

A **Chill**® Product

CHILLED

to the bone

FIFTEEN TALES OF TERROR AND DARK FANTASY

BY

ANDRE NORTON,
CHARLES DE LINT,

JUDITH AND GARFIELD REEVES-STEVENS
AND OTHERS

EDITED BY ROBERT T. GARCIA
Winner of the World Fantasy Award

CHILLED

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A Chill® Anthology of
Horror and Dark Fantasy

Edited by Robert T. Garcia

Mayfair Games Inc.
Niles, Illinois • 1991

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Published by Mayfair Games, Inc., P.O. Box 48539, Niles, Illinois, 60648

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Manufactured in the United States of America

ISBN 0-923763-44-9 (pbbk.)

First Edition 1991

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

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Distributed exclusively in the US/Canadian booktrade by The Berkley Publishing Group

Berkley Order Department, P.O. Box 506, East Rutherford, NJ 07073

Berkley Telephone Sales Dept., Toll Free 1-800-223-0510, 9:00-6:00 (N.Y. Time)

Mon.-Fri., (In New York collect 1-212-951-8966)

Canadian Orders: 7050 B. Bramalea Rd., Unit 52, Mississauga, Ontario L5S 1S9

Toll Free 1-800-268-9973, In Toronto 677-0730, In Ontario/Quebec 1-800-668-7932

Export Orders: Worldwide Media Services, Inc., 115 E. 23rd St. NY, NY 10010

Telex: 620430 Cable: WORLDMEDIA

Nationally Distributed by Warner Publisher Services, 810 7th Avenue, New York, NY 10019 1-800-631-8571

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To
Nancy Garcia,
my friend, my lover, my wife,
who has always been there with love
and help every step of the way,

&

Richard B. Garcia,
who may not understand this stuff,
but always supported me with love
and that necessary evil, cash.

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INTRODUCTION

Beware!
The bogeymen of your childhood are real.
Vampires and werewolves and ghouls, oh my!
And whether or not you believe... they *are* coming to get you.

For over one hundred and fifty years, the Eternal Society of the Silver Way, the *Societas Argenti Viae Eternitata*, SAVE, has been fighting the good fight and destroying these abominations. But, in doing so, countless men and women have died around the world.

Still... the Evil grows stronger.

The Society is losing. Once it was able to finance and maintain its secret war against the Unknown, but its members have been killed... and killed... and killed.

Few are left. Most are in hiding. Now, they can only send warnings to potential victims: messages to people who may, also, no longer believe in the bogeyman.

The danger has grown too great.

It's time to open their files, and reveal the stories of those who have been warned over the years.

It's time to tell you what happened to them.

Because if you know, you might heed the warning when it comes to you. Heed the warning and live.

Believe. Beware. Unfetter the chains of your reality and be chilled to the bone.

CORPORATE CULTURE

BY ROBERT ZASULY

The office was empty and quiet, except for the sound of her rapid, shallow breaths. The workers had gone home for the evening; their cubicles were dark and still, computers resting, printers waiting, radios silent. Only every fourth ceiling light remained on, casting a spectral light over the office furnishings, and the lights of Denver showed through the building's windows.

Her janitor's cart was parked just outside a cubicle. In addition to usual items, such as a phone, PC, desk calendar, stapler, and tape dispenser, this cube was appointed with a tumble weed in a pot, a ticket stub to the Grateful Dead New Year's Eve show, an Elvis Presley paperweight, and a Harley-Davidson wall calendar showing a leggy blonde in cut-offs and half shirt straddling the "hog" for May.

She was a black woman, dressed in a blue smock and jeans. Standing in the middle of this cubicle, her large body was stiff and racked with small, sharp convulsions. Her eyes were rolled up into her head, eyelids shuddering as if they were shorting out. A white fleck of foam hung in the corner of her straining mouth. Her arms slowly raised upward, appealing to the ceiling tiles and beyond. She moaned softly, "*Legba...Legba...Legba...*"



Monday morning the guard stopped Mike at the security desk in the lobby.

"Why can't I bring this in?" Mike asked, holding out a manila folder full of Xeroxed papers. "They're cartoons."

"No sir. I mean that," the guard said, pointing with his pencil to the CD Mike held in his other hand.

"It's a CD."

"I'm sorry, sir. They're not allowed."

As they were talking, Mike saw the security chief, Lyle, slowly making his way toward them. Lyle's province was "site integrity," which, Mike had learned over the last couple years, included everything from cabinet keys to door-access codes to the rent-a-cop in the lobby.

Mike held up the CD in a Promethean gesture: "Music."

Lyle's eyes didn't move from Mike's. Lyle hadn't given up the Marine crew cut or the Corps ring on his finger, but his body had raised the white flag long ago. His chin and neck were lost in fat, and his sloped shoulders were so indistinguishable from his torso that it seemed as if Lyle's arms stemmed directly from just under his ears.

Lyle's eyes were in a permanent squint behind his glasses. Mike wasn't sure if it was just an illusion created as the man's plump cheeks rose up to meet with the folds of his eyelids, but Lyle looked like an eternally paranoid man, one who suspected that the very air he was breathing was carrying encoded messages. He just squinted impassively at Mike, his thick lips stretched flat across his face in a completely uncommitted expression.

"CDs or any other recording media are not allowed in the building," Lyle quoted. "Company policy."

"But we can't record on these."

Lyle was unmoved.

"Lyle, you realize that lots of people upstairs have portable disc players and CDs at their desks? What do you do about people bringing their CDs out of the building?"

"All such media in the building are to remain in the building."



"You mean, the company doesn't want CDs in the building because they're recording devices, even though we can't record on them, but the CDs that people already have in the building are going to have to stay?"

After some quick calculations Lyle nodded, "Affirmative."

"I see. Okay," Mike sighed. It was obvious that he was no match for Lyle-logic at 7:30 on a Monday morning.

He turned and walked back outside, turning the corner of the building and heading toward his car. After he was out of sight, he stopped. He had a briefcase at home, but he never saw the need for it until now.

Mike slipped the CD into the middle of the sheaf of cartoons and held the folder so the papers concealed it. He stood outside and waited another minute, then he walked back in.

"Okay," he smiled to Lyle and the guard. "The offensive recording medium is back in the car." He held up the folder for them to see. "Just personal stuff here."

Lyle's expression hadn't changed, but he nodded his consent.

"Thank you, sir," said the guard.

"No problem," Mike said as he stepped into the elevator.

He was heading for Joyce's desk first thing. Mike wasn't sure what had happened the night before, and he was going to make her explain it to him again face to face, and much slower. He called her last night to see how her weekend had gone, and in no more than a minute he was holding a dead phone and, apparently, an equally dead romance. He heard some hurried and brusque words about her career, how she was committed to it, how she wouldn't let him interfere, and that was it. No tears, no I'm Sorrys or It-Was-Great-Buts, not even the infamous and always fatal We-Can-Still-Be-Friends, just a kiss off.

When he got to her desk, it was obvious by her cold PC and dark desk light that she wasn't in yet. He'd have to wait.

Mike's desk was across the maze of prefabricated cube walls. All six floors consisted of cubical mazes, of the same taupe and brown fabric, each housing its own little worker bee. Except for Chuck Spaetner's cube, of course; it had been conspicuously unoccupied for a couple weeks.

After he settled in, Mike fired up his PC and tried to lose himself in his work. He was in the Corporate Training Services division of the company, which designed and developed all types of training, from employee training and continuing education to military and commercial training for buyers of his company's aircraft. Mike's present task was to spec out the hydraulics lesson he was going to write for the Navy's new fighter, but his mind wandered as he stared at his reflection in the dark screen of the PC.

The thing that really bothered him was his certainty that he hadn't mistaken his relationship with Joyce. Their romance had started because of mutual physical attraction, but over the weeks Mike watched the relationship develop into something better, just as much fun and just as physical, but something more substantial and lasting. He had been upfront and honest with her. That's why Joyce's brush off came as such a shock. Could he have misread the relationship so badly? Things were good. They were going somewhere, and for her to suddenly back out of it left him with a bad taste.

After a half hour, he got up and went to find Joyce. The office was filled now with the din of phones and conversations and busy keyboards, but as he neared he could hear sounds of life from her cube. He grabbed one of the little synthetic rent-a-plants that Site Services, another area of Lyle's empire, spread strategically around the tops of the cubicles, and he rounded the corner with the offering extended.

Joyce wasn't there. Annette, the group's administrative assistant, was bent over the desk, packing Joyce's things into boxes.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Annette turned to look at him. Her age had always been a mystery to Mike. She had a fit figure, especially her legs, and she dressed young in short skirts and low cut blouses, but her skin seemed so dry and old that it belied her youthful figure and wardrobe. Mike decided she had been a knockout earlier, but she'd probably lived a sun worshiper's life and it had taken its toll. She was staring at the plastic plant that Mike was holding out to her.



"A joke," he explained sheepishly and set the plant down. "So what's up?"

"Joyce has been moved," Annette said.

"To a window seat?" Everyone wanted a cube by the windows.

"To Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton."

"What! Why?"

"Edward promoted her to site manager and she had to leave immediately. The Air Force is pushing ahead." Annette continued boxing Joyce's belongings as she talked. "Her things will catch up in a couple days."

Mike leaned against the desk across from Joyce's — Joyce's former desk — and sighed. "When did this happen?"

"Joyce and Edward discussed it Friday after work. They came to an agreement, and she was processed then and there."

"Things happen fast around here," Mike said, shaking his head. He was thinking about more than just work. This explained Joyce's about-face on the phone, explained it but didn't excuse it. She could have at least discussed the move with him.

The other thing Mike had to admit was that he was surprised at Joyce's promotion. Not that he had any great ambitions, but Mike had been doing a good job, and it was generally accepted throughout the division that he was next in line for a lead position. He certainly didn't begrudge Joyce her promotion, but he had to wonder why management didn't consider him suitable for the job. The ways of Corporation were unknowable to living man, he reminded himself.

"Speaking of fast," he said, "what's the story on Chuck Spaetner?" He could see Chuck's tumbleweed plant sticking out of the dark cubicle several desks up the aisle.

Annette didn't look up from boxing Joyce's files. "Mr. Spaetner is no longer with us."

"Jeez, Annette, ya make it sound like he died." Mike laughed.

Annette stopped packing and faced him, almost smiling. She had that look parents give to children when they expect the kids to understand some tacit truth.

"What does that mean, 'no longer with us'?" he asked in a thin voice.

"He had other commitments. His novel, other things. The company needed more."

"You know, rumor control says that Chuck's not around at all — not at home, nowhere." Mike threw it out to see if he could get anything from Annette.

Annette signaled the end to the conversation by turning her back on him.

"If I know Chuck at all, he's probably been in Vegas for the last two weeks getting..." Mike looked at Annette and decided to amend his language, "...revitalized."

Annette said nothing, which was typical. Folklore had it that almost two years ago — before Mike's arrival — Edward, as leader of the division, had gone to a training managers' convention in New Orleans in search of some fresh ideas. That's where he met Annette, who evidently impressed him so much with her knowledge of data bases and scheduling software that he invited her to leave her company. A couple weeks later, she was Edward's administrative assistant, his data base wizard, and girl everything. Since then, Annette, being the sole caretaker of the data base and schedule, had the division by its electronic balls. She was Edward's untouchable, and at times she made this annoyingly clear to the rest of the worker bees. This was one of those times.

"Okay," Mike said. He was dissatisfied with both Joyce's and Chuck's situations, but it was clear Annette had closed the door on the discussion, and he had work waiting for him back at his own desk.

That afternoon, Mike was wrestling with the curriculum map for the Navy's Pensacola training program when Edward walked up to his desk, leather Daytimer in hand.

Edward approached everyone with the same expression, like an old school master who was waiting for you to present your knuckles so that he could crack them with his ruler. It didn't matter whether he was going to commend you or reprimand you; he always moved in with the same stern demeanor.

Chuck Spaetner would have described Edward as an anal-retentive who got his ass in a pucker years ago and never relaxed. Come to think of it,



Chuck did in fact use those very words one day to describe Edward — or ‘His Stiffness’ as Chuck called him.

To Mike, Edward looked like Jimmy Stewart gone sour, tall and thin almost to the point of being gaunt. The man’s skin hung in translucent, liver-spotted folds on his face. It was so dry and heavily cracked that Edward’s face and hands looked more like a mosaic of dead scales than living tissue. His mouth was small and naturally pursed, and the flesh below his neck hung like a turkey’s wattle. The man’s white hair and even his eyebrows, it seemed, were sharply trimmed and combed.

He wore a white, heavily starched button-down shirt, nondescript dark wool blend slacks, somber argyles, and wing tips. His tie was always pulled up tight around his neck, and Mike never saw him with his sleeves rolled up. This was Edward’s uniform of the day, every day. The whole effect suggested that he’d been done over by a mortician. Again, Chuck Spaetner’s caustic words came back to Mike: “One of these days that peach pit of a heart of his is gonna seize up on him, and they’ll find old foreskin face in his tub, and when they do I bet he’ll be dressed in those *same damned clothes!*”

Perhaps the only contradictory feature to Edward’s pinched and restrained style was his eyes. Those slate stones were open so wide they had a certain chilling intensity. The unblinking gaze couched in his otherwise grim countenance almost gave him a possessed look.

Edward picked up Mike’s wastebasket and handed it to him as if it were a dropped Kleenex. “Keep this on the inside of your desk against the wall where visitors can’t see it.” He cleared his throat before continuing. “How’s the Navy’s curriculum coming along?”

Mike was just about to nuke the entire affair and start over. “It’s on track,” he said, using the phrase that he knew Edward wanted to hear.

Edward seemed to be weighing Mike’s response as he reached into his pocket and withdrew his Chapstick. The man constantly treated his lips with the stuff.

“How about lunch tomorrow?” he asked Mike after he capped the stick. “I want to talk to you about something.”

“Sure, Edward.”

There was an awkward moment as they stared at each other, Edward apparently waiting for something from Mike, and Mike feeling as if his zipper was down. Edward broke the silence before it got too uncomfortable.

"Are you going to put it down in your date book?"

"Oh, I haven't got one. Never had the need," Mike said.

Edward nodded, though clearly displeased. "Eleven thirty?" he asked as he marked it in his Daytimer with his Cross Limited pen.

As uncomfortable as the man made Mike feel, there was no denying that as managers went, he was one of the biggies. Total Commitment Management was Edward's brainchild. TCM was quickly becoming the company's hot new management technique, and every upper-level manager from Detroit headquarters to Long Beach to Sydney knew about or was soon to find out about this new breed of manager. Now if he could only develop a personality, Mike thought.

Late that afternoon, Mike was in the break room. He'd spent some hard hours in front of his machine, and his eyes were tired. He didn't know what Edward was going to talk to him about, but it would be a good idea to have that new curriculum in somewhat presentable order in case he wanted to see it.

Mike was deciding what brand of caffeine he would use, the cola or the citrus, when it occurred to him that maybe Edward was going to dress him down for asking questions about Chuck Spaetner. Maybe Edward was going to make Mike "no longer with us." His hand froze as it reached for one of the buttons on the soda machine. As he stood contemplating this thought, he got the feeling that someone was breathing softly in his left ear.

His hand still checked in its advance, he slowly turned his head. In the corner of the break room a tall plant was squinting at him in a very familiar way. Lyle was in there like a Japanese sniper, most of his body concealed by the potted tree. He was holding one of the tree's fronds so he could watch Mike.

"Reading palms, Lyle?" Mike punched a button, and a soda can rumbled through the machine's intestines.



While he considered Mike's remark, the corners of Lyle's eyes wrinkled even more as if the air in the room had suddenly become opaque with smoke. Lyle released the leaf and stepped out toward Mike. In their relaxed state, his arms bowed out from his girth. His fingers splayed out from his big, meaty hands like sausage links.

The crepe soles of Lyle's security-issue shoes whimpered quietly as they bore him across the floor past Mike and toward the door.

"Lyle," Mike called after him as he was walking out the door. Lyle turned, his expression unchanged. Mike considered it a long shot, but what the heck.

"Chuck Spaetner's stuff in his cube. When's he picking it up?"

Lyle walked up to Mike before speaking. "You a friend of Charles Spaetner's?"

Mike shrugged. "It's just that I'd like a chance to say goodbye to him. Seeing how we worked in the same group and all."

"If you hear from him, tell him he's still signed out for two desk keys and his access card. Company property."

"So you don't know when he's getting his stuff?"

"I've been trying to reach him at home," Lyle said by way of an answer. He turned from Mike, adding, "Can't have company property floating around town." His shoes resumed their mewling protest as he left the break room.

Mike decided to work late that night. The curriculum map was shaping up well, but it was a slow, tedious process.

Later that night, when he was sure that everyone in his group had gone home, he pushed his papers out of the way and, using the PC to steady himself, stepped onto the top of his desk. He quickly scanned the tops of the cubes for any sign of other late-night workers. Then he reached up to the ceiling light and pulled the plastic cover open so he could get at the glowing fluorescent tubes.

He extinguished each tube with a short, sharp twist, delivered with the detached proficiency of a farmer wringing the neck of a chicken for the evening meal.

He quietly pushed the sliding cover back up over the tubes and began to step down from the table. He was reaching for the floor with his right leg

when he noticed the woman watching him. He was so startled that he lost his balance, and his right foot came down in his trash can.

She was a big woman, her black skin creased at her elbow, wrist, and finger joints, giving her a segmented look. She was standing by the partition separating his cubicle from the next, and Mike noticed that she didn't appear interested in getting any closer. Her eyes were locked onto him.

"You startled me," he laughed. "I didn't think anyone was here."

She said nothing, but her gaze dropped down to his right foot, which was still planted in the can.

"Yeah, right," Mike said sheepishly and pulled his foot free.

"Didn't your mamma teach you to stay offa the furniture?" she said, apparently satisfied that he was finished with his circus tricks for the time being. Her voice was sharp and strong, as if she were shaking her finger at him.

"The fluorescent light," he said and pointed above him. "Can't stand it." He reached over and turned on a small lamp on his desk.

She stepped back a little so she could see Mike and the ceiling light at the same time. Mike could see that she was weighing his story.

She was dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt with a blue smock over that. Her nails were done in perfect coats of hot-pink polish.

"Who are you?" he asked.

She reached out behind her and pulled a cart into view. "Wastage and Impurities Technician," she said, and as if to show ID she grabbed a feather duster from the cart and held it up at the ready.

"Ah. I haven't seen you around before. What happened to Urio?"

"Made him vice president and retired his duster. Beats me," she shrugged. "I've been here las' couple weeks. Where you been?"

"Not working late, I guess." He smiled. "My name's —"

"Mike Lewis," she supplied in a bored voice. "Instructional Systems Designer. Graduated in 1983 from Florida State. Likes the Denver Nuggets — even though they're a sorry-ass excuse of a team — and hard rock and roll. Member of Cousteau Society, Greenpeace, Society for Creative Anachronism, and voted Libertarian last election. You spend a lot of time in the mountains, and until Friday when she transferred you been hold'n



hands under the table with Ms. Joyce Beeks." She crossed her arms on her ample bosom. "And you don't write your mamma *near* enough."

Mike stood dumfounded as he listened to his dossier. She even knew about Joyce! His mind began to whirl at the thought. This was beyond Lyle's work; no doubt she was some corporate operative checking up on him to see if he was spilling defense secrets. He had heard stories about corporate spooks from friends who worked for other defense contractors. They were probably watching his house, maybe even bugging the phones. Ice formed in his gut: *Did they know about Karen Goodlet and the rutabaga thing?*

"How do you know so much about me?" he asked, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"I do your trash," *fool!*, her tone implied.

"Oh, I see." The paranoia train that had built up such a head of steam in Mike's mind screeched and jumped the tracks.

"Can learn 'most anything 'bout a person in their trash, almost."

"Okay," he reasoned, "I can understand how you could see bills, renewal statements, the reunion notice, and all that, but how'd you know that about my mother?"

She snorted, "Ain't *no* boy that's written his mamma enough." Mike had to laugh with her.

"What's your name?" he asked.

She turned over the little plastic name tag on her smock. "Thyra," she said.

"Well, Thyra, you're in the wrong line of work. You ought to be a detective."

She took her feather duster and made token efforts at swatting the top of the cubicle wall, then dragged it across a stack of manuals, as if the duster were a magic wand and the act of merely touching the books would transform them into CLEAN.

"Say, Thyra," Mike said after some thought, a devious smile curling his lips. "What do you know about Larry Collins?"

"On the second floor. Man took this job just so 's he could put his girl through college, one of them schools back east. Took all kinds of overtime and stuff from those people for four years, just 'til she graduates. 'Bout killed 'em — on

top of that almost got divorced and the IRS on himself, too. Now she want's him to pay for graduate school, too! Hm, hm, hm." She shook her head.

"Damn shame," he agreed. "I always wondered about Kip Marten, the guy in graphics. Is he —"

She dipped her chin into her chest and looked at him. "He's so light in them shoes he has to carry five dollars in change just so he won't float away."

"That's the rumor all right. But a nice enough guy. You know," he continued, rubbing his chin in a ruminative way, "there's this story about Belinda Bayling and Tim Walson, the ex-pilot —"

"Uh huuuuuh," she nodded as she knighted more things with the magic duster. "In the elevator. Told everyone later that it musta got stuck. Ain't nothin' got stuck!"

Mike laughed and pretended to be punching in commands on his keyboard, trying to seem nonchalant. "And Chuck Spaetner...?"

He let the name trail off, hoping she'd pick up on it just like the others, but this time Thyra wasn't taking the cue. He turned and found that she was staring suspiciously at him again, her fountain of information dammed up by her firmly set jaw.

"Come on, Thyra," he smiled, trying to look casual, "word is he disappeared."

She studied his *Trout Fishing in America* calendar, the Star Trek poster of Tasha Yar, *Dan Quayle's Toastmaster Book* sitting on his desk, all the things around his cube that might tell her more about Mike. Then she looked hard into his eyes. Mike thought she was going to step up and grab him.

"Who says I know anything about that." It wasn't a question, more of an assertion.

Tossing her duster down on the cart, she pushed the contraption out ahead of her, gave him another look, and then left.

Mike looked around, not sure why, but absolutely certain that he'd almost gotten spanked. Put my foot in it again, he thought as he eyed the trash can.

Chagrined, he said loudly, "You forgot to empty my trash!" But he didn't hear a sound except the nervous hum of his PC.



The next morning he entered the office feeling as if he'd never left. As he was making for his desk, he noticed several people had gathered outside Annette's cube.

Mike noticed the personal items around her cube, intimations of an emotional side to Annette incongruous with her all-business attitude. Next to her desk calendar she had a small, white porcelain pot, the lid wrapped shut by a strip of white linen with a feather underneath. It looked like something you might find in an airport souvenir shop. Beads, probably from a past Mardi Gras, hung on the wall above the pot, and a small portrait of St. John hung next to them.

Annette was working devoutly with the scheduling software, as she did every day, and some of the curious gathered to watch. The only thing Edward answered to this side of corporate headquarters was the Scheduler, and Edward answered its every beck and call. It demanded daily tribute in the form of raw data, deadlines met and missed, personnel increases and decreases, final dates moved left or right, resources added or lost. Once these offerings had been fed in, it would digest the information, mechanized rumblings emanating from its divine intestines, and after ten minutes Scheduler would bring forth the latest version of The Schedule.

Edward received these schedules like revelations from his personal god. Depending on what they told him, Corporate Training Services would either continue as planned or be thrown into frenzied activity as new strategies were conceived and implemented.

The people around Annette's cube stood in a reverent silence as Annette fed Scheduler, periodically taking a sip from her Port-O Tank of water. Chitinous sounds rose from the keyboard as the machine devoured every byte of data she keyed into it.

Mike leaned into the circle. "What auguries have we from Its Most Circuited Self today, brothers?" He got a blank stare or two from the congregation.

He worked until lunch, satisfied that the Navy curriculum was polished enough to present to Edward, should he want to see it.

When it was time for lunch, Mike was surprised to discover that the manager of C.T.S. chose to drive an '82 Civic. It wasn't a collector's car, one

of those humble vehicles that became valuable simply by virtue of its pristine condition, nor was it a wreck. The back was amply but neatly filled with various product reports and what appeared to be every generation of the revered Schedule since its initial appearance on Earth.

Edward didn't ask Mike where he wanted to eat, so Mike didn't offer any suggestions.

Typically, June in Denver is only warm, the heat of July and August is still down the road — unless you're in a car with the windows rolled up and no air turned on. As they drove, moisture began forming under Mike's arms and behind his knees. Edward, however, seemed perfectly cool, his skin as pale and dry as if he were lounging under the icy jets of the company's air conditioner.

Mike remarked on the strength of the sun and rolled the window down, immediately enjoying the breeze as it cooled his forehead. Edward, looking as if he were in a foreign land and had just realized that he had forgotten an important native custom, mimicked Mike and rolled his own window down as well.

The "restaurant" Edward chose was a market store a few blocks from the office. Mike had seen the store before, but he didn't know they served food there. It was a health food store, one of those cooperatives that had eked out a meager existence in Boulder for 20 years and then was bought out by an oil corporation and expanded into a mom-and-pop mega-chain in time to take advantage of the whole-grain and high-fiber craze that was sweeping the country.

Looking at the choice of meals in the showcase, Mike was less than thrilled, but he was more concerned with what Edward had to say than whether he could recognize or even pronounce the names of the foods in the display.

Edward didn't order any food, just a large Styrofoam cup of water, which he drained immediately, his Adam's apple moving up and down in long, rhythmic pumps. When he finished, Edward handed the cup back to the boy for a refill.

They went to the section of the store that had been set aside for eating. Mike wasn't sure what to think. Edward asked him to lunch, picked the place to eat, then sat drinking water and watching Mike eat.



"You sure you don't want some of this?" Mike asked, indicating the tofuti surprise and the soy-rice dish with a name that had almost no vowels in it.

Edward declined and applied more Chapstick to his lips.

For a while the two sat in silence, Edward waiting for Mike to get into his lunch and Mike trying to ignore the fact that he was eating with an audience. Finally, Edward indicated his desire to speak by clearing his throat.

"How's the curriculum coming along on the new Navy fighter, Mike?"

"Real good, Edward. It isn't complete yet, still needs some adjustments, but I feel real good about it. You can review it when we get back." It was finished already, and Mike knew it was good, but there was no sense telling Edward that. If Edward liked it as it stood, it would look as if Mike had finished ahead of The Schedule. If Edward had a few suggestions, then it would be a good piece of work that needed some fine tuning. Standard practice.

"Fine." Edward took another drink of water before continuing. "Well, I'm sure you're aware of the situation these days with defense contractors. With peace breaking out all over, Congress is cutting defense spending like we haven't seen since the end of World War II. Iraq won't mean much to us, a little, but nothing to counteract the prevailing trend. The defense industry is taking it in the seat."

Mike stopped chewing, suddenly not liking the direction this conversation was going.

"The company will survive, but we've had to make some adjustments, reconfigure to meet the current environment. We're looking hard at the way we do business: components that were vertical business units have been reformed to a horizontal configuration. All the isolated business silos are gone now.

"You're well aware of the RIF actions in the manufacturing side of the company. The company reacts to needs, and the needs are dictated by circumstance. Circumstance and a little brainwork."

Mike nodded slowly, his mind numbing itself in preparation for what was coming. RIFs: reductions in force, corporate euphemistic babble for layoffs. As Mike heard Edward's words, he felt himself changing

from young, bright, his-future-ahead-of-him Mike Lewis to Chuck Spaetner, the company's nonperson. Chuck must have gone through this very lunch, maybe in this very seat. This was Edward's RIF restaurant.

"That's why our training programs have become so important," Edward continued, "circumstance, and some good business sense on my part, if I do say so. The circumstance is such that while manufacturing is scaling down, our programs are keeping our foot in the door with the armed services.

"The brainwork is TCM, my baby, Total Commitment Management, nothing but good business sense. I've developed a new culture here by developing trained personnel who are dedicated, willing to go the extra mile, team players who will put the company first. It's the business style of the future. The program has been very successful over the last year and a half. Sure, we had our battles with the old guard, but one by one I've been able to..." he searched for the words, "break down their resistance, bring them around.

"I've been placing people in key positions throughout the company: Bethesda, Wright-Patterson, Corpus Christi, Fort Benning, Kingsville, Mesa, Bergstrom, San Diego, San Antonio, Fort Knox, Parris Island, et cetera, et cetera. This division is positioning people, TCM people, *my* people, in all these places." Edward sat back in his seat. "Think of the ramifications."

Mike wouldn't say the man's eyes were ablaze with enthusiasm, but they did seem to have more cold radiance about them than usual.

Edward finished his water and returned to the deli for more, leaving Mike to contemplate what he'd said.

Once again Mike wasn't sure what was going on. Was he getting the ax, or was he getting the life and times of Edward Pintler, Corporate Mogulmaniac?

One thing Mike did decide was that he definitely liked his salads with more vowels and less tofu in them. He washed the food down with a Chinese cola. The bottle said it was made with all natural ingredients, and the label had some Chinese lettering to prove it. The inside of the bottle cap had cork instead of plastic.

Edward returned with a pitcher of ice water. He poured another cup and then continued.



"Mike, no doubt you've heard the saying, 'business does as business needs.' Well, the company has a need in Pensacola. It's going to be a key spot in the country's defense effort for the next ten years. You've done good work in Corporate Training, and you've learned a lot. I'd like to place you as site manager in Florida."

Mike sat back hard against his chair. It wasn't that he didn't feel up to the task, he could handle it, but the proposition was quite different from the one he thought was coming.

"I advanced Joyce Beeks to Wright-Patterson for the same reasons. I want my people in primary positions." Edward inspected his manicured thumbnail, working at some imperfection before he looked straight into Mike's eyes.

"What you have to examine, Mike, is your level of commitment. You must be willing to walk that extra mile, to assume the responsibilities involved.

"Think about it overnight and let me know in the morning, but I want to expedite this, get our ducks in order. Do you have any questions that I can answer right now?"

Mike was relieved: He wasn't getting laid off; he was getting promoted. So he'd misread the signals; he seemed to be doing that a lot lately. But who could blame him with the weirdness surrounding Chuck Spaetner's fate?

"There is one question that's come up," he started, wondering if he was about to put his foot into it. "Chuck Spaetner."

Edward leaned back and reached for his Chapstick again, his face as controlled as ever. Mike waited for him to run through his ritual.

"An unfortunate situation," he said after capping the Chapstick. "Mr. Spaetner found that he just couldn't give what the company needed from him. He had other commitments, certain convictions; he even tried to make a scene about it. Under the circumstances, the company couldn't possibly continue to carry him, so he was terminated."

"Are you telling me that I'll get a pink slip if I don't accept the position?" Mike asked point blank.

"No. His situation was different. If you feel you can't accept the position, then there are others to fill it — not my first choices, but qualified. So don't feel threatened. I must say, though, that if you don't

intend to assume a managerial role, I'm not sure what other options will be open for you down the road."

Mike had already decided he'd take the job, so he didn't feel threatened. He'd give it a shot. If he didn't like it, he could give it up with no great heartburn.

"I had to ask about Chuck just because there's been talk lately," he said.

"I wouldn't be concerned with it," Edward said coolly. "Those that can, do. Those that can't, talk." Edward was looking at him again with the same enigmatic smirk Annette gave him.

Even though he'd already decided to take the job, Mike told Edward that he'd take the afternoon off to give it some serious thought, and he'd give his answer in the morning. He'd use the free time to relax.

As they entered the building and headed for the elevator, the guard stopped them.

"'Scuse me, sir. You can't bring that in," he said.

"Can't bring what in?" Mike asked. The only thing he was holding was the last of the Chinese cola.

The guard pointed his pencil in the direction of the bottle. "That, sir."

"Soda?" Mike asked, raising the bottle so the man could see it.

"No, sir."

"Okay, for a minute there —"

"The bottle, sir. It can't go up."

Mike looked around the lobby for Lyle, but he wasn't there, not even behind the potted trees. He leaned forward, one hand behind his back and the other holding the soda bottle to his mouth as if it were a cigar, and said in his best Groucho Marx, "Well of course it can't go up. I have to *take* it up!" He arched his eyebrows up and down.

The guard didn't smile, so Mike tried his Lyle impersonation, squinting and walking slowly in his direction.

"Say again?"

"Company policy forbids the introduction of glass containers into the facility," the guard explained solemnly.

"Okay, I'll bite. Why no glass bottles?"



"I wouldn't know, sir. Company —"

"Company policy," Mike said in a tired tone.

In one swig he downed the rest of the soda and set the bottle on the desk in front of the guard. He turned to Edward, who was holding the elevator, but he had to stop and turn back again.

The guard was turning the bottle with the eraser end of the pencil, his lips moving as he read the label. "It's from China," he said to no one in particular.

"Communist China," Mike said in a significant tone. Then in a low, confidential voice he asked, "How do you know that I'm not carrying a concealed bottle taped to my ankle, ready to be brandished at the right time?"

"That would be silly, sir."

Mike made for the elevator.

"That reminds me," Edward said, ignoring the incident as the door closed on the guard and the communist cola bottle. "We may be the target of some corporate espionage. Annette's noticed that some files have been accessed, things gotten into, stuff like that. I'm in the process of... remedying... the situation, but be alert until we have the situation in hand. It should be very soon."

Mike couldn't tell if he was being tested, suspected, or warned. He agreed that the atmosphere in the office was getting a little tense.

First thing next morning Mike told Edward that he accepted the new position. Edward welcomed him to the new job by dragging him into a series of meetings with various Navy representatives who were in town that day. The meetings lasted all day, focusing on the coordination of the project and getting Mike up to speed ASAP. So much for easing into the new job.

When Mike and Edward got out of the last meeting at 6:15, he felt like someone's fingers were digging into the soft tissue of his frontal lobes and peeling them back to turn his brain inside out. "I prescribe a light dinner, a couple beers, and coma 'till the morning," he said to himself.

The lunch he'd made the evening before was still sitting untouched where he'd left it in the morning. His first lunch as manager of the Pensacola site had been Baghdad Bob's Burritos with computer printouts and bar charts on the side, compliments of the United States Navy.

As Mike was getting ready to leave, the phone rang.

"Mike. Sorry we were so busy today. This was the Navy's last day in town, so it was important we sit them down and get things rolling."

"Oh, that's okay, Edward," he said gallantly. What was he going to say?

"I've got a key issue to resolve right now, but it shouldn't take very long. I had Annette do the paper work while we were in the meetings, which means we can process you tonight and expedite this. I'll buzz you when I'm finished here."

Up yours and the aircraft carrier you sailed in on! "Uh, sure Edward. That'll be fine," he heard himself say as he collapsed into his chair.

After a moment of self pity, Mike sat up straight in his chair. Placing his feet squarely on the floor, he set his hands on his thighs, his elbows bent at 45-degree angles. He closed his eyes and inhaled and exhaled three times, reaching deep down to center his *ki*. Studying Aikido taught him that he could purge the wasteful energy within and recharge his body through disciplined meditation. Instead of dozing, he would meditate, remaining relaxed yet alert.

The raised voices woke him up. He was stretched out in the chair, his head lolling back. His neck was so badly cramped that he thought he was paralyzed.

The unfamiliar voices carried across the vacant floor. He followed them to Edward's office, where he found Edward, Annette, Lyle, and a uniformed cop surrounding Thyra, the janitor. She wasn't cuffed, but it was obvious that she belonged to the cop. Mike could tell that she was excited, but her jaw was clamped shut.

"...found poking through someone's file cabinet in Human Resources. Make any sense to you, sir?" the cop was asking Edward.

"No. None at all. That's why I called the police. We had a pretty good idea she was behind all this." Edward spoke as he and Thyra stared one another down. Annette hovered behind Edward with that familiar parental smirk on her face.

Just then the hallway door opened and another cop came in. He was holding a very large pistol in his handkerchief. There was a noticeable pause.



"Found this in the toilet brush holder on her cleaning cart, Jack," the second cop said to his partner. He hefted the heavy gun. "Forty-four caliber," he snorted. "For those stubborn stains that just won't come out."

Just then the first cop's walkie-talkie kicked in like a NASA transmission to a lunar lander, only with even more static.

The cop turned away from the group and spoke to the static for moment, then put the radio back on his belt. "Well, she's got no priors, apparently."

"Found this in the cart, too," said the second cop as he held out a clear resin cube the size of his hand. It had a portrait of Elvis Presley done in garish colors suspended inside it.

Goose bumps popped out on the back of Mike's neck. "That's Chuck Spaetner's paperweight." He was so shocked that he blurted it out louder than he wanted to. "It was his most prized possession in the office." He heard Annette's breath catch.

"Spaetner," the cop said, "That's the missing gentleman you told the captain about?" he asked Edward.

"Yes, officer," he said gravely.

Everyone looked at Thyra. She had been battling to remain silent, but she lost the battle.

"It has power," she said.

"The Elvis?" asked the cop.

"No. Chuck's psychic residue is on that paperweight!" she said. Even as she was saying it, she was clearly aware of how it sounded, and she clamped her jaw tight again.

"She also said something about some eternal society, or something like that?" asked the first cop. Shrugs went around the group.

"Wait a minute," said the second cop. "I've heard of them."

Lyle nodded in agreement, "Yeah, me too." To this point, he had been quiet, his mind racing to keep up with each new piece added to the puzzle. "It's that Jane Fonda organization," he said.

"No," said the cop, "it's that supernatural mystic group that Shirley MacLaine belongs to." He laughed at his own joke.

"Yeah," chimed in the other cop, "and Elvis, too." The cops snickered. Lyle blinked several times very quickly as he worked through the new information.

Edward applied Chapstick and said, "I think it's clear, officers, what you've got here." He shook his head, "A very unfortunate situation."

"Yes, sir," said the cop named Jack. "Well, we're going to move this to the station."

"I want a phone call," Thyra said. "Call Dublin."

"Dublin?" asked the cop. "Ma'am, you can make your phone call from the station if you want, but you better be talking about Dublin, Colorado."

Thyra stepped toward Mike, and both cops reached for her with startling quickness, betraying their casual outward appearance. She sighed, signaling her submission, and the cops relaxed, slightly embarrassed.

Mike felt uncomfortable, aware of how it might look, but he shook her hand.

"Goodbye and good luck, Mr. Lewis."

He didn't know what to say. "Good luck, Thyra," he grinned awkwardly.

"The detectives assigned will probably get in touch with you," the cop told Edward. Then the cops walked her through the door, with Lyle bringing up the rear.

There was silence after they left. It was then that Mike realized that Thyra had slipped something into his hand. It was a plain white business card on which was printed in stylized letters, *Get SAVED*. The only other thing was a long-distance phone number, overseas from the look of it.

"Well," sighed Edward. "That should take care of our security problem. And it looks like the Chuck Spaetner issue will be closed," he said to Annette. She nodded knowingly. He capped the Chapstick and slipped it into his pocket.

"So," he said to Mike. "Why don't we move to my office and get you processed and out of here."



That sounded good to Mike. He needed to get away from all the things that had happened that day.

Edward offered him a seat. The office was small and simple: Edward's desk, a file cabinet, a rectangular table, and the chair that Mike was sitting in. Edward remained standing, but at this point Mike couldn't give a rat's ass if it was bad protocol or not to sit while his boss stood.

"Mike, I want to formally welcome you aboard my team. It's a special team, one that's destined for big things."

At this point, the rah-rah stuff didn't interest Mike much. He put it on autopilot, nodding and smiling when the rhythms of Edward's speech indicated a need for a response, but he wasn't listening too closely.

"My new corporate corps is going to run the show sooner than later, and everyone will have to dedicate themselves like you've chosen to do..." Edward continued with the speech, but Mike was watching Annette as she walked into the office and set a manila folder with Mike's paper work on Edward's desk. She leaned back against the desk. She had that smirk, which was getting on Mike's nerves.

"...in all the major military installations," Edward was saying.

"Mr. Spaetner's situation was regrettable," Annette interjected, "even more so because he tried to bring in outside help. It wasn't very clean, but I think after tonight she's got more to worry about than trying to interfere in our business."

Edward walked over to the door and shut it.

Mike was exhausted and hadn't been paying much attention, and the last bit zipped right by him.

"Excuse me?" he said.

Edward and Annette exchanged smiles. "The woman," explained Annette, "the investigator who Spaetner called in to find us out."

"Thyra?" Mike said. His ears were warm and itchy. He looked to Edward for clarification, but Edward was watching Annette now.

"I don't know what her real name is," Annette continued. "The Eternal Society of the Silver Way doesn't use real names very often."

Mike looked to Edward, but he was watching Annette, content to let her talk. Mike's stomach gurgled, and the heat spread from his ears down along his spine. The little room was stuffy. He stared at the card Thyra had slipped him and tried to catch up. "Chuck...?"

"Had to be killed — reduced in force, if you will." Annette smiled. "So," she rubbed her hands together, "the processing."

Mike rose to his feet, his movements slow and uncertain. He could feel the sweat that was budding behind his knees, on the top of his butt, under his arms. He didn't know what was going on, but he needed room to think. Annette stepped toward him.

Adrenaline shot through Mike's body, supercharging his fatigued muscles and freeing his mind from its shock. The fastest way out was right through Edward, who was staring at Annette with a glazed look in his eyes. Mike sprang and made to run right over him.

"Edward," Annette said.

Edward instantly responded and met Mike head on, delivering a forearm shiver to his chest that stopped Mike in his tracks. Before Mike could recover, Edward grabbed him under his arms, lifted him off the ground as if he were tossing an infant, and hurled Mike backwards across the room. Mike slammed against the wall and collapsed on the table top, stunned. The white business card that Thyra had given him fell from his hand.

Mike tried to rise, but Edward's hands were pressing his shoulders to the table top with superhuman strength. It was all Mike could do to gasp for air. Edward's eyes looked right through Mike, no trace of awareness in them.

"When I met Edward," Annette explained, "he was a man who needed direction. I, on the other hand, had the inspiration, the means, but not the position."

She had produced a little vial of white powder from her skirt pocket and was tapping some out on a large pad of yellow Post-its.

"It's not that easy for a woman — a self-taught, down home Louisiana girl, at that — to make it in the corporate world of men and



business degrees. He had the gun," she smiled suggestively at Edward, "I knew how to use it."

Annette slipped out of her high heels, stood back, and raised the Post-its with the powder to the ceiling:

Atibon-Legba, remove the barrier for me, agoe!

Papa Legba remove the barrier

So I may pass through

When I come back I will salute the loa

Voodoo Legba, remove the barrier for me

So that I may come back

When I come back, I will thank the loa, Abobo!

She leaned over Mike as Edward held him steady, and before Mike realized what she was doing, she blew the powder into his face.

"You see," explained Annette, "it's the fundamental law of any business. No doubt you've heard it many times. Every company follows it: 'management has the right to manage as it sees fit.' It's even stated in the company policy."

The powder was cool, almost silky on his skin. Mike tried not to inhale it. When he couldn't hold his breath any longer and was forced to gasp for air, he could feel the strange powder enter his nose and mouth. It tingled like Novocaine as it worked its way into his skin.

"Some time ago, I realized that people were the major expense of any business. Not the high tech, not the buildings, but the salaries, the insurance, the benefits. People, Mike. Living people, that is.

"The dead make an infinitely superior work force — or should I say eternally superior? And commitment is the reason, Mike!"

Suddenly Mike stopped struggling against Edward. It was like the time as a boy when he fell off the motorcycle. He'd slammed his spine so hard that he was temporarily paralyzed, and he just lay motionless, staring at the sky, while a cottony feeling built in his arms and legs.

Once again he couldn't move. He felt a slow, cool burn along his spine like cold whiskey might feel if it were rubbed along his nerves. Electric

ants moved through his thighs and into his pelvis, puckering up his scrotum and tugging on something deep down inside.

"Okay, Edward," Annette said, and Edward released Mike's shoulders. Mike had no choice but to lie where he was.

Annette reached into her skirt again and came out with a small liquor bottle, like the type airlines use. She unscrewed the lid and offered the clear liquid to the ceiling, saying, "By thy power, Master of Crossroads."

Mike could do nothing but watch as she emptied most of the contents into her mouth and then sprayed it over his face and chest. It was rum.

"Commitment is key," she continued.

At this, Edward stirred from his catatonic trance. His lips tried to work words, as if he were trying to relearn speech.

"Totally committed workers don't demand much pay, work far more hours than the traditional... shall we say, life-intensive work force. Total. Commitment. Management."

Reflexively, Edward's body tried to repeat the three words that he had spoken so many times before. But now his throat was incapable of producing words, and the sounds he made were coarse and guttural.

Annette picked up a scissors from Edward's desk. Returning to Mike, she lifted her skirt and straddled his legs.

"Edward's been a big help to me, Mike. Just as Joyce and you and all the others will be." Her voice was getting thin and metallic.

She ripped open his shirt.

"*Zo wan-we sobadi sobo kalisso,*" she chanted. "*Maitre-Carrefour, Baron-Samedi, and Guede-nibo!* I appeal to you, Gods of Death. *L'envoi morts. Zombi!*" she said in a thick accent.

Annette cut a lock of Mike's hair, then snipped some of his chest hair, and, making sure she didn't lose them, took Mike's left hand and snipped away a fingernail clipping. She went to Edward's desk and deposited the three clippings in a baggy in the manila folder.

"Now we have what we shall call a personnel file on you, so to speak," she explained as she brought the file to him.



Holding it in both hands, she touched the file to his forehead three times, repeating, "*Baron-Samedi, Baron-Samedi, Baron-Samedi.*"

Then she retrieved a lipstick tube from her pocket. She made three crimson dots on Mike's forehead, then drew a cross so that the post fell along the bridge of his nose. Smiling, she drew a similar cross in the hollow of his neck and on the palm of his left hand.

Annette implored her guiding *loa*, "We are in thy hands, you our patrons and protectors."

She bent to examine Mike's eyes, which were now fixed and dilated. "Ahh," she exclaimed, "fortunately for all of us, Mike, there is death after life."

The sound of surf rose in his ears. The room dimmed, filled with gray smoke. Annette's last remark trailed off, like the last drops of water going down a drain: "Dying is something you do only once, but you remember it for the rest of your life."



"Fine," Edward said. "You'll call me tomorrow from Pensacola around 2:30 Denver time." Edward marked it in his Daytimer.

Mike wrote it down in his Daytimer as well. Then he put it in his briefcase.

"I know you'll do what we need you to, Mike," Edward said as he shook Mike's hand and walked him out of his office. Annette was sitting at her desk outside the office, and she smiled farewell to Mike.

Mike reached in his coat pocket and pulled out his Chapstick, applying it heavily to his dry lips. Then he left to catch his plane, the only sound he made as he walked through the halls was the dry swishing of his new suit.

"Annette," Edward said after Mike left, "call down to Human Resources and tell them that we'll need another two people to fill the vacancies."

Annette smiled, having already called.

UNDERTOW

BY MATTHEW J. COSTELLO

Tom Rule watched her run down to the water, to the breaking waves. The wind blew her long brown hair straight back. She was naked, and — just before jumping into the frothy water — she turned and waved at him.

Mari jumped into the ocean, into the Atlantic, and disappeared. Tom sipped his wine and waited, watched, for her to surface. He waited, the early October wind blowing cold off the water, and he tasted the salt on his lips.

If she didn't pop up, he'd have to go and get her out.

He waited, and — an old childhood trick — he counted. *One. Two...*

Slowly, watching the water, wondering if he had missed her head quickly popping up in the black-gray sea. *Three. Four.* He put down his glass. No, he had said, don't go in the water. Let's have dinner, make a fire. We're all alone on the island. There's no one else.

Don't go swimming.

But Mari loved the sea, she loved the water. This house had been her idea. That, and leaving everything behind.

Four. Five. Six. Tom took a step off the deck, down the wood stairs leading to the rust-colored beach.

He muttered, "Goddamn. Where the hell?"

Mari was young, beautiful, an excellent swimmer. Nothing could have happened to her. His bare feet hit the beach. The sand had lost its heat from the day, already turning cold, almost wet.

He started running to the water.

When her head popped up. He saw her sleek head, the brown-hair wet, pasted to her face. Her blue eyes sparkled, and she was looking at him.

Tom stopped. She was okay. She waved to him. C'mon, come in the water. Come in the water.

He shook his head.

He wouldn't go in the ocean. Not today. Maybe not ever again.

He turned his back on the ocean.



He had been married. And somehow, after the books sold to the movies, after three really *bad* movies and one phenomenally giant hit, he was able to hold his marriage together.

But there were problems. The drinking started to get out of hand, and after a while he couldn't function, couldn't write, without a few drinks.

The writing still came easy. It just wasn't as good as it used to be. He knew that. Drinking became part of his life. And then he cheated once with an actress playing a character he created in a movie. She was too hard to resist, this fantasy of being seduced by someone you created.

But none of that ended the marriage.

The sea did that.

They spent one month at the East Hampton house of his editor — a gift, a writing retreat, and a place for his family to vacation. It was a private house, secluded in the dunes. With a private beach. Jacob — little Jake — was five, and his big sister Samantha was supposed to keep her eye on him.

But Jacob was fast and far too brave.

There was that terrible moment when Tom heard Samantha's voice, the scream, calling out Jake's name.



He always remembered the words that he had written just then. The words, the sequence of letters, the sound of the syllables, were burned into his brain, right along with Samantha's scream.

The words were... "He never felt loss."

He got up from his laptop, hearing Jake's name being screamed, walking down to the beach, then running, the sun blistering hot, the sand burning his feet, and out there, dancing in the waves, was Jake's body, just another piece of flotsam caught in the playful to-and-fro of the waves.

Tom went crazy. He screamed. He ran to the water, and he watched it teasing him with Jake's body.

Later, he tried not to look at the headlines.

FAMOUS HORROR WRITER LOSES SON

No, Tom thought.

I didn't lose him. He was taken...



Mari came out of the water, the sky behind her darkening to a deep purplish-blue. There was still enough light to catch the sheen of the water on her skin.

The marriage had been over before that, of course. That was just the final act, the last big push to send them into court, where the lawyers perched, hungry, feasting on the money. Which didn't mean shit anymore.

Mari walked toward him. He had met her at a reception in New York. She was sleek, young, and beautiful. It was her idea to come here, to take the house on the island, a small island with no one else around. Total isolation, she said, to write, to create, to make love.

Tom watched her walk, her thighs moving sleekly, the gentle rise and fall of her breasts.

She looked at him, smiling, a challenge, a taunt in that smile.

She came up the stairs. "The water is *beautiful*."

Tom nodded. He moved closer, and now he could smell her, smell the sea on her skin, the way it dried, the flavor of salt and skin on the air. He held a towel out to her.

Mari took it unhurriedly, slowly wrapping herself in the towel, while Tom watched.

"You're beautiful," he said.

She smiled at him. "And I'm hungry." She walked into the giant wood and glass house, a mansion big enough for a dozen people.

Tom followed her.



Mari put down two plates filled with saffron rice, steamy spiced chicken coated with sesame. She wore a white caftan that went to the floor, and Tom thought of lifting the floor-length hem of the cotton dress, sliding it up, and kissing her, tasting her.

She looked over. Tom stood by a small desk, looking at papers.

"There's no bill here," he said. "Where's Steve's bill?"

Mari looked over. "Come, before it gets cold." She pulled the cork out of the wine bottle. Tom tried to watch his drinking around her. He couldn't let it get out of hand.

"Where's Steve's bill, for the work on the dock? He said he'd leave a bill."

Mari shrugged. "I guess he'll mail it. I don't know."

Tom walked to her. "Did he say anything when he left?" Steve Roman had been hired to repair the dock, battered from storms. The work was done, but then he disappeared. "Did he say goodbye, or —"

Mari lit two candles. "No, Tom. I didn't see him. I guess he just left. Now don't worry about it."

Tom shook his head, and he sat down to the dinner. He took a sip of the wine, a bitter white chardonnay that covered his tongue with a gentle burr.

He heard tiny specks of sand hitting the window, the wind whipping the sand around.



Mari had found this place, this island. She wanted him to come, to put an end to the past.

But as night fell, as he took a gulp of the wine, hurrying it, trying to pull its soothing cover over him, the past was here.



The doctors made him look at the body, the small, puffy, white body lying on a silvery table. Why, he had wondered. Jesus, God in heaven, why the hell do they want me to look at my boy?

They wouldn't say, they just guided him into the Long Island Medical Center's Autopsy Room. There were doctors around, green masks on, little green booties, their eyes all expressive, exaggerated. Here were creatures far worse than anything he ever wrote about.

Why are they wearing masks, Tom wondered. Nothing can happen to Jake now. But no, it's just a procedure, or maybe they think that they'll get something from my boy's dead body.

Jake was covered with a sheet. Tom shook his head. The boy drowned. What the hell more do they need to know?

One of the doctors came and took Tom's elbow and forcefully led him to the table, right beside the body.

The doctor spoke, the voice muffled.

"We wanted you to see this, Mr. Rule. To see if you know anything about this."

Tom shook his head. His stomach tightened. He felt as if he were gagging on something indigestible.

They pulled the sheet away.

And there was Jake, his small body, his body that was growing so big. Not so long ago, Jake had been a baby. Not so long ago, he crawled on the floor, a half-eaten saltine dangling from his mouth. Not so long ago, Jake took his first steps and came running toward me, Tom thought, laughing so silly, so pleased with himself.

Now, the boy's eyes were closed. His lips were a reddish-purple. His body looked fat, and —

“— To see if you know about these.”

There were welts on Jake's body, big, purplish welts, running from his kidney, across his abdomen.

Tom turned and looked at the doctors.

Do they think I did this, he remembered thinking. Is that it, so they think that I hurt my boy... beat my boy?

He started crying. They pulled the sheet back. They asked no more questions. They pulled Tom away.

There was a closed casket at the funeral.

And he remembered. He had received a letter the week before.

The letter had said: *Don't go to the sea. Don't take your family to the ocean. Something bad will happen because of your books. Something bad.*

Another nut letter, he thought. I get lots of nut letters. He had crumpled it up and tossed it into the garbage.



Tom poured another glass of wine. He got up and walked over to the desk.

“What are you doing?” Mari asked.

Tom rifled through the stacks of letters, the chatty notes from his editor, the hype from the marketing director, questions from the producer of his next film.

He looked for the new letter.

“Tom, c'mon. Sit down. Don't waste —”

She threw it away, he thought. It came last week, and he immediately recognized the handwriting, the flow of the letters. The letter was unsigned, just like the other one, with no return address.

The letter told him not to come here. Not to come to this house, not to come to the water.

You must not go to the ocean, the letter said.



"Did you throw it away? Did you throw the goddamn thing away?"

He got thousands of letters a week, wonderfully nutty letters, explaining how Tom Rule was the anti-Christ and must be destroyed, or how Tom Rule stole his ideas from some lady who made fudge in New Jersey. How God will punish Tom Rule.

Tom was used to the wacko letters.

But this had come from the same person. Someone had warned him, had tried to save Jake. Or am I losing it, he thought?

Then he found it, at the bottom of the pile. There was no return address. He couldn't understand why. Wouldn't they want him to call? Why would they hide?

Mari touched his shoulder. She leaned into him and handed him his wine glass.

"Tom," she said. "It's nothing. Just another sick person, another sick letter."

He held the single sheet of paper, the envelope with no return address. He read it again, trying to face his fear.

Mari grabbed his hand and pulled him away, pulling him up stairs, to the bedroom.



The bedroom had one complete wall of glass facing the dark silent ocean flecked with phosphorescence and the reflected pin-points of starlight.

Mari's hair, dry and sweet-smelling from her shower, dangled around Tom's chest, his mid-section, as she tasted him, whispering to him, soothing words.

The wine made it hard for Tom to think of anything but Mari moving above him, her gentle words. Her dark body was nearly invisible in the room, just barely outlined by the scant light from the moonless night.

It was hot in the room, and her salty sweat dropped on his lips, and he tasted it. She looked down at him, pressing against his chest with her hands.

And when it was done, she cuddled close, their sweat making them stick together. She cuddled close and whispered to him, "Come, swim with me."



She stood up naked, the black sky behind her. She pulled on his hands. She had told him before. He has to kill this fear. She pulled on his hand. "Come with me," she said.

It was so hot in the stuffy room, stifling, and Tom felt like he couldn't breathe. The air was so hot and heavy.

And he imagined the breeze, the cool water, and Mari touching him — it was all so good. She was brave and beautiful, and because of that, he thought, I can do this.

He got up, and she led him on, pulling him downstairs, past the dining room table, out of the dark house, to the murky light of the night outside. Then she ran down the deck stairs, to the sand, and Tom hurried to follow her.

"Come on," she shouted, and he heard the joy in her voice, her pleasure that he was, at last, following her.

The other thoughts were there, lurking nearby. But he didn't permit them to come this time. He just watched Mari running, following her into the surf.

The cold water covered his toes. The wind suddenly felt cold, and he stopped.

But Mari plunged on, kicking up white feathery clumps of water, leading him on. Tom started moving again, the choppy water reaching his knees, his thighs, and up...

Mari disappeared, diving under the water, and Tom was alone. Alone, standing in the sea.

The thought was there. Looking at the dark sea.

You took my boy. You took my boy, and —

Mari popped up, smiling, grinning, splashing him.

Tom looked back to the house. It was dark, and he glanced down the beach. He saw something there, a clump of driftwood at the water's edge.

"Dive in," Mari yelled. Tom turned back to her. All he felt now was cold, and the water swirling around him. No, he thought, I want to get out of here.

"Come on, Tom. Dive into the water."



He looked at her splashing, so beautiful in the water.

One dive, he thought, a few strokes through the water, and then I'll come out.

He took a breath and dived.



And the water surrounded him. He tasted it, felt the icy water cooling his sweaty face. He felt the funny way the water swirled as he kicked, swimming underwater.

He popped up.

"There," he said, "I got in the water. There, I —"

He looked around for Mari, but he didn't see her. The water was just deep enough so that, as each wave swelled, he had to kick with his feet, treading water. He spun around, kicking, riding each wave.

"Mari," he said, loudly. Then, he yelled her name, "Mari!"

The yell brought him back to that day. The hot sun, the scream. "Jake." The word, the horrible call, lasting forever. "Jake..."

"Mari!"

She popped up next to him.

The dark sleek shape of her head, the hair flat against her body, the sparkling eyes —

It wasn't Mari! Or it may have been, a long time ago. This was a sleek thing with an open mouth and dull fish-eyes. And the hair wasn't hair at all, but giant scales that shined like plastic.

Tom kicked away. There was no sand, no bottom touching his feet, just the uneasy swell of the sea pulling at him.

It disappeared, it slipped below the water.

Tom started swimming to the shore. With each stroke came a thought.

I know what that was, he thought. I wrote about that, now didn't I? An ancient dream, an old fantasy... something to make swimming and the ocean scary.

A story.

Stroke.

But those dreams, those fantasies — they all came from some place. They were real. I wrote about them and —

Stroke. His toes touched bottom. He felt sand, the jagged edge of a thousand broken shells.

He thought of Jake's body, the strange-looking welts on his body. The way it must have played with Jake, he thought, trying to get me to see, to make me notice, to get me to come in...

Because it wanted me.

And now —

It popped up in front of him, and there were others, dozens of them, with their bullet-shaped heads, and mouths like giant lampreys lined with pointy teeth.

He gasped at the air. A wave splashed through him, and he swallowed some salt water, coughing, hacking.

They moved toward him. He looked at the beach. He was closer now, close enough to see the driftwood. Close enough to see the odd jumble of bones piled on the beach, thrown there by the water. Steve never got off the island. Had he gone swimming with Mari? Did she tease him, lure him.

They came closer. Their mouths made clicking noises in the air.

And Tom could do nothing but wait — wait, until he felt those teeth, the lips sucking at him, the sting of his skin being cut open, the things holding him tight, and eating, eating, while he screamed and howled into the empty night air.

MASK OF THE HERO

BY STEVE AND MELANIE TEM

—For Mark—

Mark wasn't sure they were dreams. He did not, in fact, believe they were dreams, although he knew everyone else would think so. They came to him at night when he was asleep, pretending to be dreams, but when he woke himself up and turned on the bedside light, got to his feet and walked around his room, they were still there. Grinning at him. Nodding at him. Weeping. Snarling. Crowding around him.

Masks.

Bodiless heads.

Bodies without spirits. Or, he thought, spirits without bodies.

They always made an eerie sound, a humming on the very edge of what he could hear, sometimes high-pitched and thin as a hair, sometimes full-bodied and low. The music always came to him before the masks did and lingered long after they'd disappeared.

By the time he was eighteen years old, Mark was hearing the music almost all the time.

Sometimes he'd reach out in an attempt to touch the masks. When he was a child, he'd thought they were toys, or friends, or monsters come to eat him alive, or the faces of his parents whom he remembered so dimly he thought they probably had been dreams, too. Sometimes he did touch

the masks—the corner of one's eye, or the mouth hole. When that happened, both the mask in his hand and his hand on the mask showed themselves to be made of small bits and pieces, building blocks, he supposed they were molecules — smaller hands, smaller and smaller masks.

When the masks disappeared altogether, as they always did, without revealing what was behind them, Mark would raise his hands to touch his own face. Every time, his face came off, peeled away. Sometimes the pain made him cry out, and sometimes there was no pain. Either way, no one heard him. Then he would hold his face in his hands for as long as he could while the music hummed high and low.

By the time he was eighteen, Mark had come to think of himself secretly as the Prince of Masks.



In the real world, which didn't always seem very real to him, Mark went to school, went to work, went home to the group home. Now and then he fell in love with a girl, but he always talked too much or didn't talk enough or said the wrong thing.

At school he had to think about things that really weren't very important. He could get interested in a poem or a science experiment, but then he'd find he'd discover hidden meanings in the way the words were used, secret questions in the data so that when the experiment was finished you had hundreds more hypotheses to test than when you'd started. A few teachers tried to talk to him about what he was going to do when he graduated; sometimes Mark thought about nothing else, and sometimes he couldn't bring himself to think about it at all.

The group home was okay. Although none of the counselors understood him, most of them were kind, and although the other boys weren't his friends he didn't have any trouble with them as long as he stayed away from them. There were times, though — across the dinner table, watching the game on TV in the living room, shooting pool in the basement — when he'd look up and see the masks they were all wearing.

One wore a mask of a wolf, which showed he couldn't be trusted. Another wore a mask of a bird with lifted feathers; she was gone in a week. They all thought they were wearing masks to conceal their real selves, but Mark was the Prince of Masks and he knew that the masks revealed who they really were.

Then their faces would go back to normal. The wolf-man would be just some guy who thought he was cool, baring his pretty white teeth in a smile that was supposed to be friendly but made Mark sick. The bird-lady would be looking down in a way that was supposed to keep people from hurting her or she would fly away. As far as Mark knew, nobody hurt her here, but she flew away anyway.

Mark's job as a bicycle messenger took him to parts of the city he'd never known existed and brought him into contact with people he would never have met. He got lost a lot; he was sure he was going to get fired. Almost every day he came close to having an accident; he'd be riding along as fast as he could, zipping through crowds waiting for the bus, leaping over curbs, and suddenly there'd be a car right in front of him or an old lady slowly pulling a two-wheeled cart with grocery sacks in it. Mark would swerve and drag his heels to stop, and the driver would blast the horn or the old lady would glare at him over her shoulder, and Mark would see that they were wearing masks.

On the Sixteenth Street Mall one afternoon, a lady in a gray business suit and carrying a briefcase waited with him at a corner. Mark was thinking about quarterback Joe Montana, who never felt out of place, who belonged in this world, ruled this world. It was a long light. The lady half-turned toward him, the sunshine struck her face from a different angle, and Mark saw her mask. She lifted her hand as though to smooth her hair, which hadn't moved at all in the slight breeze, but instead she slipped her oval pink nails under the edge of her mask, peeled it off, and put it into her briefcase. The face underneath was rosy and younger; with it, she smiled at Mark as though they shared a secret now, and then the light changed and he lost her in the rush hour crowd.

“Hey, kid,” said a man in a dirty flannel shirt, stepping in front of him as he went up the steps of an office building he’d finally found on Champa Street. “Spare a quarter for the bus?”

Mark gave him a quarter, even though he couldn’t spare it. The bum grinned at him and held out his hand. Not knowing what else to do, Mark took it. The bum shook his hand hard and for a long time, and when he finally let go he left a tiny mask in the cup of Mark’s palm, a mask so tiny that it had no features except glittery little eyes.

Mark had been thinking about Diana, whether she was really going to break up with Rick, and he didn’t know what to do about the mask in his hand. The bum was shuffling off down the sidewalk now, muttering to himself and looking for somebody else to hit up for “bus money.” Finally, Mark rubbed his hand on his jeans and the mask fell off onto the concrete like a fingernail paring or a piece of his own skin. He wondered what the man would leave in the hand of the next stranger who didn’t just ignore him or tell him to go to hell.

Mark’s boss was Dave, a tall man with many chins. Dave always hired boys from the group home, so you were representing the whole program every day you went to work, and he talked loudly about how he was giving these boys a chance to turn their lives around. He also talked loudly about why he fired them, so Mark knew that Jake had stolen money and Bobby had gotten high on his lunch break and it had turned out that Kevin couldn’t read so he’d delivered stuff to all the wrong addresses. Kevin had only lasted three days. Mark wondered what Dave was saying about him. He did get lost a lot, because he’d be thinking about Diana or about Joe Montana or about what he was going to do when he emancipated from the group home next summer. Also because sometimes when he looked at the letters on street signs or the numbers on buildings all he could see was that they were symbols for something else, codes, masks over some other meaning that he couldn’t grasp anymore.

It took several months for Mark to get a look at Dave’s mask. The man smiled a lot. He clapped your shoulder and said your name a lot. He thought

his mask of friendliness hid how he really felt about the boys from the group home, but the open mouth and squinty eyes and puffed-out cheeks just accentuated his contempt. Realizing that each of Dave's chins was the chin of a mask, Mark wondered how far down you'd have to go to get to the face.

"Hey, son, how ya doin'?" Dave greeted him when he came in one chilly Saturday morning.

"Okay."

"Got a LoDo run for you. Warehouse down there under the Twenty-Third Street Viaduct. Think you can find it?"

"Sure," Mark said, although he'd never been into Lower Downtown, had no idea where Twenty-Third Street was, and didn't know what the term "viaduct" meant. The package to be delivered was an oversized manila envelope, very lightweight and a little stiff. Attached to the back of the envelope was another, smaller envelope. Across the front of this envelope it said MARK, in huge block letters. Thinking that it contained further instructions from his boss, Mark opened it. Inside the envelope was a paper mask, folded in half lengthwise. He opened up the mask: the eyeholes were slanted sharply, evil-looking. He was careful to keep his fingers away from them. The mouth opening was curved into a smile, but Mark didn't really think it was a true smile. It was a smile that could cut you if you weren't too careful. Written across the forehead of the mask in tiny crimson lettering was this message:

what next you deliver may in fact deliver you.
mind your steps carefully — the journey is an
important one, but perhaps not one you wish to take.

The downtown streets weren't busy on a Saturday morning. Mark pedalled briskly along the Mall through the crisp sunshine and shadows, weaving among the mostly-deserted benches and empty waist-high flowerpots. He was nervous about finding this place. He was nervous about what to do now that Diana had broken up with Rick and was obviously expecting him to ask her out; he really didn't think they

had very much in common, although he often fantasized about marrying her, making love to her, spending the rest of his life with her. He was nervous about what he'd do when he emancipated, where he'd live, how he'd support himself, whether he'd ever have any friends. There was a guy playing saxophone in the streaked shadow of the bank building with all the black glass; as Mark went past he nodded, and his horn glinted sweetly, and Mark didn't see any evidence of a mask. Maybe, he thought, the music was a mask, concealing and revealing the guy's true self.

Wind swept along the streets and alleys between the tall flat buildings, faster than he could ride. Stuff blew across his path and under his wheels: newspapers, plastic bags, hats, sections of orange mesh fencing, masks.

Masks. He almost fell, almost rode out into the street against the light. Masks, blowing along the streets and sidewalks like all the other debris, piling up against the curb in complicated little piles of grins, frowns, tongues sticking out, eyes winking and bulging, ears pointed or flapping or no ears at all.

Following what he remembered of Dave's directions, he turned right onto Blake Street and there, the only big building in the block, was the warehouse, faded red brick with only a few windows. Proud of himself that he'd found it right away, he turned right again into the alley to go into the back door off the parking lot. The alley was so full of masks that he had to dismount and push his bike. Masks bit his ankles, lifted themselves high enough to kiss his hands.

There was only one door in the back of the building, so he didn't have to figure out which one to use. He couldn't see anything to lock his bike to so he just left it leaning against the building; already he was worrying that it would get stolen and he wouldn't have any way to get out of here. Debris, most of it probably masks but he tried not to look, skittered around the parking lot like living creatures. Something hit the back of his leg and fell off; he didn't turn around to see what it was. Carefully carrying the manila envelope in both hands so as not to drop it or bend whatever was inside, Mark tried the door. It was unlocked and swung inward. He took a deep breath, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him.

"Quick service," a quiet voice said. "I like that."

There were a lot of lights in the building, but they were all dim and uncovered and they were hung up among the rafters of the very high ceiling, so they didn't cast much light. Mark thrust the parcel in the direction of the voice. "Here's your package."

"No," the voice said softly. "That belongs to you."

He'd made another stupid mistake. Somehow he'd gotten confused and brought the wrong package. He was going to get fired for sure.

Mark's eyes had adjusted to the dim light enough now that he could see something of the owner of the quiet voice, could tell at least that the person was about his own height and weight and was dressed in ordinary clothes — jeans and a plain gray sweatshirt. He couldn't make out the age or sex or race of the person, though, because the whole head was covered by the most elaborate mask Mark had ever seen.

The mask must have been three feet tall and nearly as wide. When the figure turned a little sideways, Mark could see how far the mask extended above the top and beyond the sides of the head. There looked to be dozens of eye sockets, and the opening for the mouth changed form as he stared at it, from grinning to frowning to grimacing to a scream. Protuberances that might have been noses or ears or tongues pushed out all over it, and myriad iridescent colors swirled with black, so vivid that they weren't confined by the boundaries of the mask but bled into the air itself.

"Open it," the muffled voice told him.

Mark was already shaking his head. "I'm not supposed to —"

"Open it. It belongs to you."

Knowing he shouldn't be doing this, Mark made a deliberate decision to do it anyway, to see what this adventure would be. He loosened the sealed flap of the envelope and straightened its metal prongs. He hesitated, then slid his hand inside.

Something soft and warm was in there. Something moving. Something fleshy.

He gasped and tried to pull his hand out, but whatever was inside the envelope wouldn't let him go. There was no pain, he didn't feel teeth, but he had the vivid sensation that the thing had taken him in its mouth.

"Take it out," commanded the voice from behind the tall mask.

Slowly Mark withdrew his hand from the envelope. With it came a mask. He knew it was a mask before he'd even seen it completely, and his heart raced.

"Put it on." He would have put it on without being told.

He raised the mask in his hands. Immediately it swelled, sent out feelers, and adhered itself to his face. It was so pliant and fit his features so perfectly that he could hardly feel it once it was in place.

Now the masked figure was backing into the darkness of the huge warehouse room. First its body disappeared, leaving only its face, which was a mask, looking empty, lifeless, unoccupied. Then the mask disappeared, too, and Mark was staring at a blank warehouse wall, a wide mouth-like loading door, two dingy windows above like cracked eyes.

Mark was afraid he would be left alone here, and he would remain a misfit, an alien for the rest of his life. "Wait!" he shouted, and followed the guide through the murky warehouse.

It seemed to take much longer than it should have, many steps and a great deal of pushing through some sort of viscous material before he reached the wall and the door that he thought the masked creature had gone through. Telling himself that he was a masked creature, too, he kept reaching toward the door. Finally he had it at his fingertips, but he couldn't seem to force his hand through the last few inches. He was stuck. It seemed to him he'd always been stuck, always heard calls he couldn't answer, always waited for someone to claim him and feared he wouldn't be able to follow.

He cried out. No one answered. He tried to break through with fists and feet, but his flailing was pointless. He gathered himself and flung his whole masked body headfirst against the door, but he only bounced back.

Finally he gave up. He sat down on the floor, lay down on the dirty warehouse floor and waited. Maybe he fell asleep. He didn't think he was asleep, but his mind felt viscous, too, and was full of masks and music.

The floor, the wall, the door began to dissolve around him. Momentarily he was half-in and half-out of the mask they'd put on him, and then it snapped back into place as if elastic, wrapped completely around his head, pulled and pushed at him until it altered his shape.

Then he was through to the other side.

Where half-formed faces floating in midair fought each other with fangs coming out of their nostrils and with swords held in ears that looked like hands. Where distorted humanoid figures frantically traded clothes, appendages, skins. Where heads disintegrated and totally different heads filled in the empty shoulders.

His own face floated. His own head disintegrated, re-formed in a new configuration, disintegrated again. His own clothes and skin were sloughed off and replaced by clothes and skin that had belonged to somebody else.

As far as Mark could see were rows and rows of other creatures, not unlike himself, masked and constantly transforming. Some of the masks looked too heavy to bear; others looked lighter than skin. All of them thoroughly covered their wearers; Mark would have thought they were nothing but masks if he hadn't been so aware of himself under his own mask.

"We have been calling you for a long time," someone complained.

"I'm here now." His voice felt different from behind the mask. From all around him rose a murmur of relief.

"You have been a long time coming."

Mark said, "All my life," and nodded. His mask moved in ways of its own.

He didn't need to ask where he was. This was the other world he'd always known existed, intertwined with the world of school and work and girls and loneliness. This was the world he'd glimpsed all his life, between letters and numbers when they skittered around rearranging themselves before he could put them to any use. This was the land he'd begun to perceive among the molecules of objects most people thought were solid: trees, mountains, cars, people. This was the place the masks had been telling him about for years.

"All my life," he said again. "I've heard you, but I didn't know how to get here."

"There is not much time. You may have waited too long." The tall creature wearing the giant mouth mask trembled and swayed, and its voice was weak.

Mark hated having to ask, "Not much time for what?" He should have already known. Maybe he would make stupid mistakes here, too. He might not understand what he was supposed to do. Maybe it wouldn't be so easy to fit in here, either. "What am I supposed to do?" he forced himself to ask, and answers formed everywhere, murmurs and mutterings, sighs and shrieks.

"The enemy."

"The enemy makes us wear masks that change who we are and make us do her bidding."

"The enemy grows stronger and we grow weaker. For a long time she has been sending forays into the other world, gauging its strength, changing pieces of it with her masks. Now she is ready to invade the other world completely and claim it for her own. Without you, we cannot stop her."

"But I'm wearing a mask, too." Confused, he put his hands to his face and, for a dizzying moment, thought maybe he wasn't wearing a mask anymore. In only two small places could he distinguish the edge of the mask from his own flesh: under the point of his chin and at the base of his skull.

"You are part of both worlds," they told him. "You are the only one who can save both worlds from the enemy."

"Why would I want to?" Suddenly Mark was furious. "Why should I care what happens to this world or that one? I don't belong in either one."

The masked creatures swarmed around him. The music hurt his ears. "Because if you do not," they screeched and sang, "if the enemy wins, nobody will ever be anything but a mask and nothing will ever be what it seems to be."

Mark was grabbed from behind. The masked creatures moaned and howled, but none of them came to his aid, except that someone thrust into his hand a sword, as pliant and sharp as the edge of his mask. He twisted away from his attacker and swung the sword backwards in a

wide swift arc. The sword connected with something semi-solid that came apart under the blade.

Something was pulled over his head. Another mask, he thought, heavy and with no apertures for seeing or speaking or even breathing. He couldn't breathe. Desperately he brought the sword upward in both hands, its tip perilously close to his own face, and split the mask apart. Its pieces fell at his feet, piece after piece dividing, until the ground was littered with countless infinitesimal masks.

Mark whirled. A figure in a soldier's uniform and a featureless khaki mask was lunging the short distance between them with a dagger upraised. Mark kicked at the descending fist. The dagger flew upward and then plummeted, clattering onto a dark hard surface far beneath them. Mark leaped after it, groped through thick sticky layers of some substance he couldn't name, and brought the dagger back up. He grabbed the front of the uniform and held the point of the dagger to the soldier's throat. "Take off your mask," he ordered.

The soldier shook his head violently and struggled in Mark's hold. "I cannot! The Queen has decreed —"

Mark thrust the dagger into the heavy khaki fabric at the soldier's throat and ripped the blade upward. A dark blood of dust and shadows spurted and the soldier shrieked but Mark, as if unable to stop, cut and slashed at the skintight mask until it was completely stripped away. But the soldier's face had been stripped away, too, and all he could see was blood and sinew and gaping moving holes.

Shocked by his own violence, Mark dropped both the dagger and the unmasked body of the soldier. "I'm sorry!" he breathed. "Oh, God, I'm sorry!" He backed away, then blindly turned and fled.



Light fluctuated around him, altering the shapes and textures of things, replacing shadows with reflections. He didn't know where he was heading and he couldn't tell where he'd already been. The surface

under his feet might have been ground or floor or street; it undulated randomly, shifted wildly under his weight. Sometimes he heard such a cacophony of noises that he couldn't sort them out; sometimes he heard nothing at all, a huge and almost painful silence; sometimes he heard only the piercing music of the masks. The air was freezing cold and then so hot it nearly burned his skin. It smelled of flowers and then of acrid smoke, of mint and poison.

He had the vivid sensation that he was moving between and through masks. This whole world was masked, designed to confuse and trap him. Or maybe this whole world was nothing but a mask. Maybe it had been forced to wear masks for such a long time that there was no longer anything real underneath.

He walked for a long time. After a while he was not really aware of his legs moving or his feet coming into contact with anything solid, and he thought he might be flying, swimming, crawling.

Mark had felt alien all his life. He was more alien now than he had ever been before.

Something wrapped around him, its long thick body pulsing everywhere as though it had a thousand hearts. Strong muscles coiled tighter and tighter around his chest; fangs — so tiny he could hardly see them and then, suddenly, longer and thicker than his whole body — poised dripping above his head.

Mark dug his fingers into the pulpy skin of the serpent and pulled hard. A layer pulled away, scales the breadth of his finger. The serpent shuddered and contracted; Mark's shoulders and hips ached from the pressure of the huge coils. He pulled himself inward, made himself small and narrow, and, still clutching the monster's skin, leaped downward into the inverted cone made by the sinuous body.

He slid and fell, down and down, and the skin came away in his hands. He saw that it was a mask, and under it were revealed more and more masks—smooth, with diamond shapes; rough, with a gelatinous substance in the pits and crevices; iridescent and mottled. He fell and fell, into the dark pulsing pit made by the body of the snake, and the

mask he was pulling away grew so large that it folded over him, adhered to him, wrapped him up. He was becoming the snake, or he was becoming the snake's mask.

But then he had fallen out the bottom of the serpent's coils. He stopped suddenly, his nerves jangling. The slough of skin covering him dried rapidly, cracked, and split open. Breathless and dizzy, Mark emerged into dazzling saffron light, the sweetest mask-music he'd ever heard, and the presence of the enemy Queen.

"Mark," said the enemy, and his name bespoke her power. "I am delighted to have you."

Mark was dazed by his long fall, half-blinded by the brilliant light and nearly deafened by the music of the masks. He tried to say something to her, to tell her that he wasn't here for her and that he knew her tricks, but he couldn't find his voice.

The enemy Queen was leaning over him. She was so vast and so near to him that she had no features, but the cold radiating from her was paralyzing and her overwhelming odor entangled his thoughts. "Ah, Mark," she breathed into his face, into his lungs, "You wear the mask of the hero well, as if you had been born to it. Stay with me and you will continue to be a hero, bold and daring in the hero's mask I will construct for you. You will make a fine, strong warrior. I will use you well."

She didn't grasp him; he doubted she had hands. She enveloped him, her entire body over and inside his entire body, for such a long time he thought he had ceased to exist. When she removed herself, something had been grafted to all his surfaces, so that nothing about him was himself anymore.

One plane of the enemy Queen's body turned reflective long enough for Mark to see what he had become. A warrior: face transformed by a hideous mask of violence, red and blue slashes seaming his face, long jagged teeth bared and eyes aflame; weapons literally growing from his body, daggers at his waist and guns growing out of the flesh of his hands and iron-like bands of muscle studded with spikes circling his heavy thighs.

The Queen gave a great sigh that made everything in Mark's consciousness heave and billow. "Perfect. You are perfect for my purposes. We will conquer the worlds."

"No!" With strength he'd always suspected he possessed but never had had a chance to test, Mark kicked high, so that the many spikes and daggers ripped into the mass of the enemy Queen. She shrieked, a terrible noise like the wind that would end the world, and he recognized her pain as his own, as part of the music of the masks.

He aimed the pistol of his right hand toward the place where he imagined her heart would be, and pulled the trigger again and again and again. In the tumult raging around and in him, he couldn't be sure when the gun stopped firing, but finally he flung it as hard as he could upward and outward. A machine gun rested as if glued to his left forearm, and he swung it back and forth and fired it for a long time. The enemy Queen roared and shuddered. Mark found himself sorry for her pain and frightened for his own, but he had no doubt what he had to do.

Suddenly the Queen quieted. Mark held his breath. The mask-music was a very faint keening now; he felt it more than heard it, and its sweet sharp sorrow slid between his flesh and his bones. The enemy Queen was singing now inside his heart, and for the briefest of moments he surrendered to her. In that instant, she melded herself to his mind and body and became part of his flesh. He realized, too late, that she was even stronger and more clever than he had imagined. She had meant for him to attack her so viciously, to rip into her body. She had known he would be trapped there. She had intended all along to become his new mask, the hero's mask.

"You are the enemy now." Her seductive voice moved like fire inside him. "You have become me. You have the power to use other people for anything you like, and none of them will ever know who you really are."

"No!" Mark screamed, and pulled from his belt a dagger whose blade curved like the curve of the world. He inserted its point into the base of the enemy Queen's throat, where her pulse was strongest, and ripped the blade downward through the Queen and through himself, through

all his different selves, through all the masks he had collected during his lifetime.

All his masks came off. Layer after layer after layer of them, down to the bone. Masks that Mark had never known he wore, some that looked exactly like him and some he never would have recognized as himself. The enemy Queen wailed; Mark wailed; the music of the masks wailed. Mask after mask stripped away, and when it was over Mark was nothing and nobody but who he was. In unmasking himself, he had destroyed all pretending, and destroyed the enemy Queen who had trapped him as well.

Creatures gathered around him, none of them masked anymore, all of their faces looking new and strong. "You have liberated us," they sang to him, a song he'd never been able to hear before because of the music of the masks. "Now we will take you home."

They made a sack for him and ferried him through the iridescent viscosity, took him back through the fear and wonder of his dreams and out into the chilly Saturday morning of the other world. The warehouse was empty. His bicycle was where he'd left it. His package had been delivered.

¡CUIDADO!

BY NORMAN PARTRIDGE

Todos dan su despedida pero como esta ninguna...

—Las Amarillas

(Traditional Folk Song)

Spartacus Jackson knew the makings of a bad day when he saw them. The Concord coach was bucking over every rut in the road, his backbone felt like someone had taken a hammer to it, and the beans he'd had for breakfast weren't sitting well. On top of that, the lone woman on the stage was complaining constantly in a voice that was sharp enough to peel the hide off a Gila monster.

But those were minor irritations compared to the stink that rose from the sharp-tongued woman's crate. It smelled worse than the stage driver or the horses, and that took some doing. The horses had been working hard all day, and the driver, Ben Rose, didn't smell a bit like his surname.

A month's time separated Ben from his last bath. Jackson was sure of that, because thirty days had passed since he'd shoved the old man into a horse trough. "Ben," he'd said, "as long as I'm riding shotgun on your rig, you're going to bathe right proper now and again."

"Christ, but you coloreds have put on airs since you got yourself emancipated," came Ben's soggy reply.

Jackson chuckled over the memory. He had a true affection for Ben Rose, and he appreciated the free and easy friendship that the old driver returned. Ben was a man born for the life of a jehu. Jackson figured that

Ben's wild, nearly reckless way with a team would have been admired by Jehu himself, the hard-driving son of Minshi in the Old Testament.

Jackson lowered the bandanna from around his face. The dry desert air held more than a hint of dusty grit, but Jackson hoped that a little dirt in his gullet would help to mask the incredible stink that rose from Mrs. Sloane's big crate.

He looked to the horizon, and suddenly his day went from bad to worse.

The darkness hung low to the ground, muffling the desert floor. Jackson sensed a sudden stillness in the air, a foreboding silence that made every noise that much louder and somehow strange. Each creak of the coach became a little scream, and the pounding rhythm of the horses' hooves suddenly sounded as ominous as cannon fire.

The darkness rolled forward, advancing with incredible swiftness and ferocity. Waves of sand washed across the desert, accompanied by heavy clouds that cut off the sunlight and painted everything in view the color of dried blood.

The coach bucked against heavy gusts. Ben pulled at the ribbons and brought the horses into line.

"Looks like a bad one," Spartacus shouted.

Though they sat at elbow's length, Jackson had a hard time hearing the jehu's reply. "Miserable... good-for-nothing... wind. Damn crate... making us top-heavy as a pregnant... We'll just have to sit it out," Ben complained, and Jackson simply nodded in agreement. He'd heard enough tales of stage wrecks to prevent him from being overly brave in the face of a storm.

Stage travel was rough. More and more people were choosing to ride in relative comfort on the railroads, and the ribbon of steel that now linked the East to the West was slowly killing off the old stage lines. It was only a matter of time before the rails reached south, because that was the only place left for them to go. As it was, new towns were springing up everywhere, things were getting civilized, and Jackson was beginning to wonder if there was going to be a place for him in what the newspaper scribes called "the New West."

Spartacus Jackson had come west after the war, only to be greeted by a woeful lack of opportunity. It wasn't just that his skin was black, though that was definitely a mark against him in most quarters, it was the additional fact that his left arm ended in a stump at his elbow. He'd mostly worked in saloons and whorehouses, keeping the peace with a sawed-off shotgun. He'd only come by his job as an express messenger after rescuing the owner of the stage company from a tussle in a Tucson whorehouse without skinning the old lecher's purse or pride.

At the time, Spartacus Jackson had figured it for a lucky break.

At present, in the face of a raging wind storm, he wondered.

There wasn't any cover, so the two men did the best they could in preparation for the worst that nature had to offer. Ben hobbled the horses' legs so the animals couldn't wander, and Jackson fastened leather flaps over the coach windows.

The baggage in the rear boot was covered, but the big crate up top was something else to consider. Jackson knew that if he covered it with a tarp, the stink would be trapped in the cab like a fart in a bottle. But if he left the crate uncovered, the wind would take care of the gamy smell and the heavy box would most likely be just as safe as the strongbox that was stored in the front boot beneath the driver's seat.

It was sound thinking, but Jackson didn't get very far with it. The owner of the crate, Mrs. Amelia Sloane of Washington, D. C., caught on to his scheme and complained about her cargo's sitting unprotected in such a blower. Her ice-blue eyes froze Ben as she explained for the umpteenth time that the crate contained the remains of her poor husband, Mr. Howard Sloane, who had met his demise in Godforsaken Mexico while securing artifacts for the betterment of mankind and whose corpse, furthermore, was going to be interred in view of his nation's Capitol, befitting the sacrifice he'd made.

Spartacus listened, amazed at the way the woman's voice rose above the storm. It was as if the winds were afraid to tear at her righteous complaints. He looked at the oversized crate and figured that Mr. Howard Sloane had been one big sonofabitch, indeed. His choice of

lifelong companion probably necessitated his size. It was most likely the only advantage the man had held over a hellion like his tiny wife.

Ben ducked his head into the cab, out of the wind. "You're right crazy, ma'am, if you don't mind my saying. Your fella's already dead. Fact is, a little blowin' might just freshin' him up a tad."

Suddenly, the barrel of a silver gun pressed against Ben's forehead. "I think you misheard, grandpa," said a man with gray clothes and very white hands. "Maybe you want me to clean out your ears with this little gadget."

Ben backed off and shouted over the wind, "We can tie it. It'll be as safe as..."

Mrs. Sloane nodded. "Very well. But you men will have to stay with it and make certain that it meets no harm."

Ben hollered, "Lady... there ain't one godda... chance in... of us losin'..."

The man cocked his pistol. "Do like the lady says. Besides, the likes of you ain't tentin' out with us." Sneering, he turned the gun on Spartacus. "Especially not the likes of him."

Spartacus eyed the man and remembered that Mrs. Sloane had called him "Carolina" at the swing station. And this fellow was still wearing the Gray, clean and starched as a dress uniform, though certainly too well-tailored to be regulation. Spartacus felt a phantom pain below the stump of his left elbow, the place where he'd had a forearm and hand before his visit to the hell called Cold Harbor.

Ben was ready to tussle. The other passenger, a well-dressed Mexican named Castro who had joined the coach at the swing station, seemed ready to take up the cause as well. But Spartacus just let it go. "C'mon, Ben," he said. "We'll do like the paying customers say."

Ben didn't like giving up. "Mouthy women... railroads... progress... I'm about ready to move south of the border, I swear to God."

The jehu and the express messenger wrapped themselves in canvas tarps, Ben stretching out up top next to the crate, Spartacus taking shelter under the coach. The storm deviled them through the night. It brought dreams of Cold Harbor to Jackson. He heard the screams of dying men in its whistling howls, and he pulled the canvas tighter, closer, until it rubbed at his face like sandpaper.

Then the wind was gone, and his dreams went with it. Hands were on him, shaking him, and he came quickly awake.

Castro bent over him, pity in his eyes. "The old driver... I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, señor. Your friend is dead."



Even with one arm, Spartacus Jackson could do most things just as well as men who had two. He could roll cigarettes without losing a bit of tobacco, and he had learned to light a lucifer on just about any surface. He could reload a shotgun faster than any other man he'd ever known, and he could aim and fire the weapon with a deadly accuracy that wasn't associated with a scatter-gun.

But there were some things he couldn't do, and Carolina wanted him to do one of those things now. "Go ahead and shoot me," Jackson said. "But you're wasting a bullet, because there's no way in hell that a one-armed man can dig a grave."

Jackson tossed the shovel at Carolina's feet. He stared at the crate that had held the remains of Mr. Howard Sloane of Washington, D.C. It lay broken on the ground. Odd planks had blown about in the storm, forming a boardwalk that led to nowhere.

There was no sign of Mr. Sloane's corpse.

Ben Rose lay near his beloved horses, his head lolled to one side at an impossible angle, held to his neck by a thin rope of flesh. A dead dog, bloated and crawling with maggots, was stretched across his chest. Between his legs lay another head, a false one made of rough material that looked like it should be attached to a giant doll. It had a wooden nose, seashell eyes, and a painted red grin.

And it wore a feather headdress.

Castro crossed himself and removed the doll head. He rolled the dead dog into the sand and straightened Ben's head as best he could.

Carolina turned to the well-dressed Mexican. "You seem to have a knack for this, señor. I guess you're elected. Either that, or we can leave grandpa here for the buzzards."

Castro eyed him for a long moment. He waited until Carolina blinked, and then, as if satisfied with the small victory, he took up the shovel and began to dig.

Jackson nodded thanks and moved off to tend the horses. Mrs. Sloane was waiting for him. "I'm sorry about your friend," she said, and Spartacus could see that the hard edge was gone from her blue eyes, replaced by an emotion that he imagined was not often found there.

Fear.

Just ain't any figuring it," he said. "Don't know how the crate got down there. Don't know what happened to your husband's corpse. Don't know who cut Ben's throat." He shook his head. "Either of those men leave the cab last night, Mrs. Sloane?"

"Both of them. I think they... uh... needed relief."

Jackson nodded. "You got any suspicions, ma'am?"

"Indians?" she offered, almost hopefully. "That strange head, with the feathers and all, it made me think."

"I don't know of any Indians in these parts who would make something like that, with seashell eyes and all." He studied her expression. "What I meant to ask is, do you have suspicions about Carolina or Señor Castro?"

"The Mexican, though cursed by his birthright, is a gentleman. The American is not."

Jackson nodded and turned his attention to the horses. Amelia Sloane was a tiny woman, but her eyes had once again turned hard when she'd spoken of the other passengers. Maybe the conversation had been a test, Jackson thought, her way of deciding if he'd been responsible for Ben's death and the disappearance of her husband's remains. If that was the case, her play at being fearful had been a way to get him to open up.

Jackson studied the scene. Castro had gone through a foot of earth, into dirt that was just as dry and chalky as the topsoil. Ben's corpse was stiff and going to purple. Someone, probably Castro, had weighted Ben's eyelids with two silver coins.

Jackson's gaze drifted over the flat landscape. There was no other corpse to be seen. He sniffed, drawing deep breaths. No other corpse to

be scented, either. Only the dead dog smelled, and that smell was very familiar. In fact, it was the same stink that he'd been suffering for days.

Fat flies buzzed around the dog. Suddenly, Jackson was very curious about Mrs. Amelia Sloane and her missing husband.

"You about done with the horses, boy?" Carolina asked. He was sitting on the driver's box. Jackson's shotgun was in his hands, and the strongbox was on the seat beside him.

Unlocked.

"Time to get to work." He grinned. "Sorry about your buddy. No reason for it really. He died for nothing. That thing she had in the box... Whatever it was, it sure didn't have gold teeth. Wasn't worth dyin' over."

Jackson said nothing, trying to figure it.

"You know what this is, boy. Except this is one time I don't have to tell anyone to throw down the box. That's 'cause I'm takin' the whole damn stage." Carolina cocked the shotgun. "Boy, you free those horses' legs and move off, real slow." He turned the gun on Castro, who had stopped digging. "Señor, you just get comfortable in that grave and think about the fit of it."

Reluctantly, the Mexican did as ordered. Spartacus freed the horses. Mrs. Sloane came around the side of the stagecoach. "You can't leave us here," she said. "Don't you have any Christian decency?"

"That's a laugh!" Carolina said. "Lady, did you butcher that dog yourself? And that thing in the box, all bound up like Christmas time, where'd you dig it up, anyhow?"

"I can get money." She pointed to the strongbox. "More money than that. Just tell me what you did with my... with my husband."

"Husband? That's rich. You must have been married to Methuselah." Carolina laughed. "As for what happened to that thing, you best ask these two, 'cause I left it in the box along with the other old sourpuss."

Amelia Sloane's hand rose, a derringer looming large in her tiny grasp. She fired, and Carolina let go with a shotgun blast. Mrs. Sloane lurched backward, her white petticoats ruffling, her yellow dress stained with blood and gore and her eyes flat and vacant. Jackson dove away just as Carolina

fired a second blast. Pellets missed him by inches, whizzing over his shoulder. A few caught Castro as he rose from the grave.

The Mexican fell back with a grunt. Carolina slapped the ribbons. The horses sprang forward, and so did Spartacus Jackson.

He was behind the stage in an instant. He got a grip, pulled himself onto the rear boot, and held tight.

“¡Cuidado! ¡Cuidado!”

Jackson glanced over his shoulder. Castro was chasing the coach, but he was too far away to catch up.

“Beware!” the Mexican shouted. “Beware!”



Jackson climbed on top of the stage, scrambling over the tarp that Ben had used as a bedroll during the storm. He rose on two feet, glancing down as he steadied himself.

Four brittle twigs extended from between the canvas folds.

Not twigs. Fingers. Hard and brown and —

Moving! They closed around his ankle, tight as a vise, and he nearly screamed. He fell backward and landed hard, kicking, trying to free his leg. Carolina turned, his silver Colt revolver in his very white hand. Jackson stared at the gun, then at the bony brown fingers that held him.

Then the thing rose between them, dry and dead and grinning.

Jackson caught Carolina's eye, just for an instant, and remembered the gunman's comment about a thing that was as old as Methuselah.

The grinning head swiveled on a scrawny neck. The thing's nose and eyes were gone, just empty holes, but its jagged teeth remained, along with lips that were as dry and black as dead worms: Swatches of dusky skin clung to its bones like cheap wallpaper hung by the devil himself, and Jackson prayed that the creature would fall apart if it moved again.

His prayers were not answered. The thing's bony fingers worked back and forth, sawing through his leather boot. Its mouth opened, papery lips shredding, and it reached out for Carolina, too.

The gunman's pistol thundered six times. Dust puffed from the thing's back and bullets screamed over Jackson's scalp.

Spartacus ducked low. Started to slide. Reached out with his one hand but only caught the canvas tarp. The wind wrapped it around him like a shroud.

He heard a dry popping sound as he fell against the rear boot. A broken bone. He was sure of it. Worry swam in his gut as he tumbled from the stage. He landed hard, rolling.

He rose and shook off the pain, steady on both feet.

Nothing was broken.

But that sound...

He looked down.

Clutching at his shredded boot, locked there, was the dead thing's left arm. Jackson shivered with revulsion. He couldn't look away. He couldn't even move.

Carolina's screams brought him around. Up ahead, the stage went over hard, sending up a cottony cloud of dust. Jackson kicked the dead arm loose and moved forward, unable to see much.

He heard horses whinnying. Some screamed in pain. But he didn't hear any human screams, and he didn't hear the report of a pistol.

The hazy cloud drifted toward him, slowly, clinging close to the earth as it advanced.

His shotgun was up there somewhere. Plenty of shells too, beneath the driver's box.

Unless the shells had been thrown clear. Unless his gun had been smashed beneath the wrecked stage.

Jackson stopped, eyeing the cloud.

Something rose in the middle of it.

The thing had suffered in the wreck. Dust spilled through its naked ribs and poured down its spine like sand rushing through some strange hourglass. Its face was skinned clean off; its naked jaws clacked as if it were trying to speak.

Jackson backed off, glancing over his shoulder. Castro was miles away. He couldn't even see the other man.

It's slow, he told himself, so damn slow. I can get around it. I can get to the stage, find a gun...

He remembered Carolina's bullets whizzing through the thing, not even hurting it, and he stopped cold. In his youth he'd fought Johnny Reb. In his prime he'd battled hard-cases of every stripe. But lately he'd only fought with barkeepers who refused to serve him. And a surly barkeep didn't hold a candle to a walking skeleton, that was for damn sure.

He turned to run, but saw the thing's arm lying there in the dirt, still papered with dry flesh. He bent low and snapped it into two sections, got out his makings, and filled the withered palm with dry tobacco and cigarette papers.

The dead thing was close now, its single arm outstretched, reaching for him.

"We're even now." Jackson grinned, staring at the place where the thing's other arm should have been. "Even."

He got a match, his fingers shaking. Bracing a bone beneath his foot, he struck lucifer against bone.

It flamed, and in a moment the hand was blazing.

He jammed it under the thing's ribs and prayed.



Jackson's shotgun was in fine shape.

Carolina wasn't. His neck was broken, twisted clean around so that his chest pointed toward heaven and his nose pointed toward hell.

Jackson didn't feel bad about it.

He did feel bad about shooting three injured horses, but that left three that were still fit and able. He transferred the contents of the strongbox into one of Mrs. Sloane's carpetbags, took a canteen from the driver's box, and started back toward Señor Castro. As he passed the dead thing, he emptied the shotgun into it, just to be sure.

The charred black bones flew apart like a cheap piñata.

Castro was tamping earth over Ben Rose's grave when Jackson dismounted. "You doing okay?" Jackson asked.

Castro nodded. There were a few red splotches on his right shoulder, but it appeared that he'd escaped the brunt of Carolina's shotgun blast. Jackson turned his gun on the Mexican, hoping to remind him of the damage it could do. "Right now I'm not too sure what just happened. I figure you might be able to help me out."

"I can try." Castro eyed the canteen, and Jackson tossed it. The Mexican drank. "I've been after Catherine Flint, our Mrs. Amelia Sloane, since she left Mexico City. My employers have a museum there. Señorita Flint stole something from us."

"That thing?"

"Yes. It was a *momia*, a mummy, from Peru. The remains of a very powerful man who died a long time ago. It had certain powers, powers so dangerous that we kept it hidden from those who might exploit it. That is what we do: we control evil, we battle it."

"Go on. I'm listening."

Castro smiled. "She was very ingenious, Señorita Flint. She gained the confidence of my superiors and managed to steal the *momia*. And the ruse she employed to escape — the bereaved widow traveling with her husband's remains — was one we hadn't expected. The dead dog was another brilliant stroke, adding, if you'll pardon the pun, a certain odor of authenticity. At any rate, it took me quite some time to catch up with her. I was looking for a way to take back the mummy when our troubles began.

"I don't know what she wanted," Castro continued. "Perhaps she recognized the thing's power, but I hope that is not the case. Perhaps she only wanted money. Many museums in your country are unconcerned about the sources that supply their antiquities, and they pay extravagant sums to those who plunder the riches of other lands." He pointed to the doll head. "And the *momia*, wrapped carefully many years ago and crowned with a false head, would have brought a pretty penny."

"Until Carolina decided to check it for gold teeth."

"I think that is what brought the creature back to life. But I may be wrong. There are many forces in the world which we do not understand."

Jackson lowered his shotgun. "Maybe the old boy just didn't appreciate being disturbed after all those years spent bundled up neat and tidy."

"That is a distinct possibility."

"Well, let's go," Jackson said.

"Where?"

"Tucson's closest. The stage company will be waiting for me. I've got their money and a bunch of dead passengers and a whole lot of explaining to do." He shook his head. "Damn. They'll never believe any of this."

"There will be many questions," Castro said. "They will not like your answers, amigo. This I can assure you."

Jackson knelt and pressed his hand against Ben's grave. He was quiet for a long moment, and then he said, "These folks you work for, you say they fight the good fight?"

"Yes. They most assuredly do."

"Are they hiring?"

Castro laughed. "Señor Jackson, I'm certain that a man of your talents can always be of use."

Spartacus Jackson patted the grave one last time, remembering Ben's words about moving south.

"I've always wanted to see Mexico," he said.

HEAVY BREATHING

BY MARY FRANCES ZAMBRENO

Kelsey Anders stopped in the entrance of her new Chicago apartment building, just for a moment to shake out her soaked umbrella and check her mail. She should have known better. It gave Harold Zoster, the building manager, time to pop out of his basement apartment and catch her.

"Miss Anders, I've been meaning to ask you about the tenant yard sale next month —"

"Hello, Harold," she said, giving him a brightly insincere smile. All the tenants called him by his first name. He was a small man in his mid-thirties, at least four inches shorter than she was, and he dressed perpetually in jeans, a Day-Glo T-shirt with an enamel pendant on a leather thong, and scruffy leather sandals. "Awful rain we've been having lately."

"What? Oh — yes. But the yard sale —"

Fortunately, her apartment was on the first floor; she could hear the phone start to ring.

"Sorry," she said thankfully. "There's the phone."

"But all those things of your aunt's!" he protested, his voice rising shrilly. "So much clutter. You won't want to keep all those little statues and things."

"Oh, I don't know," she said airily over one shoulder. "I like clutter."

She closed the door behind her firmly. *Weasel*. Zoster was one of the bad things about this apartment she had inherited from her aunt; he was so *intense*. Aunt Judy had evidently disliked him too, because almost the last thing she'd done before she'd died was to have special safety locks installed in her apartment. Two of the new locks were even of the burglar-proof variety, which had to be opened with keys from either side of the door, and Aunt Judy had kept all of the new keys to herself. The owners had had a fit, of course — a building manager is *supposed* to be able to get into every apartment — but Kelsey agreed with her aunt: if Harold wanted to come in, let him knock.

She picked up the phone. "Hello?"

Besides, if she wanted to get rid of her aunt's things, she'd call an antique dealer first.

"Hello? Who's there?"

At first she thought there was no one on the line; then she heard the harsh, rasping sound of someone breathing. *Oh, great. This I need*, she thought, pulling off her damp raincoat and tossing it over the back of one of her aunt's spindly French provincial chairs. *A real joker*.

"Look, if anyone's there, speak up or I hang up — now!"

A harsh guttural voice said, "He is watching you."

"What?" she said. "Who is watching?"

Click, said the phone. Disgusted, she dropped it back onto its cradle.

An obscene phone call — the perfect end to a rainy day. She knew she ought to do something about it, but what? The police or the phone company wouldn't be able to help, she knew, and Caller I.D. wasn't available in Illinois yet. She thought about getting a whistle to keep by the phone, or even an answering machine, but somehow she didn't get around to it right away. And then she forgot.



Three days later, at two o'clock in the morning, the phone shrilled. Kelsey stumbled into her aunt's crowded and knick-knack cluttered



living room to pick it up, swearing that she'd get a phone in her bedroom *tomorrow*.

"Hello?"

Heavy breathing. Memory came flooding back to her at the sound.

"Oh, damn."

She started to hang up, and the same slow, guttural voice said:

"He is watching you. The evil one."

"What?" Startled, she put the phone back to her ear. "Who is watching? What do you mean?"

"*You know,*" the voice said, cloudy with menace, and there was a *click* at the other end of the line.

That was all.



She told herself not to be a fool. It was just some pervert who got his jollies out of frightening women. Still, she couldn't help feeling twitchy. She started glancing back over her shoulder on the way to the bus in the morning and locking the three locks on her apartment door with extra care — especially the two safety locks. She'd initially disliked the security grating on all the windows of this first floor apartment, feeling trapped inside, but now she almost glad of it. She checked the windows frequently and left the blinds down as much as possible.

The girls at work agreed that it was a strange thing for an obscene phone caller to say. Who was watching? They talked about it for three lunch hours straight, so interested that she was sorry she'd ever mentioned the matter. Of course, she didn't know them all that well. She'd only had this job since she'd moved to Chicago and into her aunt's apartment. She'd liked Cleveland well enough, but Chicago was a bigger city with more opportunities. She'd been congratulating herself on a move well made — until now.

She was dusting her aunt's collection of china figurines the next Saturday morning when she heard steps in the hall outside her apartment. They stopped at her apartment door, and she froze. *Who's that? I'm not expecting company.*

I don't know anyone except the other tenants and the people at work.

Someone knocked, a reassuringly tentative sound.

"Miss Anders?" Zoster's reedy little voice said through the golden oak.

"Miss Anders, are you there?"

She left the chain on when she opened the door to talk to him, grateful that he couldn't get in unless she let him.

"Good morning, Harold," she said, keeping her expression neutral and unwelcoming. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no, Miss Anders." He blinked at her from behind thick glasses. His face was shiny with sweat, and she couldn't see his eyes. "I was just wondering what you wanted to contribute to the yard sale."

"Nothing," she snapped, suddenly annoyed at herself. "I've decided I like my apartment the way it is."

"It's for a good cause, you know," he said, as if he hadn't heard her. "We're supporting the neighborhood clean-up campaign. I'm sure your aunt would want to help."

"My aunt is dead," she said firmly. "And I've got work to do."

"If you'd like to trade instead of donate outright, I've got everybody else's contributions in the basement," he said, twitching slightly. "You could come down and look at them any time you wanted to."

"No!" She stopped, swallowed, and took a deep breath. "Look, I really don't feel well this morning. Please go away."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said sympathetically, but he smiled. His teeth were brown. "And here I've been disturbing you. Is it a headache? Because I've got a wonderful headache powder, much better than anything you could buy in the store, and all natural."

"Thank you, but I'll be all right," she said, edging the door closed.

"Well, if you change your mind about the yard sale, you know where to find me," he said, still smiling. "My apartment is just beneath yours."

That was an encouraging thought. When she closed the door, she almost didn't want to turn her back on it; she could still feel his glassy stare boring right through the wood.

He is watching you.



"Oh, don't be a fool," she said to herself sharply. "He's just a weasel with a crush on you. More's the pity."

She had to force herself to go back to her dusting, but after a while the repetitious exercise calmed her somewhat. Aunt Judy really had had a lot of china figurines. Maybe she ought to get rid of some of the collection, at that. Not at a yard sale though. She knew better than to think that the Dresden shepherdesses or the porcelain *commedia dell'arte* figures her aunt had kept on the mantelpiece would bring what they were worth at a yard sale. People would think they were copies, at best. She gave Scaramouche a little pat as she set him next to Harlequin, adjusting the pair so that they faced each other. And all the Lladro figurines, and the Hummels, and the fairy-tale characters from Royal Copenhagen — they were worth real money. Her aunt had had good taste, if just a little too much of it.

She'd been shrewd too. The *commedia dell'arte* figures were clearly antique, for example, but they were in beautiful condition for such fragile and delicate pieces. Pierrot had a slight chip in one ruffle, and Columbine's colors were beginning to fade a little — she'd have to move her somewhere out of the sun — but that was all the damage that Kelsey could see. She liked them better than the Dresden shepherdesses, anyway — Harlequin's fool's-cap even had little bells, and Punchinello's round, sly face winked at her mischievously from behind his elaborate mask.

The phone rang. Absorbed in her thoughts, she didn't hesitate to answer.

"Hello."

Heavy breathing.

"Oh, no!" This time she managed to hang up before the guttural voice had finished its message. Then she took the phone off the hook. But the sharp, rasping breaths seemed to echo through the apartment for hours.



For the rest of the day her mind went around in worried circles, considering. In the afternoon she went shopping as usual, and then in the

evening she took her laundry to the basement. She hadn't planned to spend Saturday night washing clothes, but she didn't have a date — one of the penalties of being new in town — so why not?

She timed the trip downstairs carefully. Zoster always went to bingo at the local Catholic church on Saturday night, and she wanted plenty of time to look around first. What she saw pretty much confirmed her suspicions: there were things in that basement that had no business being there. Only none of them had name-tags, so she had no real proof yet. And then, just as she was taking the second load out of the dryer, there was Harold.

Perfect, she thought, bending over her laundry basket. He's back right on schedule. Now what happens? His move, I guess.

He didn't seem pleased to see her.

"Miss Anders!" he stuttered. "What are you doing here?"

"Laundry," she said, turning to look him over as casually as she could. He was wearing a red satin shirt with the tail out; a brass pendant glittered in its folds. Her eyes narrowed. *Well, well, well. And here all the tenants think that all he ever does for fun is go virtuously over to Our Lady of the Lilies every Saturday—I don't think so. Not with that shirt.* "That's quite an outfit you've got there, Harold."

He flushed, looking down. "I was just — I came home to change."

"Um. Well, don't let me keep you." A small shiver went down her spine.

He dithered in the doorway. She ignored him, focusing on the clean towels. There was something else different about him too. She frowned, concentrating — the pendant. That was it. It wasn't the generic star-in-a-circle that he usually wore, it was a cross of some kind, maybe a crucifix. No, wait — the bar was too low for that...

She went suddenly still, a half-folded towel in her hands, seeing the cross in her mind's eye. Dropping all pretense, she whirled to look at it again and found Zoster's glittering eyes still fixed on her. Hypnotized, she looked at the cross. The crucifix. Upside-down.

He is watching you. The evil one.

So that was it, then. For sure. They stood like that, staring at each other, for a full minute. Then Kelsey took a deep breath.



"I've been looking around the basement," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. She was taller than Zoster, younger and probably stronger, and a confrontation was pretty much what she'd been expecting. "Interesting furnishings you've got down here. I particularly liked that black altar in the fruit cellar. Yours, I assume?"

His eyes bored into hers. "So. You know."

"Yes. I don't think it's at all funny. If the other tenants knew —"

"They won't find out," he said feverishly, almost incomprehensibly. "I won't let them. It's all your fault. You, coming here — not listening to me — it's all *wasted* —"

He took a step forward; she tensed, trying to sidle along the back wall. If she could get past him—he grappled with her, sweaty and smelling of cheap wine. Overhead, the single naked bulb of the laundry room swayed crazily.

What — what's happening? she thought muzzily. *It isn't supposed to happen this way.*

There was a ringing in her ears, and she felt dizzy, as if she'd had too much to drink. As if she were not Kelsey Anders, but someone else watching events from a great distance. One corner of her mind cursed hysterically: *Move, damn you! Do something!*

Then Zoster started to talk, and her blood went ice-cold.

"Baal Amen-hotep, Lord of the Dark," he droned. "Sathanas, ante me — before me, be with me — come to my Call, for my will feeds Thy strength..."

The words were heavy, filled with meaning. They pressed on her mind like Zoster pressed on her body, warm and damp and slimy. Revolted, she gasped, "I — will — not!"

Then she hit him with the Mace that she had in her pocket.

He stumbled backward, clawing at his eyes. Kelsey kicked him once and then once again, before she went to phone the police. She had felt like a fool when she'd bought the Mace, but it had paid off.

Imagine being threatened by this pathetic creature. This pathetic, insane creature.

Inside, she was still trembling.



She got Mr. and Mrs. Lopez from Apartment 2-B to help watch him while she went to call the police. Mr. Lopez was a garbage man—sanitation engineer—for the city. He was short and stocky, but even his muscles had muscles. Mrs. Lopez was by turns appalled and deliciously shocked. When the police arrived, Zoster lost it completely. He sat gibbering in one corner, his arms over his head, until they finally took him away on a stretcher.

“You mean he was raising demons?” the cop taking Kelsey’s statement said to one who had been searching Zoster’s apartment. “Again? That’s the third one this month! Why do they all want to raise demons?”

“Who knows?” The second cop was black. He grinned, white teeth in a dark face. They were enjoying themselves. She just wished she was half as happy about the situation. “Maybe to vote in the next election. This *is* Chicago. Jack, you should see the stuff he’s got in there—robes, silver knives, weird books, the works. Even a dead goat. Stuffed, I mean.”

“I’ll be damned,” Jack said, marveling. He was young, with thick sandy hair. *Not bad*, Kelsey noted, but numbly. She wasn’t really up to feeling things yet.

“You don’t think he really *did* it, do you?” she asked. “Raised demons?”

The black cop snorted. “Him? That loon couldn’t raise a bedbug. Anyway, if there was a demon down here, I think we’d have noticed it by now. He’s nuts, pure and simple—just like they always are.”

Remembering Zoster’s glittering eyes and the weakness that had assailed her, Kelsey wasn’t so sure. If she hadn’t been warned...

The police were pretty sure that it had been one of Zoster’s friends who had called her—maybe a member of his Satanist group, feeling guilty. Zoster must have talked about her plenty, and he almost certainly had friends to go with all those spare robes. They advised her to watch herself for a while, in case any of the friends were as loopy as he was.



"Or it could have been Zoster himself who called," Jack opined wisely. "Some of these guys really want to be caught. Anyway, you should be all right now. Uh, lived in Chicago long, Miss — Ms. Anders?"

He had a sort of interested look in his eyes. *This might turn into something after all*, she realized. *If I play it right, maybe he'll call me later.*

"Two months," she admitted. "I'm from Cleveland originally. I only moved to Chicago when my aunt died and left me everything. She used to live in my apartment."

"How did she die?" he asked, sharply curious.

"A heart attack," Kelsey said. She hesitated. "I suppose, if she saw something — unpleasant, she might have been frightened to death."

His curiosity faded. "Could be, I guess, but we'll probably never find out," he said, snapping the rubber band around his notebook and looking vaguely disappointed. "Not from Zoster. He is out of it, but good."

Kelsey couldn't bring herself to care.

The cop walked her to her apartment and waited while she checked it. He left whistling, with her phone number in his pocket. She clicked home the two safety locks and put the keys on the mantelpiece with a sense of relief. Home at last. Safe.

The phone rang; she snatched at it.

"Hello?"

Heavy breathing.

"Look, I don't know who you are, but you can stop calling. It's over. The police just took him away in a straitjacket. I'm grateful, but I don't need—"

She paused. More heavy breathing. Then the slow, guttural voice:

"He is watching you. *Now.*"

"He is *not!*" she screamed, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. "Why won't you leave me alone?"

She banged the phone into its cradle and sank into a chair with her head between her knees. *Deep breaths, Kelsey. No sense getting light-headed now. It's all over.*

Then she looked up — straight into the eyes of the Punchinello figure sitting on the mantelpiece. Next to her keys.

The glowing eyes.

The figure opened its mouth and gave a mewling little cry; a pointed red tongue flicked out over painted lips. Its head turned and tilted slightly.

Watching her.

"Damn you, Harold," she whispered sickly, realizing desperately that this time she was really trapped, locked into a demon-haunted apartment. "Couldn't you do *anything* right?"

Grinning all over his china face, Punchinello took one dainty step toward her and licked his lips again. He didn't look fragile now; he looked hungry. Around him, the other figures stirred.

LITTLE EVILS

BY DON D'AMMASSA

The note Kristi had found inexplicably present among the papers in her safety deposit box was now folded into a small square at the bottom of her purse. The implications were frightening even if the whole thing was a hoax. Whoever was responsible knew entirely too much about her private life; the documents into which it had been inserted included the meticulously detailed and forbidden notes she'd been keeping, theoretically in anticipation of eventually writing her memoirs as a top agent of the CIA. They were also a form of protection; some of the missions she had performed had been morally questionable at the very least. She had overcome her qualms by comparing the admittedly distasteful directives to the assumed greater benefits to which they led. However, she had no doubt that, if compromised, her superiors would throw her to the wolves.

How had the note been placed in a box she had rented under an assumed name? Kristi had taken great pains to be certain that not even the Agency knew of its existence. The single sheet of paper hadn't been there a week ago, and the key had been in her possession ever since. What's more, it urged her to take action this very evening, and there was no possible way that anyone could have known she would have visited the bank this particular afternoon; she hadn't even decided herself until mid-morning.

It was a very brief note, an address in nearby Taunton, Massachusetts written in bold, block letters, followed by a neatly typed paragraph:

It is imperative that you visit this location tonight,
June 5th, after the fall of darkness. The authorities
are not equipped to deal with the situation. Every large
evil consists of many little ones.

It would be very foolish to walk into a probable trap, but the unstated risk of exposure was unnerving.

Arriving at the small, nondescript split level where she lived just outside Providence, Kristi parked in the driveway and entered, moving directly to the closet that masked the entrance to her equipment room. Sliding the rear wall aside, she entered the narrow space lined with racked weapons, infrared goggles, a starlight scope, plastique and other incendiary devices, and other items she either owned or had borrowed from the Agency.

She never once seriously considered ignoring the note's admonition; aside from the implied threat, the author or authors had aroused her curiosity. Just past her twenty-seventh birthday, Kristi hadn't been nicknamed "The Shadow" by her fellow agents by accident; a resourceful and aggressive operator, she disagreed with some of the tactics of her employers, but had never let such qualms interfere with her performance. Thoughtfully, she selected a few items, carried them into the bedroom, sat down on the bed and addressed the picture of a middle-aged man that was mounted on the near wall.

"Well, Dad, I'm in another mess, I guess." Her father had committed suicide when Kristi was sixteen, deeply depressed after having been maneuvered off the board of trustees of the firm he had founded twenty years earlier. He had raised her from infancy. Her mother had died during what should have been routine surgery six months after Kristi's birth; the surgeon had been under the influence of a narcotic at the time. Although banned from medical practice, he was still alive, and Kristi

kept tabs on his whereabouts, along with the remaining members of the board of her late father's company. She had been clandestinely harassing them with spurious letters, small acts of sabotage, and practical jokes for almost ten years. It was a petty form of revenge, but better than nothing.

"I don't suppose you have any advice for your wayward daughter? She lay back, stretching her arms above her head, willing the tension to abandon its grip on her muscles. "No, I don't suppose you can help me on this one."

She often spoke to her absent father, particularly with regard to those aspects of her life about which she remained uneasy. Arthur Scott had been an unusual man, a successful entrepreneur who built a healthy business in a highly competitive market without ever finding it necessary to sacrifice the welfare of his employees to the imperatives of commerce. "It's the little things that count," he'd told her on more than one occasion. "Treat people fairly. Show some interest in them as people. Be honest about problems. Sooner or later, it's the people who work for you who decide whether you're a success or a failure. Whoever's on top might make the big, showy decisions, but it's the accumulation of countless smaller choices that makes a company. Or breaks it."

Her father had chosen his employees well, but his business partners poorly. It had taken them less than a year to freeze him out of his own company.

"Sometimes you have to be ruthless to survive, Dad. Maybe if you'd been a little less trusting, you'd still be alive."

He didn't answer, of course, but a stray breeze stirred a nearby curtain, and the fluttering shadow gave the illusion that Arthur Scott was shaking his head.

It was still daylight when she passed the sprawling building complex the first time. The address was that of Crook Inc., a giftware manufacturer whose doors had closed by way of bankruptcy two years earlier. Most of the buildings were elderly, brick faced, an old mill complex more or less converted to house a successor industry which had also passed away, victim of the failing economy of the Northeast. The buildings were interconnected by smaller, more recent additions, some of them

obviously prefab metal shells. The entire facility was enclosed by a six foot hurricane fence that stretched back to a heavily wooded strip along the banks of the Taunton River. On either side and in the lot opposite, similar empty buildings loomed like dying mammoths, some still displaying posted seizure notices. The parking lot was empty, with no indication of a guard. She slowed her car slightly as she passed but refrained from stopping.

Kristi ate a leisurely supper in town, drove past the complex three more times over a period of two hours. At dusk, a single floodlight illuminated a portion of the main parking lot; scattered lights went on within the nearest building as well, probably on a timed circuit. There had been no detectible human activity, only windblown leaves and trash whispering across the parking lot.

She parked on a side street over a mile away, walked down to the river, followed it cautiously back through the trees. The starlight scope made it somewhat easier to pick a path through the heavy growth. The swift flowing water masked any slight sound she might have made. At no time did she see or hear anything indicating she was expected, not even when she climbed a tree and dropped to the ground inside the fence.

Soundlessly, she scaled the side of a small outbuilding, then clambered from window to window until she reached the framework of a massive blower system. A minute later, four stories above the ground, Kristi walked cautiously across the roof of one of the larger buildings, using a flashlight to examine the windows of another, taller structure abutting this roof. As she had expected, several of them were broken. On her second attempt, she found one where she could reach inside and release the lock.

This entire level appeared to be empty, perhaps originally warehouse space; there wasn't even a security light. She moved carefully in her soft soled shoes, playing the circle of brilliance on the floor ahead so that she wouldn't alert anyone to her presence by treading unwarily.

The stairway door was closed but not locked.

"Well, if you're going to do it, now's the time," she whispered to herself, then quietly, but determinedly, opened the door.

An hour later, Kristi wondered if the entire affair hadn't been a practical joke of some kind after all.

She had wandered through room after room, offices, corridors, one very large and several smaller storage areas, a shipping and receiving room lined with docking bays, several manufacturing departments, silver and gold plating, small assembly, polishing, inspection stations, a sample room. Her exploration was efficient and professional; she shielded her own light at all times, walked so that she would not display an unnecessary silhouette or shadow when near a security light. Several times she was startled by sudden noises, but each appeared to be random sounds from the corpse of a once thriving business. Despite her growing conviction that nothing was going to happen, she maintained her concentration as she moved from building to building.

That's why she noticed the smell so quickly.

She had just entered a series of interlocking open spaces, all occupied by oversized mechanical presses, double and single action, massive pieces of equipment that now stood silent and powerless. A kerosene fueled smelting furnace stood in one corner, flanked by two fifty gallon drums. The moment she entered the area, Kristi picked up a slightly sweet scent, and as she progressed deeper into the gloom, it grew stronger, more sickly, with a hint of a second, more acrid fragrance in the background.

Then she discovered the mound.

There was no other word to describe it. In a remote corner of the press area, the concrete floor seemed to have been forced up from below, a circle five meters in diameter, tapering to an opening approximately one meter across at its apex. As she cautiously approached, Kristi crouched, played the flashlight over the side of the conical structure. At its base, the concrete was splintered and cracked, as though rent by an intrusive force. But higher, the concrete floor seemed to have been shattered and reshaped, the surface rough but still fairly even. Its texture felt wrong.

It reminded her of an anthill.

Slowly she made her way around the periphery, puzzled, wary, but not particularly alarmed. The close attention she was paying to the

mound itself was the reason she almost stumbled over the first of the bodies.

“Shit!” Her anger was at her own inattention, not the discovery of an obviously dead man lying at her feet. In her line of work, such a lapse could result in serious if not fatal consequences. Kristi had seen dead bodies before; on a few occasions, she had caused them to die. In some cases, she even felt that they deserved their fate. In the others, she deferred to the wishes of her superiors.

The expression on the corpse’s face was calm, eyes closed, arms and legs spread to the side in near symmetry. There was no sign of trauma to the head or limbs, but when she played her light down the torso, she almost lost her composure.

The body had been gutted from just above the crotch to the sternum, the ribs and all internal organs removed. The surface of the spinal column was clearly visible, nested in a swathe of muscle tissue. Crouching, she realized this was the source of the sweet smell. There was no indication of decay. What remained of the flesh was still flexible, although it felt unnaturally dry and warm to her probing fingertip; it was as if someone had sprayed the remains with a preservative.

There didn’t seem to be any blood.

When she pointed her light into the shadows beyond, she saw a second body, then a third. Stepping carefully over the first corpse, she made her way completely around the mound, counting seven before stopping. There were four men and three women, ranging from one teenaged girl to the oldest, the middle aged man over whom she had stumbled. All of the bodies were laid out in the same fashion, each had been eviscerated and emptied. Adrenaline poured through her body but despite its stimulation, she was unwilling to explore the shadows beyond.

“All right, Kristi, you have a serial killer here,” she told herself silently. “A pretty strange one, admittedly, but nothing you shouldn’t be able to handle. All you have to do is leave and make an anonymous call to the police.” But that didn’t explain the mysterious note and its assertion that the authorities were powerless here. Could the killer have written it, and

for what purpose? She crouched, reached into the pocket of her slacks, pulled out the folded piece of paper, determined to read it again, perhaps find something she had overlooked the first time.

The text was exactly the same as before, except that new words had appeared at the bottom of the note.

It's not as simple as you think. The police cannot help.

There was no technical problem treating paper so that a message appeared after the passage of time; the mechanism of the change didn't trouble her. But how could anyone have, once again, anticipated her thoughts?

Something moved inside the mound.

Kristi set aside her puzzlement and speculation swiftly in response, slipping the paper back into her pocket. It was a tentative sound, like the sussuration of cloth rubbing stone; it persisted for several seconds then stopped. Kristi drew her weapon and began to edge around the circumference, head cocked to detect any recurrence however faint. The apex was slightly more than two meters high and the sides were too steep to climb without making enough noise to alert whoever was concealed within.

She was still trying to decide whether to scale the cone when one of the bodies stood up.

At least, that's what appeared to have happened, although when the man stepped out into the light, she could not recognize him from his profile as one of those she had examined. His chest rose and fell as he moved with a perfectly natural gait, apparently unaware of her presence. She waited until he had made his way past the mound and out of the immediate area before following.

He left through a side entrance into the main parking lot, first placing a piece of wood to keep the door from closing and locking. Kristi followed, her weapon still drawn and ready. Her first inclination had been to call out, apprehend the man and turn him over to the local police, but there was still something wrong with this entire situation and she

wanted more information before committing herself to such a definite course of action.

She shadowed him as he made his way through a gap in the fence where it met the river, across an adjacent lot, then down the sidewalk, past the darkened hulks of buildings, finally turning to cross over a small bridge into the outskirts of the commercial district. He never looked back.

Over the course of the next two hours, Kristi found herself witnessing a series of petty vandalisms and cruelties that seemed an absurd contrast to the horrifyingly mutilated bodies she had discovered earlier. Her quarry trampled gardens, snapped aerials off parked cars and used the broken ends to gouge the paint in long lines from bumper to bumper. He swore viciously at two young girls who walked past, smashed a discarded bottle against the side of a store, and overturned several trash cans onto the sidewalk.

Although there were few people walking the streets at this hour, there was rarely a time when he was not within sight of others, but whether because they failed to see what he was doing or just didn't wish to become involved, no one intervened or even made a comment. Not even when he opened his pants and urinated on the illuminated sign on the front lawn of the Methodist Church. Kristi felt mild outrage at the small cowardices that led to such universal apathy, but then it occurred to her that she was not entirely free of that taint herself and was momentarily startled by this surge of atypical self criticism.

She followed carefully, fascinated, convinced this was the same man who had killed and mutilated at least seven people, now directing his attention to annoying but comparatively trivial acts of vandalism. It would have been quite easy for her to abandon the pursuit, walk back to her car, pretend she'd never seen anything, and let the authorities deal with the situation. Certainly procedure required that she do nothing to draw attention to herself, even if the consequences of such inaction were, as in this case, unfortunate.

Then a short, bearded man in a tattered coat lurched out of a doorway on a deserted side street.

"Mister, you gotta quarter for some coffee?"

Without a sound or a moment's hesitation, the taller man attacked, both hands leaping directly to the beggar's throat. His cry was cut off so quickly, it took a second or two for Kristi to realize what was happening. Then her reflexes took over.

She closed the gap with a few quick, running steps, raising her weapon at the same time.

"All right, let him go! Raise your hands above your head and step away or I'll fire!"

The struggle continued exactly as before. The beggar was flailing ineffectively at his attacker's face, pressed back into the doorway.

"Let go, I said!" She lifted her arm, aimed at the back of the man's head.

When she was ignored a second time, Kristi stepped forward, deciding at the last moment not to fire. Summary execution had always bothered her and besides, there were still a lot of questions to which she wanted answers.

The butt of her weapon smashed heavily against the back of the man's head, a blow that should have completely immobilized him. Indeed, he did freeze for a moment, half turning in her direction, before moving his arms convulsively. The beggar's head snapped to one side with a crack and he ceased struggling, crumpled limply as his assailant turned away.

In the wan moonlight, he seemed to have a perfectly normal face; his expression remained calm, almost abstracted, despite the fact that he had just killed a man.

"Raise your hands!" Kristi was startled to hear a tremor in her voice. She'd been in danger of her life many times in the past, but this was the first instance in which she felt the tentative touch of panic. There was something distinctly wrong here, something she couldn't quite define.

She had expected him to speak, to shout obscenities or make excuses or even break down into tears. Experience told her to watch for the tensing muscles that indicated an imminent attack, and she was almost taken completely by surprise when he moved with no apparent preparation.

The expression on his face when she shot the killer through the left shoulder was almost comical, a blend of surprise, confusion, and outrage. Kristi expected him to capitulate now, perhaps even faint with shock.

Instead he recovered and lunged forward with preternatural swiftness, swinging with his uninjured arm. She took an instinctive step back and her foot turned on something lying unseen on the sidewalk. As she fell, Kristi threw herself desperately into a roll, sprang back to her feet with her weapon ready.

He was gone.

She spotted him within seconds, running back the way they had come moments earlier. The streets were, if anything, more deserted than they had been only moments ago; she hadn't even heard a vehicle pass during the entire encounter. With a disgusted sound of self-contempt, Kristi set off in pursuit.

He led her through alleys and along railroad tracks, through vacant lots and well-tended backyards, sometimes losing ground but always staying far enough ahead that she would not risk another shot. It was quickly obvious where he was headed; the commercial and residential neighborhood gave way once more to the long stretch of empty warehouses, closed factories, and failed businesses lining the near bank of the river.

Abruptly she remembered the propped open door; if he got there before her, he could lock her out long enough to do whatever he intended, crawl back inside the mound perhaps. Ignoring burning lungs and protesting muscles in her thighs, she stepped up the pace.

Although she closed the gap appreciably, she was unable to overtake him before he reached the factory entrance.

He pushed through the door and turned, one hand reaching to slam the door in her face. Only a few meters separated them and by instinct more than design, she fired twice, two sharp cracks in the night air. At least one of the rounds struck; his upper body jerked backward as his knees buckled, dropping him to the floor. The door was caught against one leg, unable to close.

Kristi hit the door with her shoulder, almost losing her own balance in the process. "Now...you bastard..." Before she could recover, he twisted away, jumped to his feet, and ran off into the darkness.

"Damn it!" Exhausted, she was slow to react, then fired twice before he rounded a corner and disappeared from sight. Kristi drew a deep breath and followed.

He was scrambling up the side of the mound, one leg dragging limply, hampering his progress.

"This is the last time I'm going to warn you," she called out calmly. "Climb down right now and lie on the floor or you're a dead man."

He ignored her completely, reached the opening at the top, rose to his full height. Kristi suddenly realized he was going to jump down inside unless she stopped him. Smoothly and without hesitation, she raised her arm and shot him through the side of the head. He posed motionless for a second, then fell away from the opening, landing with a dull thud somewhere out of her line of sight.

Kristi changed magazines before approaching the body.

He lay on his back, eyes still open, limbs outstretched in the same fashion as his apparent victims, one entire side of his head obliterated. There was no chance that he might have survived the wound.

Which is why Kristi was so surprised to see that his chest was still moving.

Except that it wasn't really his chest, it was lower, and irregular, not at all like breathing. The dim light concealed details and she retrieved her flashlight from its place on her belt.

As she watched, the dead man's shirt peeled back of its own volition, revealing his chest and abdomen. An exit wound just under the heart showed where one of her shots had passed completely through his body.

"What the hell?" Unease became alarm as the flesh of the torso suddenly split and opened, revealing what lay concealed within.

Something living moved inside the hollowed out cavity of the man's body, but nothing she had ever seen before. Shocked into immobility, Kristi watched uncomprehendingly as long, sinuous, bluish white tubes were retracted from within the arms and legs, curling up against a spindly, featureless body. A fifth tendril ran up behind the sternum, apparently into the throat, and now it was withdrawn as well, a broader variation, fringed with constantly moving cilia.

It looked like an oversized, attenuated starfish.

With a convulsive movement, the creature flexed all of its limbs and extended them, then scrambled out of its housing with a spiderlike motion, quite obviously heading for the cone. Kristi's free hand flashed out, caught one of the lesser appendages, gripped it tightly despite its intensely cold and unpleasantly moist nature. Twisting her body for leverage, she lifted it from the floor and threw it off into the darkness, unwilling to maintain contact, but determined that it should not reach whatever sanctuary it sought.

As she raised the flashlight to locate the creature, there was a rustle in the darkness and another of the bodies became animated and sat up, this time a teenaged girl. The eyes were open and alert.

"You have to let me go." The girl's voice lacked inflection but was entirely human. The cavity was closing over the alien form even as it manipulated its puppet's vocal chords.

"The hell I do." She fired twice, once through the forehead, the second time striking the falling torso at the point where she believed the intruder's central mass resided. The girl, or her body anyway, collapsed soundlessly.

This time there was no indication that life still persisted within the motionless body. Kristi watched carefully before crouching to move the blouse aside. The two flaps of flesh had almost joined, but through an inch wide gap, she could see a line of pale blue. Suppressing her revulsion, she used the barrel of her weapon to widen the seam, gradually working each flap of flesh aside, revealing the gutted interior.

There was a charred hole where her round had penetrated the starfish creature at the thickest part of its body. There was no blood, but neither was there movement.

"Sorry friend, but I couldn't let you get away. I don't know if anyone's going to believe this no matter what the evidence, but at least this way there's a chance."

She was actually contemplating removing the intruder from the girl's body when its skin began to stretch, small points of movement as though something were probing from beneath.

Or more precisely, from within.

Kristi drew her hand back just as the first tiny claws emerged, retreating even further as a dozen or more diminutive creatures erupted from the ruined body of their host, then climbed out of the girl's abdomen slowly and with great effort. They were all identical, oversized centipedes with two sets of claws, except that their antennae — if that's what they were — were numerous, distributed evenly over the surface of their bodies.

Stunned, she remained motionless as each made its laborious way out of the corpse, across the floor, then up the side of the mound to the lip of the central hole. There were small clicking noises as they moved, sounds which continued in more muted fashion even after they had dropped out of sight. The only reason she was able to react in time to stop the very last one was that part of its body had been crushed by the bullet she had fired into its host (or into its host's host). It left a trail of slime as it struggled to drag its crippled body over the rough surface.

Rousing herself, Kristi stood, took three quick steps, then raised her right leg and smashed the last of the centipedes with the heel of her shoe.

From its mangled body, a score or more tiny serpentine forms emerged, each squirming frantically. They almost might have been earthworms except for the fact that their bodies were apparently covered with fur.

She retreated hastily this time, unwilling to experiment further, making no effort to interfere as the dozen or two new forms inched their way up the side of the cone. She didn't want to see what might emerge if one of them died.

It only took her a few minutes to make a decision. Her career had taught her to take the initiative whenever it seemed warranted by events. With considerable effort, she rolled one of the drums of kerosene over to the mound and used the handpump to spray most of its contents into the subterranean darkness. She hesitated only briefly before spraying the remainder over the mutilated bodies; under the circumstances, it was probably best if friends and relatives never did learn what had happened to these people. Besides, she really had no alternative.

She ignited the dome first and only turned back to the bodies after several dozen of the wormlike creatures emerged, their bodies engulfed

in flame, reduced to ashes within seconds. Nothing emerged like a phoenix from this fire.

When she started the second fire, it spread even more quickly than she had expected. The beams and floorboards were so infused with oil and resins, they served as gigantic wicks. She left hastily through the main door, and was gratified to see that the entire complex would be in jeopardy within seconds.

When the sirens started in the distance, she walked to her car and drove home.



Early the next day, she retrieved the confidential records from her safety deposit box, made several photocopies of the complete set, and forwarded them to certain members of Congress and the Press Corps. She also mailed a written resignation to her current bureau chief, although she knew leaving the service would not be nearly that simple. Nothing in her life was likely to be simple for some time to come.

Nevertheless, as she sat on her bed, she felt more at ease with herself, and more resolute about the future, than she had for some time. The mysterious note lay near her hand, with a final sentence appended.

There are more of them. We'll be in touch.

"I guess my life's heading in a new direction, Dad," she confessed. "There was a time when that might have frightened me. I've lost faith in a lot of things I used to believe, and I'm not even as confident of my own abilities as I used to be. But I do know one thing. I'm not as afraid of the big evils of the world any more, the ones we can't individually do anything about. Because when you come right down to it, they're each an accumulation of little evils. Maybe the big victories are made up of lots of little ones too. I think I can help there."

Her father, of course, said nothing, but Kristi felt certain he understood.

WHOSE HUNGRY MOUTH

BY F.A. McMAHAN

A lone. So alone. Not alive, not living. Just lonely and miserable and—
The phone rang, waking Molly from her dream. Another ring, and she lay on her back, staring into the darkness. On the third ring, she stretched out her arm and groped for the receiver, lifted it to her ear, said "Hello."

There was only a dial tone.

She listened a moment before hanging up gently, making only a quiet tap as she set the receiver back on the cradle.

The bedroom was black and still and cold. A faint scratching as a tree limb brushed against the side of the house. The wind sighed, and Molly got out of bed to turn on the heat. It was so cold that she first opened the door to the closet and pushed blouses and pants and skirts to one side, feeling for her housecoat, the one she wore in the winter. Her fingers brushed against rough wool, and she knew immediately that it was Roger's old shirt, the shirt he called his smoking jacket, the one piece of clothing that Molly could not bear to part with after her husband died. Three years, and it still hung in the back of her closet.

She found her housecoat and pulled it on, shivering. So cold that the heat came on at fifty degrees. In the middle of May.

Fully awake now, Molly stepped into her slippers and crept out into the hallway, tiptoeing down the stairs to the kitchen. Near the bottom was a particularly cold place, a cloud of frosty air that seemed to hang a few feet from the floor. She considered adjusting the thermostats in all the rooms but decided against it, thinking that surely a cold snap like this was rare for May and would be gone by morning.

Molly half filled a pot with water and set it on a burner to heat. The kitchen window faced the corner, and she looked out at the street lamp and the swaying tree and the brownstone across from and identical to hers.

Contrary to what she would have thought, it was the odd things she remembered best, the little things that seemed so unimportant at the time. Roger kneeling on the grass, pulling weeds from the edges of the sidewalk. Roger always dropping his socks on the floor instead of putting them in the dirty clothes basket. Roger going out to warm up the car on cold mornings while Molly checked to make sure that the coffee pot was unplugged, switched off the lights, locked the door. She had loved the cold days best, the winters together. The cold nights. Like tonight.

The water was boiling, and Molly spooned out some instant decaffeinated coffee and creamer into a mug, then filled it with the water.

On the way home from work today it had been hot and humid. The weatherman had predicted more of the same for the rest of the week, the rest of the month. Roger had moved them here because he had liked the heat so much, heat nine months out of the year. Yet now it was a little after three o'clock in the morning in the middle of spring, and Molly was sitting in her kitchen freezing, her hands wrapped around her mug to warm them. It was a welcome change.

So much of her life had become routine, day after day of the same things, predictable, boring — numbing. She had wanted that at first, after Roger's death, wanted the distraction of a completely planned, scheduled life. But it had finally grown old, and for the first time, Molly realized how tired she was of it all. Tired of the dependability, the consistency, tired of just passing time, tired of trying to put distance between death and herself.

She missed the unexpected. The arguments, the battles over meaningless things. The surprises, the laughter. There was no one to talk to, to turn to. No one to disagree with. No one to disturb her sleep. No one to hurt and help and love and hate. No variation to her life. After only five years of marriage, she had been left alone. Soon the time since Roger's death would be longer than all the time they had been together.

But dwelling on her life only made it worse.

The day's mail was still stacked neatly on the table where she had laid it this afternoon. The magazines and advertisements and most of the junk mail addressed to Roger had finally stopped coming, but every now and then a letter would have his name on it, and Molly would shove the envelope in a drawer without opening it.

It had been a week since she had cleaned out her post office box, and she shuffled through the stack cautiously. Bills, a sweepstakes entry, a letter from her sister, and a few other things all addressed to Molly. She picked out the interesting pieces and, leaving her half finished coffee, turned out the light and headed back to bed to read her mail.

As she was rounding the corner to the stairs, just as her hand touched the railing, she sensed someone behind her in the darkness. Turning, Molly felt the warm, solid flesh of a body standing next to her.

Even as her heart skipped a beat, Molly's fingers found the switch and the light proved what good sense had already told her was true: she was alone, by herself, completely alone.

Smiling at the fright, she put a hand to her heart, feeling it slow down, returning to normal, and she continued on up the stairs.

Once in bed, Molly settled back against the pillows and read her sister's letter, then got to the rest of the mail, piece by piece.

A postcard that she had not seen before fell out of a folded grocery store advertisement. On the front of the card, a geisha in red with a yellow parasol stood on a bamboo bridge overlooking a silver stream that sparkled in the sun as it wound and twisted through trees and disappeared into the darkness of a forest.

Turning the card over, she read the message on the back. It said only, "Beware."

There was no return address or name of the person who had sent the card, but the postmark was local and dated yesterday.

Molly held the card closer to the light and studied it, but there was nothing she had not already noticed, no obscure identifying marks or faintly scribbled names. She considered the postcard a minute longer, then put it in the pile with the rest of the unimportant mail.

After a while, she began to feel drowsy and turned off the lamp to snuggle down under the covers. The heat in her room was still running, yet the air seemed colder than ever. Pulling the blanket up under her chin, she closed her eyes and soon fell asleep.

A sharp rap sounded from downstairs, and Molly awoke with a start. Two more raps, and she realized that someone was knocking at her front door. But the clock radio glowed 5:15; it was still dark out, and she had no intention of going down to see who it was.

One more knock, and then someone called her name.

Molly sat up in bed, holding her breath, listening carefully to be sure that she had not imagined the voice.

And it came again, the voice of a child, high and melodic, whispering her name, singing softly, like the wind in the trees.

She was paralyzed, too frightened to move, too terrified even to turn on the light.

The child called a third time, and Molly slid back under the sheets, pressing her head between the pillows to muffle the sound.

"Beware," the card had said, and she closed her eyes tight.

A gust of cold air came in through her open bedroom door, and Molly knew that it had not come from outside. All the windows were closed because yesterday it had been hot enough for the air conditioner.

She did not move but stayed in bed, beneath the protection of the covers, keeping quiet and measuring her breathing.

There were no more sounds, and after a while, she grew sleepy once more, forgetting her fear as her mind turned to other things.

Thinking of Roger. She always thought of Roger in the middle of the night. Missing him. Missing all the good reasons to live. Her life still had a purpose, certainly; it had meaning and fulfillment. But without someone to share it, life seemed so empty.

Not really living at all.

Someone called her name again, but this time it was no child. A hand touched her arm, a hand that was warm and soft. But opening her eyes, Molly could see no one silhouetted against the faint light of day that was now a dim glow through the window. Fear rose in her chest as she stared, straining to see the thing that was touching her. It was no ghost, no spirit. She felt flesh and bone and the heat of blood. Neither was it Roger or even the memory of him, as she had imagined so many times before in the past three years. This thing, this being was unfamiliar, unknown.

It spoke her name once more, and the voice was soft as down, warm as summer.

Terror burned her stomach, threatened to strangle her, as she lifted her arm and gently ran a finger across the hand that was touching her. It did not end at the wrist but continued up into an arm, then a shoulder, then—

She thought of the post card. "Beware," it had said. Beware. Be wary. Be watchful. Take note.

Her whole life had become routine. Consistent. There was no variation to it. No changes made. No chances taken. Stagnant. She was wasting away.

The postcard had clearly been a warning, of danger, of death, of evil, of risk.

The danger was speaking her name, and she slid her hand down to rest upon the hand that was touching her.

And she whispered, "Yes."

The mouth formed first, full, pink lips, a tender blossom encircling perfect, tiny teeth, like polished seeds that gleamed in the light of dawn. Then came the eyes, green as new leaves with all the shadows of the night and of storms swirling in them. Flesh brown as earth covered the face, almost translucent, smooth and lustrous, like amber. And the

hair flowed with what seemed to be a life of its own, red and orange and yellow and all the colors of fall, flaming and twisting and blazing.

Molly forgot her fear, forgot everything as the face came closer, eyelashes wet with dew and breath like the sweet air of spring mornings. The body eased forth, pressing her down into the bed with its weight, and the odor of the outside was all around, of dirt and of green, growing things.

Then the hands caressing Molly turned rough and scratchy, and the nails were twigs digging down into her flesh, piercing deeply, growing long and taking root.

She screamed as the mouth came down upon hers with the roughness of bark and the taste of sap, sticky and cool, dripping slowly into her. Sprouts pushing forth into the nourishing warmth, burgeoning in the rich, fresh soil.

The rustling of leaves and creaking of limbs drowned out her cries, but the pain died away as life blossomed within her. The sensation of living, really living. Being alive.

And the bedroom was filled with the gentle perfume of flowers.

THE SILENT ONE

BY ANDRE NORTON

There was a chill wind, the first thrust of fall. Here in the city street there were no leaves to blow, only the urban discards of sticky bits of food wrappers.

The woman who had walked so slowly along was seeking house numbers, and many of those were no longer displayed. Coming at last to the steps of a half basement she saw below a window with a sign which glittered, a sign made of the very product it advertised — large, many-colored beads.

Marta Hartmann looked at the card in her hand and then to the sign. In her worry-beset mind the two had no possible connection. Yet at that moment she was willing to take any chance.

In fact she was down the two steps into the area way, her hand on the latch of the door with a spurt of determination. There was a second sign there — *OPEN*.

Somehow she was not surprised to hear the jangle of a bell when she did just that, a sound which pushed her back some forty years to when she had gone with her grandmother to Miss Worley's yarn shop.

The day outside was gloomy enough but inside here there was the brilliance and light of a treasure house. Beads, indeed! They hung in strands on the walls, they were heaped in divided trays on the counters. While inside glass-fronted display cases were beads put to use, formed into jewelry,

necklaces, bracelets, earrings, a show of what was barbaric wealth of every possible color and shape.

For a moment this display, which was far too extensive to be really seen in detail, even pulled her thoughts away from her errand here. She was drawn without being conscious of it to peer into the nearest case, pulling impatiently — really trifocals were the limit while shopping — at her glasses.

“African trade beads —”

She was startled, her reaction too quick, in fact for a moment she felt a touch of the vertigo which came with stress and which she fought so fiercely.

A woman had come out of the inner room. She was quite unlike what Marta had expected. Not the gypsy-like figure her mind had built from what hung and lay about.

For a long moment Marta simply stared at that tall, dark-suited person who might better be met behind the desk of a vice president of a bank, a most conservative bank. Then her total astonishment found voice:

“Ilse, Ilse Bergen, it is you!”

The woman dropped a string of beads on the counter as she looked at Marta as piercingly as she would at one of those globes she had just put down.

“Yes, I am Ilse Bergen but I don’t —” Then her voice changed from politeness into warmth. “But it is Marta! Marta Ferris!” Her two hands came out to Marta in the welcome they had always been quick to offer.

Marta’s thin lips twisted in a grimace even as she met that grasp. “You didn’t really know me, did you, Ilse? Well, I don’t wonder. And it isn’t Marta Ferris any more — it’s Marta Hartmann. Which is why —”

Now that the time had come somehow she had lost the words. Again she closed her eyes as those rows of beads hanging on the wall seemed to swing.

“You — you are — this?” She broke loose from Ilse’s hold. The card which had guided her had been crumpled between their palms, now she shoved it at the other. Then she took fast grip on the edge of the nearest counter to steady herself.

“Marta!” The hands were gone, there was an arm around her shoulders.

"I'll be all right," she managed to mouth, drawing on all her resources as she had so many times during the last weeks of sickness and sometimes sheer panic.

Then she found herself safely away from those dangling strings of beads, seated in a chair, Ilse standing over her with a mug held out and the old imperious look on her face as if she would accept no denials.

"Drink this."

Marta had to hold the mug in both hands she was shaking so, but she obediently sipped something which was neither coffee nor brandy as she had expected but was warm and spicy and somehow soothing.

"Now." Ilse seated herself on another chair so closely that their knees were almost touching. "Drink that up." She had the crumpled card in her fingers and glanced at it. "Where did you get this?"

Marta swallowed another mouthful of the brew. The shaking was almost gone. She had glanced over the rim of the mug cautiously, she no longer saw spinning walls.

"Esther Walters, she belongs to the quilting circle. She said —" Marta swallowed again. "Only I never thought that Dr. I. Haverling was you!"

"Mrs. Walters — oh." Ilse leaned back a fraction. "Yes, I remember Mrs. Walters. As for the Haverling, Marta, I was married, my husband died some years ago."

"I'm sorry," Marta made what she knew was the weakest of replies to that.

"If Mrs. Walters gave you this," Ilse now flicked the edge of the card with one fingernail, "you must know what she called upon me for."

Marta put the mug on the edge of a table where there were small tools and trays of unstrung beads.

"There was trouble," she said slowly, "about some lost papers — her husband's mother died very suddenly and they could find no record of investments which were very important. She said you were able to — to somehow sense where those were."

"And you did not dismiss what she said as nonsense, as well you might?" Ilse was watching her now very intently.

"No. I—I have read of such things. I do believe that some people are able to—to help when there is no—no reasonable way for the ordinary person to accomplish something."

"I see," Ilse nodded. "And now you have a need for help in such a way?"

She was not going to cry, no, she could not let herself cry! But the tears came in spite of all her efforts and after those her words spilled out so fast she was sure she was not making sense but she could not control them.

"It's Alexia—There's something wrong. The doctor says she is perfectly well—but mostly I think she believes that I'm the one who should be—be given treatment! But I've seen it happen to her, Ilse, little by little, day by day. She's changed—horribly. And it isn't drugs—that's what I thought at first, you always fear that these days. She just isn't Alexia any more. Most of the time she isn't. But other times—other times she is just as she used to be. I can't let it go on like this anymore!"

"Alexia is?"

"My granddaughter—she's only sixteen, Ilse. And she is all I have left. She was a darling, such a darling!"

Marta groped blindly in her purse for a wad of tissues and dabbed at her eyes. She did not want to face Ilse—how could she really explain after all? Perhaps it *was* she who was imagining things.

"Marta, my dear, in what way has Alexia changed? Can you remember when it began?"

Marta drew a deep breath. "I'll try to make some sense." She was giving that promise not only to Ilse but to herself. "Alexia's parents, my son Robert and her mother, were killed in a plane crash when Alexia was three. Jonas was alive then, Jonas Hartmann, my husband. We took Alexia, she was the daughter we had never had and a delight to both of us. I think, I am sure, we made her happy.

"When Jonas died it—it was difficult for both of us. That was three years ago. But we had each other and that was a comfort. Then, about six months ago, Jonas' great grandmother died. She was Lilly Hartmann, the wife of Herwarth Hartmann.

"I don't suppose many people remember about him now. He came over from Germany and made a fortune. They used to call him lucky, almost everything he tried in the way of business turned out well. He was also a very proud man, one who always insisted that his family in Germany had been of consequence at one time and it was his constant ambition to return the family to what he considered its rightful place. Back in about 1910, after he had made several millions, he took Lilly and his son Albert to Germany. He insisted that they visit an old castle there in which he believed the family had once lived. In fact he bought a kind of summer house, which was still partly intact, had it torn down, and all the stones numbered so it could be brought back here and rebuilt.

"His pride almost ruined the family — he spent at least a million dollars building a huge mansion and then filled it with art works. He never knew it, but he was cheated on a lot of those purchases. Anyway he tried to make Albert into his idea of a proper heir and it didn't work.

"Albert ran away from home in his teens. He went out west and went into mining, married the daughter of a farmer and refused to have anything to do with his family. There was something behind it all which he never told anyone.

"Herwarth Hartmann died and Lilly lived on and on — she was a hundred and one when she died. And for about fifty years, her last ones, she had lived as a recluse in that big house, most of it was closed up. The money, what was left of it, was a trust which passed to Jonas and so to Alexia and me. That, and that big useless house.

"When the lawyers got in touch with us we came here to see about settling the estate. Mainly we came — well, because we wanted to get away from our home for awhile — I thought it might be good for both of us — I did."

Marta wiped her eyes again. Why couldn't she stop this stupid crying?

"It seemed to be good for Alexia. She was interested in the old house and we spent a lot of time with appraisers. It was almost like a treasure hunt — we even found a forgotten wall safe with some very charming Victorian jewelry in it which I promised to Alexia. And after that she went hunting on her own for things. I never saw her so excited.

"Then — then she changed. She had decided to explore the garden. It had been a show place once. And she went out longer and longer each day. But she no longer talked about what she was doing. She in fact talked less and less. I wanted her to come into town with me, and she kept saying she had things to do. Then — then she went out at night!

"I found her bed empty, I'd hunt her, I'd wait up. I tried to reason with her that it might be dangerous when I confronted her.

"She — she was so angry. It was not like Alexia at all. We had always been on such good terms. I thought maybe she might be meeting someone. But we were strangers there, we never went to town except together and we had been so busy with the house that we had not tried to meet anyone but the lawyer and the appraisers when they came. I tried to follow her twice — it was as if she just disappeared!

"Then I even asked Mrs. McCarthy, we had gotten her in to help us clear things out. Her mother had been cook for the Hartmanns in the old days and she knew something of the storerooms and the like. She — she said — Alexia — Alexia had been — caught!"

"Caught?" queried Ilse.

"That's what she called it. There — it seemed there were old stories about some children — young people in the past — who acted as strangely as Alexia — some were from the town and had gone exploring on the estate — there were stories, as there always are, about it being haunted. I think there was one little boy who just disappeared, though they searched for weeks. And a girl a little older than Alexia who had been gone for several days and when she was found — she had had some sort of a shock and had to be put in a hospital. There was even a relative of the Hartmanns who had come over from Germany back in the '30s, a young refugee who was going to stay with Lilly as a companion. She hung herself! Though they say it was because she had bad news about her people back home. Oh," Marta squeezed the wad of tissue tighter into a ball. "People talked and there were all kinds of stories. It is silly to listen!"

"Not always," Ilse returned. "Some such rumors have more than just a grain of truth in them. Did Mrs. McCarthy also suggest that these various victims had the same attitude as Alexia?"

"Yes. She said that those from the town, the boy and the girl, took to going off on their own, running away once or twice when their families refused to let them. I believe that the Restons actually locked their son up and he got out by climbing out of a window on the night he disappeared. Ilse — I don't live with *my* Alexia any more, and I am frightened, so frightened — " Her voice trailed off. And then she fumbled in her purse and brought out a small plastic bag.

"Yesterday Alexia was writing something and I came into the room and spoke to her. She actually screamed and leaned forward over the paper she had been working on as if I were not to see it. Then she crumpled it up and swung around. She was wearing something, a string of beads, around her neck. I'd never seen them before, they had been hanging under her shirt and came out when she moved.

"The string caught on the corner of the desk lid and broke. She — Ilse, she was like a mad thing, scrabbling around on the floor picking up those beads! And she yelled at me — words I did not even believe she knew — horrible words. She grabbed up all the beads — or she thought she had them all—and ran out of the room and up the stairs to lock herself in her bedroom and she refused to answer me. She was a totally different person. After she had gone I found these caught under the fringe of the rug."

She held out the tiny bag and Ilse took it, swinging around a little so that she could lay it still unopened on the work table.

"You alone handled these, Marta, after Alexia's necklace broke — no one else?"

Marta nodded. The other woman worked loose the knotting of the bag top and then drew to her a square of dark cloth, allowing the contents of the bag to roll into view on that surface.

There were two oval beads about a quarter inch in size. At first glance they were dull, certainly not attractive as those in the trays about. Ilse picked up

a small tool and with that turned each of the beads around. At a closer inspection they showed very faint signs of having once been carved, time having worn away most of the design.

"These were not found in the house when you were present, Marta?"

"No. Alexia must have found them. She had such fun as she said, treasure hunting, and she did discover all sorts of unusual and pretty things. There were trunks full of old dresses — and, Ilse, even cards of beautiful laces which had never been used — there was one fan of carved ivory she just loved! She was so excited and happy!" Marta closed her eyes — it hurt to remember, oh, how it hurt!

Ilse made a quick move with her index finger, pinning one of the beads to the cloth. A second later she jerked back as if she had touched a live coal. Then very carefully she shook both beads from the cloth onto the palm of her hand, closing her fingers tightly about them, the look on her face was one who determined on a duty which was against great odds.

"Alrauna," she almost spat the word as if clearing her mouth of something foul.

"Alrauna?" Marta said. "What —?"

"There is another name for it — mandrake. It is very old, connected strongly to old evils. There are many tales and legends about it. These were carved of mandrake, and for no good purpose!"

"But where could Alexia get them? She always showed me everything —" Marta's voice trailed off.

"Apparently she did not this time." Ilse's own eyes closed. She still held her hand gripped tightly about the beads. Then she dropped them and twitched the cloth about them.

"We must take steps and very soon, Marta. This is of the most importance. I must see this house —"

"Alexia — there is trouble for her?"

"The fears which brought you here, Marta, are very well founded. Alexia is in grave danger, and not only peril of body. No, do not ask me to explain now — for I cannot be sure myself what awaits us at this strange house of yours. But the sooner we reach it the better."

Time seemed against them, Marta thought. There was a frustrating wait for the commuters' train. Ilse had stuffed into an overnight bag a book which was so old that pages had loosened from the binding. This she read, then put aside with a sudden gesture as if she had found some information sadly needed.

She turned to Marta then but she did not speak of what might lie before them but rather of earlier days when they had both been in school, recalling this and that incident from the past in a soothing voice which drew Marta, impatient at first, into shared memories as if that very tone of that voice carried with it some deep comfort. She could not put Alexia out of mind, still there was a kind of strength issuing from her companion which calmed and steadied her.

They picked up Marta's car from the station lot and drove quickly through the small town, cutting off from the main highway on a winding secondary road. Here fall was all bright color and it had life of a sort which braced one. Another turn into a drive, the entrance of which was nearly completely curtained by the growth of untended bushes, brought them by a narrow and rutted way up a low hilltop to confront the masterpiece Herwarth Hartmann had established to honor his family line.

There were towers, and stretches of ivy-covered stone walls in which the windows were sometimes completely curtained with the twining vines. Wild asters and ironweed in its imperial purple had edged in from fields to take over formal flower beds of which only the faintest traces were left.

Marta led the way to a deep recessed doorway, there was carving running around it and a shield of arms prominently displayed.

"We — we thought it was fun," she said slowly as she set key to the lock. "It all looked so — so stagey, almost like one of the gaudy covers on a paperback novel. We joked about it. Only now — now — I am afraid!" And she pushed the door open as if indeed she would rather it remained closed.

They came into a wide hall into which descended a staircase at the foot of which a statue of a nearly life-sized nymph held aloft a torch. A feeble light issued from that, enough to abate some of the thick gloom which was in such contrast to the bright fall colors of the day without.

There was a very small measure of light also which entered down from a two-story ceiling where there was a round opening enclosing glass of yellow, red, and a purple faded to violet.

The air about was chill and Marta beckoned her guest on into a side room where a fire smoldered on the hearth. She went at once to poke at it in a futile manner while Ilse stood in the middle of the room surveying the ranks of dark furniture, seemingly ranked to discourage visitors.

She pivoted slowly, her head up, almost like a hound testing for a scent. Then she said with authority:

“Old, tired, but there is nothing overt here to alarm.”

“You think that there is something wrong — here?” Marta slipped the poker back into the stand and now she gazed swiftly from side to side at the shadows.

“One cannot overlook anything. But,” Ilse opened her purse and took out the rolled up piece of cloth containing the beads.

For a single moment she allowed the beads to again nestle in her cupped hand, at the same time once more gazing about as if she expected to find some change in the room or its atmosphere. Then she said with decision:

“No, the trouble is not here, Marta. There is no response. We shall have to look elsewhere — ”

“All through the house.” Marta straightened. As if having some action in which she could have a part gave her more control. “But let us have some coffee first, and Mrs. McCarthy’s cookies. In the kitchen — we really have made the kitchen our own — ”

She set off briskly. It might have been that she wanted to delay discovery, that she was clinging fiercely to the everyday as a defense.

The kitchen indeed was a sharp change from the rest of the house. It was very large and there was a bay window at one side in which glass racks had been hung to support a number of pots each containing greenery. Ilse went directly to the display. She pinched off a small leaf here, another there, raising each in turn for a prolonged sniff. “An ambitious herb garden,” she commented, “and perhaps a very useful

one for us now. Verlaine, garlic, angelica. Who is the master gardener who is able to coax along such a collection as this?"

"Lilly Hartmann — I think she began it. She had an old cook who was supposed to be what Mrs. McCarthy says her mother called a 'yarb woman.' Mrs. McCarthy knows something about it. And takes care now. I've promised her the whole collection when she wants it. I believe that her son is building her a small greenhouse." She twisted off a leaf herself. "Rose geranium, at least this one I know. Now — coffee."

There was a round table near the herb-embowered window and they sat down together, a plate of cookies between them. Marta had just poured the coffee when the back door opened and a girl wearing a parka as bright as an autumn-touched maple leaf burst in.

She was tall but, in spite of the bulk of her clothes, looked too slender. Her hair had been cropped in a boyish style and one lock curved down over her forehead as a very pale blonde scallop. Her eyes seemed very large and were of a cool shade of gray, almost like silver with a thin frost overlaid. At the sight of Ilse she stopped so short that the door she had opened so quickly smacked her, nearly propelling her into the room.

"Alexia!" Marta set down the coffee pot. "Do come and meet a very old friend of mine — Ilse and I went to school together when we were just about your age. I ran into her quite by accident and she is to be our guest for a day or so. She — she knows quite a lot about beads and is willing to help us appraise those bead purses you found in the chest drawer." The words were coming too fast, Marta knew, but she felt at that moment they were truly inspired. "Oh, this is my granddaughter, Alexia, Ilse. And this is Dr. Haverling, Alexia."

"Doctor?" There was certainly no welcome to be heard in that cool young voice.

Ilse smiled. "Not of medicine, no. I am a doctor of philosophy — my degree was not medical at all. Marta tells me that you have been finding treasure troves all about this great house."

She had set her hand down on the folded cloth which again enshrouded the beads, pressing the palm flat. Her gaze was measuring Alexia intently.

The girl shrugged. "Oh, there's a lot of stuff stuck away. Most of it's just junk." She came farther into the room in an odd sidling manner as if she must continue to face Ilse, and there was certainly animosity in both her voice and the expression of her face where a pallor underlaid the tan of summer.

"Come, my dear," Marta cut in hastily. "There are some of Mrs. McCarthy's brownies and some of the chocolate drink you like — You must be chilled through —"

Alexia gave an impatient shrug. "I'm all right, Gran. I just went for a walk. I'm not hungry anyway." She had slid on toward the door when Ilse spoke:

"Kind, wer gab Dir das geschenk?"

German, Marta thought bewildered. Her own was rusty now but what did Ilse mean by asking "Who gave you the gift, child?" And Alexia did not even know German.

Yet the girl shook her head as if to shake out some thought before she said quite plainly:

"Sie — Sie gab es hir."

She gave it! What was it and who was *she*? But Ilse was already asking that:

"Sie, wer ist Sie?"

Alexia's two hands had gone to the collar of the parka and now she twisted them into the material of that as if she wanted to choke off the words something was making her say:

"Die Schweigende!"

Marta sat down abruptly and Alexia whirled about and was gone again through the back door. Her grandmother looked helplessly to Ilse —

"What did she mean — the Silent One? And — Alexia does not speak German!"

Ilse's hand still lay heavy on the beads.

"There are powers which can make us do many things. The Silent One —" she repeated thoughtfully. Then with a pull at the cloth about the beads she uncovered them again. This time she emptied them into one palm and folded the other over them. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes

while Marta watched her helplessly. Ilse's lips seemed to thin, her mouth became set. There was building purpose, a grim purpose about her.

Marta shivered. She never thought she was psychic in any way, yet at that moment there seemed to be closing about her a feeling as if she were caught in some dark place, that invisible walls were fast building about her. She wanted to fling out her arms to push them off, and that panic which had threatened her for days was breaking through all the bonds she had held against it.

"Ilse!" She could not stop that call which was in its way a cry for help.

The other woman opened her eyes. "Yes." She said that word not as if in answer to Marta but rather as if some sum she had proposed for herself had been solved. "You spoke of a building which Mr. Hartmann had brought from Germany, the blocks marked so it could be erected again here in the proper way —?"

"Yes. It is in the garden, but it is not a real building — it is very small. They said it was the only part of the castle which he thought could be moved, the only part which was not a complete ruin."

Ilse's purse was closer to a tote than a conventional bag. She had opened it while Marta spoke and now she took out a pair of small bottles, two blue candles, and a small pot of silver, its lid and sides pierced with an intricate design.

Leaving these on the table top she arose and went to the herbs, examining them carefully, harvesting a single leaf there and a twiglet bearing several here. These she brought back to the table and laid them out carefully. While Marta watched uncomprehendingly.

"We fight trouble as best we can," Ilse said. "This is an old trouble. If I am not mistaken, and from what these told me I am not, this evil was brought with the Anchorite's call from Germany."

"Anchorite's call?" Marta repeated.

"It is of the old church." Ilse was busy placing in the pierced pot a powder from a box and then laid on top of that some of the herb leaves. "We can believe that the castle had a chapel. It was sometimes done in the old days when a man or woman who was considered sinful would be in a manner

walled up in a special cell built against the wall of a church or chapel. They were allowed a window on the world but no door, and the window was intended for them to watch the sacred mass.

"For some of these anchorites this was an enforced penance, for others a free choice. The great mystic of old England, Julian of Norwich, was a voluntary anchorite, and there has been much recorded concerning her influence over those who came to her window for aid. She was a woman of great spiritual power. However, this imprisonment might also be a punishment — perhaps sometimes unjustly enforced — and that is what I believe has extended its poison into Alexia's life now.

"A woman unjustly relegated to something which was near a living death would, over the remaining lifetime granted her, build up certain despair, hatred, evil rage. This would produce in those sensitive to influences a residue of all that poor creature felt and knew. That portion of the first personality who experienced such great rage and hate could continue to be a poison, even after the physical death.

"These," Ilse touched the beads, "are a focus for such a personality. They are part of a rosary, a rosary used in petitions, not to any comforting or truly spiritual power, but rather to one of darkness and evil. If what I have read is true there must be a cleansing. This will not be an easy thing, but it is my hope that the fact that the place of one time imprisonment no longer rests on the ground where the evil was first rooted will be an aid."

Marta leaned forward putting both her hands on the table. "What can I do?" she asked. Belief had come, the real world she had known might refuse that belief, but she felt she was no longer a part of that world.

"We shall do this." Ilse was busy with those things she had brought with her and as her fingers sped from one to another she began to explain, carefully and sometimes repetitiously, making very sure Marta understood as well as she might.

The twilight had closed in early. Leaves drifted across the path, crackled thickly underfoot. Marta swung the torch beam at the drifts of leaves. The long unpruned shrubs were nearly tall enough to top her head and in places they were matted into what was close to a wall.

However, immediately before her a way had been recently raggedly chopped, with half cut twigs and branches left dangling.

Save for the sound of the leaves crackling under their feet there was silence. They were already out of sight of the house, swallowed up by these thickets which to Marta had become far too dark, too thick, too shadowed—

The slashing of undergrowth was more apparent the farther they went. There was something ruthless, cruel about it. Marta strove to control her thoughts — she had lost, she felt, all touch with the life she had always known. She was allowing herself to be swept along into a dark fantasy.

The torch light bore ahead into open land. Now the silence was broken, not by any rustle of leaf but sounds which might come from sullen, throat deep muttering.

Ilse's hand fell on her arm, Marta started, looked around. Her companion motioned her to wait, and then went down on one knee. The candles were brought out, housed as they had hastily been in old wooden sticks Marta had discovered in the kitchen cupboard. Then came the silver brazier and one of the small flasks Ilse had shown her earlier. Marta fumbled in her pocket for matches. But she had more attention for what lay before them than she had for what Ilse was doing.

At the center of the open space they had entered stood a small building. It was in the form of a tower as if someone had fancied to build a miniature castle out of legend but had gone no farther than this. The height was about a story, and facing them directly was an opening, narrow but tall enough to be considered a door.

Through this issued a pale light which showed that, if there had ever been a closing for that aperture, it was long gone. While the light was somehow sickly, unpleasant, certainly it did not burn as clearly as the candles Ilse had just induced into flame.

Marta stooped and picked up one of those as she had been instructed. Ilse gestured to the torch and, reluctantly, very reluctantly, Marta switched that off. Its fuller light had seemed in a measure to be a weapon against what they must face. Though, even with all of Ilse's coaching, she could not yet be sure of what that might truly be.

A thin tendril of smoke arose from the brazier which swung from a chain Ilse had looped about her right wrist. She held in that same hand a flask of some dark glass, while Marta took up the remaining candle.

That penetrating mumble had ceased. Yet Marta was aware of a pressure of silence itself. She straightened, her back stiff, as she moved resolutely forward, Ilse beside her.

The wan light from the doorway did not flicker as did the candleshine, nor was it, Marta believed, from any torch. She had all she could do to restrain herself from calling Alexia, sure as she was that the girl was in this place.

They were at the door now but it was so narrow that only one might enter at a time, and from it issued air as chill as if they were preparing to walk into some huge freezer. Ilse took the lead and Marta was ashamed that deep in her she was glad of that.

There was a single circular room within, stone walled with nothing to soften or veil those gaunt walls. A bench was part of one wall and opposite that, placed higher so that a person of ordinary height could just see out of it, was a square opening, beyond which was darkness.

Before the bench, facing the wall without an opening, knelt Alexia. There was a string of beads, clasped between her hands and one by one they slid through her fingers. As each was held in turn she whispered and her voice was like the hiss of something which was not human. Her eyes were closed and her head was flung up and a little back so that her face was fully exposed. The hood of her parka lay back on her thin shoulders, pulling with it her hair so that there was no softening to her set features. Marta gave a small gasp — Alexia — Alexia was praying!

Ilse motioned a command and Marta hurriedly followed the orders she had been given. She set down her candle on the bench before which the girl knelt. Ilse was placing hers at the same time at Alexia's right. The girl made no move. Now the hissing had stopped, but her lips still moved, as if her prayer was inaudible.

Ilse made one more preparation. She swung the brazier directly before Alexia and that trail of smoke arising from it bent directly outward toward the girl's face.

Then Ilse spoke, and the words she used were not German, nor in any other language that Marta could understand. They were uttered with a note of command, of demand — as if forming a question which must be answered.

Alexia's facial muscles seemed to twist, to form for an instant the features of a stranger. But her eyes did not open. Instead, from the grimace of her mouth, there came a screech which no one could not mistake as rage.

So threatening was that voice which was not Alexia's (could never be Alexia's, Marta protested inwardly) that she herself shrank back against the wall of the tower, while the feeling of cold increased, laying an icy touch upon her flesh.

Again Ilse spoke. Then her right hand rose and she pointed first to the right hand candle and then to the left. The flames at their crests elongated, thinned out, and crossed, directly before Alexia's face. Back and forth Ilse led other shining threads from the candles all the time speaking with authority, her words somehow rising and outreaching the screech which continued to break from the girl.

Now Alexia's head and shoulders were enmeshed in a web of the candle beams. For the first time she moved. The string of beads flailed out as she tried to use it as a weapon against those ties of light. She twisted and turned, once half arising from her knees only to fall back again. Her face was a mask of hate and anger, all of what had been Alexia seemed to have utterly vanished.

Still chanting Ilse unstopped the bottle and she poured from it a liquid which was as colorless as water, catching it in the palm of her right hand.

She was standing directly behind Alexia now, and the girl was twisting wildly, crying out sounds which might have been uttered by a trapped animal.

Ilse's hand went out, passing easily through the network woven from the candle beams. She tipped her palm so that the liquid it contained fell directly on Alexia's head.

"Alexia Hartmann you are." For the first time Ilse used words Marta could understand. "Annarhilde you are not. Go, you who are not, to the place

awaiting you. For I name this child rightfully by her name, Alexia, and I do so by that Power of Light in which no darkness can abide!"

There was one last shriek from Alexia and her body crumpled to the floor. The candle weaving vanished, but the scent from the brazier puffed out, seeming, thin as the smoke was, feeble as the flame within, to drive away the cold. For that was gone, and with it the wan light, so that only the candles remained.

Marta flung herself forward, her arms about Alexia, enwrapping her with the same determination that the candle beams had shown. The girl stirred and her eyes opened for the first time.

"Gran?" She spoke as she had as a small child when some nightmare had released its grip on her at the coming of loving care.

"Alexia, dear heart, it's all right."

"I — there was someone —" the girl said uncertainly.

"That one is gone, nor shall she return." Ilse picked up the brazier chain. With it she also took up the candle which appeared to blaze high enough to light the room. Now it caught and held on one block in the wall, one immediately above that square which opened on the outer world. There had been a carving there, a deep one, and it had been crudely defaced, the stone chipped and gouged as if done by poor tools over a period of time.

"The All Seeing Eye," Ilse said. "She could not bear its watching. Hatred brought her here, and, because that she had been taught to revere had failed her, she sought other powers. She faces other judgment now but there will be remembered what she once was and what unrightful punishment was dealt her then. Alexia —"

"Yes."

"In days to come pray for one who suffered much and who took then a wrong path. *Die Schweigende*."

"The Silent One —" the girl repeated softly.

"It — it is all over?" Marta found her voice.

"Here and now it is over, dear friend. I would say that this place which has seen so much despair, sorrow, and darkness of soul should

be destroyed. Though I do not believe that it will ever harbor again that which sheltered in it.”

“Yes — oh, yes.”

Ilse stooped and picked up the chain of beads which had fallen out of Alexia’s hold. She put it with the two others she had carried from the house. Placing them together on the cloth in which she had wound them she set the packet on the bench and put the flame of her candle to the edge. Fire flashed as if it was tinder or soaked in oil. She opened the brazier now and let what remained of its smoldering contents fall on the small blaze.

The sweet odor of herbs and spices flowed about them and what was left was ashes as powdery as dust. Ilse regarded those approvingly.

“Such things are not for our world. Better so.”

She blew out the candles then and Marta switched on the torch to lead them out into the autumn night where all shadows were harmless.

TERROR BY NIGHT

BY ROBERT E. WEINBERG

Four people gone without a trace," said the bald-headed man, his voice trembling. Nervously, he rubbed the back of an arm across his forehead, wiping futilely at oily beads of sweat with a stained white shirt sleeve. "All of them vanished. Not a sign of a scuffle or anything suspicious. Every week for the past month, another office worker turns up missing. At night they're on the job working late, the next morning, they're gone. It's spooked the whole building. Nobody stays after hours any more. Several tenants have moved out, and more are threatening to break their leases."

"You're positive the victims all disappeared while on the premises?" asked Taine. A big, powerfully built man, he spoke in calm, even-measured tones. His dark eyes stared intently at Sam Shaw, the building superintendent.

"Unfortunately, yes," replied Shaw, his upper teeth anxiously gnawing on his lower lip. "There's always a security guard at the desk in the front hall. No one can enter or leave the building without passing him. Joe Frost is a retired cop who works the night shift, and he swears that none of the four left the complex."

"What do the police say?" asked Taine.

"They claim that Joe must be mistaken," said Shaw, sounding

disgusted. "For all their investigating and hunting for clues, the cops are as much in the dark as the rest of us. That's why I turned to you."

Taine nodded. He specialized in cases that baffled the authorities. Since moving to Chicago from San Francisco over a year ago, he had solved more than a dozen crimes involving supernatural manifestations. In doing so, he had earned a reputation as a psychic detective. One newspaper had gone so far as to dub him "The New-Age Detective."

Nicknames mattered little to Taine. His main passion was solving crimes. A skilled investigator as well as an expert in the occult sciences, he used whatever methods necessary to discover the truth.

"I'll need an office," he declared, "and a cover story from you to quell any suspicions."

"Then you think someone working in the building is behind the disappearances?" asked Shaw, his eyes blinking rapidly. He looked to be on the verge of tears. "That's hard to believe. I've known some of these people for twenty years."

Taine shrugged. "Don't jump to any conclusions. For all you know the police could be right. Maybe Frost is getting forgetful and doesn't want to admit it."

"No," said Shaw, with a shake of his head. "That isn't true. I know it and I suspect so do you. There's something unnatural preying on the tenants here. I can feel its presence, feel it in my bones. Something... evil."

Sighing deeply, Taine nodded his understanding. "I believe you mentioned over the phone that you've managed these offices for more than twenty years. After that length of time, your inner eye, what psychics oftentimes call 'the sixth sense', has become attuned to the physical structure of the building itself. On a subconscious level, your spirit suffers with each crime committed here. You are as much a part of this place as the stones in its foundation."

The big detective rose smoothly from his chair. He moved with the quiet grace of a jungle cat. There was something of the black panther in Sidney Taine. "Time for me to earn my pay. I'll want to meet Joe Frost before we go up to my office. And anyone else who works the night shift."



"That would be the cleaning woman, Roska Smith. She sweeps the offices after everyone leaves," said Shaw, with a wane smile. "She's a refugee from Iran or Iraq or someplace like that. Her real name is absolutely unpronounceable, so I call her Mrs. Smith."

"I assume the police checked her background thoroughly?" asked Taine.

"Of course. She's worked here for more than a year without any problems. Mr. Larson, the owner of the building, called me from Florida and told me to hire her. Evidently, he met her overseas and promised her a job if she ever emigrated to the United States. A quiet, dependable and very hard working woman, I never had a complaint about her from any of the tenants."

Shaw pushed open the door to his office. "There's an empty suite on the fifth floor. I'll set you up there."

Taine followed the superintendent down a narrow service corridor to the front of the building. They emerged in a wide foyer where a lone guard sat reading a newspaper that rested on an ancient wood desk. Behind him creaked and groaned a pair of equally aged elevators.

A short, stocky man with wide shoulders and a barrel chest, Frost's hair matched his name. Cut short, it was as white as snow. He nodded a greeting to Shaw as the two men approached. The guard eyed Taine with undisguised curiosity. Closing the newspaper, he stood up as they came nearer.

"Joe Frost meet Sidney Paine," said Shaw, using the name they had agreed upon during their phone conversation. There was no need to alert anyone else about a private investigator in the building. "Mr. Paine is leasing the Burnham office on the fifth floor. He'll move in tomorrow. I'm showing him around the building tonight."

The two men shook hands. Though Taine estimated Frost to be in his early sixties, the retired cop had the powerful grip of a man half his age. With a grin, the security guard squeezed hard, as if testing Taine's strength. Taine ignored the pressure. His massive hand remained firm and unyielding. After an instant, Frost nodded and let go.

"Your hand ain't soft like some pencil pusher," said the guard. He squinted, as if trying to remember something forgotten. "Seems to me I read about a man with a name like yours in the paper a while back. According to

the reporter, this guy was a detective specializing in unusual cases. Kind of implied he was some sort of occult Sherlock Holmes. Big man too, around six one, six two-two twenty or so. Right around your size, Mr. *Paine*."

"Two ten," replied Taine, with a hint of a smile. The old police veteran was no fool. "I've been on a diet."

"What's your theory about these disappearances, Frost?" asked Taine. "I can't imagine much going on in this building without your knowing about it."

The security man shivered. Worry lines not in evidence a minute before suddenly lined his face and his voice sunk down to a whisper. "Ghosts," he answered, in a voice flat and filled with apprehension. "In the middle of the night, I hear their voices in the walls. They don't speak in words, just sounds-weird, garbled, *chittering* noises. Mr. Shaw claims its water dripping in the heating system down in the basement. But that ain't what I'm hearing. The damned building is haunted."

Shaw snorted in disgust. "Nonsense. You're imagining things, Frost."

The security guard started to reply then froze. He cocked his head to one side, as if listening intently. "Am I?" he asked, his mouth twisted in a crooked grin. "Maybe you want to explain... that?"

There was no mistaking the sound then. The hallway reverberated with a soft, wind-like whisper that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Shaw sucked in a breath, his face bleached white. Reacting almost without thought, Taine stepped to the near wall and placed one ear against the ancient plasterboard. Faintly, ever so distantly, he could hear the echo of voices, unintelligible and remote. In a second, they were gone.

"The rats," muttered Taine, more to himself than the others. "The rats in the walls."

"There are no vermin in my building," declared Shaw, his voice shrill with fear. "None at all."

Taine shook his head. Shaw was not the type to read H.P. Lovecraft. "Let's see that office now."

Frost waved almost cheerfully as they stepped into one of the elevators. Taine suspected the guard was relieved that they had heard the whispering voices. The old cop had probably wondered many times



if the noises were real or the product of an aging mind. Now he knew that he was sane. Or that they were all mad.

Hissing and wheezing, the lift deposited them on the fifth floor. Dim lights sent flickering shadows scurrying across the walls as the two men marched down the hallway. Odd, barely visible patterns crawled across the threadbare carpeting beneath their feet. Even the stale air in the corridor seemed heavy with age.

Surprisingly, the interior of suite 511 was quite modern. A sleek, laminated desk complete with a wheeled, swivel secretary's chair dominated the room. Behind it, nestled on a table in the corner, was a brand new copier and a FAX machine. Not a scratch marred the black metal file cabinets on the far wall.

"Burnham ran an insurance scam from the office," said Shaw, answering the unasked question. "He came in once or twice a week to meet with the suckers. The rest of the time the place stayed empty. The FBI finally tried to arrest him last month for mail fraud, but by then it was too late. Burnham skipped town the day before they came looking for him."

Taine mentally filed the story away for future consideration. Another disappearance from the same building, whatever the motive, stretched coincidence beyond probability.

"Here's the key," said Shaw. "The phone and FAX machine are disconnected, but other than that, the office is exactly the way Burnham left it. If you need anything, let me know."

The superintendent yawned. "I'm heading home. Maybe tonight, with you on the case, I'll finally get some sleep. I can use it."

"I'll let you know as soon as something turns up," said Taine, easing himself into the swivel chair. "It might take hours . . . or days."

"Hopefully not," said Shaw, grimacing. "I'm paying your fee out of my own salary. Larson couldn't care less what happens here. He inherited the property from his father. For the past fifteen years, he's lived in Florida and conducted his business by phone. All he wants is his check every month. If a few more tenants break their leases, he'll

probably close the place down and sell the land for a shopping mall. Leaving me," he concluded bitterly, "with nothing."

"What about the cleaning lady, Mrs. Smith?" asked Taine.

"I almost forgot about her," said Shaw. "She works one floor at a time, starting up at the top with number seven. That puts her here around midnight. Don't expect too much from Mrs. Smith. She doesn't speak English very well and keeps pretty much to herself. Like most refugees, she's not anxious to make waves."

"I won't upset her," promised Taine. "Though I am hoping she knows what those noises were we heard downstairs."

"The pipes," said Shaw, without conviction. "It was just the pipes."

The superintendent departed, leaving Taine alone in the office. Suppressing a yawn of his own, the big detective stretched his arms high over his head. Another case had kept him up late the past few evenings. He had been looking forward to a good night's sleep tonight.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, Taine pulled out a thick sheaf of papers. After Shaw's original phone call, the detective had called in a few favors. On his way over to the office building, he had stopped at the local police station and picked up copies of the police reports filed on the four disappearances. He doubted there would be much in the files, but Taine took no chances on missing anything.

He spent the next two hours poring over the papers. As he suspected, there was nothing very surprising in any of them. In fact, the most telling bit of information Taine gleaned from the reports was the dissimilarity of the four missing people.

Two men and two women, they came from different age groups and different income levels. One was in middle management, two were office workers, and the fourth was the sole proprietor of a talent agency. Three out of the four were over forty, while the last had just turned twenty-two. Two were black, one was Caucasian, and one Hispanic. None of them had any links to professional crime figures or gamblers. The one word that best described all four was "ordinary."



Taine sighed and leaned back in his chair. It was all extremely frustrating. Like the police, he could find no motive for the disappearances. No facts tied the quartet together. They were as mismatched a group to be found. The only thing they had in common was that they all worked in the same building.

A soft knock at his office door interrupted his train of thought. "Come in," he said.

A tall, attractive woman, clad in brown shirt and overalls, pushed open the door. Her weather-beaten face was dark brown, almost the color and texture of old leather. She had pitch-black hair, tied up tightly in a bun, and matching deep black eyes. She smiled at Taine, displaying even white teeth.

"Sorry, sorry," she said, her voice thick with a sing-song Arabic accent. "I did not mean to disturb." Behind her Taine glimpsed a big-wheeled bin lined with an immense brown cloth sack for garbage, with a half-dozen brooms and dusters stuck in the sides. "I will be pleased to come back later."

"No problem," said Taine, getting out of his chair. "I wasn't doing anything important. Please," he beckoned with one hand, "come in."

"I will only be a minute," said Mrs. Smith, wheeling in the bin. She pulled out a wide-based broom and dust pan. Without another word, she quickly started sweeping the office floor.

Taine watched her work. The woman moved silently, with a smooth, sensuous grace that he found vaguely unsettling. From time to time, she glanced up at him and smiled, her white teeth flashing against dusky features.

"This seems like a nice building," said Taine casually. "A little old but otherwise well maintained."

"Very nice," said Mrs. Smith, her head nodding in agreement as she swept. Finishing up, she emptied the dust pan into the brown garbage sack. Replacing her broom, she checked the garbage can at the base of the desk for clutter.

"Funny how the pipes make such strange noises though," continued Taine. "They almost sound like human voices crying in agony."

Mrs. Smith's black eyes widened in sudden fear. "Voices? No, no. It is sound of pipes, nothing more. Mr. Shaw told me so himself. It is the pipes."

The cleaning woman was afraid, very afraid. Taine wondered what could frighten her so badly. He took for granted that she would never tell a stranger the reason.

Without another word, Mrs. Smith pushed her bin back into the hall and pulled the office door closed. Taine could hear her hurriedly wheeling the gurney down the hallway in the direction of the elevators. In a minute, she was gone, the other offices on the floor left untouched.

The detective frowned. The woman's unusual behavior left him more puzzled than ever. He felt sure she knew something about those strange noises. She appeared terrified by their very mention. Yet, she echoed Shaw's outlandish remark about the pipes.

Behind him, the FAX machine beeped. Surprised, Taine turned and stared at the unit. A quick glance at the outlet confirmed Shaw's earlier statement. The machine wasn't plugged in. And yet, it was working.

As Taine watched dumfounded, a solitary sheet of paper worked its way through the processor and into the document tray. Then, with a click audible throughout the small room, the machine that could not possibly be functioning, shut itself off.

Taine picked up the document. Not surprisingly, the sender's name was not listed at the top of the page. However, the detective felt sure he knew the source of the transmission. For years, there had been rumors, odd tales, of a secret society fighting supernatural horror throughout the world. They called themselves the *Societas Argenti Viae Eternitata*, the Eternal Society of the Silver Way. He was positive that this message came from that mysterious group.

Curiously, he looked at the paper. The only marking on it was a number at the direct center of the page. The number, 91.

Taine's brows knitted in concentration. It took tremendous occult power to send a message by supernatural means, thus the shortness of the transmission. Yet, the mages of SAVE evidently believed that the



solitary number provided enough of a warning for Taine. It was on his shoulders to decipher the clue.

The product of two mystic primes, 7 and 13, 91 was a number of great power. Many powerful spells consisted of ninety-one syllables, ninety-one words, or ninety-one sentences. Taine closed his eyes in concentration. The thought of spells and warnings had his subconscious bubbling. Buried deep in his memory was a vague recollection of a famous quote associated with the number 91. After a few seconds, he understood the reference, and grasped the implied threat.

The warning was a line from the 91st Psalm, long regarded as a powerful warding spell against demons. *"Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night,"* recited Taine aloud, the verse's meaning terribly clear, *"nor for the arrow that flieth by day; nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday."*

Taine reached into his shoulder holster and pulled out his .44 automatic. Positive he knew the truth, he felt safer with the gun in hand. Carefully, cautiously, he pushed open the door to the office. No one was about.

Using his lock-pick, he broke into three nearby offices before he found what he wanted. In a multi-roomed suite, someone had set up a lunch center, complete with a mini-refrigerator and a microwave oven. A few seconds of searching turned up a half-filled salt shaker. Satisfied with his discovery, Taine dropped it into his coat pocket and headed for the elevator.

The sound of snoring greeted him as the lift came to a stop on the first floor. Head on his desk, Joe Frost was solidly submerged in slumber. He didn't stir when Taine walked past, heading for the heavy metal firedoor that led to the basement.

It was thirteen steps down to the cellar floor. A few scattered forty-watt lightbulbs provided the only illumination. Eyes narrowed in the gloom, Taine made his way through a maze of old boxes, maintenance equipment and rusting file cabinets. Filling the center of the room was a massive old furnace, pipes leading from it to a half-dozen upward ducts.

The faint sound of a human voice was all but hidden by the constant rumbling of the boiler. Cautiously, gun in hand, Taine made his way around the furnace.

A dozen feet away, a large trap-door opened to a black hole in the floor. Mrs. Smith, her back to Taine, knelt there on her knees, jabbering away in a language he didn't recognize. Every few seconds she paused and took a bite from what looked like a turkey drumstick she held tightly in her right hand.

Gingerly, Taine edged his way closer, trying not to make a sound. He kept his automatic pointed directly at the woman's back. At the same time, he worked frantically with his other hand, trying to remove the top of the salt shaker he had taken.

Suddenly without warning, Mrs. Smith spun around, catching Taine completely by surprise. Taine gasped in shock. The woman's face was smeared with blood. Confirming his worst fears, he saw that the object she gnawed upon was a human arm. Flesh and muscle had been stripped away right down to the bone. Bright red droplets fell from Mrs. Smith's chin as her lips stretched back into a snarl that revealed a mouthful of hyena-like incisors.

Shaken to his soul, Taine involuntarily took a step backward. That was all the time the woman needed. Howling like a beast, she flung the half-devoured limb like a spear straight at the detective's chest. Reflexively Taine raised his arms, to block the blow.

Moving with incredible speed, Mrs. Smith leapt at the detective. Covering the space between them in an instant, she slammed headfirst into Taine, sending him sprawling to the ground. His automatic went flying into the darkness. Clawing like some wild beast, she straddled Taine, her mad eyes glaring wildly into his. Flat on his back, the detective found himself fighting desperately against a nightmarish creature intent on his death.

Mrs. Smith's teeth gnashed together inches from his throat. Taine could feel her hot breath like the fires of hell burning across his eyes. His forearm, wedged up against the woman's throat, was the only thing holding her back. She hissed like some giant serpent as they fought.

Her long fingers dug hard into Taine's shoulders, trying to raise him off the ground. He struggled to stay down. A little closer and she could



rip his features to ribbons. Taine was a powerful man, but the woman's strength was incredible. Only the awkwardness of her position enabled him to hold her off. Little by little, she was forcing his arm back and her jaws nearer to his face.

Desperately, Taine shoved his other hand into his coat pocket. Miraculously, the salt shaker was still there. With a twist of his fingers, he had the cap off.

As if sensing something wrong, Mrs. Smith tightened her legs around his chest. But, Taine already had his arm free and moving. The hand clutching the shaker swung up in half-circle aimed directly at Mrs. Smith's face. A stream of ordinary kitchen salt caught her right below the eyes.

She screamed in agony. It was as if Taine had thrown a beaker of acid at her. The detective could hear hot skin sizzling like bacon frying on a griddle. Shrieking in pain the woman tumbled off Taine and rolled onto the floor, both her hands clutched to her burning face.

Taine scrambled to his feet, his gaze wildly sweeping the room, looking for his gun. The salt wouldn't stop her for long. He spotted the weapon a dozen feet away, at the base of the furnace. Taine flung himself forward, hands groping for the pistol.

Behind him, Mrs. Smith shrieked again, this time in anger not agony. The detective spun around, one hand clutching his gun, to see the woman charging directly at him. There was no time to think. Pointing the gun like a finger, Taine squeezed the trigger. And kept on squeezing until the magazine was empty.

The bullets smashed into Mrs. Smith like blows from a giant hammer. Wordlessly, she collapsed to the ground, all the life gone out of her. Far below the floor, the mindless chittering started again.

"What the hell happened here?" asked Joe Frost, emerging from behind the furnace, his gun drawn. "I heard the commotion upstairs and came down to investigate."

The security guard gasped when he saw the dead body on the floor. "Mrs. Smith?"



"Take a look at her before you make any snap judgments," said Taine, wearily. He holstered his gun. "She's the one behind the disappearances."

Frost bent down to examine the corpse. He cursed in horror. Most of the skin on Mrs. Smith's face was eaten away, right down to the bone. Flashes of white bone glistened in the dim light. Revealed as well were the animal fangs that lined her jaw.

"What did this to her?" asked Frost, his voice shaky.

"Common ordinary table salt," said Taine. He walked over to the trap-door and peered down into the darkness. "I take it this leads down into the sub-basement."

"Yeah," answered Frost. But nobody's been down there for years."

From below came the infernal sound of high-pitch chittering. Frost sucked in a breath, turning white. "That's the sound I heard upstairs."

"Carried through the pipes," said Taine. Reaching down, he grabbed at Mrs. Smith's blouse and ripped. The cloth tore free from her body, revealing her naked flesh beneath.

"Mother-of-God," Frost swore, staring at the woman's nude body. Even Taine, knowing what to expect, was shocked to silence.

Beneath her clothes, Mrs. Smith wasn't even faintly human. She had no breasts or rib-cage. Instead, her body had the free flowing form of a wolf or hyena, complete with two rows of nipples that stretched from her upper chest to her lower abdomen. Dark fur covered her flesh like a cloak.

"What—what—is she?" Frost managed to ask.

"A ghul," replied Taine. "A creature described in ancient Middle East legends. In *The Bible*, they are obliquely referred to as 'the terror by night.'" Taine saw no reason to mention the mystic warning he received that alerted him to the presence of such a monster in the building.

"Ghuls closely resemble humans. Over the centuries, they've learned to imitate our ways quite well. Which is necessary for them since we provide them with their food. Their diet consists primarily of the flesh and blood of the people they kill. Eaters of the dead, they are creatures of pestilence and decay. That is why salt, a preserving agent, burns their flesh."

You mean..." stuttered Frost, "the people that disappeared..."



Taine pointed at the half-eaten arm. "If you search this place, I'm sure you'll find the body that goes along with that limb. The other corpses she threw down there." He pointed to the sub-basement.

"Down there?" repeated Frost.

"Once I realized that Mrs. Smith was a ghul," said Taine, "I quickly understood the one thing all of her victims had in common. They were human. Nothing more than that. She was murdering them for food.

"Without any apparent motive, no one ever suspected her of the killings. I suspect chance played a large part in selecting her victims. Whenever she found herself alone in an office with an unsuspecting worker, she struck. With teeth like those, she could kill in an instant. Her canvas bag could easily hold a body, especially after she ripped it to pieces."

Frost turned green and looked ready to pass out. "But why now? She's worked here for over a year?"

Taine pointed down into the sub-basement. Both he and Frost peered into the darkness. A half-dozen pair of glowing red eyes stared back up at them. Odd, twisted shapes only faintly human, clustered around a half-devoured corpse. Then, with a wild high-pitched chittering, the creatures disappeared into the total blackness outside the square of light.

"That's why," said Taine. "Until now, she suckled her young. Lately, though they required meat-raw meat. That was why she started killing-to provide food for her children."

Frost shook his head in dismay. "What are we going to do with them?"

Taine slammed the trap-door shut and bolted it closed. "I have no idea. That's not my problem. I plan to go home and get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow, Shaw can send me my check."

The detective stood silent for a second. "When you explain things to your boss, pass along this warning. Ghuls aren't that much different than human beings. Sexually, the two races are quite compatible. Someone had to father those monsters in the sub-basement. If I remember correctly, it was Mr. Larson, the building's owner, who insisted that Mrs. Smith be hired."

"Son-of-a-bitch," muttered Frost.

"Not exactly," replied Taine, "but close enough."

GUN CONTROL

BY STEVE ANTCHAK

I pulled up to the stoplight and looked across the street. Hardin Gun & Pawn was besieged by protestors again. Another killing involving a gun bought at the place had sparked a major anti-gun movement in the area, and with the whole Brady Bill thing burning everyone's ears, well, things were getting ugly. I parked across the street, figuring the Jimmy was safer there in front of the abortion clinic.

The protestors were mostly college kids and mothers, demanding that the place be shut down for selling guns too cheaply, therefore making them easier to obtain. Precisely why I was there.

I tried to stay unnoticed as I approached the front door, but one woman saw me. She approached, alone, bearing a sign that read: IF YOU CAN'T BUY A GUN, YOU CAN'T USE IT TO MURDER.

Nice slogan.

"Wait, please," she implored. I had intended to bull right through the lot, but something in her voice stopped me. Like she really, really cared. "I have to tell you this," she said. "Then I'll let you go, okay?" I nodded. "Go home, think about this, think about what you'll be like with a gun in your hand. That's all I ask. If you go in there now... it won't be good."

I looked at her. A young co-ed, from State probably, sincere through and through, ready to change the world. Tomorrow, she'll probably be on a

plane to Brazil to save the rain forests. Then, on to a Greenpeace boat to harass tuna fishers. Not that I was an environmental dolt, mind you. I recycled and ate less beef and watered the lawn only once a week and all that. But there are limits, where common sense takes over.

"I have thought about it," I said. "I know what I'll be like with a gun in my hand. I'll be me. You don't have to worry. Excuse me." I stepped past her.

"I tried," she said to no one.

I made it past the others easily, suffering only a few taunts and pleas to buy searchlights and fencing instead. Was that the alternative, turning my home into a barricaded fortress? I couldn't live like that.

Inside, it was empty except for the ancient shopkeep behind the counter. The man was old, so old he could have passed for my grandfather, and I'm fifty. He acted old, smacking his lips together and lolling his tongue, watching me like a hawk. He looked at me like he knew all about me, while I gawked at the semi-automatic rifles and riot shotguns adorning the walls. I felt like a kid checking out the toy gun rack at Playworld. I couldn't afford any of the good ones then, either.

Finally I approached the counter. "I want to buy a gun," I proclaimed, as if challenging the protestors outside.

"Yup," he said. *Smack*. I waited for more but I guess "yup" said it all.

I looked in the glass case that made up the counter. There were big revolvers and small ones, automatics and something that looked like a mini-Uzi. I drew a blank. Truth was, I didn't know a damn thing about guns.

"Can you help me?" I asked.

"Question is," he said, "what do you want a gun for?"

That was easy. "I need to defend my family. There've been some break-ins in our area lately. One woman was raped."

"Then what you want is somethin' to keep around the house, yup." He scratched his bristled chin. "Shotgun."

That was easy too. "My wife said no shotguns."

He raised his eyebrows at that, licked his lower lip, and mumbled something I couldn't quite make out. "I, ah, am more interested in



something along the lines of a handgun," I told him. "Something not too expensive."

"You got kids?" he asked.

"Yeah, three."

He smiled. "They gonna know about the gun?"

"I imagine I'll tell them. Why?"

"Kids like to play with things, yup. Best thing is to teach 'em how to use it, then they'll respect it. Your wife too. Everyone should hold the gun in the highest respect." He reached down under the counter and pulled out a brochure. "Here." He handed it to me. It was for the Sharpshooter Firing Range. "You got to register at a range. The law. This one's pretty good. Got human shaped targets." He smacked his lips loudly, then asked, "So how cheap a gun you lookin' for, youngster?"

"Around three hundred or so," I said.

He nodded slowly, thought for a while, scratched his chin. "Hmm. Think I might have something for you in a revolver. Don't get too many autos under four hundred, except for the occasional Browning."

"A revolver's fine." The idea of owning one of those 9mm automatics was exciting, but it also scared me some. I had read they can jam on you, and that wouldn't be too good facing off with a robber holding a pick-axe.

"Down here." He walked to the end of the counter. "Not a lot to choose from." He looked down in the case as if to make sure. "Yup. These are the cheap ones. Used."

I walked over and looked for myself. There were only six guns under the glass. One drew my attention right away, it looked old, and well used, but sturdy, rugged. I pointed to it. "How's that one, on the left there?"

"Ahh. That there's a Colt Single Action forty-five. The Ol' Peacemaker. Three hundred dollars." I looked at it again. Sinister black, the barrel at least six inches long, the wooden grip even had notches scratched in it. Pretty impressive, but I doubted the notches were really an indication of how many kills the previous owner of the gun had.

"Three hundred? That's all?" I bit my tongue.

"It's an old gun," he said. "Yup, an old gun." He scratched his head. "I

suppose I could ask for more, but these days everyone wants one of those Barretts or Walthers, and if they do actually want a wheel gun, well, no one ever buys single action anymore." He smacked his lips together and squinted, as if into the past. "She's a good gun. Used to shoot 'er myself, years ago, but then... things were different. Times change. Guns like that don't mean what they used to. I decided to sell 'er. She's the last one of the bunch." He cleared his throat noisily, hocked, but swallowed it. "But you probably want something smaller, eh? Like that Smith and Wesson Thirty-eight Special. Double action, easier to conceal. It's a little more expensive."

"How much?"

"Well, let's see. I'll give it to you for three eighty-five, and that's a good price for one of these, yup. Don't make 'em anymore. Call it the Detective Special, you know, like Philip Marlowe."

I thought of myself with the .38 Special; the suave masculinity of Bogart, pack of Lucky Strikes in a silver plated case, hat tilted to one side, trench coat... Was it me? Or the Peacemaker's hard-edged manliness of the lawless Old West, John Wayne, duels at high noon, cattle rustlers, and leather. Hell, it was no contest. I've always been a sucker for westerns.

I told him which gun I wanted, and a pleased grin spread across his face, revealing yellow and brown teeth, and a wad of tobacco shoved just under his lower lip. His face was so wrinkled and stretched, the lump of tobacco didn't show when his mouth was shut.

"I had a feeling about you," he said as he boxed up the Colt and several dozen rounds of ammo. "You and this gun were meant to be. Makes my heart glad to see a good match." I paid him, cash, and started out with the newest addition to my family, when he called to me, "Hey, boy. See you in hell." Then he winked. I left the shop, shaking my head at his unusual manner, a stupid smile taking up half my face.

I bought a gun! It was like being a kid again. I wanted to take it out right away and try it.

I had lost track of time in there, and it was already after dinner. The protestors were long gone. Instead of going home, I decided to take the gun



out to the Sharpshooter Firing Range, sign up, and shoot off half a dozen rounds. Just to get my kicks while the thrill was still fresh, you know? It's the same feeling I had when I got my first bike. I wanted to ride it right away, without waiting for the training wheels, and wound up flying straight into traffic. I lucked out that time, only got a broken leg and a hairline skull fracture. The doctors were a little worried that the blow to my head might affect my behavior, but it didn't.

I knew that Colt was meant for me, or I for it, when I fired it for the first time on the range. I hit the bull's-eye. For the longest time after the first shot I just stood there and stared at the target. Something in me felt reborn then. Something in me felt a little closer to fulfillment. Of course I didn't hit the bull's-eye again that evening, despite going through two dozen rounds, although I did come respectably close a couple times. The gun was still alien to me, still felt odd in my hand, not wrong or anything, just odd.

I knew that wouldn't last, though. Before long that gun would become as familiar to me as the hand that held it.

Ellen wasn't thrilled when I got home three hours late, and her mood got worse when I told her about the gun. She did not want it around the house, and she absolutely refused to have anything to do with it. She wouldn't even look at it. My oldest, Billy, thought it was cool, but he wasn't too interested in learning how to shoot it. He only had the weekends free, working as he was forty hours a week after school. What sixteen year old boy wants to spend his weekends out shooting a gun with his father?

He didn't know what he was missing, though, and I told him. The thrill of sighting the target and squeezing the trigger, the force that swept through your body, and the noise of the gun going off in your hand... the feeling of effectiveness you had against whatever might be coming at you. Imaginary bandits taking a bullet through the heart.

My youngest, Jerome, well, the very first thing he said when he found out was, "Can I go out and shoot some bad guys with it?" I laughed. He was only seven, so how could he understand? I did let him hold it, unloaded, and he could barely lift the thing.

So it ended up just being me out at the range every weekend, which was actually just fine with me. I liked being alone there, alone with the Peacemaker.

I got a subscription to *Guns & Ammo*, which Ellen wasn't happy about. She was even less so when I bought a nice leather holster. I'd forgotten that some of the money I'd spent was to go toward summer camp for Jerome. It was a great holster, though, with a strap for around the leg, gunfighter style. I was getting to be a fair shot, too, and started going out to the range after work a couple times a week, staying past supper, to improve faster. Ellen was displeased with that, too.

We talked about it one day.

"Look," I said, "I have to become an expert with the gun if we're going to have it around the house. You really should think about coming out to the range once in a while, at least to get an idea of what it's like."

"I already told you I didn't want anything to with it," she said. "But the issue here is you. Staying at the range on weekdays past supper was not part of the deal. It's bad enough you keep that thing under the bed."

"Okay, so I'll cut down on the range. But you have to admit that this area isn't as safe as it once was, right?"

She nodded, reluctantly.

"And we need some kind of protection around here, right?"

She didn't nod then, didn't even look me in the face. She knew I was right, though, because it was true. When the city started expanding, and mass transit got big, the crime rate went up. It gave those city kids a way out to the 'burbs, where decent, hardworking folks just wanted some peace in their lives. Vandalism, bicycles stolen off front porches, then break-ins and finally rape. The rape was it for me. What was after that? I wasn't going to sit around and wait to find out. Anyone breaking into my house had just better be prepared to face the consequences.

Billy started staying out pretty late on the weekends, which didn't really bother me, because you have to give teenagers some slack. They want to go out and party, meet girls, see movies, etc. Like every other teenager since the beginning of time, I imagine. I waited up for him in



the beginning, but when you have to get up at 5:30 for work, well, staying up till 2:00 in the morning can be detrimental to your health. Bill was a pretty clean-cut kid and didn't seem to have very wild friends, so I didn't worry too much. I suppose I could have laid down the law and told him to be in by, say, 1:00, but I didn't believe in doing that. Don't give them too many unnecessary restrictions, let them be responsible on their own, that was my philosophy.

That weekend there were some more break-ins. The next door neighbor, Joe Tennen, confronted someone in his house. Joe didn't have a gun, he had a baseball bat. Luckily the burglar didn't have a gun either, but he managed to wrest the bat away from Joe and use it on him. Joe wound up with a concussion, and his place was cleaned out. Nobody saw a suspicious car in the neighborhood, nobody saw anything.

The night after that happened I could hardly sleep. I was awakened by every little noise. Of course I thought it highly improbable that the thieves would knock off another house in the same neighborhood the next night, but then maybe they were just plain old stupid.

At one point, I woke up to the sound of the stairs creaking, footsteps coming up them. Those damn stairs used to drive me crazy the way they groaned under even the lightest person, but now they were my early warning system, my intruder alert. Ellen was fast asleep, the Peacemaker under the bed. My hand was on it in an instant, but I stopped myself.

It had to be Billy coming home late. I knew it was him.

I listened. Steps in the hall, then just outside my bedroom door. Billy's door opened and closed, and finally the stereo came on, just barely audible. It was Billy, and I finally started breathing again.

So I laid back in bed and realized that had I gone out there with my gun, I might have shot my own son. If he'd startled me, coming around a corner or something... Letting my imagination get away from me like that, it could be dangerous.

That morning, Saturday, I had planned to go out shooting but decided it was a better idea to stay home and get some work done around the house, stuff I'd been neglecting lately. The hedges needed trimming, the lawnmower

was broken, the window in the kitchen needed a new lock, etc. Besides, ammunition was expensive; I didn't need to be wasting it like I was.

When I was out in the drive working on the mower, Ellen came out to talk to me.

"Why aren't you out with your gun?" she asked.

I didn't look at her. I was trying to loosen a bolt that held the blades on. "I don't need to go out shooting every day," I said. "It's not like I'm addicted to it or anything. There's plenty of stuff around here to keep me busy."

"I was starting to worry about you, I must admit," she said, squatting down beside me. "I guess I should have expected it. A boy with his new toy, can't tear them apart for a week, then suddenly it's forgotten and something else takes its place... for another week."

I looked at her then. She was wearing jeans cut off at the knees, her hair was up, and she had on one of my old sleeveless shirts. Her face was red from rubbing it — she'd just finished scrubbing the kitchen floor, an important accomplishment in "damage control," as we called housework.

"You're probably right," I said, although I knew I'd be back at the range on Monday right after work. "You know, I've been thinking a lot about sailing lately," I joked.

She laughed. "Yeah, probably around the world." She stood, and I could tell she felt better. I was not expecting a pleasant Monday evening when I got home from shooting.

Monday rolled around, and even before work I was looking forward to target practice with the same anticipation a teenager looks forward to the prospect of kissing his first date. I even considered asking Billy again if he wanted to come along, but I knew he'd refuse. I thought to myself, Damn it, if I like to go out shooting then he better like it too! I guess a father really does want his son to follow in his footsteps.

At work a couple guys were talking guns, so I went out to the wagon to get mine, to show it off some. My boss didn't really appreciate my bringing it in, and things got loud, and it all culminated in my screaming I ought to shoot him, and he fired me.



I went to the Sharpshooter Firing Range early, stayed well past supper, and missed practically every target; I was so pissed I could hardly see straight. I wasted a lot of bullets. When I got home, finally, I was in no mood to be castigated. Ellen was already in bed, but her disappointment hung in the air like a black cloud. I went to sleep on the couch.

I got up early, before Ellen and Billy, and left, hoping to keep the guise of having a job until I could find another one. I took the Peacemaker with me, figuring I might go to the range for a bit, to clear my head, then get a paper and search the classifieds.

Unfortunately the range didn't open till after noon, so I hit an IHOP and sat there with a paper and a cup of coffee all morning. I skipped the range and went home, called some places, got nowhere, and went to bed at 4:00 in the afternoon. I must have been tired, because when I woke next, it was 3:30 a.m.

I'd heard a noise. I froze, and listened. There was someone downstairs, in the kitchen; I could hear movement clearly. I didn't know Billy to get up at this hour for a snack or anything, so I decided I would have to check it out.

The gun found its way into my grasp, weighing heavily in my hand, hefted from the floor. I felt power, to stop anyone who thought he could break in to my house and threaten my family. Before I knew it I was stealthily padding down the hall, gun raised at the ready, when suddenly I heard whoever it was coming up the stairs. I stopped. My heart was pounding so hard it hurt. Whatever was going to happen, it was going to happen now.

For a brief instant a wave of doubt crashed over me, and I wanted to run back to my bedroom and get back in bed and be asleep, never having heard any noise at all. But... I could hear breathing, he was getting closer. I had to act. I decided that if I confronted whoever it was while he was still only halfway up the stairs, then I would have the advantage.

I inched around the corner, trying to keep my gun hand from shaking so much, and saw my son coming up the stairs. He looked up, saw me, saw the Colt, and stopped.

"It's me," he whispered.

I regarded him silently for a moment, then backed into the hall, and went back to bed.

I could have shot him. That's what I told him at 6:00 the next morning when he came shuffling out of his room for school, still only half awake. I told him that next time he might not be so lucky, that next time if he didn't watch it he might get his ass shot off. He just sat there silently and took it, until his ride came.

After that I needed to calm down, so I took the Peacemaker out to a field and took shots at rabbits, bottles, whatever. I thought I might go to the pawn shop again, to look over some of the automatics, but then I figured I don't need another gun. I wanted only one gun. My gun.

I popped a round off at a Coke bottle, missed, and suddenly heard from behind me, "You want to drop that gun?"

I turned around. There was the county sheriff, standing about four feet behind me, shotgun levelled at my gut. I hadn't even heard him. For a moment I thought I might raise the gun, point it at him, squeeze the trigger, but... I dropped the gun.

He walked over and kicked the gun a little farther away, shotgun on me the whole time. "What in the hell do you think you're doing?" he asked. "I could have shot you." His mirror-shades showed me my stern expression, so I softened it a bit.

"Just target shooting, sir," I told him. "Got a license for it in the car. I usually go to the range, but it's—"

"The Sharpshooter?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Hmmm. Yeah, I think I recognize you. Go there myself." He tilted his head toward my gun. "Mind if I check it out?" How could I refuse?

He picked it up, and my cheeks flushed with anger. Would he want to check out my car afterward? My wife? Who did he think he was? He pointed it at the ground, but didn't pull the trigger.

"Nice," he said. "Got a six shooter myself. Was gonna get me one of those nine millimeters, but then someone told me, 'If you need more 'n six shots, you're not in a gunfight, you're in a war.' So I figured I wasn't in a war..."



He shrugged, then handed the gun over. I took it slowly, and my anger, my jealousy, subsided. "You can't shoot out here. Within city limits."

"Oh, I didn't know that," I lied. "Thanks."

"No bother. Stay out of trouble, okay?" He started back to his car, his shotgun hefted over his shoulder, but still ready for a quick draw if need be.

I went home, and Ellen was there. Home early from work, wasn't feeling well. As soon as she saw me walk in with the gun, she started crying. "I can't deal with this," she said. We talked, or tried to, and I told her I'd get another job right away. She told me I shouldn't have lost my job in the first place. She was right. I told her that and told her I'd get rid of the gun, get counselling, do whatever it took to make her feel better about me. Finally she said she'd try, she'd stay a while longer, to give me a chance.

The gun was under the bed again that night. Its presence was strong, almost too strong, but I resisted its pull and concentrated on making love to my wife. Even then I could only manage climax when I fantasized about holding my gun, cleaning it, loading it, aiming it at Ellen, and pulling the trigger. After sex I took a shower and thought about killing myself with it.

I lay awake in bed for I don't know how long but eventually fell into a fretful sleep. I dreamed about being a gunfighter, the fast draw, hard liquor, John Wayne.

I was awakened at 4:00.

I was instantly lucid, aware of my surroundings. Had I heard glass breaking? I listened. Yes, I heard someone swearing downstairs. Breaking a window? That was how some of the robberies in the area had taken place. I reached down and grabbed my gun. I don't recall even thinking as I slipped out of bed, except that I felt good, confident.

In the hall, yes, I heard someone in my study, fiddling around with my desk. That was where Billy put the car keys when he got home late, but I knew he hadn't gone out, and he wasn't the type to sneak out after Ellen and I were in bed. I reached the bottom of the stairs silently, my heart pounded in my ears. It was maddening, the sound of it filled my head.

I hoped to God it wasn't Billy. This was what I'd been waiting for, what I wanted. I wanted to kill someone, I had to kill. The gun needed a life to have a life of its own. And soon. Very, very soon.

I stopped at the door to the study, unafraid.

"Come out of there," I ordered. "Come out of there now."

The door slowly opened, pushed from the inside, and then I heard, "Dad, it's me." The door opened all the way and there stood Billy!

I didn't lower the Peacemaker. How could I be sure he wasn't the burglar? How could I know he wasn't the one who'd raped that woman, who'd clubbed our neighbor almost to death? He was out late a lot, and what did I really know about his friends?

"Dad," he said, his voice fluttering as fear crept into it. "Put the gun away, Dad." Slowly, painstakingly, my finger began to squeeze down on the trigger. "Hey—" my son started to say something, but it was too late. The old Peacemaker went off like a cannon, a roar louder than ever before, issuing forth its unquestioning, unassuming, unwavering judgment: Guilty. The punishment?

Death.

I heard something upstairs suddenly, footsteps. There was someone up there. Ellen? Maybe.

Maybe not.

IN HER HANDS

BY BLYTHE AYNE

Narindra passed through the low doorway into the coffee shop. It was a bit cooler than the red dirt roadway of Dhurma's main street, but only because the dirt walls blocked the summer's drought-heavy sun. Men were on a tiny patio smoking their narghiles, sweating, and gossiping lazily.

Narindra decided to wait for his friend, Chandra, inside. He liked the darkness. He felt he would do anything to be truly cool. He wished ice could be as easily had here in the village as it was in New Delhi.

He grabbed again at the change knotted in the rag at his waist. It was only a couple of rupees at most, but it made him feel like a man. How he hated poverty! All the other boys in his school had money to spend, and here he was, fourteen and with *nothing*! Why did his mother have to send him to that school where he was the lowest of the low? She was proud when he'd been chosen to attend the secondary school on scholarship. He was the brightest boy from the families who could not afford the tuition.

Oh yes, he was bright, he knew that. But his mother couldn't understand what it was like to be the poorest, the worst dressed, from the worst part of the village. Only the other poor boy, Chandra, from Rewari, befriended him. Narindra's family was from the same jati as all the boys at the school, but they treated him as if he was unclean.

He smiled as he fondled the change through the thin fabric. He had gotten a bit of justice for himself this morning when he took this money from his mother's room.

His mother! Eighteen living children and pregnant again. Siddi, one of the boys at school, had told him he had nothing and would never have anything because his father was rich only in that which gives women babies... and that it was a wonder Narindra was so intelligent with a mother who was stupid enough to let his father do it to her again and again.

Oh yes, there was a bloody fight... but afterwards Narindra knew that Siddi's words would never leave him, because they were true. He surely was getting a *good* education at this private school.

And so, Narindra told himself, it served his mother right that he stole the bit of change she made sewing for the neighborhood. He would buy himself fresh mango juice, now! During the drought! But he wanted to wait for Chandra first. He wanted someone besides the shop owner to see him spend money. If only he would come.

Narindra, sitting on a stool, looked once again around the shop, but it was dark and all he could see were the men on the patio with their palpable sweat. Narindra felt as if he could smell that metallic frowziness even from here. He looked away. But as he brought his eyes back to the bar, he saw an old crone across the room, sitting tight in the black corner, her widow's white sari making a thin gray outline of her bent body.

She gestured to Narindra. He ignored her but soon found his eyes drawn to her again. She crooked a bony finger at him. He could barely see the motion, and wanted to pretend she wasn't there. He *wished* she wasn't there, but he was getting up and walking toward her anyway.

"I have a message for you, pretty boy," she said. Narindra said nothing. He stood and watched her as she took the decanter of oil from the table and poured a drop in the palm of her hand.

"Look here," she said. Narindra didn't know why, but he bent closer over her, looking at the palm of her hand. She smelled of burning sandalwood. Narindra loved



that fragrance and it made him trust the strange old woman with the ancient face that bore no lines.

He peered at the spherical drop of oil, although he could barely see it on the brown palm. But he sensed there was movement in the darkness. He leaned closer, and the drop of oil became a distinct object. He watched it cloud over, then become clear as the night sky. Suddenly there appeared Kali, the goddess of death, all of her arms wriggling about like a beetle on its back. And there was something, *something* in one of her hands.

Narindra did not want to know what it was. The soothing perfume of sandalwood had changed to a sickly sweetness, and Narindra jumped back, away from the odious old woman. He jumped right into Chandra, who had come up behind him.

"What's the matter with you? What are you doing with this old woman?"

Narindra shrugged. "Nothing. Crazy old witch. Let's get out of here."

"Hey, what about my mango juice?" Chandra asked.

Narindra swaggered to the doorway. "It smells bad in here. Let's go next door."

When they finally got settled with their mango juice, Narindra even paid for Chandra's, which he never expected of himself. But it was almost worth it when he saw how impressed Chandra was. It was easy to be powerful.

That night, as he fell asleep on the roof of the house with several of his brothers strewn about like logs and snoring in a chorus as if they were sawing one another into winter firewood, Narindra was haunted again by the awful vision in the palm of the hag's hand. Kali! Lord Shiva's wife in her most terrifying, angry, merciless aspect. Goddess of Death.

What did Kali want with him?

He shrugged and laughed. "It was just a trick, a bit of silly magic. That old crone has nothing better to do than try to scare boys." He quickly let the old woman and even Kali fall from his mind as he joined his brothers in sleep.

The heat continued to oppress the village of Dhurma. Everyone moved about like sluggish fish — except there was no water and no swaying green plants to diffuse the relentless sun.

Narindra could not stand the thought of going to school... sitting there and watching the teachers pretend to teach and the students pretend to learn when in truth everyone was nursing his fantasy about being in some cool place, doing nothing.

Why live like that, Narindra asked himself, with your mind in one place and your body in another? He borrowed his older brother's swimming trunks, the only western-style swimming trunks in the house, and headed out toward school.

But he walked right past the school and continued on through the upper class housing, right on to the "Euro-Hotel," the one where foreigners stayed.

One of his brothers used to work in the kitchen here and he had brought Narindra with him to work several times. Narindra knew the back doors and back passages like he knew the path from home to school. He put his books behind the trash by the door, stuffed his trunks under his clothing and went up the back stairs.

Prowling down one of the halls he found a room that had been vacated, the door standing open and the key on the dresser. What luck! And he hadn't encountered one person, not so much as a maid.

He hung the "do not disturb" sign on the outside of the door. Three hours to bask in air conditioning! He turned it on full force. What's more, there was an almost untouched breakfast. Narindra pulled up a chair, drank the orange juice, then he poured the corn flakes into the bowl, smothered them in sugar and drowned them with milk. He even enjoyed the cold weak western notion of coffee. This was living!

Why couldn't his father have a good job, a real job like the fathers of the other boys, working for the government or a big contractor? Or like Siddi's father, own a furniture store. A *real* store. Siddi who had only one sister and no brothers, who had hit the nail of truth so infuriatingly on the head when he'd pointed out to Narindra the reason for the inflexible poverty of his family.

Why, in short, Narindra wondered, did he have to have *his* father, who made what little money he could vending fruits and vegetables in a hole in the wall on a wretched street four blocks from home? He could hear his



father call out "*Keerla! Keerla!*" all the way home sometimes. Or more humiliatingly, on the walk to and from school.

When he started at the private school, he thought he might make friends with a couple of the boys who lived on this side of the village... not as far from school as he did, but at least on this side. But then, on the second day of the first term, he saw three of the boys look at him and laugh when his father's piercing call reached them like a peacock's cry.

He began to realize then, that there was no hope for his status, that all he would be able to get from life was what he took.

Looking up at the mirror over the dresser he smiled. If looks had anything to do with being able to take, then he was better off than all those boys with their rich fathers.

He was his father's pet because he was intelligent, and he was his mother's pet because he was intelligent and beautiful.

For some reason his hair was softer than any of his brothers, with a slight wave. His skin was lighter too than most of his siblings' and his eyes, huge, heavily lashed and captivating, were, in addition, a shade of gray. He was taller than most of the boys in his class, and his limbs were long and well-formed.

The only thing he worried about was that perhaps he was too pretty. Everyone said how much he looked like his older sister. Shanti was a constant topic of conversation among the women and, well, the men too, as the most beautiful girl in the village. And she didn't even have the gray eyes.

Well, we may look alike, Narindra thought, but we couldn't be more different. Shanti was eighteen and still not married. She refused to leave her mother, while Narindra wanted nothing more than to leave the entire village behind.

If only, Narindra thought, there were not so many children in the family. He couldn't even keep the names of the four babies straight, two sets of twins, ten months apart. He couldn't imagine what his mother might look like not pregnant. Why couldn't they live in New Delhi in a huge white sparkling palace of a house with a room for each of them... or at least a room for him... like this hotel room? Air conditioning and pictures of Paris on the

wall, television, and even a bathroom with running water. He looked at the bath tub and the shower. He decided he'd take a bath *and* a shower. What luxury!

After that indulgence, Narindra put on his brother's swimming trunks. They were a sumptuous shade of blue, like pool water, and he was sure he looked as westernized as anyone could. He wrapped his clothes in a towel then went up the back stairs and came out on the roof, where the pool was.

No one was at the pool except two girls when he strolled out, blinking in the sun. The blast of heat from the sun after the cold of the air conditioned room felt fantastic. He glanced at the blond girls, probably about his age, he decided, and they looked like sisters.

They were as still as the air, getting tanned. Narindra couldn't tell if they were watching him or not, behind their dark glasses. He stretched out in one of the deck chairs, wishing he had dark glasses too.

Everything was hot and close and still. Then one of the girls got up, jumped into the pool, swam from one end to the other and back, and got out, her tiny yellow bathing suit clinging to her faintly pink skin. Narindra ached for all that pinky white skin.

He'd never seen, in real life, so much white skin. In fact, it was only last year when he'd seen almost as much female flesh, when his neighbor had gone to New Delhi for a week and the neighbor's young wife had asked Narindra to come over and help her move some furniture. The furniture was in the bedroom, but the only moving that had been done was when the wife pulled Narindra down onto the bed, promising to take him somewhere he'd never been before, and then fulfilling that promise.

In the darkened room he'd only caught glimpses of her dusky skin intertwined with her red sari, which she did not take off.

He had fallen in love, but her husband returned the next day. The wife had actually acted as though she could not remember Narindra's name the next time she came over to visit his mother.

And now, look at these girls, almost naked, in the salacious sunlight. The two girls put their heads together and chatted. Narindra listened hard. They were speaking English, but it was some American dialect



and it was difficult for him to follow. He was used to the proper British accent of his instructors.

"Where're you from?" one of the girls asked.

"I'm from New Delhi," Narindra said carefully. English was not his strongest subject.

"Why're you here in this dumpy little village then?" the other one asked.

"Be-because my father has some meetings... with a contractor."

"Oh!" they both said. "That's why we're here! Our father has business. It's awful, isn't it? There's nothing to do!"

"That's true," Narindra said.

"You're pretty cute," the other one said. "You're just about the cutest guy we've seen in this country."

Narindra didn't know how to answer. He opened his mouth, thinking to say something like, "You are cute too. You are about the cutest American girls I've ever seen." But he wasn't sure about the grammar. Was it 'Too you are cute' or the other way around, and was it 'ever seen' or 'even seen'?

Right then one of the hotel workers came out on the roof and gave him a bad look. Then he asked Narindra what he was doing there and told him to get out, calling him by his surname.

Damn my big family, he thought, everyone knows us by our looks.

Embarrassed beyond any embarrassment he'd ever known, and even angrier than that, he bolted down the back stairs, putting his clothing on over the trunks as he went. He gathered his books from the back door and threw the towel in the trash. He wanted to keep it, but he had no place for it and it served this horrid hotel right to have it thrown in their own trash.

Narindra spent the rest of the day in the depressing little village park. He sat under the banyan tree on the brown grass, nursing the wound to his devastated pride.

Then it dawned on him that the hotel employee had spoken to him in Hindi and undoubtedly the two young girls did not speak the language, certainly not well enough to understand what had transpired. The more he thought about it, the more he convinced himself that it must have looked to the two girls as if he had been informed of some tragic emergency.

By the time he got up to go home, he had played out every imaginable permutation that his young and fertile brain could conceive of the two girls' giving him sympathy over his sudden unnamed misfortune.

He was grinning as he entered the house.

"Did you have a good day at school?" his mother asked, holding her back with one hand and one of the babies in her other arm.

"A very good day at school, Mother."

"What did you learn?"

"Oh, things that you wouldn't understand. But the school master told me that I'm moving forward in my class. I'm no longer in the middle; I'm above average."

His mother smiled that proud smile she reserved just for him, nodding. "Of course. You will be first before the year is over, I'm sure."

After dinner, Narindra went out to find Chandra. He wanted to tell him about his day, about the fabulous white naked skin of the American girls.

But as he walked, he thought of what he'd told his mother. Why did he have to make such a *big* lie? It was enough to say he'd had a good day at school. But it was so easy to make her give him that proud smile. He couldn't resist proving to himself that he could do it.

Narindra was walking into the sunset on the dirt road toward Chandra's when suddenly someone was facing him. Squinting, he saw it was the horrid old crone.

She held up her palm and in the bright light, and without even the drop of oil, Narindra could clearly see the image of Kali dancing in the surface of the woman's flat palm.

A shiver convulsed him as he watched the Goddess' feet stamp, her arms flailing and the shadowy form... a human form... shaking like a rag doll in one of her hands.

He turned and ran home. *Twice* the Goddess of Death.

A couple of days later, one of the babies became sick. It was a strange sickness... she was very quiet and turned her tiny face to the wall, refusing to eat.



"Narindra," his father said, "you must tend the vegetable stand today. I have to go to New Delhi to get special medicine for the baby."

Narindra wished to die on the spot. What could be worse? It was a larger humiliation than having his father stand there selling the few sad fruits and vegetables.

"No Father, please. Have one of my brothers do it. I must not miss school. I am trying to become first in my class."

"Your older brothers are all working, and your younger brothers are too young, nor are they as good at numbers as you."

"But, Father..."

"Furthermore, I was told you did not attend school the day before yesterday, although you told your mother you did. If you can miss a day for selfishness, you can miss a day to help your family. We will discuss that subject, and another, when I have more time."

"Another?" Narindra asked, looking surprised.

"Yes. The matter of your mother missing some money..."

"Father! I would never..."

"Don't add more lies to your sins. Now I must leave. Go to the shop immediately. We cannot miss the morning shoppers."

Narindra left the house angry. He had already promised himself that he would *never* sell fruits and vegetables.

But he thought of how his father had looked, his face gray and lined, his hair recently gray at the temples. Narindra hadn't realized his father was growing old until just this moment. He really had to think about helping his family. After all, he would soon be a man.

He got to the vegetable stand, unlocked the metal front and rolled it up. He set out the baskets of fruits and vegetables, sorting through them, culling out the ones that were so rotten they were contaminating their neighbors.

It seemed that the day was a bit cooler. Perhaps the rains would start soon.

Narindra was just beginning to think that maybe this wasn't so bad. It was better than having his teachers tell him to do this, do that. He was the boss here.

Several housewives came up and started picking through the goods, their bright colored saris crowded together.

Narindra was strutting back and forth. "Don't squeeze the fruit, madames," he ordered, gesturing like his father did and feeling important.

Right then a group of Narindra's peers passed on their way to school. One of them called, "There's Prasad's son. Now we see why he goes to a private school. He needs an education to sell cucumbers to housewives!"

All the boys laughed and Narindra turned his back, putting several vegetables on the scale in order to look busy, in order to look as though he had not heard them.

But all morning he burned, getting hotter and hotter remembering the taunt. He felt he could not endure the malodorous oranges and melons and herbs one moment more, let alone the scent of oil on the long braids of the housewives as they leaned close to him, picking through the produce.

He could not stand to be there when the boys returned from school, no matter *what* the consequences might be. It was 2:30. He had to get out of there before school let out. There was only one woman poking around at the wilted bunches of cilantro, a friend of his mother's.

"Come on, pick one out," Narindra said to her. "They won't get fresher just because you're handling them!"

"Narindra, don't talk to me like that!"

"Don't poke at my vegetables like that! Come on now, I have to leave, I have to get something for my mother."

She looked at him hard, and he knew that she knew he was lying. "Why can't you be a good boy, Narindra? You come from such a good family."

"I am good! Maybe you want to see how good I am. You'd love it!" He gave her a suggestive glance.

The woman shook her head and held up a nectarine. "You're very comely, my boy, it's true. Like this beautiful sweet nectarine — but like it too, under the surface there is rot." She pierced the fruit with her thumb and tore out its ugly brown center.

She threw the nectarine down and walked away.



Narindra watched her leave, then laughed and set about closing shop. "Another crazy old woman! Everywhere, crazy old women!"

Narindra thought of taking some money from the day's earnings, but, remembering his father's accusation of that morning, he was afraid to. He stayed out until after dark. He couldn't stand to go home. The sick baby and surely his father knew by now that he had closed the vegetable stand early. He just couldn't face it!

Clouds gathered overhead in the darkness: he saw the thin moon and the stars disappear. The redolence of rain was in the air and a cool breeze stirred.

Narindra always loved the first rain more than anything. But now he felt depressed. He turned homeward, walking slowly.

Shanti hurried toward him in the night just as the first drops began to fall. "Where have you been?" There was lightning in her eyes and thunder in her voice. "We've been looking for you. Get home at once!" She turned and hurried away in the rain.

"What's wrong?" Narindra shouted after her. She did not answer him, and he knew it must be the baby.

The rain was coming down hard now, pricking him like needles. He put his head down and ran after his sister, fear mounting in him. He ran headlong into someone. He jumped back, peering into the darkness.

To his horror, it was the old crone again. But as he watched, she transformed into Kali, seven feet tall, naked, youthful and voluptuous, her breasts huge and perfectly round above him, her skin golden, casting off a golden glow into the rain. Her whole body pulsed with sensuality and the stench of death.

Finally Narindra was able to tear his eyes from her awesome sexuality to the object that still dangled in one of her hands.

He let out a cry. There was the limp shadow of his father. Kali's hand was plunged into his chest, into his heart.

Narindra fell to his knees. "Oh great Goddess Kali, do not hurt my father! I am the one who is bad. Take me!"

Kali laughed a horrible, terrifying laugh, then faded to nothing while the rain came down harder and harder.

Narindra pulled himself back up to his feet. Shaking with fear, he ran home as fast as he could. He dashed up the stairs to his parents' room where the doctor and his mother stood on either side of the bed over his father, and the children watched huge-eyed and silent.

"What?" Narindra asked, looking at the doctor.

"Your father had a heart attack. He *must* take it easy. He has too much stress..."

"Narindra," his father called weakly.

Narindra went to his father and knelt by his bedside.

"Why are you bad?" his father asked him. "I don't understand. You have more than all your brothers and sisters, but you cannot be trusted, you steal, you lie, you show no responsibility. You were the son of my heart, and you have broken my heart."

Finally Narindra cried real tears. "Don't say it, Father. I'm sorry, I'll change! I've been bad, you're right. Forgive me, forgive me and I'll change!"

But his father did not forgive him. Instead, he breathed his last breath, and the doctor reached over and closed his eyes.

The family broke out wailing, but Narindra slipped from his father's bedside and went up to the roof to stand in the pelting rain. He thought how he had been warned again and again, and now the horror that Kali was in possession of his father.

But suddenly he realized that Kali did not have his father. She had taken his life, but she did not possess his good father's soul. He would come back again, undoubtedly as a Brahman, and surely with only good sons, as he deserved.

Now Narindra knew what the message had been all along. That Kali possessed *him*... that all his long and miserable life, he would know what was right.

But he would always do wrong. He belonged to Kali.

“WRAPPED UP IN WHITE LINEN AND COLD AS THE CLAY”

BY GREGORY NICOLL AND PATRÍCIA ROSS

Cooper's body lay on the cooling board, completely drained of blood. Quarts of dark liquid filled the drainage trough, a few horseflies buzzing inquisitively over its still, crimson surface.

Matthew Brackett lashed his apron around himself and turned to the small oak table where his freshly cleaned tools lay gleaming — scalpels, scissors, injector, trocars, aneurism hook, arterial tube, separator, forceps, and the long steel needles. Everything was in place for the long, grim task of the night ahead.

Matthew smiled. “Easy there, Blackie. It’s just a dream.”

Sleeping by the doorway to the office, Matthew’s small black rat terrier twitched its lips and growled softly. The tips of its padded feet spasmed, flexing as if chasing another rodent from the mortuary shop.

The undertaker braced himself with a sip of hot, strong chicory coffee, its surface the color of congealing blood. Brewed from beans carried by rail all the way from New Orleans, the coffee tasted good, well worth the high price he’d paid for it. He held it close to his nose. Its dark, rich aroma was a pleasant change from the heavy odors of bleacher, chloride of lime, and embalming fluid which dominated the room.

The logs in the fireplace shifted as the flames consumed them. Matthew stepped over his sleeping dog to check on the fire and to refill his cup from

the little gunmetal pot warming on the hearth. Though this was an exceptionally cool night, Matthew knew that unless he accomplished his work, the next day's New Mexico heat would make Sonny Cooper's body less than welcome on its long stagecoach journey to the north.

The changes Death brings, he mused sadly. In life, Sonny Cooper was known everywhere in the territory, welcomed for his sweet, constant singing and his spirited fiddling. But now, with a .45 slug in his heart, the only doors that will open for him are those of his father up in Santa Fe.

The sleeping dog yelped out loud, the twitching of its lips, tail, and feet increasing desperately. Its drowsy growl became a roar.

"Blackie!" the undertaker shouted, pausing from an arterial incision to watch the little creature. Perhaps I should wake him, he thought. He set the scalpel down on the table and stepped over to where the little dog lay.

At that moment the black terrier opened its eyes and leaped from its wicker basket bed, scurrying toward the cooling board where Cooper's lifeless body sprawled.

"Blackie!" Matthew shouted. "Blackie!" He reached out to grab the dog, but it deftly evaded his grasp.

A beast possessed, the terrier hopped into the trough of blood at the table's end, leaping and splashing. It yelped, frightened, rolling in the dark liquid as though its fur were aflame and only Cooper's blood could extinguish it. Ultimately the dog's frantic motions tilted the trough and it spilled, a tide of blood rinsing the floor.

BEWARE LAREDO

Matthew gawked uncomprehendingly at the words, written in crimson on the mortuary floor. The balance of the blood rolled slowly away, pooling in a distant depression of the boards. It left only this two-word command.

The little dog, now becalmed, returned placidly to its bed and began licking the gore from its fur.

The undertaker studied the message with nervous amazement.

BEWARE LAREDO

It was an unholy miracle — scrawled by an unseen hand, using a quart of the dead man's congealing blood as its ink.

Matthew found his coffee cup and nervously swallowed a sip of the hot, fragrant fluid. It tasted like blood in his mouth. He spat it out and cast the cup away, eggshell china shattering with a glassy tinkle.

The message — what did it mean? What could it mean?

He pondered this as he fetched several large rags from a bucket out back and wiped away all evidence of the spilled blood.

As he worked, he found himself remembering his nanny, Black Jenny. Something brought back to him the sound of her voice, whispering in the fearful darkness. He'd been a scared little boy, unable to sleep through the long, hot nights on the plantation, but he'd never forgotten what she told him:

"A baby borned at midnight will be seeing ghosts. You sees 'em, Little Matt, an' that can be bad or good. You got the makins' to use 'em to help men. Don' let 'em trick you to doin' nothin' else. You be you own master. Don' let 'em trick you...."

Spoken years ago and over half a continent away, the dark old woman's words still rang true to him.

At length Matthew decided the startling command "**BEWARE LAREDO**" was not intended for him — after all, the town of Laredo was on the border of Old Mexico down in south Texas, hundreds of miles to the southeast. Matthew had never entertained any notion of travelling there.

Satisfied, he tossed the soiled rags into the fire.

Blackie was sleeping soundly again when Matthew resumed his work on Sonny Cooper's corpse. For hours the undertaker labored, until at last the final fluid injection was complete. Sunlight breaking through the curtained window hastened him in his work.

There was no time for proper subcutaneous stitches as he closed the incisions; simple external anatomical stitches had to suffice. He carefully washed the corpse in chloride of lime, cleansing it of its deathly odor. After wrapping Cooper securely in a white linen shroud, he generously applied New Century Bleacher to the exposed portions of the skin. This would retard the inevitable drying and browning during the journey ahead.

At the full onset of dawn, Matthew hammered the last nails in the lid of the pine box which was to be Cooper's home for eternity.



An express agent with a pouting, toad-like face carefully tallied Matthew's silver dollars, nodding as he counted. With a slight smile, he laid a pair of first class tickets on the smooth polished counter. Then, in accordance with the law, he produced a tiny bottle of red ink and marked one of the tickets with the single word, "CORPSE."

Matthew studied this inscription as the ink dried. The red lettering reminded him profoundly of the curious message he'd seen in the blood spilled on his floor. The lettering was nearly identical. But, he concluded, this detail was of no real consequence — these tickets were fare north to Sante Fe, not south to Laredo.

In the air outside the express office hung the stink of horse manure. Passing wagon wheels creaked, and horseflies buzzed maddeningly everywhere. The sun was now level with the garish green roofline of Paddy Doyle's Saloon, and the heat of the day was beginning to rise. Matthew tilted his black silk top hat slightly to better shade his eyes.

From Paddy Doyle's came snatches of a clear Irish tenor leading a chorus of off-key drovers in song. The tinkle of piano keys drifted on the dusty hot breeze along with the boisterous, happy shouts of men already pleasantly drunk before noon.

The jingling of the stage harness drew Matthew's attention. A bandy-legged shotgun rider and three nervous town boys were trying to load the fresh pine coffin on the top deck of the stagecoach. The team snorted and stamped shod hooves. Six pairs of eyes rolled white behind black blinders. Six pairs of ears flattened over boxy skulls. One large chestnut gelding neighed his fear at the scent of cleansed death and rose in the harness. Twenty-four legs splayed and stumbled in all directions at once.

The coach rocked wildly, creaking on its bullhide slings, and it was all the four men could do to hold the coffin on. The startled shotgunner jumped to the ground and spoke soothingly to the big red horse and its fidgeting companions. Gradually the team was calmed, and the men secured the casket to the top deck with worn leather straps.

The coach was a Concord Mail, built of solid New Hampshire hardwoods. It was a brilliant red and not yet pitted from gravel or bleached by years of service on the alkali flats. The fine coach was a handsome sight, its vermilion sides the brightest color visible in the busy, dusty streets this morning, where the predominant hue was a dirty brown. Gleaming from its high front seat was the long silvery barrel of the guard's 10-gauge Remington, protruding from the coach's side like the horn of a steer.

The undertaker turned his head as he heard the banging of the saloon's bat-wing doors. A small, gaunt trailsman emerged from Paddy Doyle's, his dingy wide hat flapping on his back, and tugging at its lanyard. With a liquor bottle under one arm and an old 1860 model Henry repeater under the other, he brandished a flashy long silver-ferruled buggy whip in his right hand. The dusty little man whistled as he swaggered up the street.

For a moment a grim frown darkened Matthew's face as he recalled his gruesome experience assisting an intoxicated military surgeon during the Battle of Atlanta. Then Matthew shook off the foul memory and tentatively extended his hand in greeting.

The whistling coachman paused in his tune and sighed. Then his friendly grin raised the edges of his drooping moustache. The man's gloved grip was strong and steady as he clasped Matthew's hand and shook it. There was little evidence of cactus whisky on the coachman's breath, but a pleasant hint of tobacco clung to his clothes. "You must be the undertaker who's riding with us today," he said. "I'm the man who's driving the rig."

"Indeed," the undertaker answered. "I am Matthew Brackett, proud provider of embalming and funeral services to Estancia, New Mexico, and all the surrounding territories. Honored to meet you."

"My Christian name's Jed Skinner," returned the coachman. "Most folks jes' call me 'Mule' on account of how well it goes with my last name." He smiled briefly, then grimaced as he nodded up at the white pine coffin atop the waiting Concord. "That baggage goin' to Santa Fe, hunh?"

"It is going," Matthew said quietly, "to the Bosom of our Lord." He smiled and nodded acknowledgement at the coachman. "However, yes, it will first stop briefly in Santa Fe."

Skinner laughed hard. He wiped his eyes and nudged Matthew with the handle of his whip. "Hey, you wanna know something, Mr. Brackett? I think I could like you. You're not all stuffy. You know...fun-EAR-E-al. No offense, of course. How 'bout when we git back to town, us two go for whisky over at the saloon?"

The undertaker shrugged.

"They pour a good glass there," Skinner said persuasively, "and play some fine, sweet songs."

"My travelling companion was working in Paddy Doyle's pub early yesterday," Matthew observed. "He took a break from his frequent singing to engage in one of the establishment's notorious games of chance when, quite suddenly, he came to require my professional services."

Skinner didn't understand. His forehead creased. He looked left and right. "Travelling companion?"

Matthew nodded slightly in the direction of the coffin.

Skinner grinned, displaying even teeth darkened by tobacco juice. Once again he tapped the undertaker's chest with the butt end of his whip. "I do like you, Mr. Brackett. Yessir, I like you already." Donning his hat and tapping its wide brim with the butt of his whip, he turned toward the waiting red Concord.

In a lower tone he added, "With all due respect, I hear tell this boy Cooper drew the Queen of Spades jest 'fore he was taken. You know, I ain't much on omens and such, but they do say that the Dark Queen is the death card, and I ain't believin' all I heard about the cheatin' and such." Skinner brightened, smiled. "Let's do have that drink," he said jocularly, stepping away. He pursed his lips and resumed whistling.

Matthew tipped his top hat. He drew a long breath. The ride north to Santa Fe would be a long and dry one, he knew, and his limbs would be sore at the trail's end. It was a less than inviting prospect.

Skinner's whistling grew louder as he walked closer to the stage, now being loaded with mail and freight. The whistled melody was hauntingly familiar to the undertaker, but he couldn't place it.

Something I overheard outside the saloon, Matthew speculated, or perhaps one I came across back in New Orleans.

He walked slowly over to the coach. The final fastening of ropes, straps, and buckles was complete. Skinner and his shotgun rider climbed up onto their seats, the team shuffling restlessly and tossing their manes.

The express agent beckoned to Matthew. "Boarding call, Mr. Brackett. Looks like you and the late Mr. Cooper are our only fares this trip. May the two of you have a pleasant journey." He held open the coach door.

"Wait!" called a new voice. "Sweet Jesus blast and damn your blatherin' soul, Dunlea, we're gonna miss the stage!" Two tipsy young cowboys trotted unevenly toward the waiting tableau of coach and six.

The driver and shotgunner stilled their preparations. Matthew stood rigidly, one toe of his boot poised on the black wrought iron step. Both of the new arrivals brandished full whiskey bottles like soldiers with flags as they placed themselves breathlessly before him.

"Vincent McCarthy, sir, and this is Eamon Dunlea. We must look a rackety pair of boyos to you, sir, uh, yer Honor sir. We were Sonny Cooper's best friends. Twas the three of us you'd hear in Paddy Doyle's of a Saturday night, sir, uh, yer Honor, sir. We'd like to ride along and give Sonny a proper wake on the way to his final rest, may the Good Lord preserve his immortal soul."

At the mention of riding in the coach, the express agent assumed an indignant expression and opened his mouth to speak. Matthew forestalled him with a wave of his arm.

"I am not overly fond of strong drink." Matthew's eyes fixed on the cherubic face of McCarthy as he spoke. McCarthy looked down at his boots, swayed slightly, and didn't answer. Dunlea spoke instead, his ebony-crowned face turning almost alabaster under Matthew's hostile scrutiny.

"Now, *sir*, we'll just be ridin' on top of the coach with Sonny. We are not drunkards, nor godless heathens. There's still enough room, mind you and we won't be disturbin' your peace at all, *sir*. Death is your work, but Sonny was our friend and we mean to say goodbye to 'im proper, one way or t'other, *sir*."

Matthew's expression froze, and his body tensed at the implied threat as Dunlea continued rebelliously.

"Sonny had not priest nor prayer. We mean to take care of our friend, God rest his soul." Dunlea stuck his chin up, straightened his shoulders and genuflected with deliberate slowness. "Everyone knows that the Divil is a master of the fiddle and hellish fond of singers."

Matthew regarded the two young Irishmen's open defiance and mocking respect with mingled interest and pity. "See that you sing 'Johnny, I Hardly Knew Ye,' then."

The boys scrambled silently to the coach roof, McCarthy tossing their fare to the expressman. Again Matthew placed one foot on the coach step and started to hoist himself up inside the Concord. At that moment the driver stopped whistling in mid-verse and began to sing:

*As I walked out in Laredo one day,
I spied a poor cowboy wrapped up in white linen,
Wrapped up in white linen and cold as the clay....*

Matthew leaped back off the iron fitting as if it were white-hot, nearly knocking down the express agent, who stood behind.

"Why, Mr. Brackett, are you all right?" The agent solicitously peered up into Matthew's ashen face. "Are you ill, sir? Here, let me help you. I don't know what a fine gentleman like yourself, obviously of excellent birth I might add, is doing out here in Hell's own home, begging your pardon, anyway."

Matthew tried to disengage himself from the clinging agent to no avail. The pudgy little man prattled on like an old nurse, shooing Skinner away when the coachman hopped down from his coach seat to protest the delay.

"Go away and leave this poor man alone, Skinner," babbled the agent. "I do believe he's caught a little sun. Shame on you for keeping him out in the street jawing for so long. Not all folks are made out of dried up old boot leather like you, Skinner. Now go away! Leave Mr. Brackett to me." He smiled at Matthew. "My name's Todd. Sorry I didn't introduce myself sooner, sir."

Matthew looked at Todd for a long moment but said nothing. The round little man flinched and his bulbous nose quivered. Then he straightened up as far as he could and continued his chattering.

"Well, Mr. Brackett. It's all of a piece to me, sir. However, I would suggest that you just telegraph Sheriff McAlister in Santa Fe and have him pick up the uh, body. You're not well, sir."

Skinner stood, observing the scene, one hand on his lean square hip, the other twirling one end of his moustache. He cleared his throat noisily. "Now, Mr. Brackett, it's none of my business and I ain't much on givin' advice, but you do look a mite pale and it's clear you're unsteady. You could be takin' sick. Dedication and reverence to the dead is a mighty fine ideal, but what's the point of killin' yerself for a cowpoke what got hisself shot in a bar room? You got better things to die for, don't you?"

Matthew considered Skinner's statement, opened his mouth to answer. He remembered the message... "*BEWARE LAREDO.*"

Matthew stopped and nodded his head. "Perhaps you're right, Mr. Skinner. I'm not feeling at all well. And there are, as you say, better things to die for."

Skinner nodded and smiled slightly. "McCarthy an' Dunlea will be on board to help out. Don't forget. I owe you a drink at Paddy Doyle's when I git back." The wiry coachman turned on his heel and stepped swiftly back to the coach. He climbed up into the box and saluted the undertaker with his whip.

As the Concord lurched forward, Skinner cracked his whip and shouted at the teams, "H'yah! Get up there, Serbie! Git along there, Dutch! Up thar, Here!"

Then, as the coach receded in a storm of dust, Skinner began to sing again, his fellow riders joining in:

*Let six jolly cowboys come handle my coffin,
Let six jolly cowboys come sing me a song,
Take me to the graveyard and....*

The rest of the verse was lost in Skinner's whip cracks, and the squeak and rumble of wheels mingling with the swell of heavy staccato hoofbeats rising from the mighty team of six.

A half hour later, the hammer of the local telegraph key tapped out the following message:

TO THE SHERIFF OF SANTA FE STOP COFFIN CONTAINING
EMBALMED CORPSE OF SONNY COOPER ARRIVING ON
EVENING STAGE STOP MEET STAGE AND SECURE COFFIN
STOP PLEASE NOTIFY FATHER OF DECEASED DASH THOS
COOPER OF SANTA FE STOP SUBMIT MY SINCERE REGRETS
STOP SIGNED MATTHEW BRACKETT COMMA UNDERTAKER



The fire was burning low as the undertaker finished cleaning his revolvers. It had been some time since he'd had to use them, but periodically he greased and polished the fine weapons, just as he maintained the specialized tools of his advertised profession.

Dying flames lit the room with a faint orange glow. He poured another cup of steaming chicory coffee and sipped it, watching the logs burn low. The smell of pinyon pine crackling in the fireplace mingled with the scent of gun grease and the fragrant aroma of the New Orleans coffee.

As before, the night was cool. The little terrier abandoned its vigil at the door and followed the diminishing warmth by shuffling closer to the fireplace.

Matthew smiled. The coach and its grim cargo must have reached Sante Fe by now, he mused. Skinner would no doubt be knocking on his door late tomorrow afternoon. Maybe he would even have that drink. *One* drink. Determined to coax another half hour's fire from the logs already laid, he rose to his feet and took the iron poker from the hearth. He was inserting its curved tip between two of the glowing logs when Blackie exploded in a barrage of frenzied barking. In that instant, Matthew was sure he'd heard someone whistling Skinner's tune.

The undertaker's grip tightened on the poker. Blackie fell silent for a moment and turned his head to one side, then the other. Matthew watched the little dog, listening with it as the whistling grew louder.

Muffled footfalls thumped on the earth outside as someone approached the shop. The dog grew frantic, leaping and scratching at the door as it barked.

The footsteps ended, followed by a sharp knock.

Blackie grew still but growled suspiciously.

Black Jenny's voice came back to Matthew once again, unbidden. "A ghost will knock on your wall when someone in the house is going to die."

"Who's there?" Matthew called out, still holding the poker.

"I got here a message for the undertaker, Matthew Brackett," huffed the breathless, boyish voice outside. "It come by telegraph tonight from Santa Fe."

Matthew relaxed. "Please slide it under the door, son."

With a rustle, a brown square corner appeared below the shop door. Blackie seized the edge and pulled it inside, triumphantly carrying it across the floor to Matthew. The undertaker set down the poker and patted the dog proudly as he accepted the delivery. He unfolded it and read:

TO UNDERTAKER MATTHEW BRACKETT OF ESTANCIA
STOP COACH DID NOT ARRIVE IN SANTA FE STOP NO WORD
FROM RELAY STATION STOP NO SIGN OF COACHMEN OR
PASSENGERS NOR OF COFFIN CONTAINING LATE MISTER
COOPER STOP PLEASE ADVISE STOP SIGNED SHERIFF JOHN
MCALISTER OF SANTA FE

The undertaker held the message in his hand and closed it slowly. He crumpled the parchment and cast it into the fireplace, rekindling the dying flames with a flash of yellowish light.

The footsteps outside the door of the mortuary shop began to recede, vanishing into the night.

Strange that the boy didn't ask if I wanted to telegraph a reply, thought Matthew. He stepped over to the door and opened it, the sudden rush of cool night air chilling his skin. He started to call out, to ask the boy to tell him exactly when the message had been received.

But there was no one outside in the silent streets of Estancia.

What would Black Jenny say? Matthew wondered. She must be a ghost herself these days. It had been so many years since he had thought of the things she taught him. Why now?

The undertaker stood up, fastened a leather pistol belt around his waist, and donned his long gray trail coat and black silk hat. He selected one of his 36-caliber Colt revolvers, sliding it into his holster.

The little terrier winced as the shop door slammed shut.

A few minutes later the dog tilted its head curiously at the unusual sound of the stable door squeaking open so long after nightfall. Then came the whickering of the undertaker's dapple gray mare, Helen, followed by the sound of hoofbeats receding off to the north.



"All right, all right, I'm a comin'. Jest you wait a minute. This better be good. A man cain't get no sleep for nuthin' 'round here."

The sleepy telegraph office proprietor poked his head out of the clapboard door, nightcap slanting over one ear. He blinked. "Well, Mr. Brackett. I reckoned come mornin' I'd walk down to you with a message from the sheriff in Sante Fe. Woulda sent the boy down with it tonight, but he's been in bed two days now with a fever. Come on in."

Matthew followed him inside and waited while the elderly man fumbled with the lantern and put his spectacles on. The room was small, its wooden walls bare. Dim lamplight revealed a tiny wooden table cluttered with telegrams. The man peered down at it.

"Let's see, it was right here. Well, bless my soul, it's gone!" He turned and held the lantern up between them. "You don't look well, Mr. Brackett. I heard tell you were feelin' poorly. Why don't you sit down?"

The undertaker shook his head and spoke kindly. "Didn't you send your boy to me earlier this night? I saw the telegram. I came to find out when it arrived."

The old man turned his back to Matthew and absently shuffled through the stack of papers. "I ain't sent it, Mr. Brackett, an' that's a fact. My boy's been sick. 'Sides, I figgered as how you'd be better off with a night's sleep seein' how you been ailin' an all. You musta been dreamin'."

"The stage never got to Sante Fe," Matthew blurted. "I *know* that."

The proprietor turned to look at Matthew with rheumy eyes. He drew a long breath. "Go home an' bolt yer door, Mr. Brackett. Say yer prayers. Come back tomorrow in the daylight, an' git the sheriff an' some of the boys."



The starlight gleamed, brilliant as the laughing yellow moon while Matthew rode the northbound trail that night.

A harvest moon, the undertaker thought grimly. Not out here — nothing to harvest in this territory except dust... and death.

Ahead the road unspooled like an endless bolt of gray cloth laid across the wide and desolate countryside. Here and there cactus rose like tombstones and pinyon pines haunted the horizon, specters from a childhood nightmare. Small creatures scurried across the broken patches of ragged earth.

The cool air was heavy with the smells of the prairie, the fragrances of night-blooming plants and the choking musk of the road.

The missing Concord coach had blazed a trail the blind could follow. Deep ruts made by the stage itself were clear. Torn terrain and occasional piles of manure were calling cards left by the powerful team's passing.

Matthew was prepared to find a grisly scene, remnants of an attack by cunning bushwhackers or hostile Paiutes.

He tried to bolster himself with thoughts of simpler troubles, a failed wheel or horses gone lame. Maybe Skinner and his passengers were camped by a fire right now, hearing the wail of wild things waiting in the shadows,

or listening to his horses snorting at an unknown scent, maybe the scent of Matthew and Helen on the night breeze.

The undertaker took comfort in the slap of the Colt revolver on his left hip. But his confidence eroded when a moment later he recalled the armaments with which the missing Concord had been equipped, Skinner's Henry repeater and the massive double-barreled Remington shotgun carried by the guard.

On the pitted road ahead, the coach tracks ended abruptly.

Startled, Matthew reined in his mare, turning her in a slow trot back to the spot where the tracks left off. He dismounted, unholstering the Colt Navy with his right hand, still gripping Helen's braided rein with his left. Leather creaked as he stepped from the saddle, and the big gray mare uneasily shifted from hoof to hoof.

The tracks simply ended — all of them, the coach and the six.

There was no gradual tapering as if the stage had reached hard packed ground. Helen's hoofprints paralleled and then passed the coach tracks with no detectable change in the depth of their impression on the rough road.

The undertaker remounted and rode in a wide circle around the puzzling spot, looking for signs of trouble. He doubled back to be certain that nothing had escaped his keen night vision.

Matthew looked up as if the answer to his search were in the face of the laughing moon. Some giant, unseen hand had plucked the entire conveyance from the road and lifted it straight into the sky.

Reluctantly he rode onward to the north, stopping twice when he thought he heard Skinner's tuneful whistle. Nothing.

The third time he stopped, he heard the unmistakable sound of wheels coming up fast behind.

Helen reared and shied, exploding into a rough gallop that almost unseated him.

A fierce chill buffeted them as a gray coach and six rushed past.

For a few awkward seconds Matthew fought to regain control of his terrified mount. Puzzled, he forced the reluctant mare to follow the spectral

vehicle. The animal went haltingly, eyes rolling white and foam drooling from her mouth as she fought the bit.

Horse and rider moved closer to the now slowing coach. As it turned, Helen stopped. The undertaker could see that the coach was the color of moonlight, not red as the fine Concord had been earlier that day. The coachman cracked his whip, and the six horses moved swiftly back toward them in a smooth silent canter.

Matthew wheeled Helen back toward town.

The team's hooves made no noise as they pounded the ground. Their progress displaced no dust as they gained on the undertaker. The shadowed driver and shotgun rider sang:

*Get six jolly cowboys to carry my coffin,
Get six pretty gals to carry my pall....*

The chorus was joined by a third voice, one strange yet somehow distantly familiar. Then in a moment of shock Matthew recognized it—it was the voice of Sonny Cooper.

Matthew let Helen gallop for all she was worth, and she streaked across the prairie. The hellish coach stayed on his tail. Now there was a resounding chorus of five voices on "Johnny, I Hardly Knew Ye." He heard Dunlea and McCarthy harmonize with agonizing precision:

*With your guns and drums, and drums and guns,
The enemy nearly slew ya*

Trusting Helen to avoid the ruts and pits of the trail without his help, Matthew turned to look back over his shoulder.

Sonny Cooper was riding one of the lead horses in the harness, anatomical stitches clearly visible on the boy's dead white wrists as he clung to the big charger's mane. The team drew close to Helen's left flank. Sonny's mount snaked its lathered neck out, snapping at Helen like a rabid dog. Foam flew.

Matthew leaned forward, urging Helen ahead, his gray coat flapping behind him.

Then the coach slowed, veering off sharply to the right, toward Sante Fe. The sounds of drunken laughter and heartfelt song resumed. The wiry coachman touched the silver ferruled whip to his hat, a final salute. The coach and six vanished as the last chorus echoed in the desert.

Matthew reined in his mount, unsure of victory. Then he glanced down and saw the road.

The moonlight-colored coach had disappeared at the exact spot where the rutted tracks had ended.

Again the undertaker remembered Black Jenny's words to him, when he had been just a small, frightened boy. *"A baby borned at midnight will be seein' ghosts... You be you own master. Don' let 'em trick you..."*

Somewhere far away, coyotes howled at the laughing moon.

In the midst of the hellish serenade, Matthew swore he heard the old woman call to him once again, this time just a single word:

"Beware."

BLUEBOUND

BY JUDITH AND GARFIELD REEVES-STEVENS

A single, narrow shaft of autumn sunlight shone through a gap between the heavy blackout curtains and the vampire toyed with it, running his hand through the light as a cat might play with a trickle of water.

Galen Sword entered his darkened study, holding a Federal Express envelope beneath his arm, and for a moment watched the vampire at his idle game. The vampire was Orion, last of Clan Isis, a nightfeeder adept of the only world that mattered—the First World. “Doesn’t that hurt?” Sword asked.

Orion held his hand open and motionless within the luminous shaft and only then did he look up. His smooth, golden-brown skin appeared to glow with a pale inner light as if he had captured the sun’s essence in his veins. The color almost matched the subtle tones of his fine-textured hair which was efficiently sleeked back in a simple warrior’s queue. A thin tendril of what appeared to be smoke began to rise up from the circle of sunlight held in the vampire’s palm, but he fixed his attention on Sword and what he carried. “Is that the package?” was all he said.

Sword looked away from the vampire’s hand and walked over to his desk. There were many things he did not yet understand about the First World and the beings who dwelt in it—beings who were the ultimate

source for all human legends of the supernatural. Galen Sword knew he still had much to learn.

He laid the envelope carefully upon his matte-black desk. Hours earlier, after contacting Orion and asking for his help, he had slipped the package back into the envelope, exactly as it had arrived this morning at the Loft—Sword's converted warehouse headquarters in Manhattan's SoHo district. He wanted Orion to see the package exactly as it had been delivered.

Sword switched on the desk lamp and the envelope was centered in a soft pool of honey-colored light. Orion now stood beside him, six inches taller than the lean, black-haired investigator. The vampire passed a well-manicured hand over the envelope, not quite touching it, though mapping all its contours. Sword watched as Orion parted his lips and drew in a faint breath, olive-green eyes fluttering closed in concentration.

"No scent of flowers," Orion said, opening his eyes slowly. Sword was surprised. From the nature of the package inside the courier envelope, he had assumed that a First World wizard must have sent it. But if Orion could detect no by-products from the metabolism of magic...

"Open it," Orion said.

"Why don't you?" Sword countered. He knew what the package inside did when it was touched.

Orion smiled charmingly and kept his feeding fangs politely unextended from behind his human-normal teeth. "You have already handled it without apparent ill-effect. It has been my experience that successful strategies should be pursued. And I have had a great deal of experience."

Sword hesitated. This type of situation should have been handled by the other members of his team—Melody Ko or Adrian Forsyte—using their sophisticated equipment in the Loft's lab. But they wouldn't be back in New York until tomorrow. And the strange package within the envelope was marked URGENT, even though it had resisted all Sword's attempts to open it.

"If you wish me to help," Orion said, "you should not waste my time. Show me the package."

Sword gingerly lifted the end of the envelope and the package inside slid out onto the desk. When it made contact with the desk's surface, it crackled with a sudden nimbus of blue fire.

"See what I mean?" Sword said. He reached out to touch the package—cylindrical, less than a foot long, no more than two inches in diameter, sealed at both ends and gleaming with an almost chromelike finish of blueblack swirls which seemed to shift and flow as if they were more than mere reflections. In striking contrast to the sleek metallic form, a simple, hand-lettered label had been wrapped around it and fixed in place by a piece of clear adhesive tape. The label read: GALEN SWORD, CLAN PENDRAGON: OPEN QUICKLY. URGENT.

When Sword's fingers made contact with the package, a second miniature storm of blue lightning jumped up around his hand, softly crackling like a distant fire. The instant prickling sensation it brought wasn't painful, only startling, and it had happened each time Sword had handled the package thus far. He looked at Orion, waiting for his answer.

The vampire picked up the cylinder, unperturbed by the flurry of blue fire that danced around his own elegant yet powerful hand. "Whatever is inside is bluebound," he said as he examined the cylinder. "Held in a compacted form, impervious to the passage of time and physical alteration."

"Magic?" Sword asked.

Orion frowned. "Perhaps. A bit of crystal. An elemental's touch. Even fairy glamor. It's a simple trick with many ways of being accomplished. A well-taught human might be capable of it, if he had the proper charms."

Sword rubbed at the back of his neck. He was an adept himself. At least, he had been born an adept of the Clan Pendragon. But as a child he had suffered an abrupt exile from the First World of adepts to the Second World of humans. Only in recent years had he learned the truth of his origin and begun his search for his true home and destiny by becoming an investigator of what humans called the paranormal. In most instances, his investigations had revealed only trickery, or simple natural phenomena, improperly observed. But occasionally, as in the case of this package, he discovered a

real paranormal incident that could serve as a beacon to the First World and a potential doorway to his home.

"Can you open it?" Sword asked.

Orion shook his head and replaced the cylinder on the desk. "That is the point of it being bluebound. Unless a more powerful enchantment is used, that which is bluebound cannot be opened, except by the one intended to open it."

"But it's addressed to me and I can't open it."

Orion picked up the Federal Express envelope to read the airbill within its plastic pocket.

"I've already checked out the sender's address," Sword said. "It doesn't exist. Whoever sent it dropped it off at a Fed Ex office in Boston and paid cash. Untraceable."

Orion ignored him. "It's not addressed to you." He pointed to the airbill. "It reads: The Sword Foundation."

Sword grimaced. "I *am* the Sword Foundation. And my name is on the cylinder."

"As is the name of your clan. Pendragon."

"So?"

"Just this: Whoever sent this knows about you and your connection to the First World. So we must then conclude that the sender also knows that there is someone employed by the Sword Foundation with the ability to open it for you."

It took Sword only an instant to realize what Orion meant. "I'll get Martin," he said.



Martin, as he himself told the story, was a halfling, born of a mother who had been human and of Astar, a long-missing father who had been a powerful shifter adept of the Clan Arkady. Humans might have described Astar as a werewolf, if any had lived long enough to do so after meeting him.

By the light of day, there was really no single attribute that set Martin apart from any other young human teenager. True, his arms were a bit long for his height, and his legs a bit short. His form was unusually compact and muscular, his ears a shade pointed, and his thick swirls of body hair perhaps more like fur than most other people's. But cloaked by night, loping through shadows on feet and knuckles with the speed of the wind, there could be no doubt as to Martin's actual untamed and inhuman nature. For now, however, dressed as he was in a Hulk Hogan T-shirt, a wildly patterned pair of lemon-yellow and lime-green surfer pants, and hanging sideways by one hand and one foot from a metal beam twenty feet above the Loft's expansive garage, he was neither human nor animal. He was simply Martin.

Sword stepped out of his study to stand on one of the metal catwalks surrounding the Loft's cavernous central interior and called out for Martin. At the sound of Sword's voice, and with the eagerness of a dog who had just seen a long lost master return, the halfling spun in midair and excitedly swung from hand to hand until he executed an effortless forward flip to land lightly and noiselessly beside Sword on the catwalk.

"Martin guard Galen Sword cars trucks keep shifters away Martin work hard," the halfling said proudly. That simple mission had been enough to fill his day.

"Good work." Sword reached down to pat Martin's shoulder but the halfling leaned his head to the side so Sword's hand grazed his ear instead. Sword knew what was expected of him and dutifully scratched.

Martin bared his incisors in a beatific smile, then leaned closer to the doorway to Sword's second-floor study. He sniffed the air and growled, furrowing his eyes at Sword, almost accusingly. "Nightfeeder stink still here Martin gag."

Sword remained impassive. The enmity between shifters and vampires was too deeply rooted in a world and a history still alien to Sword. So far, all that had kept Martin and Orion from each other's throats was Orion's arrogant self-discipline and Martin's fierce loyalty to Sword. Sword drew on that loyalty now.

"I want you to come into my office, Martin. Orion says that you can help me."

Martin bared his teeth again. This time it was not a smile. But he followed Sword into the study without question.

As they entered, Sword noticed that Orion had wisely withdrawn to the far corner of the room. Martin appeared to ignore the vampire but commented that the room was too dark and offered to pull the curtains wide open to let in lots of sun. Sword asked the halfling to look at the package instead. Reluctantly, Martin complied:

He immediately said, "Bluebound."

"Can you tell who sent this?" Sword asked.

Martin picked it up and sniffed it, wrinkling his nose as blue sparks danced against it. "Big nightfeeder stink bad," he said after careful consideration.

"Orion only touched it. He didn't send it." Sword shoved his hands into the back pockets of his black jeans. "Can you tell if it was a wizard who sent it? A shifter? Lights?"

Martin sniffed at the package several more times, then licked it and gave an experimental chew, completely unfazed by the sporadic flurries of blue fire. He shook his head. "Crystal wash nothing left all gone," he said. He looked at Sword meaningfully. "Means big secret. No one know who send."

"Can you open it?" Sword asked.

"Martin open anything," the halfling said enthusiastically. "Martin have father blue power."

Sword understood. Blue powers passed through adepts from the father's side. Martin's blue power gave him the ability to open anything locked or sealed. "Go ahead," Sword said.

Martin cradled the package in his hands, rolled his eyes back, and a sudden blue glow flared around the cylinder. Then the halfling held the package out to Sword and the glossy metal package was now nothing more than a parchment scroll, no larger than an ordinary piece of writing paper. Slowly, the parchment unfurled.

Sword inspected the scroll without touching it. The parchment held only a few lines of neat and regular text, no pictures. Orion stepped out from his corner, one hand extended. "I would be pleased to provide a translation."

Sword took the scroll from Martin to look at it more closely. "That's okay," Sword said. "It's in English." He held it inches from his eyes. "And it's from ... a typewriter?"

Orion appeared indifferent to the idea of a bluebound, First-World parchment having been inscribed by a Second-World device. "There is more trade and traffic between the worlds than you might suspect, Mr. Sword. What words does it carry?"

Sword read the message aloud. "'Galen Sword of Pendragon: At all costs you must avoid Greenview. For the safety of your realm, do not disturb the realms of others.'" Sword looked up, feeling the hair on his arms bristle. How had whoever sent this known about Greenview? "That's it."

"Greenview?" Orion repeated, as if he had sensed danger. Even in the dim light of the office, Sword could see the vampire's feeding fangs edge down from their hidden sockets behind his upper, ordinary teeth.

Sword nodded. Now that he had begun to penetrate the secrets of the First World, he faced many new challenges. But at the moment, none was more important than finding a safe haven for Kendall Marsh, a television reporter who had once been his lover, and who now lay in a helpless coma, a victim of Manes Hel, Victor of Clan Tepesh, the same vampire who had destroyed Orion's clan.

In his search for Kendall's haven, Sword had found only three suitable locations. All were private clinics dedicated to long-term medical care, and all permitted the presence of privately retained caregivers and security personnel. One was in upstate New York, one in New Jersey, and one in Connecticut—the Greenview Convalescent Center.

"I thought you said whoever sent this knew about me," Sword said to Orion. "But whoever sent this knows nothing. You know there's only one thing I can do after getting a warning like that."

Orion did not withdraw his fangs. "Perhaps that is what they are counting on," he said.



As Sword expertly guided his specially equipped, black Porsche 928 S4 onto the freeway exit, Martin stuck his head out even further from his open window and howled exuberantly as the car sped under an overhead ramp. The reverberating echoes could be clearly heard over the roar of the Porsche.

Sword gave a quick glance to the halfling. "We're off the freeway now. Back inside." That had been part of their agreement for this trip. Martin could ride with his head out the window only on the freeway, and only when Sword said that the road was clear of other cars. But now that they were on the smaller roads around Litchfield, Connecticut, it was time for Martin to behave.

The halfling, kneeling sideways on the leather seat, glanced once pleadingly over his shoulder at Sword, then gave a quick last howl out the window before jumping back into position.

"Seatbelt," Sword said.

Martin curled his bottom lip inside out and slouched his shoulders, but did what he was told. "Bad tie up Martin bad bad," he protested. Sword ignored him. They were almost there. It was time to think of other things.

Sword had not visited any of the three facilities on his list. He had left the initial selection to Scarlatti, Holcroft & Chancellor, the law firm in charge of the multi-million-dollar foundation that his guardians had established for him in this world. Angela Scarlatti herself had reported that Greenview Convalescent Center was often used to provide post-operative care to individuals who had entered the Justice Department's witness relocation plan—especially post-plastic surgery care. Thus, Greenview's staff was quite used to accommodating the nameless government operatives who arrived to guard the facility's smaller and more private bungalows and the Greenview administrators had said that they were more than happy to meet all of Mr. Sword's special and costly requests for Kendall Marsh's security.

Based on Scarlatti's recommendations, Sword had been inclined to select Greenview and had made plans to drive out to the facility at a later date. But the bluebound warning from someone apparently acquainted with both the



First World and Sword's position in it had made an immediate first-hand visit impossible to resist. To Sword's mind, the message was not a warning—it was a challenge. And ever since his new life had begun with his discovery of his true nature, he had given up running away from challenges.

At ten past two in the afternoon, Sword and Martin drove through the stone gates of Greenview and onto the narrow, curving road that led to its main building. They were only two hours from New York and if necessary Orion would be able to join them later, two hours after sunset. Somehow, the vampire had lived through almost all of the 20th century without learning how to drive and would thus have to rely on Sword's car service to reach Litchfield. In the meantime, the chief administrator was expecting Sword this afternoon, to give him a personal tour which would give Sword a chance to conduct his preliminary survey, and to see what 'realms of others' might be involved in this place.

Sword parked his Porsche in a small paved clearing near a large, white clapboard building, three stories tall, capped by a green mansard roof, and half surrounded by a spacious veranda that was outlined with intricate, carved wooden gingerbread trim. Greenview looked less like a private hospital and more like a Victorian vacation lodge. Sword supposed that was one of its prime attractions for prospective patients.

Beyond the main building the facility's grounds swept away in an undulating expanse of rolling hills, wrapped in lushly green and perfectly trimmed lawns, paving stone footpaths, and artfully scattered stands of trees and shrubs, brilliant with the colors of fall. Along one of the paths, Sword could see a white-uniformed woman pushing a man in a wheelchair. But he saw no one else, and nothing out of the ordinary.

Relieved by Greenview's apparent normality, yet alert to what might still be hidden within the shadows of the surrounding trees or the unseen depths of the hospital's basement, Sword cut the engine and pulled up on the parking brake. "Do you remember what you're supposed to do?" he asked Martin.

Martin made a show of holding his seatbelt far away from his broad chest, as if the belt were a length of barbed wire made from silver—deadly to

shifters and toxically painful to him. He spoke rapidly and without enthusiasm. "Martin sit stay in car 'til Galen Sword say come go."

"Where's your transceiver?" Sword asked.

Martin sighed and turned his head so Sword could see the Mitsubishi headset that was held in place by the red bandana stretched across his forehead. A small, pencil-thin vox microphone extended a few inches from the side of the bandana and Martin's ear held a tiny, almost unnoticeable earphone. Sword reached over to the battery packs clipped to the inside of Martin's T-shirt and turned on the two-way radio. His own transceiver was in the inside pocket of his leather jacket.

Sword set a digital time display on the Porsche's dash computer to a sixty-minute countdown mode. "And what happens if you don't hear from me by the time these numbers read zero zero?" Sword asked.

Martin bit his lip, then reached down between the seats and picked up the car phone handset. "Press star button," he said.

"And...?" Sword prompted. The halfling didn't reply, only rocked in his seat. "Martin? What do you do then?"

Martin half-heartedly recited his instructions. "Talk to nightfeeder say help help help." Martin placed the handset back in its cradle and folded his arms with another deep and weary exhalation, letting Sword know what he thought about the idea of a vampire coming to the rescue of anyone.

Sword tapped his fingers against the steering wheel, wondering if it was worth reminding Martin once again that Orion was on their side, when a louder tapping sounded against his window. The noise was not loud enough to be threatening, but for reassurance Sword touched the handle of the gas jet pistol beneath his jacket before pressing the control that would drop the heavily tinted window beside him.

"Mr. Sword?" the man who had tapped the window asked animatedly as his face came into view.

Sword recognized the man's distinctive, gravelly voice from the phone call he had made earlier. He was Dr. Elliott Bryce, Greenview's chief administrator. Sword got out of the car to greet him.

The doctor was an enthusiastic and experienced promoter of Greenview who dismissed all of Sword's apologies for arranging an appointment at the last minute. He was only a few years older than Sword, no more than thirty-five at most, but prematurely balding. The fringe of hair he still had spilled over his collar and blended into his full and untrimmed beard, more white than gray against his deep brown skin.

"We're here to serve," Dr. Bryce explained sincerely as he pumped Sword's hand. "Our policy is to meet all the needs of our clients. Whatever. Whenever. However."

Sword was caught by the doctor's use of the term 'client' instead of 'patient.' He was also struck by the way the man wore his hair. He had seen that kind of style before: hair treated more as fur than as hair. It was a style that had been favored by the humanform shapeshifters he had battled in the past. Sword realized he would have to have this Dr. Bryce checked out by an expert. "May I introduce you to one of my assistants?" he asked, then led the doctor to the other side of the Porsche and opened the door.

Martin was busily adjusting all the buttons on the dash radio and disk player and didn't seem too interested in shifting his attention to the doctor. Thus their introduction was brief and to the point. Before shutting the door again, Sword managed to lean down to Martin and silently mouth: "Is he human?"

Martin wrinkled his nose as he scented the air. Then he nodded. Sword felt relieved. He had had enough of shifters in the past few weeks. He wouldn't object if the message's 'realms of others' referred to less dangerous adepts.

Throughout an hour-long tour of Greenview, Dr. Bryce talked nonstop but said little that Angela Scarlatti had not already passed on to Sword in the form of a two-page report. Sword's law firm had informed the doctor that Kendall Marsh was a comatose patient who would require the presence of two armed bodyguards around the clock. Dr. Bryce had responded that Greenview was prepared to offer two different options at two different price plans. The first, and less expensive option, would give Kendall the top floor of an isolated wing

attached to the main building. It provided less in the way of privacy perhaps, but had only one entrance for the bodyguards to cover. The second and more expensive option was to set Kendall up in a private bungalow. That would allow far more privacy, but did entail providing security for all four sides of the unit, doors and windows included.

Sword caught a glimpse of how another Greenview 'client' had arranged security when he saw two large figures in dark trenchcoats standing near the entrance to Bungalow Eight—a small, single-story white building, about the size of a two-bedroom cottage, with a shallow green roof. Bungalow Eight nestled in a protective stand of towering pine trees. Sword asked Dr. Bryce if he could talk to the men—obviously guards of some sort—about their security arrangements. But Dr. Bryce explained that by the client's wishes, Bungalow Eight was completely off-limits.

As far as Sword was concerned, that made Bungalow Eight his target.



When Sword opened the door of his Porsche, Martin was lying backwards in his seat, bare feet over the headrest, arms dangling listlessly in the footwell. Before he had come to know the halfling well, Sword might have thought that Martin had been ambushed in his absence, but the frenetic teenager was only bored. Sword slid into the driver's seat, closed the door, and picked up the car phone handset.

Martin opened his eyes a fraction. "Go home Loft now?" he asked despairingly.

"Not yet," Sword said. He waited for the phone to connect through to the Loft's message system. Orion had said he would contact the system at sunset. "I want you to check out a building for me and—"

Before Sword could finish his sentence Martin had wrapped his arms around his knees and rolled like a giant ball in his seat to sit upright and ready for action in less than a second. The maneuver had been accomplished without a sound and without touching any part of the cramped passenger area except for the seat. Sword was impressed, once again.



"Go out now?" Martin asked eagerly.

Sword held up a finger to quiet him as he left a message for Orion to come up to Greenview as soon as possible. "It's just about three thirty. Martin and I are going to check out Bungalow Eight. If I've left no other messages for you after this one, then that's where you should start, too."

"Now?" Martin asked again when Sword had hung up the phone.

"Now," Sword said, and Martin was out of the car before Sword could even open his door.

A few minutes ago, at the end of the obligatory tour, Dr. Bryce had offered Sword a drink in the administration office and Sword had politely declined for the moment. He had told the doctor that Martin was a student intern for the Sword Foundation, from an underprivileged inner-city family, and that the youth would enjoy a chance to walk around the hospital's grounds. If the doctor didn't mind, perhaps Sword could join him for that drink in an hour or so. The doctor hadn't objected.

Sword led Martin along the paths, heading away from Bungalow Eight until they were out of sight of the main building. Then Sword doubled back through a stand of trees to show Martin the building that was of interest. But Martin didn't need to have the bungalow pointed out to him. His nose told him where to look and what he would find.

"Shifters," Martin whispered, crouched behind the rough-barked trunk of a pine tree.

Sword stood behind the halfling. They were two hundred feet away from the bungalow, looking up from a hollow. As Sword watched the open spaces and the path leading to the building, he could see one trenchcoated guard. The other guard was presumably on the other side, out of sight. But Sword didn't care about the guards. He was more interested in what they guarded. "How many?" he asked quietly.

Martin opened his mouth and rolled the cool, late-afternoon air against his tongue with an expression of total concentration. Then he held up two fingers. "This many," he said.

"Are you certain?" Sword asked. Shifters liked to run in packs. The bungalow was large enough to hold a dozen of them, even more.

But Martin nodded vigorously.

"Any chance that there are more shifters inside that you can't scent?"

Martin rubbed at his face, forcing his lower lip down. "Maybe," he conceded.

From beside the tree, Sword continued to watch Bungalow Eight, weighing the odds. The fact that there were at least two shifters present confirmed what the message had implied about there being a First World presence in this tranquil setting. Now the question was: What kind of a presence was it and why was it here? Adepts kept many enclaves among the world of humans, and in Sword's experience most had been set up to function as springboards for some kind of incursion into the Second World, incursions invariably fatal to humans. And the fact that shifters were present as guards did not necessarily mean that what they guarded were other shifters. The rules of commerce appeared to be the same in both worlds and the shifter guards might even be employed by vampires.

With that thought, Sword felt his pulse quicken. What if Manes Hel and the vampires of Tepesh were setting up their own ambush for Orion? What if Tepesh spies had uncovered Sword's inquiries about hospital suites for Kendall Marsh and had already placed themselves in position?

Sword crouched down beside Martin and whispered his next question, not knowing what kind of ears might be hidden and listening in the bungalow. "Could there be nightfeeders inside?"

Martin tasted the air again. "Maybe," he whispered back. "Hard to tell."

Sword made his decision. He slipped his transceiver into his ear and activated it, making it link with the preprogrammed car phone. As he listened to the electronic tones of a second call going through to the Loft, he withdrew his gas jet pistol and loaded it with a thick yellow plastic clip holding five modified tranquilizer darts which no longer held a tranquilizing drug.

The Loft's message system came online as Sword released the safety on his bulky pistol. "Orion, it's about forty-five minutes later. Martin has confirmed that the two guards outside Bungalow Eight are shifters. He can't be sure what's inside. I think there's a chance the Tepesh have set up their own ambush for us and I'm going to go in. If there are vampires inside, then

I've still got over an hour of sunlight left to my advantage. If whatever's inside *isn't* vampires, then it doesn't matter when I go in. If this is my last message... take care."

Sword stood and hefted the pistol in his hand. With the low-velocity darts, he needed to be within twenty-five feet to guarantee a hit on an exposed area of his target's skin. The necessary diversion to allow that proximity would be up to Martin.

"Martin know what to do," the halfling said as Sword explained his plan. "Martin hunt good." And then he bounded off into the forest to circle around to the back of the bungalow where it pressed into its own stand of trees.

Twenty minutes later, an inhuman howl ripped through the air from the direction of the bungalow. Sword saw both guards rush for the back of the building and as soon as they disappeared, he burst out from the protection of the trees, raced across the open lawn, and flattened himself against the bungalow wall. He could see no one else on the grounds visible from Bungalow Eight, but he could hear what almost seemed to be a dialogue of growls and animal hisses from behind the building. Slowly, he edged to the corner to see how Martin's diversion was faring.

Not well.

The halfling was twisted face down on the grass, held in place by one of the guards who had wrapped one arm around Martin's leg, and another arm around Martin's arm. Sword squinted, trying to make sense of the hold the guard had placed on Martin, for it appeared as if the enwrapping arms were bent without regard for normal joints, as if each were made of rubber.

The second guard had squatted down in front of Martin and pulled the halfling's head up by tugging on his hair. He was grunting at Martin in a guttural language that sounded nothing at all like the shiftertongue that Martin sometimes spoke. Martin only spat angrily in reply.

As soon as it appeared that the guard questioning Martin was preparing to strike him, Sword stepped entirely away from the corner of the building and aimed his pistol with both hands.

"Let him go."

Both guards swung their attention to Sword as Martin let out a howl of victory. Judging from the confident way the questioning guard jumped to his feet to confront Sword, Sword thought that howl might be a bit premature.

"Stand back," Sword cautioned the slowly advancing guard. But the humanform shifter didn't stop, obviously not recognizing the real threat that Sword's gun represented.

Then the guard's footsteps began to lengthen, not because he moved more quickly, but because his legs were actually growing. He raised his hands, now covered with coarse red fur, fingertips splitting with the pressure of rapidly growing claws.

Sword had seen this sort of transformation before, though never so controlled. Whatever type of shifters these guards might be, Sword had not faced their kind before. And that made him wonder if the darts would work this time.

The guard saw the sudden look of doubt that touched Sword's face and growled in pleasure at his prey's fear.

He was only ten feet away, seconds from ripping out Sword's throat.

Sword quickly corrected his aim and fired.

The shifter stopped as he took the impact of the dart against his throat and for an instant began to smile by pulling back thick lips from a mouthful of dripping, needle-sharp teeth. Then he hesitated, as if he just that moment realized that he had not been shot by a bullet—something which would have had no effect on him.

He staggered, thrusting his hands to the dart and tearing it from his flesh. Too late.

The shifter shrieked as he crumpled on the grass, writhing in unbearable pain. Instead of a tranquilizing drug, the modified dart contained a preparation of photographic silver halide solution. It might as well have been molten lead, so terribly did it burn at the molecularly compressed flesh of the shifter.

The stricken guard had only strength enough for one more strangled scream before his half-transformed arms flopped lifelessly to his side,



though his pulsing neck continued to swell in a bubbling eruption of slick red flesh. The creature was dissolving from within.

The second guard unwrapped his arms from Martin, twisting them like tentacles. He kicked Martin savagely in the ribs, then charged at Sword, arms stretching out like enormous pseudopods. The visual shock of the second transformation cost Sword a vital second and his next dart flew wild. Before he could fire again, the tentacles were on him, slithering across his chest and around his neck in a trail of icy slime.

The pressure that the attenuated limbs exerted was instantaneous and suffocating. Sword heard his heart pound in his ears. He felt his neck constricted until no breath was possible. With his last flicker of consciousness, he fired the pistol without knowing where it was aimed. And then a brutal impact smashed him to the ground.

For an instant, darkness flickered at the edges of Sword's vision, then he suddenly felt his lungs gasp freely for air. The tentacles' grip had loosened. Martin had tackled the second guard from behind. The halfling pulled the flaccid, boneless body from Sword and tossed it to the ground. Sword could see the halide dart dead center in the creature's chest, surrounded by pulsing, corroding flesh. By now, the first guard was little more than a pile of windblown ash. The speed of his decomposition meant he had been ancient, perhaps on the order of centuries.

Martin helped Sword to his feet as the second guard also crumbled to ash.

"What kind of shifters were they?" Sword asked.

"Stupid ones," Martin said. "Go inside now?"

Sword rubbed at his neck. He checked the sky. Almost an hour of sunlight remained. "Yes," he said, then led Martin around to the front of the bungalow, trying not to think of how Orion had played with the shaft of light earlier that morning, as if there were times the sun did not affect vampires.

As Sword expected, the bungalow door was locked, but it took only a second for Martin to open it with a flash of his blue power. Sword scanned the grounds one last time, reassured himself that no one was watching, then stepped quickly inside, gun held ready.

It wasn't necessary.

The bungalow was a single open room, brilliantly lit by overhead fluorescent fixtures that permitted no trace of shadows. The walls were white, devoid of windows or other openings. Sword's first thought was that he had entered into a prison cell, and straight ahead, in the center of the huge room, he saw the prisoner, contained in what could only be a First-World cage.

The prisoner was, as far as Sword could see, a woman, perhaps fifty years old, thin and muscular with short hair molded like a cap to her bony skull. She wore baggy linen pants and shirt, suggesting a prison uniform, and she sat in a simple wooden chair, her head in her hands. And she and everything else with her—a small cot, table, and commode—were ringed by a flickering glowing hemisphere of red energy.

The prisoner raised her head. Sword began to move toward the energy field but Martin grabbed him by his jacket. "Don't touch shield," the halfling warned. Sword had already guessed as much and he stopped five feet from it.

Beyond the red dome of energy, the woman left her chair and moved toward Sword, also keeping back from the perimeter. She held out her hands to him. She spoke to him. He could hear nothing. But the words she said were simple to interpret from the movements of her lips: Help me. Help me.

"How?" Sword asked, expecting that the woman would be able to read his lips as well.

She motioned to him to go to the far side of the screen. On the floor, only inches from the outside of the field, Sword saw a jagged red crystal the size of Martin's fist held on a simple, three-legged wooden platform, no more than a foot from the wooden floor. Though the effect was hard to discern beneath the bright lights above, Sword could see that the red glow within the crystal flickered in time to the fluctuations of the glowing shield. Whatever First-World magic or technology had been used to create the energy field, the crystal was clearly what maintained it.

Sword looked over at the woman. She pointed at the crystal. Stop it, she urged silently.



Sword glanced at Martin. The halfling crouched on the floor, head angled, like a child transfixed by a television set, watching the energy screen flicker around the woman. "What is she?" Sword asked, keeping his face from the woman so she wouldn't see his question. "Human or adept?"

Martin tapped his nose. "Can't tell through shield. Everything out everything in. Don't touch."

Sword saw the woman gesture at the crystal again. Soundlessly she implored him: You can stop it, Galen.

Her use of his name decided him. She knew who he was. She had been captured by shifters. Her enemy was his enemy. That made them allies.

Sword bent down and brushed his fingers against the crystal. The light within pulsed once, then dimmed as Sword's body grounded the charge the crystal held, leaving the rough stone glass-black like obsidian. At the same instant, the glowing dome winked out, and only a circle of fine red powder was left to mark where it had once stood.

"Thank you, Galen," the woman said. She hugged her arms to herself, appearing overcome by emotion. "Thank you."

Without the masking effect of the energy, the woman looked older and frailer than she had at first. Her skin was ivory white and she seemed to sway with each breath she took.

"Are you all right?" Sword asked. He heard Martin hurry over to stand ready at his side.

"Now I am," the woman said. She moved closer to the red circle, but did not step outside it.

"Why were the shifters keeping you here? How long have you been captive? How do you know my name?" Sword's mind swam with the questions he had for her. There was still so much he didn't know.

"Where are the shifters?" she asked.

"Shifters follow moon," Martin growled contemptuously. "Dust dust dust."

The woman looked at Martin as if seeing him for the first time. Sword saw a flicker of what looked like recognition in her eyes.

"What's your name?" Sword asked her.

"Eve."

"Why were you kept here?"

"I know things."

"About what?"

"About their plans," Eve said. She lowered her voice, as if confiding a secret. "About what they want. The shifters. What they want in our world."

Sword felt a chill that cut through to the bone. He had been wrong. Greenview was more than an ambush for Orion and Kendall. It was the site of another First-World incursion. "What do they want?"

Eve's mouth twitched slightly. "Human flesh," she said.

Martin slapped at his cheek. "Shifters already have that. All the time." He looked up at Sword. "They do," he said defensively.

"Are they planning some sort of major operation?" Sword asked.

Eve nodded. "We should leave. Before any of the others come."

"Right," Sword said. He began to head back to the room's single exit, but after a few strides he realized that neither Eve nor Martin were following him. "Is something wrong?"

Eve looked down at the circle of red dust. She seemed embarrassed. "Could you? It's... it's a binding chant." She looked expectantly at Sword but failed to see comprehension in his eyes. "An enchantment. To keep me contained within the circle."

Sword didn't understand. "Then what was the energy field for?"

"That was to keep me quiet. And to keep others out."

Sword studied the red circle. "What do I have to do? Just scrape open a hole in it?"

"No, no," Eve said sharply. "You'd be picking up dust specks for years. No, just get your wizard in here to—"

"What wizard?"

Eve stumbled over her words for a second. "Well, then, your counter." Again she seemed discomfited by the lack of understanding in Sword's eyes. "Someone who can cast a counter enchantment."

"I know what a counter is," Sword said. "But I don't have one."

The woman stared at him. "Then how did you open the message?"



Sword pointed at Martin. "I didn't open it. Martin did."

Eve snorted. "That's no wizard. He's only a... a halfling."

Martin growled menacingly and Sword put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Martin opened the message," Sword said. "He has a blue power. He... wait a minute, how did you know about the message?"

Eve gazed at Martin as she answered Sword. "I have... friends... friends who ... who know about such things. Who often send such messages. We had to be certain that you were everything that the softwind says you are." She looked at Sword. "We had to know you were connected to the First World, so our message was one that only a wizard or a counter could open. Something that only someone with First-World connections could..." She looked harder at Martin. "A *blue* power? A *halfling* with a *blue* power?"

"What's wrong with a halfling having a blue power? And why did you have to make certain that I know about the First World?"

"You saw the guards. A human with no knowledge of the First World could never have defeated them." She pursed her lips. "What's your clan, halfling?"

"His *name* is Martin," Sword said.

Martin stood as if challenged. "*Myrch'ntin Pendragych*." Sword knew what he meant. The halfling, whose name in the shiftertongue was *Myrch'ntin*, had abandoned his own clan and allied himself to Sword's.

"Pendragon?" Eve repeated in disbelief. "You're no elemental adept. Tell me your clan of birth."

Martin crouched back on the floor. "*Myrch'ntin Pendragych*," he repeated sullenly.

"His clan of birth was Arkady," Sword said. "What's this about? Who are you?"

Eve reacted as if she had been struck. "Arkady." The word left her in a gasp. "A halfling with a blue power. A halfling of Arkady."

Then Eve seemed to grow six inches in height and the years melted from her until she had become a woman no more than twenty years old.

"What are you?" Sword said.

"Ask the halfling," Eve answered, her voice sounding stronger with each word.

Martin began to rock back and forth. "Chimera," he said. "Special shifter. Not many left. Good thing."

Eve towered over the halfling. "Break the circle, Martin."

Sword stepped forward. "You said you needed a wizard to break it."

"Why would I need a wizard when I have a halfling with Astar's blue power?" Eve's younger face had become drawn and hard.

"You know his father?" Sword asked.

Martin's mouth dropped open. "Astar powerful shifter."

Eve's lips pulled back in an emotionless smile. Sword saw that her incisors were lengthening. "Astar was a *magnificent* shifter. Break the circle."

"Don't do it, Martin."

"You will do it, Martin. I know where your father is. I know what they've done to him. I can tell you where to find him."

"Don't listen to her, Martin!"

"Listen to me, *Myrch'ntin*. Break the circle. Set me free and I'll take you to your father!"

"No, Martin!"

Eve faced Sword and pointed at him with a finger now topped by a wicked, ivory claw. "You be silent!" she commanded. "You've served your purpose." She turned back to Martin and her face instantly softened and her claws melted back into her fingertips. "Please, Martin. Help me. Help me and I will help you."

Sword cut in front of Martin and drew his gun. He didn't know if silver worked against chimera, but he was willing to risk it. "Go back to the car, Martin. I think there's a good reason why she's being kept here."

And then a distinctive, gravelly, and completely unexpected voice echoed against the solid walls and wooden floor of the bungalow. "A reason, yes, but not a good one."

Sword whirled to find Dr. Elliott Bryce in the bungalow's doorway, holding a shotgun at eye level, trained on Sword.



"Drop the pistol, Mr. Sword. And move away from the circle."

Sword thought about spinning and firing a dart at Eve. But the shotgun blast would hit him before he could pull the trigger. The only option now was to provide some diversion for Martin so that at least the halfling could escape. Thinking quickly, Sword dropped the gun and stepped away from the circle, increasing the distance between himself and Martin.

"Now open the circle like she told you," the doctor said to Martin. "Or Mr. Sword dies. Is that simple enough for you?"

Martin looked anxiously at Sword. "It's all right," Sword said. "He won't kill me. He—"

The shotgun blasted up into the ceiling light fixtures, showering Sword with a storm of shattered glass. Electrical sparks burned and arced overhead and the room was suddenly lit only by a handful of flickering, buzzing fluorescent tubes.

"Last chance," the doctor said harshly as he lowered the shotgun back to Sword. "Break the circle."

Martin turned his back on Sword. He slapped both hands into the dust that formed the ring, rolled back his eyes and as if a fuse had been lit, blue fire crackled out from Martin's hands along the path of the red dust, turning it white.

Eve, triumphant, stepped free of the circle. Beneath her white prisoner's garb, Sword could see that her body was still transforming, shifting, but into what he could not tell.

"Astar," Martin said. He kept his head low, as if ashamed, but still he had to know where his father had been taken. "Tell Martin where."

Eve reached down to cup Martin's chin with fingers twice as long as any fingers should be. "I don't know, you cretinous halfling. But wherever he is, I hope the Tarls are chewing on his bones."

Martin drew back his arm to strike the adept but her other hand shot out even faster and pinned him in place. "Astar was *mine*," Eve hissed. "Until that human bitch stole him from me!" Eve's arms straightened like hydraulic rams and sent Martin skidding back across the floor, kicking up the white ash from the broken circle. "Just think," she said, her voice

deepening in timbre as the musculature and bones of her chest rearranged themselves, still growing. "You might have been mine, little halfling. A child born of shifter and chimera. Who knows, perhaps you would even have had a brain. And a future."

Martin tried to push up from the floor but could only whimper, shaken from the force of the blow. The chimera turned and stalked toward the doctor. The floor shook with each footstep. Sword estimated she had increased her height by eighteen inches and her mass by a hundred pounds all in the few moments since the circle had been opened. He had no idea what it was she was becoming, nor where the extra mass and energy had come from.

Eve held out her hand to Dr. Bryce. Six clawed fingers waved like seaweed fronds. "Give me the charms."

The doctor dropped what appeared to be a handful of inch-square blue ceramic tiles into the chimera's palm. She came for Sword. Her legs now had an extra joint, close to her ankles, and her once baggy clothes were beginning to open along their seams.

Sword stared up into her eyes as she stopped before him, and even though her irises had shifted to yellow and her pupils now folded to form small black squares, he could see the madness in them.

"You weren't held captive here, were you?" Sword said, at last understanding. "You were only what everyone else is here. A patient."

The chimera laughed and the sound of it rolled like thunder.

"A very special patient," the doctor said. "One who was not, shall we say, understood. Not even by her own kind."

"And the message...?" Sword asked. "Not a warning."

"A challenge," Eve boomed.

Sword shook his head, unafraid. "A lie. Like the one you told Martin. You just needed someone to release you. Someone who had First-World connections but didn't know about you."

"In other words," Dr. Bryce said, "a fool."

The chimera was now three feet taller than Sword. Her skin was slowly taking on a pebbled greenish cast, impossible to identify clearly because of

the erratically flickering lights. She patted Sword's head roughly. "And you played the part so well." As if overcome by a seizure, Eve suddenly stretched her neck out, deforming it and lengthening it even more. She opened her mouth and groaned and Sword could see her blackened tongue beginning to split along its axis. Leathery ribbed frills began to peel away from her jaw, wrapping her expanding head like the corona of an armored dinosaur.

The seizure passed and Eve delicately held out a single blue tile between two claws. "And now comes your reward," the chimera rasped. Her breath was rank and hot. "A simple bluebinding charm, aligned only to me, so that I can take you with me." Eve smiled as her jaw stretched forward, bristling with yellow teeth like daggers. "Imagine that," the creature said. "For all the legends told about you, about the coming of an elemental warrior, you end up bluebound in a charm only I can open." She waved the tile in front of Sword's face, keeping him in position with her other giant hand still against his head. "Don't worry. It doesn't hurt. A hundred years from now will only seem a day away." She moved the tile closer. Sword tried to pull back.

But Dr. Bryce stepped forward with his shotgun. "Don't try to run away," he warned.

Sword stared up into the creature's crazed eyes. The doctor was right. He shouldn't run away. He had given up running away. For Martin, for Kendall, for Pendragon, he had sworn never to run away again.

The chimera held the charmed tile against Sword's forehead and began to whisper an enchantment in a hiddentongue.

Sword felt the growing pressure of her claws as she neared the culmination of the chant. He forced himself to wait for the moment. The absolute last moment. He would not run. From this, or from anything.

The chimera spoke the last word. The tile began to glow with a chromelike, blueblack finish. She tightened her embrace so he could not pull back.

And he did not pull back.

He attacked.

He felt the creature's talons rake at his scalp as he pushed forward, taking her completely by surprise as if he rushed to seize the fate offered by the tile.

But instead, he swept his hands before him, closing them around the tile, tearing it from the slippery polished surface of the claws that gripped it, turning the tile around and leaping up for the pebbled flesh, the dripping teeth, and the insane yellow eyes.

He shoved the tile directly onto the creature's forehead, then fell back as a shriek split the air.

Sword smashed against the wooden floor but scrambled to his feet at once, ready to dodge the blow of a clawed fist or the blast of a shotgun. But nothing and no one came for him.

The chimera was rooted in place, capable of nothing but clawing at her forehead in a useless attempt to dislodge the tile — the tile that was already the center of a swirling mass of gleaming reflections cast in solid light.

Eve bellowed in rage, deep purple blood streaming from the wounds she was inflicting upon herself. But the shimmering grew until her clawed hands were trapped against her face. The shimmering curved around her entire body until a cylinder of what seemed to be rippling mercury began to grow down the length of her to the floor.

Then the cylinder began to narrow. Eve's triple-jointed legs and taloned feet were swallowed by its downward growth and the instant that the last of her flesh had disappeared from view, her roars of agony and outrage vanished, not even leaving behind an echo. The cylinder began to compact, to compress, to shrink until it was no larger than the simple shining package that had arrived at the Loft that morning.

The chimera was bluebound.

By a spell designed to be lifted by only one being — the very being now trapped inside the cylinder, forever unable to reach out to undo what she had done. Forced to wait until a more powerful enchantment could be cast.

The cylinder achieved its final size and form and tipped over to clatter on the floor, roll a few inches, and then... nothing more.

Even the sparking of the lights had ceased.

"You bastard," Dr. Bryce croaked. "You coldblasted meddling shirley." His mouth twisted with fury as he swung the shotgun to cover Sword. "She was... so... so beautiful."

"She was monstrous," Sword said, slowly backing away, trying to see where Martin might be lying in the shadows. "Even to her own kind. That's why she was kept here, wasn't it?"

But the doctor was beyond any explanation other than his own. He raised the shotgun to his shoulder. He took aim.

And then the gun was wrenched from his grasp by a hurtling dark shape that howled like something not quite human.

Martin rolled to a stop in front of Sword and offered him the shotgun. Dr. Bryce was on his knees, sobbing amidst the ashes and the shards of broken glass for what he had lost—some connection to a First-World malignancy Sword could not begin to comprehend.

Martin looked up through half-closed eyes as if expecting Sword to strike him. "Galen Sword mad Martin open circle make bad?"

Sword took the gun, broke it and emptied its remaining shells. "No," he said. "*Myrch'ntin Pendragych*." He held his fist out in the salute of the First World and Martin gratefully touched his hand to Sword's.

"*Pendragych*," the halfling said, confirming the bond between them that could never be broken.

Sword walked over to the gleaming cylinder. When he picked it up, it possessed the same mass as the first he had received. The only clue as to what this bluebound package held was in the pattern of the swirls that seemed to glimmer beneath its metallic skin. Held just right beneath the failing lights, it was almost as if a woman's desperate face appeared, framed by grasping hands that closed on nothing, and whose eyes held a chaos that had transcended the world into which she had been born.

Sword hefted the cylinder in his hand. A wizard could defeat the charm, even a well-trained human, Orion had said. But for now the chant would hold and the lethal insanity of the chimera would be contained.

He wondered how she had come to be here. What crimes she had committed. Which of the clans had been responsible for her capture and her treatment. Once again, his contact with the First World had left Sword with more questions than answers.

"Do you require any help?"

Sword turned slowly to the bungalow's door. There was no need for concern. It was Orion in a wide-brimmed hat, wraparound sunglasses, and a long black coat with turned-up collar. Even at this distance, Sword could detect the scent of excessive sunblock lotion.

The vampire walked unhurriedly into the darkened room. Beyond him, through the open doorway, the sky was red with the setting sun.

"How'd you make it here so quickly?" Sword asked.

"I started out when I heard your first message. The limousine had tinted windows. The driver received three tickets for excessive speed." Orion yawned, as if awakened too early, then took off his sunglasses to better see the room.

"It's all right," Sword said as he saw the question in the vampire's eyes. "As it turns out, this facility has some room to spare. But it's not the place for Kendall." He motioned for Martin to leave the doctor, still weeping on the floor. "We'll try someplace else."

"What about that?" Orion asked, pointing to the cylinder Sword carried. "Another message?"

"I suppose." Sword shrugged. "It tells us that in some ways the First World and the Second are not that different. Each has its criminals, as well as its secrets." He slipped the cylinder into an inner pocket of his jacket. There was a great deal of expensive equipment in the Loft's lab waiting to examine it.

Orion adjusted his collar as he, Sword, and Martin moved to the bungalow's door. "You know, Mr. Sword, there are times I feel I do not understand you at all."

"Then we're even," Sword said.

The setting sun cast long shadows behind the three as they walked from Bungalow Eight. Orion made a show of boldly facing into the sun. Martin yowled incessantly on the freeway, all the way back to the city. And feeling the close presence and weight of the new bluebound message he held in his jacket, Galen Sword sensed that he was one step closer to his final goal and his true home.

Whatever and wherever they might be.

BUT FOR THE GRACE GO I

BY CHARLES DE LINT

You can only predict things after they've happened.

— Eugene Ionesco

I inherited Tommy the same way I did the dogs. Found him wandering lost and alone, so I took him home. I've always taken in strays — maybe because a long time ago I used to hope that someone'd take me in. I grew out of that idea pretty fast.

Tommy's kind of like a pet, I guess, except he can talk. He doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but then I don't find what most people have to say makes much sense. At least Tommy's honest. What you see is what you get. No games, no hidden agendas. He's only Tommy, a big guy who wouldn't hurt you even if you took a stick to him. Likes to smile, likes to laugh — a regular guy. He's just a few bricks short of a load, is all. Hell, sometimes I figure all he's got is bricks sitting back in there behind his eyes.

I know what you're thinking. A guy like him should be in an institution, and I suppose you're right, except they pronounced him cured at the Zeb when they needed his bed for somebody whose family had money to pay for the space he was taking up and they're not exactly falling over themselves to get him back.

We live right in the middle of that part of Newford that some people call the Tombs and some call Squatland. It's the dead part of the city — a jungle of empty lots filled with trash and abandoned cars, gutted buildings and rubble. Sitting in their fancy apartments and houses, with running water and

electricity and no worry about where the next meal's coming from, the good citizens of Newford have got a lot of names and ways to describe this place and us. I've seen it described in the papers as a blight, a disgrace, a breeding ground for criminals and racial strife, though we've got every color you can think of living in here and we get along pretty well together, mostly because we just leave each other alone. We're not so much criminals as losers.

We just call it home. I think of it as one of those outlaw roosts like they used to have in the Old West — some little ramshackle town, way back in the badlands, where only the outlaws lived. Of course those guys like L'Amour and Short who wrote about places like that probably just made them up. I find that a lot of people have this thing about making crap romantic, the way they like to blur outlaws and heroes, the good with the bad. I know that feeling all too well, but I broke the only pair of rose-colored glasses I had the chance to own a long time ago.

I'm not saying this part of town's pretty, or even that I like living here. We're all just putting in time, trying to make do. Every time I hear about some kid ODing, somebody getting knifed, somebody taking that long step off a building or wrapping their belt around their neck, I figure that's just one more of us who finally got out.

It's a war zone in here, and just like in Vietnam, they either carry you out in a box, or you leave under your own steam carrying a piece of the place with you — a kind of cold shadow that sits inside your soul and has you waking up in a cold sweat some nights, or feeling closed in and crazy in your new work place, home, social life, whatever, for no good reason except that it's the Tombs calling to you, telling you that maybe you don't deserve what you've got now, reminding you of all those people you left behind who didn't get the break you did.

Sometimes I pretend I'm here because I want to be, because it's the only place I can be free, because I'm judged by who I am and what I can do, not by how screwed up my family is and how dirt poor looked pretty good from the position we were in.

I don't know why we bother. Let's be honest. I don't know why I bother. I just don't know any better, I guess. Or maybe I'm just too damn stubborn to give up.

Angel — you know, the do-gooder who runs that program out of her Grasso Street office to get kids like me off the streets? She tells me I've got a nihilistic attitude. Once she explained what that meant, all I could do was laugh.

"Look at where I'm coming from," I told her. "What do you expect?"

"I can help you."

I just shook my head. "You want a piece of me, that's all, but I've got nothing left to give."

That's only partly true. See, I've got responsibilities, just like a regular citizen. I've got the dogs. And I've got Tommy. I was joking about calling him my pet. That's just what the bikers who're squatting down the street from us call him. I think of us all — me, the dogs and Tommy — as family. Or about as close to family as any of us are ever going to get. I can't leave, because what would they do without me? And who'd take the whole pack of us, which is the only way I'd go?

Tommy's got this thing about magazines, though he can't read a word. Me, I love to read. I've got thousands of books. I get them all from the dump bins in back of bookstores — you know, where they tear off the covers to get their money back for the ones they don't sell and just throw the book away? Never made any sense to me, but you won't catch me complaining.

I'm not that particular about what I read. I just like the stories. Danielle Steele or Dostoyevsky, Somerset Maugham or King — doesn't make much difference. Just so long as I can get away in the words.

But Tommy likes his magazines, and he likes them with his name on the cover — you know, the subscription sticker? There's two words he can read: Thomas and Flood. I know his first name's Tommy, because he knows that much and that's what he told me. I made up the last name. The building we live in is on Flood Street.

He likes *People* and *Us* and *Entertainment Weekly* and *Life* and stuff like that. Lots of pictures, not too many words. He gets me to cut out the

pictures of the people and animals and ads and stuff he likes and then he plays with them like they were paper dolls. That's how he gets away, I guess. Whatever works.

Anyway, I've got a post office box down on Grasso Street near Angel's office and that's where I have the subscriptions sent. I go down once a week to pick them up — usually on Thursday afternoons. It's all a little more than I can afford — makes me work a little harder at my garbage picking, you know? — but what am I going to do? Cut him off from his only pleasure? People think I'm hard — when they don't just think I'm crazy — and maybe I am, but I'm not mean.

The thing about having a post office box is that you get some pretty interesting junk mail — well, at least Tommy finds it interesting. I used to throw it out, but he came down with me to the box one time and got all weirded out when he saw me throwing it out so I bring most of it back now. He calls them his surprises. First thing he asks when I get back is, "Were there any surprises?"



I went in the Thursday this all started and gave the clerk my usual glare, hoping that one day he'll finally get the message, but he never does. He was the one who sicced Angel on me in the first place. Thought nineteen was too young to be a baglady, pretty girl like me. Thought he could help.

I didn't bother to explain that I'd chosen to live this way. I've been living on my own since I was twelve. I don't sell my bod' and I don't do drugs. My clothes may be worn down and patched, but they're clean. I wash every day which is more than I can say for some of the real citizens I pass by on the street. You can smell their B.O. a half block away. I look pretty regular except on garbage day when Tommy and I hit the streets with our shopping carts, the dogs all strung out around us like our own special honor guard.

There's nothing wrong with garbage picking. Where do you think all those fancy antique shops get most of their high-priced merchandise?

I do okay, without either Angel's help or his. He was probably just hard up for a girlfriend.

"How's it going, Maisie?" he asked when I came in, all friendly, like we're pals. I guess he got my name from the form I filled out when I rented the box.

I ignored him, like I always do, and gathered the week's pile up. It was a fairly thick stack — lots of surprises for Tommy. I took it all outside where Remy was waiting for me. He's the smallest of the dogs, just a small little mutt with wiry brown hair and a real insecurity problem. He's the only one who comes everywhere with me because he just falls apart if I leave him at home.

I gave Remy a quick pat, then sat on the curb, sorting through Tommy's surprises. If the junk mail doesn't have pictures, I toss it. I only want to carry so much of this crap back with me.

It was while I was going through the stack that this envelope fell out. I just sat and stared at it for the longest time. It looked like one of those ornate invitations they're always making a fuss over in the romance novels I read: almost square, the paper really thick and cream-colored, ornate lettering on the outside that was real high-class calligraphy, it was so pretty. But that wasn't what had me staring at it, unwilling to pick it up.

The lettering spelled out my name. Not the one I use, but my real name. Margaret. Maisie's just a diminutive of it that I read about in this book about Scotland. That was all that was there, just "Margaret," no surname. I never use one except for when the cops decide to roust the squatters in the Tombs, like they do from time to time — I think it's like some kind of training exercise for them — and then I use Flood, same as I gave Tommy.

I shot a glance back in through the glass doors because I figured it had to be from the postal clerk — who else knew me? — but he wasn't even looking at me. I sat and stared at it a little longer, but then I finally picked it up. I took out my pen knife and slit the envelope open, and carefully pulled out this card. All it said on it was, "Allow the dark-robed access tonight and they will kill you."

I didn't have a clue what it meant, but it gave me a royal case of the creeps. If it wasn't a joke — which I figured it had to be — then who were these black-robed and why would they want to kill me?

Every big city like this is really two worlds. You could say it's divided up between the haves and the have-nots, but it's not that simple. It's more like some people are citizens of the day and others of the night. Someone like me belongs to the night. Not because I'm bad, but because I'm invisible. People don't know I exist, they don't care, except for Angel and the postal clerk, I guess.

But now someone did.

Unless it was a joke. I tried to laugh it off, but it just didn't work. I looked at the envelope again, checking it out for a return address, and that's when I realized something I should have noticed straightaway. The envelope didn't have my box number on it, it didn't have anything at all except for my name. So how the hell did it end up in my box? There was only one way.

I left Rexy guarding Tommy's mail — just to keep him occupied — and went back inside. When the clerk finished with the customer ahead of me, he gave me a big smile but I laid the envelope down on the counter between us and didn't smile back.

Actually, he's a pretty good-looking guy. He's got one of those flat-top haircuts — shaved sides, kinky black hair standing straight up on top. His skin's the color of coffee and he's got dark eyes with the longest lashes I ever saw on a guy. I could like him just fine, but the trouble is he's a regular citizen. It'd just never work out.

"How'd this get in my box?" I asked him. "All it's got is my name on it, no box number, no address, nothing."

He looked down at the envelope. "You found it in your box?"

I nodded.

"I didn't put it in there and I'm the one who sorts all the mail for the boxes."

"I still found it in there."

He picked it up and turned it over in his hands.

"This is really weird," he said.

"You into occult shit?" I asked him.

I was thinking of dark robes. The only people I ever saw wear them were priests or people dabbling in the occult.

He blinked with surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

I grabbed the envelope back and headed back to where Rexy was waiting for me.

"Maisie!" the clerk called after me, but I just ignored him.

Great, I thought as I collected the mail Rexy'd been guarding for me. First Joe postal clerk's got a good Samaritan complex over me — probably fueled by his dick — now he's going downright weird. I wondered if he knew where I lived. I wondered if he knew about the dogs. I wondered about magicians in dark robes and whether he thought he had some kind of magic that was going to deal with the dogs and make me go all gooshy for him — just before he killed me.

The more I thought about it, the more screwed up I got. I wasn't so much scared as confused. And angry. How was I supposed to keep coming back to get Tommy's mail, knowing he was there? What would he put in the box next? A dead rat? It wasn't like I could complain to anybody. People like me, we don't have any rights.

Finally I just started for home, but I paused as I passed the door to Angel's office.

Angel's a little cool with me these days. She still says she wanted to help me, but she doesn't quite trust me anymore. It's not really her fault.

She had me in her office one time — I finally went, just to get her off my back — and we sat there for awhile, looking at each other, drinking this crappy coffee from the machine that someone donated to her a few years ago. I wouldn't have picked it up on a dare if I'd come across it on my rounds.

"What do you want from me?" I finally asked her.

"I'm just trying to understand you."

"There's nothing to understand. What you see is what I am. No more, no less."

"But why do you live the way you do?"

Understand, I admire what Angel does. She's helped a lot of kids that were in a really bad way and that's a good thing. Some people need help because they can't help themselves.

She's an attractive woman with a heart-shaped face, the kind of eyes that always look really warm and caring and long dark hair that seems to go on forever down her back. I always figured something really bad must have happened to her as a kid, for her to do what she does. It's not like she makes much of a living. I think the only thing she really and honestly cares about is helping people through this sponsorship program she's developed where straights put up money and time to help the down-and-outers get a second chance.

I don't need that kind of help. I'm never going to be much more than what I am, but that's okay. It beats what I had before I hit the streets.

I've told Angel all of this a dozen times, but she sat there behind her desk, looking at me with those sad eyes of hers, and I knew she wanted a piece of me, so I gave her one. I figured maybe she'd leave me alone then.

"I was in high school," I told her, "and there was this girl who wanted to get back at one of the teachers — a really nice guy named Mr. Hammond. He taught English. So she made up this story about how he'd molested her and the shit really hit the fan. He got suspended while the cops and the school board looked into the matter and all the time this girl's laughing her head off behind everybody's back, but looking real sad and screwed up whenever the cops and the social workers are talking to her.

"But I knew he didn't do it. I knew where she was, the night she said it happened, and it wasn't with Mr. Hammond. Now I wasn't exactly the best-liked kid in that school, and I knew what this girl's gang was going to do to me, but I went ahead and told the truth anyway.

"Things worked out pretty much the way I expected. I got the cold shoulder from everybody, but at least Mr. Hammond got his name cleared and his job back.

"One afternoon he asks me to see him after school and I figure it's to thank me for what I've done, so I go to his classroom. The building's pretty well empty and the scuff of my shoes in the hallway is the only sound I hear as

I go to see him. I get to the English room and he takes me back into his office. Then he locks the door and he rapes me. Not just once, but over and over again. And you know what he says to me while he's doing it?

"'Nobody's going to believe a thing you say,' he says. 'You try to talk about this and they're just going to laugh in your face.'"

I looked over at Angel and there were tears swimming in her eyes.

"And you know what?" I said. "I knew he was right. I was the one that cleared his name. There was *nobody* going to believe me, and I didn't even try."

"Oh, Jesus," Angel said. "You poor kid."

"Don't take it so hard," I told her. "It's past history. Besides, it never really happened. I just made it up because I figured it was the kind of thing you wanted to hear."

I'll give her this: she took it well. Didn't yell at me, didn't pitch me out onto the street. But you can see why maybe I'm not on her list of favorite people these days. On the other hand, she doesn't hold a grudge — I know that too.

I felt like a hypocrite going in to see her with this problem, but I didn't have anyone else to turn to. It's not like Tommy or the dogs could give me any advice. I hesitated for the longest moment in the doorway, but then she looked up and saw me standing there, so I went ahead in.

I took off my hat — it's this fedora that I actually bought new because it was just too cool to pass up. I wear it all the time, my light brown hair hanging down from it, long and straight, though not as long as Angel's. I like the way it looks with my jeans and sneakers and this cotton shirt I found at a rummage sale that only needed a tear fixed on one of its shirttails.

I know what you're thinking, but hey, I never said I wasn't vain. I may be a squatter, but I like to look my best. It gets me into places where they don't let in bums.

Anyway I took off my hat and slouched in the chair on this side of Angel's desk.

"Which one's that?" she asked, pointing to Rexy who was sitting outside by the door like the good little dog he is.

“Rexy.”

“He can come in if you’d like.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not staying long. I just had this thing I wanted to ask you about. It’s...”

I didn’t know where to begin, but finally I just started in with finding the envelope. It got easier as I went along. That’s one thing you got to hand to Angel — there’s nobody can listen like she does. You take up *all* of her attention when you’re talking to her. You never get the feeling she’s thinking of something else, or of what she’s going to say back to you, or anything like that.

Angel didn’t speak for a long time after I was done. When I stopped talking, she looked past me, out at the traffic going by on Grasso Street.

“Maisie,” she said finally. “Have you ever heard the story of the boy who cried wolf?”

“Sure, but what’s that got to do with — oh, I get it.” I took out the envelope and slid it across the desk to her. “I didn’t have to come in here,” I added.

And I was wishing I hadn’t, but Angel seemed to give herself a kind of mental shake. She opened the envelope and read the message, and then her gaze came back to me.

“No,” she said. “I’m glad you did. Do you want me to have a talk with Franklin?”

“Who’s that?”

“The fellow behind the counter at the post office. I don’t mind doing it, although I have to admit that it doesn’t sound like the kind of thing he’d do.”

So that was his name. Franklin. Franklin the creep.

I shrugged. “What good would that do? Even if he did do it —” and the odds looked good so far as I was concerned “— he’s not going to admit to it.”

“Maybe we can talk to his supervisor.” She looked at her watch. “I think it’s too late to do it today, but I can try first thing tomorrow morning.”

Great. In the meantime, I could be dead.

Angel must have guessed what I was thinking, because she added, “Do you need a place to stay for tonight? Some place where you’ll feel safe?”

I thought of Tommy and the dogs and shook my head. "No, I'll be okay," I said as I collected my envelope and stuck it back in with Tommy's mail. "Thanks for, you know, listening and everything."

I waited for her to roll into some spiel about how she could do more, could get me off the street, that kind of thing, but it was like she was tuned right into my wavelength because she didn't say a word about any of that. She just knew, I guess, that I'd never come back if every time I talked to her that was all I could look forward to.

"Come see me tomorrow," was all she said as I got to my feet. "And Maisie?"

I paused in the doorway where Remy was ready to start bouncing off my legs as if he hadn't seen me in weeks.

"Be careful," Angel added.

"I will."



I took a long route back to the squat, watching my back the whole time, but I never saw anybody that looked like he was following me, and not a single person in a dark robe. I almost laughed at myself by the time I got back. There were Tommy and the dogs, all sprawled out on the steps of our building until Remy yelped and then the whole pack of them were racing down the street towards me.

Okay, big as he was, Tommy still couldn't hurt a flea even if his life depended on it and the dogs were all small and old and pretty well used up, but Franklin would still have to be crazy to think he could mess with us. He didn't *know* my family. You get a guy as big as Tommy and all those dogs... well, they just looked dangerous. What did I have to worry about?

The dogs were all over me then with Tommy right behind them. He grinned from ear to ear as I handed him his mail.

"Surprises!" he cried happily, in that weird high voice of his. "Maisie bring surprises!"

We went inside to our place up on the second floor. It's got this big open space that we use in the summer when we want the air to have a chance to move around. There's books everywhere. Tommy's got his own corner with his magazines and all the little cut-out people and stuff that he plays with. There's a couple of mismatched kitchen chairs and a card table. A kind of old cabinet that some hoboes helped me move up the one flight from the street holds our food and the Coleman stove I use for cooking.

We sleep on the mattresses over in another corner, the whole pack together, except for Chuckie. He's this old lab that likes to guard the doorway. I usually think he's crazy for doing so, but I wouldn't mind tonight. Chuckie can look real fierce when he wants to. There's a couple of chests by the bed area. I keep our clothes in one and dry kibbles for the dogs in another. They're pretty good scavengers, but I like to see that they're eating the right kind of food. I wouldn't want anything to happen to them. One thing I can't afford is vet bills.

First off I fed the dogs, then I made supper for Tommy and me — lentil soup with day-old buns I'd picked up behind a bakery in Crowsea. We'd been eating the soup for a few days, but we had to use it up because, with the spring finally here, it was getting too warm for food to keep. In the winter we've got smaller quarters down the hall, complete with a cast-iron stove that I salvaged from this place they were wrecking over in Foxville. Tommy and I pretty near killed ourselves hauling it back. One of the bikers helped us bring it upstairs.

We fell into our usual Thursday night ritual once we'd finished supper. After hauling down tomorrow's water from the tank I'd set up on the roof to catch rainwater, I lit the oil lamp, then Tommy and I sat down at the table and went through his new magazines and ads. Every time he'd point out something that he liked in a picture, I'd cut it out for him. I do a pretty tidy job, if I say so myself. Getting to be an old hand at it. By the time we finished, he had a big stack of new cut-out people and stuff for his games that he just had to go try out right away. I went and got the book I'd started this morning and brought it back to the table, but I couldn't read.

I could hear Tommy talking to his new little friends. The dogs shifting and moving about the way they do. Down the street a Harley kicked over and I listened to it go through the Tombs until it faded in the distance. Then there was only the sound of the wind outside the window.

I'd been able to keep that stupid envelope with its message out of my head just by staying busy, but now it was all I could think about. I looked out the window. It was barely eight, but it was dark already. The real long days of summer were still to come.

So is Franklin out there? I asked myself. Is he watching the building, scoping things out, getting ready to make his move? Maybe dressed up in some black robe, him and a bunch of his pals?

I didn't really believe it. I didn't know him, but like Angel had said, it didn't seem like him and I could believe it. He might bug me, being all friendly and wanting to play Pygmalion to my Eliza Doolittle, but I didn't think he had a mean streak in him.

So where *did* the damn message come from? What was it supposed to mean? And, here was the scary part: if it wasn't a joke, and if Franklin wasn't responsible for it, then who was?

I kept turning that around and around in my mind until my head felt like it was spinning. Everybody started picking up on my mood. The dogs became all anxious and when I walked near them, got to whining and shrinking away like I was going to hit them. Tommy got the shakes and his little people started tearing and then he was crying and the dogs started in howling and I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

But I didn't. It took me a couple of hours to calm Tommy down and finally get him to fall asleep. I told him the story he likes the best, the one where this count from some place far away shows up and tells us that we're really his kids and he takes us away, dogs and all, to our real home where we all live happily ever after. Sometimes I use his little cut-outs to tell the story, but I didn't do that tonight. I didn't want to remind him of how a bunch'd gotten torn.

By the time Tommy was sleeping, the dogs had calmed down again and were sleeping too. I couldn't. I sat up all night worrying about that damned

message, about what would happen to Tommy and the dogs if I did get killed, about all kinds of crap that I usually don't let myself think about.

Come the morning, I felt like I'd crawled up out of a sewer. You know what it's like when you pull an all-nighter? Your eyes have this burning behind them, you'd kill for a shower and everything seems a little on edge? I saw about getting breakfast for everyone, let the dogs out for a run, then I told Tommy I had to go back downtown.

"You don't go out today," I told him. "You understand? You don't go out and you don't let anybody in. You and the dogs play inside today, okay? Can you do that for Maisie?"

"Sure," Tommy said, like I was the one with bricks for brains. "No problem, Maisie."

God I love him.

I gave him a big hug and a kiss, patted each of the dogs, then headed back down to Grasso Street with Rexy. I was about half a block from Angel's office when the headlines of a newspaper outside a drugstore caught my eye. I stopped dead in my tracks and just stared at it. The words swam in my sight, headlines blurring with the subheadings. I picked up the paper and unfolded it so that I could see the whole front page, then I started reading from the top.

GRIERSON SLAIN BY SATANISTS.

DIRECTOR OF THE CITY'S NEW AIDS CLINIC FOUND DEAD
IN FERRYSIDE GRAVEYARD AMID OCCULT PARAPHERNALIA.

POLICE BAFFLED.

MAYOR SAYS, 'THIS IS AN OUTRAGE.'

"Hey, this isn't a library, kid."

Rexy growled and I looked up to find the drugstore owner standing over me. I dug in my pocket until it coughed up a quarter, then handed it over to him. I took the paper over to the curb and sat down.

It was the picture that got to me. It looked like one of the buildings in the Tombs in which kids had been playing at ritual magic a few years ago. All the same kinds of candles and inverted pentacles and weird

graffiti. Nobody squatted in that building anymore, though the kids hadn't been back for over a year. There was still something wrong about the place, like the miasma of whatever the hell it was that they'd been doing was still there, hanging on.

It was a place to give you the creeps. But this picture had something worse. It had a body, covered up by a blanket, right in the middle of it. The tombstones around it were all scorched and in pieces, like someone had set off a bomb. The police couldn't explain what had happened, except they did say it hadn't been a bomb, because no one nearby had heard a thing.

Pinpricks of dread went crawling up my spine as I reread the first paragraph. The victim, Grierson. Her first name was Margaret.

I folded the paper and got up, heading for the post office. Franklin was alone behind the counter when I got inside.

"The woman who died last night," I said before he had a chance to even say hello. "Margaret Grierson. The Director of the AIDS Clinic. Did she have a box here?"

Franklin nodded. "It's terrible, isn't it? One of my friends says the whole clinic's going to fall apart without her there to run it. God, I hope it doesn't change anything. I know a half dozen people that are going to it."

I gave him a considering look. A half dozen friends? He had this real sad look in his eyes, like.... Jesus, I thought. Was Franklin gay? Had he really been just making nice and not trying to jump my bones?

I reached across the counter and put my hand on his arm.

"They won't let this screw it up," I told him. "The clinic's too important."

The look of surprise in his face had me backing out the door fast. What the hell was I doing?

"Maisie!" he cried.

I guess I felt like a bit of a shit for having misjudged him, but all the same, I couldn't stick around. I followed my usual rule of thumb when things get heavy or weird: I fled.

I just started wandering aimlessly, thinking about what I'd learned. That message hadn't been for me, it had been for Grierson. Margaret, yeah, but

Margaret *Grierson*, not Flood. Not me. Somehow it had gotten in the wrong box. I don't know who put it there, or how he knew what was going to happen last night before it happened, but whoever he was, he'd screwed up royally.

Better it had been me, I thought. Better a loser from the Tombs, than someone like *Grierson* who was really doing something worthwhile.

When I thought that, I realized something that I guess I'd always known, but I just didn't ever let myself think about. You get called a loser often enough and you start to believe it. I know I did. But it didn't have to be true.

I guess I had what they call an epiphany in some of the older books I've read. Everything came together and made sense — except for what I was doing with myself.

I unfolded the paper again. There was a picture of *Grierson* near the bottom — one of those shots they keep on file for important people and run whenever they haven't got anything else. It was cropped down from one that had been taken when she cut the ribbon at the new clinic a few months back. I remembered seeing it when they ran coverage of the ceremony.

"This isn't going to mean a whole lot to you," I told her picture, "but I'm sorry about what happened to you. Maybe it should've been me, but it wasn't. There's not much I can do about that. But I can do something about the rest of *my* life."

I left the paper on a bench near a bus stop and walked back to Grasso Street, to Angel's office. I sat down in the chair across from her desk, holding Remy on my lap to give me courage, and I told her about Tommy and the dogs, about how they needed me and that was why I'd never wanted to take her up on her offers to help.

She shook her head sadly when I was done. She was looking a little weepy again — like she had when I told her that story before — but I was feeling a little weepy myself this time.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I guess I thought you'd take them away from me."

I surprised myself. I hadn't lied, or made a joke. Instead I'd told her the truth. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

"Oh, Maisie," she said. "We can work something out."

She came around the desk and I let her hold me. It's funny. I didn't mean to cry, but I did. And so did she. It felt good, having someone else be strong for a change. I haven't had someone be there for me since my grandma died in 1971, the year I turned eight. I hung in for a long time, all things considered, but the day that Mr. Hammond asked me to come see him after school was the day I finally gave up my nice little regulated slot as a citizen of the day and became a part of the night world instead.

I knew it wasn't going to be easy, trying to fit into the day world — I'd probably never fit in completely, and I don't think I'd want to. I also knew that I was going to have a lot of crap to go through and to put up with in the days to come, and maybe I'd regret the decision I'd made today, but right now it felt good to be back.

GOD CAN BE A CRUEL BASTARD

BY G.WAYNE MILLER

The elms.

That was the first thing that struck me. Those towering elms that used to line the road encircling the lake—they were gone, not a single one left. In the 21 years since I'd been home, Dutch Elm disease had claimed them. DPW crews had planted maples in their place, but they were still saplings, scraggly and insignificant.

The lake.

Quachintoga Lake, it's called, after an Indian tribe that once camped on its shore.

The lake was the second thing that stopped me. When we were kids, Steve and I used to fish in that lake. Yellow perch, crappies, an occasional eel — on our best days we'd pull three dozen fish out of Quachintoga. Those endless summer mornings we'd sit under those elms, our eyes riveted to red-and-white bobbers Armstrong's sold for a quarter, waiting for that prize-winning bass we just knew was down there somewhere. Waited and watched, Steve and me, dreaming together the cowboy dreams of young boys.

I was telling you how much I missed those elms. More than I would have imagined, driving up from New York. Quachintoga looked so different without those trees. So naked. Even on a day like the day I finally came

home, sunny and warm, the forsythias in spring bloom, the grass thick and green — Quachintoga looked naked. Dirty, too. I didn't remember the water being that muddy, didn't remember it having that smell, either — foul, more like a city sewer than a suburban lake.

The joggers — I noticed them right off, too. When I left Wakefield, Vietnam was still a dirty word, the Beatles were still a group and the health craze hadn't begun. You could measure how much time had gone by, all right, seeing all those joggers. They ringed the lake, an army of them — men and women and teens, decked out in Nikes and sweatsuits. I had never seen so many joggers as I saw around Quachintoga Lake that afternoon. Not even in Central Park, where it's chic these days to sweat.

Twice I drove around the lake, taking it all in, reminiscing about old times... and Steve.

God can be a cruel bastard, he'd always said when we got high enough to philosophize about such things.

And you're nothing but a goddamn cynic, I'd always answered, laughing. Of course, that was 21 years ago, 18 years before they buried him.

Twice I circled the lake and then I drove downtown, where I stopped at a phone booth. I didn't need to look the number up. Even after so long, I remembered it like yesterday.

The phone rang three times and then Mrs. Krensky answered. It was the same voice as 21 years ago — calm, sweet, motherly.

"Mrs. Krensky?" I said.

"Yes?"

"It's Joey." I didn't bother with a last name. Steve and I — we'd been so close growing up. "My second son," Mrs. Krensky used to call me. "My kid brother," Steve used to joke. I was three months younger than him.

"Joey. Joey! It's been so long."

"Yes it has, Mrs. Krensky."

"How are you, Joey?"

"I'm fine," I lied. The truth was, I wasn't fine. The truth was, I was desperate, scared. I was losing it... had been losing it for three years, ever since Steve died.

"Fine," she repeated in that accent of hers — an accent that still evoked the old country, Poland, more than 40 years after she'd escaped. "I'm glad. Such a one as you deserves to be fine."

"And how are you?"

"Hey, you know, I can't complain," she said. "If you did complain, who would listen, anyway? Isn't that right?"

"That's right." It was an old exchange. It must've gone back to when Steve and I were still in grammar school.

"Why are you calling, Joey?" she said. "You, I know. Always up to something. Even as a little boy playing in my yard, always up to something. You and my Steve."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Krensky. So sorry."

"My blue-eyed boy," she said. "Such a terrible thing."

"I'm awfully sorry."

"So tell me why you called, Joey. You, I know. It wasn't only to talk."

"I called to find out where Steve's buried, Mrs. Krensky," I said. All the times I'd rehearsed that question, I hadn't figured out a better way to put it. "I... want to pay my respects."

"After so long?"

"I was in England," I said, truthfully. "My job. I work for IBM now. They send me all over. I sent a letter, as soon as I heard. Did you get the letter?"

"I got the letter."

"And the flowers? I had flowers wired."

"The flowers, too."

"I hope they were nice."

"They were nice. Very nice. Expensive. So now you want to pay your respects?"

"Yes."

"I think Steve would have liked that," she said, and for an instant I was tempted to say: *If you're not sure, why don't you just ask him, Mrs. Krensky? Did you know he's still with us? Been reminding me for weeks of a little favor I still owe him?*

"I think so, too," I said.

"Well, then," she said. "He's in Sunset Point."

I shivered, hearing that, but I wasn't surprised — it fit, yes it did. In an ironic way, it fit.

We'd spent our share of time together there in that cemetery, Steve and I. We'd smoked dope there. Brought girls there. It was there one night the end of our sophomore year at Wakefield High, that he'd first said to me: *God can be a cruel bastard, you know. Plays the game the way he wants to. Jams you inside, fast and hard. Know what I mean, Joey? Do you?*

I didn't. Not then.

"Sunset Point," I repeated.

"You know where it is," Mrs. Krensky said.

"Yes."

"On the lake."

"Of course."

"When you were kids, you used to fish there. I remember the fish. Do you remember? We fried those fish."

"I remember."

"Those were good times, Joey."

"Very good times." It had been one of our favorite spots, Sunset Point. We'd lean our bikes against the war memorial and toss our lines in the water from there... and daydream in the cool shade of those magnificent elms.

"You fished there, and now he's buried there," she said, sadness in her voice. "Life can be funny."

So can death, I thought. *So can death.*

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Krensky." It sounded so meaningless. I didn't know what else to say.

"Everything was so sudden."

"I understand."

"We were lucky, if such things can be called luck. We got a plot right by the water. Do you know where the war memorial is?"

"Yes."

"Steve's next to it. You can't miss it. A big stone, black marble. It's a pretty spot, Joey. Very pretty. Mr. Krensky and I will be buried there, too."

We talked a few more minutes. About the past. About Steve and me. About our eighth-grade rocket club. The car he'd driven into a telephone pole senior year. The junior prom. That awful day we both got cut from the JV baseball team. The time he was suspended for arguing with the high school principal. The demonstration we led against the dress code. A tie-dyed T-shirt I used to wear. The corn-cob pipe she found in his pants doing the laundry. On and on like that. It's funny what the mind remembers, what it forgets.

After feeding a couple more quarters into the phone, I promised to stay in touch. She said she hoped I would. We said our goodbyes and hung up.

I drove back around the lake, past the joggers, through the stone gates and into the cemetery, which fronts on Quachintoga's western end. Dutch Elm Disease had taken Sunset Point's elms, but it couldn't touch the oaks and ashes and maples, and it was cool as ever there, quiet, deserted except for a groundskeeper stealing an afternoon nap next to his mower. This was the only spot on the lake the joggers didn't come. This was a place you could be alone. A place to think — to fish, which is really nothing more than an excuse for long and lazy thinking.

I found his stone easily enough. It was just where Mrs. Krensky said it would be, to the right of the war memorial and almost directly on the shore. It was an ornate tombstone, highly polished, with his name in large Gothic script. Two dates were below his name: July 14, 1954 — July 3, 1988.

It was spooky seeing his name like that.

A Grade-A cruel bastard, is what he'd said. *That's what God can be, when he gets a mind to.*

That's when the memories really started coming back, standing there in front of his tombstone — standing six feet, seven at most, over the casket containing his remains.

I've already told you how we were attracted to that cemetery when we were grammar-school kids, how we fished there, how we made out with our first girlfriends there. We smoked our first dope together there. Got high as the sky, as Steve used to say — *in tune with the moon*. We held our seances there, scaring the holy beejesus out of more than one crowd of high-school

girls. We got drunk there, and did gravestone rubbings there, and threw a Frisbee there, and had our first discussions about the Great Topics — Life and Death. But don't assume there was anything supernatural or weird about Steve and me and Sunset Point, because there wasn't. It our was refuge, that's all, a private patch of green in the middle of suburbia. A part of our growing up, as natural and easy as a canoe trip across Quachintoga.

Right through high school, we were tight. You couldn't have found two better friends than Steve Krensky and Joey Richards. Graduation was when we began to drift apart. That fall, Steve went off to Boston College. I spent a couple of years working odd jobs up and down the East Coast. A fish-processing plant in Maine. A factory in New Jersey. A charter boat in Florida. There were some girls, some rock music, the standard drugs, the long hair and all that. I was trying to find myself. Weren't we all, back then?

Eventually, I enlisted in the Coast Guard.

So much for finding myself.

All I can say for the Coasties is they knocked some grown-up sense into me. When my four years were up, I knew enough about the world to go to college, just like Steve. I studied computers and then I landed this job. That was the last time I saw Steve, right after joining IBM. He'd returned to Wakefield, taken a position at a bank, bought a house and a BMW and a timeshare in Vermont, the whole Yuppie trip. We met for beers and talked old times, but the magic of two young boys with cowboy dreams was gone. It was sad, in a way. But not in a big way. People change. It's OK.

Steve was buried by the time I heard he'd drowned. The accident had happened right there in Quachintoga, on a sunny afternoon not at all unlike today. He'd been sailing, and his boat, a Hobie Cat, had been rammed by a powerboat. Cut his Hobie in two, spilling him unconscious into the lake. I heard they'd had to drag the lake before finding his body. I heard it took two days.

I looked out on Quachintoga now. There were sailboats on it, a motorboat pulling a water-skier, several tan and muscular young men on sailboards. On the other side, I could see the joggers. I checked my watch. It was 5:30. Six

hours to go. Now that I knew where he was — now that I was sure I could find him after dark — I had time on my hands.

I cruised Main Street, but most of it was different — big, corporate '90s different. The stores had names that weren't even around back then, Seven-Eleven, and Major Video, and Avis Lube, and Fotomat. I ate dinner at Spooner's Restaurant, about the only establishment left from the old days. I didn't go there for the cuisine — wars could come and go, seasons change, but Spooner's food would always be the same: greasy and bad.

I went hoping to catch a glimpse of Pam Schiavone, whose dad owned the place. Junior and senior year, Pam had been my steady. We were hot, real hot, the way only teens can be hot. She was the first girl I ever kissed, the only one who made my head spin just thinking of her, the first one I ever slept with, if so dignified a term can be applied to what happened there on the grass of Sunset Point. Toward the end, we talked about getting married, settling down, raising a family. Then she left me. No warning or anything, just left me, for a college freshman. I guess I never got over Pam. Even after I married, there was a secret part of me that kept believing our fairy tale would spring to life again someday.

Spooner's was mobbed, but I managed to find a table in a corner where I could watch the comings and goings without standing out. Through the grapevine, I'd heard that Pam had married, had had a couple of kids, divorced, returned to waitress at her dad's place. And there was a waitress that looked like her that night... a lot like her, if you took into account what age had written, the wrinkles, the too-heavy eye shadow, the extra pounds, the frosted hair. I don't know for sure if it was her. I didn't want to know. Some things, you're better off not knowing.

I ate and left, glad I'd taken that seat in the corner, glad I'd had some young thing wait my table. I spent the next four hours in a bar, having exactly one beer and three coffees and remembering...

remembering Steve.

So you don't think he's a cruel bastard? he used to taunt me.

No, I'd say, I don't.

Then what about Vietnam? he'd ask, fire in his eyes, so big and blue — eyes that got girls crazy. Bangla Desh? People in Appalachia? How do you explain all that?

Those are man's doings, not God's, I'd reply. Why not admit it, Steve: You're nothing but a cynic.

And you're nothing but a fool. So naive you make me want to puke. War, poverty, hunger — he gets off on injustice, can't you see? Made the world after his image, an image of meanness and foul play. That's our God, Joey. The Big Guy himself. A bastard, not that benevolent all-loving all-knowing being they taught you about in CCD.

At 11:30, I left the bar and drove to Sunset Point. It was Monday, a night off for Wakefield's holy-hell raisers, and I wasn't terribly worried about the police. The cemetery gates were secured with a chain and lock for the night, but I was prepared for that. Before leaving New York, I'd purchased bolt-cutters — spent almost 50 bucks for them — and they did the job cleanly and easily. I drove through, stopped, and closed the gates behind me.

It was a cinch finding Steve's grave. I parked by the war memorial, got out and opened the trunk. It was full of tools. Brand-new tools I'd bought at the same store where I'd purchased the bolt-cutters. There was a shovel. A crow bar. A sledgehammer. A screwdriver. A battery-powered lantern. I hadn't found a winch.

Before I picked up any of those tools, I stood.

Stood and remembered once again — there were a million memories that day, too many to begin to sort out — remembered the high-school conversations we'd had not far from here.

It had always been Steve's biggest nightmare.

That someday he would die, and having no say from that point on about the fate of his earthly remains, he would be buried. That having been buried, having been locked into his satin-lined box — tons of earth above him, six feet of hard-packed earth impenetrable to sound — he would wake up.

Wake up.

Fully conscious.

In his casket.

His *locked, pitch-dark* casket. Would wake up like that, and would run his fingers along the cloth, would pry his frantic fingers into the joint between the coffin's lid and bottom, would locate the hinges... rusted solid, rusted forever...

and then he would scream.

Scream through bloodless lips. Scream, the impossibly stuffy air filling his lungs, his fingers tearing madly at his surroundings, his sweat profuse and dank like the mold already beginning to grow around him.

And then — then, at the moment when panic was greatest — there would be the pronouncement.

Maybe it would only be inside his head. Maybe it would actually be a voice, deep, throaty, authoritative.

God's voice.

Forever.

Just that single word, *forever*.

Steve would hear it, and he would begin to scream again, and then it would happen... utter hopelessness, drowning him.

But not truly drowning him, of course.

Forever.

Never to sleep.

No eternal rest.

God can be a cruel bastard, he always said. *Wouldn't that be a cruel bastard kind of thing to do? Wouldn't that bring a smile to a cruel bastard's lips?*

Please don't think Steve was a morbid son of a bitch, because he wasn't. Not about most stuff. He didn't believe in ghosts or goblins or vampires or spirits or any of that flappedoodle. Just this hangup, this crazy conviction that God was saving this practical joke for him — *him*, especially for him — a conviction so firm you'd think it had been written in the Bible somewhere.

I should mention that Steve had another fear that chilled him to the bone. Claustrophobia. The paralyzing fear of enclosed spaces. The fear of closets, phone booths, tunnels, caves.

And coffins.

With embalming, nobody gets buried alive these days, I scoffed the first time he mentioned his nightmare, that night sophomore year. We were sitting in this very cemetery, Steve and me and Pam Schiavone and another girl whose name I've forgotten, a girl who'd looked into Steve's eyes and fallen madly in love. We'd been at that corncob pipe again. We were stoned out of our gourds.

I'm not talking about being buried alive, he answered. *I'm talking about coming back to life. What you Christians call resurrection... only with a twist. A cruel bastard kind of twist.*

You've been reading too much Poe, I'd said. *I never heard of such a thing.*

Of course not, he answered, and we could all hear the gloating in his voice. *That's the point. That's why he's such a cruel bastard. Don't you see? No one ever came back to tell. But I bet if we dug up one of these graves, why we might just find —*

You're crazy, Pam cut him off. *That's ridiculous.*

Is it? Maybe it's his idea of a good time, waking some poor bugger up so he can watch him lose his mind. Maybe he gets his jollies like that.

What kind of God would that be? I asked.

The kind that allowed a Hitler to send my grandparents to the gas chamber, that's what kind! The kind that lets this country drop burning napalm on innocent women and children. The kind that put blacks in chains. A Grade-A cruel bastard.

I didn't have a response for that — not a good one. Not that first time, or any of the other times he brought it up. When he got going like that, all the theological rebuttals I might have made seemed strangely hollow.

It was almost midnight when I got down to work. The digging took less than an hour. That surprised me. I had envisioned spending two hours, three, maybe more. But it was less than an hour when my shovel hit the concrete lid of his burial vault. It took another 15 minutes to pry the lid off and rest it on its side.

His casket looked expensive. Mahogany — isn't that the finest money can buy? Isn't that the kind that keeps morticians driving Mercedes? Mrs. Krensky had spared no expense. In the lantern's light, it looked smooth,

polished, with only a trace of the mildew I'd expected to find. It looked — it looked like it had been only a few weeks since he'd been interred, not three years. I guess that's what fancy burial vaults are for, to keep the moisture out, to detour the groundwater and rain, to keep time and microbes at arm's length as long as possible. To keep the contents preserved... for the life of me, I don't know why that would matter, but to the Mrs. Krenskys of the world, it does.

There was no way I was going to be able to lift that casket out; I had to open it there. With the crowbar and sledgehammer, it was fast work. It made a whooshing sound when it opened... the same sound a fresh can of tennis balls makes when you turn the key.

Please believe I wasn't looking forward to seeing Steve. If there had been any other way, I wouldn't have looked at him, wouldn't have touched him, wouldn't have smelled him. The smell... I knew it would be bad, and it was bad. Sick-to-your-stomach bad.

Promise me you'll make sure I'm cremated, he'd said that first time, that night in June.

Are you planning on checking out sometime soon? I laughed, and Pam and the other girl along with us had laughed too.

Just in case... promise me you'll have me cremated.

Why don't you put it in a will or something?

I already have. But there's no guarantee with wills, Joey. Families can be funny about wills. Wills can take too long to be opened and read. You have to promise. You're my best friend.

I promise.

Swear with your life you won't let me be buried.

I swear.

I mean it, Joey. I don't care how silly you think it sounds, I mean it. God can be a cruel bastard. I can't give him his chance. You'll do it for me, won't you, Joey? Whatever it takes, have me cremated?

I found out later it was his mother who had handled the funeral arrangements. His mother, an old-World Jew, a woman whose culture and religion demanded the body be buried intact... and quickly. No

wake. No organ donations. No post-mortem at the medical examiner's. Into the ground within 24 hours of death.

Amen and farewell.

I had to get Steve into the open air. Combustion requires oxygen.

I can't impress on you how repugnant that was, hoisting him out of his casket. He'd been a 200-pound man, and while he didn't weigh anything near that now, I guess microbes know their stuff, he was still extraordinarily heavy. Slippery, too. There's this notion that the deceased body naturally dries up, and then slowly turns to dust, just like in the Bible—ashes to ashes, and so forth—but that's malarkey. It was with Steve, anyway.

Twice, he slipped out of my grasp. Twice, back into his casket.

It wasn't until I finally had him on the ground that I saw his hands—what was left of them. They were fingerless, those hands. The fingernails, the bones, the tendons, the skin—he'd scraped right through it, all the way down to his palms.

Just as I had expected.

An awfully cruel bastard, Joey.

Standing there I could hear him say that word, as clear as yesterday. *Bastard*. For a second, I almost felt pity for him. Trying so frantically, so long... until after a month, two months, a year, whatever it was, he'd finally run out of steam. Finally given up, his muscles degenerating after that initial flurry.

Only not his mind. Not that. The eternity he'd talked of wasn't an eternity of frantic motion. Only an eternity of consciousness, of endless awareness of pain and his plight.

It wasn't the hands that almost made me lose it. It was his eyes. In every other respect, my friend Joey looked dead. His facial skin, gaunt and shrunken. His hair, dirty and mold-covered. His burial clothes, mildewed, like a towel left too long in the rain.

Not his eyes. Those baby blues looked as alive as ever.

There was something in them, I swear there was. It wasn't my imagination. There was a glimmer in those eyes... should I call it a smile? A greeting, for God's sake?

There was life in those eyes, I swear.

I mean it, he'd warned me. If you don't have me cremated I'll haunt you forever. I may not be able to get out, but I'll haunt you the rest of your life.

And how do you think you're going to be able to do that? I'd scoffed.

The power of the mind, Joey. You see, He can be a cruel bastard, but he can't take away my mind. Don't you see? It wouldn't work if he did. His joke wouldn't work. The one thing I'd have is time. Just think of all the time, time to develop the power of the mind. All the practice I'd ever need to... I don't know what. Just don't let it happen, Joey, for your sake and mine. Don't let him have the chance to make me a cruel bastard, too. I beg you, please.

He was on the ground now, exposed to the night air, within spitting distance of Quachintoga. I could hear crickets, an owl hooting in the distance, a car on the road outside Sunset Point, what might have been a midnight jogger. Otherwise, all was quiet.

One thing I'd learned early about Steve. You didn't cross him. As good friends as we were, I'd learned that. *My iron-willed boy*, Mrs. Krensky had proudly called him. *Stubborn as a mule. The sort of quality that can take a man places.*

Standing there remembering that, I had to laugh. It was a nervous laugh.

I had crossed him. Allowing him to be buried — that's how he saw it, *allowing*. It didn't matter that I was in England, didn't hear until it was too late.

God can be a cruel bastard, he'd said. *Don't let him make me one, too.*

In the three years since Joey's death, I had lost most of my family. My parents were the first. They were lifelong skiers. Even in their late 50s, they had travelled the world in pursuit of the best slopes. They died in a spring avalanche in the Colorado Rockies. Buried under a thousand tons of fresh powder snow. They weren't found for a week. I often wondered if they were conscious for any of it and if they were, what they thought of God.

I didn't see it then. Didn't make the right connections. It had been so long ago... a world away.

My wife was next. She died last summer. It was her 15th college reunion, and she was among those in a crowded bar when the fire struck. They didn't find her body for two days, buried under tons and tons of rubble. They said there was reason to believe she'd survived a little longer than most, probably been conscious for some time, there in that hell. They said there was evidence supporting that conclusion, but I didn't ask what it was.

I thought of Steve then. Remembered my vow.

And dismissed it. Even after losing Libby, it seemed ridiculous. We had been kids, fond of inhaling deeply what came out of a corncob pipe, that's all.

This spring, the dreams began.

Steve — reaching out to me from the grave.

Steve — saying familiar words.

An unsigned letter — with a single word, *Beware*.

Still — still I didn't act. Still, I found the whole idea incredulous.

It was such a painful year. So hard on me, and especially on Susan, the four-year-old daughter Libby left me to raise. We were both under a psychiatrist's care. I was on mild sedatives. Of course, I told the doctor about my dreams. About Steve — his hand reaching out of the grave like that scene in *Carrie*. I told the doctor how that hand didn't have any fingers, how they had been scraped off in his nightmarish struggle to escape.

Stress, the good doctor had said, *can take many unusual forms*.

Last week, Susan died.

She was everything to me, that child. The earth, the moon and the stars. It was a gruesome tragedy, a freak accident, to quote the papers — the kind of accident you hear about maybe once in 25 years. She'd wandered out of our Manhattan apartment while the babysitter was engrossed in TV, wound up near the construction site for a new building that's going up on an empty lot. Somehow, she got too close. Or the operator was negligent. Or equipment failed. Until the investigation is concluded, we won't know for sure.

One thing we do know: A dump truck carrying 7.5 cubic yards of crushed stone emptied its entire load where Susan had been playing. For three hours, she was buried.

I emphasize the word buried.

I didn't ask the medical examiner what, if anything, he could conclude about Susan's final moments.

I didn't have the Steve dream that night. I didn't have to.

Because I finally was convinced.

My vow.

Standing above him now, I poured a five-gallon can of gas over his body.

But I didn't torch it immediately.

What I did was reach over with a pocketknife and pierce both of those lovely blue eyes. A teaspoonful of fluid drained out of each.

You see, Steve's only other big fear was blindness.

If he's really such a cruel bastard, I bet God's been aware of that fear, too. I bet in all the time Steve's had on his hands, God's had a thing or two to say about losing his sight. I bet he played that one up mighty big.

After I had cleaned my knife and folded it up, I sat in my car, listening to late-night radio. After a few minutes — when I figured I'd made my point — I threw a match on Steve. He went up in a blaze of smoke and orange flame. He was still smoldering when I started back to New York.

THE CONTRIBUTORS

Steve Antczak is a new author whose stories have appeared in *After Hours* magazine and the *Newer York* anthology.

Blythe Ayne is a poet and author who has recently returned to writing after working long and hard at obtaining her doctorate. She has had several poetry collections published including *Excavation: 3976 A.D.*

Matthew J. Costello has written everything from computer games to fantasy novels. His horror titles include *Wurm*, *Midsummer*, *Beneath Still Waters* and *February is Dark Born*.

Don D'Ammassa spends much of his time reading as book reviewer for *Science Fiction Chronicle*, and found time to write the novel *Blood Beast* (not his title) and short stories in the anthologies *Shock Rock* and *Hotter Blood*.

Charles deLint wrote the contemporary fantasies, *Mulengro*, *Moonheart*, *The Little Country*, *Ghostwood*, *Jack*, *The Giant-Killer*, *Bringing Down the Moon*, *Ascian Rose* and many others. His short fiction has appeared in *Cafe Purgatorium*, *Stalkers* and *Post Mortem*.

F.A. McMahan has had numerous pieces published in semi-professional magazines over the years. This is her first professional sale.

G. Wayne Miller's first novel *Thunder Rise* is now available and his short fiction has appeared in the magazines *American Fantasy*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and the anthologies *Masques II & III* and *Borderlands I & II*.

Gregory Nicoll's short fiction has been published in the anthologies, *Ripper!*, *All the Devils Are Here* and *Cold Shocks*. He tells us that Matthew Brackett, will appear in the upcoming *Confederacy of the Dead* anthology, and hopefully, one day, in a novel of his own.

Andre Norton, winner of the Grandmaster of Fantasy, Phoenix, and Balrog awards, has well over a hundred books to her credit. Her latest dark fantasy, *The Jekyll Legacy* was written with Robert Bloch.

Norman Partridge is a new author whose short stories are in *Final Shadows*, *Shivers*, *Dark Voices 4*, *Dark At Heart*, *Copper Star* and *New Crimes 3*.

Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens have been a writing team for over twelve years. They've written two Star Trek novels, *Memory Prime* and *Prime Directive* both of which made the New York Times bestseller list, plus the novels *Shifter* and *Nightfeeder* — the first two books in the dark fantasy series featuring Galen Sword and company. Besides collaborating with Judith, Garfield is also the author of *Dark Matter*, *Bloodshift*, *Nighteyes* and *Dreamland*.

Patricia Ross is a poet, playwright and songwriter. This is her first fiction sale.

Melanie Tem's first novel *Prodigal*, was just published and her short fiction appeared in *Women of Darkness 2*, *Cold Shocks*, *Dark Voices 3*, *Skin of Our Soul* and *Final Shadows*.

Steve Rasnic Tem has just had several chapbooks published: *Absences*, *Charlie Goode's Ghost*, *Fairy Tales*, and *Celestial Inventory*. He has published dozens of short stories in almost every modern horror anthology including *Hot Blood*, *Tropical Chills*, *Blood is Not Enough* and *Final Shadows*.

Robert E. Weinberg, twice winner of the World Fantasy Award, is the author of *The Devil's Auction*, *The Armageddon Box* and the forthcoming *Louis L'Amour Companion*. His character, Sid Taine, also appears in the novel, *The Black Lodge*.

Mary Frances Zambreno is the author of *A Plague of Sorcerers* and numerous short stories, a few of which have appeared in *Vampires*, *Things That Go Bump In The Night*, *Sword and Sorceress III & IV* and *Pulphouse* magazine.

Robert Zasuly had made his living as a technical writer/editor and training specialist for large corporations. Now he is trying his hand at freelancing. "Corporate Culture" is his first published short story.

THE EDITOR

Robert T. Garcia is a writer, editor, book designer and award-winning publisher of *American Fantasy* magazine. He has held jobs as janitor, cashier, stock clerk, soda jerk, advertising director, video store manager, typesetter, office manager and senior editor of America's fourth largest comics publisher. He resides in an apartment in Chicago with his wife Nancy and their cat, Banzai.

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Galen Sword and of Robert Weinberg's
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PEOPLE YOU DARE NOT SPEAK TO.

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Charles de Lint
Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens
Gregory Nicoll and Patricia Ross
Melanie and Steve Rasnic Tem
Mary Frances Zambreno
Matthew J. Costello
Robert E. Weinberg
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ISBN 0-923763-44-9

U.S. \$9.95
(\$12.95 in Canada)

1091660MFG995
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