant fruits, new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved.” He was a horny one, Solomon. “Come smell the mandrakes, while I get my leg over.” That’s what he was really saying.

And then there’s Genesis 30: 14-16—the story of Jacob, Rube, Rachel, and Leah. What woman needs another woman’s man when she can chew on the fruits of the mandrake? Or bring herself off with its root.

And the smell... narcotic? “When perfectly developed the fruits lie in the center of a rosette of dark-green leaves like yellowish bird eggs in a nest. They have a peculiar but not unpleasant smell and sweetish taste, and being principally an emetic, purgative, and

narcotic, are mildly poisonous. The plant was much employed in dubious medicine in the olden days, mainly due to superstitious regard of its thick tap-root, which has a passing resemblance in shape to the lower limbs and quarters of the human body..."

That's what one book says of it. But that's one of many books, and mainly botanical. Other volumes are more concerned with the superstition itself. Look for the mandrake in Josephus, and in Pliny, and in the "Lost Books" of Solomon himself—if they weren't "lost"; but since they treated of magic, King Hezekiah destroyed them, "lest their contents do harm."

The mandrake—the *baharas*—the Zauberwurzel, or sorcerer's root... as in the German.

My father used to kill Germans. And then the Greek monks had to dispose of the bodies.

"They had wagons," he recalled one time. "Nothing motorized, you understand. Just donkey-hauled carts with wooden or very occasionally rubber wheels. Traders hauled fish, fruits, kerosine, oil, hay, between villages. The priests had to come down out of the mountains for all their provisions, even for water when the rains were late. At least, that was the excuse they used for always being around. But if we were up to a bit of sabotage and a German patrol came on the scene, we weren't afraid to take them out. We could always count on the brotherhood to be there with a cart. I can't tell you how many motorcycles got dumped in the sea where the cliffs fell sheer into deep water, or how many kraut bodies were hauled away in those donkey-carts. The monks weren't much bothered by German check-points or patrols, you see? Not at first, anyway. I mean, for supposedly religious types they were the blindest-faced liars I've ever come across! And the bravest. But... oh, there was something about them. I don't know."

"And you don't remember where this happened?" I said. "It was life and death, but it escapes your memory?"

"We were active on many islands," he told me. "It's as if it has all merged into one." And, as so often before: "It's as if I'm not *supposed* to remember."

"And you think it's important?"

"What did they do with the bodies!" he said. "That's what I keep asking myself. What did they do with the bloody bodies! Where—*how*—did they dispose of them? I mean, those German patrols simply disappeared. So completely that for a long time the German officers in command must have begun to believe they were dealing with deserters! Which wasn't

unthinkable, because by then they were on the losing end of things. They were watching the harbor, all the small bays and other suitable landing places, checking that their young soldiers weren't simply running away to the mainland and putting distance between."

"What is it that's drawing you back?" I asked him. "Is it just to get it out of your system—the horror of it, I mean?"

"The horror of it? Of the war, the killing?" He shook his head. "Horror, yes, of something. But not of that. That was my job..."

"And you never did find out what the monks were doing with the bodies of the Germans you killed!"

"No." He shuddered, despite that it wasn't nearly cold in the greenhouse. "Yes, I did... I think, but I'm not sure. And that's what's driving me. I have to be sure."

"Oh?" I tried to keep it light, because this was the closest my father had ever come to the root of it. My God, to the root of it!

"One night," he told me, very quietly, "one night when my party of Greek resistance fighters had blown up a small ammunition depot and melted back into the hills, I talked to one of the priests. He asked if he could help, but I said no, there was nothing to dispose of this time. Which was when I thought to ask him what they did with the bodies. He was a very young man, young as myself and very mild-seeming. But, 'Ah,' he told me with a grin you wouldn't believe—an almost fiendish grin, that showed his shattered teeth and savage satisfaction—the bodies of the Germans, yes? Well, don't you worry about them. They will never be found. Not a trace. They are no more. They sleep with the mandrakes..."

"His shattered teeth?"

"Some German had hit him with the butt of his rifle. Nerves were fraying and their brutality was on the increase. Also, a group of priests had been rounded up and shot along with the young men of one of the villages. It was as a reprisal for the loss of one of their officers."

"And this sleeping with the mandrakes thing?"

"I took it to mean they were buried. Like this Sicilian thing about sleeping with the fishes—when they dump a victim's weighted body in a lake or in the sea. That's what I *took* it for, anyway..."

"But you... I don't understand," said the old monk, breaking into my memories. "Him, you father, I understand that. But not you, Why *you* come here?"



"You understand about my father?" I said, eagerly if aching, and more than a little wearily. "Then you know why he did it, why he slept with the mandrakes—actually *slept* with them, here—there." I twitched my stiff neck, indicating the ground behind me, the coarse Mediterranean shrubbery, weeds, and mandrake rosettes in their hundreds.

"A mistake," the old man told me. "He not know. Thee accident. Thee Germans were preparing to leav- ing thee island. He do bombs, sabotage on their boats. They hear him on his radio: he will be picked up from thee beach. But which beach? Thee Germans no know. They cover thee one road, thee donkey tracks, and thee beaches. Your father, he must hide. He is—how you say—pinned down, yes! He stay here, thee whole long night, hiding. But *here*, in this place! Mandraki!"

"And he slept. Lying low. On the ground. With them."

"He was—how you say?—exhausted, yes..."

Exhausted, like me that time when I was with my father in the greenhouse. I was exhausted from the tension and the continual mental tug-o'-war. We were sitting opposite sides of a garden table. Suddenly he got mad with his useless memory—or with the memories that wouldn't let themselves be remembered—and he brought his left fist down on the table. His little finger made a dry cracking sound, and broke off at the junction with his hand. It just broke off!

He looked at it lying on the table, then at the stump. No blood. It didn't bleed. It was grey, fibrous, like a piece of rotten dowelling; there was maybe just a suggestion of moisture, like an old carrot when you snap it. Useless and unfeeling, his entire left hand was more or less the same. He could scarcely bend the rest of his fingers. This was the first time I had noticed this infirmity, because he'd kept it hidden. But no longer.

And I thought: leprosy! I knew there were colonies in the Greek Islands, though the disease has been on the decrease ever since World War Two. But he had been *in* World War Two! Was that what this was all about

He reeled out of the greenhouse and I sat there paralyzed, thinking he was going to the doctor's.

Exhausted, yes—emotionally exhausted. And I fell asleep. I slept with the mandrakes.

When I woke up I was in my chair—but my feet were three or four inches down into the dry earth, as if it were a bog in there! I pulled them out, and they

made a sucking sound. then I pulled up the mandrakes—dragged them up by those horrible forked roots which are so like the bodies and legs of a man or woman—all of them. But though I half expected it (for I had been reading my father's books), not a one of them screamed.

Of course not, for they were only mandrakes. They had only been nourished with water, and maybe a little plant food. They *were* plants, with no dreams of their own.

His scribbled letter said good-bye; he was going back to the islands. I would not see him again. Whatever he left behind was mine. And whatever else I did, I must never sleep with the mandrakes.

Too late.

When I removed my shoes, they had been eaten right through the soles. They were as soft and as riddled as Gorgonzola. And I wondered: something in the plant food, maybe?

But I thought not.

"You missed him," I told the old monk, whom I now knew to have been my father's monk. "He came back. He was—he is—here. But you didn't stop him. Why not?"

"I hear them," he said. "Mandraki! In my dreams I hear them. It is like thee—how you say—thee *excitement!* Thee whispers! But not for thee long time. Then last summer I hear them again. But I think is *only* a dream. I come down out of thee monastery anyway. But they are quiet again. I no know, but perhaps..."

"...Not perhaps," I cut him off. "Definitely. That was my father." And I held up my father's watch, stainless steel, all crusted with dirt, as I had found it in the soil where I slept with the mandrakes. He had always been a solid, very much down-to-earth type, my father. *Hab!*

I'm sure that the old monk couldn't understand my humourless grin when I told him: "The strap—a single corroded link of the strap—was sticking up out of the earth. Where there's muck there's brass, you see, or sometimes chromium-plated steel and sometimes much more than that." By then he had brushed by me to go stumbling about in the mandrakes, his mouth gaping—working in a sort of silent, violent, biting horror—snapping at the air with those blackened fangs. Because suddenly he knew that I had been sleeping with the mandrakes. And yet I was sure there was something other than horror in him, some

grotesque curiosity, something habitual, almost an addiction.

There in a den of squirting pod-plants, which he set popping and hissing as they jetted off like small aerial plums to spread their seed, he found my bed. A place where the soil was indented in my shape; more than indented, *hollowed*, to a depth of some eight or nine inches.

"But why? Why *you*?" he finally mumbled.

I could have told you then, old monk, that it was probably in my blood, or that I had picked up my "habit" in England, in my mother's old greenhouse. But I didn't bother. I knew that it was irreversible, and that eventually you'd be reading this. Oh, yes, for I know now that this is for you.

Still, I was a little anxious and angry. You'll remember I asked you: "Why haven't you destroyed them? Is it... *Godly*, or even priestly—or monkish—that they're allowed not only to exist but to flourish here?" And your answer:

That the mandrakes had been here in Mandraki before you, and before every invader, and that they'd always been used for the same purpose. That there are Romans down there, and Asiatic Huns, knights crusader, Turks, Italians, and goodness knows who or what else! "Their screams, they would be make thee brotherhood deaf—or mad!" you said. "Thee whole world might be make deaf, or mad."

"They scream?" I didn't believe... until I remembered my father's nightmares. *They would scream* (he said), *but have forgotten who to scream at*.

"In our dreams," you explained, you old Priest of the Mandrakes. "In thee dreams—and in thee *minds*—of men!"

"But mainly in the dreams of the brotherhood? The Brotherhood of the Mandrake?" I nodded my understanding. "A Pandora's box, which you daren't destroy."

"And besides," you said, "thee Turkey man is always thee threat, even today..." Followed by that terrible grin of yours that my father saw, for like me you had

accepted the inevitability of *my* lot. And you had simply shrugged it off! With that grin, and a smell like raw sewage from your rotten mouth—you oh-so-false-priest, you—you'd accepted that I was lost. And I knew you would do it again, if you thought it was necessary. You and your *unorthodox* brothers in their high white monastery would start it up again, if or whenever your bloody island was threatened!

And then, quietly I asked you, "Do they know? Did any of them other than my father know? Tell me: are they down there thinking, *knowing*, even now? And... and does it hurt? I mean the change? Does the change hurt?"

But you could only shrug that fateful shrug of yours, for you didn't know. And it seemed to me that now that you had accepted *my* fate, you didn't really care...

You didn't know if it would hurt, couldn't say if there would be pain, because the ones *you* had lain to rest with the mandrakes were already dead. (All of them, I wonder?) But like my father before me *I* am still alive. And by the time you read this, old man, I shall know. But *unlike* my father, I shall remember everything. And it will be that much faster for me, for while he did it only once, I've slept with the mandrakes night after night.

And because it will be faster, I won't have time to forget I shall remember! And tomorrow or the day

after—or the night after that, or next year—but definitely while I'm still able, I'll come back here. And I *swear* that I'll remember, for everything will be written here in my book. Then, when they take me, I'll not merely sleep with them but *talk* to the mandrakes, explain it all. And then *they* shall know and remember, too.

Yes, and then they'll know how to scream and where to *direct* their screaming! Good luck to you and your bloody brotherhood then, you old false priest...

The girl on the sundeck of the speedboat where it lolled gently on an ocean blue as the sky found the old man with her binoculars and sighed her relief. He was

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**By then he had  
brushed by me to go  
stumbling about in  
the mandrakes, his  
mouth gaping—  
working in a sort of  
silent, violent biting  
horror—snapping  
at the air with  
those blackened  
fangs.**

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the same one she'd spoken to a year ago, she was sure, but he wasn't on the beach. This time he was climbing a track between stunted olives towards the little church. And he seemed to be in a hurry. That was good; she hadn't much cared for his air; his teeth were horrible and his breath disgusting. But he was a priest and so she'd shared her catch with him. This time the beach was deserted, however, and she and her party would go ashore.

The boat was anchored and already the rest of them were in the water, their gorgeous golden bodies arrowing for the beach. But still she focussed her binoculars on the old monk. What on earth was he doing?

He had come to a halt; he stood stock still on the rocky goat track, then gave a little leap—and another! And now he was tearing something up. A book? Scraps of paper went fluttering, like a flower shedding petals. His weird dance continued. He cavorted, his body twisting and whipping, his black cassock swirling, billowing. And for a moment—a brief moment as she twisted a knurled knob to bring him into clearer definition—she saw his face. Those bulging eyes; that yawning rictus of a gape. And his

ravaged teeth that she remembered only too well! Then his tall black capstan hat went flying; he appeared to be slapping his open palms hard against his ears, as if to crush his head between his hands!

Some kind of ritual? Or was it simply a bad toothache? But that agonized look on his face—why, she believed she could even hear his screams, or somebody's screams, from here! Such a powerful image—like *The Scream* by that odd artist fellow, Klee, was it? Or maybe he was insane. They must be very lonely up there on the mountain. But she had twisted the knob too far and the priest had suddenly blurred to a lurching black blob.

Then, once more remembering his smell, she shuddered, hung the binoculars on the deck rail, dived cleanly into the water. Despite that he was a priest, or monk, or whatever, his memory was an offence to the tranquillity of the place. This forgotten little wilderness of a beach that for some reason or other no one ever came to visit. This place known only as Mandraki.

A tranquil place, yes.

But up in the monastery in the mountains, everything was other than tranquil. Everything was bedlam...

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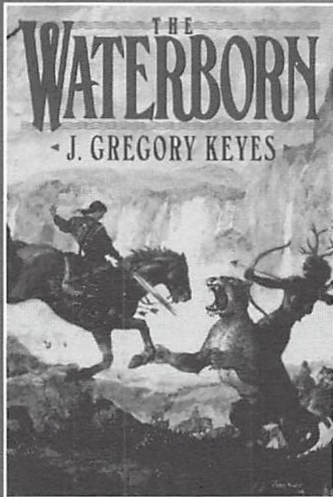
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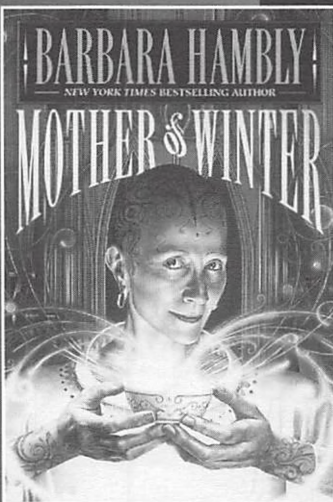
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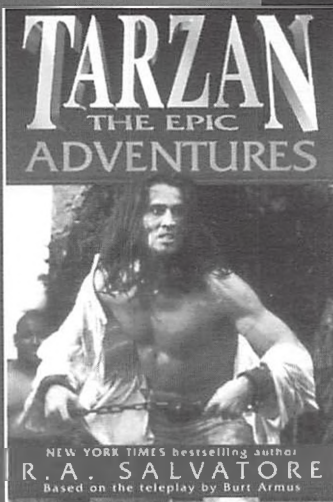
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# ELLEN ASHER: LIFE AT THE SCIENCE FICTION BOOKCLUB

Interview by Richard Gilliam

*Ellen Asher began her career at the Science Fiction Book Club in 1973, making her one of the longest tenured editors in any sort of publishing. Under her leadership the SFBC has published many of the genre's best known and most critically acclaimed works, while during that same period more than doubling its membership.*

RG: *Twenty-three years is a long time to be in one place in publishing. Any secrets for maintaining such stability?*

EA: I like what I do is probably the main reason. I'm happy being the Senior Editor and have made it clear that I have no interest in being promoted into the more administrative echelons of publishing. There's no point to taking a job you don't want just because it pays more money. Liking what you do for a living is one of the first requirements for long term job stability.

RG: *You've survived corporate takeovers and drastic shifts in the publishing industry. Liking your work is important, but there's got to be more to it than that.*

EA: I've been fortunate, at least at the SFBC. On the other hand, I ended up at the SFBC because my prior employer decided to reduce its work force by 10% and I was very low on the seniority list.

RG: *Your former employer was NAL?*

EA: Yes. And Fawcett back before that, when Fawcett was still its own company.

RG: *How did you get started?*

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**“We don't publish that many novels with graphic sex or graphic violence, but the ones we do are usually among our better books. Part of that is because I really do believe that if you're going to risk offending someone it should be for a reason.”**

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EA: Flunked out of graduate school. Probably the best thing that could have happened. I was in a doctoral program studying Tudor/Stuart history. I loved studying narrative history but as I got into the higher level courses the work was more and more statistical. Dull, tedious stuff. So I read the complete works of Georgette Heyer, which was out of period, went horseback riding three times a week, and generally avoided finishing my doctorate. Even with a Masters degree from Stanford there weren't a lot of jobs so to pay bills I went to work at Fawcett in an entry level clerical position.

RG: *And then to NAL?*

EA: Yes. My boss at Fawcett helped me get the job at NAL. Again, I started in a secretarial position but

moved up to where I was editing their sf line. Then NAL decided to get rid of 10% of its work force. I applied to be a reader at the Literary Guild. Had no idea the SFBC job was available but when it came open they remembered my science fiction background and contacted me. Here's an interesting bit of irony—the job opening was created as a result of Elaine Kostner leaving the SFBC to go to work at NAL. At any rate, that was back in 1973. Old history. I'm pleased with how things turned out.

RG: *The Literary Guild and the SFBC are both a part of Doubleday?*

EA: Well, sort of, all the clubs are a part of Doubleday Direct, Inc., which is not the same as Doubleday Publishing. When Bertelsmann took over they reorganized their U.S. assets into four separate compa-

nies. The first was retail stores which they sold off fairly quickly. The second was publishing, the third was their printing operations and the fourth was the book clubs. Works well for us, since it gives us access to the very big bestsellers that are purchased for the Literary Guild.

RG: *So when one of Doubleday Direct's book clubs purchases rights, all of the clubs have access to the title?*

EA: Yes. Anne Rice's new book, for example. Or *The Regulators* which is the new Richard Bachman book.

RG: *Stephen King has a new Bachman book?*

EA: No. This is a manuscript newly discovered by Bachman's widow Claudia. Bachman died back in 1985, remember. Cancer of the pseudonym. Very tragic. He never lived to see *The Running Man* filmed. It's true that King took an interest in Bachman's career, but this is very definitely a Richard Bachman novel and not a novel by Stephen King.

RG: *Are horror novels a big part of the SFBC, or have Rice and King each pretty much established their own genre separate from other horror publishing?*

EA: Rice and King and one or two others. Horror generally hasn't sold well for us otherwise, though we like to keep new titles on our offer lists. Vampire novels do pretty well, but that's almost become a genre wholly separate from other horror.

RG: *How many new titles does the SFBC offer each year?*

EA: Around a hundred. It's a zero sum event, though. Every time I bring a new book into print I have to delete an old title from the warehouse. That's one reason for doing omnibus books—combining two or more interconnected works under one title. We have a max of around 450 titles that can be offered at any one time, so publishing all three books of a trilogy under one cover allows us to count that as one title rather than three. A long time practice of the SFBC that predates my being here. The Foundation Trilogy, for example, which has been in continuous publication since almost the start of the club.

RG: *Isaac Asimov was the SFBC's first author?*

EA: Yes. *Currents of Space*. March, 1953. The first book offered by the club. For the twenty-fifth anniversary of the club we reoffered the book at the same price it was in 1953—One dollar. Back in 1978 you could still print a hardbound book for less than a dollar. We couldn't do that again, though, not without selling the book for less than the production cost.

RG: *Is Isaac the SFBC's all time best-selling author?*

EA: Maybe, though Anne McCaffrey's books total the most current sales. I'm not sure anyone has ever put together the club's cumulative numbers, at least not separated by author. The Foundation Trilogy has sold a lot of copies over the years so I'd guess that Isaac may be the leader in total sales.

RG: *What other books that the SFBC offers predate your involvement with the club?*

EA: For continuous publication there are three others. Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and Robert Silverberg's *The World Inside* which has done amazingly better for us than it has outside the book club. I was the editor at NAL who first bought *The World Inside* so I'm a little extra pleased that it's done so well. I repurchased the rights to Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, so that title isn't continuous, even though it was one of the earliest books offered by the SFBC. There are probably other books that the SFBC once offered, and then later returned to print, but our records aren't complete. Over the years I've made an effort to collect SFBC's history, but there are big gaps in the pre-1973 period I know very little about.

RG: *What's the longest continuous pub for a book you've bought for the SFBC?*

EA: Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous With Rama*. It was one of the first books I bought at the SFBC and has stayed in print for us.

RG: *Are there many books that sell well for the SFBC that do not sell well in bookstores?*

EA: There are a few. Tanith Lee's *Red As Blood* is one of our more consistently popular titles. I don't think it's stayed as popular elsewhere. For the most part



though, what sells well in bookstores sells well for us. But it's nice that we also have additional titles that find readers that they were not able to find via traditional booksellers. It's very clear that we're an expansion of the market, and that our sales are generally ones that would not have been made by bookstores.

RG: *You've also had success with bringing small press books to larger audiences.*

EA: Yes. George Alec Effinger's *Maureen Birnbaum, Barbarian Swordsman*, for example, which is also an exception to the general rule that short story collections don't sell as well as novels. One of my favorite books that we've published in recent years.

RG: *How do you find books? Do publishers automatically send you books to consider?*

EA: Many of them do, though it varies from year to year which publishers are aggressive in seeking book club deals for their titles. We'll go after rights to a book we want if we know it's out there, but we're long past the point where anyone can keep up with everything that's being published nowadays. We can't go after what we don't know about.

RG: *Do you accept submissions other than from publishers?*

EA: Yes, though only for work that's been accepted elsewhere. No slush. Normally the rightsholder is the publisher so that's who we mostly deal with. In a few cases the rights may have reverted back to the author—we recently bought a book from Poul Anderson that way. We're happy to have rightsholders or their agents send us work to look at, though again let me emphasize this does not mean slush. It's very, very rare that the SFBC originates a book.

RG: *How would a rightsholder go about submitting a work to you?*

EA: Send it to me via the SFBC address: 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. The cover letter should contain the pertinent information. Publishing history. Is the work currently in print. What's the format and cover price. Expected pub date if it's a forthcoming work. That sort of stuff.

RG: *A copy of the manuscript is acceptable if the work hasn't yet been published?*

EA: Yes, though if galleys are available, that's what we'd rather look at. Most books read better in galley, particularly if they've had a good edit. Manuscripts are often much rougher. It's astonishing the things you see perpetrated in manuscripts. There are authors who I don't think bother to proofread anything before they send it off to the publisher. Some of it may be that word processors make it easier to write quickly without thinking too much about the structure of sentences and such, but I also think that it'd be helpful if writers spent more time studying English grammar and other basics. Of course, if the book's already been published, that's what we'd rather look at. Aside from the need for editing, manuscripts are unwieldy, heavy things and it's much easier to read from a book or a galley.

RG: *What rights does the SFBC purchase?*

EA: All English language book club rights in all formats, including formats that may not currently exist. That means that if you find another book club that wants to do a cuneiform edition of your novel, they'd have to come to us for the sub-rights. Not that clay tablets are a particularly practical method of publishing books, though the idea of a hard copy format that'll last for several thousands of years has more than a bit of merit.

RG: *Perpetual rights?*

EA: Yes, though the contract is unilaterally cancelable by the rightsholder after five years.

RG: *The Science Fiction Book Club uses negative option replies? That is, members have to notify you each month not to send the current selection.*

EA: Yes, though we also offer a positive option membership which is what is automatic for APO addresses and can be requested by other members once they've fulfilled the purchase requirement for their membership. And currently we define a year as having sixteen months, plus once a year we send a special offering that isn't a negative option reply. Seventeen mailings a year, which we coordinate with our

Creative Department which is the part of the company that produces the club magazine, handles our advertising and cover design and so on.

RG: *Does Doubleday Direct, Inc. have the equivalent to a corporate "standards and practices" division the way that television networks do?*

EA: No, I'm pleased to say. In the twenty-three years I've been here I've never yet had a corporate attempt to censor the books that I buy. We do think it's important to use content warnings to help make readers aware of potentially objectionable material they might find in a book, particularly since mail order customers can't thumb through a book to get a feel for the sort of material inside. It's interesting that sometimes both we and the Literary Guild will offer the same book and even though we're both a part of the same company one of us will issue a warning and the other won't. For example, the Literary Guild is much more concerned about violence and we're much more concerned about sex, particularly since SFBC books are often purchased for minors.

RG: *Are there books that you'd reject publishing solely for subject content?*

EA: Sure. One obvious area is that we're almost certainly going to reject any book that isn't science fiction or fantasy. I say almost because we have a new Anne McCaffrey book that's essentially a straightforward historical novel, but we're publishing it because it's by an author that members of our club are interested in reading. We don't publish that many novels with graphic sex or graphic violence, but the ones we do are usually among our better books. Part of that is because I really do believe that if you're going to risk offending someone it should be for a reason. I'd like to pretend that each of the 450 books the SFBC offers is a stellar work of the highest literary quality, but the truth is that some books are better than others and that some commercially successful books are not very well written at all. Maybe we have tougher standards for books that contain explicit descriptions of sex or violence, but rejecting a book because it contains a poorly written gratuitous sex scene seems to me more a matter of taste than of censorship.

RG: *What makes a book well written?*

EA: Many novels are too long for the story they tell. They'll contain episodes which are wonderful within their own segment but which aren't necessary to the work as a whole. Writers would benefit from learning to edit themselves better—to ask if each specific bit of content is a necessary part of the sequence they're constructing. Before a book can be well written it has to be not badly written first.

RG: *Are there long works you particularly admire?*

EA: Yes. Many. George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* for a recent example. There's not one page extra in the story. It takes great skill for any writer to sustain a book that well, particularly at longer lengths. It's very satisfying to find a work you're enthusiastic about and then see it do well in sales.

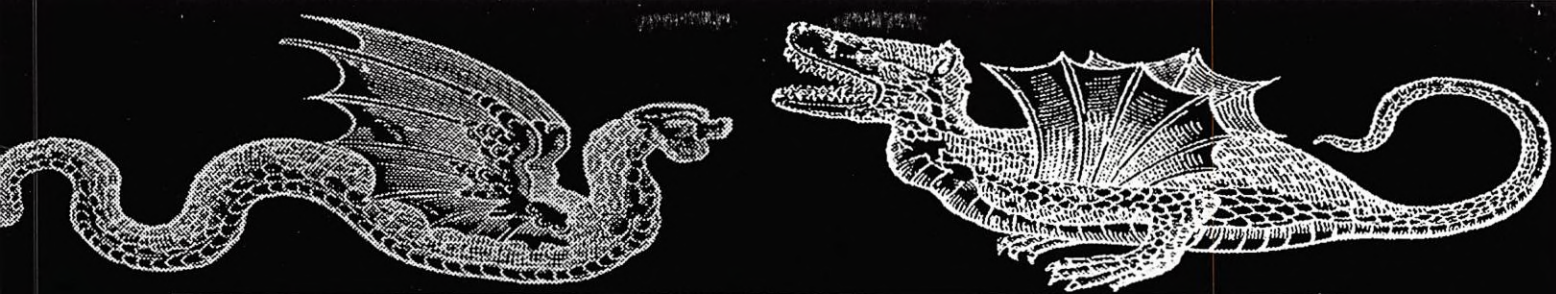
RG: *Maybe that sort of satisfaction is why you've stayed for twenty-three years so far.*

EA: Absolutely. I really do believe in what we're publishing, that what we do serves an important need for the sf community. We've often kept titles in print for years after they were no longer economically profitable simply because they were important titles to the history of sf and there was no where else new readers could have easy access to them. It's not just enough for people to bemoan the sad state of backlist publishing, it's really helpful when they support publishers who keep classic works available. Buy copies and give them away as presents, particularly to younger readers who are just discovering the rich heritage of sf publishing. There's very little danger that the SFBC is going to stop offering Star Wars or Terry Brooks, but there are dozens of great works by classic authors that vanish each year to the used book stores and antiquarian dealers where it often takes a significant effort to locate a specific out-of-print title. We really do hope that people who love those sorts of books will join the SFBC and help us to keep more of those titles in print.

RG: *Thank you for taking the time for this interview.*

EA: You're welcome, and please give my thanks to the World Fantasy Convention for inviting me to be a guest at their convention.





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A





# RON WALOTSKY: AN APPRECIATION (NO HAIKU)

by Alan Dean Foster

THIS IS NOT A BIOGRAPHY—I don't do stats. I don't think I could do stats in this case anyway, because enumerating Ron Walotsky's creative statistics would take up all the space I'm supposed to be using for an appreciation. It isn't that Ron is just prolific—his output verges on the Promethean. What is so off-putting is his casual disregard for his own production.

Ron doesn't just do cards for game companies: he does entire decks. He doesn't just do book covers: he does whole series. Where other artists create individual paintings, Ron generates the work of a studio, producing by the handful, the gross, the bushel and the peck. The thing of it is, he's so casual about it that you tend not to recognize the achievement. It's like listening to a house painter describe how he's going to redo the interior of the Sears Tower. By himself. Next week. With suitable frescoes and flourishes and maybe a mural or two thrown in just for a little variety.

And the wonder, the miracle, the delight of it is, that it is all good. Because Ron does not sacrifice quality for speed. There is nothing slapdash about the finished compositions he churns out for game companies, book publishers, foreign interests, private parties, singular commissions, cards, and for all I know, the Flagler Mansion in Flagler Beach, Florida, where he and his lovely liling willow of a wife Gail reside.

Fast, oh yeah. Fast, and versatile. So versatile that I'll bet many of you have seen a couple of dozen Ron Walotsky paintings that you never thought of as being by Ron Walotsky. Because he does not limit himself. One thing you cannot say about Ron is what kind of illustrator he is, a definition I apply in the most complimentary way.

Want hi-tech? Check out Ron's spaceships and future worlds. Want astronomical art? That's Ron's work over there in the art show, not Chesley Bonestell or Ron Miller or Rick Sternbach. How about the characters of science-fiction? Study the real expressions on the faces of the real people he paints.

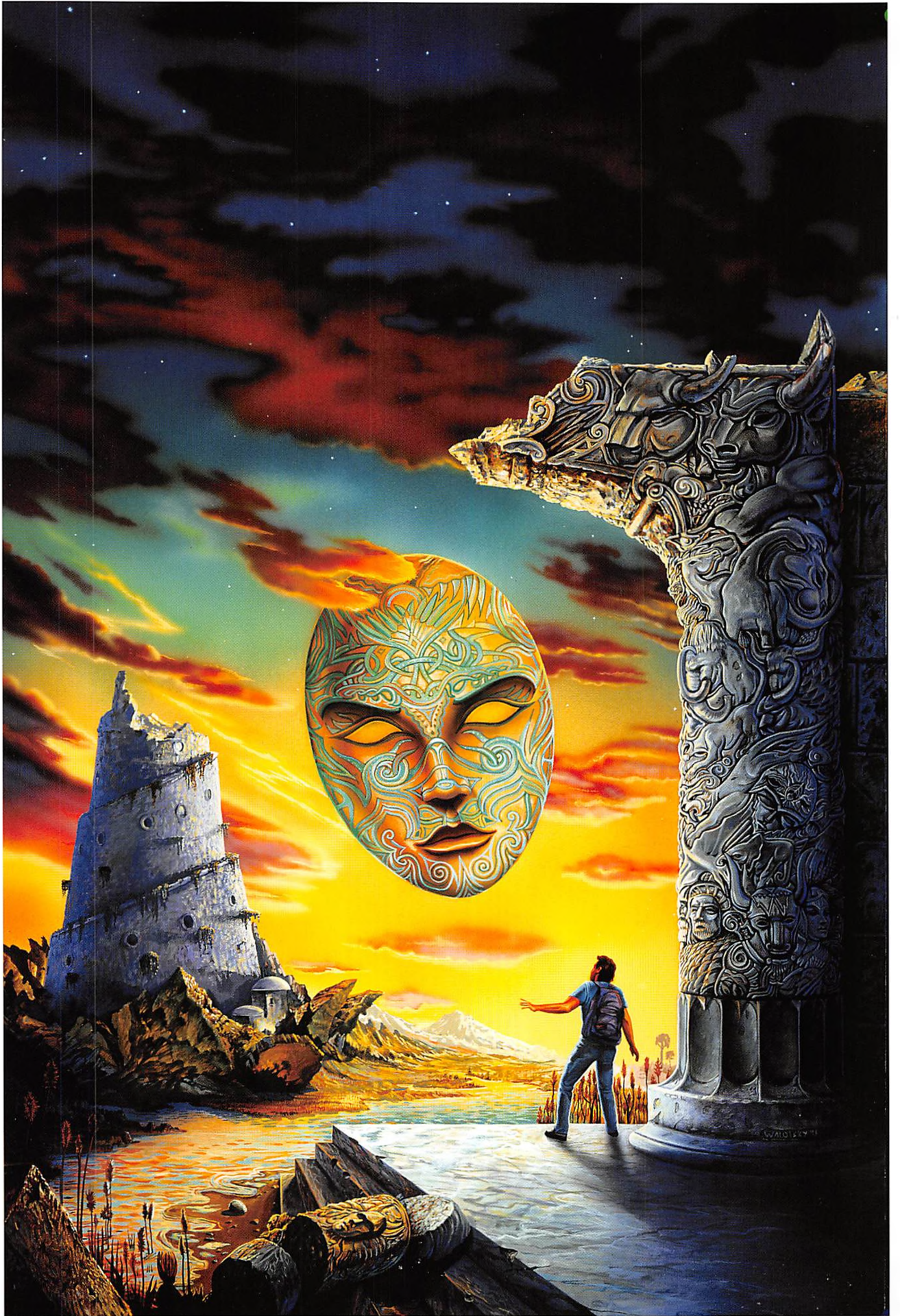
High-fantasy? Ron's your man. Horror? Sword-and-sorcery? How about a children's book? Horseshoe crabs?

Wait a minute. Horseshoe crabs?

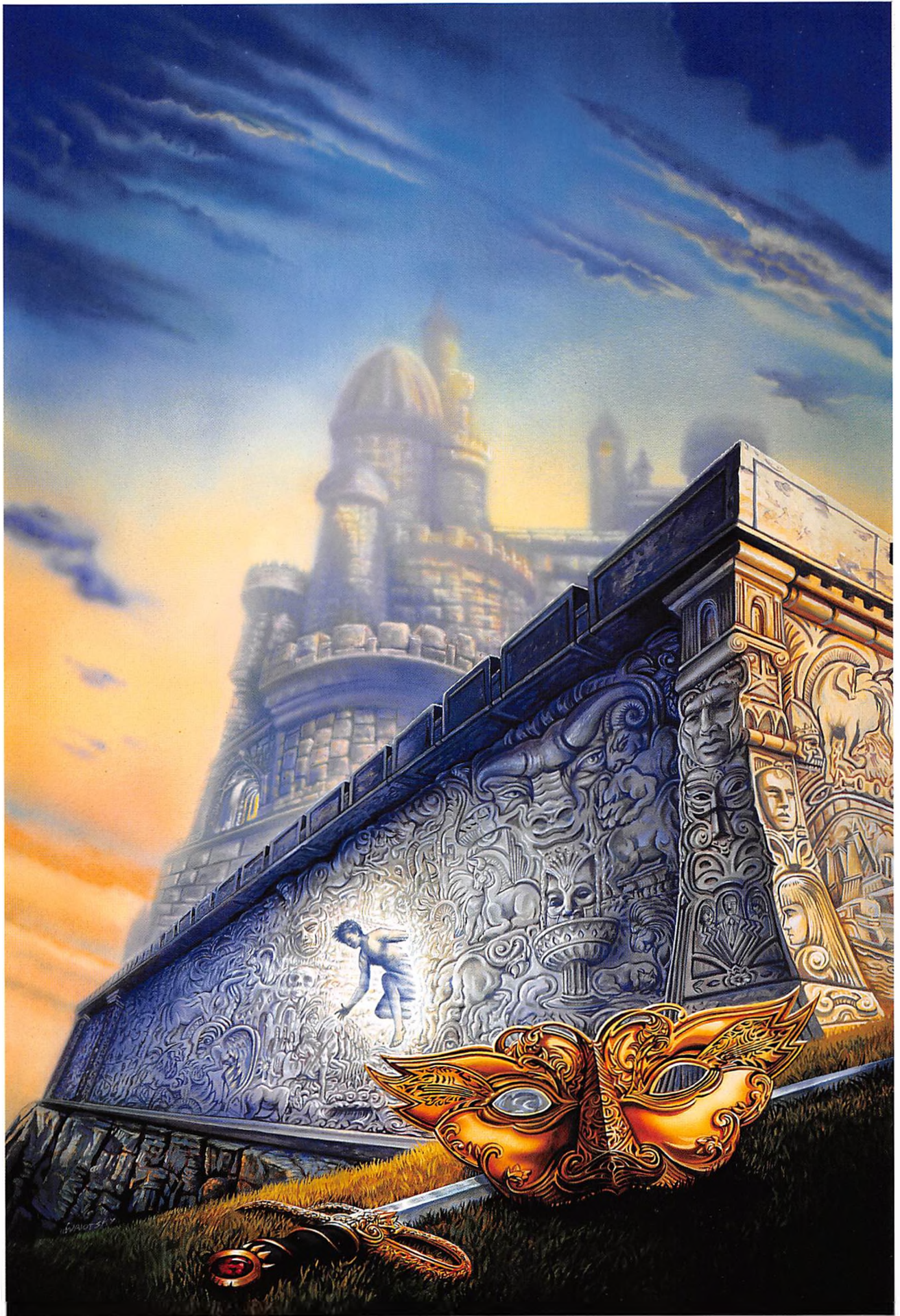
Did I mention that Ron somehow, probably in another space-time continuum he keeps tucked away in a spare drawer somewhere and unlike so many other always busy illustrators, manages to find time to paint for himself? Now there's a happening you don't often come across within the field these days. Well, he does, and one of the things he paints are horseshoe crabs. In fact, I believe I can say unequivocally and without fear of contradiction that Ron Walotsky is the premier horseshoe crab painter working in the United States today.

*Continued on page 56*

















E



When I say that Ron paints horseshoe crabs I do not mean that he supplies them with racing stripes, pin work, and backward streaming flames so that they can return to the sea and subsequently overawe their equally primitive but less aesthetically endowed companions. What Ron does with a horseshoe crab (deceased) is to transform it. Through the enchanted application of brush, paint, talent, imagination, and the artist's eye (that's the third one, there, in the middle of the forehead) the lowly crab becomes a humanized figure of fantasy, a totem raised up and extracted from an unknown society, an emblem fraught with mystery and magic, a chitinous conundrum. One thing of beauty has, in Ron's hands, become another entirely. Through the gift of his art he has given a demised crustacean another life, another existence.

And he does this, of course, in his spare time. Along with the pebbles.

Yes, Ron Walotsky paints pebbles. Resplendent, liquid, burnished, brightly colored, enchanted pebbles. In Ron and Gail's house is my favorite Walotsky, a huge canvas consisting of nothing but painted pebbles as they might lie on a beach, or in the bed of a stream. It seems so simple, until you look long and hard at it and realize what has been accomplished. Any fool sketch-head can make a dramatic painting of Yosemite Valley, or crashing waves, or the twilight skyline of New York.

But to grab a viewer's attention with pebbles, to engage their emotions with bits of paint that aspire to represent and interpret nothing more than tiny, water-polished rocks, that requires something more than skill, more than mere proficiency with charcoal and pencil and brush. It requires the ability to do Art, which is rather more than what is needed simply to illustrate.

So I present to you, Ron Walotsky, Artist. Go thou and admire. And remember that when viewing Ron's work, small, secretive, private smiles of delight and pleasure are not only acceptable, they are virtually *de regeiner*.

### Guide to the Gallery section and Cover Art

**A:** The title page/frontispiece for the Easton Press edition of Brian Aldiss's *The Malacia Tapestry*. **B-C:** Ron has painted over 300 book covers including one for *Red Dragon* and the early covers Roger Zelazny's Amber series (used for over 15 years). Featured here are the paintings for Robert Holdstock's *Ancient Echoes* [B] and *The Unknown Region* [C] for Penguin/Roc Books. **D:** Ron's first job was for *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 1969. Since then he has done over 40 covers for them, including this one for the 1996 anniversary issue. **E:** Using elements from an album cover he did for Tomita, this is an unpublished piece from Ron's private collection. He plans on including it in a career retrospective: *Inner Visions-The Life and Work of Ron Walotsky*. **FRONT COVER:** This is a mixed media piece (watercolor and pen & ink) which Ron created using his title page art for the book *Benedictions of Pan*. **BACK COVER:** Ancient Warrior: horseshoe crab shell mask. **NOTE:** Ron has had a long career of gallery exhibitions ranging from shows in the Herst Gallery to the Martin Moirinaire Museum in SoHo. He invites you to his latest which will be held on December 5th, 1996 at the Ormund Memorial Garden & Museum in Florida.



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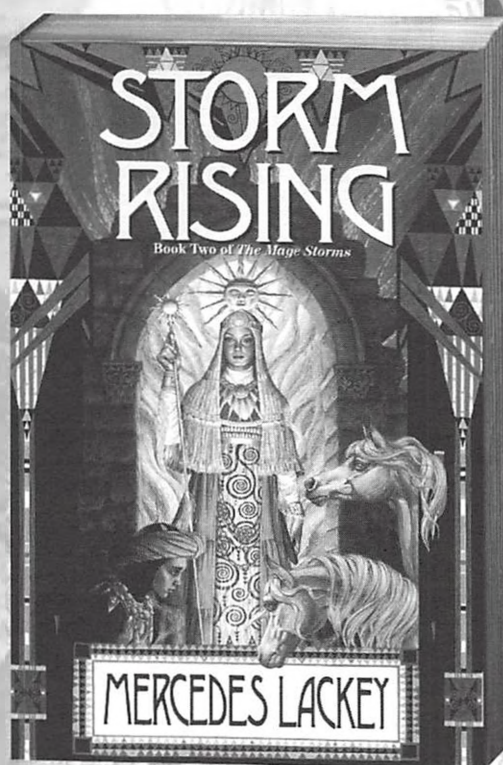
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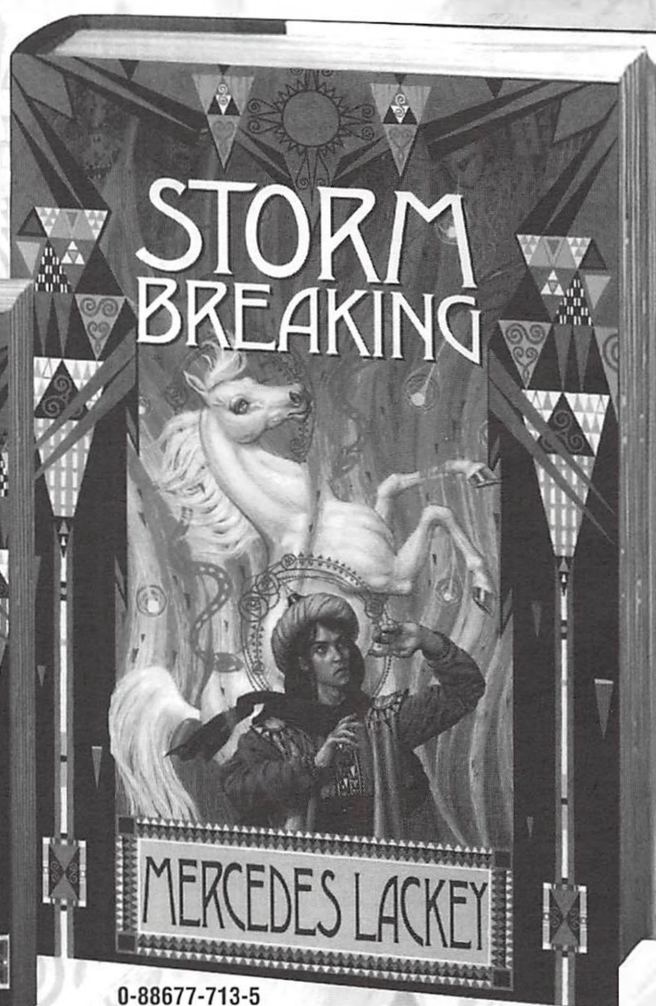
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# TO THE SEVENTH

by Gene Wolfe

GOD AND THE DEVIL WERE PLAYING CHESS. Which was which depended on which side you were on; Mack Chance was on God's, and God's name was E-One.

Across an eternity of frigid nothingness and dark matter, the Devil said, "Honesty, decency, and a genuine respect for the value of human life alike compel me to tell you that you will lose. As of the present move, I have extended my investigation of operational permutations to one hundred sixty-five thousand. May I ask your own?"

"Oh, fifteen or twenty thousand." God chuckled, "But to tell you the truth I seldom do it. There's only so much time, and it rarely turns up anything of value. I'd say I played by the seat of my pants, if I wore pants."

"Your method has achieved very little."

God considered. "Doesn't that depend on the measure of achievement?"

"You have suffered heavy casualties and lost a great deal of territory."

"True." There was a note of sadness in God's voice.

"All while I was examining a mere hundred thousand."

"I'm surprised you didn't do better," God told him.

A visual simulation of General Hart appeared in Mack's screen. "Captain Chance!" (So it would be filtered to us.) "Yes, sir!" Chance saluted.

Hart's simulation returned the salute. "You are about to get a transmission from E-One."

Hart's simulation said nothing more, so when ten seconds or so had passed Mack inquired, "Do you know who will be conveying E-One's instructions to me, sir?"

"E-One will talk to you directly, Captain. That's what I've been given to understand."

This was serious even if it wasn't true. Mack, who wanted to frown, smiled. "I'll stand by, sir."

"Have you ever talked to E-One directly before, Mack?"

It was extraordinary cordiality, and Mack felt a sinking sensation; generals with gold galaxies on their shoulder boards condescended largely to those captains who—in the generals' opinion—were slated to die soon and messily. "No, sir," Mack said. "Never."

"I didn't think so, and thought you might welcome a little briefing in advance."

"I certainly would, sir."

"You don't have to stand on ceremony with E-One, and you don't need to look out for trickery. No traps."

That sounded more frightening still. "Of course not, sir," Mack said. He stole a glance at his digitals as he spoke, but everything looked perfectly normal.

"It's hard for E-One to express itself to us, however. Its thoughts are a great deal deeper than ours, Mack. Bottomless, in fact."

"I understand, sir." This was definitely a simulation, Mack decided, and wondered briefly who was putting it out.

"So if you don't follow everything it's saying, don't be shy about asking for explanations. I don't know what it intends to ask of you."

(Mack's built-in defibberator buzzed.)

"But whatever it is, it will be of utmost importance that you know just what you are to do and why you're to do it."

"As far as I'm capable of knowing, sir."

"Exactly. It will probably ask you to volunteer, Mack. It usually does."

"I will, sir."

The glimmer of a smile crossed the simulation's frosty countenance. "Sight unseen, Mack?"

"Sight unseen is easier, sir."

"Rook to rook's four," the Devil declared in a voice of steel.

God nodded thoughtfully. "Pawn to King's—what do you call the horses?"

It had been (mentally, Mack glanced at his implant) an hour and sixteen minutes. Seconds flitted by: twenty-three, twenty-four. . . . Still no E-One.

He had filled the time by checking everything that could be checked. Charge was a little over the top, and thus slightly dangerous. Both fuel tanks were nearly full, and there was food and water for almost a year. Every tube was loaded and every missile ready to arm. He was checking circuits now, well aware that there would be nothing wrong with any of them. The main battery laser that was his little ship's principal weapon would be next. After that—"Captain Chance?"

He looked around. The screen was blank.

"It is I. I can give myself a human face if you like. An old man with a beard."

"No thank you, E-One."

"Some people like it. A talking sun? A cloud? The fat man with an elephant's head?"

Mack shook his own; presumably E-One could see him, in whatever way it was E-One saw things. "No, thank you. I'm comfortable like this, E-One, if you are."

"Good." E-One smiled, and for a badly confused moment Mack wondered how he knew that E-One was smiling. "Captain Chance, I need you for an extraordinary mission, the most extraordinary in history."

"I'll go, E-One."

"That," the smile broadened, "is not customary, Captain Chance. Custom demands that I first seek to persuade you, then force you. That I indulge in polite blackmail, to be frank."

"If I don't go," Mack said, choosing his words, "for the rest of my life I'll know that when you wanted something from me, something real and necessary—"

"Your patrols are real and necessary," E-One said without interrupting him.

"I refused. That's blackmail enough, E-One. I'll do it, whatever it is, or die trying."

"Do you believe in miracles, Captain Chance?"

"Yes."

"You answered without reflection. This time I want you to reflect, Captain Chance. Do you believe in miracles?"

Mack reflected, tussling with successive layers deceptively labeled "soul," "core," and "innermost

being"—tearing each to bits and throwing each aside, only to find that it kept creeping back. At length he said, "Where you're concerned, yes, sir. I do, sir. I mean—"

General Hart's simulation reoccupied the screen. "You're more comfortable with a human face," E-One as Hart told him.

Mack shook his head. "Not really." He took a deep breath. "I wish you wouldn't do that, E-One."

Hart faded. "Your ship is capable of jumps of five hundred thousand light years, Captain Chance. Since you carry fuel for one recharging, half a million light years defines the sphere of no return. For convenience we may call it a hundred and fifty thousand parsecs. Larger ships are capable of more, but larger ships are both more easily detected and less easily spared."

Mack nodded. "I take it that this is outside my sphere, E-One. I won't be able to get back."

"Correct. The distance is nine hundred thousand parsecs. You will require six jumps to reach it."

"Then I can't. I can't even get close."

"In the heart of our enemy's territory is a world that he once occupied. It is ruled by entities that are neither hostile nor friendly to him. If they were hostile, he would have been destroyed long ago. If they were friendly, we would have been similarly destroyed. You and I would not be talking as we are, because neither of us would exist."

Mack was seized by the optimism with which a small number of very fortunate men confront death. "You have some way of getting us there—the *Prawn* and me. You think they can be turned against the enemy."

"I know that they cannot be turned against him, and that there is no way for you to reach them save by your own efforts. Will you go? I warn you that I will not ask again. This is your final opportunity to turn back, the edge of your sphere."

While Mack was thinking it over someone else said, "Yes." That, at least, was the way that it seemed.

Hyperspace jumps were, as Mack admitted to himself, no fun at all. He tapped the key. They were also dangerous as . . .

He and his ship existed here as a totality. He was the man who had spoken with E-One and the infant in the womb, the boy who had rejoiced at his appointment to the Academy and the man whose life was over and done with. His ship, too, was ores and



organic matter, itself complete, itself half built, newly built, and scarcely begun. Outside its sides that were not sides the universe was a point of matter vastly heavy, and a vastness beyond the reach of mathematics in which matter was so rare that it could be truthfully said not to exist.

And all between.

Five hundred thousand light years away, he and it snapped into existence "again."

Mack nodded to himself and tapped in "Recharge." Behind him, the drive's reactor hummed below the threshold of hearing.

An admiral filled the ship's screen. "You've got an onboard processor problem, Captain."

Mack saluted. "I don't think so, sir."

"We've notified yours, of course. It should be running a self-exam."

As the admiral spoke, data flashed across his medals, and Mack, seeing it, said, "I don't think so, sir."

"We got your destination."

That was routine; Mack nodded.

The admiral drew breath, "It's outside your range. Hell, it's outside mine."

Mack nodded again, and found a strange, slightly bitter pleasure in watching the admiral's expression change and change again.

"That's actually where you're bound? Going to try to go? We received special orders about you. That's why I contacted you in person when your destination was reported to me. We're to refuel you and supply anything else you may need. Did you know that?"

"E-One told me the orders were going out, sir. I couldn't be sure they were received, naturally."

"E-One told you?"

"Yes, sir. E-One had ordered they be sent before we spoke, it said. It apologized for that, but said it wanted to make every effort to see that they got there before we did, and we left right away. After E-One and I were through talking, I mean, sir."

The admiral nodded, his expression still showing traces of shock. "A tender is on its way to refuel you, Captain. It also carries water and rations, if you need them."

"No, sir."

"Is there anything else you need?"

Mack started to say, "No, sir," and stopped himself. "Yes, sir. Information. E-One told me a little, but

your data may be more current. You can supply a human perspective too."

The admiral cleared his throat. "I'm to cooperate with you in every way, Captain, and I want to. But there are certain matters that cannot be discussed over a scannable link. You realize it, I feel quite certain."

"Yes, sir. The things I want to know are mostly things the enemy knows already." Mack laid a radar trace over the admiral and nodded appreciatively at a blip that was presumably the tender. "You've got a ten DS battle-cruiser task force, executing combined operations with Admiral Fischer's? E-One says it likes to attack up the middle of the board with his knights."

Momentarily, the admiral's face went blank. "He—it said that, Captain?"

"Yes, sir. E-One was trying to couch its explanation in terms I would understand, I feel sure, sir."

"You could put it like that, I guess." The admiral's hand, longer and thicker than Mack would have supposed, appeared on screen as it rose to stroke his chin. "That might actually be a good way to put it. Certain to be, if that was the metaphor E-One used. We've been giving the enemy fits. No doubt about it."

"Yes, sir. That leads to my first serious question, sir. You can estimate pretty easily where my next jump's going to land me. What do you think the chances are that I'll find myself in the middle of an enemy force?"

"A substantial one?" The admiral shook his head. "Zero. You might encounter a patrol, though I doubt it. A gunship and a couple of chasers, something like that."

"That would be more than enough." Mack spoke mostly to himself.

"I suppose so. Hasn't E-One supplied you with special armament?"

"No, sir," Mack said.

The admiral's expression showed plainly that he did not believe him. "Captain, if you can release the information, what are you going to do two jumps from now? It's going to take five to get where you're going. Five anyway, and maybe more. You're recharging now, I take it, and my tender will refuel you. But when that fuel's gone and you've got no charge left, how are you supposed to get there?"

"Find some," Mack told him.

God muttered, "Pawn to the king's knight's four."

Approximately five hundred thousand light years into enemy territory, Mack and Mack's ship materialized in an instant. The radar showed nothing, and he sighed. He had diverted his course by a trifling amount and ended his jump some four light years from the place where he was supposed to be. If the enemy had picked up his conversation with the admiral (as seemed likely) and if the enemy could break the almost uncrackable algorithm used to encrypt such transmissions (as E-One had been quite sure the enemy could) patrols would be converging at this moment on the place where he was not.

As he began the recharge that would exhaust his fuel, his ship informed him that it would occupy an estimated two hours, twenty-one minutes, and forty-seven seconds—probable within one half of one percent. His next jump, like all such jumps, would take no time at all. And infinity.

"Pawn to the king's knight's five."

The Devil's voice held a contempt as vast as the cosmos. "You are trying to queen that pawn. It won't work."

God shrugged. "Perhaps not. Your move, I believe?"

Two blips, moving so fast that their present positions would be well in advance of those shown on radar. The ship calculated them and added without being asked that they were presumed enemy.

It was barely possible, however, that the admiral had sent them. A larger ship, carrying more fuel, might accompany and refuel him for another jump or two, depending on size. E-One had told Mack that nothing of the kind would be done, but it was possible—barely possible—that the admiral had acted on his own, essentially sacrificing one of his ships.

Mack tapped in an order, and battle harness deployed around him. Two taps more brought full acceleration; he struggled not to black out as he activated the simulator.

On his screen, the blips became DS long range pursuits, the ship's best guess as to their type. Lasers that were visible red streaks lanced from their turrets, and the air crackled with what some anointed expert had felt might do for the sound of a near miss. Mack killed the audio.

"Enemy initiates engagement," the ship told

Mack. "Fire response?"

"Negative." (It required a single keystroke.)

"Near miss. Ten thousand K."

That needed no reply and Mack gave none.

"Survivability eighteen percent."

Had it not been for the crushing acceleration, Mack would have nodded.

"Request reactivate sound simulation."

"N"

"Request . . ."

Mack had blacked out.

When he resumed consciousness, an enemy officer's face occupied his screen. He blinked.

"You were thought deprived," the enemy officer said with the aid of a language filter. "Thought deprived you could not know the no hopefulness nature of your position here. I tell you that if you do not slow we shall roast you to pieces."

Mack tapped his keyboard; his ship's acceleration fell to nothing.

"That is preferred by me," the enemy officer said. "You are our prisoner. You must soon open your airlock to the from my own boarders or perish."

"I'm a defector," Mack told him, wondering just what was being heard at the enemy officer's end. "I have information for your high command."

"You must open your airlock," the enemy officer repeated, and vanished.

Mack shrugged and tapped in "Local."

Both enemy DS long range pursuits were within a kilometer of his little ship, slender, darkly shining cylinders designed to present the smallest possible frontal area to the missiles of the pursued and warted here and there with laser turrets. As he watched, an inky mole appeared on the side of one, from which two space-suited figures emerged. Presumably one would stay to pilot his little ship; the other would escort him back to the DS long range pursuit.

A moment later the second DS long range pursuit fired its nuclears and pulled away (making about one and a quarter Gs, according to his screen) then vanished as it jumped.

He retracted his battle harness, got up, and released the airlock bolts.

The first boarder was a woman, short-haired and without makeup. She waved him aside, took his place in the pilot's seat, and stabbed at his keyboard as if



she hated it.

The second, a man, presumably had a language filter. "I speak as you do, somewhat," he said, "but not so well that we can do without this. Do you see that which I say?"

Mack nodded.

"Already your suit you have on and this is very good. You say you have the information precious? Get it and we go."

"It's in my mind," Mack told him. "There are no books or disks." His ship began a slow roll, end over end.

"The software of you we must have, and such disks as you have all. Get these."

Mack nodded again. An alarm shrilled, and he looked around at his screen anxiously.

"She is seeing to this," the man told him. "You get for us all disks and records. Soon she will learn your system." The roll stopped abruptly, then reversed. Toward the back of the ship, a second alarm sounded, a howling siren. Angry red lights blinked on either side of the screen.

The man looked disgusted. "Help her."

"Don't do that," Mack told the woman, "unless you've all-cleared the frying pans."

She looked at him without comprehension, and he pushed over to her and pressed keys. The first alarm fell silent and the second dwindled to a lonely wail. One of the red lights turned green, then amber and purple.

"I'll get that software now," Mack told the man. "You really want all disks? It'll take us a while—"

The siren howled again and something crackled at the back of the ship. The woman cursed in an incomprehensible tongue, left the pilot's seat, and began what sounded as though it would become an extended complaint to her male partner.

With an apologetic look, Mack slipped into the seat and tapped three keys. Battle harness snapped into place about him, and the little ship shot forward with a violent acceleration that slammed both boarders against the jumpermountings. Skewing sidewise, it fired a single missile.

The shock of its detonation followed instantly, drenching the little ship with momentary heat and radiation.

Mack sighed as he watched the readings creep back toward normal, and began recharging. It would be necessary to wait, perhaps for days, until the wreck

of the DS long range pursuit cooled down enough for him to board. Even then, it was quite possible that every fuel tank it had carried had been breached. He searched the boarders, taking a few items that might be of value and trying very hard not to notice whether either one was still alive, then pushed them out of the airlock.

God muttered, "Pawn takes bishop. That puts it on F five, doesn't it?"

The Devil's snarl was the DS long range pursuit's only threnody.

Mack scanned his instruments anxiously. There had been fuel enough for only a single charge. The second, surviving pursuit would already have reported his position. Eventually the absence of the pursuit he had destroyed would be noted, and the correct conclusion reached. The second, or a more powerful ship, would begin searching for him.

As carefully as ever, he determined his exact location and retrieved that of the mysterious world that was his destination. If it was possible—if only it was somehow possible—to refuel here, charge, and refuel again. He could get to within a single jump of it.

An uncharted yellow sun was in easy nuclear range. It looked promising.

"Here we are," Tobi remarked, and put the transmission into PARK. Rain lashed the windshield as she pushed the headlight switch in and turned off the ignition.

Mack leaned back in his seat.

"Are you still an alien from someplace a gazillion light years away from here?"

He nodded.

"And your spaceship's right here. It's just that it's under the water."

He nodded again.

"Under the fucking Pacific Ocean. That's really, really good." She felt herself grow angry. "Because if it wasn't, if it was floating on top or up in the clouds we couldn't possibly see it because it's too Goddamn dark."

"This is the only way I can make you believe me," Mack explained. "There are probably regulations against it—I don't know, and to tell the truth, I don't care. I've got to carry out my mission, and you're far inside enemy territory."

"You want me to go back to the station and tell everybody in Portland that we've been contacted by aliens."

"Only me. One alien."

She nodded, suddenly afraid he was going to switch on the dome light. "You could at least put away that gadget you're playing with and hold my hand."

"I've been wanting to," he said, and did.

"You're the pilot. It's just a teensy ship, you said. A one-person ship, and you fly it."

Thunder boomed in the distance; she felt rather than saw his nod and snuggled closer.

"So I'm out here in the dark and the rain with a lunatic. Will you get mad if I call you a lunatic? I'm mad enough for both of us already."

"No," he said.

"We'll sit out here looking at your ship—underneath the water, those big combers you can see once in a while way out there—for a couple of hours, and a few days from now we'll get some carryout and maybe a bottle of wine and go out here to look at your ship again." She shrugged, and her lips brushed his. "You're not the only one who's crazy."

"That's good." (She was warmed by the smile in his voice.)

"We need a great many crazy people, so I can get my fuel. Two represents an increase of one hundred percent."

"Your hands are so hard." She wanted to say that they were strong, too, but told herself that she mustn't push things too fast. "I think you're really a brick-layer."

"I'm alone on my ship for months at a time," Mack explained through the language filter. "Once for more than a year. When something goes wrong, I must repair it. There's no one else. I tear down my equipment to inspect it, too. And . . ."

"And what?" she asked him.

"Sometimes I take things apart just for something to do, and to train myself to do it quickly and efficiently. Usually there's no subjective gravity, and so—" He was silenced by three sharp raps on her window.

"Oh, God!" She pushed the button, then started the engine and pushed again. "A cop. We were just talking, officer. We stopped for a minute to look at the view. I'm—"

He bent to peer through the window, a large man

nearing middle age, in an orange slicker on which POLICE was printed in bold black letters. "To look at the view," he repeated skeptically.

Mack pointed. "When the lightning flashes, we can look far out to sea."

Tobi said, "If I were to tell you we were sitting here conferring about a news story, you wouldn't believe me, so I won't, and we'll move if you tell us to. But we'll just go someplace else and talk some more."

The policeman blinked away raindrops. "You're the anchorwoman Channel Seven. Tobi Butler."

"Belter—you recognized the freckles, right? I'm a co-anchor. I've got all my clothes on, see?" Lightning painted the night with white fire, and thunder rumbled behind it; but neither of them looked beyond the windshield.

"An hour be enough for you two to talk?" the policeman asked.

"Certainly, officer. More than enough."

He nodded, "I'm supposed to keep the kids away from here. If your car's still here when I get back, I'll have to move you along." He straightened up, and sensing rather than seeing something stared out into the blacker dark beyond the low stone railing. "Turn on your headlights, Ms. Belter."

She pulled out the switch and swore as the beams lit up a wall of shining metal that seemed to have cut them off from the rest of the world.

Lightning flamed again, and her jaw dropped. The hull of the largest supertanker would have been lost inside it. A full hundred stories it towered, and its width was three times its height; its length, concealed behind the blunt, mountain-like prow, was unguessable. "My ship," Mack told her. There was a touch of pride in his voice.

Reverently she said, "Shit," and did not know that she had spoken. The policeman was sprinting for his squad car and its short-wave radio.

"If I'm able to complete my mission," Mack explained, "the capabilities of my little ship will be increased a hundredfold. The rulers have promised that, and E-One says it's true. With a hundredfold increase—"

She silenced him with a gesture. "Look! Down there, that line across the water. Is it on fire?"

"That's the emerald, my main battery lens." Lightning returned, and half the ocean was ablaze with hot viridian and dancing berylline.

"It's—it's . . ." Her back against her door, she



pointed a trembling forefinger. "You're true!" Her cell phone buzzed as she snatched at it. "Who is this? Sharmaine? Sharmaine, I've got—"

"But it's New York. Sharmaine, this—" She fell silent, listening, then spoke to Mack, the vast ship rising from the Pacific almost forgotten. "Somebody nuked New York. The whole damned city's wiped out. Eighteen million people."

"I'm speaking from a secret location on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean," Tobi announced from the acceleration couch Mack had rigged up next to his. "As you know, chemists at a dozen top universities have synthesized the incredibly powerful fuel that will permit this ship to attack and destroy the one that is devastating the whole world." She glanced at Mack, who nodded.

"Captain Chance has indicated that he is ready. You will now witness the takeoff as a second passenger aboard the deep space patrol ship that is quite literally, the only chance Earth has. This is Tobi Belter for—"

A giant's fist slammed her deep into softness that was no longer soft, but darkness.

When she returned to consciousness, Mack asked, "Want me to feed the screen?"

Weakly she nodded, and the camera that had been focused upon her swiveled.

"Am I still on? I guess I am. I can't hear anything in my earphones. If we've already jumped—that's what Captain Chance says, he says 'jumped'—there will be a delay due to the speed of light. Have we, Captain?"

He nodded. "Twenty nine point two seconds."

"A delay of about a half minute."

In her ear, the new national anchor said, "We got footage of your takeoff from a satellite, Tobi. Incredible. It's still raining sea water as far east as Jefferson City, Missouri."

"What you are looking at is what Captain Chance sees in his screen. It's a simulation of the enemy ship, based on the data this ship's on-board computer has. It may change while you watch because new data can revise our guess at the type of ship we'll be facing.

"It looks pretty horrible, Captain. Is it bigger than ours?"

"About thirty times our size," Mack told her. "A knight."

"Did you say a night?"

The enemy ship vanished, buried under graphs and leaping numbers that were not in Arabic notation. "There seems to be a filter problem," Mack told her. "A heavy battle cruiser." Is that what you heard the first time?"

"No, but it doesn't matter. Can we beat it?"

He shook his head.

"But we must," Tobi told the listening world. It may be a hundred times bigger, but we have to win. Captain Chance is determined. So am I, not that it matters. Have we engaged yet, Captain?"

He nodded again. "Those dots—" He touched a key and the enemy ship returned. "Are missiles. At this range they'd take a month at least to reach us, but they know I've got to bore in to use the main battery effectively. If I short jump, I'll cut the range and one will be right on top of us."

"What are you going to do?" Tobi asked.

"I'm going to run," Mack said. "It's the only thing I can do." He and the ship vanished into hyperspace, and she with them.

"We are taking evasive action," she said when she was less real again, and watched the scarlet line of a laser creep toward them as the image of the DS heavy battle cruiser dwindled.

In her ear, the new national anchor said, "Can you tell us whether battle is imminent, Tobi?"

She ignored him. "As I understand it, we can leave those missiles behind by moving the fight to another part of the Solar System, so that's what Captain Chance is planning to do. Those fiends that have killed so many good people may be bigger and stronger than we are, but they have to come after us. In space fighting, that's an enormous advantage. Another is that our smaller size makes us a lot harder to locate and hit. But our main battery—that's the big laser that takes up so much room on our ship—can destroy the enemy."

"Cripple it, anyway," Mack told her. "Kill it with three or four hits, maybe."

In her ear, the new national anchor said, "Is there any way for you to escape the enemy's missiles, Tobi?"

"I apologize, folks," she told her audience, "this thirty second delay, or whatever the exact figure is, is the pits. But there's not much we can do about it."

The new national anchor said, "Got you, Tobi. I'll try not ask any more dumb questions. The lag

seems to have been cut by your passage through the fourth dimension in any case."

Earth replaced the enemy in Mack's screen, and the face of a general replaced Earth. "We think he's within extreme range now, sir," the general told Mack. "The Russians have the window, and they'd like to use it. What do you say? Want to give them the go-ahead?"

"Not yet. I can bring it in quite a bit more."

The President overlay the general. "I'm told that one of our subs will be able to launch in about fifteen minutes. For geopolitical reasons—"

"Hold until I tell you," Mack said, and short jumped again.

Tobi said, "I can't describe it. I really can't. What did you see, John?"

In her ear the new national anchor said, "Lost you for a minute there, Tobi, but I think we're getting you back now. You probably don't care, but you and Captain Chance have the largest audience in history, well in excess of two billion. That's most of the remaining population of the world."

My God, she thought, what will I do for an encore? And the answer came to her at once: die.

"You wanted to know what it looked like to us. We didn't see anything, just lost the picture."

"I feel like I've been to heaven and hell," she told the two billion. "Different parts of me, but both at once. Only I can't describe either one for you, because there aren't any words for what's going on there. Not really."

The enemy ship was on screen again, its long dark hull polka-dotted with crimson. Mack said, "They're locked to us. No use waiting," and short jumped for the third time.

This time it was a simulation of Earth that she saw, with ICBMs streaking up Russia and China, and a shadowy vessel that was still submerged in the Bay of Bengal.

"Won't they see those too?" she asked Mack. "Can't they jump away from them?"

For the first time that day, he smiled. "They're watching us, and some of those ought to be on top of them before they can recharge."

"Pawn takes knight," God announced almost regretfully. "You know if it weren't for the suffering,

this would be lots of fun."

Five hundred thousand light years from Earth, Tobi Belter tapped Captain Mack Chance's shoulder. He froze, then spun around.

"I'm here," she told him, "freckles and all. "Not one of those fake things. Not a simulation. This is me." She took a half step closer, so that they were almost touching. "Feel something. Anything. I'd like that."

His hand stroked the back of her thigh.

"This is the one before the next to last, isn't it? You're recharging—I can hear the machines. That will use up the fuel we brought from Earth. You'll jump once more, and then we'll have to refuel somehow."

"I left you on the shuttle," Mack said.

She smiled a little sadly. "You thought you did. Those things have two airlocks. One to outside and one to the cargo bay. When I saw you were getting ready to go, I went out through the cargo bay. I got into our ship about three minutes before you did, and hid."

"We're going back," he said. "I can take you back to your own world and get more fuel, start over."

"Yes, you could. But you're not going to." For perhaps ten seconds she was silent. "The President was thinking about taking our ship. Did you know that? Seizing it and having American scientists go over every molecule of it. Imagine what they'd learn! They already know how to make jump fuel."

"I was—" Mack interrupted himself. "Are you saying he told you?"

"Of course not. But I'd talked with him several times, and I know how to tell what a politician's thinking. That was what he was thinking, and he tried to sound me out without telling me anything. There'd be a PR problem, a big one, after the way we'd built you up. That's what I told him, and it was the truth. Then I offered him an alternative that was nearly as good, and better in some ways, with no problem attached. Do you think I could've pulled off that stunt on the shuttle without the astronauts' cooperation?"

Mack said nothing, glancing at his screen then back to her.

"This is the alternative. I'll go with you, make you take me along—"

"You can't."

"I think I can. So does the President. You're going



to take me along, and I'm going to learn as much as I can about our ship and how it works. When it's transformed into a supership that even you can hardly—

"If," he told her. The word came like a stone.

"When it's transformed, made eight times faster and twelve times more powerful, which is what you told me once, I'm going to learn all I can about that. And I'm going to get you to take me back to Earth, which will be nothing to you then. You'll probably tell us a lot more than you have already, too, because the things you know now will be child's play to you then, and if Earth becomes a space power you'll have a friendly force and a refueling station behind enemy lines."

He had turned from her to press keys. "We're going back. We'll jump back as soon as we're charged."

"It will be the end of our mission."

"My mission."

"Ours, because if you take me back and kick me out, the mission is over. Failed. You'll have to land to refuel and they'll never let you get away again."

"You'll be killed." His shoulders sagged, and she knew that she had won. "Tobi—oh, Tobi!"

"Tell me you love me. That will make it easier."

"That makes it harder," he said. "A thousand times harder."

"Easier for me."

"I love you." He stood and embraced her, not kissing her because kisses were still a new and foreign thing to him; but clasping her slender, frail body to his. After a long time, a time expressed not by the ticking of a clock but by the hums and clickings of the drive, he said, "For all those years I dreamed of this. All those patrols."

"I did too." For a moment she reveled in his honest apple-green eyes. "Life is crazy, isn't it? You get what you really want, no matter how impossible it seems . . . . While I was talking to the President, and plotting and planning, and talking to him again and to people at NASA, I dreamed of this."

God cleared his throat. "Pawn to F seven."

"This is Tobi Belter for ABC, BBC, CBS, CNN,

NBC, and the rest of it. It will take one million years for this broadcast to reach Earth, and by then it will have attenuated to nothing and the human race will have died out or evolved into something else. I know all that. But it's possible that jump ships from there may pick this up somewhere while it's still strong enough to read. That's why I'm doing this. I want you to know what happened to us.

"We're out of jump fuel. All we have are the nuclears, and there are a couple of enemy battle groups coming for us. There's no way we can outfight them and no place to run. We think we've got about five minutes more.

"But we tried. Tell the children. We tried to save the whole goddamned human race from something that grinds people down to animals or machines. And we tried to make a couple of human beings more than anyone's ever been, because it wasn't just Mack's ship they were going to make a hundred times better, it was Mack, too, and with me with him it would've been me.

"Now we're going to die. But we would have died anyway, a TV reporter that nobody a hundred miles from Portland, Oregon, ever gave a damn about, and a Navy man nobody outside of his own Navy ever heard of.

"But we tried. We took the chance knowing the odds were against us. And this is better. Tell the children. Tell them—"

The Devil exclaimed, "Gotcha! There's no way out. No way! No hope."

"There's always *some* hope," God objected mildly. "I've seen to that."

"Ha!"

"My move I think? I can't advance that pawn any more at present, just as you say, so I think I'll move this one over here two spaces. That takes it to B four, right? Which seems significant somehow."

The Devil's response was at once a snarl and moan, tragic yet horrible.

God told him sympathetically, "I know how you feel, old fellow, Believe me, I know *exactly* how you feel."

# **AVON BOOKS**

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# ONE-TWO-THREE FOR ME

by Gene Wolfe

ONE OF THE YOUNGERS WAS RAPPING on a stick of firewood with another one, moving it up and down and listening to how the noise changed; and Jak—big, tough, blond Jak—yelled, “Don’t do that!” sounding mad.

That was how it started, and this is the story he told. It was hard to get it out of him, but if I told you about all that it would take until morning. What finally did it was Dik getting sticks, too, and tapping one with the other like the younger, and then I did it, and Jak told us to make us stop.

It was four years ago (he said) and I was hard for this one girl, I can’t even remember her name, but back then I thought the worlds turned around and around just for her. You know how it is.

On spring walk we went back to the old one, back to Earth. There’s people digging there all the time, looking for stuff that might explain how people got to be the way they are. Or they think it will. Anyway, they say they do.

I used to think it too, ‘cause the machines said so. If you know how an animal acted when there weren’t any people, you can understand—maybe—why it acts the way it does now, so how’d people act before they got to be people? Only I don’t believe it any more. Now I think you ought to let dead stuff alone.

But we were really loud for it then, this girl and me were, telling each other things we’d uploaded and pretending they were our own ideas ‘cause we’d changed a couple of words. You know how you do.

We set down and each of us got a bot, and our bots told us we could dig anyplace we wanted and they’d show us whatever they found and let us touch it if we wouldn’t hurt it and be real tappy. They had suggestions, too—you know how they do. Places where somebody else found something a hundred years ago. Places where everybody else had dug already. We said no, show us the map.

They did, and there was a big hill on it where some city’d been. I forget the name. We said let’s go

there, and the bots said nobody goes there ‘cause it’s too recent, only about eight hundred years. Nobody digs there.

That settled it, we made them take us there and they were right, there wasn’t anybody else for a long, long way, just dry grass and the wind blowing dead bushes around. Jo An and me—that was her name, I remember now—thought it was swell. We had the bots set up our jifhuts and started digging, each of us picking a place for our bot. Mine was a couple hundred meters from hers. My bot found some buttons and bones, and those big pins they used to use to fasten wood. I kept the best buttons and threw the rest away.

Pretty soon Jo An started yelling for me, so I came over and she had this bent thing with some square buttons where it bent. I still see it every time I shut my eyes. It’s black, and the square buttons are in sort of a square, too, three wide and four high, if you know what I mean, and when we scraped the dirt off them, there were numbers on them, like somebody that couldn’t count had to see the number on each of them to know what to do. The first three across said one, two, three, and the next row, four, five, six. Like that. Zero was in the middle of the last row, sort of like it was really ten, only it didn’t say ten, it said zero. The ones on each side had other stuff on them, One was a star, I remember that.

Jo An said listen, and she pushed in the first one, and the bent thing made a noise sort of like hitting together two sticks, not loud. She pushed in the second one, the one with a two on it, and it made a noise that was almost the same, just a little bit higher up. Then she pushed the three button, and it got a little higher again.

I said it was probably for some kind of lab demonstration, but her bot said it was for calling people who weren’t there, and was well known to science and all that. So we asked what the buttons were for and the bot said they were to say who you wanted.

“That’s crazy,” Jo An said, “why not just say who

you want, like we do?"

And the bot said that back then people mostly thought they were too good to talk to machines unless to call them names, so they did this. "You may keep it if you wish," it said. "It is without scientific value."

She wanted to know who she'd been calling when she pushed the buttons so I could hear it, but the bot didn't know. Then Jo An said she'd keep it a while and maybe fool around with it some more, and she put it in her jifhut with the rest of her stuff. We found a lot more after that, some pots and wire, and a skull, only I don't think they matter.

After a while it started getting dark, so we told the bots to quit digging and fix us something to eat, and we ate and sat around talking and listening to the wind, and I said how about it tonight and she said, no, not tonight. You know how it goes when you're a younger, I got kind of mad then and went into my jifhut and told my bot to wash me and lay down, only I couldn't sleep.

Jak wanted to stop talking then, and I wish we'd let him, just started talking about something different. But we didn't. We kept after him till he started again. We knew he hadn't really told us about the sticks and why they bothered him so much.

I lay down a while, he said, only I couldn't go to sleep. And I got to thinking maybe she wasn't asleep either, only I didn't want to go over and talk or anything 'cause I was still pretty mad. But I put on my clothes, most of them, and went outside and looked around and listened to see if I could hear her asleep or talking to herself or anything.

Only I couldn't. It was pretty cold, I remember that, and you could see a lot more stars than the machines ever show you. I turned up the heat on my coat and walked around, and finally started climbing the hill, the big hill that had been some kind of crazy city before people knew how to really build them and where to put them. I shouldn't tell you naifs this, but I was thinking maybe she'd wake up and buzz my jifhut and I wouldn't be in there. You know what I mean? Then she'd think where is he and look all around and finally see me way off on the top of the hill watching the stars and maybe come up there with me.

It didn't happen—I guess it never does. I climbed

and climbed and finally got up to the top, and when I did I felt like I'd been climbing that hill all night, so I didn't want to go down right off. So I looked at the stars a while just like I'd planned to, and there was this big white planet real close, with most of it blacked out by the one we were on. That was kind of interesting.

Mostly I was thinking about the city I was standing on, and how it had probably been all spiky the way you see them on a terminal, with those little narrow towers held up with iron, and probably they'd thought it would always be there. There'd been birds, a lot of them, 'cause my bot had said a lot of the bones we found had been bird bones. So I thought about birds flying around the towers, white birds, and the people walking around not paying a lot of attention, but thinking about the sort of stuff I was just about always thinking about, what's for dinner and how'm I going to do on the KUTT. And I decided I was going to slow down a little bit and stop going on all the time like that stuff mattered. Sometimes I forget, though.

My legs were hurting a little and I was pretty tired, so after a while I turned around and climbed back down. I was up there half an hour, maybe. You naifs really want to hear this?

All right. It isn't anything, I guess. Only when I got close to the bottom where our jifhuts were, somebody came out of hers, somebody not as tall as she was. There weren't any lights inside, and that made it way darker than out where I was, and I saw the door open and somebody come out.

No, I knew it wasn't her. It was too little and didn't move like her, and if it had been her I'd have been able to see her face, a little bit anyhow. And I couldn't. It was like it was all covered with hair or something.

I just saw it for a minute and it was gone. It came out and shut the door, and then I don't know. Maybe it went into the shadow of the jifhut or something, but it was gone. When I got there I looked all around. I didn't find anything, and pretty soon I went into mine and went to sleep.

In the morning I was up eating, and Jo An came in just in her robe. She was kind of dancing around, and she said, "Look what I found!" and held it out. It wasn't anything much, just a little bit of white powder in a bag, Not real white, even, but sort of yellowy-brown and dirty looking, like somebody'd dropped it



on the ground and scraped it up.

"It's wonderful!" she said. "Here, you want to taste it?" I said it was probably salt, and I'd tasted it already. She held it out and laughed a lot, showing it to me and then pulling it back like I wanted to take it away from her, and jumping around. "You know how I feel? I feel like I've been dead my whole life, and this is the, you know, what makes you alive and I am but you're still dead and I feel wonderful!"

I asked her where she got it, and she said she found it. "I'll put a little bit on my hand," she said, and she did, just a couple grains. "There! Lick that! Lick it up!"

She kept after me, but I wouldn't, and all of a sudden it wasn't Jo An and me any more. I was alone over here and she was alone over there, and there wasn't anything I could do about it even if I wanted to. She licked her hand herself, finally. I remember how clean it was, and how bright her eyes were, so bright it sort of hurt to look at them, and how her spit strung out till she wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

That was when I called my bot and said we were leaving, to pack up all my stuff and we'd go back as soon as it was ready. I just wanted to get out of that whole place, and I don't ever want to go back there again, either. If any of you want to go, that's fine. It's up to you. Just don't try and get me to go with you, all right?

Oh. Well, I sort of had to push her out of my jifhut so my bot could pack and I could finish eating. And when it was done I looked around for her so I could tell them when I got back how long she'd said she was going to stay. They could've left it on her terminal, sure, only I had an idea she wouldn't send much back. Probably nothing.

We looked around thinking maybe she'd gone back where she'd been digging or something, but she wasn't there and didn't answer when I buzzed her

jifhut. Finally her bot went inside and found her in there, and she was dead with that powder on her hands and face and sort of dusted on the floor around her. I don't know how much more she'd licked up, but there was a lot left.

So I went back, and after a while they let me come back here. It was a long time before I could think about it 'cause it hurt so much. I kept thinking I should've done something, about all the things I could've done, you know, and not much, really, about what had happened.

Even when I did, it took me a while to see it. But she'd called. She'd called, using the bent thing her bot found for her, and whatever it was she'd called had come just like it was supposed to. And it left her the powder, left it beside her bed 'cause that was what it was supposed to do.

Jak wouldn't talk much after that, so somebody said, "You think it'll come again? Come here, because we were making the same kind of noise?"

He sort of sighed and shook his head. "I just don't like to hear it, that's all. You wouldn't either if you were me."

I wanted to know what had happened to the bent thing that Jo An's bot had found, and he said he had it. "But I've got it in a box that locks up good, and I won't let you touch it or even look at it. I didn't want it, but I guess her bot must've put it in with my stuff, 'cause when I got home and unpacked, there it was."

Nobody said anything after that, and Jak got up and put more wood on our fire. Dik pulled two sticks out and started rapping them together like the younger had, trying to get the noise right. He did it two or three times, and then we heard something, an animal or something, moving around in the dark, down where the blow-pipe cane grows ten or twelve meters high, rattling and rattling, and Dik threw them in the fire.

**For his many and varied  
contributions to the field,  
our congratulations to**



**Robert Weinberg**

**on his fifth  
nomination for a  
World Fantasy Award.**



# SIDHE WHO MUST BE OBEYED

by Jody Lynn Nye

"HELEN GAHAGAN DE DANAN? That's an unusual name," said Peter Mehoy, mentally counting the number of pages in the nominating petition sitting on the desk in front of him. "De Danann. Is that French?"

"No, it's Irish. Old Irish. Very old Irish."

"Well, you're campaigning in the right city, ma'am," Mehoy said, with a smile. Then he looked up.

"My father always said he felt at home here," said the statuesque young woman on the other side of the desk. Mehoy found he was gawking, pulled in his eyes and yanked up his jaw. She was as tall and thin as a supermodel, but where they looked undernourished, she seemed normal, even extraordinary. Her huge green, slightly slanted eyes were like windows into a wild landscape that had conquered millions and took no prisoners. She was beautiful in an otherworldly way. Were those ears of hers... pointed? Good lord! Mehoy's jaw escaped his control and dropped open again. "And before you ask if there are any more at home like me, there aren't."

"Thank God for that," Mehoy said, recovering his senses. "Well, this all seems in order. You have the correct number of signatures, and if they all check out, you're on your way to becoming Mayor of the city of Chicago. All you need is the votes."

"Thank you," said Helen de Danaan, extending a long, slim hand. Mehoy took it, and just kept from wincing as she squeezed his fingers in a formidable grip like a wire clamp. "I hope I can count on yours."

"Uh, of course," Mehoy said. As soon as the young woman left the office, he was on the telephone. "Mr. Scanlan? Yes, sir. I've just met someone you're going to have to watch."

Only seventy-odd days remained between filing as a candidate and the February election itself. With the change in the election laws barring partisan primaries, Helen de Danann was only one of several Democratic candidates for the high office. She hadn't

been approached by any of the big dealmakers yet, depending instead on devoted special-interest groups. In an effort to win support and attract campaign workers, she went from luncheon to whistle-stop to college auditorium, speaking her mind on the issues.

Her platform, weighted as it was toward the environment and family issues, received considerable approbation from her listeners. The press loved her, because she was photogenic and not afraid to stir up controversy over the issues. She made her point, again and again, that if she was elected, she intended to take a strong line over what she considered to be wrong and corrupt in the city. There was so much to be done, she exhorted the audience, and they cheered, because they agreed with her.

All the time, Helen was aware that she was being watched very carefully. She waited until the big fellows were ready to spring, and make their demands.

"Hey, dere, Helen!" A voice came from behind a limousine window that was rolled down only far enough to let sound out, but no light in. The palms of Helen's hands tingled. This was it, then. "C'mere, hon. I wanna talk to you."

She looked around. No one else from her entourage was nearby. With the utmost caution, she approached the car and tried to peer in the window. She could see only a shoulder and most of a hand holding an unlit cigar. And the car was full of cold iron and steel. She felt it clear through to her bones.

"C'mon, hop in," the voice said. "There's some people who want to have a little tete-a-tete."

"I don't think so, sir," Helen said, backing away.

"I'll have to insist. Boys, help the lady in."

As she looked over her shoulder, she saw a couple of very big men in suits turning the photographers and newsmen away. Two more well-dressed bruisers had appeared out of nowhere, and each taken one of her elbows. The big man on her right opened the car door, and urged her toward it.

No time to summon a messenger fairy to go for help. Rather than sprawl face-down on the pavement,

Helen got in. As she sat down at the extreme edge of the leather seat, her companion scratched a match and held it to his cigar. In the sudden light, she identified him. Alfonse Scanlan. The big man. At last, the dealmakers had come to her.

Helen made herself comfortable at the head of the table in the private room in the back of Bruno's restaurant. The front room looked like a simple family establishment with ten tables covered by checkered tablecloths and candles leaning out of chianti bottles. Back here, it was strictly class: white linen, silver, and crystal glasses.

She watched the careful way that the shorter of the two obvious bodyguards closed the door on his hand so he could just see out through the crack, to make sure there were no physical eavesdroppers. She assumed the room had been swept for electronic bugs, or other kinds of listening devices. All the kinds but those her family was capable of, that is. Helen hadn't lived in this city all of her life without understanding the benefit of an ace in the hole. Several were in her possession, to be sure, though she doubted she could defend herself against all these ruffians if things turned really dirty. Bruno's had a reputation as a place where inconvenient people disappeared. It sat on the bank of the Chicago river, and, she had been told, it had a trap door in this very back room leading to water.

The men, for they were all men, kept the lights low as they took their places, but she had excellent night vision, and identified them all one by one. Guy Chavriole, of the restaurant chains. Stanley Lafferty, the oldest man there, a member of the first Daley Machine. Dominick Frangi, son of Apollonio Frangi, head of the Teamsters Union. Fabio Umberto, 'connected' to all of the others. Bernie Crawford, from the grocery store empire. And Alfonse Scanlan, the man in whose limousine she had ridden, a rich, influential power broker. A dangerous brew. She was certain some of them were armed; the feel of cold steel in the air was tangible. But there was also a palpable fear. They were scared of her. Good. Helen settled back in her chair and crossed her legs.

"Miss De Danaan," Lafferty began, "you've stirred up a lot of interest in your run for mayor."

"I should hope so," Helen said, nodding. "It's a lofty post, with a great deal of responsibility and a lot of power. People should pay attention to it."

"They do pay a lot of attention," Lafferty said. "In fact, dere's an accepted way of going about gaining dat exalted office. And some people don't enjoy having the status quo changed. It isn't good when... dose people are upset. They have a way of making anybody in their way disappear. You look like a nice young woman. You probably don't run into that kind of person very often, and I promise, you don't want to."

"But what about when the status quo is bad?" Helen asked. Show no fear, her father had always told her. The only things her people were frightened of were gray iron and salt. "You'd think that those people want to choose the best for Chicago. There are things that ought to be changed."

"We don't want 'em changed," Scanlan said, frankly. "If you push us, we could make it hard for you. Even impossible."

The bodyguards near the door each put a hand into the front of his coat as if to check for weapons. Helen felt the hand of fear touch her heart. She could die here. Cold steel surrounded her in every direction. They knew. They knew about her.

"How—" she began. Her voice squeaked, so she stopped and started over again. "How would you make it impossible?"

"Well..." Scanlan looked at the glowing tip of his cigar, took a long drag, and blew out a plume of strong-smelling smoke. "How do you think your precious tree-huggers and moms-with-dependent-children would react if they found out that maybe," he leaned toward her, and his eyes kindled like the end of his cigar, "maybe you wasn't human?"

They knew about her! Helen felt her eyes go wide. Frangi took her reaction for fear, and grinned.

"We had you followed to your so-called address, baby. 3250 North Lincoln Park West."

"Nice location, isn't it?" Helen asked.

"It's a boathouse on Belmont Harbor. And you don't own any of those boats. We checked."

"I never claimed I did," Helen said. Now she could hardly keep from laughing.

"And, then," Frangi said, pausing for effect, "my guy says he saw you dive right into the water. Sploosh! And you come out the next morning, right out of the water, dry as a bone."

Helen couldn't hold it in any longer. "And this is your great threat? Tell anyone! Publish and be damned to you!" She laughed merrily, until she was



out of breath. She beat her feet upon the floor. Oh, wait until she told her father!

"What?" Scanlan asked, springing to his feet. This surely could not be the reaction he expected. His men had drawn their guns. She had nothing to fear from lead bullets.

"I don't deny your precious charges," Helen said, dabbing with her handkerchief at the running mascara in the corner of her eye. "It's not a secret, unlike many of the things I know about you gentlemen. In fact, it's true! I'm proud of my heritage. I'm not a human being, dear man. I'm one of the Sidhe."

The men laughed, uncomfortably.

"Yeah, sure," Frangi said, with a sour grimace. "And I'm Bozo the clown."

"Well, Bozo, here's a bit of tomfoolery for you!"

Through the crack in the door, a tiny messenger fairy zipped in. Like a ball of light, it flitted from one man to the next, drinking up the contents of the liquor glasses on the table. The men leaped up and made for the door, but she bound it fast, wood on wood, with a flick of her will.

"Oh, come and sit down," Helen said. She stood tall, the business suit abandoned for the flowing robes of a sidhe princess, the fairy hovering over her head like a light bulb. She tossed back her hair so her ears were in full view. "I'm not finished with you yet."

Now the tables were turned. Instead of expecting her to fear them for their power and their ruthlessness, they watched her as warily as chickens eyeing a fox.

"But, why you?" Lafferty asked, and there was a lot of nodding and muttering from the rest of the shadowy figures. "Why do you want to be mayor if you can do all of that?"

"Experience, gentlemen." Helen put her hands on the table, where the men could see the webbing between her fingers, see the green gleam in her eyes. "The only way to make things happen is to be at the top where the decisions are made. We're willing to work and be cooperative, but no one's listening to us. Who do you think has been clearing the zebra mussels off the water intakes for the city? Civic-minded sidhe, that's who. And we didn't say a word when all of that trash was dumped into the lake after the Great Fire. But it didn't end there. It's become worse! You can't go on using the lake as a dumping ground."

"It's legal," Lafferty said, with a shrug.

"It's a disaster. The city needs cleaning up. Since

the end of the most recent Daley dynasty, it's gotten...messy. Until the next lad is old enough to run, we thought we'd better step in and keep the seat warm, so to speak. The latest mayor was a disaster. He had no care at all for the environment. The parks are dying. The harbors and rivers are full of garbage. The lake is getting to be such a mess. Can't have that. Living creatures need life around them. Otherwise we'll become moribund, humans and sidhe alike."

"You've already got the green vote," Bernie Crawford said, refilling his glass and swigging the contents.

"I intend to run a clean campaign, gentlemen, without dredging up the past, and I do mean dredging. And speaking of which," she said, scanning her audience and finding them uncommonly receptive, "living in the depths of the lake as we do, you meet people that others thought long lost. You might say we know where all the bodies are buried."

At that, several of the men started violently. "What about it?" Umberto shifted. His voice was a deep croak. "People die every day. There's nothing to prove how they got there."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Helen replied. "Not only do the dead vote in this city, gentlemen, they...talk. Mr. Crawford, I bring you greetings from Ed Jefferson. Mr. Umberto, Sonny Grangio sends his regards. Mr. Frangi, the Tolla brothers want you to know that they remember you. And they remember many other things, too." She rattled off dates, times, and names of men who attributed their abrupt demise to those who were present.

Wood and water would not lie to her. Where was it? Helen held out her hands as if dowsing, and located the trap door by the feel of the air above it. She ran to it in a flutter of white robes. "We have a handy door here. Shall I invite them up to talk with us?" The men were aghast.

"No! No!"

"Wait just a moment," Lafferty said, stabbing at the air with his cigar. "What are we all getting bugged about? If you're something supernatural, you can't run for office."

"Certainly I can," Helen said, ambling back to her seat. "Show me anywhere in the regulations that says I have to be human. I'm a citizen, a resident, and a registered voter, and I'm well over eighteen years old. You've checked up on me already, I'm sure."

"Yeah," Umberto said, taking a slip of paper out

of his breast pocket. "And we know you're a fraud. In your campaign literature, it says here you graduated from Von Steuben High School in '02."

"I certainly did."

Umberto glared at her from under his heavy brows. "There are no records of anyone called de Danaan graduating in 2002."

"You're a century off, dear man. I was in the class of 1902. I was the prize of their women's swimming society. A pity women weren't competing in the Olympics at the time. Those were great days." Helen thought back nostalgically. "Although I don't miss the woolen swimsuits at all." The men at the table were speechless.

"You don't look 124," Scanlan said gallantly, breaking the silence.

"Thank you," Helen said, with a grin. The famous sidhe charm was starting to work at last. These were indeed tough men. "You'll find that the rest of my resume checks out true, too. My family came over about the same time the Daleys did. I am not trying to scare you gentlemen off. No, indeed. I need your help, as you pointed out at the beginning of our meeting."

"Cleaning up the city," Lafferty said, skeptically.

"To get elected," Helen said. "Once I'm in office, I will clean things up. Count upon it. But this is the first time my people have had anyone willing to run openly for office. There may be resistance to the idea, as you pointed out."

"Whaddaya mean, openly?" Umberto asked, frowning.

"Oh, well, some of your ward heelers are real healers," Helen said. "And for a while, about a sixth of the aldermen were sidhe—both seelie and unseelie, which is why they bickered so much and got nothing done. I'll change all that. I won't rule by fiat, and I won't enchant you into helping—don't think I can't

if I want. I prefer willing cooperation. When I give instructions, I'll want them followed."

"To tell you the truth, ma'am," Lafferty said, "we don't much care for the notion of putting all our influence behind a newcomer."

"I'd never ask you to back a newcomer," Helen said. "I know this city. For a human realm, it's the best in the world. I've done my apprenticeship for the last fifteen Democratic campaigns. I've stuffed envelopes and made telephone calls. I know what people want, and what they expect. I learned this city like a book, going door to door at Thanksgiving, handing out turkeys to voters, and carcasses to the deceased ones."

"Yes, but the dead can't really vote," Lafferty said, looking really worried now.

"They have in the past for your candidates," Helen replied. "And they are some of my most devoted campaign workers. But it's the flesh and blood vote I need to depend upon. Between your influence and my family's powers, we ought to be unbeatable. So what do you say, gentlemen?" She put her hands on the table and stood up. "Can I count upon your support?"

"What about the guys on the bottom?" Crawford asked, suspiciously.

"You help me with my campaign," Helen promised, "and dead men will tell no tales."

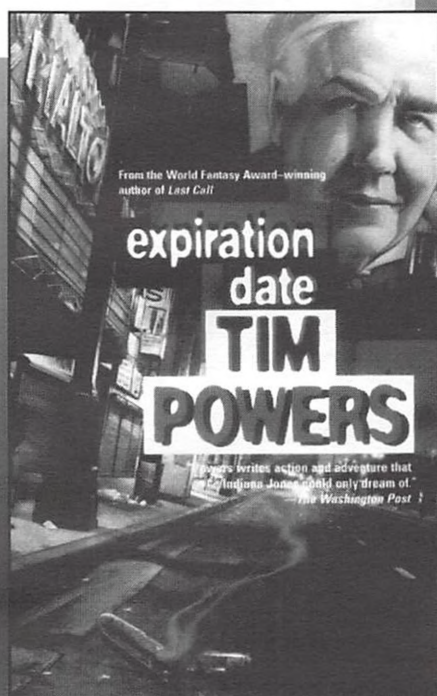
"It's a partnership, then?" Lafferty asked, standing up and offering his hand.

"It's a hierarchy," Helen said, firmly. "And I shall be the one in charge. Between your people and mine, my friends, the City That Works will be the City That Works Miracles."

"Gentlemen," Scanlan said, raising his glass to her. "I give you the next mayor of the city of Chicago."



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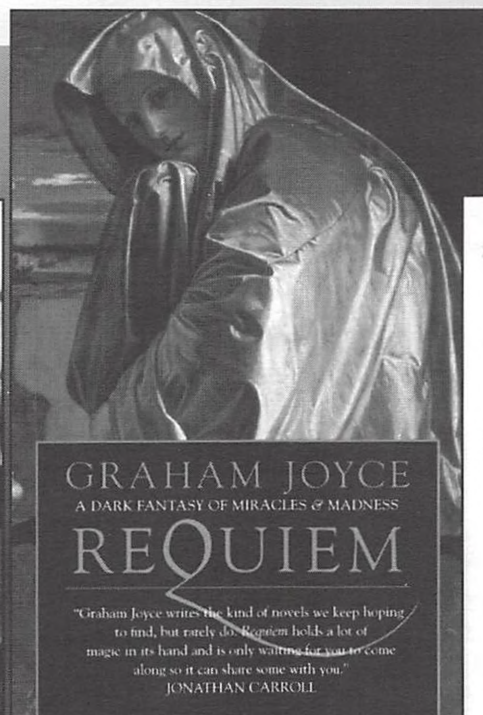


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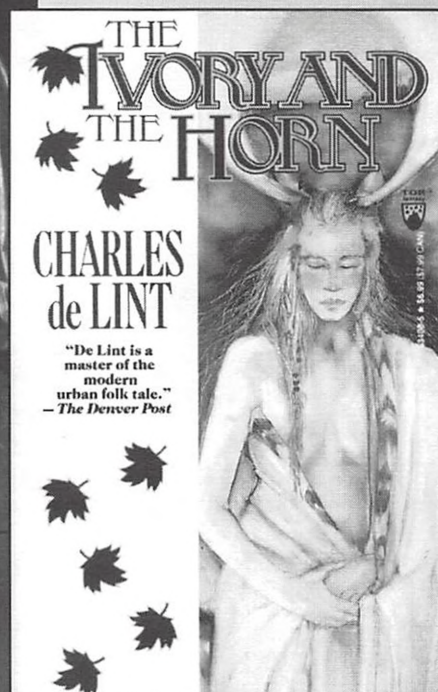


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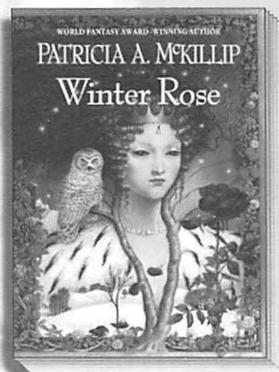
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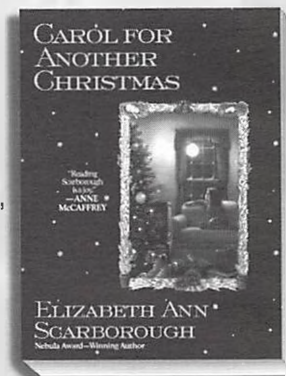


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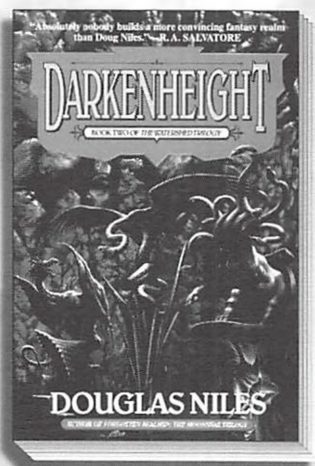


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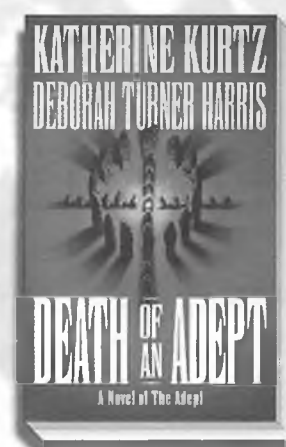


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# GRANDPA'S SECRET

by Jay Bonansinga

A TELEPHONE RINGING in the dead of night—especially in a silent apartment—is a shattering incongruity, like a frightened bird trapped in a church.

Stirring from his fitful sleep, one eye blinking open, focusing fuzzily on the digital clock beside him, Brinsley Kettlekamp was groggily unaware of just how shattering this call would turn out to be. Brinsley was not the type to get his bowels in a bunch over late night phone calls. Over the years, he had settled into a starkly numb lifestyle uncluttered by trivial details such as human relationships or kids or even hope for the future. The booze had taken care of all that, the booze and the grueling hours as a probate attorney, and the constant drone of unease in the back of his mind that he might one day succumb to the mental illness that had claimed both his mother and his grandfather. Madness ran in the Kettlekamp clan—a poisonous current flowing through the veins of each successive generation—and Brinsley knew it was always just a breakdown away.

Out in the hallway, the phone kept clamoring.

Brinsley managed to disentangle himself from his bed, his head buzzing from the nightcap of bourbon and water he had inhaled hours earlier. The floor was cool on the soles of his bare feet as he padded across the room. He was a tall man, gangly as an arthritic stork, with stooped shoulders and an awkward manner that suggested a man at war with his own pituitary gland. He had a long neck, a shock of unruly red hair, and a freckled, boyish face that belied his thirty-nine years of stuffing the world's misery back down his throat.

He answered the phone on the fourth ring, combing spindly fingers through his hair. "Hello?"

Without greeting, salutation, or even a warning, a voice on the other line blurted, "He's talking, Brinsley—*Jesus*— he's speaking—"

"Debbie?"

There was a young night-nurse who worked at Sauk Valley Nursing Center named Debbie Maloney, and this shrill, ghostly voice sounded vaguely like her.

"—Brinsley?— did you hear what I said?!—"

Brinsley licked his dry lips, his mouth tasting of rotten almonds. "What are you talking about? You're not talking about Gramps—"

"—I'm talking about your grandfather! I'm in the lounge outside his room!"

Chicken flesh stitched up Brinsley's neck. "What do you mean, speaking? Speaking like how?"

"*Speaking*-speaking—what do you think I'm talking about?"

"—but—how?—"

"I can't explain it, Brinsley, but it's bad, it's definitely very bad, it's definitely not good, and you've just got to get over here!"

"—but—see—it's gotta be some kind of a mistake—"

"—Brinsley! Please!—"

"Okay. Fine. Um, fine. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

He hung up the phone, and he tried his very best to keep his hands from trembling while he dressed.

In all her twelve years of professional nursing, Debbie Maloney had never been this spooked. It wasn't exactly the breathy rattling of the wind against the battered aluminum shutters outside Enoch Kettlekamp's windows, or the echo of ancient parquet tiles ticking and settling in the labyrinth of empty corridors outside his room, or the muffled sputtering of countless steam radiators as the nursing home's current population of thirty-six ailing geriatrics slumbered in their respective wards. On the contrary, the thing that was giving Nurse Maloney the jim-jams like never before was the sight of Enoch Kettlekamp himself, his withered form sitting up against the metal backboard of his hospital bed, his gaunt, jaundiced face puckering like a child attempting to form a compound sentence for the first time. The old man had been completely mute for decades, his mind ravaged by Alzheimers, his throat constricted by senile dementia, unable to form the simplest declaration. And now,

tonight, in the rock bottom pit of the graveyard shift, the old cocker decides to cackle some pathetic confession to one Debra Lorraine Maloney, RN, MSW—a woman who had never asked to play priest to some sad old head-case from Chicago.

“—errr—rahhh—ll-lll-lahh—” The old man’s garbled voice sounded like a rusty engine that hadn’t been started for decades, the bearings having trouble turning over. His expression was creasing and contorting, his eyes shimmering with tears, his tongue darting in and out of rotted teeth. It was hard to tell whether the words were some painful deathbed atonement, or some joyous spiritual exclamation.

Whatever it was, Debbie thought to herself, the old geezer was dying to say it.

“That’s very good, Mr. Kettlekamp,” Debbie urged, stroking his withered, wrinkled hand, his flesh like cold bread dough. She spoke loudly, clearly, simply, as though addressing a small child. “Just hold that thought because your grandson’s gonna be here in a just a minute.”

“—rrrruhh—llllhhh!—”

“Take your time, Mr. Kettlekamp, it’s okay, everything’s gonna be fine.”

“—rr-rrr-rhhll!—”

“That’s very interesting, Mr. Kettlekamp, now try to—”

Debbie stopped abruptly because she heard something out in the corridor—and Debbie was on intimate terms with every sound, every bump, every creak, every last rattle in every last corner of the building as though the Sauk Valley Nursing Center were one of her own children slumbering behind her, and she had that inchoate sense that all mother’s seem to develop over time, the sense that lives in the central nervous system, that instantly identifies, catalogues and distinguishes a distress-cry from a harmless little burp—and right this instant, that particular sense was telling Debra Maloney that there were footsteps entering the building that didn’t ordinarily belong.

*That was fast,* Debbie thought to herself. “I think your grandson is here, Mr. Kettlekamp—you remember your grandson—Brinsley?”

Enoch’s face was blazing with effort: “Rrr—ruhh—”

“I’ll be right back,” Debbie said as genially as her frayed nerves would allow.

She stepped out into the corridor.

Several things struck her at once: The flickering

fluorescent tube overhead, vibrating, making the corridor buzz like a dimly lit nickelodeon, and the figure coming through the far door, the door leading into the critical care ward. A long black overcoat was draped over the visitor’s decrepit little physique, and a slouch hat obscured his ancient visage, his face turned downward as he approached. He was still over thirty feet away, yet Debbie could plainly hear his wheezing, tubercular breath.

This was not Brinsley Kettlekamp.

“Can I help you?” Debbie was stunned, motionless, standing half way between Enoch’s doorway and the opposite wall of the corridor where a yellow fire extinguisher was mounted to the crumbling cinderblock.

The old man in black said nothing, just kept striding purposely forward—albeit with a nasty limp—toward Enoch Kettlekamp’s room.

“Wait a minute—sir?—you can’t go in there! Sir?! Did you hear what I said?!”

The man paid no attention to the nurse.

“—Sir!—”

The intruder walked into Enoch’s room.

At first, Debbie couldn’t move, couldn’t utter another sound, couldn’t compute what she was seeing, it was such a non sequitur, the logic of it so surreal, so inexplicable, so wrong; but then she got a little bit miffed because she saw that this black clad old gent was leaning over Enoch Kettlekamp’s bed now, clamping a sinewy hand down on Enoch’s mouth as though trying to prevent whatever nonsense was threatening to trickle out the geezer’s lips.

Debbie stormed back into the room. “Now you wait just one damn minute!—”

The intruder whirled toward Debbie, and he showed his teeth, and Debbie got a good glimpse of the intruder’s face for the first time, and it wasn’t something that she would have chosen to put on one of her homemade Christmas cards, no-sir-ree-bob, the haunted blood-shot eyes buried in map-like wrinkles, the sunken cheeks and grizzled chin, the expression cured by a black knowledge that no person in their right mind would ever want. Debbie advanced toward him, starting to say something else, when the intruder opened his mouth and let out a caterwaul that sounded half-human, half-feral, like a cat being skinned alive. The cry only lasted a few seconds, but it paralyzed Debbie with its tormented, ululating sound, and for a moment Debbie thought she saw a stump of



purple scar tissue inside his mouth where his tongue should have been, wagging like a boxer's tail, but that was impossible—wasn't it?—

"Now wait!—you can't just—*get away from him you asshole!*" Debbie's choked cry came out a lot less forceful than she intended.

The chrome plated revolver came out of nowhere, leaping up out of the man's sash pocket, fluorescent light glimmering off the silver barrel. Debbie stared at the weapon like it was a poisonous cobra about to strike, and all at once, time seemed to slow down to a crawl, a dreamy, syrupy slow-motion, as the man pressed the barrel against Enoch Kettlekamp's head, and Debbie found herself acting on some kind of heroic reserve that she didn't even know she had, and all of a sudden she was lurching toward the bed, arms outstretched, reaching for the gun before the intruder had a chance to fire, and her hands clutched at the barrel like a dousing wand—

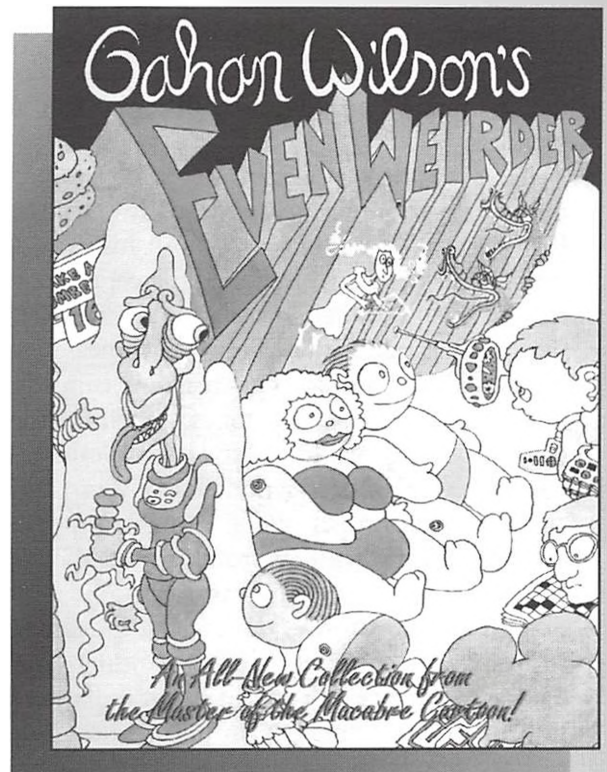
—and the gun went off.

The bullet went high, chewing a hole in the stained acoustic tile ceiling, puffing plaster dust and asbestos snow down on the bedding, and Enoch shuddered and stammered, and the intruder growled like a jackal, trying to wrench the gun away from Debbie, but Debbie was holding fast to the barrel—which was now as hot as a branding iron—and the momentum drove both of them against the wall. The gun went off again, twice, the blasts like muffled, watery claps in the tiny room, the flare like an arc weld, the noise making Debbie's ears ring. Finally, the white hot barrel slipped from her grasp.

Both combatants careened to the floor.

Debbie managed to make it out the door, and was half way down the hall before the man in black started shooting at her.

Brinsley took the Arkham Extension north, a four-lane divided highway that snaked across the verdant pasturelands of northern Illinois, then across the state line into southern Wisconsin. The Extension was built in the late eighties to accommodate the sprawling suburban population north of metro Chicago, and at this time of night, it was a desolate ribbon of black weaving through slumbering discount malls, darkened gas stations and abandoned grain elevators, broken only by the occasional intermittent pool of golden sodium vapor light, as cold and sterile as a Martian moon. As he drove, Brinsley let his peripheral vision



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play out across the black void of ancient oaks beyond the wash of his headlights, and he thought about his grandpa.

The sad fact was, Brinsley still adored the old man. Adored him unconditionally. From the time Brinsley was old enough to blink his eyes, Grandpa Enoch had been an ally, an influence, a mentor and a trusted friend. When Brinsley was a toddler, the old man used to take him down to the museum and spend hours with the boy, lovingly teaching him the taxonomy of fossilized dinosaur bones. When Brinsley was in grade school, chock full of the indiscriminate awe and curiosity that inflicts a pre-teen boy in this day and age, Grandpa Enoch would bring home strange and tantalizing little trinkets from around the world that would galvanize the boy's imagination. A shrunken orangutan's paw from Indonesia. Magic tamarisk seeds from Syria. A petrified wooden amulet from Egypt. And as Brinsley grew, so did his grandfather's reputation in the academic community. As one of the pioneering minds in the field of anthropology—not to mention a founding member of the American Archaeological Society—old Enoch Kettlekamp was on the fast track to the Nobel Prize.

Then Fate took a dark turn for the Kettlekamp clan. Enoch and his wife of thirty-five years, Gwendoline June, announced they were getting a divorce, shocking the entire extended family. Brinsley probably should have seen it coming; rumors were rampant of Enoch's deteriorating home life, his spiraling obsessions with finding some fabled lost city known as R'lyeh and his dreams of ultimately decoding some ancient hieroglyph that few believed even existed. The following year, tragedy visited Brinsley again. While returning home from a vacation in Greece, Brinsley's mother and father, Barbara and Brinsley Senior, were killed in an airliner crash over the Mediterranean. Brinsley was fifteen at the time, and he turned to his only surviving relative for solace. But Enoch was unable to provide much comfort; the loss of his son and daughter-in-law had only served to drive the old man deeper into his obsessions. Eventually Enoch was fired from his teaching post at the University of Wisconsin, drummed out of the American Archaeological Society, and shunned by the academic community as a crackpot—

A sign loomed in the glare of the headlight, snapping Brinsley out of his daze: SAUK CITY, ARKHAM, THIS EXIT.

He coaxed the rattle-trap Nissan down a narrow off-ramp, wrestling with the shift lever, the engine whining petulantly. Five minutes later, he was tooling down a pitch black rural route that wound through Pickman's Woods, a primordial riot of diseased birch and mutant foliage bordering Arkham. The road narrowed through a corridor of trees, and the shadow-rush on either side of the vehicle gave Brinsley the momentary impression that he was passing through some kind of strange cosmic portal, traveling back in time.

When had it happened? When and where had his life fallen apart? Was it the death of his parents? Was it his subsequent sleep-walk through college and law school, through depression and drug addiction and a pair of suicide attempts? Or was it ultimately the loss of his grandpa that had sent Brinsley reeling into a miserable life of regret, inarticulate rage, and *fear*, fear like a silent shark circling just beneath the surface of his days.

Brinsley could still remember his grandfather's final trip abroad. The old man had spent his last dime on the fool's errand to the Middle East, accompanied only by a motley group of failed academics, porters, and mercenaries. Health failing, mind deteriorating a little more every day, Old Enoch had managed to scribble off a rambling note to Brinsley before embarking. "This is the final expedition, my grandest grandson," he wrote in his crooked scrawl, squeezed onto a torn piece of onion paper. "I don't know which is more terrifying: That I will fail in my attempt to vindicate myself, never finding the final passages of the Apocrypha known as the Book of Eibon... or that I will succeed." Brinsley never learned which came true; when the old man returned six months later, he was so far gone they had to institutionalize him.

At first, it appeared that Enoch had suffered brain damage from some terrible exotic malady born of desert climes, malaria, sleeping sickness or pneumonic plague. His comrades had all vanished amid the endless shifting sands, presumably succumbing to a similar malaise. But back in Wisconsin, upon his admittance into the Sauk Valley center, the old man's vocal chords had been tested and found to be perfectly normal; his throat, trachea, esophagus—even his brain patterns associated with speech—all were found to be absolutely normal. The doctors called it Hysterical Muteness, a precursor to the onset of Alzheimers, but Brinsley had other ideas. Brinsley



could tell that the old man had simply *chosen* to give up talking, as though it was the only way to avoid articulating the dark wisdom that had been gleaned in the middle east. Or perhaps it was something even more desperate and purposeful, a defense mechanism. Brinsley remembered stories of esoteric texts that were considered unutterable, that were considered deadly when spoken, that could even invoke demons from other dimensions if spoken aloud. Had Enoch uncovered a Pandora's box in the desert? Had he stumbled upon those fabled incendiary lines?

Perhaps by becoming mute, Grandpa Enoch had been providing a service to all mankind...

Brinsley looked at his watch: 3:21 AM.

Five minutes later, he was pulling into the cobblestone lot in front of the Sauk Valley center and parked, feeling certain that things had gone desperately, totally, excruciatingly wrong. Everything about the crumbling old building seemed wrong, from the way the shadows lolled and swayed around the gabled rooftops, to the greenish glow behind the second story windows, to the absence of ambient noises from the surrounding forest. It was as though the flora and fauna had come to some frozen tableau, poised in breathless anticipation for whatever terrible phenomenon was about to emanate from within the nursing home.

For a brief instant, before going inside, Brinsley flashed on a painful memory from his childhood. It was during the torturous days immediately following the death of his parents. Brinsley had been staying with Enoch, commiserating with the old man, trying to make some kind of sense out of their collective grief and pain and angst, and the twosome had started drinking, and they drank deep into the wee hours one night, and that was when young Brinsley made the mistake of asking the old man about the "other side." Brinsley wanted to know what Enoch thought about the afterlife, about heaven and hell and all the big, cosmic questions. Brinsley would never forget the look on the old man's face—a mixture of longing, pain, and fear. "It's a secret," the old man had finally murmured. "Maybe some day I'll tell ya." *And maybe some day, decades later, standing outside the entrance of this God forsaken nursing home, Brinsley wondered if—*

A sudden metallic popping sound inside the building.

A woman screaming.

Brinsley bounded up the herringbone brick walk,

moving on instinct, slammed shoulder-first against the front entrance. The mammoth oak door burst open on congealed hinges, and Brinsley stumbled across the threshold into the main hall. He barely noticed the flickering fluorescent tubes, or the stale odors of mentho-rub, chicken grease and urine, or the fact that the security guard was lying in a puddle of his own blood only ten feet to the left, inside the front office. Brinsley was busy heading toward the stairwell at the end of the main corridor, the one that led up to the second floor. He reached the stairwell in seconds flat and took the steps two at a time, but when he reached the second floor corridor, he made his first strategic mistake of the evening.

He stumbled directly into the line of fire.

Before the shot was fired, there was just enough time to glance up and see the craggy faced man in black standing off to the right, just outside Enoch's door, raising a silver handgun, aiming it directly at Brinsley, and to his left, Nurse Debbie, wounded, on the floor, crawling toward a fire exit, leaving a leech trail of her own blood on the faded green tiles. Brinsley made a half-hearted effort to duck, but it was too late.

The man in black had already pulled the trigger.

Professor Nehemiah Stitz couldn't believe his ears, the sound of the Colt revolver clicking impotently in his grasp like a wet match that wouldn't light. *Six shots!* He had fired six damned shots chasing down that meddling nurse and now the gun was out of bullets.

For an awkward instant that seemed to stretch into eternity, the professor glared at the young man by the stairwell—Kettlekamp's grandson, no doubt—who was standing motionless, staring like a spring lamb caught in the headlamps of a truck. Professor Stitz blinked, staring at his own gun, sucking the leathery stump at the base of his pallet, marveling at the sheer rotten timing of his weapon. He had come so far, had spent so many sleepless nights at local inns, monitoring the nursing home's outgoing calls, watching, waiting for the improbable to happen, waiting for the senile old bastard to begin talking again, begin speaking the unspeakable. Stitz was the only other surviving member of the R'lyeh expedition—the only *sane* survivor who had glimpsed the Book of Eibon—and afterward he had seen fit to have his own tongue surgically removed. It was insurance that he would never be tempted to utter the blasphemous litanies.

But Enoch—that arrogant old bastard—he had simply gone mute, probably mad as a hatter. But madness was not enough of a guarantee.

Alzheimers had a way of bringing back fragments of memories best left unspoken.

Now the grandson was moving again, fists clenched, coming toward Stitz. “Drop the gun, old man, drop it, DROP IT!” the young man barked, adrenalin blazing in his eyes.

Professor Stitz reached into his coat and pulled out the speed-loader.

“Don’t even try it!” the grandson bellowed, then lunged across the corridor.

Professor Stitz was fumbling with the bullets, trying to fit the speed-loader tips like tiny robin’s eggs into the Colt’s chamber, when Brinsley arrived like a whirlwind, tackling Stitz, throwing him off balance and sending bullets flinging off against the walls. The two men sprawled across the floor, Professor Stitz landing hard against the cinderblock, his breath convulsing out of his lungs. He gasped for air, and he clawed at the floor, and he dragged his weary bones toward Enoch’s room. He could hear the old codger’s senile voice again, and this time the words were clearly discernable.

“—*Cthulhu R’lyeh—fhtagn—Yok-Sothoth Ubbo-Sathla!*—”

Professor Stitz froze, crouching near the doorway to Enoch’s room, his flesh crawling, ice water flowing through his arteries, magnesium-sharp terror numbing his chest. *The words, the unutterable words!* They seemed to swirl out of the old man’s room like the first gusts of a winter storm, the smell of decay and death on the currents. Stitz tried to stand, but his legs were noodles, and his heart was racing so furiously it felt as though it might rupture. The air pressure was changing, the acrid stench rising—the smell of the tomb—and Stitz managed to rise up against the torrent of impossible wind. He started through the doorway.

“—*Yok-Sothoth Ubbo-Sathla!*—”

Something slithered around the professor’s waist like a python, then slammed him hard against the door jamb, and Stitz tried to tear away, but the invisible bonds were tightening, and the noise was rising, and the gales of noxious wind were bull-whipping across the room, and Stitz looked up and saw poor old Enoch Kettlekamp sitting up against his yellowed pillows, senile lips working, muscles spasming involuntarily, and great gouts of smoke pouring out of his

mouth, impossible smoke, metamorphosing into something wet, corporeal—

“—*Cthulhu fhtagn!*—”

The smoke coalesced into a hand, a vast ghostly hand the color of pus, and it leapt out at Professor Stitz, clutching him in its nebulous grip, tightening, squeezing off his air, then flinging him backward with the force of a giant angry battering ram. Professor Stitz whiplashed into the wall, his skull tagging the cinderblock.

Then the light was fading.

Then darkness was smothering him.

“Gramps!”

It was like swimming against invisible rapids, crawling toward the doorway to Enoch’s room, Brinsley on his hands and knees, cringing, shuddering, the noise like a freight train above him, engines roaring, gears keening, wheels gnashing metal-on-metal fury, and the sound of the old man’s feeble voice echoing, deepening, rising as though caught in a gargantuan pipe organ—*R’lyeh Cthulhu fhtagn!*—and Brinsley just barely making it through the doorway—

—into the maelstrom.

“—GRAMPS!—”

Brinsley didn’t care that the entire room seemed to be swimming, transforming, a two-dimensional diorama spinning around the axis of the bed, re-focusing behind the lens of a stereoscope, walls warping, seams twisting, turning inside out, the noise like a dragon’s roar—but none of this mattered to Brinsley, because he cared only about his grandpa, his beloved grandpa—and Brinsley started swimming toward the bed, fighting the currents, crying out for his only true friend. Enoch was pinned to the headboard, his cataract encrusted eyes wide and hot. He looked like a frightening animal on a carnival ride gone haywire, the glistening hell-smoke pouring out of his lungs, clouds of otherworldly insects, an eldritch sound from another dimension—

“—*GRAMPS—I’M HERE!*—” Brinsley reached out for Enoch just as the bed began to change. The metal rails melted, the bed frame flowing into the center of the swirling vortex, the sheets turning liquid, the pillows and blankets darkening, turning the color of rich arterial blood, and when Brinsley reached out to touch his grandfather, a bolt of something like electricity—but cold, cold like nothing Brinsley had ever felt—suddenly jolted up Brinsley’s fingers, up through



his marrow.

Brinsley jerked backward, tripping over his own legs and tumbling to the floor.

Enoch was flailing now, sinking deeper into the spinning black whirlpool, his spindly old arms and legs shrivelling, torso contracting, shrinking, the sounds of his garbled cries drowned by the hellish wind and the sound of something more obscene—almost a sucking noise from beyond, as though some unearthly entity charged with evil volition was literally exsanguinating the old man—and Brinsley was trying to climb back up to the edge of the spinning bed now, trying in vain to reach out for his dear grandpa and pull him back.

The old man was a desiccated husk now, a rag doll with big button eyes, his flesh virtually mummified, sinking into the swirling, bottomless oblivion, and Brinsley began to violently weep, his sobs drowned by the noise of tidal waves crashing against alien shores, and Brinsley was still trying to clutch his grandfather's sleeves, grabbing at his diminishing limbs, the acid tears burning Brinsley's eyes, and then, *then*, just before the old man vanished into the vortex, Brinsley saw the old man's expression change, ever so slightly, his wizened old eyes meeting Brinsley's one last time.

He looked as though he were deeply sorry.

Brinsley fell to his knees at the edge of the vortex, sobbing convulsively as the old man vanished, and all the festering pain was flowing out of Brinsley now—all the decades of longing, and loneliness, and aching regret for a life lived alone, wallowing in his own miseries—all of it poured out of Brinsley in one great, keening, griefstricken wail.

Then the porthole opened up before him.

It happened with the abruptness of a shade snapping open, the last remnants of the hospital bed peeling away, revealing a gaping window into another dimension. Brinsley gazed up at the hole in the universe, an impossible gash hanging in midair, and he looked into it, and he saw the absolute pure essence of the other side, and his mind seemed to seize up all of a sudden like a clockwork jamming, because the blackness of it was telling him something, telling him something important, something about the thing that was too horrible to know, the netherworld, the place beyond death toward which Brinsley had always held

a morbid fascination. It was grandpa's secret.

It was staring back at him.

Brinsley opened his mouth to scream, but the horror was beyond expression.

All at once, as though a switch had been thrown, the opening seemed to pucker closed like a wound healing in time lapse, and the monstrous roar dwindled, and the sound of cogs slowing down filled the air. Then the silence crashed, and it was excruciating, like a pall descending on the little room, and all at once Brinsley Kettlekamp was alone in the stillness of the room with his own rattled thoughts.

He stayed there like that for some time, crouched on the cold floor, the last surviving member of the Kettlekamp clan, the sound of a distant police siren echoing outside the window. The smell of cordite was thick in the air, and something else, something like an electrical terminal that had just overloaded. The bed was gone, the place where it had been now just an oily, charred swath on the tiles. Brinsley tried to focus on that swath, tried to think, but it was futile. His vision was narrowing, light fading, his chest going cold.

The floor came up and met the side of his face.

Then he mercifully fainted dead away.

Brinsley doesn't remember much these days. His waking hours are filled with pretty colors, grape and cherry jello, confetti candy on cupcakes, and good-good medicine mixed up in his orange juice. The nurses and doctors are all really nice around here, and they talk in soft voices and play fun games with Brinsley, games like name-that-picture and think-of-a-word. Brinsley especially likes Doctor Hildebrandt. Doctor Hildebrandt never asks Brinsley to remember any of the bad stuff. Doctor Hildebrandt is fun and friendly and nice. But the best thing about Doctor Hildebrandt is the stuff he gives Brinsley at night.

It's a little white pill about the size of a pea with numbers written on one side. It tastes kind of bitter, so sometimes Doctor Hildebrandt crushes it up with some sugar water. The pill takes all the dreams away, so now Brinsley's nights are just sleep and dark.

But not too dark.

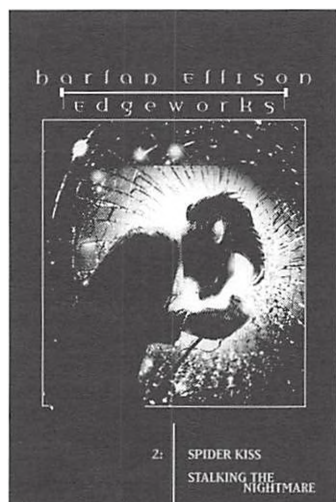
Not dark like grandpa's secret.

That wouldn't be good, no sir, that wouldn't be good at all.

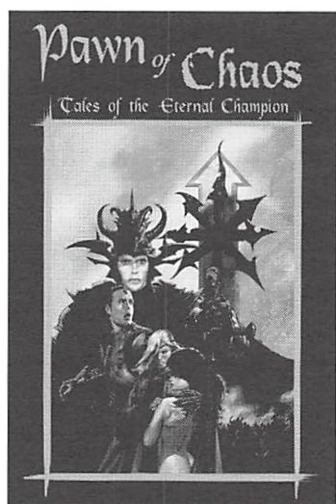
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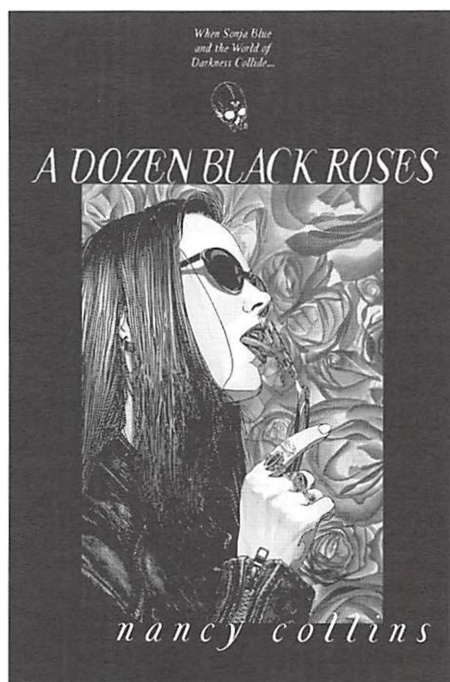
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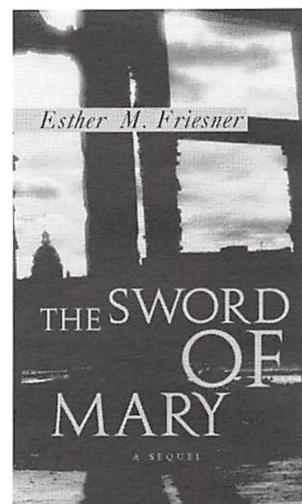


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# LUCK OF THE CITY

by Mary Frances Zambreno

THE FIRST TIME JENNET VASCANYO—CALLED THE IBERIAN—SAW Calchas d'Infer, she was working with the nightsoil crew at the Esquiline Gate, loading human waste onto the river barges. She considered her current employment ironically apt: her father had bred horses. Before he'd disowned her, she'd spent half of her life shoveling shit, and here she was again, up to her elbows in the human variety rather than the equine. It made small difference, so far as she could tell.

Calchas, on the other hand, made a great deal of difference. Tall and lean, with crisp dark hair and eyes like chips of blue ice, his bloodline made him by law and caste-bound custom the traditional overseer of the City sewer system. The regular crew rarely saw him—but then, the regular crew rarely saw anyone but each other. Jennet didn't even notice the stranger until the bargeman poked her with his hook, and pointed.

"Hsst—Iberian. We're honored. Look at the pretty boy."

Pausing with a full shovel, she whistled soundlessly. Kelso the bargemaster was talking to an elegantly-dressed lordling. He was pretty, all right, but well-muscled, too, with a long pair of legs that made her admiration very specific. "My, my. Haven't seen anything like *that* down here before. Who's he?"

"Calchas d'Infer, Toma's eldest—supposed to be making sure the sewers stay open. He should have interviewed you when you were hired, but he was off someplace." The bargeman hawked, and spat into the waste channel. "Not like in the old days, it isn't. In the old days, wouldn't be anyone down here who wasn't the right kin."

Jennet ignored the comment. She was accustomed to being told that she had no place in the sewers, not being of the appropriate caste; the problem was, as an Outlander, she had no place anywhere else in the City, either. Nightsoil duty was the only work she could find. She tried to tell herself that it wasn't for long, that she'd only been out on her own for a year and she'd soon find her feet—but meanwhile she shoveled shit and went home at night to the only

lodgings that would accept her, a run-down bathhouse and laundry whose proprietess was simply too desperate to turn away *any* custom. Even that rent took almost everything she earned. She had precious little savings, and prospects were not good.

*At this rate, I'll live and die in the sewers, she thought wearily, emptying the shovel. Wonder if they'll load me onto one of the barges or leave me in a tunnel for the rats?*

"Hey!"

"What?" Startled, she looked up. Her aim was off, ordinarily not a matter for concern—but this time she'd splattered liquid filth on the young overseer's trousers. He was frowning down at them, as if he weren't standing next to a ditch full of shit, for Lady's sake. "Oh. Sorry about that."

The pretty boy didn't look up, but Kelso the bargemaster was apoplectic. "Sorry—you—I'll teach you to beslime your betters!"

He uncoiled the whip he normally kept for the mules who pulled the carts, and lashed at her. Automatically, she ducked—caught at the whip—pulled. She only meant to get Kelso off-balance and show him that she wasn't for abusing, but unfortunately the elegant stranger was standing just to the right of Kelso, slightly in front of the lash. When she pulled it taut, it bounced hard against his shoulder—and he went face down, full-length into the waste channel.

There was a moment of appalled silence. Jennet thought Kelso was going to faint, he was so white. *Wonder what the penalty is for drowning a lordling in shit?* she thought, caught between hysterical laughter and alarm. *Whatever it is, I bet it's worse if you're an Outlander!*

She was considering jumping into the river and swimming for it, when Calchas rolled over, sat up—and began to laugh, white teeth vivid against filth-smearred features.

"Luck of the City, I said—I wanted to inspect the waste channel, but not with my chin!" he gasped, holding his sides.

"Lord, I—" Kelso blew out his breath in a great sign of relief, but his eyes were still wild, as if he didn't quite believe his own good fortune.

Jennet smiled, a long, slow smile that felt good on her face. "Here," she said, offering Calchas the bit of toweling she kept for clearing her eyes. *A body like that, and a sense of humor, too . . . goodness.* "Try this."

He inspected the tattered square of cloth, and then—shrugging—used it to wipe at the worst of the slime. When he offered it back to her, she took the hand that held it and pulled him to his feet.

"Thanks," he said. "You're Iberian, aren't you? By the accent."

"I was Iberian, once." Her turn to shrug. "Not any more. I live in the City now."

"I see," he said, and there was a quick sympathy in the blue eyes which made her feel that he actually did. For a wonder. Most City folks didn't understand being exiled. "If you live in the City now, I suppose you know a bath-house that could deal with these?" With one hand, he indicated his destroyed clothing. "I can't go home like this."

Kelso was speechless; Jennet ignored him.

"I know a place," she said. "Let's go to Miryam's."

It was the beginning of an unlikely friendship, between the Outlander who worked in the sewers because she had nowhere else to go and the City lordling who had been born to clean up the muck left by his fellow citizens.

"I'm a sewer-rat by birth," he said, with his easy grin. "Like my father before me, and his father and his father and his father, back down the endless generations. When you live in the City, you take what your birth gives you. It's not so bad a life—the pay is good, if you can stand the way your peers tend to turn up their noses when you walk into a room."

"My father kept horses," she offered. "I grew up mucking out stables."

"Oh, but horses are useful, Jennet! And attractive, and good exercise for the rider. People, now . . ." The cynical amusement in his voice charmed her.

They were sitting together at Miryam's little outside table, the one she kept for Jennet to sit at while her work-clothes were washing so as not to offend the other patrons with her stench. Young, fair-haired, and obviously pregnant, Miryam had to struggle to manage the heavy tray of cider and two mugs that Jennet had ordered; when Calchas leaped to help her, she

relinquished her burden with a blush and a flustered murmur of thanks.

"Young to be the owner of a place like this," he commented.

"Her husband was older—not much, but some," Jennet said, pouring the cider. "He was killed in a carting accident on Waycross Street, three—maybe four months ago, leaving her this place to run and not much else."

"Poor girl," Calchas said. "Is she alone in the world?"

"Not for long," Jennet said, shortly. "As you should have been able to see."

They sat together at Miryam's often. He came to the sewers more than she'd realized, she found out, though always to walk the tunnels on his own—it was his duty to inspect, he explained kindly, as it was hers to shovel—and sometimes they'd leave together, and he'd stay with her while she waited for her clothes to be ready. He took her to her first horse-race outside the City walls, and her first gambling club—not that she had much to gamble!—and she held his head the night after they both had a little too much to drink and got maudlin drunk, celebrating the end of summer. Calchas was a good companion, clever without being cruel and willing to hold his own in any game that was going. All in all, it was a good friendship, the best she'd had since she'd left Iberia.

It was one evening at Miryam's that he put his hand on her knee—gently, undemandingly.

"No," she said, realizing what he was asking and flattered in spite of herself. "Not tonight, anyway."

He seemed more curious than upset. "Why not tonight in particular?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Because I know my own body." You didn't run with the plains-herds without learning about fertility cycles. Did he understand? Apparently not—he was a City man. Delicately, she elaborated: "Tonight, and I might wind up like that big-bellied fool, Miryam. That isn't happening to me—not ever."

"Oh." He sat back. "But—surely you'll marry someday. Won't you? Just because you refused to wed the man your father chose for you doesn't mean you'll never have a husband or children of your own." By now he knew that much of her life's story, but not the whole of it.

"Any man I marry will have to be satisfied without children from me," she told him. "My mother died in childbed."



"That isn't a reason to. . ." he hesitated. "Jennet, there's no need for you to feel guilty."

"Oh, it wasn't me!" she said, and stopped. Calchas was a friend. He deserved an explanation. "It was—it would have been my brother," she said, haltingly. The words came hard. "After the first time—the healer and the midwife both said there was a problem with the blood, that she shouldn't have any more children after me. But my father wanted a boy, and so she—tried." *And tried, and tried and tried.* Jennet felt her throat go tight. "The last time she tried, it killed her." Once again she was huddled in the trembling darkness under the garden window, listening to her mother scream—the scent of summer jasmine thick and sweet in her throat as she fought back terror, praying silently and desperately to the Lady, to whatever gods might be—and worse, the night when the screams stopped.

"I'm sorry," Calchas said softly into her grief. "I shouldn't have asked."

"It's all right," she said, and realized that it was. "I've never talked about it before, but—it's all right." She took a deep breath, feeling the burden ease—feeling the memory slip away as it was shared. *About time*, she thought, blinking back tears. *About time I learned to live with it.*

"I'm glad," he said simply.

They drank in silence for a moment. *Time to start a new conversation*, Jennet decided. *Something less—fraught.* "You know, Cal, there's something I've been wondering for a while now," she said. "If you don't mind my asking. . ."

"Ask away," he said, apparently as relieved as she was at the change of subject.

"Why do you stay in the sewers? I mean, you're rich, educated—" *gorgeous*, she thought, but didn't say—"you could do anything you wanted."

"You know why," he said, checking the level of cider in the pitcher. "I'm d'Infer. I didn't have a choice."

"You could leave," she insisted. "There's a whole wide world outside the City."

"Do you really want to know why I stay?" Leaning forward, he caught her eyes, his whole manner suddenly eager. "It might be dangerous for you."

"Tell me," she said, intrigued by the sudden change in him.

"I can't. I have to show you." He swallowed the last of his cider in a gulp. "Come on—it should be safe enough at this time of night."

But when they got there, she couldn't believe it.

"The sewers?" she asked. "You want me to go back into the sewers after I finally got myself clean from the day's work?"

"You won't get dirty," he said, impatiently, holding the grate for her. "No one's used where we're going in donkey's years."

Inside, she squinted, trying to adjust to the dim light. The tunnel was dry, and about twice the height of a tall man; its sides were crumbling red brick.

Calchas lit a torch with a flourish. "There," he said, his chiseled features outlined by the harsh light. "That should do it. Now follow me."

Dubiously, she followed him, as the wide tunnels led to narrower, and then still narrower ones. After a while, she noticed something.

"We're going up," she said, conversationally. "Don't sewers usually go down?"

"This one's different," he said, eyes bright with deviltry. "Watch and see."

The last tunnel was so narrow it was almost a stone slit, and it was half-blocked by fallen earth, besides. A pile of bricks sat beside the entrance to it, obviously removed from the cave-in.

"Mind your step," he said, turning sideways to pass it.

"Who cleared the rock fall?" she asked, turning sideways to pass.

"My father, originally. At least, he found the blocked passageway and started the job. Then he died and I—finished it. Shh, now. We're almost there."

The way opened into a large chamber, as wide as the Esquiline Gate. It had odd stone benches, placed at intervals, and a long, low ledge across one end. Above the ledge was a stone grating covered by a heavy, dusty tapestry. Holding the torch carefully behind him, so that none of its light fell forward, Calchas lifted one edge of the cloth.

"Look," he breathed, motioning for Jennet to come up beside him.

She looked—into the echoing, incense-filled space of the Temple of the Goddess. She knew what it had to be, for all that she'd never been allowed inside; there was no other building in the City that size. But it was not the vastness of the temple which amazed her now.

"Holy god," she whispered.

"Goddess," he corrected.

The statue of the Faceless Goddess was outlined in fire from the flames that burnt perpetually before Her altar. It was a bit less than half the size of a woman, Jennet had been told, though it was really only about a third her size. She was tall for a woman. The image itself was carved of a single block of natural chalcedony, which by some miracle of nature had been formed with a ruby the size of a woman's head within it. The Goddess sat cross-legged, her arms folded comfortingly over the burden of Her child-heavy belly.

She was literally faceless, a smooth blank where Her features ought to be. Her healer-priestesses wore thin gauze veils drawn tightly over their own faces, in homage. Her sorcerer-priests, enigmatic and arcane, painted their faces white.

"The Luck of the City," he whispered in her ear. "Sister to the Moon and patroness of every woman in childbirth, from the greatest lady to your little friend Miryam. There's even a curse on whoever touches the image with impious hands, or so the priests say."

The great ruby glowed through the translucent white of the moonstone like blood in warm milk.

Calchas let the tapestry fall.

Jennet sighed in relief. "What is this place?"

"The chapel of the sewer-workers, from the days when we—they—weren't allowed above ground," he said. "Long ago. Once a year the priests would raise the grate and carry the Goddess over to where the workers could worship it."

Even his pauses were filled with meaning. Jennet regarded him consideringly.

"Cal—you wouldn't be thinking what I think you're thinking," she said. "Would you?"

"Why not?" he said. "Think of it, Jennet! The wealth of a thousand emperors, just sitting there."

"You don't believe in the curse then?" she asked, curiously. The Faceless One was his goddess, after all; she followed the Lady of the Plains, for all the good it had ever done her—or her mother.

"Oh, I believe, all right," he said. "The sorcerer-priests will see to the curse. But they'd have to catch me first!"

"Then—what are you waiting for?" she said, mind leaping ahead. "That passage has been cleared for a year at least, by the dust. Every month you delay you run the chance that some poor repair crew might get lost and stumble on it by mistake."

"I'm not strong enough," he admitted, teeth

flashing in the grin she'd come to know so well. "Someone's got to go inside and get the statue while someone else holds the grate. I need a partner . . ."

He stopped—not asking, but waiting. For a moment, she just looked at him, meeting his eyes with her own daring. *A way out of the sewers, for both of us*, she thought.

"Why not?" she said lightly. "It's worth a try."

In the dark by his side, two weeks later, she wondered at her own daring. But Calchas had no such misgivings.

"Nothing will go wrong," he'd insisted, bending with her over the table at Miryam's. "It's a perfect plan. We'll do it at Harvest, when the Temple is least attended. You hold the grate and I'll go down and—"

"I'll go down," she said. When he looked up, she frowned. "I mean, it Cal. I'm stronger than you are, and you know it."

Reluctantly, he capitulated. "Well, if you're sure . . . I'll hold the grate, and you go down. We'd better rig up a sack of some sort, to carry it—probably leather, it's strongest."

"How do we get out of the City?" she asked.

He grinned at her. "Guess."

"What do you—oh! The Esquiline Gate."

"Exactly. No guards in the sewers—it would be beneath their dignity, and the proprieties must always be observed, don't you know." For a moment, his face took on the haughty, supercilious look of one of the Greater Lords, the sort who wouldn't have anything to do with either of them, and she chuckled. Soberly, he went on. "It should be easy enough to slip on board one of the barges, and no one ever the wiser. We don't even have to come up out of the sewers until it's time to leave—I know places down there that the rats couldn't find."

She hoped he was right.

The Temple beyond the dusty chapel seemed filled with bustling priests and acolytes. Droning penetrated even the heavy old tapestry, filling the air with muted worship. Jennet found herself clenching and unclenching her fists, anxious to begin.

"Not yet," Calchas whispered. "Wait."

She waited. After a while, the droning stopped. He slipped one hand beneath the tapestry, peered—and nodded. Heart beating wildly, she took one end of the stone grating, and helped him tug. It came away from the ledge with an awful groan.



“Hurry,” he whispered, holding it up. Light from the Temple illuminated the old chapel eerily, but Jennet had eyes only for the white of the moonstone goddess, waiting below. “You’ll have about ten minutes.”

Check the limp carriesack on her back—all secure. One leg over the side, a moment’s hesitation—and she was down. Then cat-footed across the Temple floor to the altar, to take up the statue. It was heavy! She used both arms to lift it, straining to get it into the sack. *Hurry, hurry, not too much noise—*

The statue on her back, she turned to face a silver and black uniform—a guard! No more than arm’s length away—but he wasn’t looking at her, he was looking at the altar where the statue had been, his face white with shock. One hand clubbed around the hilt of her dagger—she didn’t want to kill the man—she reached out and hit him from behind, and then, stumbling under the heavy weight on her shoulders, fighting for breath, caught his unconscious body and lowered it quietly to the floor.

Then it was up the side of the wall again, more of an effort this time with the load she carried. When she was safely inside, Calchas let the grating fall.

“Well done,” he gasped. “Oh, well done! This way—”

He took one end of the carriesack, to help her, and they lurched through the darkness of the dry sewer, moving by feel until they were past the narrow space. Then he stopped, and lit the torch.

“Let’s see,” he said, his voice sounding strained.

“Now? But—”

“I want to see!”

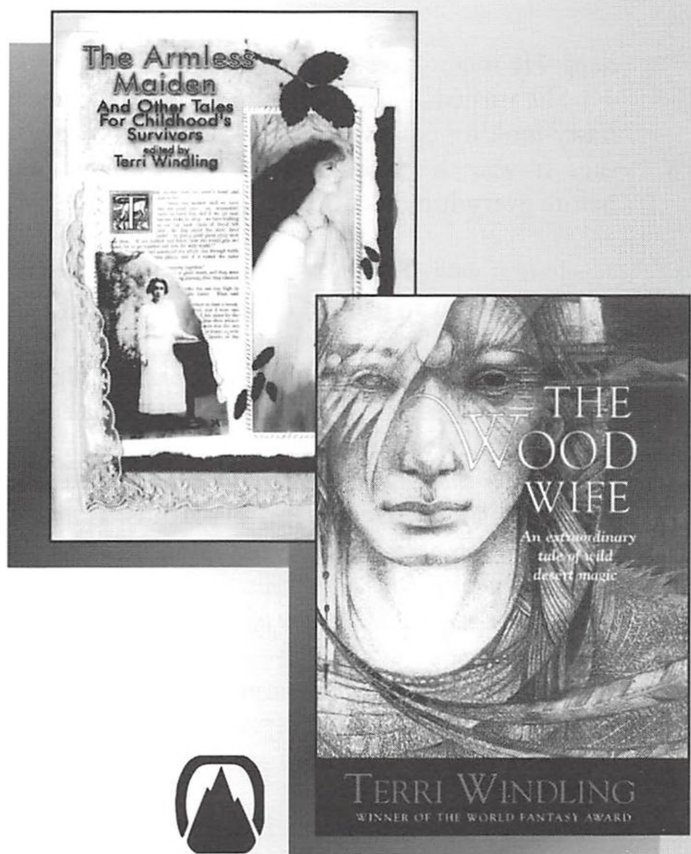
“All right, all right.” Shrugging free of her burden, she tugged at the straps, and the richness of moonstone filled the tunnel.

“Ah!” Calchas leaned forward, caressing it. “At last. At last! All my life, I’ve been waiting for this, Jennet. All my life. Living with the sneers of idiots and puppies who thought they were better just because—all my life, waiting for one chance! The wealth of a thousand emperors, and all mine—”

“Look, wherever you plan to hide, let’s go find it,” she said, when he seemed disposed to gloat. “I had to take out one of the guards.”

He looked up anxiously. “Is he still alive? Did he see where you went?”

“Yes, he’s still alive, but I don’t think he saw much,” she said, bending over the carriesack. “I hit him pretty



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hard. He might have smelled me, though.”

She turned—just to in time to glimpse the short, nasty-looking club she didn't know he'd been carrying. It was the last sight she remembered seeing, before everything went dark.

Jennet woke lying in the dust at the bottom of the old sewer, with an ache in her head, a foul taste in her mouth and an even fouler one in her spirit. It didn't take much to realize what had happened: Calchas had decided that the wealth of a thousand emperors was just too much to share.

*Lady of the Plains, what an idiot I was!* she thought bitterly, cradling her head in her hands. *Calchas, my friend. Simple Jennet, the perfect dupe. Yes, and I'm the only one who might have been seen in the Temple, at that. Wonder if that was part of the plan from the beginning? Probably. Poor Jennet—but if she's caught, who cares? She's only an ignorant country girl, after all. They won't torture her too much before they flay her alive.*

She shivered. *I've got to get out of the City. Got to hide, somewhere.*

Staggering, she climbed to her feet. One hand brushed against the wall, and she discovered that Calchas had left her the torch—or a torch, at least. Well, that was good. For a moment she considered going after him, but he had at least a half-day's head start, and she didn't know the sewers anywhere near as well as he did. Vengeance would be too dangerous—take too long. Better to get out of the City by a more normal route, and then figure out what to do next.

But when she climbed up through the first street grate she came to, there was nothing normal about the City. She stood for a moment, disoriented, while people pushed and shoved past her. It was later than she'd thought—past moonset—and these streets were never this crowded! She passed three house fires before she'd gone two blocks; there was a sound of a woman screaming, men's voices raged in fury. What was going on?

Not really aware of what she was doing, she started for home—for Miryam's. When she got there, it was to find another fire, in the laundry, and Miryam struggling frantically to put it out.

“Jennet!” she gasped, her round face streaked with soot. She had a rag rug in her hands, and she was beating ineffectually at the flames. “I thought—oh, please, help me!”

“Who did this?” Jennet said, taking the rug and

dealing with the fire in a few brisk swats; by the looks of things, it hadn't had much time to catch.

“I don't know,” Miryam said, distraught. “It just—it just happened. People are so afraid.”

“Why?”

“Because—because—” her face crumpled. “Oh, Jennet! The Goddess—someone's stolen the Goddess!”

For a moment, Jennet just stared, too stunned to speak. *I don't—the Goddess—it's just a piece of stone!* “You mean this is all because some silly statue has gone missing?”

“The image of the Goddess is the Luck of the city, Jennet,” the child insisted, folding her hands across her heavy belly in a gesture that reminded Jennet queasily of the Goddess. “Without Her—without Her—”

She turned away, but not before Jennet saw the white face, the tears. *I didn't know, she thought guiltily. I didn't understand.*

“It'll be all right, Miri,” she said, trying to be comforting. “You and your baby will be fine.”

“Of course we will,” she said, sniffing in a way that was more touching than a river of tears. She sounded as if she were trying to convince herself, and not succeeding. “Everything will be fine. The Goddess won't desert us just because—because . . .”

“Trust me,” Jennet said, quietly, knowing now what she had to do. *This is my fault. Mine to break, mine to mend,* Mother would say. Miryam looked at her in puzzlement, and she put every ounce of certainty she might ever have into her words. “I mean it. Everything will be fine.”

Then she turned, and headed back to the sewers.

She started under the better section of town, the Temple district. Moving slowly through the fetid darkness, she kept her dagger in one hand and her torch in the other; waste-water sloshed as the ground gave softly beneath her feet. Red eyes in the dark—rats. Jennet flinched, her grip tightening on her dagger's hilt. Left or right? Left, for a first cast—that seemed to be the way to the lower levels. She lit her torch in some relief. The heat would keep insects away from her hands and face, at least. The damp in the walls was as cold as the earth surrounding them; she was on the river level now.

Wheel-marks down here, scufflings in the muck. Ignoring the filth, she knelt and studied the floor with her sputtering torch held close for light. Most of these were old, last week at least—no, there. Fresh



boot marks, the dragging step of a man carrying something heavy.

She stood up. Calchas knew the sewers better than she did, all right, but he didn't know she'd learned tracking in her Iberian homeland. As a City man, he probably didn't know what real tracking was. He'd learn.

The trail led downward again, as she'd known it must. Downward, and always to the left. It came and went, came and went—yes. This was where he waited, where he returned time after time. She thought the river gate was near, but she couldn't be sure. Crouching in the shadows, she extinguished her torch in the thick liquid underfoot and settled down to wait. He'd be back soon enough, to see if the barges had come in.

A soft scuffling noise in the second corridor. She tensed, then relaxed when she saw the red eyes—a rat again, blast the little beast. And then she realized that no rat would make that dragging, rubbing noise she heard. No rat was large enough to cause the muck to eddy forward in little ripples around her boots. She pulled back, her own eyes slitted and searching the shadows for a darker one.

Calchas. The bulk on his back had to be the statue, still in its leather sack. She heard his heavy breathing before she could see him. Almost she could feel sorry for him. Almost.

"Hello, Calchas," she said softly.

He whirled. "What—who—"

"Look closely," she said, moving away from the wall. "Who do you think it is?"

He gave a gasping sob. "Jennet! I—I didn't mean—"

"Hell you didn't," she said. His betrayal was a corroding bile in her throat. "You knew exactly what you were doing. *My friend.*"

"No—the risk—I—"

"What good is money if you don't live to spend it?" Jennet felt ill. "Calchas, listen to me. This isn't some rich lordling you've stolen from. That's a scared and angry City up there. If they don't get their Luck back soon, they'll start to kill anyone they *can* find—and once they start, they won't be able to stop. Do you want to be responsible for that kind of slaughter in your own City?"

"What do I care for the City?" he rasped, savagely. "They owe me, Jennet, all of them, every Greater Lord or priest or merchant who ever spat on me, or looked down my nose when he thought I smelled of

the sewers. Whose fault was it, if I did? That's why I took their damn luck—their luck, not mine. Curse or no curse, it was worth it. Let them burn."

He was still clinging to the shadows. Cautiously, she felt for her torch. "It's over Calchas," she said gently, in spite of herself. "I won't make you go back—but I will have the statue. Put it down and you can leave."

"I ought—to let you take it," he said, gasping. "I ought to leave it to you, go out of the City—into the light . . ."

"Well, if it's light you want, here!" With a flourish, she relit the torch.

Calchas leaped back, crying out and thrusting his arms before his face. The statue fell, splashing, but Jennet didn't notice. By the all the rules her eyes should have been better prepared for the light than his; she should have had an instant to leap forward, to take him, but she was too stunned to move.

She gaped. "What the—"

The handsome lordling with the chiseled features was gone. In his place was a pasty-white monstrosity, as pallid as if he'd lived for years underground, and his eyes the red-rimmed orbs of a rat. His belly bulged where his hands caressed it, pulsing in tumorous agony. He looked like an obscenely pregnant woman, and his livid stare was wild with agony.

"The curse," he said, painfully. "She—the Goddess—She is the curse. You said—but you didn't believe. I—I believe, Jennet. I thought—the priests would be too busy, too busy for curses—it's a statue, like others, moonstone and the great ruby would be—I thought, I thought I would show them . . . but the Goddess—her curse is mine now, Jennet, all mine. I'll never go into the sunlight again, and neither will you!"

He leaped for her without standing up, arms outstretched at her throat. Instinctively, she reacted, jerking backwards and dropping the torch. Her knife was ready in her hand, but a swift uppercut through the abdomen missed, so that she caught only cloth from his tunic. His hands were around her throat, his face so close she could smell the rancid breath of him, as foul an odor as any in the sewer. She lifted her knee savagely, and he shrieked and let go.

"Well, so you're still that much of a man, are you?" she panted, and caught him in a head lock. Her knife reached for his throat. No time to think, to feel—if she so much as paused for breath, sheer horror would destroy her.

The knife-blade drew blood, but not the rich

gush of a severed jugular. Calchas' dead-white skin was like leather, better than armor in its way. He twisted in her hold like a giant snake, and she cried out as his teeth met through the skin on her forearm. Viciously, she stabbed downward with the point of the knife and had the satisfaction of feeling it grate against a rib. One of his hands caught the side of her head and she saw sparks of light in the darkness, and fell, clutching in the muck with both hands.

*Don't pass out! she told herself fiercely. Lady of the Plains, help me! If I go down, I'm dead!*

Her hands dug into the liquid filth. Where was her knife? Still in Calchas' ribs. Fool, fool, hadn't she learned never to let go of a blade?

"You shouldn't have come after me, Jennet," the harsh voice of a man she had once liked and trusted said in her ear. "I didn't want to kill you, but I have to, now. *She* wants me to kill you. Besides, I'm so hungry. . ."

He was kneeling on her back, one hand pressing her head down into the slime. She tried not to breathe and came up coughing, with a mouthful of liquid dirt. Her arms flailed about as she tried for purchase, to get her knees under her.

Calchas giggled. "You should have stayed up above, Jennet," he whispered. "Up above, in the sun."

Gasping, she lunged forward into the muck. Calchas swayed slightly, but his grip never wavered. With her right hand, Jennet reached numb fingers down as far as she could, digging into the ground. Finding something square and hard—she pulled it up, and struck with all of her remaining strength.

Calchas stiffened. His eyes stared at her from the ruin that the loose sewer brick had made of his face. She pushed him off of her, away, and lifted the brick again—and again, and again, until the back of his head was a pulpy mass that matched the front. And still he wouldn't die.

With both hands she jerked her knife out of his ribs, set the point firmly at the base of his throat. The red eyes looked at her. For a moment she thought she detected a glimmer of sanity in them, and hesitated.

The blade moved as Calchas' throat worked, his mouth miming vileness, and then she drove the point home.

Red blood fountained to her wrists. Trembling, she pulled the knife free and bent to wash it and her hands in the sewer water. Anything was better than this viscous blood. She didn't even want to look at the

corpse—and then she saw something white crawling across its distended stomach.

What was *that*? Oh, Lady, not any more! She couldn't take any more!

While she watched in sickened horror, a small, white, worm-like thing edged along Calchas' swollen abdomen and began to reach for the blood that still gushed sluggishly from his throat. Lady, there was another one! And another! Gagging, she backed up, pressing against the wall. Where were—they were coming out of Calchas! The first creature emitted a small, mewling noise as it opened a tiny pink mouth and began to feed on Calchas' body. In minutes, she couldn't tell that there had been a man there; it was just a writhing mass of hungry worms eating something.

And then they turned on each other, tearing with little mouths until Jennet dropped her hastily relit torch onto the squirming bodies and stood aside to let the obscenity burn.

"It figures," she said dully, as the flames flared and smoldered. "Pregnant Goddess, pregnant curse."

Then she stumbled to the shadows and vomited until it felt as if the lining of her stomach were coming up, and her throat was raw with acid.

It was over. The leather carriesack had come loose when Calchas had dropped his terrible prize, revealing the smooth, satiny curve of the chalcedony—the glow of the ruby. Cautiously, Jennet bent to inspect the carving for damage, but the moonstone was smooth and unblemished.

The featureless face stared at her, as if waiting.

*The wealth of a thousand emperors.* For a moment, even now, she felt the pull of it. The curse hadn't struck her yet; maybe it couldn't touch an Outlander. With the price of the ruby alone, she could buy land and horses, even go home to Iberia if she wanted. It might almost be worth the risk. . .

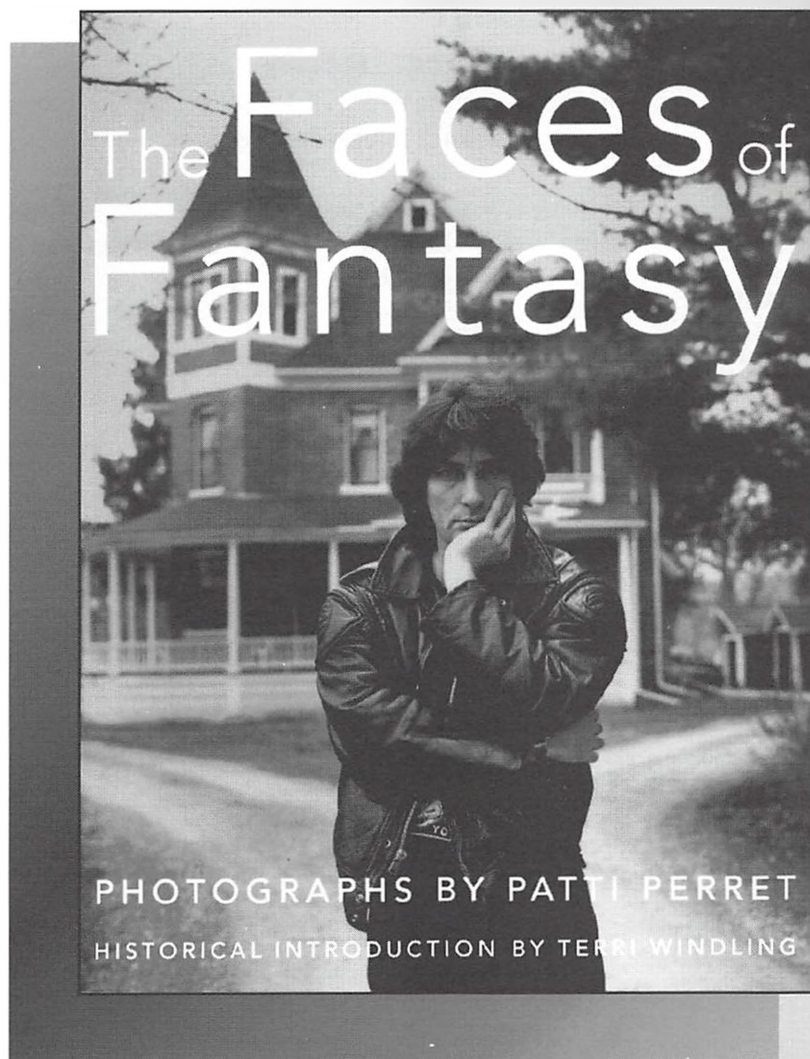
Then she remembered Miryam, and knew that it wouldn't be.

"Don't look at me like that, Moon's Sister," she said coldly to the statue. "I'm not doing this for Your sake. I don't have much use for my own goddess, let alone You. But there are people up there who think they need You, and who am I to deny them? Besides, I'm not a thief. You and Calchas have taught me that, between you. I haven't the, uh," she gulped, and swallowed before going on, "I haven't the stomach for it."

Deliberately, she turned away from the image's mocking, invisible smile.



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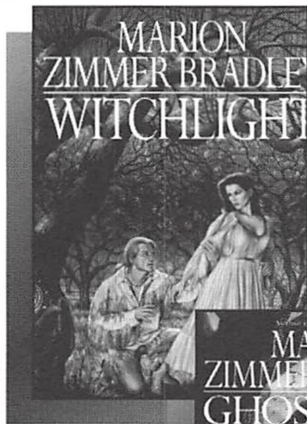
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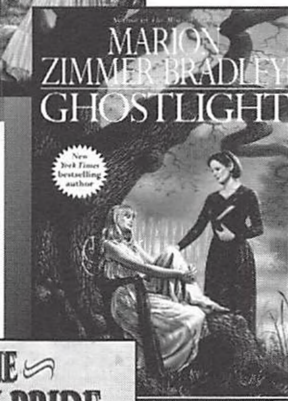


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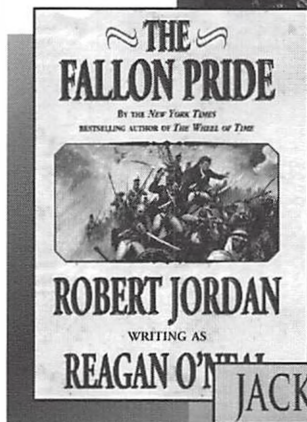


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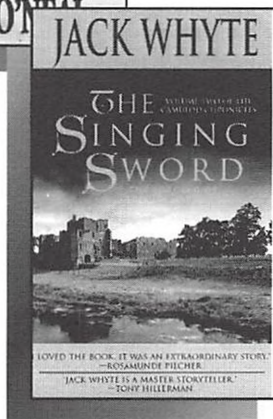
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# RUN DOWN WEST

by Rick Wilber

COMING UP ILLINOIS ROUTE 4 TOWARD CARLINVILLE, I CRESTED the big hill south of town and then, a few hundred feet farther on, took a right and drove over to the two-lane concrete road that runs along for a mile or so parallel to the new highway.

It's old Route 66, a little preserved stretch of it. More than seventy years old now, the mile of highway still exists because, at first, no one bothered to break it up and haul it away when they built the new road to replace it.

Now, of course, it's become a local point of pride, a tourist attraction: the original Route 66. It even has official state historical signs marking the road and one of those large, metal plaques hammered into the ground, describing it as "America's Most Beloved Highway and the Mythical Road West."

I drove slowly along that mythic road, watching for a site I once used to visit often. A large woodchuck browsed the tall grasses on the shoulder and sat upright on its haunches to watch me drive by. There were a few crushed beer and soda cans here and there, a broken kitchen chair lying on its side, a dirty red Cardinal sweatshirt with one sleeve flung straight out pointing west.

A half-mile down that narrow ribbon I found The Spot. The skid marks that once marked where it happened were long gone, of course, but the place was easy to find, right there by the intersection with Butler Road. Purple thistle weeds grew five-feet tall there on the shoulder, and some volunteer corn sprouted right in the damn middle of the concrete—downstate Illinois taking back the road that helped define it, the route from Chicago to Los Angeles, from the heartland to the Golden West.

There was a four-way stop there back in May of 1969. The new stretch of nearby interstate wasn't completed yet and the road carried a heavy load of traffic. My brother Chris and three of his friends came that way, mourning their failure, their loss in the soft spring sunshine up in Springfield where the state baseball championship slipped away from them in the eighth

and ninth innings. Chris, their star, was hurt and on the bench and couldn't help them; no key doubles up the gap, no slick double-plays in the field. Glenbrook North, from up in Chicago, took the title that Chris knew he could have won.

They ran the stop sign, those boys, and without ever touching the brakes they slammed under a tractor-trailer rig that was halfway through the intersection. The rig sliced off the top half of the white Chevy Impala they were driving. The funeral was closed casket.

Chris was a hell of an infielder. Big-league glove at short, strong arm, great range. Good hitter, too, with great bat control. You needed the ball hit behind the runner, Chris could deliver. Great control. That was the best thing he had, that great control.

My dad was a big-leaguer, if briefly. He had a cup of coffee, as they say, with the White Sox in 1959. He was up from the Double A Memphis Chicks to join the big club for that famous pennant drive. The one that got started when the Go-Go Sox swept four from the Indians in late August.

Remember that team? Nellie Fox was MVP that year at second, Luis Aparicio played brilliant shortstop. The Sox were strong up the middle on defense, had great pitching, solid hitting. People forget sometimes that the '59 Sox brought Ted Kluszewski in for the stretch run and that Early Wynn won twenty-two games even though he was nearly forty years old. That pennant was no fluke.

And Dad, pinch-hitting and filling in behind the plate a few times, had his moments in that extraordinary autumn, a double against the Red Sox in late September, a game-winning single against the Yanks to end the season. He looked every bit the promising young kid catcher they thought he was. He was on his way.

But all anyone remembers now of Dad is the World Series, and the passed ball that gave it to the Dodgers. Sherm Lollar was hurt in that sixth game and

Dad was behind the plate. He did fine, had a single his second time up, called a great game for Billy Pierce out on the mound, nailed Maury Wills trying to steal second in the fourth.

And then, in the eighth, with Duke Snider at third and Wally Moon at the plate, Dad let one of Turk Lown's curveballs get away from him. It rolled toward the backstop.

I can still see it happening. I'm in the box seats with my brother and sister and our mom, and I'm watching the slow motion horror of that ball rolling and rolling forever backward while Snider bolts toward home and Lown comes in to try and make a tag. My mother and my sister watch in silent horror. My brother Chris cries out in anguish as the moment stretches on. Chris idolized Dad until that moment.

Snider didn't even have to slide. That wound up being the game, and the Series.

Dad went back to Carlinville, waiting to see that big-league contract show up in the mail. But come spring training the Sox assigned him to start the next season in Memphis, said they'd bring him back up by July. Instead, by June his arm was sore and his hitting didn't look so good. By August he was home, back on the farm, worrying about the soybeans and the sweet corn.

Dad got over it, even wound up taking a perverse kind of pride in his brief career. But Chris, poor Chris—the passed ball ate at him for years, became a family wound he was determined to bind.

Dad died two days ago, coming out of the shower. The way Mom told it to me over the phone, he stood there shaky for a moment, towel in hand, staring at the woman he'd been married to for not quite fifty years. The look on his face, she said, was the same one he wore almost thirty years ago, when he heard the news about Chris. Those thick eyebrows were furled, his eyes in that squint of his, like he was concentrating, trying to understand.

"Joanie?" he asked her, and then he collapsed. Dead pretty much instantly, as I understand it. A brain aneurysm that burst and a few seconds later, death. Healthy and strong as a plowhorse all his life and then suddenly he's gone.

I pulled into the gravel driveway on Hale Street and took a deep breath just to see how little the old place had changed in the ten years since I'd seen it. Chris's sycamore, the one Dad planted a month after the accident, was huge now, full grown and healthy,

anchoring the whole front yard. The house needed some paint and the porch still sagged: not much had changed.

The house is at the edge of town. You look out from the wide front porch and Carlinville's tidy, tree-lined streets stretch on west toward that oddly huge county courthouse and the tall steeple of the Lutheran church. Carlinville tried to woo the state capital its way once in the 1870s and built an edifice worthy of the role. Springfield, sixty miles north, got the capital, though, and all Carlinville got was that huge building, an impressive oddity for a town with just two stoplights.

Look east out the back kitchen window and the corn and soybeans grow off into the distance, our fields blending into the Oltman's acres and from there into the Smith's until the crops get lost in the summer haze.

My sister Sally sat in the big rocker on the porch. Sally's had a rough go of it lately, her marriage collapsed, her kid getting into trouble. But she still looks great. Our little Sally was Miss Illinois, then Miss Congeniality in the Miss America pageant—she's always been a fragile, delicate light, blonde beauty, and she's always paid a horrible price for it. But now, flirting with being forty years old, she's still an amazing sight, and tough as nails underneath all that facade.

Tough or not, she didn't need this new thing on top of all that, but here she is ahead of me even though she lives a world away from here, out in Reseda, near Los Angeles. I'm surprised she got here this fast, but then this little family tragedy offered her something to run to while she ran away.

Hell, we're all running from something. Me, I drove here, wanted to take my time and see some sights I haven't seen in a long, long time. I made it up from Dallas in the little Lexus in something under fifteen hours, sliding through Oklahoma City and Tulsa and on into the edge of the Ozarks at Joplin. Got off the interstate a few times, back on the old roads, the ones we used to take way back when, Dad at the wheel singing about shrimp boats a'comin and Mom smiling there beside him while the three of us harmonized in the back.

When I left, I told Tammy—the fourth wife but this one seems to be working out—that I'd be back in a few days and then maybe we'd skip on down to Grand Cayman for a week or so, try to get all this behind us. She smiled at that. She likes the Caymans. Nice restaurants, good scuba. This year, Tammy's into



scuba.

My good sister Sally stood and smiled thinly at me as I shut the door on the Lexus and started walking up the cracked concrete sidewalk.

"Hi, Twerp," she said to me. "Mom's inside, talking to Brantly, the funeral home guy."

Sally looked fragile, ready to break. "They're, you know, working out the details. Dad said he wanted to be cremated. He said he ...."

And that's as far as she could go with it. There was just too much baggage around it all for a moment, and her facade cracked. Sally started to sob and ran into my arms, where it's safe. We hugged.

When we were kids, me and Sally and Chris, we played run-down for hours a day, all summer long. Sally, the oldest by three years, stood at one base. Chris, next oldest, stood at the other. Me, the baby of the family, ran back and forth between them, trying to get from one base to the other without being tagged out.

We took turns at the positions, as I recall, and played pretty evenly most of the time, the runner sliding in safe about as often as getting tagged out.

Except for me. When I was the runner I was almost always out.

I would leave Sally just as Chris let go of his throw toward her. Racing down toward Chris's bag, sliding in hard trying to beat the throw back from Sally, I'd give it everything I had. But Sally, smooth Sally, would catch the ball, yank it from her glove and fire it back to Chris all in one fluid motion, and I was nearly always out by at least a few feet. Chris always took an older brother's special delight in slapping the glove down hard on me as I slid in.

Every now and then, maybe one time in twenty, I would make it safely, sliding in under the throw before Chris slapped me. A little hesitation on their part, a throw that was slightly off target, and I'd come home safe, triumphant. Those were delicious moments, savored all the more for their rarity.

We started playing run-down when we were just kids, I couldn't have been more than six or seven and they were just a little older. Over the years we wore a bare patch into the side yard, and then that bare patch wore deeper and deeper into the soil. A few years ago I saw a similar track, about one-hundred miles west of St. Joe, Missouri. Two ruts, heading west, marked the Oregon trail. The permanence of those ruts in the soil surprised me.

We kept playing run-down right to the end. Chris by then was an All-State shortstop for the baseball team and a great hitter. He was going to make them forget about Dad's error. That was his goal, to play for the White Sox and be a star and make them all forget.

I was running track, from the sprints to the middle distances. I was good. I won state and set the record that year in the eight-eighty. Won the four-forty, too. Finished fourth in the hundred-yard dash. No one, of course, remembers any of that now, but I could really run back then. By god, I could really run.

By that time Chris and I were at brotherly war with one another. Just eleven months apart, we competed for everything from girlfriends to varsity letters, and there was nothing friendly about the rivalry. We fought often, as brothers can.

Through it all we kept playing rundown, with Sally as our steady influence, the one who kept us in line, made sure we kept the rundown a game instead of a war. Sally made sure no one got hurt out there, and she was good in that official's role. Only once did things get out of hand. In all those times we played, just that once did someone get hurt.

I stood there as my sister the beauty queen, the damned fine shortstop and ace umpire, put her hands on my chest, pushed herself away, stood up nice and straight, wiped away the tears, and smiled at me. "Hey, sorry about that, Twerp. God, it's good to see you. I'm so glad you're here. It's been a rough couple of days." She shrugged, added, "Hell, a rough couple of years."

I just smiled. "They're in the living room? Are they sitting on the Untouchable Couch?"

She grinned. "It's a new couch, actually. But the rules are the same; no kids allowed on it."

"But Mr. Brantly's allowed."

She nodded. "Mr. Brantly's allowed. He's on one end, Mom on the other."

I went in and said hi, making it clear to Brantly that I was there. He's a nice enough guy for being the local mortician, but he's in the business of making a profit off death and Mom was never a haggler, plus she's not a youngster anymore and pretty shook up, so I just wanted Brantly to know I was there, keeping an eye on things.

A stack of papers was gathering on the coffee table in front of the two of them. Mom, after she hugged me and smiled bravely, asked me to look over the papers for her while she talked a few more things over with

Brantly. I took the papers with me and walked into the big, old kitchen.

It had been completely redone; new cabinets, a fancy new Sears refrigerator with, by god, an ice-maker built in, a new oven, new floor tile—the works.

And there, on a stool at the counter, sat Sally's ten-year-old boy, Christopher, looking bored and unhappy.

"Hi," I said to him and held out my hand for a shake. "I'm your Uncle Robert. You must be Chris."

"Christopher," he said. "It's Christopher." And he reached back to shake my hand.

It was the first time I'd met the kid. I don't see Sally often, and the last two times we'd just met for lunch when I was out in L.A. on business. I'd never met her ex, the slime, and only now had my chance to meet his progeny.

He was a thin kid, small for his age, carrying the same fragile exterior as his mother. I wondered if he had her internal strength. He'd need some of that now, with his father busy acquiring new girlfriends and his mom struggling to keep it together, her teaching career and her family both. I lived out there in L.A. for ten long years, trying to get a career in radio started. I hated every minute of it; the falsehood, the pollution, the various kinds of deserts that surrounded me. Even Dallas, when the chance came, seemed better.

I gave the boy a comforting smile and tried some small talk. "You've never been to Illinois before, right?"

"Yeah, first time. It's really flat."

I nodded, it certainly is that.

"And there's nothing but corn everywhere you look. I've never seen so much corn."

"Soybeans, too," I said, and pointed out the window to the fields. "See the green stuff, not so tall. That's soybeans."

"Great," he said. "Soybeans, too."

I chuckled. "Hey, you're in the breadbasket now, Christopher. Not a mall within an hour's drive of here. Just that good Illinois soil."

He smiled wryly. "Mom says this'll be good for us, get away from the Valley for a few days. Fresh air. Good food. No crime. That kind of stuff."

"She's right," I agreed, then added "This can't be easy for you. Or for your Mom. I know things have been a little rough lately."

He shrugged. "'s'way it goes sometimes. I'm OK. Mom's OK, too. We'll be fine."

That sounded pretty rehearsed to me, but I took it

at face value. He was one brave kid, I thought; either that or one good actor.

He wore a t-shirt and shorts, looked about average in height, wore his light brown hair short with one of those little rat-tails behind that I see the soccer kids wearing. He was lightly built but with legs that looked strong and a good upper body. He looks a lot like his namesake, I thought.

"You a ballplayer?" I asked him.

"Some. Just Little League."

"Pitcher?"

"Yeah. And second base. I'm a pretty good hitter, too."

"Did you know your grandfather was a ballplayer? Played in the big leagues."

"Mom told me. A catcher, right?"

I nodded. "For the White Sox. He didn't last long, but he had his moment."

"Yeah, that's cool. Got into a World Series, right?"

I nodded again. "Yep. And played great there, too." I didn't mention the famous error. Maybe the kid didn't know, and now wasn't the time to tell him.

"You know," I added. "Somebody ought to look through the attic and see if there's any old baseball stuff up there. Maybe a glove of Dad's, or a bat, some balls. Who knows?"

The boy's eyes lit up. "You think there might be?"

"Could be. We could at least go find out."

"We could? Now?"

I laughed. "Sure," I said, and so, a few minutes later I opened the door that led from Chris' old room into the attic. Chris' room still had a few reminders of the boy who'd lived there that long time ago: a pair of trophies on top of the chest of drawers; a picture of Chris turning a double-play, his body up in the air, nearly prone, while he throws to first.

The room otherwise had long been changed, converted into a guest bedroom.

But the attic. There were no conversions there, no room for guests. There, behind the door, the boy and I found a baseball shrine, a weird, sad reminder of the past. There was an old Route 66 sign immediately to my right as I walked in, and Dad's Chicago White Sox uniform, #23, to the left, hanging on a hanger.

We stayed at the Picadilly Hotel, over on Lakeshore Drive, that summer in 1959. The place is long gone, but in that attic was a menu from the hotel restaurant (\$2.50 for a Porterhouse steak), a couple of Picadilly Hotel towels, and a big eleven-by-fourteen



black-and-white photo of the building, six stories tall, red brick, with that big sign on the roof.

On a little wooden table underneath that photo was Dad's catcher's mitt, the old Rawlings. I picked up the mitt, slid it on my left hand. It fit perfectly.

"See this glove, Chris?"

He gaped at it on my hand. Nodded.

"This glove caught Billy Pierce and Early Wynn."

The names meant nothing to him, but he got the idea.

"This glove," I went on, "played in the World Series. You know, I had no idea he still had it."

"What about this one?" young Chris wanted to know. He'd walked over to the far, dim corner of the attic and seen something there in the shadows. He pulled a string hanging from a naked lightbulb and the corner came alive in sudden, hard shadows.

Chris held his namesake's glove, my dead brother's old infielder's mitt, the one he'd gotten from Luis Aparicio and used lovingly for years afterward. Luis had liked Dad, and gave him the glove for his oldest boy.

Chris loved that glove, and depended on it, took good care of it. He told me he planned to use it in the big leagues one day, but first it had to win state. The glove never got that chance, of course, because of what happened that last game of run-down in the side yard that Friday evening in May of 1969.

I shook my head to clear it of the memories of those times, of the blame.

"That's Chris's glove," a voice from behind us said.

We turned, the boy and I, and there stood Sally, silhouetted in dark shadow against the bright summer light from Chris's room.

Young Chris held it up. "It fits me perfect, Mom."

"It fits him perfect, Mom," I mimicked, smiling. "Must be fate, Sal, eh?"

She shook her head. "What else have you boys found in here?"

"It's like our personal Cooperstown in here, Sal. Here's Dad's old glove, some stuff from the Picadilly Hotel—remember that place?—and a bunch of other old baseball things. Dad's uniform, his old cleats..."

"and his cap, too," added Chris. "Look at this." And he put it on. It was way too big for him, and sat comically over his ears, falling down in front of his eyes, those wonderful child's eyes.

We both laughed, Sally and I, and then she walked in all the way to sit down and play. The three of us had

a grand old time there for a half-hour or so, rummaging through the detritus of a lifetime focused on a golden time so tarnished by tragedy.

We reminisced, for Chris's sake, Sally and me talking about how things were when we were kids. Inevitably that led to thoughts on our brother Chris, and baseball, and playing run-down.

Young Chris sat silent through a lot of this, the glove on his left hand, the fisted right hand occasionally pounding into the pocket of the glove. Finally, as Sally and I got lost in the best of those times, young Chris wandered off into the other remaining corner of the attic.

"Hey, guys," he said from that corner, interrupting us, "look what's here."

It was a ball. It was The Ball, autographed by the team right before the big championship game, for injured Chris who was unable to play, nursing a broken wrist.

"Who are these guys?" the boy asked, and I told him. Harvey Regis, Larry Leslie, Ken O'Connor, Stevie Walsh and all the rest. Illinois State Runners-up, 1969.

Young Chris looked impressed, then tossed the ball my way. I had Dad's catcher's mitt on and caught the ball with a laugh, picked it out of the wide pocket of the mitt, looked it over, those young men's scrawls all over the ball.

"Sorry you couldn't play," read one from Walsh. "Missed you, pal," said the one from O'Connor. "Wait till next year!" exclaimed the one from Harvey, Chris's best friend.

They were the boys who died, back at the intersection of Route 66 and Butler Road. Walsh, O'Connor, Regis, and my brother Chris at the wheel, with that broken wrist in a cast, a beer in the good hand, that sudden intersection after the rise.

After it happened, a month or so after the accident and the funeral, I took Dad's car, the old Buick, and drove to the spot one early morning about two. I walked around in the full-moon mist, wading through dew-damp waist high-weeds, picking up bits of plastic from their car, tiny shards of angry metal, a foot-long piece of chrome.

I was searching for ghosts, searching for answers, searching for a good Catholic boy's absolution. At one point I about convinced myself there was something there at the edge of the woods, someone standing there in the shadowed moonlight, watching me. I could feel

him, could feel the anger and resentment that I'd earned from him.

I walked over to the spot, heart thumping, ready to beg for forgiveness, ready to offer anything, even my soul, to have things back the way they were before.

But there was no one there. There is no way back. I looked hard into those surrounding woods, still hoping there would be a way to say I was sorry and to say goodbye. Instead, finally, feet soaked, heart broken, I walked back to the Buick, climbed in, and started west, heading away on Route 66, getting some distance.

That first time I made it to Joplin, Missouri, before I calmed down and called home, then turned it around and drove back to Carlinville.

Here, in the attic, I tossed the ball back to young Chris. He tossed it to his mother, and that got us started. "C'mon," she said, finally, "let's take this outside so we don't break anything. We'll play a little catch."

And you know where that led us. Within a few minutes I'd shed my suitcoat and tie and rolled up my sleeves. Sally had slipped out of her high-heels and tied back that perfect hair and she and her son threw that autographed ball back and forth, base to base, while I ran that worn path between them.

It was a joke, just silly fun, me jogging back and forth a bit while they threw it, caught it and tagged me out. I was being careful, wearing slacks and a clean, white shirt that cost me nearly two-hundred dollars at Bentford's, in Dallas.

And then Sally dropped one and I got in safely, hooting with laughter as I reached in with my right foot to touch the paper sack we'd placed there as a base.

Sally just looked at me. She smiled. "OK, Twerp. See if you can do that again," she said, and fired one, hard, down to her son.

He caught it easily, pulled it from his glove, and then, faking one first, threw it back.

I hesitated. I didn't want to ruin my pants, so I certainly wasn't going to slide. My only chance, then, was for them to miss the ball, and that would only happen if I hurried them. OK, then, next chance I'd go for it, full speed ahead and the hell with middle age, just run hard and hope.

Sally had the ball. She flipped it easily back to Chris. He caught it again, pulled it out of the glove, and stood there, staring at me, focused intently on his mother and her brother down there at the other end of that worn path. Finally, grinning broadly, he cocked

that right arm way back and let it fly toward his Mom. Taking a chance that he wasn't going to fake the throw, I took off as he brought his arm forward. I had one step behind me before it left his hand. His throw looked low to me, like it would be in the dirt where Sally would have a hard time fielding it. I ran hard.

The Spot, they used to say, was haunted. Friends of mine would tell me they'd be driving by at night and see four boys out there playing catch. It got to be a local myth, the ghostly game at The Spot.

Tom Seals, the baseball coach at the high school who'd been shattered by the boys' death, took to going out there past midnight every week or so and talking to his dead players. I thought that was pretty damn morbid.

A guy from upstate in a pickup truck told the breakfast crowd at Aunt Janie's cafe that he had a flat out there and these four young high-school kids helped him fix it. He offered them a ride into town but they turned him down, said they had things to do right where they were.

Well, I don't believe in ghosts, at least the ones that we don't create for ourselves. On the one-year anniversary of that terrible night I tried one more time, sat out there all night, drifting in and out of sleep, watching the shadows from the nearly full moon walk their way toward me. Shadows, yes, and an owl or two and a whole top-hat's worth of rabbits just as gray dawn grew over the hill.

But no damn ghosts.

As I ran toward Chris's base I could hear Sally behind me yelping with delight as she dug the low throw out of the dirt on the short hop, pulled the ball from the glove and fired it back to Chris. I was still a good fifteen feet from the bag when the ball whizzed by me, shoulder high, perfect for young Chris.

I watched him catch it, could see the look on his face, the determination as he reached up to snag it, then started bringing the glove down to tag me as I—forget the damn slacks from Dallas, forget my damn middle age—launched myself into a slide, leaving from my right foot, bringing the left foot up as the right hip hit the ground and I started sliding in toward the bag, all overweight out of shape too damn old two-hundred and twenty pounds of me in expensive slacks and shirt coming to my father's funeral.



What happened in 1969 was this. The day before the state championship game, it's me and Sally and Chris playing run-down in the side yard. I'm the man in the middle.

Sally pegs it to Chris. He puts down the glove. I slide in, angry as hell for how I'm always out, for how he always wins, for how dad loves him, for how he's going to win state and I'm running an anonymous four-forty in track that no one cares about.

I'm filled with envy, with brotherly hate and jealousy for my older brother and his perfect life and his perfect future. I'm sliding in, chock full of this venom, and I raise my left foot some. I can see it so clearly even from this distant lens of thirty years. I raise that foot and then shove with it as I slid in.

There's a snap. It's Chris's wrist. I've broken it. I've broken him. I've broken us, all of us, since that singular moment, that sharp break, leads to his death and our family's shattered life and my personal wanderings west where I've spent a lifetime searching for something unfindable.

Young Chris has the ball down waiting for me. I'm moving in slow motion, barreling in toward him, thirty years worth of regret and guilt plowing me down into that rutted Illinois prairie soil. Behind me, I can hear my sister Sally yelling at me, something incoherent about it being a game.

And she's right, of course, it is just a game, something artificial and invented, with rules and an etiquette and a sense of honor that we all just agree on. Other things, the corn and soybeans, the weather, the insects and the sunshine, the family: they all matter more. Dad, I realize, knew all this a long time ago. Chris just never got to figure it out.

I dig in hard with that right foot, stopping my slow, long clumsy slide, coming to a painful stop, coming to my damn senses. All these years, all the running, and it comes to this. I'm an old, slow middle-aged man and my hip hurts like hell and my slacks are torn from the right knee to the waistband and I've come to a full stop a good three feet short of the bag. It is, perhaps, the worst slide of my life, maybe the worst slide ever.

Young Chris reaches out, grinning, to tag me out. Behind me, Sally is now hooting with laughter, doubling over with the mirth. "Nice slide, Twerp," she gasps out between guffaws. "Real nice slide."

You don't get to go back. You don't get to do it

over. You can't make them forget. There are no ghosts. There are no second chances when you make The Big Mistake. Dad's error will always be there. Chris, frozen in that moment for me when I cracked his wrist, will always be there.

But there is this: A boy's smile. A sister's laugh. A mother's warm hand on yours as you say goodbye to her good man.

And there is Illinois; that good place, that solid ground that holds us all up, the soil that renews each spring when the crocuses break through the melted snow. It is knee-high corn by the Fourth of July and arguments at Bruno's Bar over the Cubs and the Cardinals and the damndest sweet corn in the world when the crop comes in.

The Picadilly Hotel is long gone, but the new Comiskey answers that for me. I've been up there for a dozen games this summer and will be back against next summer. I am, by god, a White Sox fan, and if the scoreboard gets a little too damn noisy sometimes I've learned to handle it.

I'm back from Dallas, back from the west. St. Louis is a nice town and my business prospers. Tammy even likes the city. Good shopping, good museums. We live on the Illinois side, in a calm little town named Troy.

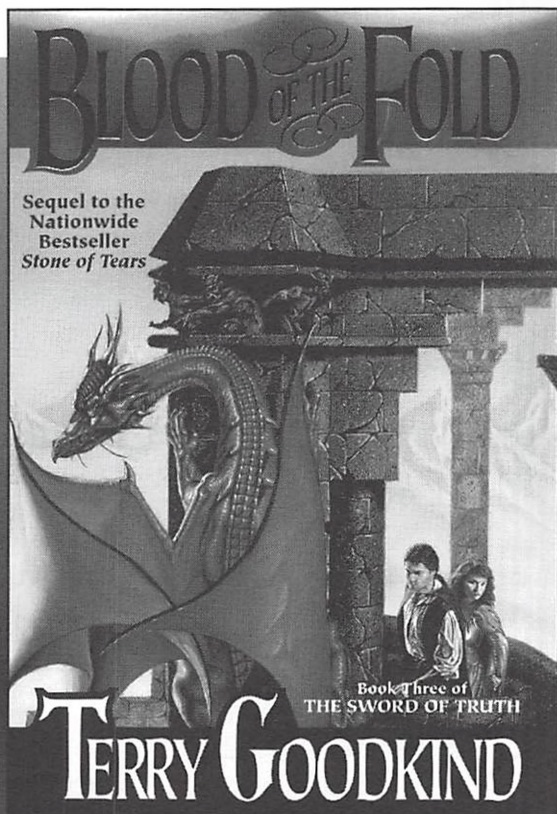
Sally and young Chris live with Mom in Carlinville. Sally teaches at Randal H. Miller elementary. Chris is the star of his Little League team. He has the gift behind the plate. Soft hands, quick reactions, a strong arm, and smart. The high-school coach has his eye on him.

I visit with them about every weekend, and take young Chris along to those Sox games. He says he wants to be big-leaguer like his grandpa was. Well, I think, just maybe. He's got the right genes.

And every now and then I drive over again to The Spot. I find no ghosts there, but the place does seem to listen. I started taking that old Aparicio glove with me and just walking around, tossing that autographed ball in the air, and talking, telling no one in particular about the high-school teams, talking about Dad and Mom and Sally and her boy, and the price of soybeans, and how good the corn looks.

It's peaceful there, on a Saturday afternoon, saying these things to the wind and to the trees and to that old, two-laned concrete that heads east as much as it does west. We all feel good there now. Good, and calm and forgiving.

# TOR



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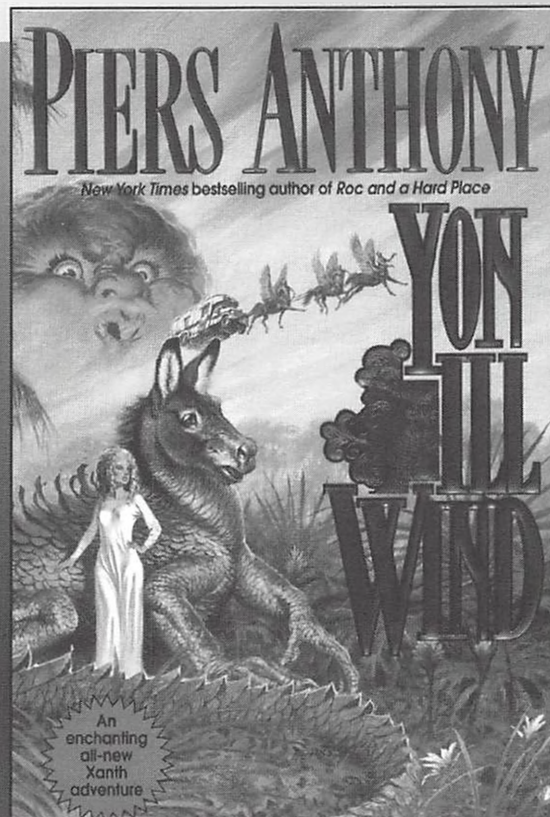
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# ONE AMONG MILLIONS

by Yvonne Navarro

SONDRA KNEW exactly when the vampire started stalking her and the babies.

She called the police and they came out to the house, two dutiful small-town, small-minded men with beer bellies and the smell of grease and old cigarettes on their clothes. The twins, their cherubic blue-eyed faces achingly beautiful beneath wispy, platinum curls, cooed and giggled from the playpen in their room, oblivious to the terror on their mother's face and the tense conversation a room away.

"Listen," Sondra said, "I've seen it following us—"

"It?" The older of the two cops wore a name tag that said McShaw and sent his partner a meaningful look. He jotted something quickly on the form attached to his clipboard.

"Him, I mean." Her face was calm but inside she slapped herself for the verbal slip. Fear was a nasty, constant companion and could cause all kinds of mistakes, make a person tell the truth when that was the last thing in the world she wanted to do. She couldn't afford the truth here, not when the price was Mallory and Meleena's safety. "I've seen *him*."

"Okay." The other lawman was younger but headed the way of his chunky partner; too many donuts and sitting on his ass in the patrol car, wheeling around town and thinking he looked so smart in his blue uniform and spit-shined shoes, the carefully oiled .38 snug in its leather holster. Galena was far enough from Chicago to leave the murders and brutality to the city folk; little occupied these men during the day besides petty theft and speeding teenagers, maybe a few alcohol and drug situations. His revolver had probably never been fired at anything but a paper target—what did this man know of blood and terror? "So you saw someone following you in Fox Valley Mall," he repeated. "And you say he walked behind you and your children nearly all the way to your car—"

"Yes."

"—then disappeared when you turned to confront him in the presence of another couple."

Sondra finally saw his nameplate, slightly askew

on his shirt pocket. "Exactly, Officer Walters." She sat back.

McShaw grimaced. "Fox Valley is a big place, Ms. Underwood." He peered at her over the rim of his glasses, brown eyes full of skepticism. "Isn't it conceivable that this man's car could have been parked close to yours? That it was nothing but a coincidence?"

"I'm telling you he was following us," Sondra said, too loudly. The twins made a noise from the other room and she glanced anxiously toward the doorway, then lowered her voice. "He . . ." Her voice trailed away and she rubbed at her neck absently. These two placid cops . . . how could she explain the panic she'd felt when the man with the familiar razored teeth fastened his gaze on hers in front of the Toys R Us store? She was only window shopping with the babies, of course—she had no money for anything other than the essentials—but Sondra had forgotten all about the silly mechanical dog that yapped happily from behind the plate glass. The wide, brightly lit corridors and garish lights of the mall had done an odd sort of spin-and-fade, until nothing remained in the world but her, and *him*... and the twins, of course. Their little arms waving in the air as they began to cry for him, as mesmerized as her by his dark presence amid the shine and hustle.

"He what?" prompted McShaw. Pen poised above his clipboard, another three dozen boxes to be filled and checked off before he could leave for his next coffee shop appointment.

Sondra swallowed. Careful now, she warned herself. Be very, *very* careful. "I-I've seen him following us before."

The younger policeman's attention picked up. "How many times?"

"Twice," she said. "Once when I took the children to the clinic, and once when we were out for a walk."

"So he knows where you live?"

Walters's voice had sharpened, but instead of feeling vindicated, Sondra had the urge to slap him. Why should she have to lie to get them to protect her?

Because being stalked once or twice was okay, but the magical number three was not. "I'm afraid to go out anymore."

"Tell us about the other two times," McShaw said.

Abruptly Sondra stood. "Would you . . . like some coffee?" she asked shakily. "I'm going to pour myself a cup."

"If it's no trouble." The older policeman looked at her speculatively.

"None at all." She walked to the door of the nursery and checked inside before pulling it shut. Mallory and Meleena were settling down for a nap within the netted confines of the playpen, their soft, chubby bodies curled around each other like well-fed kittens. The door firmly closed, she turned back to the men waiting on the couch. "Sugar? Cream?"

"Black is fine," Walters said. "For both of us."

Sondra nodded and hurried to the kitchen, fumbling out mismatched mugs from one of the cabinets and making sure none of the nasty cockroach egg casings were stuck to the bottom. The insects in this place were a terrible problem and she didn't want to be embarrassed, but what could she expect from a place of hiding, a place of exile? The coffee was too strong from sitting on the burner since this morning and she didn't really want any, but she needed time to gather her thoughts so she didn't fuck up the story. Her claim of seeing the man who hunted her and her babies by the clinic had been a lie, but Sondra could gloss that over by saying she'd only had a glimpse of him then; they might write that sighting off, but they might not. Saying he knew where they lived was the truth, as was telling that he trailed after them every time she stepped out of the house, a specter of living hunger that was impossible to deny.

Her knees went suddenly weak and she leaned against the counter for support. Would any of this do any good? Perhaps she would have to run again, flee in an endless, exhausting effort to give her babies a normal life. Dear God, would he never let them be?

Without warning his mocking, cruel chuckle filled her mind and the memory of his frigid hands sliding over her skin made her flush—

*"Open your legs."*

*"No!"*

*His eyes were black, his gaze oddly sprinkled with yellow glitter, like a reflection of a midnight sky swollen with stars. His fingers, tipped with nails sharp enough to split her skin, scraped along the insides of her thighs. His*

*touch made her veins throb with need.*

*"Bear my children."*

*"Let me go!" she cried. She cursed him, then damned her own body as her thin knees began to spread. Lying against the black sheets, her limbs were like the petals of a pale lily unfolding to float upon an onyx ocean.*

*"I will fill you with blood and fire," he whispered in her ear as his body weighed her down and pierced her with exquisite ice. Her insides pulsed around him in involuntary response and he moaned against her neck as he rocked, a wolf's growl of pleasure as the sharp edges of his teeth rubbed along her neck, so very close to the one thing he had yet to steal from her. Everything else was gone; her pride, her self-esteem, her virginity. She was his harlot and his slave, and soon she would carry the ultimate proof that he had used her. Surely he would allow her to keep the final, fragile bit of her humanity that pumped within her arteries. Surely—*

The sugar jar jittered dangerously in her grasp and she slammed it on the counter and decided to do without rather than risk spilling it. *He* had sent the cockroaches to this place to torment her, to try and make her leave, and she'd be damned if she'd do anything to feed them. Turning to the sink, Sondra rinsed her hands and face in cool water, then used a paper towel to pat her skin dry. Easy does it, she told herself. Ten more seconds and her hands were steady enough to fish a battered rectangular cake pan from the drawer by the oven and use it as a makeshift serving tray to hold the mugs. She nearly dropped it when she turned from the counter and found the younger of the cops standing directly behind her. His eyes met hers and she felt trapped for an instant, came perilously close to telling him everything, the whole corrupt story burning at the edges of her lips. On the battered aluminum surface, the mugs rattled against each other.

"I'll take that for you," Walters said. He reached for the pan and his fingers, cold like hers, brushed her arm. His face was unreadable but his touch left her oddly weak, disoriented. Standing before him in the small kitchen, Sondra saw that she'd been wrong about his build; he wasn't overweight at all. In fact, his entire body seemed to have elongated somehow and become lean, like a dog that looks soft and warm and sleepy until it stands up and stretches. Fear bubbled into Sondra's throat, but he only took her elbow with his free hand and guided her toward the living room and his waiting partner, his flesh burning against her own like dry ice.



McShaw looked up from scribbling on his form and dropped his pen onto the coffee table, reaching eagerly for one of the mugs. Sondra sank onto the worn love seat with a feeling of relief that shattered when Walters settled loosely next to her instead of returning to his place on the old rocking chair across the coffee table. Everything about the apartment was small: the rooms, the windows and the meager amount of sunlight they permitted inside, the furniture; his thigh, bunched with muscle beneath the fabric of his slacks, pressed coolly against hers, but there was no where for her to move to get away. Was she suffocating here or was the pulse hammering in her throat simply getting in the way of the air trying to flow into her lungs?

"Okay," McShaw said after a moment. He made no move to pick up the clipboard he'd set on the table next to his pen. "Tell us about the other two times."

"I thought I saw him when I took the babies to the pediatrician at the free clinic last Tuesday," Sondra said hoarsely. She was proud of the way she kept her voice from shaking, from giving away her petty deception. "Following us again. But it was too crowded there and when we got out it was rush hour. He was gone."

"You thought?"

Sondra nodded but didn't elaborate. Let them discount this one if they wanted; it was a lie anyway, mere icing on an already poisoned cake.

"And when was the other time?"

"Last . . . night. I took the babies up to the park for the fall festival. He w-was there, and he followed us home."

McShaw leaned forward. "Ms. Underwood, if he followed you home last night, why did you wait until this morning to call us?"

Sondra looked at her hands, the knuckles red from scrubbing furiously at the filth of this place, the fingernails strangely white under the edges from baby powder. "I-I don't know," she whispered. "I guess I was hoping he would just go away, but when I got up this morning and I thought about it, I realized that's probably not going to happen."

"Has he ever tried to make contact? Threatened you?" Walters's voice was smooth and vaguely . . . *sweet*, like one of those expensive frozen drinks the upscale restaurants served. She thought she heard all kinds of innuendo in it, as rich and varied as the variety of liquors dumped into the exotic glasses edged with garnishes made of fruit and plastic sticks.

Sondra's gaze found his unwillingly and she lost herself for a single, panicked moment, snapped back in time to answer before McShaw noticed her lag. "No." With a dying feeling, she realized how lame all of this must sound and she had to force the answer past her stiff lips. She had called too soon, they would never believe her; she was alone in her efforts to protect Mallory and Meleena, as she had been from the moment of their birth—

*"We're going to have to call a doctor," the midwife said grimly. Sondra lifted her head and saw the woman's heavy, black face peering back at her through the inverted triangle of her spread legs and over the spasming mound of her bloated stomach. Apprehension made her south side accent run the words together. "You're bleeding too much and you've been in labor way too long."*

*"No doctor," Sondra hissed. The refusal ended in a scream as agony rippled through her uterus, as if the child inside were trying to tear its way through the prison of tissue and mother's blood. Had it heard the midwife's words and realized the danger of prolonging her agony? "It's coming now!" she screamed and pushed, bore down as she had never done before to expel the thing within her body that was trying to kill her.*

*"I see it—push again!" The midwife's hands were warm and wet with Sondra's blood and they pried at her ravaged flesh for a moment, then locked around something huge and painful. "I've got the head. Come on, Sondra—if you don't keep pushing you'll kill it and yourself besides!"*

*Sondra screamed again and dug into the sides of the mattress with her fingernails, felt the decrepit fabric tear at the same time as the child shot from her body with a wave of pain that nearly made her lose consciousness. Dear God, she thought disjointedly as she fought to find her breath, why hadn't the mound of her stomach grown smaller? Was it afterbirth—could the fruits of her coupling have filled her with that much dark debris?*

*She was still panting from Mallory's birth when deep within her belly the fire began anew, making her writhe on the soaked sheets and open her mouth in a scream too huge to be heard. The midwife was there in an instant, her large, slick hands working at Sondra's belly, kneading and pressing—*

*"Twins!" she declared. "Hold on, girl—there's another one coming!"*

*Sondra's wail found substance as a second child forced its way free. Something deep inside her relaxed and let her breathe, disregarded the short, puny cramps*

that followed as the midwife worked her stomach to get Sondra's body to eject the bloody afterbirth. "What?" Sondra finally managed, sucking in welcome air as she fought to sit up. "W-what are they?"

"Girls," the midwife said, turning back to the changing table. "Just as healthy as can be, too. A little over six and a half pounds each—big for twins." Despite her assurances, the black woman's voice was reserved, puzzled. Exhausted, Sondra listened to the splash of water from the basin as the midwife expertly sponged down the infants, then wrapped them in receiving blankets.

"Can I see?"

"Here you go. One for each arm."

Warmth settled on either side of her and Sondra tucked her chin to her chest for a glimpse of her babies. Sleeping already, come into the world without so much as a whimper; tiny fingers bunched into loose fists, delicate lips still bluish-purple but pinkening by the second. Their heads were crowned with thick, dark hair above perfect eyebrows and petite, tilted noses; as she gazed at them, the second one—Meleena—spread her heart-shaped mouth in a barely discernible yawn.

Sondra jerked and both babies opened their eyes and regarded her solemnly. "What was that?" she asked. Her voice was shaking.

For a moment the midwife said nothing, then the big woman folded her hands in front of her as though she were trying to pray unobtrusively. "Something I've never seen on a newborn," she said at last.

"Teeth."

—and now Sondra faced a new danger: Walters. There was something about him that reminded her of the twins' father, an elusive call to forbidden sexuality that she'd thought only one man, one *creature*, possessed.

"Open your legs."

"No!"

"Bear my children."

She gasped when someone touched her arm, then realized it was McShaw. "Are you all right, Ms. Underwood? You don't look like you feel very well."

"I'm f-fine," Sondra stammered. "Tired, that's all. It's hard to get a good night's sleep with two crying babies." She clamped her lips shut, abruptly afraid she was whining. It was another lie anyway; the twins never cried. Her sleep was broken by the stealthy creaking of the stairs in the hallway outside the apartment, a thousand phantom shadows in the corners of the dark rooms, the hushed rasp of steel fingernails

along the bottom of the too-flimsy front door.

Walters nodded sympathetically and for a moment she had the absurd notion that he could read her mind. "Of course," he said. "We understand."

Sondra bit back a sharp remark and they both stood, as if some invisible puppet master had pulled the UP strings simultaneously. She found herself watching the subtle movement of muscles beneath the taut fabric of Walters's uniform, then flushed when her gaze traveled to his face and she realized he was watching her watch him. For the first time she noticed that his eyes were a strange yellowish color unlike anything she'd ever seen, the stare of a lion surveying its prey.

"If you see him again, you call 911," McShaw said. "Plus we'll put your building down for a few extra drive-bys every shift, try to make the squad cars more visible. Until you give us something more concrete, that's about all we can do. I'm sorry." The chunkier cop looked down at his clipboard and frowned. "It doesn't seem like he's ever gotten close enough for you to get a solid description."

Sondra opened her mouth, then shut it again when Walters ran his cat-colored gaze across her. She'd been about to say *He looks like HIM* and point to Officer Walters; horrified, she put a trembling hand to her mouth and prayed McShaw wouldn't see her shivering. Was there that much of a resemblance? No, of course not.

Of course not.

*Open your legs.*

Walters was the last of the two to go out the front door. She didn't know why the tense words came, but when he looked back at her, "He wants the twins," was all she could say.

He nodded. "I know." Before she could close the door, he reached back through the opening and placed his fingers lightly on her wrist—a speed search for the hot pulse of life just below the skin?—then glanced surreptitiously toward his partner's retreating back, as though he were her colleague in some great and secret conspiracy. "I'll be in touch," he whispered.

*I will fill you with blood and fire.*

Sondra slammed the front door and stood trembling with anticipation and terror.

The babies were bathed and fed and put down for the night. They lay crowded against each other in the playpen—she couldn't afford a crib—content and quiet, like two halves of a whole. Sondra watched



them for awhile, knowing they wouldn't close their eyes for hours, wondering what they'd be like when they grew up. Right now they were small for their age, but would they catch up later? Go through one of those amazing growth spurts that parents were always crowing about and pediatricians predicted with nauseating regularity? She wished she could think of a way to keep them small and safe forever, by her side and without the sweet, dangerous offering of the rest of the world.

After awhile she went into the bathroom and stared at herself in the mirror. Her image was shell-shocked and pale, a thin face with prominent cheekbones and a nondescript nose, hazel eyes undercut with purple shadows of exhaustion. Budget shopping and constant worrying had made her gaunt and graceless, left her mouth an over-sized flesh-colored slash across the bottom part of her face. Even her brown hair was nothing special—cut to shoulder length, then falling into a stupid wave that made the ends go in all directions. What was it about her that drew them? Why *her*?

*"Because you are one among millions, Sondra."*

She spun with a slow-motion movement that felt like she was trying to turn underwater. "You!"

Officer Walters gave her a handsome smile. "I told you I'd . . . be in touch."

Sondra took a step backward, felt the sharp edge of the cheap drawer pull dig into her spine. For a moment she thought it was teeth and her knees tried to buckle; she locked her muscles and felt behind her for reassurance—an old, bent brass handle, that's all. "How-how did you get in?"

"The door was unlocked."

"That's impossible," she said hotly. "I didn't—"

He was standing in front of her before she had time to form her next word, the width of the room no more than a blink between them. Whatever she was going to say broke off when his hand, cool and white and alarmingly powerful, reached up to cup her jaw. His thumb skated delicately along the line of bone, the skipped up to trace her lips. "I think you left it open for me—"

"No!"

"—didn't you?" Walters leaned over her, his face only an inch away. His breath was thick and meaty but not unpleasant, a cool, unnatural draft against her cheeks. He looked different than he had earlier, as if the chunky, donut-plied town cop were only a cos-

tume he donned to give stereotypical service to the public job and complement his partner's rotund figure. The basic features were still there, but now he looked like a predator, something long and sleek and dark; a panther, slipping through the night that was her life and ready to ambush its quarry.

"Please," she heard herself say. She wanted to cry but her eyes were as dry as her mouth. "Don't touch me."

"You don't mean that," Walters murmured against her neck as he grasped her upper arms and pulled her from the bathroom and into the cramped kitchen. Sondra tried to turn her head and made the monumental mistake of locking gazes with him. Immediately she felt like she was dropping through space, an exhilarating dive from a hundred story building and no concern about the unyielding earth rushing up to crash into her; she would have tilted sideways except that he was pressed fully against her now, holding her, the temperature of his skin bleeding through both his clothes and hers.

*"Open yourself to me, Sondra."*

His voice had deepened and twisted and sounded so much like the other's that a moan of dread made it past her lips. Shivering violently, she could be lying facedown on a blanket of finished leather for all the heat she felt from his muscular chest, the hard plane of his stomach, the firm pressure of his thighs. Her heart was slamming in her chest long before his fingers hooked around the collar of her blouse and tore it open.

*"You can do this for me, make a miracle. Let me be inside you—"*

"I am not a fucking breeding farm!" Sondra wailed. "Get away from me!" She tried to beat at him but she was pinned against the wall, the refrigerator, against *something* that made it impossible to escape. When his hands slid over her breasts and cupped them, then began to massage away the chill of his own touch, she wanted to screech as she unwillingly pressed her hips against his and her fingers tangled in the heavy locks of his hair to yank him closer.

*"I can make you warm again, my sweet. I can fulfill you. With blood—"*

His teeth, so sharp and wet, scratched along the line of her neck and sent a spike of pleasure into the deepest pit of her stomach.

*"—and fire."*

In response, damning herself the entire time, she

started tearing at his clothes, desperate to feel his wintry flesh against her heat, shuddering with the need to cool the fire he'd started inside her.

Sondra screamed as he took her standing against a kitchen cabinet, then screamed again when she came and remembered she didn't even know his first name.

"Nicholas will come for you," Sondra said woodenly. It was the first time she'd spoken the other's name aloud since the night sixteen months before when he had first possessed her mind and body in a basement bedroom more than five hundred miles away. Perhaps she deserved all of this for letting him bewitch her so easily back then, allowing him to pick her up in a bar and enchant her into following him docilely into his loft apartment with the huge windows and black-sheeted, oversized bed. But how well she had suffered for her weakness! She should have been stronger then; she should have been stronger tonight. But she was nothing to Nicholas, or to Walters, a poorly used and ragged feather, blown crazily about by the wind of their cravings. "He might even kill you."

Her words were slurred with cold, her legs still sticky with the testimony of their mating. The dull tiles of the kitchen floor beneath her bare skin were freezing, the unseasonable cold outside seeping through the concrete foundation and crawling up her limbs and lower back. She wanted to move, get up and huddle within something warm until she could feel her blood pulse once again in her veins, but Walters had wrapped his legs and arms around her from behind like a giant spider sucking the essence out of its juiciest kill. Even the cockroaches had gone, fled from this oh-so-superior hunter.

"Nicholas only wants to see his children," Walters said against her hair. His lips nuzzled the strands, tongue flicking out now and then to taste. "If you allow him a meager visit every so often, everyone will be happier. His mind is . . . younger, more fickle. His life has lacked experience and the babies will prove overwhelming—I doubt he'll even stay. Instead you run from place to place like a terrified jackrabbit with her offspring, forcing him to follow and calling the police every time he comes too close. But I am not so foolish or irresponsible as brother Nicholas, my love."

"What do you mean, *brother*? What are you talking about?" Panicked by the realization that he knew their pursuer was actually the twins' father, Sondra tried to twist out of Walters' grasp and face him, but

the arm across her rib cage was like a tight steel band. She started kicking at his feet in frustration and his free hand dipped between her legs and stroked; behind her spine he began to harden again and he ground his hipbones against her and started to rock. Gasping with shame and pleasure, her hands gripped his knees as her legs parted and she arched to meet his fingers. She forgot the icy kitchen floor and the disappearing cockroaches and most of everything else as Walters probed and readied her, finally raised her whole body effortlessly and settled it on his. Beyond the orgasm pounding through her senses, Sondra still managed her strangled question. "What did you mean?"

"*I thought it was clear,*" Walters said. His voice had deepened to the familiar sexual growl and he rolled forward with her, still joined, until Sondra was on her knees beneath him. One of his large hands slipped beneath her left arm and encircled her throat; he didn't squeeze—never that—simply held tight enough to feel the hot rush of her pulse through the artery so close to his killing fingers. The feel of her blood excited him more and he drove deeper into her, making her cry out in surprise and spiraling ecstasy. His other arm snaked across her hipbones and lifted until her knees were clear of the floor and she dangled from his body with only her fisted hands to keep her face from banging against the tiles. Flopping loosely in the air while he fucked her like she was some kind of whore doll, Sondra would have been furious except for the tenderness in his dark voice and the convulsions of rapture that were enveloping her. The words in her ear were like ice-crusting velvet as his mouth grazed the soft juncture of her throat and shoulder and left another barely bloody scratch for him to suckle like an infant.

"*Remember what I said, Sondra? You're one among millions, able to do something which should be treasured. And I will do just that. I will exalt you and place you above all else, forever.*"

Sondra didn't know if it was his next words and the way his hand moved from her throat to caress her waiting belly, her rippling, final orgasm, or her sanity giving way that made her begin to shriek as he came and filled her with a blazing, blood-streaked icy liquid and passion.

"*Unlike my twin brother Nicholas, I will be with you at every moment as you carry my precious sons and bear them into this world.*"



# ELEVATOR GIRLS

by Robert Weinberg

"Any resemblance between characters in this story and real people and publishers is, of course, *purely*, coincidental."

BRIAN CASSIDY ENCOUNTERED his first elevator girl at the 1989 World Fantasy Convention in Seattle.

A quiet, introspective writer, Brian disliked science fiction conventions and usually turned down any invitations he received to attend them. Not that he was often asked. Horror writers, except for the few biggest names, were considered non entities by most sf and fantasy fans. And, though both of Brian's novels had received excellent reviews in the mainstream press, neither of his books had been plugged by the horror critics in either of the monthly science fiction newsletters. Which, by fan standards, meant he was not a "hot new author."

His agent, Milt Gross, was determined to change that perception. He had insisted that Brian leave his comfortable Chicago apartment and travel to Seattle over the Halloween weekend to attend the convention and "network" with the right people. Going against all of his convictions, Brian reluctantly agreed. He had poured his heart and soul into his novels and their lack of success hurt him, both financially and emotionally.

The gathering so far had proven somewhat of a surprise. The fantasy convention was a limited membership weekend, with a high admission price and no events catering to science fiction media fans. Costumes were not allowed, and with only 750 people in attendance, there was not the usual crush of humanity that made socializing at such affairs impossible. Though he hated admitting it, Brian was actually having a pretty good time.

He had participated on two panels that afternoon—one dealing with the use of black magic in horror stories; the other on why most horror protagonists acted so foolishly. Each of the discussions had been well attended, and the audiences were attentive and appreciative. Their questions at the end of each panel indicated real interest in the subjects, and they had actually applauded when the panelists had left the podium.

Afterwards, Brian had been astonished to have

more than two dozen people approach him to autograph *Dead Kisses* and *Grave Shadows*. For an author whose best signing in Chicago bookstores had attracted three people, it was heady stuff.

That feeling of euphoria quickly evaporated when he and Milt attended the Lion Books party that evening. Introverted by nature, Brian disliked loud gatherings in suites crowded with people he didn't know. A quiet, soft-spoken man, he felt extremely out of place. His discomfort intensified when Milt wandered off looking for free refreshments and never returned.

The air in the room stank, and it was as hot as hell.

Feeling slightly faint, Brian tugged the neck of his shirt open wider. When they entered the suite around midnight, Milt told him that the party was just beginning, and that it usually lasted all night. Brian doubted he could spend five minutes more there, despite Milt's admonition for him to "network, network, network."

Brian took a swallow of soda pop to clear his throat. The atmosphere was so befouled by smoke that his lungs burned just from breathing. Not accustomed to smoke-filled rooms and large crowds, he found the party overwhelming. There were several hundred people squeezed into the suite that normally held fifty or sixty comfortably. The din of conversation was mind numbing. It was impossible to hear anything said in less than a shout.

"They say the air on the Russian space station smells like this after a few weeks," declared someone dryly on Brian's right. "But they don't permit smoking there."

"No surprise," replied another person. "You'd kill all the plants on board with this pollution. Not to mention the crew."

Brian smiled, then grunted in pain. An unexpected elbow caught him in the side as a big, burly man smoking a cigar pushed his way past. Brian knew better than to expect an apology. Manners didn't exist

when this many people crowded into a room.

Sighing, Brian stood on his toes and tried to catch a glimpse of his agent. For all of his talk of making new contacts and conducting important business at these parties, Milt spent most of his time at the bar or refreshment spread. At times, it seemed to Brian that his agent lived on the largesse of others. In fact, he couldn't remember seeing Milt pay for a meal during the convention.

It wasn't a thought that pleased Brian. Milt represented him in dealing with editors and publishers. If his agent was regarded as a grifter, it reflected worse on him.

He had signed with Gross when he first started writing. Few agents expressed any interest in his early work. Milt had taken him on at standard rates while others had asked for reading fees merely to look at his stories. Gross had been the one who steered him away from writing short stories and into novels. Though neither deal had been of earthshaking proportions, it was Milt who had sold his first two books to Paperback Library. Brian felt he owed what little he had accomplished so far in the horror field to his agent. Still, the thought hadn't stopped him from thinking about finding someone else to handle his work.

"Hey, Brian," a voice called from behind him, breaking his train of thought. "How you'all been?"

Smiling, he turned. The speaker's accent was unmistakably Texan. It could only be Jack Landers.

A stocky middle-aged writer with jet black hair and a perpetual grin, Landers had been one of the convention's most pleasant surprises. He had been a member of Brian's first panel and afterwards had made the point to come over and introduce himself. Jack had long been one of Brian's favorite writers, and the Texan had caught him totally by surprise with his high praise of *Grave Shadows*.

"Kicked me in the head like an ornery mule," Landers had declared in his own unique vernacular. "Damned book showed a lot of talent, Brian. A lot of talent."

It was heady praise, coming from one of the most successful writers attending the show. Landers had recently made the leap from horror to mainstream suspense with an ambitious, long novel about serial killers. Rumors of his most recent deal with Green Dragon Books pegged his advance in the six figure column.

"Enjoying yourself at this wing-ding?" Jack asked, with a chuckle. Wearing a black shirt with metal buttons and a hand-made string tie, he looked much more a cowboy than an author. "These parties ain't exactly my cup of tea."

"Mine either," admitted Brian. "My agent insisted I come and circulate. He wanted me to network."

Landers shrugged. "Nothing wrong with that," he said, unconsciously fiddling with the decoration on his string tie. Constructed of tiny bits of wood, string and beads, it resembled a tiny human figure. "Man's gotta deal with the bullshit if he's going to work in the pasture."

Brian nodded. "So I've discovered."

Landers noticed Brian staring at his tie. "Like it?" he asked, grinning. "My wife gave it to me when I first started attending these conventions. She's half-Cherokee. Little lady insisted I wear the thing for the weekend. It's a charm to keep away evil spirits." Lander's voice sunk to a conspiratorial whisper. "Not that I believe in such stuff, mind you. But, I know better than to risk offending my better half. She can be a pretty evil spirit when she's mad."

The Texan chuckled. "Besides, I like the fella. Makes me feel right comfortable. Not like most of the stuffed shirts attending this here party."

Brian tugged his at his collar again. He could feel the droplets of sweat trickling down his back. "There doesn't seem to be much actual socializing taking place. Everyone appears to be talking to people they already know."

"Right you are," said Landers. "It's just like real life. Nobody here is looking to meet anyone different. Especially newcomers. You got an agent? They're the one who should be running interference for you here, making all the introductions and such."

"I lost Milt a half-hour ago," admitted Brian. "For all I know, he's left for the hospitality suite."

"Tempting food there," said Landers, chuckling. "Lots of salmon. In years to come, they'll remember this show as the Salmon Con."

The Texan frowned. "Milt? You ain't hooked up with Milt Gross, are you?"

Brian nodded. "That's right. Why? Is there something wrong with him?"

No longer smiling, Landers took Brian by an elbow and steered him to the rear of the suite. He stopped by an open window, away from most of the crowd. The Texan leaned close so that he couldn't be



overheard.

"There's two types of agents, son," said Landers. "A writer's agent and a publisher's agent. A writer's agent works for his client, getting him the best deal possible. It makes sense, don't it. Agents get paid a slice of your earnings, so the better deal you get, the more they collect as well. A good agent earns every penny, cutting deals, retaining rights, stuff like that.

"That ain't the case with a publisher's agent. They're the lazy ones, the prairie dogs with a foot in the door of a certain company or two. Varmits like them are primarily interested in making sales, lots of sales. Keeps the money flowing into their pockets. So they don't fight so hard for their clients. Usually, they take what's offered, or do a little adjusting in the contracts so that it looks like they're doing a good job. Instead of struggling for the writers they represent, these agents work keeping the publishers happy. It's the old case of you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. And the authors get the shaft."

The muscles tightened in Brian's chest, signalling the onslaught of a tension attack. "And you're saying Milt...?"

"He's a publisher's agent all the way," replied Landers, nodding. "What'd you get for that second book of yours?"

"Five thousand," said Brian.

"You should have gotten ten," said Landers. "Lancer Books would have paid that, easy. They're always looking for new horror talent. And you're good, son. You're real good."

"But Milt took me on when no one else would even look at my work," said Brian. "I felt I owed him...."

"Bullshit," interrupted Landers. "You don't owe your agent nothing. Good ones or bad ones—remember they work for you, not the other way around. Without you, they're nothing. Don't ever forget that, Brian. Agents, even the best of them, are parasites. They're like vampires. They live off your blood, your creativity. Gross ain't your friend, he's your employee."

Brian drew in a deep breath, trying to steady his nerves. "I appreciate your honesty," he said to Landers, his voice shaking. "It's not that your saying anything I haven't suspected already. Confirmation is just a bit difficult to accept."

"You okay?" asked Landers, sounding concerned. "I didn't mean to lay it on so heavy. But you're too

good a writer, Brian, to be stuck with the likes of Milt Gross."

"I'm all right," said Brian, feeling somewhat shaky. "The smoke in here is making me dizzy."

"Hey, Landers," screamed someone from across the room. "Come on over here and tell these fools how your wife hired a stripper to deliver your birthday card last year!"

The Texan grinned and shook his head. "I'll never live that one down. Sorry, Brian, gotta run. My public calls." Lander's voice grew serious. "You take it easy now. Ever need some help, give me a call. That's what friends are for."

"Thanks," said Brian, as Jack was swallowed up in the crowd.

## 2.

Deciding a drink would clear his head, or at least make his problems less pressing, Brian headed for the bar. Located near the front of the room, it was staffed by two attractive women, in their early thirties, dressed conservatively. Brian recognized them both from a panel that afternoon as editors for Lion Books, the company hosting the party.

"I didn't know editorial duties included tending bar," he said to the nearer of the two, a brunette with long hair and piercing gray eyes. "Can I have a coke? Easy ice."

"You'd be surprised at what editors have to do to earn a living," the woman replied, her tone indicating she was only half-joking. She handed Brian his sodapop. "Brian Cassidy, right?"

"That's me," he admitted. "I'm sorry, but I don't remember your name."

"No reason you should," said the woman. "We've never met. I'm Sarah Milhouse."

They shook hands. "I'm horror editor for Lion. I've read both your novels," said Sarah. "They're strong stuff. If you ever consider switching houses, I'd be happy to see your next book."

"Why... thanks," said Brian, overwhelmed. Sarah Milhouse had the reputation for being one of the most savvy editors in the field. "I've just started working on a new book. Needless to say, I think it's my best one yet."

"You're with Milt Gross," said Sarah. It was not a question, but a statement of fact.

"Right," said Brian, immediately feeling defen-

sive. "Though I have to admit I'm starting to have second thoughts."

"Good idea," said Sarah. She leaned forward across the bar, so she could speak softer. "You...."

Whatever wisdom the editor was about to impart was drowned out by the arrival of another writer at the bar. "How about some service," the man belted, his tone belligerent. He stared at Brian for an instant, as if trying to place his face. Then, with a shrug of dismissal, the man focused his attention entirely on Sarah. "I need a drink, babe. Now."

Sarah grimaced at Brian then turned to the speaker. A smile that went no further than the edges of her mouth blossomed. "What would you like, Amos?" she asked, sweetly. "Nothing's too good for one of Lion Books best."

"Damned right," said the author. A big burly man with a ruddy red face and bloodshot eyes the size of saucers, he hung onto the edge of the bar like a life preserver. Brian recognized him as Amos Sawell, known in the field as the master of vampire fiction. The author of more than twenty novels, Sawell had been writing dark fantasy for more than a decade.

"Give me scotch on the rocks. Straight up, none of that fuckin' ice to water it down."

"Whatever you say," declared Sarah, pouring the author a tumbler full of liquor. "Your wish is my command."

The sarcasm so evident in the editor's voice was completely lost on Sawell. Eyeing Brian, he sneered as if in contempt. Manhandling the glass, he disappeared into the crowd.

"Is he always so..." began Brian, searching for the right word, as Sarah wandered back to him.

"Angry? Obnoxious? Drunk?" replied the editor, smiling. "Yes to all three. Don't let his attitude bother you. Amos treats everyone he perceives less important than himself like dirt. And that includes just about everyone in the world."

"He seems rather bitter, actually," said Brian.

"Very perceptive," said Sarah. "You might act the same if you wrote twenty novels and not one of them ever made the best seller list—any best seller list—despite wonderful quotes from all your buddies in the field. Friends, by and large, who have passed you by and left you standing in the dust."

Brian's eyes bulged at Sarah's casual, almost off-hand remarks. "But, he's one of your top authors."

"Sawell?" she declared with a nasty laugh. "He's a

coaster. Nothing more, nothing less. We publish him to fill up the slots in our list."

"A coaster?" repeated Brian, puzzled by her choice of words.

"You are a naive one," said Sarah, pouring herself a drink. "You sure I can't get you something stronger?"

"Coke is fine," said Brian. "It helps me stay alert with all you wolves around. You were going to explain coasters?"

The editor laughed. "A coaster is someone who survives on his or her past accomplishments, Brian. They've lost their creative spark but know enough to keep afloat in their chosen profession. It's not just true in the writing field. Every profession is filled with coasters."

"Ever watch *Hollywood Squares*? Or any of a dozen other celebrity quiz shows on afternoon television? Few, if any, of the participants have made a film in years. They're coasting, living off their reputation." Sarah grinned. "Tell me one thing Zsa Zsa Gabor's done lately other than get arrested for slapping a police officer. One project. Get what I mean?"

"But Amos Sawell," protested Brian. "He's a big name."

"Only in his own mind," replied Sarah. "His agent put his last novel up for bid. Sawell proclaimed it was his best book ever, his breakthrough novel. The one that would finally vault him into the mainstream horror market." Sarah lowered her voice to a whisper. "By my count, it's the *fifth* breakthrough book he's written. Needless to say, they never caused a ripple. This time, none of the other publishers even bothered to enter a bid. We got it for the floor. The lack of interest shook Amos up pretty bad. I haven't seen him sober since."

Brian shook his head, not knowing what to say. Swallowing his coke, he handed the glass back to Sarah. "Another please."

"Going for a caffeine jag," she laughed as she poured him more pop. "Half the authors in this room are coasters, my naive young friend. They haven't had a new idea in years. They merely recirculate old concepts again and again, packaged in slightly different ways. Fortunately for them, most publishers, mine included, don't care. They're not looking for new, innovative books. They want novels that sell. And, most fans aren't looking to be challenged either. They enjoy reading the same familiar stuff they've read time



and time again. Look at the popularity of series books. I don't have to mention names because you know who I'm talking about. Some of the people who write them haven't had an original thought in years. But they keep on selling books. Lots of books."

Brian sighed. "It's not the way I envisioned the field. Not the way at all. I thought creativity meant something."

"It does," said Sarah. "The best and the brightest are still turning out smart, elegantly written books filled with ideas. Take Jack Landers. Or Drake Krestin. Or half a dozen other writers who take their work seriously. They're the ones to admire. Not people like Sawell."

Sarah paused. "Trouble is, that except for Landers and one or two others, the top authors rarely attend conventions any more. It's almost as if they keep away on purpose. Maybe they feel they'd lose their inspiration if they start making the rounds. It often seems to me that the only writers at these shows are the newer, ambitious ones, anxious to make their mark on the word, and the coasters."

The editor smiled. "There's a story idea in that, somewhere, Brian. Oops, gotta go. There's my boss over there. I need to suck up to him for a while. See you around. And remember me with that next book."

"I will," said Jack, downing the rest of his drink. He still felt a little dizzy. Plus, the one-two punch of Landers and Milhouse had overwhelmed his sensibilities. He needed a little time to sort out things in his mind. A short walk outside the hotel, he decided, would help immeasurably.

### 3.

The Lion party was located on the twentieth floor of the hotel. Not in the mood for company, Brian was relieved when he found only one other person, a slender old man with a white goatee, waiting for the elevator.

Though the corridor was still too warm, at least it didn't stink of tobacco smoke. Sighing with relief, Brian removed his name badge and put it into his pants pocket. For a few hours, he preferred not to be associated with the convention. Closing his eyes, he leaned against the wall. After the constant din of the party, the quiet was a pleasant novelty.

"Excuse me." It was the old man with the goatee.

Up close, he appeared frail, not slender. Skin drawn so tightly across his face gave him an almost skeletal look. Bright blue eyes stared directly at Brian. "Are you taking the elevator to the ground floor?"

"Yes," answered Brian, trying to sound polite but distant. It did no good.

"Would you mind if I accompany you?" The slender man's mouth bent into a slight smile. "An odd request, you are thinking. With good reason. The explanation is quite simple. I am somewhat claustrophobic. Riding the car all the way to the bottom by myself would be a great strain. Normally, there's always a crowd going down. But, tonight, no such luck."

"No problem," said Brian, glancing at the older man's name tag. Startled, he looked again. "Why, you're Gene Macklin! I've read all of your books. Some of them many times."

The slender man's smile broadened. "Thank you. No author tires of hearing words like that. It's always a thrill."

Brian flushed. "You're one of the Guests of Honor. I should have recognized you."

"Nonsense," said Macklin. "My last novel was published fifteen years ago. In the horror field, that's several generations. I haven't been at a convention of this sort in more than a decade. The committee invited me as a courtesy. I'm the old-timer guest. I doubt if more than a few of the attendees have any idea who I am or what I wrote."

"That's not true," said Brian, knowing it was but not wanting to admit it. "*Call Me Legion* is an acknowledged classic werewolf novel. As is *My Soul Is Darkness*."

"Perhaps," murmured Macklin. "Which perhaps explains why both books have remained out of print for the last ten years."

The old man stiffened, all the blood draining from his face. "Here's our elevator. My personal horror story."

They entered together. Brian couldn't help but notice how Macklin's entire body shook with fear. The old man's hands clenched tightly into fists as he stepped into the car. Blue eyes wide with terror, the author turned and faced front, as if trying to ignore his surroundings.

Surprisingly, there was another person standing in the elevator. Surprising since they were on the top floor of the building. She—for the other rider was a

young and very attractive woman—showed no signs of exiting. Brian surmised the girl had boarded the car not realizing it was heading up, not down. It was none of his business. He punched the button for the lobby. The doors slid closed.

Macklin stood frozen in place, his gaze fixed on the floor indicator. He never once looked around, remaining absolutely motionless as the car hurtled downward. Only the shallow rise and fall of his chest indicated he was alive.

Arms folded across his chest, Brian waited patiently as the elevator descended. Trying not to be too obvious, he studied the other passenger with more than idle curiosity. She was definitely worth a second, even third, look.

Tall, dark, and very sexy were his first impressions. The young woman, he estimated her age at no more than twenty-one or twenty-two, wore a short black leather dress that hugged her body like a second skin. Her hair, cut short, was jet black as were her eyes. She wore black fishnet stockings and five inch heels. Her skin had a slightly yellowish hue, leading Brian to guess she was oriental. Not unusual, with Seattle's large Japanese community. Her small mouth was painted with bright red lipstick and her cheeks showed just a touch of makeup.

Brian immediately pegged her for a hooker. He had heard stories that this hotel attracted a number of high-class call girls. Then, he noted that the girl was wearing a fantasy convention badge and held a copy of *Science Fiction Times* in one hand.

He shook his head in mock dismay. The first really attractive girl he spotted at the entire show and he mistook her for a prostitute. Grinning, he turned back to the door. With the barest whisper, the door slid open. They had reached the lobby.

Macklin hurried out of the car, eyes straight ahead. "Bye, bye, Gene," said the girl, catching Brian completely by surprise. "Nice to see you again."

The old man didn't stop or give any indication he heard the young woman's words. Brian, feeling slightly embarrassed by his companion's actions, pressed one arm against the recessed elevator door. He gestured with his other hand. "After you."

"Thank you," said the girl. There was a faint trace of an accent in her voice, but Brian couldn't place the source. "But I'm not getting off here."

"Uh, sure," said Brian, puzzled. The girl had ridden the elevator from the top of the building to the

lobby. There weren't any more floors. "Whatever you say."

"Nice meeting you, Mr. Cassidy," the young lady said unexpectedly as he stepped out of the car. "I'm sure we'll bump into each other again."

"I hope so," said Brian, but the door to the elevator had already closed.

Frowning, he wondered how she knew his name. He no longer wore his badge and the girl had definitely not attended either of his panels. He would not have forgotten someone who looked like her.

Macklin waited for him a few feet away, an unreadable expression on his face. "Sorry for my rudeness," he said. "I can't help myself. Care to join me for a drink? I'd consider it repaying a favor."

"My pleasure," said Brian. "Should we go to the bar?"

"There's table service in the lobby," said Macklin. "Let's sit there. The chairs are much more comfortable."

They found a small cocktail table located in a far corner of the huge atrium, away from the hustle and bustle of the front desk. Their drinks were delivered by a blonde cocktail waitress whose eyes lit up with pleasure when Macklin paid her with a twenty and told her to keep the change.

A touch of color returned to Macklin's cheeks as he slowly sipped from a glass of white wine. Still, there was a disquieting, almost haunted look in his face that Brian found troublesome.

"Attractive young girl in the elevator," said the older writer, his eyes staring directly at Brian. "Almost too good looking for this type of show, don't you think?"

Brian chuckled. "She caught me by surprise. I've never seen anyone like her at any of my panels or signings. Do you know her very well?"

"We've met at previous shows," said Macklin, making it quite clear that he had no desire to pursue the conversation. "Her name is Talia Van. I'm surprised to see her here on her own. Usually she attends conventions with several of her girlfriends. They're a wild group."

"I'll bet," said Brian. "Are her friends as good looking as she is?"

"Better, depending on your taste of course," said Macklin.

"I've never seen her or anyone like her at any of the small shows I've attended," said Brian.



"Nor will you," said Macklin, softly. They only go to those affairs that attract the biggest names in the field. And then, only to the parties."

"Science fiction groupies?" asked Brian, trying not to sound naive. "That's hard to believe."

"Perhaps," said Macklin, "but the world is filled with unbelievable things."

"What do you mean?" asked Brian. There was a subtle note of menace in the old man's voice. As if trying to warn him of something without stating it outright.

"Nothing," said Macklin, "nothing at all."

He took another sip of wine. "Ever read Bradbury's short story, 'The Crowd'?" he inquired. "Or Poe's 'Man in the Crowd'?"

"I remember them both," answered Brian. "Each describes how people seem to show up from nowhere whenever an accident or trouble takes place. The implication in each is that the onlookers are anything but innocent bystanders."

"A wonderful concept," said Macklin, sipping his drink. "Over the years, I've developed my own variation of the idea based on my personal observations at conventions. Haven't you ever wondered why so few people at the publisher's parties look familiar? There always seem to be many more of them there than ever in attendance during the daytime activities. Party people, I call them, because they only appear at night at the parties. That's the reason those events are so unbelievably crowded."

"Party people," repeated Brian. "It almost sounds like a story title."

"It is," said Macklin, with a chuckle. "I've been working on that novel for twenty years. One of these days, I hope to finally finish it."

"It's a mystery?" asked Brian. "Or a psychological suspense story?"

"No, no, no," said Macklin, chuckling. "Straight supernatural fantasy. A modern day horror story. For you see, these hangers-on aren't human. Though they appear absolutely normal to anyone who meets them, they're vampiric in nature. Succubi actually. They live on human emotions. In this case, they suck out the creative spark in artists."

Macklin's eyes glowed feverishly, all humor gone from his voice. "They prey on writers, draining them little by little, of their imagination. Physically, their victims remain unchanged. But, mentally, that's another story."

The old man grimaced and drained his wine glass. "Another story entirely. Traveling from convention to convention, using their issues of *SF Times* as directories, these party people slowly devour every shred of talent from their unsuspecting quarry."

"How?" asked Brian. Somehow he got the impression Macklin was no longer merely discussing a book concept.

"Through sex, of course," said the old man, smiling as if at some secret joke. "Each seduction takes a little more from their prey. After all, Brian, they are succubi. Beautiful women, they always dress in black."

Macklin chuckled dryly. "Enough of this yarn-spinning. Forget my party people. Someday you'll know the whole story."

*Know the story*, Brian thought to himself. Not read it, but actually know it. He wondered how, if Macklin hadn't attended a convention in more than ten years, he knew Talia Van who looked young enough to be his granddaughter.

"I've heard your name mentioned several times at this convention, by people whose opinions I respect," said Macklin. "I've rambled on long enough with my wild tales. Tell me about yourself and your work."

Brian couldn't help but obey. When one of the most famous authors ever to write in the genre asked about your career, you spoke. And afterwards, you answered honestly his very perceptive questions.

Thirty minutes and several drinks later, Brian concluded his autobiography, finishing with his recent conversations with Jack Landers and Sarah Milhouse. With a sigh of relief, he settled back in his chair. Usually quiet and introspective, it felt strange and yet exhilarating to spill his doubts and fears to a near complete stranger.

"There are three rules, Brian," said Macklin, "necessary to survive as a writer. Would you like to hear them?"

"Of course," replied Brian.

"Almost all editors are scum," declared the old man solemnly. "Almost all publishers are scum. And almost all agents are scum. Remember that advice and you can't go wrong."

"What you're saying, in other words, is that you can't trust anybody," said Brian.

"Exactly," replied Macklin. Reaching into his wallet, the older man pulled out a business card. "That's my agent's name and phone number. Laura

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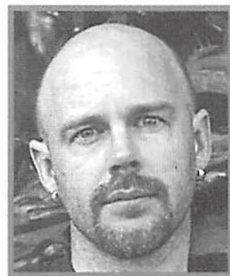
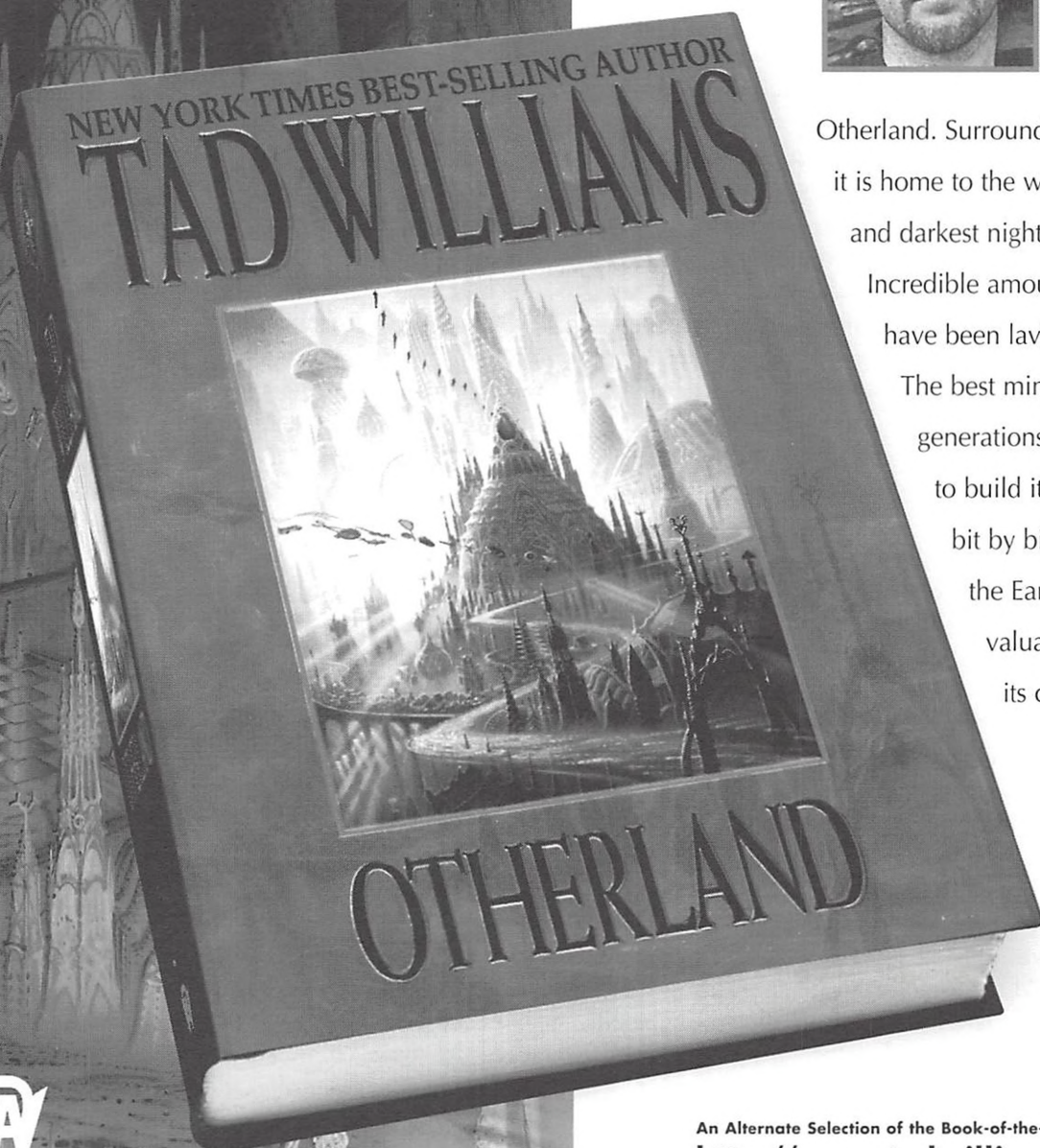


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"Thanks," said Brian. "I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything," advised Macklin. He raised his wine glass as if in a toast. "Here's to big advances, honest royalty statements, and to beautiful young girls wearing black leather in elevators."

"Agreed," said Brian, finishing his drink. He couldn't help but notice the fear in the old writer's eyes. The fear and more than a hint of remorse.

#### 4.

The next few months passed in a blur of activity.

Brian finished his new novel, *We Are the Dark* in January and sent it off to Milt Gross with high expectations. Two months later, the agent reported back that he had an offer of \$7500 for the book from Paperback Library, with a slightly higher royalty rate. As usual, Milt urged Brian accept the deal, saying it was the best they could expect in a weak market.

Restraining his anger, Brian called Gross and told him to submit the book elsewhere. Milt objected, again stating that the market for vampire novels was dying and they dared not risk offending the one publisher who was interested in Brian's work.

Brian's reply was short and to the point. "Milt," he said, no longer feeling the slightest trace of guilt. "*You're fired.* As of this moment, you no longer represent me or my work. I'll expect you to return my manuscript within a week. Or you'll hear from my lawyer. Goodbye."

Five minutes later he was on the phone with Laura Armstrong. The agent recognized his name immediately. "Gene Macklin mentioned you might call. He urged me to read your books. I was extremely impressed. If your new novel is as good as the others, I think we can generate some real money. Maybe even a movie deal. Vampires are hot these days in Hollywood."

Flushed with excitement, Brian didn't know what to say. He wasn't prepared for such enthusiasm. "How's Mr. Macklin doing?" he finally managed to ask, trying to stay calm.

Laura Armstrong didn't answer for a minute, her silence chilling Brian. "Gene died last week," she said

quietly.

Brian was stunned. "But, but, he looked fine at the Fantasy Convention."

"Gene suffered from incurable cancer for the last three years," said Laura. Her voice cracked with emotion as she spoke. "He kept it secret from everyone but a few close friends. That was his style. That convention was the last one he ever attended. One of the committee members knew about Gene's condition and wanted to honor him before he died."

"I'm sorry," said Brian, feeling terrible. "I truly am."

Then, another thought struck him. "His last novel. The one about the party people. Did he ever finish it? From what he told me about it, the book sounded like a classic. It would be a fitting tribute to his life to see it published."

"Manuscript?" said Laura, her voice sounding odd. "Gene never mentioned anything to me about another novel. The pain made writing impossible. It's been years since he put a word on paper."

The breath caught in Brian's throat. Macklin's story suddenly took on a whole new meaning.

"I—I must have been mistaken," said Brian hurriedly. "You know how it is—the parties, the smoke, a few drinks. I obviously misunderstood."

"Forget it," said Laura. "Gene turned a little strange as he grew older. He started imagining all sorts of things. Best to ignore whatever he told you. Let's talk about this new novel of yours instead."

Talk they did, reaching a deal that afternoon, confirmed by FAX that evening. A month later Novel Library paid \$75,000 for *We Are the Dark* in a heated auction with three other companies. An option for movie rights came soon after, with a \$50,000 guarantee and escalator clauses raising the price into six figures if the picture actually went into production.

Suddenly, Brian was very hot. Glowing reviews of his first two novels appeared in *Science Fiction Times* and *SF News*, where he was proclaimed to be a "bright new star in the horror field." There was no mention why neither book had been reviewed when originally published.

Small press magazines which had ignored him and his work until his big sale clamored for interviews. They also wanted short stories from him, or excerpts from his new novel. Several proposed publishing special "Brian Cassidy" issues. Numerous conventions, large and small, invited him to attend, some



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even offering to pay his way. By and large, he ignored all of the attention and kept busy writing.

5.

He met Laura in person for the first time in late June at the Horror Writers of America Banquet in New York City. As usual, Brian had no desire to attend the gathering but Laura insisted, hinting mysteriously at big news she wanted to reveal to him in person. With the money he had earned in the past few months gathering interest in his bank account, Brian found he had no excuse for not going.

A short petite woman with blond hair and blue eyes, Laura was everything he expected from an agent and more. She burned with nervous energy. Pushy and sarcastic, she reminded Brian of a typical brash stage mother, out to get the most for her child. Five minutes after meeting her, he felt confident that any deals Laura negotiated for him would be the best one possible.

She insisted they have lunch Saturday at the Carnegie Deli, located only a few blocks from the convention hotel. Over corned beef sandwiches so huge they needed to be held with both hands, she revealed his latest triumph.

"Paramount is definite with *We Are the Dark*. Coppola's set as director, and there's rumors that Michael Douglas wants to play Landros."

Slowly, Brian lowered his sandwich to the plate. "What's this mean to us?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"Money," replied Laura, grinning. "Big money. But, that's not all."

"There's more?"

"Remember when I called you after the ABA and told you that there was a lot of foreign interest in the novel. I thought that would be the case. That's why I refused to give Novel Library worldwide rights, even though they offered more for them. Well, we've gotten offers from England, Germany, and Japan. Together, they should equal or top the money you got for the U.S. sale."

Brian stared at his sandwich suspiciously. "Can I eat now? Or is there more?"

"The Book-of-the-Month Club wants *Dark* for its November release. The publisher signs the papers next week. And, tomorrow night we're having dinner with Ross Cavanaugh."

"The President of Novel Library," said Brian, shocked. He wondered if this was all a dream.

"You bet. I sent him your proposal for *Forever the Night* last week and told him he had two weeks before I showed it to anyone else. I think he wants to make an offer. I know he does. *A substantial offer.*"

"But *We Are the Dark* hasn't even appeared," said Brian, puzzled. "It's not due out for months. Why would they buy another book from me before the first hits the shelves?"

"Advance orders have been incredible," said Laura. "A friend of mine works at Novel Library and she tells me the numbers from the sales reps have been astonishing. Everyone there expects the book to debut on the *New York Times* Best Seller List." Laura paused dramatically. "High on the list."

Still in a daze, Brian parted with Laura in the hotel lobby. She had a meeting with another client at the bar in a few minutes and he wanted to return to his room to rest and recuperate. So much good news at one time had him reeling.

It wasn't until after he stepped into the elevator going up that he realized he wasn't alone. Standing in one corner of the car was Amos Sawell. Cuddled close to him, one of his big arms around her shoulders, was Talia Van. She smiled slightly and dipped her head as if in greeting. Sawell, reeking of liquor, scowled but said nothing.

*They always dress in black*, thought Brian, as he tried to keep his eyes to himself. Talia wore a sleek, knit catsuit that emphasized her sleek curves and lean, long legs. She clung so tightly to Sawell that she seemed almost a part of him. Like a leech sucking out his life's blood.

Brian's room was on the ninth floor. The only other button pushed was for the twenty-fifth. Stepping out of the car, Brian glanced back at Talia. Already, Sawell was clumsily pawing at her body. She hardly seem to notice. Her eyes were fixed on Brian. Licking her lips slowly, sensuously, she winked. Then, the door of the elevator closed and Brian was alone and very, very scared.

6.

There was a cocktail party that evening, at the penthouse on the fortieth floor of the hotel. Laura had warned Brian she wouldn't be there until late, due to a meeting with an important editor, but he

didn't mind. Instead, he went hunting for Jack Landers.

It didn't take him long to find the Texan. As usual, the writer was surrounded by a gaggle of followers, all laughing loudly at his outrageous anecdotes about his days working on a farm before he became successful as a writer. Nervously, Brian nursed a coke until Landers spotted him.

"Brian, buddy," said the Texan, grinning. "Good to see you."

Then, as if sensing something wrong, Landers turned to the crowd. "Scuse me folks. But me and my friend Brian got some catching up to do. Been a long time since we got to socialize. Talk to you-all later."

Landers peered at Brian through narrowed eyes. "You look like somebody hit you in the head with a two-by-four, boy. Something's troublin' you. Want to talk about it with Pappy Jack?"

"Maybe," said Brian. "Depending on whether or not you'll think I'm crazy."

"Never thought nobody was nuts," said Landers. "A bit touched in the head, maybe, but never crazy. I've seen too much in this world to disbelieve anything I hear. You want we should move to a less crowded spot?"

Off in a corner of the room, Brian related his tale to Landers. He started with his meeting with Gene Macklin and their encounter with Talia Van in the elevator. In exacting detail, he told of Macklin's strange story of 'party people' and Laura Armstrong's lack of knowledge about any such work. He concluded with his most recent sighting of Talia, in the elevator with Amos Sawell.

Landers didn't say a word until Brian was finished. Frowning, the Texan shook his head. "I don't know what to make of it, Brian. I'm not denying there's author groupies. It ain't like rock-and-roll, but there's a bunch of women anxious to sleep with an honest-to-god writer. This Talia chick, she sounds like one of them. Does that make her a succubus? I'm not so sure."

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "It's common knowledge that Amos Sawell's lost what little spark he ever had as a writer. Still, is that due to some sort of 'elevator girls' draining him dry or him just attending too many of these conventions and not spending enough time concentrating on the business of writing? "What I'm saying is that I'm not sure there's a

supernatural explanation behind it all. Lots of writers burn out. Playing fast and loose with some women might be responsible. That don't make them ladies monsters. Even if they do wear black."

"Then you think I'm imagining all this?" asked Brian, recognizing the wisdom of his friend's words.

"Ain't saying that either," replied Landers. He patted the strange little idol holding his string tie together. "Like I told you, my wife makes me wear this goofy charm every convention I attend. She checks up on me too, every time we talk on the phone, making sure I got it on. Won't tell me the reason why, but I ain't never been approached by any women like the type you've described. Maybe she knows something us men don't. My advice is to stay away from that Talia babe, no matter what she's wearing. Girl sounds like trouble, Brian—big trouble."

"I agree," said Brian. He looked down at his watch. "You going to be here for a while? Laura brought me over a bunch of bound galley's of *We Are the Dark*. I left them down in my room. I want to give you one."

Landers grinned. "Why, thank you kindly, sir. I'd surely like to own one of them. Word is out that it's going to be a blockbuster."

"Be back in five," said Brian, his spirits rising.

Lander's advice made perfect sense. He had been getting upset over nothing. Vampires only existed in horror novels, not in real life. Smiling, he stepped into the elevator going down. And found himself alone in the car with Talia Van.

7.

The door slid closed before he could react. Automatically, without thinking, he pressed the button for the ninth floor

"Brian," she said softly, her voice like the purr of a cat. "I was hoping to run into you tonight. I've been hearing wonderful things about your work. You sound so...creative."

"Uh, thanks," said Brian. Despite himself, he found he couldn't help staring at the young woman. he wore a short black leather dress that left her shoulders bare and barely came down to her thighs. Centered between her breasts, a silver zipper with large pull tab descended the entire length of the outfit. As before, she wore black stockings and spike heels.



"Like it?" she asked. "I wore it special for you."

"It's very attractive," said Jack, looking at the floor indicator. The elevator hardly seemed to be moving.

"I find *you* very attractive," said Talia, and with a rustle of leather, was beside him. Before he knew what was happening, her arms were around his neck. Her body pressed tight against him. Her skin sizzled. She felt like she was on fire. It took only the slightest amount of pressure to bring their lips together.

What resistance he had melted with that embrace. The kiss burnt Brian to the depths of his being. He had never experienced passion like that before, and knew that he would never experience it again unless it was with Talia. Hungrily, he kissed her, no longer worrying about the slowness of the elevator or of their eventual destination.

Lust overwhelmed him. Reaching down, he grabbed her by the buttocks, pulling her body ever closer, wielding them together. Shamelessly, she reached down and grabbed his erection through the cloth of his pants. "I want you," she growled. "I want to feel you inside me."

A small part of his mind, a very small, insignificant part, was screaming for him to stop, to realize what was happening. Brian ignored it. All he knew was that he had to possess this woman, he had to make love to her, as soon as possible.

By the time the elevator reached the ninth floor, Brian was ready to explode. It took all that remained of his self-control not to rip Talia's clothes right off in the hallway and take her right there on the floor. Her breath, coming in short, intense gasps indicated she wouldn't object. Hurriedly, they half-walked, half-ran down the hallway to his room.

He hardly noticed Sarah Milhouse coming from the other direction. Nor did he see the strange expression that passed across her face as he and Talia swept by. His entire existence, his entire being, focused on one thought. He needed to fuck Talia Van. Immediately.

Hands trembling with emotion, he unlocked the door to his room. Talia entered first, Brian following. It never even occurred to him to lock the door. Nothing mattered other than the woman he was with.

"Take off your clothes," she commanded, her voice heavy with passion. She pointed to the king-size bed. "I want you there—naked—now!"

Brian kicked off his shoes, then ripped off his clothes. In seconds, he was lying on the sheets, flat on his back, his erection throbbing so hard that it hurt.

Eyes glowing with desire, Talia tugged at the clasp to her zipper. Slowly, she pulled it down, revealing her nakedness beneath.

She wore no bra or underwear. Her white skin glistened in the dim light of the room. Brian gasped in excitement. Talia was the most exciting woman he had ever seen. He couldn't define what made her so desirable. All he knew was that he wanted this woman like no other in his life.

Cat-like, she stalked over to the bed. "I knew you were next," she said mysteriously, "ever since that night in Seattle. I sensed it then. The talent was there, waiting to be released. That's when I put my mark on you, warned the others to keep away. You were mine, all mine."

"Others," said Brian, his hands reaching for her, hardly listening to what she was saying. "What others?"

"Leahl, Kattie, Janise, and the rest," answered Talia. "The rest of my kind. My sisters."

"Your sisters?" repeated Brian, trying to shake the cobwebs from his mind. He felt so strange, so very strange.

"Hush," said Talia, crawling onto the bed, next to him. She pressed her lips, her burning lips on his. "Forget them. Forget everything, except your desires."

As he sunk into her embrace, he felt her body covering his. Her breasts, the nipples hard and excited, pressed into his chest. Her thighs encircled his waist, her dampness grazing his erection. Gathering his strength, he raised his hips, trying to thrust into her. Chuckling, she arched her back, pulling away.

"No, not yet," she said, lifting her mouth from his. Her dark eyes glowed with an inner light. "Let me do all the work. I want to fuck *you*. I need to be in charge."

Brian's body tensed as slowly, teasingly, Talia started to lower herself onto him. He gasped in pleasure as he felt her warmth begin to engulf him, drowned him in ecstasy.

Then, without warning, Talia screamed! Shrieking in pain, she leapt off of him, her face contorted in rage. "Bitch!" she howled, poised at the edge of the bed, her hands extended claw-like in front of her. "I'll rip you to shreds!"

As if waking from a dream, Brian groggily looked first at Talia and then the woman she confronted at the other side of the bed. It was Laura Armstrong. In one hand, his agent held a small but ornately engraved crucifix.

"Try it, and I'll brand you worse than that," said Laura harshly, waving the cross in the general direction of Talia's buttocks. Astonished, Brian saw there was a red mark, corresponding in size and shape to the crucifix, on Talia's hip. "I believe in protecting my clients. Now get the hell out of here before I really get mad."

Snarling, Talia grabbed up her clothes and shoes and headed for the door. She didn't even bother getting dressed. "I won't forget this," she vowed angrily.

"I'm shaking," said Laura sarcastically.

Talia exited, slamming the door behind her. Laura turned to Brian, who hastily covered himself with a sheet.

"Here," she said, throwing him his clothes. "Get dressed. You can thank your lucky stars I ran into Sarah Milhouse in the elevator going up to the penthouse. She said just enough to get me worried."

Laura grinned. "Leaving your door unlocked helped too. Though I doubt if you were in any condition to notice."

Face red, Brian hastily donned his clothing. "You said Macklin never wrote that book."

"He didn't," said Laura, nodding approvingly as Brian stood up. She brushed off his shirt and straightened his collar. "Good. You look reasonably respectable. There's several important people upstairs I want you to meet. Come on. They're not the type who like to be kept waiting."

"But," said Brian.

"Macklin never wrote a word," said Laura, half-escorting, half-dragging him into the hallway. "But you're not the only one he told of his suspicions. That's why I always carry this crucifix with me when I attend conventions." She grinned. "It comes in handy from time to time."

Brian shook his head in disbelief. "Then they actually exist, these party people, going to conventions, preying on authors, draining them of their creativity."

"Elevator girls, I call them," said Laura impatiently. "Because they spend their time in elevator cars hunting for new victims."

"But, shouldn't we be doing something?" said Brian, angrily. "Like warning the other attendees."

Sighing, Laura grabbed Brian by the shoulders. "Two points, Brian. Two extremely important points. Listen carefully and don't forget them.

"First, consider the state of most of the male writers attending this conference. If you could actually convince them that there are incredibly beautiful female vampires roaming the hotel, willing to fuck them in exchange for some of their creativity, you'd never be able to get on an elevator again due to the overcrowding. Hell, assuming there are elevator boys as well as girls, you could add most of the women writers to the list.

"Second, and more important, this is 1993. No one believes in vampires any more. They'd all think you're nuts or looking for publicity. Publishers don't like dealing with crazy people, even incredibly talented ones like you. Go upstairs and tell everyone what happened and you can kiss that movie deal goodbye. Not to mention the Book-of-the-Month Club. And the best seller list."

Brian shook his head. "Then, you're saying I should just forget the whole thing. Treat the entire incident like it never happened."

"Exactly," said Laura, smiling, and taking him by the arm. "Just make sure from now on you wear a cross whenever you go to a convention. Now, let's move."

"Laura," he said as they waited for the elevator to the penthouse. "Assume for an instant that I wasn't your client. And somehow you discovered that Talia Van had taken me back to my room to seduce the creativity out of me. Would you have bothered saving me? Truthfully."

She hesitated only an instant before answering. But, it was enough for Brian.

"Of course I would," she lied. "You know that."

"Of course," Brian lied back.

As they rode up to the penthouse, he remembered what Jack Landers had said about agents. The Texan had been absolutely correct. Elevator girls were by no means the only vampires attending the convention.



# TRACKS OF A HELLHOUND

by Tina Jens

FOR MY HUSBAND, BARRY JENS, WHO HELPED WRITE THE LYRICS.  
AND, BOB KOESTER, FOR THE BLUES HISTORY LESSON.

THE SIGN ON THE OUTSIDE OF THE DOOR READ,

THIS CLUB IS HAUNTED.  
IF YOU'RE AFRAID OF GHOSTS,  
GO AWAY!

The sign on the inside of the door, after you paid the bouncer the \$7 cover charge said,

1. WHEN THE MUSIC'S PLAYING—DON'T TALK!  
*(We Got 10 Beers. You Got 10 Fingers.  
Our Waiters Can Count.)*
2. WHEN THE MUSIC STOPS—APPLAUD!
3. WHEN THE WAITER SERVES YOU—TIP!  
*(The Eagle Flies On Friday,  
But the Bills Come Due the First of the Month!)*

WELCOME TO THE LONESOME BLUES PUB  
*Mustang Sally, Proprietor*

It was a Sunday afternoon and the music didn't start for hours yet, but Old Ratman pushed on through the door. He knew Mustang would already be working at the club, polishing tables, stocking the cooler or cleaning up the stage. He worried about the young girl sometimes. She spent too much time at the bar. But with her mama run off and her left all alone, maybe it was better for her in here than out on the streets.

She heard him shuffle in and greeted him with a smile. She had to be the only white girl on the north side with a gold capped tooth, but somehow, it looked right on her. He and Old George had given it to her for her eighteenth birthday. She'd had her choice between the gold cap and a new guitar. She said her old guitar was just fine, thank you and had made an appointment for the dentist the very next day. Her mama hadn't approved, of course. But then, Miss Sarah wasn't here anymore. Ratman figured he and Old George were Mustang's family now. Leastways, that's what she said.

"Hey Ratman, howya doin' today?" She stood on her tip toes and leaned across the bar to kiss his leathery cheek.

"Doin' a mite better now," he wheezed.

She laughed, and pulled out a bottle of Wild Turkey, filling his snifter up nearly to the rim.

Nope, The Lonesome Blues Pub wasn't a traditional bar. And Mustang wasn't a traditional bartender. She was too young legally, to enter the premises, but the woman was older than her age. She'd had a ghost for a nursemaid, had her diapers changed by some of the Blues greats, and even played guitar against a demon band from Hell—and won—but if Mustang had seen it, it'd walked in the doors of the Lonesome Blues Pub. He didn't reckon she'd been more than ten blocks away from the club in her whole life. Except maybe to go to Buddy Guy's fiftieth birthday bash at his club in the South Loop.

"I've been waiting for you. We got a package from Dusty Joe at the Blues Historical Society. I didn't want to open it till you got here, but I did read the note."

"Well girl, what's it say?"

"Dear Miss Mustang. Here's a gift, I think you'll appreciate, considering the club's history. A riddle which requires your special talents to solve. Fondly, Dusty Joe."

She ripped the packing tape off the box, and opened it, gently lifting a stack of lacquered disks out and setting them on the bar.

She picked the top disk up, carefully cradling the edges.

"It's an old Bluebird label, but the rest is handwritten. Hard to read... *Oct. '35... Independent*. Must be one of those demo records you could pay to have them make for you.

"*RO JO... Hellh*— I can't make out the rest of the word..." Her voice trailed off.

Mustang connected the initials, date and half-scrawled title in her mind.

Could it really be an unknown Robert Johnson

record? Recorded thirteen months before his first San Antonio session?

It had to be a joke or a hoax, or some other artist.

There was one way to find out.

"I'll get the record player out of the office."

She set the old portable player on the counter then moved behind the bar to plug it in. The lights dimmed as the plug went into the socket. Wind began to howl through the room as Mustang picked up the top record and gently slid it out of the sleeve. A cold chill blasted across the bar as she carefully set the disk on the record player peg. The wind cried "NOOOOOO" as she turned the power on.

Mustang struggled against the buffeting wind, and shouted at no place in particular, "Jayhawk, DO something!"

The bar's guardian ghost did something. It was as if he'd flicked the power switch in a virtual fuse box or slammed a spectral window sill down. The lights came up, the wind died down, and the howl was reduced to a quiet moan, like a puppy whimpering in the dark.

"Thank you," Mustang said to the air.

"Now, play that thing," Ratman said.

And the eery, plaintive wail of a young Blues King cried out, "I've got to keep movin'..."

The loneliness and rejection, the evil thoughts and wanderlust that young Robert described, as much with his guitar as with his words, crept into her soul. Suddenly she understood how a body could want to run, even if it had no place to go and didn't know what it was running from.

It was as if the spirit of Robert Johnson had reached through the speaker and wrapped his cold dead hands around her heart. When the last despairing notes faded away, Mustang found herself crying. Her heart broke in two.

She turned away to grieve in private, and saw a man, or a spectre of a man, sitting at the end of the bar. He wore a pinstripe suit with padding that didn't quite hide his rounded shoulders, a felt hat, and a guitar hanging low down his back.

He nodded hello, then spoke soft. "I wish you hadn' gone an' done that. Ya let him loose again."

It was the spirit of Robert Johnson, Mustang knew, for he looked something like his famous "dime store" picture. Awed and honored by his presence, and remembering his fondness for whiskey, Mustang poured him a double shot of Wild Turkey, and one

for herself.

This was Robert Johnson, King of all the Delta Blues Men, Father of the Chicago Blues sound, and an inspiration to countless rock and roll musicians. Mustang wondered suddenly if the spirit had ever heard Eric Clapton's version of *Crossroads* or the Rolling Stones' rendition of *Love in Vain*. She wondered if he'd like them.

She watched in fascination as he drank a ghostly image of his drink. The glass itself stayed on the counter, but when he set his drink back down, the whiskey levels matched.

When he had wiped his lips with a white handkerchief, he spoke again.

"Them records weren't meant to be played. They was Bob's protection."

"Set who loose? Protection from what?" she asked.

"The hellhound, girl."

Somewhere out on Halsted Street, a hound bayed with a voice that was two parts hunger, one part frustration, and an equal measure of blamed meanness.

Ratman looked to the window. "I guess that'd be him now."

Mustang jumped when her friend spoke. She had forgotten he was here. But that was Ratman's way, to drift into the shadows, and watch, unnoticed, seeing all. Dealing with hordes and hell-fires with the same calm and maddeningly slow way.

He shuffled to the inner door and put his frail back to it, inching the massive wood frame closed.

"What are you doing? We open in an hour, and you're going to hurt yourself. Stop that!"

Ratman paused in his efforts, to wheeze out an answer to her. "Mustang, you don't open your door to evil spirits. You done forgot what happened last time we had one of those in here?"

Mustang hadn't forgotten. She hurried around the counter and put her back to the door. Then hung a closed sign in the window and pulled the shade.

"Now what do we do?"

Robert answered, "We drinks whiskey and waits for him."

Ratman nodded at his wisdom.

Mustang said, "And then what?"

"Best way to deal with a recal'itrant hound is to face him down and show him who's master," Bob said.

Having never dealt with a hunting dog before,



Mustang wondered just how one demonstrated this. But as she had no better ideas, now that all the doors and windows were locked, she hitched up a barstool and sipped her whiskey.

Unable to sit still, she left her perch, went around the bar and began polishing glasses. At least it kept her hands busy. Idle hands being a tool of the Devil, Mustang figured the Dark Lord had all the help he needed in the form of the hound.

Robert studied the girl as she washed the perfectly clean glass. She was just a sliver of a thing, with honey blonde hair that fell round her shoulders and a gold tooth that sparkled when she smiled. The girl looked more like a musician than a bartender, Robert thought, with her tight black pants, black silk shirt, and knee-high snakeskin boots. She even wore a mojo bag around her neck.

"You plannin' to hex someone, or you just wardin' away random spirits?"

Mustang fingered the beaded leather pouch. "It was a gift from Marvelous Marva Wright, Blues Queen of Bourbon Street. Marva said it would ward off Evil Spirits and Amorous Musicians."

Robert chuckled evilly. "Spell musta wore out."

"Why's that?"

"I'm here, ain't I?"

Robert Johnson was known for three things in his un-naturally short life. His innovative style of playing the Blues, his womanizing ways (that likely got him murdered), and a persistent rumor he spread himself, that he'd sold his soul to the Devil in return for his musical gifts.

With that in mind, Mustang wondered which category he put himself into.

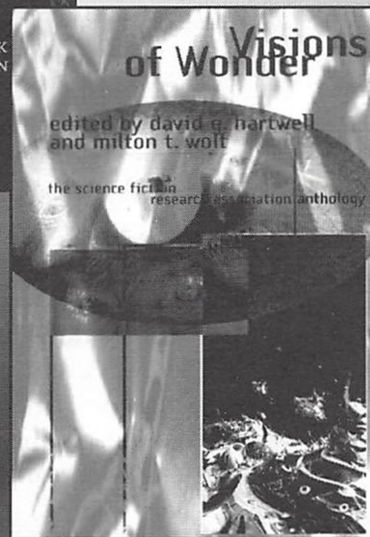
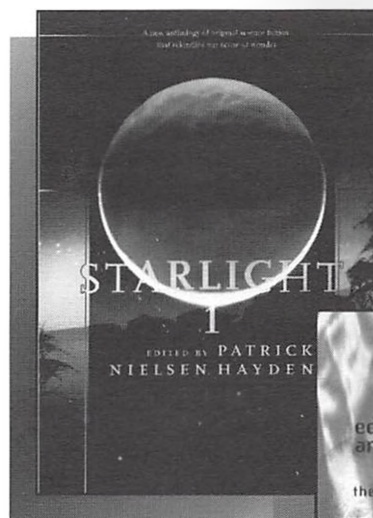
Outside, thunder crashed, and rain began drumming on the roof.

The ludicrousness of their actions struck Mustang. They'd locked themselves up, and were going to turn away a band and business, just because some dog on Halsted had bayed at the moon. There were lots of dogs walked on Halsted. Mustang had thought about buying one herself, so she could join the evening parade.

"How do you know there's a hellhound after you?"

"Because you let it loose when you played the record."

"How and why, exactly, did you trap a hellhound on a record?"



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Outside the hound howled again.

Robert looked at her as if to say, the howl was proof enough.

But Mustang stood her ground. She'd have her proof from the man's lips, rather than the hound's. Even if the man was a ghost.

It was only when Bob unslung his guitar and set it in his lap that Mustang realized it had been riding down his back the whole time. It hung there like a natural extension of his body. He picked at the strings softly before he spoke.

Mustang thought she recognized the melody of *Walking Blues* but she couldn't be sure.

"It was October of '35, and we was playin' down in St. Louis. Me and Johnny Shines had been travelin' round together, you know. He was young an' still learnin', but he never tried to steal my licks, so I let him tag along. Anyways, we got the notion to hie on up to Chicago. Ain't never been, but a lot of our friends had made the trip, and cut some records. Came back speakin' highly of it. Some even stayed on a long spell.

"I was tired of St. Louis. I never could stay in one place for long. So we hitched our way north as far as we could, then caught the Illinois Central Rail and rode that into Chicago.

"We pulled into town, neither of us even knowin' which neighborhoods allowed coloreds. We'd heard tell that a Bluesman could do worse than to look up Tampa Red down on the South Side. He lived above a pawn shop at 35th and State. Word was his wife would feed you a fried chicken dinner while Tampa Red helped you get situated musically. And that there was always a record producer hangin' around scouting talent and hiring session men. At the worst, Tampa could tell you what corner of Maxwell Street you could set up and play at without hitchin' someone's territory."

Mustang knew the Maxwell St. Market had served for decades as an open air Blues audition center. Muddy Waters, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Big Bill Broonzy had all done their time playing impromptu street dances; the shoppers tossing their bags on the curb to jitterbug and Watusi. Many a Blues legend had been plucked off a Maxwell Street corner and whisked into a recording studio. Blues clubs—jook joints—in the city at that time were few and far between, but the studios churned out the "race records".

As Robert paused in his recital, their attention was drawn to the front of the bar. They heard a sound like a dog snuffling at the door, there was the crackle of fire in his breath and a tearing at the wood.

The knob rattled. Mustang imagined a massive paw batting at it, the nails scratching across the brass knob.

Snuffling at the key hole. Three thumps at the door, but not a fist knocking. A tail wagging?

The noises moved away. Mustang let out her breath with a sigh.

"Could it be that easy?"

"He'll be back," Ratman warned.

Mustang turned accusing eyes on Robert Johnson. He shifted uncomfortably under her gaze.

"You know I sold my soul to the Devil?" he asked quietly.

"I'd heard that rumor," she said.

"It ain't a rumor. I told all about it in *Crossroad Blues*."

"I've heard the song," she said. "But do you really expect me to believe you went down to the crossroads at midnight, met the Devil and sold your soul in return for learning how to play the Blues? Wouldn't it have been easier just to take lessons from Son House or Willie Brown?"

"Not just *play* 'em. I sold my soul to be the *best*. Ain't never been no one played like I do. Ain't never will be. 'Sides, Son and Willie laughed at me. Said I'd never 'mount to nothin'," he said defensively. "But I showed 'em. People remember me. Only reason they recall Willie Brown's name is 'cause I wrote him into a song."

"And the hound?"

"The evil spirit come early, 'fore he were supposed to. I could see 'em comin', see his shadow prowlin' round the edges of the crowd, his red eyes burnin' in the taillights of auto-mo-biles that would pass by. Most times I could keep a town or two ahead, but sometimes he'd catch up and I'd have to walk off stage and leave my money behind. But the hound kept getting closer, trickier. He was near on to us by the time we boarded the train for Chicago. Johnny didn't want to spend the money for the fare. Said we could hitch and earn money at the towns we passed through. But I knew my only salvation was to board that train. I'd sit by the window at night, peering out. I could see him runnin' beside the tracks, just as easy as you please. I never did tell Johnny bout the trou-



ble I was in. I couldn'ta beared it, if he'd quit me. I figured he was safe enough. The hound had no business with him."

Mustang wondered about that. Had Johnny Shines really been safe? Was she and Ratman safe? Robert Johnson was a talented musician, but he was an arrogant and selfish man, who thought nothing of manipulating others for his own benefit.

This was, after all, the same man who had told a musician friend that when he went to a new town, he always made a fuss over the ugliest woman he could find. Ugly women weren't likely to have a jealous man, and it only took a little attention before they'd do anything for you. Robert Johnson had lived off a series of such conquests.

Course, if he had stuck to those methods, he might have lived a longer life. No one knew for sure who killed him, but the second most popular story said that a woman knifed him after he spent the night coming on to her, but left with another.

The most oft repeated story said he was carrying on with the barman's wife in a Three Forks jook joint where he was playing. The barman sent over a doctored drink. Robert was so arrogant that when Sonny Boy Williamson knocked the first bottle of whiskey out of his hand and warned him never to drink from an opened bottle, it was Sonny Boy who was victim to Bob's rage. When the second bottle arrived, already opened, Bob drank it down. He passed on three days later. Unkind folks said he crawled on his hands and knees and barked like a dog before he died.

"Storytelling works up a powerful thirst," Robert said meaningfully.

Mustang refilled his glass, then went to put the liquor away.

"You can leave the bottle."

Women hadn't been Robert Johnson's only weakness.

"What happened next?" Mustang asked.

"When we got to Chicago, I pulled Tampa Red aside and told him my trouble."

"And he knew what to do?"

"Said he'd fix it right. Eli Oberstein, knowed as the man with a suitcase full of money, if he liked ya enough, he'd have you sign a contract and pay ya right there on the spot. Anyways, he was at Tampa's house that night. I played for him there in Tampa's living room, and Eli liked my sound, so he was willin' to arrange a test session for me on the Bluebird

label. Eli wasn't too keen on the idea of a midnight recordin' session, but since it was a test, an independent recordin', I paid them for the privilege. And since they didn't have to hire any session men to accompany me, we finally talked Eli into it. Tampa just winked at me, when we got a handshake on the agreement. We wouldn't be tellin' Eli that none of his studio 'xcutives was gonna hear the recordings. Cause those records weren't ever to be played."

He looked at Mustang resentfully.

"Why didn't you destroy them, then? You leave a record sitting around, somebody's gonna play it."

"I knows it," Robert said wearily. "But we couldn't destroy the records. That would break the spell."

"What happened at the session?" she asked.

He poured himself another drink before he continued.

"Bluebird had their studio in the Webster Hotel at that time."

Mustang nodded. "The hotel's still in business. It's not far from here."

"This was a real rootsy tootsy part of town back then. Some of Bluebird's bigger acts would record late into the night if things were going well. Eli said I could piggy-back on the end of one of those sessions. Memphis Minnie and her husband Kansas Joe McCoy were recordin' that night. Memphis Minnie was a fine lookin' woman, and I never did know a gal to play guitar like that. It ain't really womanly, but Lord she could play. She always recorded with her husband at the time. When she got tired of the way they played, she'd find herself a new husband. She was one cracker of a woman!"

Mustang grinned. Memphis Minnie was one of her favorites.

"Anyways, Tampa told me how to fix it with the recordin', but to be discreet-like, not to let on to the studio men that I was doing anything but cuttin' some demos. I said the things he wrote down for me to say as they screwed the lacquered disk down to the turntable. Tuned my guitar special, played a certain way, with the special slide he'd doctored, you know. Tapped special rhythms with my foot as I played, and it worked, just like Tampa said."

Mustang looked skeptical.

Ratman spoke up. "No surprise that Tampa Red had the knowledge. There's people say you have to sell your soul to the Devil to play the Blues. It's the

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Devil's music and you can't play it otherwise. If'n that's true, then it only makes sense that they'd been workin' on ways to avoid timely payment of the debt."

Outside the storm seemed to howl in agreement. Thunder boomed and lightning struck nearby. In the flash of light, Mustang thought she saw the silhouette of a hound staring in the window.

"Ratman! Move away from the window!" she shouted, her voice cracking.

Ratman eased himself off the barstool, picked up his drink and ambled toward the back of the room, with a slowness so deliberate Mustang wanted to rush over, pick the old man up and carry him to safety.

"No need to panic Miss Mustang. We knew he'd be back," the old man said soothingly.

Tears sprang to Mustang's eyes as her friend used the title that had once belonged to her mother. *Miss Sarah*. The title had fallen to her when her mother abandoned the club to hook up with a vacuum cleaner salesman from Detroit.

Mustang was just eighteen when her mother married, but she'd chosen to stay with the club. Mustang knew it was nights like this that had made her mother leave. And caused Mustang to stay. Spirits were drawn to the club, and Mustang was drawn to the spirits.

But that didn't mean she wasn't frightened, and that her fear didn't increase, when the hound howled *inside* the club, and an invisible hound's wet foot prints started tracking 'cross the floor. The size of an old 78 record and just as heavily grooved, they started at the front door and stalked along the aisle toward the barstool where Robert Johnson sat.

The air seemed to shimmer above the footprints. If the illusion was any indication, the beast was huge. He'd be able to walk up to the bar and lay his chin on the counter. A growl rumbled through the room.

"Now would be a good time to show him who's master," Mustang said.

"Yes, I believe it would," Robert said. "Trouble is, I never owned a huntin' dog."

"Music's not been good to the dog. Maybe you could play something," Ratman suggested.

Mustang noticed that even his voice had just a hint of worriedness in it.

In a slow, smooth moment, Robert unslung his guitar, and began to quietly tune it.

"I really don't think a sour note is going to mat-

ter at this moment," Mustang said, silently cursing her cracking voice.

Robert strummed a tentative chord then began to pluck the bass line on the bottom string, while picking a simple melody on the strings above. Bending the string and shivering his hand hard, Robert Johnson didn't need a slide to make the strings talk back.

*When the Blues knocked on my door, Out the back  
I ran*

*When the Blues knocked on my door, Out the back  
I ran*

*You know that he done caught me, Cause the Blues  
walk like a man.*

The beast set to whining by the end of the first line. And it didn't take much to imagine the dog tucking its tail between its legs and slinking out the door. No footprints marked its retreat, but the whining and jostling of bar stools showed his path clear enough.

*You can run, You can hide, You can catch a  
Greyhound and ride*

*Well, you can run, You can hide, You can catch a  
Greyhound and ride*

*But you know you can't outrun him, Those Blues  
stay right at your side.*

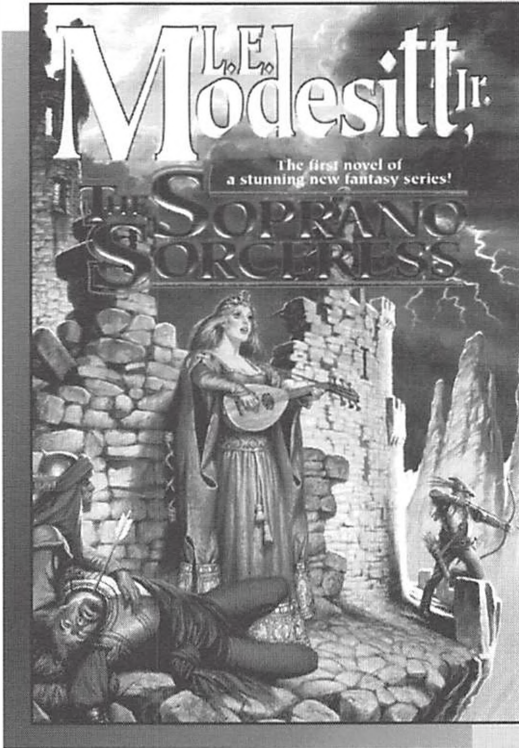
The hound was gone by the end of the second verse, but Robert kept playing, whether to drive the hound further away, or just to show off, Mustang wasn't sure. Either way she was glad. She knew every song Robert Johnson ever recorded. This one wasn't among them. The mythical thirtieth song. In his short career, the man had only recorded twenty-nine. To Blues musicians, finding a thirtieth was like a quest for the Holy Grail.

*You can offer him your money, your woman or your  
home*

*You can offer him your money, your woman or your  
home*

*But nothing you can do to make the Blues leave you  
alone.*

*Mmmhmmmm, Well....*



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*When the Blues come calling, Walking like a man  
So when the Blues come calling, Walking like a man  
Open up that door boy, put out your right hand.*

With a flourish Robert plucked the last note, then slapped the palm of his hand across the strings to still their voice.

Mustang was breathless. And the pounding of her heart couldn't be blamed on a hellhound.

"What do you call that?"

"*Blues Walk Like a Man.*"

"That's nice. *Real* nice."

Robert grinned at her slyly. He knew the effect his music had on women. White or black, dead or alive, some things didn't change.

He pushed his hat back on his head, sidled up to the bar, and said, "Little girl, little girl, ya know I could write a song for you."

Mustang blushed and tried to find a way to break the mood. She turned to Ratman for help, but Ratman was no longer there.

A quick search of the office, back hall and bathrooms turned up no one. To add to her worries something was thumping on her front door. Storm, hellhound or customer? Mustang couldn't be sure. And she was in no mood to go to the window and find out.

She swore revenge on the spirit of Robert Johnson if he'd been lying about just who the hellhound would hurt. She wasn't exactly sure how to hurt a ghost, but if anything happened to Ratman, well... she'd been around enough ghosts that she knew she could find a way.

With the savage screaming of the storm and a evil spirit stalking round her door, who could blame her for jumping when the back door slammed open and Ratman staggered in?

"You nearly scared the life out of me! Where have you been?"

Ratman closed the door and bolted it, shrugged out of his overcoat and shook the rain from the drooping brim of his felt hat, then patted his pockets for a cigarette, coaxing the damp roll to a smokey life, before he answered her.

Mustang didn't repeat the question. It would do no good.

Ratman answered, finally, "I went for suh-plies." He dug into his pants pocket and pulled out a square tin can and held it up for inspection.



Mustang read the label:

*Doctor Pryor's Alleged Hot Foot Powder  
for burning or sprinkling  
manufactured by Japo Oriental Incense Company  
Chicago, IL*

"You've got to be kidding," she said.

Robert Johnson spoke up. "Old Bob can tell ya, it works, girl. I wrote about it in—"

"Yeah, I know," Mustang said wearily. "I've heard *all* your records, alright?"

Bob preened at the compliment, and Ratman started pulling cans of Hot Foot Powder out of his other pockets. There were more than a dozen of them lined up on the bar when he finished. "I take it you have a plan to go with these," Mustang said.

He did.

The Plan was simple. They'd sprinkle Hot Foot Powder all along the floor, open the door and lure the hellhound in. Then play music at it. The idea was that between the powder burns and the beast's fear of Robert Johnson's music, they'd drive the dog away long enough for Bob to get a good head start on running.

Mustang didn't think much of The Plan, but she didn't have a better one.

One thing bothered her though. From the lyrics of Bob's song, Mustang had never been sure whether the woman in question had sprinkled Hot Foot Powder around his door to keep the wanderin' man from straying, or to drive out a no good man who'd been hanging 'round too long. She hoped it wasn't an important distinction.

With a final sip of Wild Turkey, for courage, she and Ratman began shaking a liberal coat of the powder along the floor.

"This stuff will be murder to sweep up," she grumbled, as she straightened up to replace her empty can.

"Juz hope it ain't mixed with somebody's blood 'fore we're through," Ratman said darkly.

Mustang turned and looked at Robert Johnson, hunched over the bar, brooding deep in his drink. She wondered if ghosts could bleed.

They'd left a narrow border clear around the edges of the room, and Mustang tip-toed along this path. She threw the door open wide, then took up her post behind the bar. She knew the open door was all

the invitation an evil spirit needed to come on in. Ready or not.

Still, the sudden appearance of the hellhound at the threshold shook her with surprise. They could see him this time. Four feet tall and seven feet long. And ugly as sin. His eyes burned with hellfire as he turned his massive head to look around the room.

And then he leapt. Flying half way across the room, he landed on a table top. The barstools circling it clattered to the floor. The table rocked dangerously from side to side. But the hellhound was undisturbed.

His coat was coarse as steel wool, and black as the heart of Cain. He opened his massive jaws and growled, and the bottles rattled on the shelves. His breath was as foul as the Chicago stockyards. Sizzling strings of slather fell to the floor mixing with the powder to form a lumpy paste.

Mustang judged the distance between the door and the table, and the table to the stage, and saw the fatal flaw in their plan. No one had realized the damned dog could fly.

Robert Johnson stood in the spotlight on the stage. His jacket and hat hung on a mike stand. His guitar down his back. Mustang thought it damned silly way to hold a guitar.

Before she could catch her breath, the hound leapt again. But Jayhawk, the guardian ghost, or the simple dynamics of physics interceded. The table toppled and the hound fell to the floor. He scrambled to his feet, shook himself, and lunged for the stage.

Still the powder had no effect.

A hare's breath before the dog reached him, Bob made a jump himself and took off down the aisle the way the hound had come.

The hound's long body didn't fit well on the stage, and equipment went flying as he turned around in pursuit. Mustang ducked behind the bar as Bob and the dog began a deadly game that was one part Ring-Around-the-Rosy, and two parts Keep Away.

Ratman shouted, "Play, Bob! Play!"

Mustang realized she'd never heard Ratman shout before. She scrambled out of her hiding place and waved her hands wildly, shouting out something that was a cross between a Banshee's cry and one of Ella Fitzgerald's scat phrases. She hoped to distract the hound long enough for Robert to get set up in a safe place.

He jumped into the "bleachers," a section of the

bar raised up a step on a platform. They were the best seats in the house. The wood railing and support beams also provided extra shelter for him. There wasn't a clear leap for the hound.

As Robert played the opening riff of *Hellhound On My Trail*, the dog charged. Robert back pedaled but kept playing, even when he rammed his back into a table. The hound continued to stalk him, the heat of his breath burning the musician's skin.

It was the same song that had locked the creature up sixty years ago, but it had lost its power over him.

They say that you can only summon a particular demon once. After that, you have no power over him. Perhaps that was true for locking one up, too.

The hellhound had the man cornered. It leapt, fangs bared, aimed for Bob's throat. But the musician slipped under the wooden rail, running for his life.

"Everybody to the stage!" Ratman hollered.

"Then what, old man?" Robert asked, panting, breathless from the chase.

"Dunno," Ratman said, shrugging. "Just seemed like it would be easier to defend the high ground. *You* got any ideas?"

"Done run out," Bob admitted.

While the hound was busy trying to untangle himself from a knot of barstools and table legs, Mustang charged the stage. This time Mustang wasn't waiting on the men to come up with another half-assed solution. She knew the answer. She had The Plan.

There was magic in Robert Johnson's music. Mustang had seen it before, when she and Ratman drove off the Devil and his demon band by playing *Sweet Home Chicago*. The Blues had changed since the musician first locked up the immortal creature.

Robert Johnson's sound had given birth to Chicago Blues. But there were two important differences between the father and his child. Chicago Blues wasn't played by one wandering musician. To play Chicago Blues, it took a band, and that band had to plug in.

Mustang dashed up the stage stairs and grabbed the house guitar—a black and white hollow-bodied, electric Gibson. It stayed on the stage, because it was home to Jayhawk, the club's ghost. Mustang knew she'd have his help as she played.

And she knew the magic song. It had come in to being as she tried to learn Johnson's *Hellhound On My Trail* and *Crossroad Blues*, back when she was 12

years old, and had gotten the verses confused. Over the years she'd added additional verses until it evolved into a damn fine song. Ratman called it *The Good Parts Version*. Mustang called it *Hellhound Blues*.

Even though she was sharing the stage with the greatest Bluesman of all time, or at least the spirit of the greatest Bluesman of all time, Mustang was going to play lead. And she wasn't afraid at all.

She vamped on an opening riff and motion to Ratman to pull out his harp. When Robert and Ratman had lined up behind her on the melody, she launched into the verse.

*Babe, you sprinkled hot foot powder, all around my door*

*Babe, you sprinkled hot foot powder, all around my door*

*Then you wondered, what I was leavin' for.*

The hound stood still in his tracks.

When they reached the chorus, she let Robert Johnson fill in the riffs. He pulled out a switchblade, flicked it open and used the dull edge of the blade as a slide to make the strings whine.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mustang studied his technique. She was afraid if she was too obvious in her interest, Bob would leave the stage, hellhound or not. He'd done more to protect his unique style. Mustang knew of no other guitarist who could sound like two people playing when he was the only man in the room.

She launched into the second verse.

*Goin' to the highway, Blues fallin' down like hail*  
*Goin' to the highway, Blues fallin' down like hail*  
*One road leads to my baby, The other to jail.*

The hound whimpered and fell to his haunches, then laid down on the floor, hiding his head between his paws.

When they came to the chorus, Bob whipped out the switch blade again. But two could play at that game. Mustang knew how to play slide guitar, too. She reached for a dead beer bottle, abandoned that afternoon by the rehearsing band. She grabbed it by the neck and smashed it against the table, then slipped her third finger into the neck and caressed the strings with the glass. The jagged edges flickered in the spotlight.



*Gotta keep ramblin', Blues fallin' down like a storm  
of hail*

*Gotta keep ramblin, Blues, mmmmm fall like hail  
Gotta keep movin, there's a hellhound on my trail.*

Now Robert was singing along, parroting back the second line to her first.

The hound began to howl, singing to the band, the world, and his Master, of his pain.

Mustang turned and gave a nod to Ratman. He stepped to the mike and poured all the suffering he'd seen in his seventy some years into his rusty harmonica.

Water fell from Mustang's eyes.

The hound struggled to his feet and Mustang saw smoke rising from his pads. The powder had worked afterall.

*Standin' on the highway, Lord knows I can't be  
saved*

*Standin' on the highway, Lord knows I can't be  
saved*

*One road lead to the bright lights, the other down to  
my grave.*

The hound howled again, and Mustang's heart shattered for his pain. But it was a battle for the immortal soul of the greatest Bluesman who ever lived. He was arrogant and manipulative and sometimes downright mean. But his music was Redemption. Mustang thought she could hear the very souls in Hell sighing at their song.

*That mean old wind's arising, Leaves tremblin', fall  
right off the tree*

*Mean old wind's arisin', Leaves tremblin' off the tree*

*As the Lord's my witness, the Devil's comin' after me.*

A mist formed around the hound, and Mustang though she saw two arms tenderly lift the dog and carry him away.

*Hear the hounds a bayin', but I can't go on  
I hear the hounds a bayin', but I can't go on  
Cause every day been darkness honey, since you been  
gone.*

\*\*\*

They shared a victory toast of Wild Turkey, then Mustang watched her hero shrug into his coat.

"You don't have to leave, you could stay here you know."

"I thank you kindly for that. But there's two reasons I can't take you up on a temptin' offer. First, Hell's got more than one hound, and they'd come lookin' for me here."

He smiled sadly.

"And the second reason?" Mustang asked softly.

He held up his foot. Black smoke curled from the sole of his shoe.

"Hot foot powder works on men as well as hounds," he said. "The spell done hit me. I got *Ramblin' On My Mind*."

He set his hat more firmly on his head, and slung his "rider" low down on his back. As he was about to step over the threshold, Mustang stopped him one more time.

"Robert, how did you *really* die?"

"They was a woman involved." He stared long at her. "When Bob gets in trouble, they always is..."

And then he slipped into the night.



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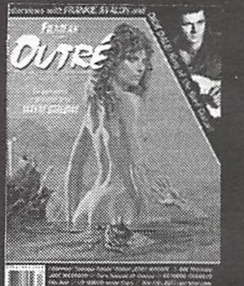
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