
Wildside
<http://www.wildsidepress.com/index2.htm>

Copyright ©2000 by David Bischoff

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the original purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines or imprisonment.

Other books by David Bischoff

Philip K. Dick High

Nightworld

Ship of Ghosts, Ship of Dreams

J.R.R. Tolkien U.

H.P. Lovecraft, R.F.D.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

TRIPPING
The Dark Fantastic
DAVID BISCHOFF

WILDSIDE PRESS
Berkeley Heights, New Jersey

Copyright © 2000 David Bischoff.
All rights reserved.

“In the Bleak Mid-Solstice” first appeared in December 1997 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Copyright © 1997 by Mercury Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.

“The Xaxrkling of J. Arnold Boysenberry” first appeared in *First Contact*, edited by Martin H. Greenberg and published by DAW Books. Copyright © 1996 by David Bischoff. All rights reserved.

“Cam Shaft” first appeared in *Children of Dracula* edited by Ed Kramer and published by White Wolf Press. Copyright © 1997 by David Bischoff. All rights reserved.

“Joy to the World” first appeared in January 1999 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Copyright © 1998 by Mercury Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.

“Vicious Wishes” first appeared in *Buried Treasures* edited and published by Jerry Olton. Copyright © 1997 by David Bischoff. All rights reserved.

“Love after Death,” “Fat Farm,” and “Side Effects” are original to this volume. Copyright © 2000 by David Bischoff. All rights reserved.

Tripping the Dark Fantastic

An original publication of
Wildside Press
P.O. Box 45
Gillette, NJ 07933-0045
www.wildsidepress.com

FIRST EDITION

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

In memory of Lou Stathis

Special thanks to Alan Rodgers

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

CONTENTS

[Introduction: by Charles Sheffield](#)

[Forward: *The Tenth Muse* by David Bischoff](#)

[Love after Death](#)

[In the Bleak Mid-Solstice](#)

[The Xaxrkling of J. Arnold Boysenberry](#)

[Cam Shaft](#)

[Fat Farm](#)

[Joy to the World](#)

[Vicious Wishes](#)

[Side Effects](#)

[About the Author](#)

Introduction: by Charles Sheffield

I met Dave Bischoff for the first time twenty-three years ago this month. He seemed like a pleasant, sunny-natured chap, a full-time writer who thought well of the world and most of the things in it. Actually, I believe that at the time he was indeed such a cheerful and bonhomous fellow; a man who, as the late Theodore Sturgeon said in reviewing Dave's works, was "in love with words." Sturgeon could have added, had he known Dave a little better, "also with music, beer, female companionship, and certain

types of wine.”

It’s not clear to me what changed Dave. Maybe it was the move to the West Coast, and the *bizarrerie* of Hollywood life in particular; maybe it was winter months in Cambridge, England, the other place where the sun never shines; maybe it was encounters with certain members of the opposite sex, whose names I note but decline to catalog. Maybe it was all these things.

Whatever it was, it has in the past few years enabled Dave to produce some of the nastiest stories in the complete inventory of Barnes and Noble. You will find them here, in this collection, as you trip the dark fantastic. Not just nasty, either; the man is still in love with words, so what you get is intriguing and smoothly-written as well as nasty. There is never a danger that the reader will fail to eat all the poisoned pudding.

This assumes, to mix metaphors a little, that the pudding has not been pulled from the bookstore shelves before you have a chance to open the volume and apply the spoon. Any woman who remains calm after “Love After Death” is no woman of my acquaintance, and a feminist uprising against the book is not impossible. Read the story, and see if you agree that it will infuriate at least half of the human race. “Joy to the World,” by contrast, may irritate only the world’s richest man and his ten thousand lawyers.

Hollywood may actually like “Vicious Wishes,” and recognize its own image. The love of music is still visible, too, in what may be the strangest story in the book, “In the Bleak Mid-Solstice.” And it is genuine horror, a deep moral outrage at today’s treatment of “difficult” children, that lies at the bloody heart of “Side Effects.”

Perhaps all these qualities, obsessions, likes and dislikes were there in Dave many years ago. Maybe I was simply too obtuse to notice them. Although we wrote novels together, I still thought of him as a nice guy. I should have seen the skull beneath the skin when the two of us were in Verdun, France, collecting background material for “The Judas Cross.” One day we visited an ossuary, an appalling place where the collected bones of a hundred and forty thousand unknown soldiers lay jumbled in a vault.

We stared at the tangled mass of chalk-white remains in dead silence, then proceeded, much subdued, back to our hotel. We ordered dinner, with lots of red wine. The wine came and was poured. Dave raised his glass, and said, “Well. Bone appetit.”

That’s the authentic Dave Bischoff speaking. He will speak to you, too, with that same elegant mixture of humor and horror, in the stories of this collection.

—Charles Sheffield

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Forward: The Tenth Muse by David Bischoff

“If you’re writing stories, why don’t you model them on *good* stories.”

This is my college creative writing professor talking. I had a copy of *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* with me in class, and the guy was turning up his nose at it. He was a doctor in American Lit, with special interests in Southern Literature. He had his pedigree in applied fiction from a sale to a literary magazine. He proudly read the story for the class, and it was quite good. Best of all, the Doc had the key to success in getting the most out of a creative writing course, and he used it. He made his students turn in

one story every week. If you want to write fiction, he said, write fiction.

Still, that quote from my creative writing teacher embodies the standard college creative writing attitude toward stories and it pissed me off. The Professor had this neatly trimmed goatee and tended to wear bow ties. In short, he'd bought into the odd idea that Writing and Literature is practiced on some lofty perch, inspired by the Muses and then the golden sheets drift down to bless the Earth.

Now, of course, I know the truth about his particular writing models. Earnest Hemingway swiped everything he knew about writing from Dashiell Hammett. Scott Fitzgerald probably wrote with a quill pen dipped in his own drinking vomit. Thomas Wolfe wouldn't have had a damned thing published if an editor named Max Perkins hadn't gotten hold of him. And William Faulkner's vaunted style was probably inspired by dementia from Southern moonshine.

Of course, if I ever wrote anything as good as what these fellows managed to turn out, I'd be one proud fellow and promptly get myself tenure at some prestigious university and teach one class a week. My muse, however, is different.

My muse's name is Drollphina.

She smokes a cigar. She's a King Crimson fan. She's just like Thomas Hobbes's quote about life: Nasty, brutish and short.

Drollphina, you see, likes short stories with some style and bite. Drollphina hacked out most of the Greek myths, but far preferred her work on the Norse tales. Drollphina did some rewrites for Shakespeare and hung around Jonathan Swift all the time. But Drollphina really got down with fiction writing when Edgar Allen Poe came along.

You see, Poe really wanted to be a Poet. The short story stuff was an outlet for money and creativity and probably to vent his swollen spleen. You think when he wrote "A Cask of Amontillado" he wasn't walling some poor critic up in his mind? When M. Valdemar started melting, you don't think Poe imagined it was some rival dripping all over the floor? Poe's imagination was gothic and he wrote these stories in prose. The Mystery Writers hand out his mordant idol as awards because he invented the modern mystery tale, and his horror stories still do a number on the spine. But what most people forget is that Edgar Allan Poe was the first writer to employ poetic devices in fictional prose. Just telling a bare bones of a Poe story is like humming Ode to Joy instead of listening to Beethoven's Ninth.

Where do you think Poe got this idea from? Drollphina, of course.

Drollphina, you see, worked with Aristotle too. Drollphina is into form. Just as in poetry there are sonnets and couplets, odes and rondeaux, so there are forms in short stories, albeit less well defined. They know the artful way of beginning and ending a tale. They know what to leave out as well as what to put in. Form in short stories is also function.

After Poe, Drollphina had a few drinks with Dickens, but the guy was ultimately far too long-winded and sentimental for her. Her great love was Mark Twain, who wrote in bed with her. She had a torrid affair with Guy de Maupassant and then moved on to punch up some of Oscar Wilde's material. Mind you, in the Victorian era she went in for a bit of strange here and there, and she tells me that she even ravished W.S. Gilbert a few times.

After that, Drollphina opened up shop and decided to stop pussyfooting. She became a little more professional. She had O. Henry as a client. In the twentieth century, her proudest worshippers and lovers include John Collier, Roald Dahl, John D. MacDonald, Richard Matheson, Donald Westlake, and Jack Vance. She lived with Harlan Ellison for a while. Today she drinks a lot of tequila south of the border

with T.C. Boyle. Lots of other writers come to her shrine and take back inspiration but they're not quite sure what, how or why, and she tends to get belittled by University folk, even though stories like "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner and a goodly portion of Norton's Short Story Anthology are the result of flirtations and flings with her.

Lately she's gone Hollywood and is a staff writer on *The Sopranos*.

Theme? Subtext? Hell yeah, says Drollphina.

Post-modernism? Been there, done that, says Drollphina.

Irony? Duh, what's that? says Drollphina.

My own relationship with Drollphina is up and down. Sometimes she comes around to watch pro-wrestling with me and passes along an idea or two. When I'm writing sentimental crap, though, she's nowhere to be seen, and I respect her for that.

The first stories I ever wrote, I realize were shades of her. There is something about her attitude and philosophy that somehow has all of Keats's vaunted Truth and Beauty to it, and enough Art to satisfy—and yet have the kick of electrified British blues and the complex musicality of Mozart. Now all my personal favorite stories I owe to Drollphina.

When Drollphina comes around we sit around and drink coffee late into the night and talk about Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard, the WWF, Gentle Giant, fifties and sixties jazz, our pulp magazine collections. She tends to bitch about her current flames like Don DeLillo, John Updike, Michael Cassutt, and Joyce Carol Oates. In the wee hours, she gets morose and sheds a tear or two on the table.

In the morning, those tears are gems.

Some are rough diamonds, some are rubies, some are just nicely shined quartz.

Here are a few of those gems, for your approval.

Excuse me. My English Creative Writing Professor is rattling his cup in the basement. I must go to him. As usual, he'll get a copy of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* for dinner—but tonight he gets a treat.

Tonight he'll get a copy of this humble book of Drollphina-inspired tales for dessert.

Bon appetit, Doc.

—David Bischoff

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Love after Death

I guess I never expected her to call. I'd never tried the personal ads before, so when I sent a letter and my photograph to the box number in the ad in the *Village Voice*, I really didn't expect a reply, let alone a romantic adventure of a purely bizarre nature.

Then again, this was New York City. This was a place where strange things happened. And if they

didn't, that was the strangest thing of all.

* * * *

The ad had read:

SWF. 27-year-old book reader and smoker. Loves theatre, romantic dinners in Little Italy, scuba diving and steak tartare. Looking for understanding companion.

Maybe it was because there wasn't a word about the size of her breasts or how pretty she was, maybe it was because I read voraciously and smoked too and like to eat out. I know it wasn't because of the scuba diving ... probably it was mostly because I too could use some understanding ... and was more than willing to exchange some of mine for some of someone else's.

In any case, I shot off a letter and forgot all about it, going back to my lonely and challenging job as a paperback editor for a large mass-market house. I used to do the men's action-adventure line but those books have pretty much been bazookaed by the recession and cheap videos. Now I work with some western writers and mystery novels. I'm not sure why I'm an editor. Maybe somewhere in dim past I was a romantic. I remember reading a biography of Maxwell Perkins and then *Youngblood Hawke* by Herman Wouk and deciding that since it didn't seem as though I was destined to literary immortality through my poetry, I might support that habit through other channels. New York City is choked with poets and literary circles and so when I got out of the University of Maryland, complete with a year's worth of editing the literary journal there, I figured that the Big Apple maybe had a bite for me. Well, it did—mostly seeds, but it's a job, and it's with words so I don't complain too much. I just edit. New York isn't that bad a town if you learn where not to sit on the subway cars and what not to step in. I've got friends here. I play cards with buddies and do the agent-editor-author lunch tour. I've been to a few book conferences and ABAs and had a few long distance affairs ... mostly of short duration with the fair and desirable sex ... uhm, the female sort, to be absolutely specific if I already have not. I even managed to eke out the odd date amongst the pool of female editorial assistants in town. However, what I haven't managed to get out of this whole deal is a girlfriend. A regular girlfriend that is, you know, the sort you can call up late at night or who complains you don't come over enough and who leaves soaking panty hose in your sink.

I guess I got enough safe sex, really, what with this and that. I wanted to trade the bachelor life in for some continuity, some boredom and for want of a better word, some companionship.

Hence the personal ad.

What I got for my thirty bucks (one week's posting) was only one reply.

Though it did sound promising.

Hi,

it said.

You sound like a nice guy. Why don't we have coffee? I'm twenty-seven years old, I have long brown hair. People say I'm pretty. I work as an artist. I love books and cats and weird restaurants and I like to travel when I can. My hobby is collecting rubbings. I spent a whole summer in Europe doing that and now I have a really good collection. I do smoke, I don't drink much. (Some wine with dinner, maybe beer but only if its really good beer). I guess the only problem you should know about is that I'm dead. That is if you don't count the fact that I'm a sucker for Michael Bolton concerts. Here's my number. Call me if you want to talk. Thanks. Betsy.

Well, you know in the writing business we have what we call narrative hooks—and if nothing else I wanted to use this one for the beginning of a mystery novel or something. Call it something like *Dead*

Girls Are Easy. Or Dead Ladies Make Cheap Dates. Or Kiss Me Dead.

So I took the phone number and gave her a buzz.

The phone rang a few times without being picked up. I was about to give up when someone finally answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi Betsy. This is Jim. Jim Marshall. You answered my personal ad.”

“Oh. Yes. Hello.” Not a whole lot of inflection or excitement, but cool and pleasant, but by no means off-putting.

“You said you’d be interested in a cup of coffee sometime? I’m never adverse to a caffeine fix myself.”

“Good. The Coffee Bean on Houston, then.”

“Sure. I know where it is. When would be good for you?”

“How about Saturday? About one in the afternoon. I’ll be there, in the back, okay? And I’ll be wearing jeans and a black turtleneck sweater, and, oh yes, horn-rimmed glasses.”

Horned rimmed glasses. Didn’t sound particularly promising.

“Okay. I’ll put my John Lennon granny glasses on.”

She didn’t laugh like she was supposed to, but she didn’t act annoyed either. I’d hoped to chat just a little longer, to get something going we could spark off from at the coffee house, but she didn’t seem particularly communicative. So I just signed off with a cheery goodbye and chalked up the coffee date for Saturday.

Some people were just not great talkers on the phone and that was okay.

Besides, she did seem from her letter to have a sense of humor, and so I figured it would come through in our initial meeting ... once the ice was broken. Not that I think that coffee is a particularly good icebreaker. I far prefer that good old-fashioned sort, that fabled social lubricant, the Drink. Be it hop or grape or malt or grain, there’s nothing like a little alcohol to release the inhibition lock on the old mouth. It’s almost like, as I sip the stuff, I watch the logjam unclog and a stream of coherent words flows from my lips, often as not fairly clever.

Not so with cappuccino or espresso. But maybe tea ... some English breakfast tea with milk and sugar....

* * * *

I sipped the sweet concoction but the boa constrictor around my skeleton that my musculature had become untensed not one iota.

“Nice place,” I said. “You come here often?”

“No.”

Silence draped itself again in heavy folds around the red checked table. The buzz of other conversations mocked me. Happy sunshine poured through the front door and the smell of the astringent coffee and baked goods floated gently in the air amongst the clatter of cutlery in the kitchen.

I was giving the date a big fat zero in my book so far.

The unfortunate thing was that Betsy was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life.

She had lovely green eyes that shone like beacons. Her face was a dream of sweetness, a portable work of art, and encased beautifully in those snug jeans and that delightful frilly blouse her body was just the perfect congruence of angle and line. When she'd walked in the place I'd seen every male eye look her way, which was really something since this was the Village and a healthy percentage of the lookers (or unhealthy as the case may be these days) were gay. Definitely a few women looked as well. But my favorite part of her was the hair—a rich brunette cascade of sweetness, long and delightful, a banter of tone and shade and suggestion that would wrap itself forever in my dreams.

My heart caught its breath when I first saw her, and a kind of tingling want of love bumbled through me. The first sight sort, fatal.

Nonetheless, I managed to choke out some introductions and we ordered and then tried to carry on a conversation.

Monosyllables.

She talked in mostly monosyllables.

If it was a yes or no question I asked she answered with merely a yes or a no, no elaboration. Anything else she answered briefly and succinctly and accurately, but without a shred of a word more than necessary.

Conversation, in my opinion, is like a game of tennis. You serve a ball and it comes back to you. You hit again ... And so on, bounce and bounce, across the net.

She wasn't returning my serves here. She wasn't serving herself. As far as I could tell I was impressing her as much as a bowl of soggy cornflakes for dinner.

"So," I said, yet again struggling for a conversational gambit. "You said you like to read. What are your favorite books?"

"Whatever I'm reading at the time," she said. Her voice contrived be both musical and monotone at the same time. It was both fascinating and frustrating.

"I mentioned I'm a book editor," I said lamely. "I get lots of free books. I'm *always* reading."

Yeah, right. Stick with me, honey and get gratis books! How sparkling, how clever of me. I felt doomed. Absolutely *doomed*. The tea was almost gone, and her coffee was as well. We hadn't ordered lunch or even cookies. The deadliness of the date was absolutely stupefying.

"That's nice."

Dead silence again.

And then just as I was teetering on the brink of total despair and hopelessness, something marvelous happened.

She said something without being prompted.

"Look. I'm sorry, but I'm not much of a conversationalist. I didn't mention that in my letter, but I should have."

“Well, first dates are always difficult I guess,” I said with a sigh.

A smile broke out, like the dawn.

“No, really. I like you. I do ... Do you like me?”

What was the correct answer here? I couldn't exactly say that she had a sparkling personality. So far she hadn't displayed much personality at all. Monotone beauty. But then still-waters run deep, they say, and I just knew intuitively that she had absolutely *wonderful* legs, and that gets my vote every time. Besides, my social schedule wasn't exactly filled to the brim.

“Sure. I like you.”

“You're going to ask me to a movie or something?”

“Why not?”

“Would you like some lunch?”

“Sure.”

She looked around and smiled sheepishly. “No. Not here. I made a salad back home. I thought you might like some.”

Back home? She was inviting me *back to her place*? I was getting onto first base with a gorgeous woman when I figured I was striking out, big time? I think I smiled a lot then, and I know I must have been relieved.

“Sure. I'd love some. Where to you live?”

“Around the corner. A loft. I think I mentioned I do artwork. It serves as my studio. I'll show you it to you, if you like. I don't always show it to people.”

“Okay. Sounds great.”

She nodded, and her beautiful hair moved and I caught a whiff of her perfume ... a flowery, smoky concoction I really wasn't familiar with.

And there was something I couldn't put my finger on about her smell.... Something exotic...

Something *wrong*.

* * * *

The scent about Betsy wasn't bad or off or anything like that. It just didn't smell quite like anything I'd detected off a human being before ... And in New York City, believe me, you get the whole catalog.

It was there in her loft as well. Peeking around the corners and springing on me unawares at odd times.

Eventually I placed the smell. It was the pleasantly musty smell of an old book that's been in the attic for a while. Filled with forgotten mystery and knowledge and maybe even a quaint nostalgia...

The salad was very good. She gave me a glass of wine along with it, a nice French burgundy that complimented the tomato dressing. She didn't eat herself, though, saying that she was on a diet, that she'd already eaten. She just drank coffee, a coffee she poured from a Chemex, thick and black.

She showed me some paintings and some sculpture. It was twisted and bizarre, predominantly in tones of black, angles of bent, a troubled mindscape emanating from someone so seemingly tranquil and calm.

In the middle of my tour of the artwork, amidst the detritus of paint palettes and baling wire for papier-mâché work, the phone rang.

She excused herself and went over to a cubbyhole where she picked it up.

“Yes ... Oh ... “ I heard the mutterings of her muted conversation. “...I’m sorry ... not now.... I’ve got somewhere here.... tonight? I really don’t want to. Yes. Necessary. All right.”

When she came out I pretended to be absorbed in the admiration of a large gauche abstract painting..

“Let me guess,” I said, wagging my finger at the contorted wanderings of line. “Cats in the dark.”

She didn’t laugh. “Close. Very close. You are quite perceptive, James.”

“You can call me Jim, Betsy.”

“I think I like James better.” Some of her calm seemed to have left her, but it wasn’t so much that she was nervous or agitated as she was distracted.

“So what about that movie...” I prompted, wanting to collect my chips and cash in while I could.

“Hmmm? I’m sorry. You’ve got to excuse me. Sometimes my mind wanders. Annoying, I know. But that’s me.”

“You mentioned a movie. How about tomorrow night?”

“No. Tomorrow night’s not good.” Again distracted as though thinking about something totally off the wall.

“Well, it sounds as though you’re an afternoon date person. How about that?”

“Tomorrow afternoon would fine.”

I told her I’d check movie listings and call her at noon. She said that would be fine.

I went home and thought about her all day as I worked on a manuscript I had to get finished by Monday. She wasn’t just beautiful, she was mysterious and elusive. Deadly, deadly. She kept creeping into my mind. She was like an animate statue, a work by an exquisite sculptor, not yet brought fully to life, ready to be molded, Pygmalion-like, by some intelligent and patient man.

I was intelligent. I was patient. And I was certainly a man.

By then, I’d practically forgotten all about the “dead” business in her letter.

I shouldn’t have.

* * * *

We went to see the new Woody Allen movie. An appropriate date for a couple neurotic New Yorkers, I guess. She didn’t laugh, but she said afterwards she enjoyed it very much. We had coffee and agreed to see each other again. Call me, she said. I kissed her on her mouth, briefly, almost chastely.

Her lips were a little cool, but oddly exciting.

Years ago, I'd read an old Thorne Smith novel called *Night Life of the Gods*. Smith, if you recall, was the popular novelist of the twenties and thirties who specialized in light, spicy, frothy comedic farces. Thorne Smith created *Topper*, for example, the one about the sexy married couple with the alcoholic Saint Bernard who haunted the middle aged banker. You remember. The classic Cary Grant movie. The Leo G. Carroll TV series? Well, *Night Life of the Gods* is about a whimsical scientist who develops a ray that will turn people into statues ... or statues into people. He happens to aim it inadvertently at a group of ancient Greek statues of Olympian Gods, and they come alive. The whole lot, from Aphrodite to Zeus. They galloped around town, having a high old time.

Well now I felt as though I was dating that statue of Aphrodite, albeit with arms, thank goodness, but alas with a little bit of the marble still mixed in with her persona.

We didn't talk on the phone much that week. She said she really didn't like phone conversations much and to be truthful as you might have guess she wasn't the most forthcoming of phone conversationalists, so I didn't press the point. However we did agree that we should meet again on Saturday afternoon.

For coffee, of course ... and then see what we felt like doing.

Those were her words, "felt like doing" and I must say they opened up a panorama of possibilities. All week long I fantasized about the possibilities, mostly the horizontal sort. Could the Ice Queen be unlocked by the heat of passion? I didn't know, but I sure wanted to find out. Every once in a while in our dates, I'd catch her looking at me with a bit of a glimmer in her eye. She seemed to really like me.

In short, I wanted to see where this was going.

And lets face it, I hoped it was going to end up in a very satisfactory romance.

The Saturday date started off on a strange foot, however. I was getting out of the elevator that led to her apartment, and standing there, waiting to use it, was a decidedly odd gentleman. He was black, with smooth almost Caucasian features. He wore his hair long and in dreadlocks. He was wearing a colorful cotton print shirt displaying tropical fruits. He smelled of tobacco and something muskier.

The ghost of Bob Marley?

In New York, you see all kinds of characters. But I hadn't expected to see a Caribbean sort coming from the general direction of my date's apartment.

Especially one who glared at me.

Betsy greeted me with a nervous smile. "You're early."

"Yes," I said. I wasn't sure I even had the right to ask about the guy that seemed to be leaving her apartment. My eyes drifted over to her stereo. No reggae records lying about. There was no signs that another man had been in her place at first ... but then, I noticed the telltale smell of smoke.

That tobacco smoke and something more ... I placed the scent ... marijuana. Somebody had been smoking *ganja* in the loft, and it had been a miasma of the stuff that I'd smelled around the departing man.

I was hardly in a position to inquire who the guy was, but nonetheless I felt a little upset and it must have showed. She acted exactly the same way, though—cool, unemotional, collected—so I calmed down and proceeded with our date. She made me coffee and asked if we could just stay at the loft and listen to some jazz CDs she'd just bought. Fine with me. I liked jazz ... this turned out to be a shared interest that made me all the more attracted her. Damned hard to find young ladies these days who aren't just into pop or hard rock. So we drank coffee and listened to some finely cleaned up Miles Davis and Zoot

Sims. Lovely stuff, and it did relax me quite a bit.

She was showing me her CD collection at one point and I grinned.

“No reggae?”

She frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, I just saw the guy that was here before me. Looked like a reggae sort.”

She gave me an odd, unexpressive look. But there was a twinge of surprise and maybe even fear in the back of her eyes.

“You saw him. Did he say anything?”

“No. He just kind of stared daggers at me.”

She nodded. “I see.” That’s all. No other information. She started talking about her collection of classical CD’s. “Mostly when I work I listen to these,” she said. “I like all kinds of music, I guess, but classical music works best when I create.”

We had some more coffee, and we talked more about classical music and then she asked me how my week had gone. I told her and then there was a long conversational lull.

“Well, maybe I should be going,” I said.

“No. Don’t.” She looked upset at the very thought.

“I have a manuscript I have to work on this weekend.” And this date is dying.

“I’m sorry. I’m not friendly enough. Not lively enough.” She thought about it a moment.

“Your fine, really. Just fine. Maybe it’s me.”

“No. *I care* about you. I really do. Would you ... Would you stay with me awhile ... hold me? I think ... I think I need to be held, James.”

“Who doesn’t, Betsy?”

She took my hand and led me into the bedroom.

* * * *

Afterwards, I suppose I could have put up with a whole conversational lull all afternoon. Just as long as I could be with her. She led me out of the bedroom an hour later and made some more coffee. I declined, but she drank it.

“You’re wonderful,” she said. “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“I’ve got that feeling here, too.”

I smiled at her, she smiled at me. It had been like magic in bed, and the tingles and effervescence of it lingered, like gentle after-hours music. The passion had been all mine, though her lovemaking had been a work of art. She was cool but curiously earnest in ardor as well as in the rest of her existence.

I wasn’t only getting used to it, I was getting to like it.

“We haven’t talked enough though. I hadn’t expected this to happen so soon ... But I thought maybe I was losing you, so I just let myself go.”

“I could have waited.” I grinned. “But I honestly can say I’m sorry it happened, Betsy.”

“No. I’m not either.” She stroked my arm with some of the sensual knowledge that had made our previous stroking so electrical.

“Can I stay with you this evening?”

She shook her head.

Intimacy can unlock other things than pleasure. I got a little peevish. “Why not? I’d *love* to spend a Saturday night with you! Surely you haven’t got another date?”

“No. Nights are too soon, my love. And besides, we haven’t really talked enough. I can’t let it get out of hand before we address an issue I brought up initially.”

I stared at her. “What’s that?”

She looked at me in an odd way. “I mentioned it in my letter to you, but you haven’t brought it up.”

I honestly didn’t know what she meant then. My mind was on other things, and I didn’t know what she was talking about.

“Oh?”

“Yes.” She looked away. “About me, being ... uhm ... you know....*dead*.”

I blinked. “Well I hope you’re feeling more alive now.”

She stared at me blankly.

I laughed nervously. “You did mean it metaphorically, right? We’ve all felt emotionally dead some time or another.”

She shook her head, eyes staring at me quite soberly. “No. Nothing metaphorical. Quite literal. I’m dead. I died two years ago, in the Caribbean.”

I shook my head. “Oh, no. I figured you must have a sense of humor in you somewhere, buried deep maybe, but there all the same. But...” A flashback image crossed my mind. That guy in dreadlocks. “This is sort of sick. You know, bent.”

She just stared at me, earnestly, looking totally blank.

“You’re not going to tell me that guy I saw ... he’s a witch doctor, or something?”

She nodded. “That is Robert. He has my soul.”

“Whoa. Just a moment! That guy ... is looked like a Rastafarian. You know, Jamaica ... Reggae ... Island fun. I’m a literate enough sort ... Haiti has witch doctors and voodoo, not Jamaica.”

She shook her head slowly and sorrowfully. “I am a different kind of zombie. I eat, I sleep, I have a pulse, I make love ... I love ... But, in the most important sense, I am dead, for my soul is gone, and my life is not my own.”

“A zombie.”

She nodded. “A New Zombie.”

“This is no joke, is it?”

She shook her head.

Well, I figured I had a limited number of choices as to what to do next. I could just disbelieve her and ignore the whole thing. I could walk out the door. I could drag Betsy to a shrink and enroll her for some heavy-duty brain therapy.

Or I could ask her a question.

I asked the question.

“What can I do to help you?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I’m lost. Forever. I’ll live out my life as best as I can, but when Robert comes for me, I must give him what he wants?”

A jolt in the spine. “Sex?”

“At first. No longer. He has grown tired of that. No. Something far worse—do not make me speak of it now. Some day I’ll tell you about it ... if you still want to see me.”

“Of course I want ... I mean, *I love* you.”

She smiled at me weakly. “And I love you ... as much as I am able.”

That was good enough for me, I suppose. I had to cling to whatever I got. My life, I realized, has been so horribly empty before—and even though this person I’d gotten involved with claimed that she wasn’t a full person ... claimed, indeed, that she was “dead” ... here, in my arms when I wanted was a living breathing body, a fount of subtle scents and sighs. True, she didn’t smile much and she wasn’t the most lively of companions and now that I knew what her real problem was, the romantic aspect of the mystery she exuded was gone. However, despite what she had, she had a pulse, she was warm and she was as good a sexual partner as I’d ever had (albeit I rather missed laughing in bed, and Betsy never laughed anywhere, anytime.)

I shrugged. “Look, I don’t pretend to understand the full extent of what you’re saying to me ... But I’m not about to give you up just because you’re dead.”

She came to me and held me, saying nothing for a moment, and then, “Thank you.”

“Look, I mean you’re not the most exciting of women.” True. Sometimes there was more animation in a Stepford Wife. “And I suppose sometimes I even miss the fights and the ups and downs of a relationship. But honey, I know married people who’ve got it far, far worse than me.”

“Shall I make you lunch?”

“Sure. Why not.”

She made me a tuna sandwich. With fresh dill and homemade mayonnaise. It was delicious.

After I ate in silence and watch her eat her own small portion, I asked, “Look, how did this happen?”

“Pardon?”

“Getting dead, I mean. How did you get involved with a Reggaed-out Jamaican Witch-Doctor?”

She looked at me a moment with that characteristic empty stare. Finally, she shrugged. “He was my art agent. I met him at a gallery in Soho. I showed him my work and he took me on. He was an art teacher as well ... He showed me things. He told me things. He helped me to be better at what I did. For awhile, he was my lover as well.”

I nodded. “Sounds normally New York Bohemian. Where did this death thing come in.”

She looked away. “I wanted to be better. No. I wanted to be the best. Robert told me, you do not have it in you. I was discouraged, but he kept on hinting that there was a secret ... there was something that *he* and he alone had that could make me into a better artist. Finally one day he said, Betsy, perhaps *I can* help you. I can take your soul, the core of your talent, and put it in a place where it will grow into a great artist. There was no greater ambition, I thought, nothing more that life could be about, and so I asked him what I had to do. “Work with me on this” he said. ‘I know magic. I come from a magical family. Come to my island for a week, and we will beat out the music of a great spell.’

She shrugged and looked away. “I will not go into details now. Perhaps some other time, if you are interested. Suffice it to say that I entered his loft the next day, my soul full of hope. And I exited with no soul at all.”

“I don’t understand. Why did he want it? What’s he doing with it?”

“I don’t know. With its loss, I have also lost my curiosity and my drive. Oh, I still do artwork, and I still sell it, but it is empty stuff ... and I don’t really care. Robert can still sell it and I make a living. But that is not why he keeps me animate and not why he visits me.”

“I’m listening.”

“I am detached from my soul, out of touch with it, and thus dead, even though my body and my mind function. However, should this body cease to function—then my detached soul would go ... elsewhere.”

“Heaven ... Limbo?” I paused, still skeptical. “Hell?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps they are one and the same. It is not for my to question. It is only my duty ... and my doom ... to exist.”

“But what about me? Why do you bother with me.”

“You are a good companion. Just because I am dead does not mean I do not need company.”

“But your soul ... You didn’t tell me why Robert needs your soul?”

“He uses it...” said Betsy with almost a wistful air to her voice. “He uses it for *his* art. And others ... He is a very famous artist now, you see. He has other souls at his command.”

“Artist souls, you mean.”

“Yes.”

“Where does he keep these souls?”

“Somewhere in his studio, I suppose. I do not know. But come let us listen to some music. And then

make love. And then have a fine dinner. Perhaps we can go out dancing tonight?”

“But Betsy ... Your soul!”

She shrugged. “The living dead are many in this world. Perhaps souls are over-rated.” She came and she melted warmly into my arms. “Perhaps we should make love now, hmm?”

I felt myself responding to her and allowed myself to be led away to the bedroom.

Later, drowsing about in a half-narcotic frame of consciousness, listening to John Adams modal musical experiments blend with the traffic outside and the smell of old coffee and paint and books, I figured that all this was just some aberration of Betsy’s mind. Yes, that was it, I told myself. She just got herself all wrapped up in her art agent’s magical view and was hypnotically gulled into believing that she had had her soul stolen. Perhaps because she wasn’t satisfied with her artwork and she needed something other than herself to blame? Perhaps because of some old stubborn neurosis from her childhood? It would all be explained eventually, I told myself as I ate the delicious chicken au vin she’d prepared and washed it down with wine. I can wait, I thought as we danced to the nightlife rhythms in a club amidst the smells of alcohol and perfume.

There is no hurry I thought as I rustle amongst the late morning leaves of the New York Times and she made me Kona coffee and toasted bagels. Just one more strange story in this strange city, I mused as I went over a copy-edited manuscript on Monday morning. I have company now, I reasoned. I’m not alone. I have a friend, a lover, a warm body.

So what if she lost her soul.

So what if she’s dead?

“So, how’s the love life?” asked Nelva Perkins, an agent who wanted to sell me a book why we ate Indian food and drank Perrier water.

“Great,” I said. “I’ve got this wonderful new girlfriend.

* * * *

Great.

Yes, it *was* great.

A few more weeks passed and I realized how good I had it.

All along in the relationship with Betsy, I’d waited for the usual parting of the curtain. You know what I mean—when you date someone, you’re on your best behavior. But after you realize that you like each other and relax enough to settle back into your old warped human behavior patterns, the warts and the cracks show through. The old temper flares, the old obsessive-compulsiveness. Women lose their patience with male sloppiness, and the acid of normal female worldview eats through the temporary saccharine shield. Insecurities start to rear up, snarling and gnawing and biting, and the facade of “perfect companionship” wears down, blending into the normal chaos and tattered nerves of reality.

It’s at this point that a perennial bachelor like myself usually starts wondering whether a regular companion is all that much better than the odd safe-sex bumps in the night.

Not so with Betsy.

For one thing, she had a wonderfully even temper. I started finding myself staying over her place more,

and she at mine and she dealt with my sloppiness in two ways: either she allowed it, or she simply picked up after me.

She made sure I ate regular and nutritionally balanced meals, and she was an excellent and varied cook.

True, she didn't say much. However, if I'd had a bad day at the office, or was loaded down with manuscripts to read or other work (as is an editor's wont) she was unfailingly supportive. She never had a cross or negative thing to say to me, and never seemed to suffer from the hormonal woes that other women seemed to experience. No PMS stress-outs with Betsy, no screaming and wailing and gnashing of teeth with this lady.

Needless to say, after a long stay in the zoo of male-female relationships ala New York City, this was quite a relief. There's nothing quite so grating on the nerves as the screech of the hormonally distressed female.

Best of all, she was the most sexually available woman I'd ever been with. Not only could I have her whenever I wanted her (she once told me that I could wake her up in the middle of the night, if I was so inclined) but she seemed to intuitively know just the right times that seduction was just what I needed.

In other words, a perfect woman, right?

Except she was dead.

For a long delicious weeks I enjoyed the relationship as I'd enjoyed no other, ignoring what Betsy had said and not ascribing this seeming perfection of mood and character to lack of soul but rather to an ineffable womanly saintliness.

Think! A woman with a sweet disposition! (There's an incredible find alone!)

Think! A woman who makes you a cup of good coffee without having to ask for one, who collects your dirty underwear and washes your socks regularly.

Think! A woman who seemed to be cut from the fabric of the fifties in household duties, had a mind of a saint, and yet performed her bedroom rites with the panache of the top lady in a sultan's harem.

Think! Absolutely knockout gorgeous, with a great figure and incredible taste in everything from food to perfume (ah, the scents that radiated from her!)

Think, guys, of your wildest dreams for what the perfect woman would be like. I had them all in Betsy, and I exulted in them. I enjoyed them, I lapped them up like a thirsty man drinks water after a trot through the desert. All of my body simply shimmered in satisfaction, its hungers and needs totally slaked. Sex, company, scents, touch, taste of her sweet mouth. Perhaps, as much as all the rest of me gloried in her, my stomach gloried the most. I put on ten pounds in those months, enjoying every ounce, getting a nice little pouch on the tummy that she would pat fondly and coo over as though I were pregnant. She complained not a whit about me getting fat.

In fact, Betsy simply did not complain.

I suppose this lack of female lips yapping in my ear was such a stunning switch that I simply didn't realize how wonderful it was. Some women have the delightful habit of a machine gun verbal attack, unfiltered by a silly little thing called reason, powered not even by intent but by annoyance or mood or whatever estrogen monster is clawing at their strings, usually but not always oafish behavior in a man. (Of which, of course, I *am never* guilty!) I've been unfortunate enough to get more than my share of relationships from this particular pool of Venus. So to get all these "good" qualities from a relationship and none of the

“bad” was something that stunned me so much that I often found silly grins staring back at me from mirrors.

At first I responded by being a perfect gentlemen. I brought flowers to Betsy every other day. I was kind and considerate, I even attempted to do the dishes much more often than is my wont.

However, slowly but surely, not only did I fall back into my woeful ways ... I found myself treating this lovely angel, this gem among ladies, this delightful example of her gender ... well, treating her almost with contempt.

No, you couldn't even really say that I was “taking her for granted.” It was much worse than that ... Far more heinous. I found centuries of swinish male behavior foaming up through my racial memory and curse and brutishly claw their way towards her.

Now I'm a little too civilized and neurotic to allow actual male behavior of this type to take any kind of toll. I mean, I didn't beat and rape her by any means, though the sense of Betsy that I was getting was that she would have merely powder-puffed the bruises and gone on about her life. No, I stopped talking to her much, I found complaints suddenly propelling themselves from my lips where I'd normally kept the little buggers tied down. I started finding ridiculous little faults about Betsy and everything she did.

One Sunday morning, my bagel was a little burnt and I found myself about to scream at her.

“Wait a minute!” I said.

“I'll go and make you another one, dear.”

“No, no, don't do that. I'm being a pig.”

“It's burnt. You're right. I'm sorry. I've got another fresh one right her. There's no problem.”

She started to get out of bed, but I grabbed her.

“I'm the one who's sorry. I don't know what's coming over me, Betsy.”

“I don't know what you're talking about, darling,” she said in her usual sweet monotone.

“I'm really behaving very badly lately. We should talk about this.”

“You've been just fine.”

I shook my head adamantly. “No. I haven't. You deserve better.”

She looked at me with a puzzled expression and something like concern. “Are you all right, darling? What's wrong? I don't understand. You've never complained before.”

“Nothing's wrong,” I said, almost defensively.

“It's me, isn't it?”

“No, it's not you, Betsy. It's me. I've been a real jerk lately. I don't know what's come over me. I've never acted like this before.”

“It's because I'm dead, isn't it. That's the problem. That's the problem all along.” She sighed and looked away. “Well, I could have predicted it. I guess I'm just doomed to a life of loneliness.”

I stood up and went around and went down on my knees in front of her, something I'd never done before. True, it was the only position that could call up her attention, but nonetheless the fact that I stumbled down was significant and I paid heed.

"No, Betsy. Absolutely nothing of the sort. I love you and I think you love me."

She shook her head. "You don't understand, do you. I'm *dead*. I ... I just have shadows of emotions ... Ghosts. I'm in a kind of gray limbo, James." She smiled grimly. "But even dead people need company. Why do you think there are cemeteries?"

I nodded. "Okay. I believe you."

"You believe me. Thank you."

"Now tell me what I can do."

"Do?"

"Yes. To get your soul back from Robert?"

She gave me a puzzled look. "That ... That would be crazy."

"Why?"

"He's a dangerous man. No, I won't allow it."

"Why is he so dangerous? What, he carries a gun?"

She got up and went to the window. She stared down to the street for a second, then looked back, eyes still blank as usual. Nonetheless, I thought I saw a flicker of concern in them. Or was I just reading my own emotions into her—was that something I'd always been doing?

"He might take *your* soul," she stated simply.

"Well then, I'll ask him to put it the same place as he's got yours, then." I stood up and put my hands to my hips. "So tell me about this Robert fellow. Tell me *all* about him, every little thing." I went over to pour myself another cup of coffee. "First, though, tell me where he lives."

* * * *

Robert Devalier lived in a huge loft in Tribeca, a newly fashionable district for the bohemian rich and artfully inclined, along with the usual collection of cocooning and down at the heels aging yuppies.

I wrangled the address from Betsy with a great deal of effort, but I didn't exactly race down and confront the dreadlocked Jamaican witchdoctor.

No, I bided my time. I performed a reconnaissance of the area, at day, at night. The usual concrete slabs of buildings sprayed with the occasional green and brown of trees that is the Manhattan landscape, but with a good view of the Hudson and without the splatter of trash in the gutters.

I also got a gun.

That was easy enough, but it was something I had to give some serious thought to. Guns are, of course, illegal in New York City and well they should be. I'm of the liberal bent, with a healthy fear of firearms and a faint contempt for the NRA sort and a deep fear of ghetto guys packing heat. I heartily approve of strict gun control.

On the other hand, just as I did not begrudge policemen their weapons, I figured that when you go up against a magician like Robert Duvalier, you'd better have something besides your bare knuckles going for you.

I got the gun from one of my old western/action-adventure writers, a gun-nut. I had to drive up to Vermont to get it, but I took Betsy and it was a pleasant interlude.

When she figured out that we hadn't gone up to the mountains just to look at the changing leaves, she didn't say anything. I got a nice Smith and Wesson .38 revolver from Fred, who seemed thrilled with my new interest in guns.

On the way back, Betsy said, "I don't like the idea of you with a gun. You could shoot Robert or yourself. Either way you'd be in trouble."

"So, have you got a better idea?" I said, Connecticut streaming by the car window.

She said nothing.

"You know, surely in the time you spent with him, you must have picked up *something*."

She thought for a moment. "He was very secretive. He told me very little and showed me practically nothing of his magical elements. But I believe I know where he keeps my soul."

"Oh?"

"In his palette."

"His painter's palette?"

"That's right."

"Sort of helps mix the colors right, hmm?"

"Yes. Other souls are in his brushes. Robert's work is known now for its incredible diversity."

"That because he's shackled a lot of souls."

"That's correct."

"You have no contact at all with your ... uhm, soul..."

"No. That is why I am dead."

"But the artwork. Can you see yourself in the artwork he produces?"

"Bits and pieces perhaps. But as I said, it is blended with others."

"Critics probably call him the canvas mixmaster."

"Have you been reading reviews?"

"Just a wild guess." I let some time pass. I opened a window to let some air in. I smoked a cigarette. I hadn't smoked in years, but I recently started doing it again, a few a day. Usually girlfriends complain if I smoke, saying I was killing myself. Betsy said nothing. I guess she figured she didn't have much room to talk.

Finally I stubbed out the butt in the ashtray. “Okay, tell me one more thing. How’d he do it?”

“Do what?”

“Steal your soul.”

She sighed. A monotone sigh. Strange to hear. “It’s this strange stuff he makes. Some kind of chemical compound. He put it in my wine I drank at dinner one night in Jamaica. I went into a kind of catatonia for a few days.”

I grunted. “That would concur with the stuff I read about the Haitian zombies. Did you get buried and then dug up?”

She shook her head. “No. When I came back to consciousness, I was pretty much as I am now. Robert was there. He was very patient and considerate. He told me what had happened, how he had taken my soul and that he would take care of me. He taught me a new way of doing things, and he showed me how to cope as ... as a zombie. I remember him saying, ‘You’ll do just fine, kiddo. There are a lot of folks out there just like you. You’ll be in good company.’ I didn’t really care much. I just kind of coped. Only after awhile I got lonely.”

“Even zombies get lonely, hmmm?”

She nodded soberly.

“Would you have settled for another zombie?”

She just turned and looked at me. “Maybe we’re all zombies in one way or another.”

I was a bit taken aback. “Sounds like a Robert Heinlein story.”

“He must have been a wise man, this Heinlein?”

“Well, he was a good writer, anyway.”

I started smoking another cigarette, but stubbed it out after only a few puffs. We were getting close to New York and I had to hash all this out as well as I could right now.

“The way I figure it, Betsy, all I’ve got to do is break into this guy’s studio loft.”

“I can’t stop you. But I can only ask you not to. I am content now, James. Please, let’s just continue the way that we are.”

“You’re not happy, Betsy. And I’m not happy because you really are missing something. Hell, maybe I’m missing something as well, but the only way I’m going to get that back is by working it out with a fully alive human being. Maybe I can come alive then too.” I took a deep breath. “I’m not just doing this because I love you. I’m doing it because I need it too. I’m doing this as much for me as for you.”

“But what will you do when you break into the loft?”

“Simple. I’m going to get that palette.”

I reached inside my jacket for another cigarette, but stopped myself. Hell, I thought. I don’t need these.

I threw the pack out the window.

* * * *

It was a Saturday afternoon, and I was doing the burglar shuffle.

I'd pretty much scoped out the place and, along with the detailed descriptions of the interior and exterior of the building. I watched Robert Duvalier's comings and goings and got used to the feel of the sounds he made.

All this from a distance of course. I figured if this guy has some sort of grip on magic, who knows what talents he has. I mean, a guy that could imprison a person's soul in an artist's palette could very well wise up pretty quickly to the fact that some nerd is checking him out. Nonetheless, he seemed totally oblivious to my presence. I think, with my usual *savoir-faire*, I bumped into his view a few times, but it didn't seem to register, even though surely he'd seen me around Betsy. He certainly knew that some editor was dating her, but didn't seem to mind at all, just as long as she droned on through life, safely allowing her soul and talent to live on, a prisoner of his artwork.

Now, when I first started believing this zombie business my first thought was to simply confront the guy. Grab him when he came to visit Betsy or something and demand he release her from this half-life prison he'd thrust her into. Part of me wanted to go to the authorities ... but then I realized a guy coming in spouting wild stories of artsy-fartsy zombies in Manhattan wasn't going to get the kind of notice he wanted.

However, when I suggested this to Betsy, she said, in about as excited and emphatic a voice she was able to muster in her state, that this was a suicidal plan, that she knew for certain that Robert had killed before and if he thought I was a potential risk for him, he wouldn't hesitate to bring about my death—or worse!

It was the “worse” part that kind of got to me, especially after reading that *Serpent and the Rainbow* book, which I figured was necessary groundwork for what I was trying to accomplish.

The editor part of me thought about making a book out of the experience too, maybe sell film rights ... But ultimately I didn't see how that could be done without exposing Betsy to things that might break up our relationship.

Lots of things swimming through my head then, yes—but finally, I had to focus on my goal exclusively and try and forget everything else.

I had to get that artist's palette.

The plan was to do it on a Saturday afternoon. Often as not, Robert visited Betsy on Saturday afternoons. It was a Saturday afternoon when I my first weird encounter with him, after all. Betsy called an made an appointment. There were things she needed to talk to him about, she said, and he hadn't been for a few weeks, so he was inclined to go anyway. When he got there, the plan was for Betsy to *keep* him there as long as possible, while I got into the loft and grabbed the palette.

So there I was, on a Saturday afternoon, drinking coffee on at a Greek place on the other side of the street, waiting for Duvalier to make his move so I could make mine.

He walked out at about two thirty five, looking particularly funky and third world in a glaring chartreuse and red caftan, his dreadlocks bouncing on his back, his smooth black face sheened with frown and purpose—his usual expression.

I gave him a few seconds for his heels to click on down the road before I paid my bill and hopped over to his building. I knew the security code ... Betsy knew that much ... but the rest was up to me. Duvalier hadn't trusted her with keys.

No problem.

When I'd gone up to Vermont to visit my friend, I'd also procured some equipment he dubbed "urban survival gear." Included in this bag of goodies were various tools specifically for breaking and entering. Now according to Betsy, Duvalier had about as many locks and mechanical protective accoutrements as the next paranoid New Yorker, so I didn't think I had much chance getting in through the front door. However, I'd noticed that the lattice of fire escape ladders and landings led up to the back window and I figured I had a damned good chance of getting in that way if I could get onto the fire escape. Sure enough, I'd discovered that on the fourth floor there was an open window that led out onto the fire escape system that in turn led up to topmost of the building ... Robert Duvalier's studio loft.

This was what I intended to use.

So, the coffee sloshing in my stomach and knotting up my nerves further with tension (a mistake, that coffee ... I was determined that it would be my last one today) I headed for the front door. The code got me in with no problem. So far, so good, I thought. Of course I'd gotten this far before on the prelim scouting, so I couldn't really start congratulating myself yet. I made it up the stairs as well to the floor where I'd checked the window before. The window access to the fire escape was closed. However the lock was inside and as I was safely inside I had no problem unlocking it and scooting on out.

The fire scaffolding was the old fashioned type, clanky and rusting. There were a few spots where I was hanging over multiple stories of drop, my heart pounding, but all in all my climb went pretty well. I hauled myself up to the twelfth floor where Robert D.'s loft perched and, on the final landing, sat for a moment, puffing and checking out the lay of the land.

I had expected an obstacle, which was why I'd brought the tool bag along. But it was a nice fall day, and so Robert had left a window open. After sufficient rest, and much relieved that my hardest task was really not difficult at all, I pried the cracked window open the rest of the way and warily crawled into the place.

It was big, but then that was one of the attractions of these lofts. There were numerous drop sheets, splattered with color, along with a number of half finished paintings and sculptures and designs sprawled between the ceiling supports like a rotting museum exhibit. It smelled of paint, of course ... acrylics and oils mostly, with paint remover laced richly in the air as well. But there was something else in the air as well, a perfumed taint that gave me much unease at the pit of my stomach, the base of my spine. I shrugged it off and started to look for that palette.

The studio was halved by a large curtain hung from what looked like a hemp rope. I found the part to the side and pulled it open. Beyond was what amounted to a neatly ordered penthouse apartment, different rooms created by slabs of rounded drywall, hung with finished artwork and relics of the Caribbean. It was all quite nicely artistic, terrifically furnished and definitely had the feel of rich bohemian slumming.

I didn't think I'd find painting equipment in the living quarters, though, and so I looked elsewhere.

It didn't take me long to find the sink and cabinets and other paraphernalia that provided a painter's support. The cabinets weren't locked, either, so I went through them. There were paints and other equipment in profusion. You name it, this Robert Duvalier guy had it—all the stuff that made an art studio go.

All except for two sets of important items.

There were no paintbrushes and there were no painter's palettes.

At first I was upset, but then I reminded myself that if these brushes and palettes of Duvalier's were so magical, why would he possibly want to leave them in an accessible place. Besides, the very fact that he had a special place for them, confirmed that they were indeed special—and that any remaining doubt about Betsy's story was limited to practically nil.

After a quick sweep of the studio, I saw nothing in particular that seemed to be a hiding place, so I went back into the living quarters.

The more I examined the furnishings and rugs and artwork adorning that place, the more I realized how valuable they all were. I found several bedrooms and a state of the art kitchen and a lovely sunken bathroom (the place was getting less and less bohemian) and then, finally, something that might be the place I was looking for.

It was a shrine.

Or that's what it looked like, anyway. It was like some kind of strange mixture of Buddhist temple and Catholic chapel, only with no particular Far Eastern or Christian symbolism. There was an altar and there were candles and there were incense burners, all grouped around pieces of artwork of a decidedly abstract nature, the meaning of which were totally beyond me.

Also hanging in the air was that peculiar lilt of perfume. Death and flowers. I shuddered. This must be it—this was the center of Robert Duvalier's magic.

As I walked into the narrow but long room (totally enclosed so that it was dark save for several votive candles which flickered into strange shadows in the corners) I had the definite feeling of the numinous—there were powers at work here. That last shred of doubt I had about Betsy's story was promptly booted out of my mind—and replacing it was a kind of fear that I'd never felt before. My gut instinct was simply to drop everything and run for the door, get away from this place, get away from Betsy, turn off my mind and just become whatever kind of zombie I'd been before.

I fought it.

I took a deep breath and I closed my eyes, and I visualized a happy Betsy, her soul gently and mischievously smiling from those green eyes of hers.

I took another breath, opened my eyes, found myself again in that awful room, but this time without quite the fear running through my veins.

I went about my business.

The room was surrounded by a number of baroquely designed cabinets. It was these that I started to examine, since there seemed a very strong possibility that what I was looking for was in one of them.

The first few were open and revealed wealths of glass jars, filled with liquids and dried herbs and pickled animal parts, labeled with obscure codes that I did not recognize. It wasn't difficult to conclude that this was the odd stuff of Duvalier's magic, but it held no particular use to me.

I went on, finding bags and bottles and tubes of what appeared to be homemade painting supplies. Apparently, Duvalier created his own peculiar colors. There was magic not only in the brushes and palette but in the paint as well—and sure enough, the canvases. There was a whole cabinet devoted to them, and other cabinets filled with supplies markedly odder than what you'd find in Downtown Art Supply.

But where were the special brushes?

Where were the palettes?

Most importantly, where was THE palette?

None of the supply cabinets were locked, so that gave me a good enough clue: if I were Duvalier, I'd keep my captive souls under lock and key, inside and out, actually. However, I was pretty sure they were somewhere around here—this seemed to be the special “unholy” place.

I scanned the area again. Nothing looked particularly obvious. And of course there were no illuminated, pulsing arrows pointing toward what I was looking for. I didn't have time to keep on searching. Betsy was only going to be able to detain that soul-keeper for only so long....

I stood there for a moment, metaphorically scratching my head, feeling the telltale prickings of panic at the base of my gut. Again, deep breaths. Steady boy, steady ... think.

And then, I realized that I was looking straight at it.

The altar.

It was large and boxy—plenty of room to hide something. And although there were no obvious openings at the front, that didn't mean there weren't any in the back.

I went and looked.

The closer I got to the assemblage of odd bric-a-brac on top of the thing, though, the more I got that feeling of spiritual wrongness. It was like heading nostrils first into some huge stink. I had to force myself to do it.

Sure enough, though, a closer look at the back of that blasphemous altar revealed a locked panel. As I didn't have the key, I was happy to have the equipment that my friend in Vermont had given me.

First I tried the ring of keys in the bag. None of them came close to working. Well, radical measures were called for and so I took them. Time, after all, was running out.

I pulled out the crowbar.

Fortunately, there was a place to fit the end, and so I stuck the end inside. I swallowed and readied myself for anything. It isn't everyday that you violate a black altar and I'd seen my share of horror movies, after all.

Then, with all my strength, I pushed on the crowbar.

The compartment fairly flew open. I fell on my face, totally off balance. I scampered to the balls of my feet, crouched there, staring over at the newly opened altar, ready to run, ready for just about anything.

Nothing happened, though.

It was just a cabinet. A cabinet flickering now with the shadows of the those votive candles.

I shone my flashlight inside.

There on shelves, wrapped in plastic bags were brushes—and in the upper part a single, very large painter's palette.

It didn't glow in the dark or anything like that, but still as I reached in and touched it I got a sparky feeling

of specialness. There could be no question: this was it.

If I had any doubt about the efficacy of magic, it was erased at that moment, because it was then that I felt the true hint of my lover's soul.

I realized my heart was pounding in my chest then, pounding not with fear but with excitement. Here, before me, was my heart's desire. Betsy's soul. And I was going to be like some brave knight in a legend, rescuing it.

Well, I told myself, controlling my pulses. There it is all right, but we're not out the door, and even when I get this thing back to Betsy, what happens then? I had no idea of how to accomplish the transference of a soul from an inanimate object back to its home body.

There wasn't any time to muse on the subject. I pulled the bagged palette out, tucked into my own bag and got up. Time to haul butt out of here and worry about other things later.

I turned and took two steps toward the door of the chapel.

There was a figure there, looming in the shadows.

I stopped cold, and so, I think, did my heart.

The figure strode forward into the candlelight.

It was Robert Duvalier.

* * * *

Maybe I should have just charged him, bowled him over and then gotten the hell out of there. Unlikely, but still perhaps I should have tried. Nonetheless, nothing seemed to be working particularly well in my body then. Everything seemed jammed, frozen, seized up.

I said nothing, did nothing. Maybe I should have reached into my bag and pulled out the gun right then and just let the guy have it. But now, a million thoughts and fears were vortexing in on my muscles, conflicting thoughts and fears, and they all jammed up my operational motor function.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Evans," said the Jamaican.

I grunted.

"I knew that we would meet eventually, but I must confess that I thought it would be under more convivial circumstances." His voice was mellifluous and spellbinding, not the Uncola Island bass and accent, but nonetheless definitely a tropical island sort of speech.

I suddenly found words. "You never sounded particularly convivial. And I didn't think you would agree to what I would propose."

He laughed. "No. No, of course not. What I possess is quite valuable. Why should I want to lose it?"

"Perhaps we can talk now."

"Well, talk is cheap. I don't see what you can do to get yourself out of your predicament now. It is only a good thing for me in this instance that I trust my instincts."

"Betsy couldn't keep you at her apartment?"

"I never got there. Something whispered in my ear just as I walked up the front steps there ... A little magical bird, shall we say." He went over to a side table and lit a couple more candles, illuminating his fine, strong features further. The lights that streamed up under his chin gave him a dark, sinister look that belied the smile that he wore on his face. "I listened to that bird, yes, and here I am."

"You have no right to what you keep here."

"No right at all, Mr. Evans. Which is why I must use metaphysical means to imprison what I own. But have you seen my art? If you have, you will know that the cost is worth it."

I realized, suddenly, that he was carrying absolutely nothing. He was unarmed. He didn't even have a baseball bat.

"Wait a minute. What are you going to do to prevent me from just walking past you and out your door. I've got what I came for."

"Oh yes, I don't doubt that you do. But suppose *Idid* just let you waltz away. What would you do with my lovely palette? Hmmm?" His voice carried a terribly smug smirk. "Feed it to Betsy? Just how is her dear inspired soul going to make that transmigration?"

"We'll find a way."

A bellowing laugh. "Without my assistance. Never." He folded his arms and his big head tilted down, so that he looked at me from under what seemed a very larger and malignant brow. "No, I would just allow you to have the palette if I didn't need it myself. You are a fool if you think that you can undo what I have accomplish."

It was at this point that some of my motor power seemed to be coming back into my body. I didn't wait long to use it. "I guess I'm a fool, then!" I said and began to stride past him. After all, he didn't present any signs of *real* threat. He wasn't *that* big. And I wondered if maybe he wasn't just trying to intimidate me with boasts about his power.

I was wrong.

As soon as I drew astride him, his arm shot out.

It did not strike me.

But *something* did.

It felt like a full body blow. I was slammed back into the "chapel." I tripped and went tumbling in a cacophony of my sack and tools. But I clung to them, and most importantly to the palette.

"Fool," he snarled, mockingly.

I was more angry than afraid, even though I'd just experienced an indication of the fulsomeness of his powers.

I reached into my sack and pulled out my gun.

I had it just about aimed and was about to pull the trigger when he simply reached his hand out, wiggled his fingers blithely and got immediate results.

The gun was simply plucked from my hand, wrenched away and tossed into a dark corner of the room.

“Please, spare me any more of your silly efforts,” he said. “And kindly hand me the palette. Perhaps I shall let you go then.”

The effect of this display of magical powers was still sinking in. I didn’t know quite what to do or say.

So I did nothing.

“Come, come. Let’s be quick about it. You see what I can do. Do you want me to rip your heart out and throw it after your gun?”

I didn’t of course, and my heart pounded hard with fear at the very notion. But I simply wasn’t going to give up the palette quite yet.

“What are you doing?” I said, hoping to engage him in conversation so I could stall, so that I could give this whole thing a little bit of thought.

“Simply exercising a small portion of the powers of my command.”

“Magical powers, clearly.”

“You are quite observant.”

“Any special type?”

“I own at my command a fine blending of the dark powers.”

“You want to tell me your recipe.”

He cocked his head curiously and stepped toward me. “That is interesting. Why do you wish to know?”

“I’m a book editor.”

“Oh? And you wish me to write a book on the subject.”

“You want to sell a book. Let Betsy have her soul back and I’ll buy and publish a book from you!”

He reared back his head and laughed heartily. “What an amusing notion.”

“Your autobiography perhaps? Maybe a coffee table book filled with your artwork. We have a whole division devoted to coffee table books. I’m sure your efforts would make a handsome addition to our editions!”

“I’m sure it would—but alas, such is my artwork that greatest part of the effect is in the actual nearness of the viewer to the artwork itself. It of course would be quite beautifully reproduced, because I am full of talent myself and there is much beauty and art in the colors and the renderings and such. The sublime angles, the curves.... oh yes, I see things in a most profound way and it certainly shows in what I do.”

He seemed to be warming up to the subject. His stance noticeably relaxed. What I could see of his face looked quite placid and hardly menacing at all. And I certainly wasn’t going to discourage him from continuing.

Any time I could buy now, *any*, might be put to good use. I don’t know exactly what kind of good use, but I’m sure I could figure out something to do with it.

“Yes. I’ve seen your work. Here and elsewhere. That’s all true.”

He nodded his head as though I had just uttered the most profound truth in the universe—and yet, surprise! There was even more and he would be more than happy to present me with an inkling of the vastness of importance which this comprised.

“Indeed. However, as you doubtless suspect, there’s much more than just the visual image that is present. The substance of the materials is impregnated not just with spirituality and life, but with cosmic inspiration and creativity. It communicates on many different—” He waved a hand, trying to find the right word. “—wavelengths, shall we say. The full impact of the work just sinks directly into the soul of the observer on many different levels.

“Now, not only is this method, magical and darkly magical at that—creating great works of art that enrich our international culture...” He grinned, and I saw a immense set of pearl white, feral teeth. “It is also making me a very rich man. Now I must say, up till now you have been very good for Betsy. I have approved of your arrangement with her.”

“Clearly, or you would not have permitted it,” I added, just to keep the conversation going. Possibilities were percolating in the back of my mind, and I needed to work on them a while—letting Duvalier go on and on was something that would give me that little spare margin that I was going to need.

“Absolutely. You are most perceptive. Perhaps this is my fault—perhaps I should have known that you would have found out and would not be pleased. Perhaps I should have had you over for dinner and conducted a pleasant conversation with you over a fine wine.” He gestured about. “It would have been *allmuch* more civilized than the unfortunate situation we find ourselves in at the moment.”

“I could still do with a glass of fine wine.”

He shook his head. “Give me the palette, my friend, and I shall send you home with a case of the finest wine you have ever tasted.”

“You’re trying to bribe me?”

“I am only trying to make this a much more pleasant situation. Now are you going to cooperate?”

“And if *Ido* cooperate ... you’re just going to let me go about my business. Carry on my relationship with a zombie ... Keep her happy and entertained, while you utilize her soul, her gifts to create works of art with your signature ... and oodles of lucre in the bargain.”

He gave that some thought. “Well, yes, that’s the general idea I think.”

“And you don’t want *my* soul?”

“Fellow ... you have no particular artistic talents that I can perceive ... Now perhaps if I was of a literary bent, then I might be so inclined. However, as I am not ... you’re safe on that score!”

“And you’re going to trust me not to go to the police and let them know what you’ve been up to.”

“You’re going to tell the police that I have capture the souls of artists in my painting materials? Well, that will put me in jail immediately, won’t it?” He shook his head sorrowfully. “No, somehow I think you have far more to worry about from the police than I do. Indeed, may I advise you that all I have to do is to call 911, summon those marvelous knights in blue and have *you* arrested.”

He had a very good point, of course. One of which I was quite aware. However, again, I was just buying time with pure blather.

By then, though, I'd settled on what I was going to do.

I proceeded immediately onto that planned course.

"Very well, this is what you want, correct?" I pulled out the palette. The candlelight glimmered on the plastic wrapped. It crinkled and crackled.

He nodded, his eyes lighting. I could tell he was thinking, perhaps this fellow won't be so difficult after all.

Which was exactly what I wanted him to go on thinking for as long as possible.

"Yes. Just give it over. There's a good fellow. We'll have that excellent glass of wine I promised. Yes, and I dare say we could actually work on some other worthwhile perks for you."

His friendliness here was a good indication that I was on the right track. As long as I held the goods in my hands, he was in a vulnerable spot.

I crinkled off the plastic.

His smile drooped a little.

"That not necessary," he said, "That plastic covering is there for a purpose. I don't want—"

"You don't want your precious palette to get dirty, do you?" I said. I took it both hands. "Well, how would you like it to get *cracked* ... or worse yet, *broken*!"

He twitched. He could not hide the squirm.

"You wish to destroy the soul of your lover?" he gasped.

"Better than in *your* hands, *your* control!" I said, and held it up in a way that said, Yes, I'm *perfectly* willing to break your precious palette right in two! Hands gripped on the sides of what, after all, was quite thin board.

A storm of emotions passed over his dark, chiseled, expressive face. At first an attempt to stonewall, to show nothing to bluff. But even as I started to bend the paint-dappled wood a bit, that look exploded into a dozen varieties of alarm and terror and fear.

"No," he said. "Don't."

"Very well," I said. "I'm walking out here, then. With the palette."

"Just don't break it."

"I have no intention of doing so."

He nodded.

I walked around him, giving him ample berth. There was always the possibility of another trick.

I made it, however, out of the chapel. I started walking for the door. Halfway there, he called out after me.

"Wait," he said.

I kept on walking through the plush living quarters.

“It will do you absolutely no good, that palette.”

I reached the door, grabbed the handle.

“I’ll make you a bargain then!” He called. “Let me come with you. I will transfer Betsy’s soul back into her body. In return, you will give me my palette back, unbroken.”

I stopped. He really did have a point. Once I got back to Betsy’s loft I hadn’t the faintest idea of what to do with the palette. Most likely Betsy hadn’t either—look at all the help she gave me with what to expect in this place.

It didn’t take long to decide.

“Okay,” I said. “But no tricks.”

* * * *

We took a cab. My choice. That limited Duvalier’s opportunity to pull something.

We drove the blocks in crushing silence. I made sure that the palette was out, and obviously under my control. It could be broken with a single *snap*! Somehow, Duvalier’s eyes never drifted far from the object of his anxiety.

At Betsy’s place we rode the elevator up in tenser silence.

I rang the doorbell.

She saw him first. “You’re very late...” she began. Then she saw me and then she saw the palette.

She did not react, but neither did she speak either. She stepped out of the way and let us in.

“I got it,” I said. “But he came back. However, it would appear that we have a bargain, your master and I. He pulls the soul out of the palette, gives it back to you and goes away—with a whole and undamaged painter’s palette...” I turned to look at Duvalier again. “And promises never to affect us again?”

Duvalier nodded. “I swear it. I hate to lose Betsy, but there is far more at stake than her in that palette.”

Betsy nodded, emotionlessly. He gestured for us to follow her into the living room.

We did so, and I felt quite ill at ease about the whole thing. Duvalier looked weary and resigned rather than defeated. He didn’t seem like a man who had lost something all that valuable—rather like a man who’d just had one more bump on a long and rough road—but knew how to take it.

He sat Betsy down on the couch.

“Give me the palette,” he instructed.

“Nope. I don’t trust you.”

He sighed. “Very well. Step over here then and place the edge on her left temple.”

I did so. I felt a slight tremble in the palette, like some kind of electronic vibration originating from a different dimension. Duvalier put his hand on the edge of the palette and I shot him a warning look.

“Sorry. It’s quite necessary. You don’t have to trust me. The palette is even more fragile than you think. It can be broken easily.”

This said, the nattily attired witch doctor closed his eyes and began to mutter a keening, incoherent chant. My nerves, about shot anyway, almost teetered on the edge—but I bucked up, braced myself, and rather than do anything just now, simply

stayed in an alert a state as possible.

The chant dived down into a lower, softer timbre of bass throb, and the words that crawled from Duvalier's mouth had absolutely no relationship to English or any other language that I was familiar with. I could feel the vibrations more heavily now—and then suddenly light exploded in curled spectrums and spiraled rainbows. Intertwined I saw gossamer faces reeling and vortexing, eyes of stars glittering and twisting into a blending that mirror-into-mirror face stacked into a borderless infinity.

A mélange of souls, teetering into the damned heavens of creativity.

A flicker, a breath of breeze and on wings of paint and shards of geometry I fancied I saw the missing jigsaw puzzle piece that was the soul of Betsy flutter and waft, lifting up from a puddle of magenta and woozing back like scent back onto a beautiful bunch of flowers.

Betsy reeled away from the palette, swooning onto the couch, her eyes half closed and staring off into nothing.

"Betsy!" I said, not daring to take my hands off the palette.

"She is all right. You will release the palette now, please," demanded Duvalier.

"No," I said. "Not until I'm absolutely certain."

He shrugged. "It will only be a moment—there ... observe..."

I chanced a glance over, still keeping the witchdoctor within my peripheral vision.

Betsy's eyes were open fully. Something more shown out of those blue eyes than had been there before ... an awareness, a perceptiveness ... I saw a whole dimension that hadn't been there before...

And I feel in love with her all over again.

She turned to me and at first she looked at me without recognition. But then, abruptly, she smiled.

"James," she said.

"Are ... you all right..."

She nodded. Then she turned to the painter, a hard cold look.

"*Youused* me! You defiled me!"

Duvalier shrugged. "Mea culpa. So sue me." The witchdoctor turned to me. "Well? Satisfied?"

"Yes." Somehow, intuitively, I knew that the full woman was there now ... her soul had been returned.

"Good. Then we shall make a pact then now. I've had my fill of this business. All that was mine is now back to you, my dear. Along, I must say with a very prosperous business of your own. No doubt you will find yourself tremendously artistically enriched by your little stay with me. Yes—the pact. It's quite simple. You leave me alone, I leave you alone, hmmm? No bad feelings."

“Plenty of bad feelings, you pig,” said Betsy.

“Good enough,” I said. “Good enough for me. Just leave and let us be now—” I put a comforting hand on her shoulder. A restraining hand as well—I could tell that she would very much like to leap and scratch his eyes out. “I’ll take good care of her.”

Duvalier grinned oddly. “You just do that, my friend. You just do that.”

He sauntered from the apartment, that palette tucked protectively under his arm, and let himself out with a final defiant slam of the door.

I hesitantly looked over to Betsy. “Are you all right?” I said.

“God, what a ride. I could use a drink!”

I went to the icebox and got the half bottle of wine that remained from yesterdays’ dinner. I opened it and the bouquet released was like a delightful genie from the lamp, filled with promised wish fulfillment.

I poured two high-stemmed glasses and brought them out to my darling, who would even now be sparkling with her new soul on the couch.

She looked up at me, cringed a bit. “What’s *that*?”

“Wine.”

“Oh dear, I couldn’t *bear* wine. Not now.” She smiled seductively at me. “Would you be a dear and go down to that liquor store on the corner and get me a bottle of single malt scotch?”

I put the wine glasses down.

When I got back with my filled brown paper sack the harsh odor of marijuana filled the loft.

I got out two fresh glasses and poured.

* * * *

“*Goddamn it!*”

There was a crash and clatter and the sound of a easel, then a chair thumping to the wood floor.

I started from the chair. Then I realized it was only Betsy in the throes of creation. I returned to my manuscript, blue pencil hovering above the text.

I sipped at my scotch, a new habit I wasn’t sure I cared for much and tried to return to work.

There was more smashing and harrumphing from the directing of the loft, and finally a ragged voice screeched out like an enraged fury who’d just gotten downwind of Oedipus.

“James! Could you find a moment in your *busy* day to give your lover a little bit of help?” The voice was brittle with seething sarcasm.

I took another long swallow of the scotch and then strode toward the studio.

Into the fumes of creation, the odor of stubbed out cigarettes. Blue tobacco smoke hung in the air above a demolition scene, like fleeing ghosts from an explosion. Betsy hovered above it all, swaying slightly, a Camel dangling from the side of her mouth.

I'd seen Betsy look better, but mostly when she'd been a zombie.

Her hair hung, straggly, down her face. Her cheeks were flecked with paint. The smock she wore was like Joseph's Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat—dug up from its grave.

She turned my way, and she didn't smile at me.

"Could you help me get this easel up?"

"Sure."

The art she was working on looked like an impressionist's painting that had been used for birdcage liner. I pulled the easel up and set the canvas back in its seat.

"Nice," I said.

"What do *you* know?"

"Something not jelling?"

"The perspective? Can't you see! Haven't you got *eyes*? I'm not getting the perspective right."

I looked at the picture again. Strike the birdcage bit. Try a gorilla cage. "Uhhh—looks okay to me."

"Would you just shut up and go back to your blood porn. When I want an opinion, I'll ask the *New Yorker*."

She removed the cigarette from her mouth long enough to stuff a few ounces of scotch through it.

"By the way, remember it's my poker night tonight," I said. "I'll fix some dinner for you first, though, if you'd like."

She fixed me with flinty eyes. "Wait a minute. *Poker* night?"

"Every second Wednesday of the month," I said.

She nodded. "Right. Fine. You're just going to leave me here alone again. I don't *like* being alone at night. You know that!"

"Well, I guess I could miss it just once."

"You've got a problem with having dinner with me?"

"I said, I could skip it, Betsy! Cool it!"

"No, I won't cool it. I can't believe that you'd even think of leaving me here while you go off alone and have yourself a *disgusting* good time playing a ridiculous game!"

I sighed. Caught in the sticky web of female rhetoric again. A struggle would only drag me in deeper, spin a sticky thread of silk about me and draw me into a fight, which I knew I could not win.

You cannot win an argument when there are no rules to the game. You cannot even break even when the other contestant's goal is sheer chaos.

"Okay, then," I said, teeth gritted. "I won't go, dear."

Her voice became whiney. “You *never* play cards with me.”

“You know I told you that you could come and play poker with us sometime if you liked.”

“I abhor that game.” She shuddered melodramatically. “So ... Bourgeois.”

“Oops. Sorry.”

“Look I don’t need that tone of voice from you. I’ve had an awful day. I could use some sympathy.”

“How about some tea?”

“You’re always trying to foist that shit on me, aren’t you.”

She shook her mangy head of hair and looked back upon her artistic efforts. “Well, it ain’t Jackson Pollock, but even on my bad days I’m better than that whorebitch Denise Desididiero! Hmm?”

“What, you would like something else to drink then?”

She frowned. “You think that witch’s better than I am, don’t you?”

“I said nothing of the sort!”

“You changed the subject. It’s in between the lines.” She harrumphed. “What a cold, unfeeling *bastard* you are. And yes, I want a drink. Can’t you see that my glass is empty?”

She handed it back to me disdainfully and then turned back to her work, her cigarettes again fuming in sympathy to her state of mind.

I went back, filled her glass half full of scotch, and then brought it back to her.

Betsy accepted it with a grunt and downed a swallow immediately, not even acknowledging my existence.

It was a relief.

I went back and had a swallow of the stuff myself. It went down smooth, exploding into blast of warmth in my stomach. My nerves were slightly glossed over, numbed and felt slightly less raw.

Making sure she was still working intently, I went to the phone and dialed the number that had been in my mind for some weeks now.

The other line rang twice, and then there was an answer.

“Hello.”

I recognized the mellifluous voice.

“Duvalier,” I choked out. I swallowed hard. “This is James Marshall.” I looked out the window and remembered faintly another time, a better time. I said to the witchdoctor, “Could we ... talk?”

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The sun had long since set over Cambridge, England.

No spires dreamed here, though the occasional church tower stood apart in the darkness like some stolid, lonely stone sentinel survived from medieval times, all its builders dust. The chimes of the Catholic church rang out the hour of eight in the evening as Roland Andrews rolled his bike out of its moorings by his basement apartment and started pedaling for the Rovers Return Pub to see a dead rock band.

Well, he'd thought them dead anyway.

As far as he knew the Wicker Men hadn't recorded since 1978, and his feverish record and CD hunts of the last two months here in the British Isles had turned up nothing that he didn't already have on vinyl or CD reissues.

Now, though, it would seem that they would be playing a gig in Cambridge, and the notion filled him with anticipation and excitement he'd not felt for some time. He'd made no friends, had Roland Andrews. The English had all been very polite, but below the politeness was a chilly aloofness. He could not understand it, since his books and papers had all been inspired by English methods of cold and clinical analysis. He himself had no patience with whimsy of fantasy. His view of the medieval world was clean and clear and atheistic, just as was his view of modern life. Reason and logic and truth: these were the beacons of his life.

Somehow, though, the scholars here, despite his efforts, didn't seem to like him. He fancied they were laughing behind their backs at his Latin, chuckling at the very notion that a person who'd studied *their* field had done so at some inferior university in the wasteland of the United States—a place that hadn't even had a medieval age, for God's sake!

Andrews felt lonely, and so he took comfort at the notion of seeing tonight's show.

It was December and cold, with a chill that only Britain seemed to be able to conjure as Andrews biked past the huge spread of land called Parker's Piece, named after a famous Cricketer. Beyond it was the faint, almost numinous glow at the city's center—the glow came from the famous colleges that comprised one of the world's most famous universities. King's. St. John's. Trinity. Peterhouse. All a jumble of Medieval and Renaissance and Victorian glory of stone and old, lasting architectural concepts. A haze hung like a faint hood over the street lamp. There was the taste of frost and grass in the air, and the smell of winter. Andrews had seen a Father Christmas walking in the Market Square today, and Christmas ornaments were going up in Marks and Spencer's.

He shivered in the thick coat he'd just bought and pedaled on up the road, careful of the traffic that barreled past him. Cambridge was a town of bicyclists. Autos tended to treat cyclists far better than they did back in the Midwest, where he was from. Still, though there were very few collisions each year, he did not intend to be amongst them. Besides, tonight he had a mission. He was going to see the Wicker Men.

The pub was just short of the Grafton Center, an unfortunate modern Mall perhaps a mile from St. Mary's Tower and therefore a candidate for student housing. Alas, what it held were the usual shoe shops and cookie stalls, food court and multiplex cinema that the United States had spawned so successfully.

Still, the Rovers Return was a satisfactorily English place, growing from the side of the road like some unredeemed Edwardian mushroom. Scuffed and sour, it sulked amidst a welter of KFC and fish and chips wrappers, beaten but unbowed. Dour lights glimmered from within like memories of illumination.

By the front door, a man stood, taking tickets or selling them. Andrews had already bought his up at the

Arts Theater Box Office some weeks ago for a monumental price of four pounds, amounting to somewhat over six dollars, American. He felt somewhat guilty paying so little for his favorite progressive rock band of the seventies, but then he figured he'd splurge on any CD's or tapes they might have for sale.

There were already about fifteen people in the place. The pub was laid out for performances in a simple, Spartan fashion, like a stumpy T, with stage at one end, bar at the other and a small offshoot side room with an exit into a dark and uninviting as sea coal. Posters announcing acts in the future or acts of the past were tacked in a haphazard fashion on the walls. The floors were bare boards. Andrews' experiences of pubs before this had been of plush, inviting places—cozy, warm, colorful. This had a stripped down, functional look.

Back in the States it would have been called a dive.

Nonetheless, the patrons looked typical enough of Cambridge. There were a few haggard hippy-looking souls in drab coats and stringy hair; a few academic and townie folk—bright-eyed and alert, sitting in the rows of folding chairs, sipping at pints of cider or beer.

Andrews shook off the chill that still clung to him, draped his coat over a chair positioned neither too close to nor too far from the stage.

On the stage stood a worn-looking drum set and a rack of Korg synthesizers pasted here and there with scabby peace stickers—they looked like bandages holding the battered electronics together.

It was the kind of rock-garden assemblage that usually includes half a dozen electric string instruments guarding the rest like watchful sentries—but the strings (guitar, bass, celloe) were strangely missing.

Andrews put his notebook down on the chair, rubbed his hands together as much out of excitement as to get some circulation back into them. The place was warm and friendly enough, and though not exactly nice-looking, it had a sense of lots of good music still ringing in its rafters. There were spiffy amplifiers on the stage and racked on the ceiling, and a decently modern sound mix system in a booth to the side.

Andrews walked back to the bar. To one side was the one nod to a sense of comfort in the place: a sign displaying types of sandwiches and bottled beers sold amidst a bookcase of old books. Above the bar were lists of ales and lagers and ciders sold, their prices and their alcohol content.

The bartender, a chunky middle-aged man with no sign of gray in his thatch of black hair, eased forward. "Yes, please?"

"Hmmm. Just a John Smith's, please. That looks safe enough."

"Pint, then?"

"Yes. A pint."

The bartender picked a large glass directly from a cagelike drying rack, stuck it under a spigot and pulled on the big wooden tap. Dark foamy beer whooshed out to fill the glass.

"What time does the music start?" asked Andrews.

The bartender glanced over at a clock. "Oh, I'd say about another half an hour. Yeah, half eight or so. These blokes though—no support. Straight through till last call at eleven. Maybe a ten-minute break."

"You've heard them?"

“Oh yeah. They play here ’bout once a year.”

“I’d thought they’d broken up long ago.”

The bartender took Andrews’ two pounds for the drink while he waited for the head to settle so that he could top it off. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you. Naw—they’re like The Enid. Got their own studio and stuff.... But they pop up from time to time in this town or that—gigging.”

Andrews knew the name well. The Enid. Robert John Godfrey, an art rocker who wouldn’t say die. He and his group released CDs on their own label. Andrews got them through an import record service. But then, he’d never seen anything available from the Wicker Men. His heart raced.

“I never thought I’d ever have the chance of seeing them,” he said.

The bartender smiled and gave Andrews his ten pence change.

“Yeah, well, they’re no spring chickens no more, that would be the truth,” he said. “Roughest lookin’ band I’ve ever seen. Still, they *can* play, there’s no question about that—and they’ve still got their fans. This place will start filling up pretty soon. Mind you, this ain’t no Oasis or Blur gig.”

“No. Guess if I wanted Britpop I’d go to the Corn Exchange or The Junction,” Andrews said, citing the other, larger venues in town.

“You’d be an American then?”

“That’s right. Professor on Sabbatical. Using the University Library for a few months. I’m doing a book on music in Medieval Literature.”

“Well, the Wicker Men—they go back to the Dark Ages, then, don’t they?”

Andrews nodded and laughed. “Right. Like one of their songs ... ‘Renaissance Synthesizer.’”

“Well you’re in the right place for music of the ages ... You can go to King’s College for some Mozart or Purcell ... Come over here for some fifties rock and roll or Delta Blues ... Or groups from the sixties, seventies, eighties—” A rueful smile. “Or, hell, even the nineties. They all want to come here. And you know why?”

“The decor?”

He laughed out loud. “Oh yes, right, that—and the fact that the Rower’s Return is a socialist collective. We’re don’t stick pamphlets in your face, but we’re all socialists here.”

“And the Wicker Men ... they’re socialist.”

“Never asked ’em.”

A few more people had straggled and headed straight for the bar for drinks.

Andrews shook his head and got one more question in: “So why haven’t I heard what the Wicker Men have been up to back in the States?”

The guy turned to him and gave him a piercing stare. “Mate, there’s a lot that goes on here that you don’t hear in the States.”

With that, the barman turned and took the first new order, his statement hanging in the air like a little puff

of strangeness.

And he was right, Andrews thought as he made my way back to my chair. He sat down and thoughtfully sipped at his smooth bitter.

Andrews had been in England for close to three months now, and it wasn't getting that much more familiar. Of course, he realized that being from the white-bread Midwest had something to do with it. But damn it, he thought, quaffing the brew. There *was* something elementally different here, and he couldn't put his finger on exactly what.

He shivered.

He'd come in a hot, touristy August. England had been picturesque then, a postcard. Smiling Bobbies, double-decker buses. Fresh scrubbed monuments in London.

And Cambridge—well, Cambridge had been perfect, just as he'd always imagined it would be. (Give or take a few thousand tourists, and the CamTour buses cruising the city's arteries like clots in a human bloodstream.) Punts and pretty pubs on the Cam. Darwin's house! The exquisite lawns of college courtyards. He'd even once seen Stephen Hawking steaming along in his electric wheelchair as the assistant he'd just married walked beside him.

And the University Library! A scholar's dream, packed with books and manuscripts numberless and accessible. He could accomplish far more here in four months than would be possible in four years back at the University of Kansas. Each day he'd wake early, have tea and toast and be at the nine-thirty opening of the "U.L." And he didn't have to venture outside again till the 6:45 p.m. closing, if he didn't care to. The "tea room" had coffee hour in the morning, "lunch time" in the early afternoon and "tea time" in the late afternoon. The very best and most famous scholars used it. Cripes, he'd just seen Germaine Greer in there today!

It was a scholar's paradise, and he loved it.

However, as the daylight hours shortened and autumn moved like a cold and humid specter across the fen-lands of East Anglia, instead of getting more familiar, England was getting stranger and stranger. The politeness of the people, at first delightful, seemed now to be merely a front for cold reserve and mystery; the eloquence of speaking a barrier. The buildings in their cold northern light seemed more like elaborate gravestones than monuments to architectural vitality. Cambridge, indeed, all of England, seemed skewed and slanted into some different and not entirely healthy dimension. As the skeletal branches shook in the North Sea wind that smelled of soggy East Anglia he could well imagine how the grim supernatural thoughts might have risen with the damp here over the many centuries—how tales of ghosts and fairies and other weirdness wound their way through folk literature.

There was something slanted, canted here from the straight, what-you-see-is-what-you-get in the States, he thought. Resonances and dim colors and stippling on this particular multi-leveled canvas of England that all the study in the world could never have prepared him for. The language, the knowledge the study gave the illusion that Britain was comprehensible. Not so, he realized now. It was inimitably alien, coughing up color and processed culture to lure in money, but hopelessly foreign to those who cared to stay longer.

He was hopelessly fascinated by it all, yet somehow strangling for lack of oxygen. He felt cut off and alone in a subatomic land of strangeness and charm. His trip had been priceless, and yet for the first time he eagerly anticipated returning home to the bored, somnolent faces of his students and the cheerful song of the prairie, comforting and solid and real.

In some Middle English readings on old manuscripts, he had come upon a fascinating passage: “the brownies and pixies and beasties live not just in the forest and glens, but in the pantry and the living room and in the streets.”

As a Latinist, he was well aware (from monkish writings and the grotesques in the margins of squiggling characters occasionally illuminated by real gold) that many in the medieval ages had believed that demons lived in their latrines. They believed that those smelly portals were little Hellmouths that had to be dealt with gingerly and only a certain times of the day. Andrews could see aspects of this kind of unpleasant animation all over this odd island, and he longed for the simple, plain and efficient toilets of home.

Still, there was art and mystery here....

And that was why he was here to see the Wicker Men.

Somehow, all those years ago when he had first bought their records, they had intimated this bizarre, incomprehensible and yet starglow-majestic England.

As he pondered, he drank.

Dashed out of his reverie, he realized that he’d almost finished his pint. Now the pub was half full, and people were still straggling in. Reckoning that the show was close to beginning, he went back, purchased another pint and then resettled, looking at the people around him. They were for the most part his own age. Fortysomethings, with glimmers of youth in their eyes. A few older, a few younger, perhaps, but mostly clearly there from their memories of the seventies prog-rock glory days...

And perhaps the shade in their presence of something more as well....

They all had weathered English faces—high cheekbones, ghostly pale thinning hair. Prominent foreheads.

Last month, Andrews had gone to Guy Fawkes night and watched as fireworks had smashed the sky with disquieting closeness, shedding pieces of dazzle onto the wet grass. And then: a huge bonfire had been lit, gobbling up a huge effigy of a eerie man: The Guy.

He could still remember the reflections of the flames in those eyes of the English, and the savage cheers of the children as blaze danced and cavorted. They seemed to be peering back across the ages to another time—

He was half through his second bitter when the *Clockwork Orange* version of Purcell’s “Funeral Dirge for Queen Anne” started playing from the loudspeakers.

Fifteen seconds later a voice erupted over the loudspeaker:

“Ladies and Gentlemen, from the bowers and bosom of the West Country—the Wicker Men.”

A group of four men emerged from the shadows. They all wore cloaks and floppy, conical hats, from which could be seen long spills of hair. They all carried instruments—even the drummer held his drumsticks. The keyboard player held a portable piano, which he strapped down onto the top of the synthesizer. A cable ran off from this to a box on his belt. As the others plugged in Andrews could see that indeed they all had these boxes—even the drummer’s drumsticks cabled down to one.

No sooner were these surprisingly energetic fellows strapped in than the Funeral March was swallowed by the somber tones of the keyboard, starting a declaration of the dominant theme of their fifth album, “Albion Aluminum.”

The drums launched and one by one the bass and guitar joined into the music, steadying it and launching it forward onto its sprawling, magisterial, epic, lurching way.

It was a full fifteen seconds into this before Andrews realized that he was holding his breath.

He exhaled and leaned forward, taking in the amazing wash of sound. He'd always loved the splendor of a full orchestra playing some item of timeless Bach or Mozart, Beethoven or Bartok. But somehow, this rough and smooth blend of amplified instruments, this bastard child of Benjamin Britten and Chuck Berry rattled his heart and soul to the very core.

The musicians were murkily lit and kept to the shadows as they played the ten-minute piece. Like much of the best of "progressive rock" it was a blend of hard rock, jazz, symphonic music, folk, and perhaps even other music styles not invented yet, peering in from the future. By Andrew's lights it had, like so much other music of the past thirty years, started with the Beatles with their blend of orchestra and electric guitar, their fiddling with electronics and phasing. However the mutant results were far stranger, and yet more familiar. The key instruments were the various permutations of synthesizer, organ and electronic piano, allowing the keyboardist to launch his fingers at the flick of switch, into arpeggios of different sound. True, the bass pedals were amazing, and the guitar synthesizer was able to do wondrous things—but it surely all began with the possibility of one man's talent turning into an orchestra. The mellotron—that bizarre yet aurally delicious instrument—had been launched by the Moody Blues, but then appropriated by King Crimson, perhaps the first true "progressive" group, the first "art rockers" coming into view about 1969. Then, of course, there were Procol Harum whose blend of classical music and rhythm and blues had lit up whole vistas. Then the early seventies groups like Yes, Renaissance, Pink Floyd, Gentle Giant, Camel, and, above all, Genesis with Peter Gabriel had turned much of the rock scene into a glittering Venice of musical invention and delight.

So many other wonderful groups—not just from England, but from other European countries as well. Groups like PFM and Banco from Italy. Tangerine Dream and Krafwerk from Germany. All sorts of permutations like the medieval rock of Gryphon and the Elizabethan rock of Jethro Tull.

All this incredible combustion of styles and genius! This strange interweaving of psychedelia and classics and rock was a veritable explosion of musical evolution.

Then came 1977, when the garage reclaimed rock, stripped it down to attitude held together by sneers and safety pins—and punk was born.

But before that, the Wicker Men arrived on the British scene.

When the first number ended, the audience exploded into applause and Andrews joined them.

There was a brief "Thank you" from the stage and the band launched into "Glastonbury Fog." Another of Andrews' favorites, with a wonderful acoustic heart, surrounded by fairy harpsichord frills. He sipped at his beer throughout, and, finding it empty at the end of the number, went back and got a refill.

The Wicker Men were from the heart of Cornwall, and in their music was the sea spray of the Atlantic and the heart of the Celts. If Merlin the Magician had decided to join a rock band, Andrews had always thought, then surely this was the music he would have played.

Chimes and mandolins and crumhorns sounded from the keyboards. Intricate harmonies and counterpoint underpinned delightful and unexpected melodies. The music was a compendium of styles, but the heart seemed to be an English mysticism, speaking of primordial enchantments and startling discoveries of sonics and textures and intricate movings and churnings between volume and subtlety.

After a startling and resounding finale to “The Midwives of Bath,” featuring a virtuoso bass solo that wound the throbbing theme into knots and then magic-tricked them the rope of music once more into linearity, the lights rose a bit, and Andrews could see the faces better.

He was shocked.

Despite what the bartender had said, he was unprepared for how bad the band looked. The last pictures he’d seen of them had been from almost twenty years before, and they’d not exactly been young looking then, and one of them was already balding in a Phil Collins kind of way. However, it wasn’t the aging that started him, the stringy grey hair and the wrinkles, the potbellies and the saggy faces.

No, it looked as though the members of the Wicker Men had been in some sort of accident involving acid, fire and explosives and then had been pieced back together.

That was Andrew’s first impression, anyway.

As he looked closer, as they launched into the spacier, electronic number, “Rocket to Camelot,” he saw that it was a trick of harsh light upon creases and hairlines and wrinkles—and enhanced by makeup.

It was like that cover of Jethro Tull’s first album, “Stand Up,” where Ian Anderson and cronies, all in their early twenties, donned old age makeup. Only here it was like makeup from a George Romero flick.

Day of the Living Druids, perhaps?

That the effect was mostly brought on by makeup was encouraging. The look somehow made Andrews more cognizant of his own encroaching middle age.

Still: the effect was mitigated immensely by the vitality, exuberance, mystery, reverence and exhilaration of the music.

At this point, the band did a few numbers not on their seventies recordings, music with every bit of the melodic and inventive values, and yet a little more jagged with jazz, time changes, a little harder edge. Bitterness at popular rejection? A possibility, but for all the crunching and snarling of the guitar and the snap of the drums, there was still a majestic sense of music as ... as...

Through those numbers, Andrews groped for the right term, the proper concept.

With the tinkling of synthesizer chimes in a particularly poignant tune, and then the harmonic convergence of bass and lead guitar to lead to an almost celestial gasp of awe, he realized what it was:

Transcendence.

Woven from the mists of this strange island life, its history and mystery, its mingled peoples, somehow this music manufactured a kind of spell of explanation.

It said: *There are more things in heaven and earth, Andrews, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

A rock critic friend of Andrews’ had this theory:

The Brits, he said—The Brits love music. The Brits love *allkinds* of music, from around the world, from their own islands. And when they have the talent to play instruments and sing, all they want to do is to imitate that music. But they are so odd, so peculiar, that the music comes out twisted and warped and wonderfully and inimitably their own.

This was the case with the Wicker Men, certainly, and yet there were things in the music that touched chords of the bizarre beyond even this insight.

You could climb inside the music and stand on an ethereal plane of myth and imagination made real, with twinkles of wonder and hints of scuttling night creatures in the caverns of the majesty beyond.

For an hour and half more the band wove a tapestry of sound and texture. By the ringing cymbals of the encore, Andrews was blissed out of his skull—and not just by the music. Somehow several more pints of bitter had found their way into his system.

Andrew heard a brief announcement that CDs were available at a table to one side, and then the band was gone, victims of the coming of that pumpkin-turning time in English pubs, eleven p.m. Andrews could have wished that they played for hours more. Their music was so much more splendid and resonant live than recorded.

Nonetheless, the notion of CDs for sale—albums he did not have in his collection—was a satisfactory and thrilling one. Fortunately he'd just used his ATM card to get a healthy amount of money out of the bank. British CDs tended to be expensive and he braced himself for paying a lot of money as he took the last of his beer up to the table with the sale material. He'd already discovered an incredible amount of music simply unavailable in the States and could not help but buy it, even though it generally cost about fifteen pounds per CD—over twenty two dollars apiece, in US money.

There were four CDs he wasn't familiar with available—and at only eight pounds apiece, they were a bargain.

He bought them all, along with a tee shirt. He put his name on a mailing list, too.

As he made a large buy, the fellow behind the table was very friendly to him.

"I don't suppose," said Andrews, "there's any more coming out."

"Hmm. You know, actually, the band themselves might have another CD in a case we didn't get up. Called *Equus Magister* as a matter of fact. Said that if anyone was interested, they could come up for the first fifteen minutes after the show. While you're at it, they'll probably be quite happy to sign these for you as well."

Normally, Andrews was rather shy about this sort of thing. He had to force himself to even go up to authors who were selling their books.

Now, however, emboldened by the large amount of beer swilling about in his abdomen and brain, he followed the pointing finger of the guy behind the table to a door just a few feet away.

This he opened and found a worn staircase leading up to the second floor. The only lighting was a dim low-wattage bulb hanging forlornly from the ceiling.

Andrews, gripping his recent acquisitions in one hand and his half-empty pint of bitter in the other, walked up the steps.

It was like entering C.S. Lewis' Wardrobe ... only quite a bit more worn and tackier. Faded posters of past performances, mostly ripped and patchy were tacked onto the walls. He reached the top of the stairs and he heard voices from an adjacent room.

He negotiated carefully past a table.

He took one more gulp from his bitter and then set the glass down. He took a deep breath and headed toward the open door through which the voices filtered like whispers from an alternate dimension.

He leaned in slightly, and rapped the door politely.

Inside, the band members were sitting at a table, in front of collection of opened and unopened beer cans. They were laughing amongst themselves at some joke, and, for all their exertions upon the stage, seemed not a bit tired. Towels about their necks, but they had not yet taken off their makeup. Andrews felt as though he was intruding upon an after-concert meeting of Kiss and Alice Cooper at some Golden anniversary show. They still held their instruments in their hands. Even the drummer gripped his drumstick on one hand, a beer can in the other, as he swung around to greet the visitor.

“Io, Mate,” he said, showing a grim set of teeth. “Got some stuff for us to sign then?”

The keyboardist smiled as well, showing another set of bad teeth, many missing. Andrews had noticed this during the set, but he had thought that they’d been blacked out. The rotten teeth, closer up, were very real. “Come on in, then,” he said. His name was Gabriel Dickens, Andrews remembered. “Let’s see what you’ve got here.”

“Good Lord,” said the bassist, Burt Larkin. “e’s got them bloody *all!*”

“Well, all that I don’t have at home,” said Andrews, emboldened by their friendliness. “I didn’t even know these were available.”

“Ah yes—compact disks,” said the lead guitarist, Roger Bonham, wiping beer foam from his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. “They brought us back from the grave, they did.”

The others chuckled as though with some private joke.

“Actually, I understand that there’s one that’s not down there. I mean, they told me that I could buy it up here.”

That caused a commotion and smiles all around.

“You mean *Equus*?”

“*Equus Magister*, yes.”

“You bought the other four ... maybe we should just give it to ’im,” said the bassist, the fret board of his guitar wobbling excitedly.

“No, really, that won’t be necessary,” blurted Andrews. “I mean, eight more pounds won’t make any difference...”

He caught himself. The English were funny about money. Money was something rather impolite.

Still, the Wicker Men seemed to not be too bothered by the notion of either giving away the CD—or taking the money.

“Well, if you insist.” The drummer got up and headed over to a cardboard box, still holding his drumsticks. He began to root through the box.

“Buy another in advance and we’ll tell you the story of ‘The Bloody Troll and the Frenchmen,’” laughed Gabriel Dickens. “You’re American, then?”

“Yes, that’s right ... Uhm ... a professor from the Midwest. Here at Cambridge to research.” He took a breath. “You know, it’s such a treat for me to hear you. I know you Brits get embarrassed easily, but I have to say, I’ve been a fan of yours since the seventies.”

“*You’re* the guy, then!” said Larkin, and the others started laughing so hard Andrews thought they might fall apart. All they were animated enough, up close they looked much more frail than they had on the stage.

“Actually, one of many—maybe you should tour the States.”

The others looked at each other, and the smiles momentarily faded.

“Here you go,” said the drummer, coming back and holding a CD in his hand. Inside the plastic cover was the pictograph of a horse with a rider holding a spear and a drum, with the title and the Wicker Men spelled out in runelike letters.

Andrews fished out his eight pounds and then took the CD’s.

“Have a seat!” said Dickens.

Andrews sat in the ratty chair that the man pointed at. It was covered with strips of masking tape and it wobbled, but Andrews was happy of a place to purchase. He felt a bit dizzy what with all the alcohol he’d consumed. There was a bit of sour smell to the room, which didn’t help, but his enthusiasm drowned all that quite well enough. Nonetheless, he could help but feel as though he’d just dropped down a hobbit hole, and its odd occupants with their lilting West Country accents were welcoming him with decidedly peculiar tea and crumpets.

“ere you go. P’raps you’d like a beer.”

A large can of Ruddles County ale was clopped down in front of him. He really had had enough, but figured it would be impolite and impolitic to refuse.

“Yes, and if you’ll just sign these, I’d really, really appreciate it.” He tendered the CDs, and accompanied them with his Bic ballpoint. “The one I just bought too, please.”

“Right. Seeing as you’re the only one that’s accepted our invitation, I suppose we can take some pains ’ere,” said Dickens, starting the process.

An uneasy silence fell on the assemblage.

Andrews popped the top of his Ruddles, lifted the heavy can and drank as two of the band members grinned at him approvingly, lifting their own drinks.

When he could drink no more, he put the can down. What to talk to them about? *Whowere* they? He was terrible at making small talk, awful at cracking jokes. He’d already burst out with what a fan he was ... what could he add to that.

Ah ... the old failsafe ... a question.

“Erm ... Do you tour much?”

It seemed extremely rude to ask if they had day jobs. Surely they didn’t make enough from touring small clubs like this one and releasing self-issued CDs. Studio time, instruments, travel expenses: all that must eat all that up. It seemed that it all must be a labor of love ... and it must hurt terribly that they didn’t

receive proper compensation for their remarkable mystic accomplishments.

“Ah...” said the drummer, accepting the first CD and signing it with a pen from his pocket with his right hand. Still he clung to his drumsticks with the other. “Well, I suppose you could say we tour when the spirit moves us ... And that would be about this time every year.”

“Aye, the two weeks before the winter solstice,” said the lead guitarist, “With the ghosts of Christmas in the air!”

“Aye. That seems about the right time for us,” said the bassist, taking out the sleeve from one of the CDs and affixing his signature to it. “The moonlight wears well.”

“And the drink tastes right.”

“It’s really lovely—incredible music that you make, I must say. What would you say is your greatest inspiration?” asked Andrews.

“Well, it certainly isn’t pound notes!” said the bassist.

That brought about laughter all around.

The keyboardist turned. His seemingly half-ruined face took on a thoughtful cast. He took a sip from his can of Ruddles and he held the small keyboard case close to him, like some sort of talisman.

“Aye. The moon and the stars, the sand and the sea. The roots and the hops, the sun and the freeze of ice rind on the leaves at the edge of the forest, and the shivering hare there. These islands have known wave after wave of peoples and souls and languages, and all of them had their musics and their magics. And then technology invaded ... And the musics and magics made that its own. But you know, Master Andrews, it is said that there were beings here before the first humans, beings of moondust and starlight. And like the Celts, the Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes, the Vikings, the Romans and the Normans, they mixed their blood and dreams and power with each succeeding wave—and yet remained very much their own selves. Perhaps that is who we hear then, whispering in the brooks and pubs of our homes ... singing in the telephone wires the old songs to the beat of electricity and internal combustion machines ... Perhaps we only play the music that these creatures of Britannica whisper in our ears.”

There was total silence for a moment, except for the scratching of pens as the others signed the progression of CD sleeves.

Andrews felt again that he was the presence of strangeness beyond telling.

“And then again,” said the bassist. “Perhaps we’re just the progressive Spinal Tap and don’t know when to throw in the fuckin’ towel!”

Again laughter, and Andrews felt relief.

“Rock and roll imbeciles, heh?” said Gabriel. “Well at least we make a joyful noise going out.”

He held up his can of beer and saluted the assembly. They all dropped their signing pens and saluted as well.

Andrews picked up his own beer. He was so shaken, he found himself finishing it.

He waited patiently as the others scratched out their names up on the CD sleeves. Finally, when they were finished, he put them all in a stack.

“And if you’d care to stay in touch,” said Dickens. “There’s an address.”

“You’ll let me know if a new CD’s coming out?”

“We’ll let you know *when* the new CD’s coming!” barked the bassist, still gay.

Andrews blushed with embarrassment. “Yes, of course there’s going to be one...” He tucked the CDs under his arm and stood. “Thanks very much and it’s really been great to meet you.”

Farewells were made as the others returned to their beers and discussion. Andrews exited as Dickens lifted a wrinkled hand and gave him a nice toodle-loo.

“And could you just close the door behind you as you depart?” said Dickens. “There’s a good fellow.”

Andrews did so. Afterward, he had to stand for a moment in the hallway to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

In the room behind him, one of the men started singing. Andrews recognized the words. “Where the bee sucks, there suck I.” Shakespeare. “Midsummer’s Night’s Dream.” Puck’s speech.

Andrews shook his head.

When he got back to the Midwest, the first thing he was going to do was going to Harry’s Diner. He was going to get an American hamburger (he was avoiding the ’burgers here not just because they were bad—but because of something called “mad cow disease” that was affecting British cattle) real American fries, a vanilla milkshake. He was going to look out to the vast panorama of prairies and wallow in the normality like a sweet lukewarm bubble bath.

There were a few stragglers left in the pub, and a guy was going around picking up empty glasses, stacking them one upon another and then carrying them to behind the bar.

Just at the exit, Andrews thought to stop for a moment to examine his prizes before he took his bike ride back home.

The CDs looked wonderful, with vibrant, colorful artwork. No Roger Deans, of course, but it was the thought that counted. Across these were scratched signatures. At this point, he really couldn’t tell which was which ... But it really didn’t make any difference. He’d gotten that other CD.

Or had he?

He didn’t see *Equus Magister* right off hand.

Hastily, he shuffled through the lot.

No, not here.

Damn. He must have left it back upstairs!

He looked back toward the dark stairway that he’d just come down. How embarrassing!

However, he couldn’t just leave it there. He wanted the CD desperately. Perhaps, in a more sober state, he would not have had the nerve to go back up and intrude upon the group. However, emboldened by drink, and desperate for the album (unique now, after all, because of the signature and the memory) he tilted toward the stairs once more.

After all, they *had* been friendly enough, he thought as he started padding up the dark and dreary stairs. They'd understand and in fact be alarmed themselves that he'd left it behind.

"Look 'ere!" he could see them saying as they popped another bitter can top. "The American's left behind his CD."

"Oh dearie me! Absent minded lot, aren't they?"

"Perhaps we should bring it down to him."

Yes, that was what they'd say, he thought as he reached the landing. Only he'd save the time for them.

Even though he thought he'd closed it, he saw that the door was open. Soft light seeped out, and there was that sour smell again, accompanied by strands of tobacco smoke drifting out.

Soft voices whispered and cans clinked.

Relieved that the door was open (a sign of welcome, surely) he stepped forward and entered the room.

"Pardon me," he said. "But I left—"

He stopped, stunned by the sight before him.

Three of the members of the band were sprawled upon the couch, like abandoned mannequins. No, they looked like corpses, mummified, dried with strips of skin sticking out wily-nilly. The fourth was slowly sinking to the floor, slipping down from a bass guitar suspended in the air, gleaming as though in starlight. From the base of the guitar, legs like those of a hairy frog had grown, with webbed feet. From the frets now extended wings of fairy gauze. Moth-like antennae rose up from the tip, with big shining, alien eyes, glowing with phosphorescent intelligent light.

Behind this creature of pixie technology stood the other instruments. The drumsticks, having grown butterfly wings and lemur eyes fluttered above like a moth about a candle. Long spider-legs had grown from the keyboard, and spangled eyestalks wobbled as they turned to look at Andrews, eyelids heavy with a diamond dew; and finally, the lead-guitar, batwings aflap, a stern but not unkind elfish face turning around eyes twinkling as though peering in from a different dimension.

For a moment a twitch of consternation trembled through this arbor of alien, fairy vines. Tinkling communications were made and for a moment Andrews felt a terrible sense of danger.

But then green leaves seemed to sprout from the lead guitar, studded with flowers.

They said something, and it sounded like a waterfall of cascading musics, dancing in a rainbowed glade: not words at all.

A tendril wrapped around a CD, lifted it. It seemed to float in the air, borne by moonbeams and mist, then hung suspended in the air before the astonished professor.

The voice sounded like a mellotron attempting to speak.

"Keep your gob shut, eh?" it seemed to say.

"Yes," said Andrews. "Yes, of course."

He grabbed the CD, turned and hastened back down the stairs.

Fairy music twinkled and glittered and laughed behind him like the voices of the spheres, removing their vestments of moldy and rich earth.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Xaxrkling of J. Arnold Boysenberry

He was in a basement lavatory of a San Francisco club called Dive 69 when the alien first made contact.

“J. Arnold Boysenberry,” said the alien, disguised as an American Indian Medicine stick. “We have chosen you to spread the word.”

Jack Boysenberry zipped up quickly and self-consciously and looked around at the sound of the gnarly, piping voice. The smart drugs had just kicked in, and he felt a little buzzing in his head, a razor-edge on his perceptions, but for the life of him he couldn’t tell where the voice was coming from. The gritty men’s toilet—black and white tile scuffed, naked fifteen watt light bulbs dim, commodes overflowing, urinals caked with crud and pubic hairs—was empty, he thought, except for him.

Him and the Medicine Stick. He’d put it down on the solitary sink beside the urinal to use both hands to deal with his business. It was a long piece of driftwood with an eagle’s talon on one end. Feathers covered its shaft; and at the top was the strangest figurine—a monstrosity that appeared to be the American Indian equivalent of a medieval Harlequin.

Sequined eyes that seemed to gleam of their own accord.

Or was that the effect of the Piracetam?

Jack Boysenberry shrugged and went to wash his hands.

As the cold water trickled over his fingers (how interesting the sensation of *chill* was with his senses faintly stepped up and tingling) he wondered if there’d been something odd in the IQ Juice they’d been servicing at the bar. Whatever, he wanted to get out of this men’s toilet—it smelled like the sewage and fungus and subterranean damp was winning its war with the disinfectant, and it was really time to get back to Ted and Janet’s pleasant townhouse apartment suite in Haight-Ashbury and away from this peculiar club scene.

“Jack! Jack? Aren’t you listening to the cosmos, Jack? Aren’t you properly plugged?”

“What ... Who’s that?”

He looked around, shivers seeming to wave over him with static echoes. When he saw no one, as before, the electric needles prodded again.

“Me, Jack Boysenberry. Look down!”

Jack looked down.

“Here I am.” The dried gourd covered with khaki cloth moved. Actually, it was the rouged mouth that was moving—as though in mockery of speech rather than an actually properly synched statement.

“Jesus *Christ!*” said Jack, panicking. “I’m loosing control. What’d they give me ... acid?”

“Calm down, calm down, Jack—this is actually *realer* than your normal reality. A virtuous brand of

virtuality. You're just able to perceive more than before. And don't worry ... there was no LSD in the punch." The pronounced eyebrows of the Indian Harlequin scrunched up and the glittery jewel eyes seemed to roll in their dry sockets. "Communication at this level is simply facilitated tremendously. Now lean closer, in case there are listening devices. We must talk very seriously about the fate of the Earth."

Jack looked down with astonishment at the Medicine Stick. He found himself transfixed, unable to move. The eyes glowed hypnotically, seeming to reach up and grab him by the brain stem. He found himself reaching down and grasping the stick and raising it until he was almost nose to snout with it.

It smelled musky, like wet animal fur.

"That's right, Jack. Now let's get down to brass tacks."

Like a stainless steel tongue, a hypodermic needle flicked out from the mouth and jabbed him in his nose.

* * * *

Jack Boysenberry was a Writer/Producer for the popular network space travel series, *Star Wagon*. He'd come up from Los Angeles to spend the long Memorial Day weekend with some friends in San Francisco. He'd read about the Smart Drug scene in the Los Angeles *Times* Magazine. It had intrigued him then, and so he'd decided that he should visit one of the special parties thrown by what his San Francisco friends called "smuggies"—flipped out young people, doing a cyberpunk kind of song, loading up on Energy Elicksures bubbling with choline and other odd vitamins and minerals aimed at boosting gray matter activity. These drinks—augmented by certain prescription drugs such as Hydergine, Piracetam, vasopressin, vincamine and Dilantin—were supposed to increase intelligence, creativity, perception and make the cerebellum a hopping kind of place for ideas and other keen neuro-nuke stuff.

Just the sort of thing a television producer needed, especially if he worked on a show like *Star Wagon*.

Not that *Star Wagon* was particularly cutting edge in the creative science fiction department. In fact, it was pretty much 1950s *Astounding* magazine stuff, decked out in contemporary techie jargon. It was more the crush of work, the crunch of egos and the raging political intermeshes that demanded the extra juice. Jack took lots of vitamins, he tried to fit in as much exercise as possible in three times a week and he didn't smoke. Nonetheless, he'd been finding the stress such that he'd definitely felt for something more than a vacation, something that would boost him every day. Long ago he'd learned the cocaine wasn't the answer, even before coke was declared addictive. That had been before his television career as well. So he couldn't turn to illegal things.

So why not try something perfectly legal? If it wasn't necessarily scientifically sound, then it seemed experientially so? Lots of testimonial success. At the very worst, maybe the placebo effect would carry him through the season. Anything to get through this season, the Season Coughed up from Hades Filthy Toenails, as Mary Lou called it. And Mary Lou liked *Star Wagon* much better than he ever had or ever would.

Once he was up in the Bay Area, his friends had nixed a trip to the Dive 69 themselves. But a friend of a friend knew about the scene and agreed to take Jack along. "Research trip" was the phrase bandied about, but Jack had enough enthusiasm that it was clear he was really interested. The "friend of a friend"—a clothing designer who occasionally did some work for Amoeba, dropped him off, did a little business talk with a couple of people and then took off for *Mad Dog in the Fog* for a couple of beers, promising to pick Jack up later.

That was okey-doke with Jack.

If nothing else, the scene here was good for a couple of alien ideas to pitch back on the show.

Dive 69 was basement chic, blaring with synthesizer beat from aurally correct audio speakers on the wall. Computer nerds dressed up in ludicrous outfits mixed with beatnik geeks, trying to be as sullenly obnoxious as possible in the psychedelic spray of lights, pulsing sounds and jarring growls of the blenders at the bar. There was a chemical smell to the air, but it wasn't the comforting smoky smell of the sixties, nor the sedative alcohol smell of the seventies nor the exiting money smell of the eighties. It was the smell of the nineties, and it was neither classifiable nor particularly pleasant.

Jack, with his LA-trained casual manner and cool ways, made friends immediately with the bartender, tipped the hairy wall-eyed fellow well and received an excellent introduction to the array of drugs available, along with, for a mere twenty dollars, the new updated paperback edition of *Smart Drugs and Nutrients* by John Morgenthaler and Ward Dean. All plus, of course, all the drinks and drugs that he could cram down his maw.

Somehow about two hours into the scene, when all the drugs had kicked into gear in their subtle ways it all started to make sense. The lights, the sounds, the smells—

It was all just a bizarre excuse for a ritualistic party.

Jack wasn't sure how much all of this was going to help him on *Star Wagon*. In truth, a dose of choline might just make a tantrum by one of the Executive Producers or stars much harder to take. Maybe while he was writing a script, or developing an idea—maybe while he was brainstorming. He'd certainly give it a try ... no harm, really, and anything might help ... But it was, he'd decided, hardly the revelation he'd been half-hoping for, the *catharsis* he'd been seeking.

Oh well, a party was a party.

He'd hang out here a while, walk to a bar, have a beer, and then take a cab back to the house ... Not a loss at all, but an *experience*. He liked San Francisco. It was a world away from LA with its affable natives and the rolling fog and the excellent food and nightlife. This was good for him, just getting away. Maybe he should try to get up here more often. He certainly had the money to now. Money, but not a whole lot of time to enjoy it, that was the problem. In the dim past, he'd had the crazy idea that writing for television was simply writing scripts. Which was like saying that marriage was simply making love.

That was when he went down to the toilet for his pee.

* * * *

He fell back onto his butt on the filthy bathroom tile.

He laid there for a moment, disoriented. His nose felt like it had been stung by a bee. His head swirled as though in the vortex of a kaleidoscope. His nose stung, but it was overwhelmed by a synethesia. Smell became sight and disjointed, cracked, dissipated into brackish, salty chemical taste.

Something hard was sitting in his hand. His head lolled sideways.

The Medicine stick lay in hand. Its far end was glowing. He lifted it and a beam of iridescence sprayed forth, bashing into a graffitied toilet stall door. It swung open, giving way into a rainbow splash of streamered, rotating light and tunneled back into the wall.

A form separated from the color.

It flopped along, a paramecium supported by stalks. Cilia flickered and whipped.

"J. Arnold Boysenberry," it said in an accent that sounded like a clam attempting to imitate a Frenchman's attempt at the Queen's English. "You need not fear."

“No?” said Arnold. If there was any fear in him, he certainly couldn’t feel it. His nerves felt lined with psychedelic silk. Muffled and slightly shuffled.

“You are a Chosen one.”

“Oh?”

“Prepare to be anointed.”

“Anointed?”

“Xarxled, actually, it just doesn’t translate very well, I’m afraid.”

The alien crawled forward, the galaxies in the wobbling tunnel behind it gleaming and glazing.

* * * *

The meeting was going badly.

“What’s wrong with you people?” the executive producer moaned, flopping onto his couch. He picked up a paddle and started to bang the rubber ball attached to the length of rubber band as he chomped away on a wad of bubble gum. “All I’m asking is to come up with another good story line involving the Pelican People.”

Arnie Boysenberry looked up wearily from his pile of notes. There was a list of about twenty story ideas he’d brainstormed before bed last night. None of them were quite up to snuff in William Minton’s opinion. None of the other story editors or producers had any ideas that came up to snuff, either. *Star Wagon* had been chewing up pitches for two solid months, with no sales, and there were only two scripts ready for production and five in various stages of preparation.

“Uh—can’t we work with any you *sort* of liked, Bill?”

The Executive Producer blinked. He stopped the back and forth paddling of the rubber ball and stood up. “What? I can’t believe you said that, Arnie! *Star Wagon* only has *quality* scripts. And only from *quality* ideas do quality scripts emerge.” He shook his head sorrowfully. “Clearly I’m going to have to do a little thinking on my own—and I’m really going to resent it because it’s not like I’m overflowing with time.”

That certainly was true. The company already had other projects they wanted him to develop—and for more money as well. What this meant was that Bill Minton was going to be even more a bitch to work with.

The others looked totally defeated. They looked as though they just wanted to file out, get into their Ferraris and Jaguars and start the long slog home. Sorrow was all over their faces—but nothing was forthcoming.

“Okay, okay ... we’ll talk about this tomorrow ... first thing. Nine a.m. And I want some ideas, damn it!” Minton was grinning, but it was a nasty grin. An Or Else kind of grin.

Arnie Boysenberry got up, left the office and moped down the steps to his office on the next floor. His assistant was already gone, and there was a stack of messages for him. He ignored them and went into his office.

He sat down in his chair and put his head in his hands. He sighed. The ideas had been great ones, all twenty of them. He’d never had a brainstorming session like that one before—and it was all because of

the drugs he'd been taking, because of the alien contact.

Inspired.

That was what he'd been—stone inspired.

“Inspire” of course meant to receive the breath of God. Well, it hadn't been God who'd given him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation—but it might as well have been for the way his brain had been blown out into a scattering of psychedelic cascading droplets.

He had hoped that Minton would see the genius of these plots, but clearly he hadn't. Which meant, unfortunately, that he'd have to go to Plan B.

After snorting a little of the brain-booster he'd brought back from San Francisco, he called Minton on his private line.

“Bill,” he said, marinating the rule of fake TV casualness. “I think I've got a couple more ideas you'll like.”

“Shoot!”

“Can you stop by my office? They come with some things I did on my computer.”

“Graphics?”

“Yes. Graphics.”

“Good. I like graphics. I'll stop by on my way out.”

“On the way out” was a good hour distant, but Boysenberry waited patiently. Just as well. The building would pretty much be empty by that time.

Finally, Minton showed, strolling in as he shrugged on a leather jacket.

“Just plain vanilla, please, Boysenberry.” It was an old tired joke—but then, Minton was hardly in sitcom, was he?

It meant: get to it, guy.

“Something I want to show you, Bill. Something I brought back from San Francisco that really inspired me and I think you'll find it will work for you, too.”

“Huh? You told me you had a couple of good ideas.”

“I do, I do. Just come here for a moment. Five seconds. Five seconds of your time, that's all I ask.”

Minton, clearly faintly intrigued, shrugged his leather epaulets and stuck his hands into his pockets. “Okay doke. You got five seconds.”

Boysenberry beckoned him back to the closet. He opened the door, reached in and pulled out the medicine stick.

“What the hell is that?” said Minton.

“The future,” said Boysenberry.

Before the executive producer could do a thing, the hypodermic needle was buried in his neck.

* * * *

“First things first,” said Minton, beaming. “I want you all to congratulate Arnie here. He’ll be our new Co-Executive Producer.”

The surprise registered immediately on the faces of the others. This was unprecedented. Nobody got promoted until the end of the work season when contracts were renegotiated.

And Arnie Boysenberry?

The buzz around the office—in fact, any office that Boysenberry worked in—was that he was a hell of a writer, but a hellish producer. That he was the living embodiment of the Peter Principle—a man who had been elevated to a position just past his level of competence. Boysenberry could hack out the scripts, all right, and he could work with people okay—but when it came to actually doing the other kinds of stuff necessary to production sorts—back-stabbing, political power plays, lying, casting—he just didn’t have the chops.

And Co-Executive Producer? He’d just leapt over the next rung past regular producer, Supervising Producer.

What the hell was going on, was what was in the staff’s faces.

“You’re probably asking yourself, what the hell is going on?” said Bill Minton, beaming. “I’ll tell you what is going on. You guys know the problems with been having with getting the quality ideas for WAG, right?”

Did they know? Of course they knew. But it wasn’t a problem with *ideas*, so much as it was a problem with the Executive Producer’s *sattitude* toward ideas. That was to say, they were getting ideas all right, ideas that were perfectly workable, many of which would actually result in shows superior to the usual drone produced by *Star Wagon*. The problem was that one of the ways Bill Minton kept the show under his control was by staying in charge in every single facet—and by being so difficult.

Yes, was the silent reply from the staff to the previous question.

Minton stepped over and clapped a hand onto his new co-executive producer’s shoulder.

“Well, my good friend Arnie here has broken through that particular block. Just in the meeting we had yesterday we developed five solid storylines. Count ’em. Five. Copies are right on the desk over there.”

The staff eyed the contents of the desk as though they were coiled rattlesnakes.

“Treatments, folks. Detailed treatments—beat-by-beat action, even dialogue. Each of you take one and do a first draft teleplay, keeping within the parameters of the outline. Do you understand?”

The staff clearly hadn’t gotten past the fact that Arnie was now Co-Freaking-Executive Producer. Having five detailed beat sheets was even more astonishing—perhaps even beyond their grasp.

“Good,” said Bill Minton. He grabbed up the pile and distributed them to the rank and file. “Now get thee to thy offices and write thy tiny brains out!”

He grinned as the writers shuffled eyed, eyeing Arnie as though he were Judas Iscariot in a new suit flipping a silver coin.

When they were gone, Bill Minton turned to J. Arnold Boysenberry. He clapped him on the back. “Think they can handle it, Arnie?”

Arnie nodded. “There will doubtless be some rewriting necessary. But they can all do scripts. That’s why they’re here.”

Bill Minton nodded. He went to a closet, opened it and pulled out the medicine stick.

“Do you know how many people on Earth watch *Star Wagon*, Arnie?”

“Fifty million?”

“Closer to a hundred million, chum. A hundred million of the best and brightest.” Minton touched the medicine stick. “What better way for communication from another planet, another race, eh?” The transcendence tunnel began to vortex open. “Not your flying saucer in front of the White House, but a slow preparation for contact from an intergalactic race. It makes you wonder—how long has this been going on? Has science fiction itself been the result of this kind of incredible medicine stick therapy?” He grinned and looked at the stick as though it was his new god.

Minton was high as a kite. Spaced out. On Beyond.

Arnie could tell because he was just as high.

“Think about it—what a brilliant master plan for the gradual assimilation of truths about the universe. Preparation for a new age, Boysenberry. And to think that we had something to do with it—we are bearers of the News. Why it’s a grave and important thing, J. Arnold Boysenberry.”

Arnie could only nod, he was so fascinated with the sparkling colors and the whirling spectromatics.

“And not just through storyline, but a massive subliminal hypnotic pattern transfusing each *Star Wagon* presentation. These aliens—they certainly are brilliant.”

“They certainly are, Bill.”

They could see the creature coming through the tunnel now, crawling, undulating.

“Enlightened beings who have come to enlighten us, Arnie. And at such a low, low cost.” He gave Arnie a significant look. “You *did* get what they asked for?”

“Yes. In the closet.”

“From where?”

“South Central.”

“Good. Get it.”

Arnie went to the closet, opened it. In the closet was a cloth gunny sack, and in the gunny sack was an illegal Mexican immigrant, smuggled in last night, doped to the gills and still out. Arnie pulled the man from the closet, unwrapped the sack and put him in front of the tunnel.

Almost immediately, a set of tentacles unfurled, wrapped around the man. Eyes opened just for a moment, horror flashing—and then the man was dragged into the tunnel, and the sound of sucking and gnashing and a muffled scream abruptly shut off was heard.

“Yes, Arnie. When things get underway and we can operate a little more above board, as it were, I know some studio executives who will have meetings with our tunnel friend here.” He chuckled. “Ah, what brave new universe!” said Bill Minton, nodding.

“Yes,” said J. Arnold Boysenberry.

Although it seemed pretty much like business as usual to him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Cam Shaft

I’ve been in England a little while now, looking for mysteries and enigmas and freaky stuff and trying to have a vacation as well, and I guess the main mystery I’ve found so far is how come more of these people don’t leave this stupid country. I mean, they speak English (well, sort of) and they could do all right in America if they worked hard, and if they didn’t want to go to America they could go to some other okay country. Why they stick it out here is beyond me, I guess. It’s a dark, dreary, gloomy *lame* place.

Besides, it’s full of vampires.

Especially in Cambridge.

* * * *

So there I am at Heathrow, in a long line at seven thirty in the morning, passport in one hand and my dick in the other, waiting. Shit, they do like to wait here in this stupid country. “Queuing” they call it as in IQ and it certainly is low. Nearby, Brits returning to “Blighty” just breeze on through, carrying their drugs and duty free booze, tra la la, no sweat, and we third-raters sit in line to get permission to enter this bizarre, trampled, squalid little dirt lump the Atlantic couldn’t stomach. And Flowers is prattling on about how “charming” the place is and how enthusiastic she is to be here. Charming. Pah. It’s cold and gloomy outside with a brittle wind whipping Cadbury wrappers onto the runway. There’s the smell of rancid pork meat from a breakfast bar along with disinfectant from the bathrooms and the air is still and humid and warm as a Mexican dungeon.

A pasty-faced guy looks up at me from a chair and asks me what I’m doing here in England, and I’m wondering that myself. It’s certainly not to get myself infected with bloodsucker spit and live an eternal life listening to BBC1 Radio.

“Vacation,” I said.

“And how long will you be in Great Britain?” asks the jerk, his nostrils quivering as though something was distasteful about the smell of my passport.

“A month.”

“I see. And where do you intend to stay?”

“Cambridge.”

“Ah.”

It’s funny how the Brits can draw about a paragraph’s worth of meaning from one monosyllable. Flowers

makes me watch some of the TV imports she so dearly loves, so I can pretty much scope out the irony. What this little bastard was really saying was a condescending “Oh dear, another Yank come over to desecrate this royal throne of kings, this sceptered isle ... This other Eden ... This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England—the filthy rotter.”

He looked me over. Maybe it was the ponytail he didn’t like, or the jeans and checked jacket, the mustache and the shades. I don’t know what the problem was ... I gave my pits Right Guard sprays, right after Flowers and I re-enlisted in the Mile High Club, British Airways branch. People do tell me I look like a drug dealer sometimes. Hell, I’m no damned dealer ... Just a good customer.

“And what, sir, is your occupation?” he asks.

“Journalist.”

“Ah.” Meaning, *Yeah. Right.* “Might I see some proof of your ability your financial means to sustain this trip.”

“Oh, that’s *my* job!” blurted my beloved girlfriend. Flowers stepped over and shoved a thick wad of five hundred dollar traveler’s checks along with her ample cleavage. The guy raised an eyebrow and not much else, which made me positive that I’d met my first British gay. Take it from me, Flowers Brown didn’t get short changed in looks from the DNA Department of Sexuality.

“Yes, and I’ve got bills ... and a Visa card.”

“Right. Thanks.” Brit speech has more clips than a barbershop. He took the customs slip I’d signed, promising that I wasn’t trying to import fruit or democracy to Britain. “If you’ll just head through customs.”

And I swear the rube must have fingered a switch on the underside of his booth, because as soon as we rolled our luggage through customs some British military sort who looked like he had epaulets on his privates searched our luggage thoroughly.

“Ah yes, then,” says Colonel Blimp. “What are these then?” pulling out a box of Trojans. I knew he knew, but he opened them up anyway, looking for cocaine or something.

Flowers shot me a nasty look. “Jack!”

“Hell, sweetheart. I think they need them badly over here. Thought I’d make a contribution to the Commonweal, ya know?”

She examined the box. “Oh yeah.” She says in her Texas drawl. “Big size. They can’t be for you, can they?”

* * * *

I guess that wasn’t exactly a great sendoff for our British Trek, but then I wasn’t expecting much. I didn’t want to come here anyway. That was all Flowers. But like she said, she had the money and we’d gone on a Caribbean cruise last year, and the boss back at the *Galaxy* told me in no certain terms I should take a vacation.

“You’re burning yourself out, Jack. We need *you* here, not some hollow-eyed zombie.”

Something wrong with my work?

“Fact checking sucks. Grammar and punctuation take two copy editors.... Hell no, same as usual, Jack.”

Tap of fingers on my pile of yellowing past issues of our weekly rag. “It’s your researching and your ideas.” He flips through a pile of my copy. Dead Baby Needs a Family.... Psychic Hitchhiker Takes a Truck Trip to the Hereafter.... Pin Cushion Man Gets Stuck on First Date...” Tsk tsk. “Old hat. No vitality.” Puff of cigar smoke into my face. “I know you love your work, but take it from me, Jack. You need to fill up the well.”

When you’re one of the prime hacks in Orlando Florida for the *American Galaxy*, the premier weirdo rag on the supermarket stacks, and you’re pulling down some decent money for your stories, you pretty much have to toe the line in terms of editorial dictates. What I wasn’t telling my editor was that my stuff was getting kind of tired because I busy moonlighting on my own personal project.

Hell, though, I think. I’ve got one of those cute little Compaq four-pounders. I can whack out some pages on my time off, wherever it was. Flowers was overjoyed of course and immediately insisted on a trip to England.

And so here we were, on our way to Cambridge. Why Cambridge? Simple. That was where the UK *Blake’s 7* Fan Club was based and where a convention was imminent.

Blake’s 7? Sort of a 1970s Brit *Star Trek* meets Robin Hood with some cheesy special effects and class-consciousness in space.

Me, I prefer *Star Trek* in its various incarnations. You watch it, you take a snooze, you wake up—you can pretty much figure out what’s up. Very soothing.

But vampires, Jack. You mentioned vampires...

Yeah, well, like I say, I wasn’t real thrilled with being in England. You know that feeling you get when you go into a Salvation Army Thrift shop and there are some a few nice things there, but the rest is kind of ragged and rumpled and has this sour smell? Add some old architecture, fish and chips, tea and lots of discomfort, you’ve got England. The only thing that gave me a brief jolt of joy was the Brit tabloids, which make the *American Galaxy* look like the *New York Times*. Favorite headline comes from the *Sport*: Above a picture of some blond Diana Dors reincarnation, “British Boobs Are Best.”

Believe me, in Britain, there are more Boobs than those on the Babes.

* * * *

“Good evening,” said the tall gentleman with an East European accent and reddish eyes. “Welcome to the Cambridge Branch of the *Blake’s 7* fan club.”

Flowers looked as though she was going to faint with excitement. She clamped onto the guy’s hands and enthused in West Texas Obsequious. “You must be Doctor Jacob Alucard! We’ve corresponded! I’m Flowers Brown, from the United States, and this is my boyfriend Jack Dillon. We’re here for that convention you’re throwing in a couple of weeks. Figured we’d come here early to Cambridge, leave late, and soak up some culture. Jack, this is the guy I’ve been telling you about!”

The Doctor managed to extract his hand from Flowers’ possessive clutches and extend it politely my way.

The hand was long, with narrow, faintly curving fingers. Very long, pointy fingernails too. I put my paw out, shook that hand. The grip was surprisingly strong and assertive.

“Hey, Doc,” I said, smiling.

“Welcome to Cambridge, Mr. Dillon. I hope that you find what you’re looking for here.”

This Alucard guy was old but damned impressive. He had this real strong aquiline face, with a high bridge of a thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils. Man, talk about domed foreheads. This guy had the Houston dome of foreheads. Hair grew scantily round the temple, but profusely elsewhere. Big eyebrows. Awesome eyebrows, you know ... the sort of Tom Cruise Neanderthals that almost connect. The mouth, as much as I could make out, was fixed and kind of mean. His face was flushed with a ruddy health you don't see much in old timers ... but his ears were pale, and pointed at the top. The chin was broad and strong, and the cheeks firm though thin. He was dressed in a dark suit and a red tie and I wondered what the hell he was doing mixed up in a TV fan club.

"Thanks. Looking for some R and R, myself." I looked around him, noticing that some of the frumpy-looking housewife fans or four-eyed computer nerds with tousled hair were holding drinks in their hands. "Say, there wouldn't be a bar nearby, would there?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there's one right down the corridor," said the Doctor, rolling his Rs delicately.

"Hey babe," I said to Flowers. "You want a drink?"

"Yes! A glass of wine be would nice, Jack." She gestured toward our host. "How about you, Doctor? Would you like a glass of wine?"

"I don't drink.... wine," said the Doctor, eyes flashing with amusement. "However, please help yourself to whatever libation you find nearby." His smile got a little larger and I noticed how white and healthy his teeth were, how faintly prominent his incisors were, like a wolf baring its teeth. Looked like this Hollywood agent I used to have.

"Thanks." I liked the fact he didn't have an English accent. I was getting plenty sick of those by now. I'd thought that Flowers' insistence that I watch tapes of *The Forsythe Saga* and *Masterpiece Theater* would accustom me to the things. No way. Unless you're listening to a BBC announcer, it's all coming at you way too fast. I figured out pretty quick that Brit accents weren't like American. We've got equal opportunity accents. In Limeyland, they go around sniffing at each other's accents, like dogs sniffing each other's assholes.

I was feeling grateful and suddenly curious about this guy. He was neat, elegant and somewhat apart not only from the scruffy crowd here not only in intelligence but demeanor. He had a capitalist's sparkle to his eye, not the usual tea-steamed socialist's dullness I was seeing too much over here.

"Say, Doc. What's your specialty, anyway?" I asked.

He seemed surprised but not unhappy to steer the subject away from Club Business or Video Sci-Fi.

"DNA, actually. I'm a Professor here, but my principal work is in the Hematology Labs in the middle of town. We've involved in some exciting breakthrough work there." He nodded thoughtfully. "Blood, after all, is the life."

Where had I heard that line from before, I thought. Ah yes. Some 1950 monster flick. Exciting breakthrough work. Yeah. I used that all the time when I wrote up some kind of science story for the *Galaxy*. You know, like exciting breakthrough work in UFO contact. Exciting breakthrough work in Elvis DNA samples. I was thinking I should cultivate this guy—might milk him for some interesting ideas for stories.

"Say, you know, Flowers here is the big *Blake's 7* fan. I'm interested in everything, though. Maybe we could get together sometime and I can ask you about blood."

“Blood? It is my life’s work,” said Doctor Alucard. He examined his watch. “Ah. I see it is time to convene to the meeting. Mr. Dillon, if you would care to procure your drinks, by all means do so, and don’t worry about interrupting the meeting. There are always stragglers. Besides, it is a very informal affair, and we are mostly discussing details of the upcoming conference.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

“Don’t be *too* long, hon,” said Flowers, kissing my ear and giving me a gust of Liz Taylor’s Passion. “And don’t forget my wine.”

“Sure. Tell you what.” I stuck my hand into my pocket. It was heavy with British pound coins and there was a thick wad of bills, all courtesy of Flowers. “I’ll get you two glasses.”

She didn’t seem to hear, though. She was engulfed again in fascination with the regal looking guy calling the meeting to order. All seemed damned civilized, too: I’d expected to come seeing people dressed up in dreary versions of the costumes from the show, like some Trekkie con. They didn’t even have posters of the characters pasted all over the place.

The room was a hotel function room, with reddish carpeting, and they probably got it free in return for a guaranteed consumption of booze. Or maybe Doc Alucard knew the manager. I don’t know. I was gonna contribute to the former, if that was the case.

I’ll give this to the Brits. They got some good digs to drink in. We were at the Central Holiday Inn (thank God—an island of Americana to cling to) and I’d already been checking out the bars. There’s a pub problem of pulling in the carpet promptly at 11:00 p.m.—started during World War I, so munitions workers wouldn’t drop the bombs they were working on the next morning—but being at a hotel, I could always go down to the private bar, open till a more reasonable two a.m. Anyway, this hotel had a nice bar, dark and clean, with a good, friendly crowd doing what the Brits do best: Drink.

I hopped onto a bar stool shot my cuffs, and was feeling better just from the fumes. Mind you, I can’t stomach “bitter” or anything dark, but fortunately England’s recently emerged from the Dark Ages and they’ve actually got at least a Renaissance form of refrigeration so they can serve beer reasonably cold, if they care to. Me, I’m a Bud man, but I’ll give it to the Brits. The stuff they give you is a hell of a lot stronger.

“Stella Artois!” I said to the bar man, and he tapped off a pint of the stuff for me. Something to wet my whistle, I thought, while I figured out what kind of wine I should get for Flowers.

The guy put a gigantic glass of gold stuff in front of me, and I was a happy man. A pint over here is twenty ounces tall, which means almost twice as much brew was looking at me, and more bang for the buck, alcoholwise, too.

I doled out my one pound, eighty pence, and started working on the stuff, pondering life, the Universe and the bestseller I was supposed to be working on. Unfortunately, my epic Harold Robbins potboiler was stuck, and I was getting antsy. Antsy was good, since it meant that I was yearning to work again. By the time I was back in my Orlando office, sucking on air-conditioned smog, I’d be whacking away at stories.

Trouble was (as the trouble often is in my copy-hungry line of work) I had to come up with new angles for stories.

Naturally, we often go back a few years and recycle stories. Common enough. Give ’em a little spin, like that. But you also had to throw in some new shit into the mix from time to time. Here, in England, was my

chance to do just that. What should it be, though, I wondered, downing my drink. *Blake's 7 Fiends Threaten Centuries Old University?* No. Maybe if I made them Trekkies, though ... *Brits Drowning in Megapint-Sized Drinking Problem*. Maybe, maybe not, but I sure would like to research that one thoroughly.

No, it had to be something wackier, something stranger, something to catch the eye of the average American Winn-Dixie market-goer as they hauled the Spam from the shopping cart...

"Here, mate," growled a voice. "That's pretty poor. Mind topping that off?"

My concentration was broken. I looked down the bar, and found a surly looking guy leaning over the bar, pushing his pint of brown ale toward the bar man. At first I couldn't tell what was wrong. The guy was pointing at the big head on his beer.

"Should settle down, sir," said the bar man.

"Nonsense. Top it off! Damned stuff is expensive enough as it is. My right as a customer!"

The barman frowned, but shrugged. "'Deed it is, sir, but you needn't be so harsh about it." He took the pint, scooped the foam off it, then stuck it under the narrow tap spigot, literally immersing the knobby head into the drink. Then he flicked off the catch to the controls and pulled hard on the tall wood and metal lever. Looked damned hard, too. These barmen over here must develop some decent biceps.

The fluid level arose, some of it dripping off the sides.

"Topping off" in Britain constitutes filling the glass so high that the beer seems to swell up past the lip of the glass, kept from spilling over by surface tension alone. The barman gingerly pulled the pint out from under the tap then hoisted it over to drain on the plastic bar grate advertising Carlsberg beer.

The guy, a strapping guy in a flannel shirt and cap who looked like a cab or truck driver, sighed. "Thanks. Sorry. Bit hot under the collar. Me bike just got nicked."

The barman softened. "That's a shame. Had a mountain bike stolen last year myself. Terrible plague."

My ears pricked up. I'd heard intimations of this particular Cambridge problem from our bicycle place on King Street. Flowers had insisted on acting like the natives, and since the vast majority of Cambridge sorts biked about the brick and cobble town, she thought that we should. It was suggested that to get the kind of snazzy bikes Flower's sensibility and fashion style insisted upon we should just buy them with her deep-pocketed credit card and then sell them again when we got back ("Or just store them for when we come back, dear!" she'd suggested. Fat chance.) Flowers, being of sound horse trader stock, considered this a fabulous concept. I hadn't been on a bike since I delivered my city's paper in my prepubescent days. I know it's been fashionable for yuppie types in the past decade but hell I'm pretty far from being a yuppie. Anyway, these things I'd seen ching-chinging around this medieval town were pretty far from the light, sporty things the yups favored. They were solid looking and comfortable and I figured, Hell, why not? Looks like fun. Maybe even relaxing. That's exactly what I needed. A little biking on nice paths by the river. I was having a hard time with Brit culture and attitudes, but biking by a nice-looking river seemed like a pretty universal damned good thing.

Anyway, Mr. Bike Guy warned us to buy locks and use them, so I was pretty curious about this "plague."

"Bad news," I said. "Could I buy this man's next beer in way of sympathy?"

The man, already half-glugged through his enormous pint, perked up considerably. "You sure could,

mate. Ta!”

Actually, I was exercising my reporters’ knowledge that a little alcohol gift went a long way into collecting information. Cash was best, but hey, a beer was much cheaper.

“My pleasure.” I pushed a few of the thick pound coins the barman’s way.

“You’re a Yank, then?” said the former bike owner.

“That’s right. Never been here before. Having a—what do you call it ... Holiday?”

“Picked a nice hot summer for it, didn’t you? I been to cooler summers on the Costa Del Sol.” Glug glug. “Pah. Whole world’s going to the wolves, I say. You’d think a man’s bike would be respected. ’Round here ... No way.”

“A plague you say?”

“You bet, mate. This ain’t a big town, you know? Three thousand bicycles were stolen last year.” He chugged another few ounces of the bitter to assuage the trauma of this pronouncement. “And those were just the ones reported to the police!”

I had the sudden urge to go out and check my own bike, secured to a bike stand with a lock provided by the dealer. I’d had this keen new bike when I was eleven years old I’d bought myself. A black ten-speed Schwinn Racer. A real honey of a bike, and the envy of my neighborhood. I had it all of a week before it got stolen. Never found it, and had no insurance so I had to go back to riding clunky three speeds on my route. When I had my pick of which bikes to buy the day before, I’d chosen the one that had looked the most like my old Schwinn. I was already getting attached. But no, I told myself. Don’t panic. I had this damned fine modern bike lock now, product of the nineties and my new bike would be just fine.

I had another pint with the guy, I admit, so I was kind of late with the wine for Flowers. I just brought it out in a half-pint glass so I could carry another pint for myself, top part drunk off so I wouldn’t spill any.

I was feeling no pain, I admit. Flowers didn’t seem to mind. Her attention was immersed in the proceedings. Apparently discussion of the upcoming convention had been finished up, because the assembly was discussing the ideal casting of some ideal *Blake’s 7* movie. Generally, it was agreed that, though well beloved, the original cast wouldn’t do, and so current actors were being cast hypothetically into, presently into the “Avon” and “Villa” parts. The original Avon—a guy named Paul Darrow—was apparently kinda chunky now, for instance. Flowers was making a case for Tom Cruise, to the distinct annoyance of Alucard, who stood, a vision of straight Old World posture, by a lectern at the front of the rows of chairs.

Blake’s 7 is the story of a bunch of outlaw misfits on the lam from a tight-assed empire in a wobbly spaceship. I could tell why people liked it: it was pretty wild and woolly and nasty, the actors treading the BBC studies with melodramatic snarls and snappy diction. The Avon character was a sexy, arrogant, nasty bastard and, hey, women like that. Me, I don’t know why. Women love me because I’m a sweetheart.

Thanks to the beer and boredom, I kinda zoned out, except for the when my elbow sprang up automatically to feed my mouth some booze. The old noodle was zooming around, peeking under stones for good material. There was such a stew of stuff here, I couldn’t quite put my finger on the really powerful one I knew I needed to start with.

The odd thing was I had this real strong feeling that there was something here, in the first three days we’d

been here, right under my nose, that was exactly what I was looking for ... kinda like the murder weapon in Roald Dahl's story "Lamb to the Slaughter."

In mid-thought, I suddenly burped.

It wasn't just any old burp, but a real fruity Bronx cheer burp, straight through an open mouth sounding brassy and American and real.

Damned thing upstaged the spacey *Blake's 7* meeting something fearful. Brits are pretty hard to ruffle, though, so the only one who actually turned my way was Flowers.

"Jack," she whispered harshly. "We're in polite society. Excuse yourself."

"Pardon me," I mumbled.

Unredeemed, though, I finished off most of the lager. The stuff must have been rumbling through me like some stealth freight train, cause next thing I know gas hit my lower bowels, hard.

Reader, it escaped.

It sounded like Pavarotti farting in an airplane hangar, and this time I did see a few startled looks cast my way.

Including Alucard's.

Only the Doctor's expression wasn't startled...

Flowers was clearly mortified. "Jack," she said, and I got a curt whack across my arm.

...Alucard's expression was knowing, piercing, and, well ... murderous. I was stunned by it, the glower a dark sneer of creased brow brought a flash of fire beneath its bushy brows, and I felt sudden frisson of danger and menace.

"Uhm.... sorry."

I was mortified.

Not so much by my eructations, but by my Britishness. Yeah, the Brits go around knocking into each other on this crowded isle and invariably the reaction is a tangle of "Sorry." "Sorry." "Sorry." I'd thought the word was pretty pathetic, and was aghast that it had dropped from my mouth.

"Little digestive problem," I announced, suddenly onstage. "Maybe I better go to the Men's Room."

"Yeah, Jack. Maybe that would be a good idea," said Flowers, her face flushed with embarrassment.

I got up and felt Dr. Alucard's eyes boring into the back of my neck.

I couldn't help myself. I turned to look at him, and sure enough, the guy was staring at me. Only this time, it wasn't a murderous glower I was receiving, but a cold, assessing look, as though they guy was somehow peering into the gaseous nether bowels of my soul. He was looked like some dark heiomancer, digging his paws into the remains of some dead thing, villainously thereby peering into the murky future.

I felt as though someone was shitting on my grave.

With a shudder, I got out of there.

I went to the Men's room as promised, and then I made a beeline for the bar.

* * * *

That weird Doctor's look was still moiling around inside of me, along with the queasy lurch of a hangover, as I exited the Holiday Inn the next morning to go for a cycle around town with Flowers.

I'd gotten plenty of tongue the previous night—but alas, no sex was involved.

Flowers was keeping it wagging now. Her gift of Texas gab had its dark side.

“You know, it's not like you're back in some Florida cracker bar, Jack,” she said tartly. “These people have principles and manners. You're in polite society. You just can't behave like that.”

I grumbled something and grimaced as we entered the daylight. England is usually dark and gloomy—except on days when I get hangovers.

“Okay, okay, so lay off, huh? I just had a few problems last night with the pipes, ya know?” We made our way over to the bike stand where'd we locked up our new bikes. “Cripes, the lousy plumbing they have over here ... you'd think a guy with personal plumbing problems might be forgiven.”

Today we were going to take a tour of some colleges. A place called Trinity College was of especial interest to Flowers, since one of the undergraduates had given her a little PR about it. Apparently Trinity was founded way back in 1546 by King Henry VIII himself. Lord Byron was one of its many famous students. These “colleges” are really independent entities that house and feed students going to the University—and keep up traditions. They're real old and they all have huge courtyards filled with grass and absolutely nothing else. I guess this is a big thing for Brits, to preserve a spot of lawn just to look at, since this is such a cramped, dingy little isle, but me, I don't see much use for grass. And you can't even walk on it. Sheesh!

So anyway, at the top of the elaborate gate is this carved statue of Henry. Up till the 1920s the wife-killer held a scepter in his hands. One wild night, probably after drinking at a bunch of pubs on King Street, a student climbed up, took the scepter out of the king's manly hand and slipped in a chair leg, one end sharpened so as to fit in the fist. This was apparently deemed a worthy student act because the chair leg remained until the eighties, when another drunken bunch of students climbed up, removed it and stuck in a bicycle pump. These hijinks were frowned upon. The authorities caught the culprits, removed the bicycle pump—and put the chair leg back.

Me, I think they should have put a turkey leg in the King's pudgy hand. I mean, he's always got one in Renaissance Fairs.

So anyway, a day of tourism was something I was not exactly looking forward. The good news was that since there was a pub on practically every street corner here, I could probably go and have a pint and calm my internal World War II.

We got to the bicycle rack. I was actually looking forward to getting on and peddling, relieved, away from Flowers.

But the bike wasn't there. The lock was, though, opened somehow and on the ground, looking useless and forlorn.

My heart sank and suddenly I was eleven again.

* * * *

Loss is a hard thing to take.

Me, I've lost a lot over my life. Maybe that's why I am the way I am, a little hard bitten, a little cynical—a little rough around the edges. Maybe all that keeps the big bad world a bit away from me.

Once in a while, though, life just slams me in the head with a two-by-four.

I guess losing my bike there in England was one of those times.

So much for goddamned “gentlemanly” behavior. The Brits were just as larcenous and criminal as anyone, it would seem. And hypocrites to boot about the whole thing. Damned good thing they don't let people have guns over here—they'd all shoot each other immediately.

I let Flowers go ahead on her tour, agreeing to meet at G. David's bookshop at a certain time later on in the afternoon. Me, I had work to attend to.

I was going to the cops.

First I had that pint at a newly opened pub. It put a little space between my and my rage. Then I called and reported the crime, expecting a constable maybe to come over. You know, dust for fingerprints, like that. When they found out it was “just a bike stolen” they suggested that a better course of action might be to come into the station.

I did. A bored desk jockey who smelled like old bacon took down my registration number, the details of the crime, then thanked me stiffly for coming in.

“That's it?” I said.

“Yes, I'm afraid so. Only so much to be done. Might keep your eyes peeled. Sometimes they turn up again, these bikes, in the oddest places.”

I was incensed. “I don't understand. Why is this allowed? Wait I minute, I know. You haven't got the death penalty here, right? There's no punishment for this heinous crime.”

“I assure you sir, there is indeed.”

“And you can't shoot the bastards 'cause you haven't got guns.”

The guy gave me an odd look. “I truly don't think guns are necessary ... for anything, sir.”

Goddamned liberal, I think. But I knew I wasn't going to do myself or my cause—or for that matter, my hurt—any good by complaining. As soon as I left the station I knew that the Guv'nor there was probably going to pour himself some tea, eat a crumpet and read *The Guardian*.

I went out and had myself another pint of lager at a place called The Fox and Hounds. Then I had another.

I stewed awhile, thinking.

I was going to have to meet Flowers pretty soon. There had to be something I could do in the meantime make me feel less the helpless sap, the victim. Some kind of payback would be nice ... I mean, hell, it wasn't like I was in Italy, right? I was in England, supposedly a place of rationality and justice!

So I went to a sporting shop.

“I’d like to buy a baseball bat,” I said to the clerk.

“Ah—American baseball, sir?” asked the chirpy young clerk. He wore a tie and looked like he’d just been out on the Cam for a rowing contest.

“No. Zulu baseball.”

“Ah—yes ... well, we’ve neither, I’m afraid.”

Hmm. The nice thing about a baseball bat is it has a double purpose. A nice solid one, smooth wood, good balance, some heft can bash a little canvassed number out of the park.

It can also put you in good stead in a dark alley somewhere.

Fully sober I might have blown a gasket. But the beer had put a soothing interface between nerves and cause of abrasion. So I took this news in stride, burped politely, pardoned myself and took a little stroll.

It didn’t take me long to find something.

“What’s this, pray tell, sirrah,” I said, pointing to a display near the back.

“Cricket bats, sir.”

“What? To kill insects with?”

The guy took it as the joke intended. “Alas, no. They’re used for a game called cricket. Please don’t ask me to explain it. Most people who play it don’t fully understand it.”

“Ah, yes. Okay.” I studied the things thoughtfully. They looked like a boat paddle without the middle part. I’d think the wide part brought on encouraged air resistance and thus dragged—but if you swung narrow part first, you’d be okay. And it was neither cricket balls or baseballs I intended to hit. I dredged up my Visa card.

“I’ll take one, please.”

* * * *

There was a full moon riding over the old walls of Emmanuel College. The night was quiet and the air was cool and hushed. The contrast was amazing, considering the bustling ant colony it had been during the day, cars and tourists and shoppers scurrying about while the Cambridge Tour double decker buses patiently waddled through the winding streets. There was the taste of beer in the air—

No. Must have been just in my mouth.

I pulled a large can of Heineken up from its place on the stoop where I was hiding, and took a sturdy gulp, then peered out around the doorway to the bicycle rack.

Nothing.

Quiet.

I sighed, readjusted my grip on the cricket bat and sat back to wait. They’d be round soon enough, I thought.

“I tell you, mate,” a guy had said to me at a pub that evening. “An unlocked bike—the thieves*smell* it.”

So what I'd done, I'd taken the lock and chain off of Flowers' bike and now it just sat there, not even on the rack but against the stonewall nearby, naked and vulnerable.

I was going to get me a piece of these goddamn Limey thieves, no matter how long it took.

Meantime, I had a few beers to keep me company,

Flowers was back up in the hotel room, snoring away. I hadn't told her about my plan. She'd have given me hell and forbidden me, and we'd have had a fight—so why bother?

I'd bash myself a bike thief, call the cops, be a hero ... and be back for a nice sleep afterwards. She'd promised me a good sleep the next day anyway.

So there I was, hunkered and waiting for a bicycle thief in Cambridge, England, a cricket bat in my hand, pissed off as all hell.

It wasn't like the day had improved my mood that much.

We'd gone around looking at colleges, as promised. Peculiar things, I thought. Old and cold looking, even in the summer and such a jumble of architecture as to look like some kind of gritty gothic skeleton. And the courts! Jeez, seems to me, the least they could do is pave them over and use them for parking lots.

We'd crossed the Bridge of Sighs, we hired a punt and I almost fell off (nice tradition though of drinking while boating) and potted around the market place.

On a stroll back, Flowers had gotten all excited, pointing up at a sign fronting a long tall building with lots of windows showing lots of offices with lab paraphernalia peeking through.

"Oh ... that's Dr. Alucard's lab!" she said. "He said if we were in the area..."

I wasn't particularly inclined toward meeting up with the grim Doctor again, but Flowers was insistent.

Looked pretty much like a lab to me, I thought. Dr. Alucard was polite to Flowers but pretty much gave me the cold shoulder—and when I wasn't looking, the evil eye—as we marched through ranks of beakers and Bunsen burners and refrigerators and lab racks. I was half-crocked so I only sort of heard this and that about the blood work they were doing. Some Aids stuff, plasma work, artificial blood—blah blah blah.

It was a pretty speedy tour, I must say, and mostly my mind was conjuring up variations of bloodwork themed stories for the *American Galaxy* and a dark determination to bring certain bicycle thieves to justice.

As we were leaving, the Doctor bid us a peculiar farewell after saying he was looking forward to seeing us at the *Blake's 7* convention.

"And please," he said, one of those bushy eyebrows raising a bit in my direction. "Stay out of trouble."

The stare intensified and again I felt as though he were staring through me.

This, I thought, is the guy the police should use to interrogate the bicycle thief I catch.

There was a baleful howl somewhere, echoing through stone alleys in Cambridge. The temperature seemed to have dropped and despite the antifreeze in my veins, my teeth were starting to chatter. There was a damp in the air, an ancient damp, the damp that must have touched the hearts of the Celts and

Romans, the Angles and Saxons and Jutes, the Vikings and Normans, Charles Dickens and Jack the Ripper. It's an forbidding alien cold, the chill of mystery and dark spirits, and I guess it was getting to me because I was seriously thinking about giving up this snipe hunt and heading back to my warm bed and cushioned bed companion when I heard a noise.

A jingling.

Yes, a jingling and the click click click of a bicycle tire moving.

The funny thing was that I hadn't heard any footsteps approaching, just a kind of background flutter and clop on stone. I'd been listening damn carefully too, you bet. Nothing much else to do.

I immediately forgot about the cold.

Adrenaline shot through my system.

I rose up, adjusting my grip on the cricket bat.

I stepped around the side of the building and immediately saw the guy. He was just this form—dark ... no, like a blobby absence of light amidst the lesser night.

Around this cloaked form I could see the front and back of Flowers' bike, which he was wheeling away.

My rage returned.

"You son of a bitch."

I raised the bat and ran toward him.

The guy swept around, with a flutter of his cape. There was light a leak of light from the lamps over on Saint Andrew's St. and I saw him pretty well.

He was a young guy, huddled in a dark cloak, with a pale face and red, red lips. His eyes shone like peepholes into Hell, and the surprise on his face immediately turned to rage.

His mouth opened and all I could see were teeth.

Long, sharp teeth.

He came for me. I swung the cricket bat for all I was worth, but he caught it easily with a strong grip. He plucked it from my hand and he snapped it into two.

Then he came for me, and his cloak swept around me like a shroud, and consciousness popped out of my grip like a wet bar of soap.

* * * *

I've been unconscious before against my volition.

Too much to drink at times. Pills. Once, a car accident. Couple times even bar fights.

Not pleasant. Still they were heaven compared to coming out of that particular dip into death.

I was aware first of all that I was sitting in a straight-backed chair. I could not move my hands. There seemed tied together behind me with some sort of leather bands. My head felt as though somehow had pulled my brains out by the nerve roots and then filled the skull back up with pain.

I half-expected some kind of choke around my mouth, but my groan came out loud and clear. I looked up and my surrounding gradually blended together from blur to the merely surreal.

I was in an old room, filled with old furniture and William Morris wallpaper. There were high back chairs tastefully placed here and there, portraits and a landscape painting. There were no windows that I could see, although some thick black velvet curtains could well be hiding them.

The place smelled of a century of pipe tobacco. Silent echoes of classical music seemed to hang in the air. All I could taste in my mouth was the sour of old beer and the iron of blood. I felt as though Sherlock Holmes might walk in at any moment...

Or some other character of Victorian fiction.

The pounding in my head was being offset rapidly by curiosity and fear...

Where was I?

No place promising, that was for certain. Gradually memory dripped back into my enfeebled faculties, and the fright-face of the guy I'd surprised showed up.

Damn. Trouble.

The snap of that cricket bat lingered in my head.

Could have been my neck?

Shit. All I'd wanted was payback on a score. I hadn't expected to end up trussed up in the middle of a nineteenth century nightmare.

I didn't have long to wait until the major questions in my head were answered.

After the answers, though, I wished my brain hadn't been asking any questions.

There were voices in the hall outside. Then the door opened and a tall figure stepped in.

It was Doctor Alucard.

He didn't look at me at first, just went to a cabinet. He opened it, took out a two clean glasses and a bottle of whiskey. He poured out healthy shots of the whiskey, then casually placed them on an old table to my immediate right.

Then he pulled up one of the high-backed chairs and sat down, crossing his legs. When his eyes found mine, I could see no particular glower or menace in them now.

"Would you like a drink, Jack?" He said, pushing the glass forward close enough for me to smell it. "Single malt from the Highlands. I think you'll like it. Might take a bit of the sting out of your head."

"Okay."

"Soon enough." He took one of the glasses, sipped it thoughtfully, those brows of his looking almost avuncular now, not threatening at all. "Once you've told me a few things I want to know ... Once we've shared some information."

"Where the hell am I?" I said, keeping my voice low but still making it tough, not showing any of the fear or uncertainty I was feeling.

“You’re in my rooms in Cross College, Jack. My college, you know.” His accent seemed a little thicker now, a little more filled with pride, propriety and prejudice. “Did you realize that many of the colleges of the Cambridge and Oxford are some of the largest landowners in Britain? It’s true. They’ve been financial entities for hundreds and hundreds of years. Cross College, for instance, owns an entire prospering port, much of the land between here and Oxford, much in London—indeed, a whole Channel Island. And I...” A small smile passed over Alucard’s lips. “I own Cross.”

“Great,” I said. “You want to untie me?”

“I think not. Don’t worry, though. I’ll help you drink your drink.” He stood up and strode back and forth, long tapered fingers softly stroking his chin. “Now then, I shall come to the meat of the matter. You, sir, are a troublemaker, and I’m afraid I’m going to have to rid this cooling ball of mud of your foul carcass. However, before you go, I should like to get some information, as I said. Your cooperation in these matters will more or less determine the levels of pain you will experience in your demise...” That eyebrow arched. “And perhaps even the nature of your afterlife.”

I somehow managed to keep my face immobile, but inside fear was knocking down the supports. Fear is never your friend, though. I grew up in a tough neighborhood. I got the shit beat out of me often by older boys. But I learned damned quick that if you showed nasty bastards you were afraid—they would just kick you harder while you were down.

And I’d pretty much figured that this Alucard guy was a nasty bastard.

With fear gripped tightly and under control, my brain began to put two and two together. The guy with the sharp teeth and bat like cape stealing Flowers’ bike—This guy’s look, his teeth ... his blood lab...

Only I’d never quite seen two and two add up to a *Twilight Zone* Four.

“Please, Doc. Tell me you’re not a vampire and you lead a gang of vampires in Cambridge. Huh? I mean, really. This religious motif has been getting to me here ... Christ College. Jesus Lane. Jesus Pieces. God’s Fish and Chips ... But the vampire shtick seems to be a little bit cliché.”

That got him mad.

His face writhed into a horrific mask. One moment he’s in the chair, next his face was in my face and his breath was like a flame against my eyes. “Beware, mortal. The Devil is not to be mocked!” he snarled.

My spine went icy and I shut my mouth for a moment. The Doc calmed down and sat back into his chair, taking a small sip of whiskey. “You almost had yourself a True Death there, Jack. Well done, if your goal was a quick release from me.”

“Shit, Doc. I just want to go home to Florida and get back to work. I don’t like it much here.”

“Yes ... Your work. That is what I need to know about.” He pulled my wallet out of his pocket, tossed it onto the table. Then he pulled my passport out, thumbed through it casually and flopped that down as well. “I see nothing in here to indicate connections with your government in any official capacity. Yet you are an agent for it, are you not...? Or perhaps some corporation, hmm? Tell me all about it know, if you please, and things will be much easier for you.”

“Secret agent?” I was aghast. “What, snooping *Blake’s* 7 conventions? Looking for vampires.... Trying to get a good whack at a bicycle thief?”

“I read human beings, Jack. You are a dangerous man. You are a snooper.”

“Shit. I’m a damned reporter. I write for the *American Galaxy*, a cheesy tabloid that sells for ninety-nine cents at supermarket checkout lines. Didn’t Flowers tell you that?”

That arched eyebrow again. “Your estimable lady friend claims you’re a distinguished journalist, a very important man. It seems to me a very good cover for investigations. Tell me the truth, Jack.” He went to a hearth and pulled out tongs. “Do not make me pull it up by the roots of your tongue.”

“Look, Doc. Believe me. Yeah, I snoop ... You’ve got the right tag on that one. You gotta dig some to get stories. But hell, mostly I just recycle stories ... Or make them up!”

“The *American Galaxy* you say. I have been to the States ... and why, yes. I think I remember. A most peculiar black and white periodical. I believe I saw some kind of cover involving Elvis and Aliens.”

“You got it, Doc. That’s the *Galaxy*.”

He gave me a most peculiar look. “But you are here in England to dig up stories to write that only the least educated of your readers will believe?”

“You’d be surprised at how many of its readers believe the *Galaxy*, Doc. And no—I’m here with Flowers for a vacation and I guess, yeah, I’d intended to dig some stories up ... can’t help myself, can I? That’s not the reason for the trip, though.”

I figured I shouldn’t lie. He seemed to have some kind of psychic gear to scope out lies. He was just inferring too much. Investigator for the U.S. Government? What the hell was this?

Of course the fact that this bothered him meant that something peculiar was going on in that hematology lab—something the Doc, by implication, wanted to keep under wraps.

Maybe even something about his identity.

The word “identity” somehow was the key. I thought about this guy’s vampirish look, his demeanor, and his name did a little flip in my head.

“*House of Frankenstein*,” I said. “1944.”

“Excuse me?”

“Alucard. That’s Dracula, spelled backwards.”

The Doc’s face grew concerned. “This was in a movie...”

I was still coping ... “No. It’s just a joke, right? Funny, Doc. Ha ha. Dracula is just fiction.”

The guy just kind of smiled. “Perhaps fiction is the best place to hide from enemies, Jack. Perhaps it was I who gave Mister Bram Stoker his story, thus to mask the truth of my true coming to England ... And then putting a fitting climax to the tale to help the nightmares to recede.”

“Yeah. Right. Let me see if I remember ... Yeah. Van Helsing chased you back to your homeland and put a stake through your heart.”

Alucard ... or Dracula, or whoever he was smiled grimly. “I look forward to the literary critic who one day realizes that Van Helsing and my fictional namesake are two sides to the same coin. Perhaps together they add up to something like the truth of the matter.”

“All that carrying of coffins ... and native earth ... must have been a hard haul to get over here ... uhm,

what's your first name? Ah yeah—Vlad.”

A humorless chuckle. “Superstitious nonsense ... again perhaps to cloak the truth.”

“And that truth is?” I was curious, yeah. But mostly I was stalling for time. This guy clearly had an ego on him the size of the orbit of Mars. “I mean, sounds like I’m not going to get out here anyway. You might as well tell me.”

Meanwhile, my mind was racing for a way out and my hands were working at the leather bonds behind me. I had some experience with leather. Little, uh, extracurricular activities in my younger, more experimental years. One night a sexy girlfriend had tied me up and then passed out. It took me half the night, but I eventually extricated myself and came out of it with a pretty good knowledge of leather—and anathema for the questionable pleasures of B and D.

Alucard looked at me. “I don’t think that will be necessary. Suffice it to say that my work with hematology has been most rewarding for the past century, and that as you may surmise, my students have spread my truths throughout the world....” His eyes gleamed. “But they are truly the select and secret race ... Which is why the authorities which represent doubtless are investigating me.”

“Look, I told you. I’ve got nothing to do with any authorities, Doc.” I shook my head adamantly. “Anyway, I’m still in the dark here. Your saying the vampires are real ... You’re the king of the vampires ... but it’s not supernatural?”

“In Cambridge?” He smiled. “In Cambridge there are two principal sayings. ‘What’s the evidence?’ And ‘In Cambridge, we have standards.’”

“So it’s some sort of infection ... a disease...”

“Please. It is a privilege to be gifted with the Blood. We are the Select.”

“Yeah, yeah, right. You keep on saying that.” I wasn’t going to get any DNA transcriptions from this jerk, that was for sure. “But I don’t understand ... Where does the *Blake’s 7* business fit in?”

“I have lived a very long time,” said Alucard. “I must have my hobbies to amuse me.”

“Oh. Right. Okay ... and this Bicycle Theft ring. What the hell is that supposed to be?”

“Ah yes—well, I suppose that sort of information is harmless enough to pass on. Besides, I need to perform an appropriate Summoning, anyway.”

Doctor Alucard closed his eyes. His long, tapering arms folded across his chest.

The sharp fingers fluttered silently.

There was a noise like the wind outside in the hall. Shutters flapped and banged and shudders ran down my back. I had a sense of something numinous occurring outside ... Not good but *bad* numinous.

“Enter, Joseph,” said the Doctor.

The door opened. In walked the fellow in the cloak who’d I caught stealing Flowers’ bike. This time, however, he did not look so demonic. In fact, he looked like nothing so much as a fresh-scrubbed graduate student just in from having a few pints with his rowing team.

The Doctor opened his eyes. They seemed slightly redder now, as though his student’s presence were affecting him in some odd way.

“Joseph is my assistant,” said the Doctor in a deep, resonant voice. “He is one of my...” His teeth bared and the canines seemed to grow before my eyes. “...Children...”

Joseph’s eyes grew red. A sneer revealed growing teeth. He seemed the epitome of both of health and death. “Good evening again, sir.” He said in a high-class accent so nasal you’d have thought his vocal chords were in his nose. “I believe this belongs to you.” From his cloak he drew out the two pieces of my cricket bat, contemptuously tossing them at my feet. “I far prefer rowing.”

“Yes,” said Alucard. “Joseph is one of our champion rowers here at Cross. All the rowers are my children.” He sighed happily. “All the stout-blooded lads that have been Cross men—my men—out into the fields of academia and science across the globe. Mine. I knew when I came to England that it would not be possible for control from any kind of quixotic government. Control would be more valuable much earlier in the formation of the young controllers. Oh, and I have plans—marvelous plans.” He shrugged. “Some in the past have not worked out as well as I would have liked.... But oh well. I have a long time to dabble, don’t I?”

“I still don’t quite get the bicycle theft ring, Doc,” I said, not just stalling for time but honestly curious.

“Oh, very well. That will be harmless enough for you to know,” said the Doctor, placing a fatherly arm around Joseph. “Joseph here, for instance, as I said, happens to be one of my assistants in my hematology labs. By now, of course, due to my work, my Family needs no longer to fear the daylight or garlic or other such hindrances. However, these are perky and restless young pups, my children. They need exercise and they need training. There are thousands of bikes in Cambridge.”

“Quite a lark,” said Joseph, displaying his teeth. “Good college fun, don’t you know—and a source of metal and rubber for other ... projects.”

“Absolutely. There you go. And come to think of it, I’ve let on far more than I had intended to. Oh well.” Doctor Alucard came close to me, his eyes dark and burning. I could feel his breath in my face. “It is time for you to tell us more. And I think the ministrations of Joseph here will encourage your participation.”

In his eyes I could see centuries of madness and darkness. In his breath I could smell the future of blood.

This guy meant business.

“Please,” I said, unnerved totally. “I’m telling you ... I’m not a government agent...”

Joseph’s hand spread out before me.

Long sharp talons were growing.

“This is not a television show, sir,” said the cultured young vampire. “Our kind have thrived for a very long time. Tell us. We will win no matter what. You are helpless against us. Spare yourself some agony.”

I was about to tell them anything they wanted to hear, but suddenly there was a commotion outside.

I could hear a shrieking, almost hysterical voice coming from the front of the college rooms.

I recognized it.

“I don’t care if it’s four o’clock in the morning! I’m an American citizen. More than that I’m a citizen of *Texas*! I demand to see Doctor Alucard. Immediately!”

Flowers!

A look of infinite weariness crossed the Doctor's face. It was a look I was too familiar with, a look I have doubtless worn as well.

Only this time it was a look that I was very, very happy indeed to see.

Before I could even think about crying out, the Doctor pulled out a gag and whipped it around my mouth.

"Oh my," said Alucard. "There are forces that even the powers of darkness must deal with personally." He turned to his henchman. "Joseph, I must go and quiet our American friend. Please stay and guard our guest. However, no torture yet, all right? We don't want any undue noise with the formidable Miss Flowers about."

Elegant and poised, the Doctor left the room immediately, leaving me with College Boy.

The vampire, however, did not seem particularly interested in me. He went to the door and placed his ear to it, to better hear the conversation going on downstairs.

I could hear some of it, but truth to be told I was busy with my leather bonds. I hadn't stopped working with them the whole of the interview, and I was on the verge of freeing myself.

I could hear some of the sounds below.

"Doctor, thank you so much. I'm sorry to disturb you," Flowers was saying. "It's Jack. He's vanished."

The Doctor's dramatic voice was easier to hear. It boomed with gentle, reassuring authority.

"Now, now, my dear. I'm sure he's all right. Your gentleman seems to be of a free, unbound nature. I'm sure you've spent more than one night alone while you've known him."

Guy was damned right about that, I thought guiltily.

Still, I was better to Flowers than I'd been to just about any other woman in my life. Guess that means I must love the pain in the butt!

It was no time now for soppy sentimentality, though. I had to work on these damn leather bindings.

Just about there...

"Not right in the middle of the night, Doctor!"

"You called the police?"

"He has to be missing for a certain amount of time before they can do anything."

"Now, now. Cambridge is hardly a dangerous place. And I have heard tell of gambling dens open to all hours. Perhaps your Jack found one of those."

Drat! The guy had me to a T!

I could tell it was getting to Flowers too—She well knew I could hardly resist throwing down a wad at the toss of a pair of dice.

I had to move quick if I was going to have any hope of taking advantage of this intrusion by my beloved.

I took advantage of Joseph's intent distraction and worked away at the leather violently. The effort worked, and I was out of them. I lifted my hand up to work at my gag. All I had to do was to yell for Flowers. My only hope was that while Alucard's intentions for me were specific and accomplishable, covering up for two missing Americans would be quite a bit harder ... Particularly since Flowers was already on record with the local constabulary.

Unfortunately, as soon as my hands got to the gag at my mouth, Joseph's head whipped around.

He hissed and glared, and with a huge bound headed toward me.

Some kind of preservation instinct must have hit me because I wasn't consciously aware of what I was going to do next. I just did it.

Even as the vampire leaped toward me, my hands abandoned my mouth gag, and went down to the floor. They came up holding that cricket bat again.

Or half of it anyway.

The handle half, which has broken off in a way as to form a sharp spike. The vampire was on me quickly enough, but I stuck out that cricket bat spike and held it firm just in the right place to catch him full in the breast.

There was a meaty "thunk" as the cricket bat spike drove directly through the vampire's chest.

His mouth came open and blood gushed out.

The talons reached for me, but I nimbly ducked aside.

He turned around, but seemed suddenly more concerned with the length of wood stuck in him than me. Joseph had a perplexed look on his features, the look of youth promised immortality, perhaps, and facing something more abrupt and infinitely nastier.

Purplish blood was welling voluminously from the sides of the spike. He staggered around for a moment, trying to pull the wood out and then with one sudden shudder and spasm, plopped down flat on his horror-stricken face.

I didn't wait to see if he was going to get back up again, but rather got the hell out of there.

Pulling off the gag, I hopped down the steps.

At the landing below, Doctor Alucard was just ushering Flowers outside.

"Doc! Doc!" I called, running down the steps but allowing the gag to drop behind me.

The look on Alucard's face almost worth the whole adventure. This was one smug bastard who'd just getting a bucket of shit dumped on his head.

A scheme dawned on me.

Doc couldn't seem to cough up any words, but I supplied them readily enough.

"Doc, I can't let you do this," I said.

Alucard looked almost apoplectic.

“Jack!” said Flowers, a look of perplexity and joy simultaneously appearing on her face.

“Doc, I can’t let you cover any more for me,” I said, getting down to them, riffing off the Doctor’s mention of gambling clubs. “Flowers, hon, I’m sorry but the Doc mentioned how he enjoyed gin rummy for money. I was out looking for bike thieves, saw his light on and just couldn’t resist the challenge he posed me.”

A look of indecision was moiling on the Doctor’s face. He could take us both now, he doubtless knew ... But was it really worth the bother...?

Perhaps not.

He sighed. “Very well, Jack.” He turned with artful penitence toward Flowers. “I fear our weaknesses found each other out. I am sorry to have caused you any pain. And certainly I regret lying to you as I did.”

“Yeah, babe. That was my fault. I put him up to it. Don’t take it out on the Doc, huh?”

Flowers’ look of distress was slowly turning into her sour look of cold acceptance—lightened, fortunately by a light in her eye that told me she was actually happy to see me well and in one piece. “Don’t worry, Doctor. It’s not the first time. And gin rummy.... Well, I guess I like a game of cards myself from time to time.”

The Doctor bowed a little bit. “May I show you to the gate?”

I figured we’d better get out quick before he changed his mind. “That’s okay, Doc.” I took his hand, shook it. “You can pay me that hundred quid you lost any time you like.”

A look of amusement flickered on the Count’s face. “Ah. Yes. But perhaps we can play again sometime when we do not alarm your lovely companion.”

“Yeah, that would be great, Doc,” I said. “And then we can up the stakes.”

I grinned at him for a moment, grabbed hold of Flowers and got the hell out of there.

* * * *

Good grief. Dracula. The real Dracula!

And I bump into him. All kinds of ideas for stories were churning in my head. Problem was, I really didn’t know what exactly he was doing in that hematology lab. My imagination boggled.

Next night, while Flowers was out with a couple of other *Blake’s 7* fans, hypothesizing perhaps on the size of the male characters’ penises or whatever, I found myself a nice cozy pub on King Street and brought out a notebook I’d bought at the Heffers Stationary store. Not only Flower’s bike was back—mind had been returned as well, and waiting for me in the afternoon was a cheque for a hundred pounds from Doctor Alucard.

I jotted down some thoughts on the whole business at the pub, while sipping at a Heineken. I’d slept late—like to the tune of the late afternoon. Flowers had gone out to see some exhibition or another. Me, I’d gotten up real early, run down to the chic shop at King’s College Chapel and bought myself a cross I’d seen there and hung it around my neck. I don’t know exactly why, since Alucard had claimed imperviousness to such supernatural boundaries. I guess it made me feel a little better.

Now, I was making a list of possible stories.

King of the Vampires Breeds Elvis Monsters.

UFO Vampires Stalk Halls of Learning.

Dracula Lives in Academia!

Halfway through my Heineken, I was presented with another by the barman.

“Thanks, but I didn’t—” I started.

“Fellow bought your drink.”

I looked up and next thing I knew Doctor Alucard was sitting next to me.

“Good evening, Jack,” he said. “Playing yet again with the children of the night?”

“Yes, and within the Howls of Academia.”

He had a glass of something red in his hand. Tomato juice, I hoped. He glanced at my sheet of paper, tsk-tsked, and sipped at his drink. He shook his head sadly. “No. No, those won’t do at all. How about ...*Prince Of Blood Meets Sleazy Mortal Journalist Fool* ...” He sighed. “Jack, I did do some inquiry into your background, and everything you said was all too true. You have absolutely no connection with any kind of governmental secret agencies.” His voice was light but his face was dark.

“I’m just a lowly writer, Doc.”

“Ah yes ... but the power of the pen ... Hmm. Well, there is no great threat. Your periodical has absolutely no power nor reputation of validity. Still—” Suddenly a long, sharp fingernail was in front of me. It slipped down and scratched across my chin, toying near my jugular. “I suggest you do no stories about our encounter for any journal or book. I shall be watching you. As will my minions—”

The fingernail pointed toward the other side of the room. I followed. Sitting in a corner was Joseph, looking healthy and vigorous sipping a drink. He raised his glass to me.

I guess my shock showed.

“Perhaps a better knowledge of our anatomy would have dispatched him properly,” said Alucard. “But it’s all one, really. And it’s just as well, since we’d made a mistake about you anyway. It would have been such a difficulty to dispose of your body—and the idea of inducting you into our ranks. Why, it makes my skin crawl.”

“Gee—Thanks.”

“In other words perhaps for the first time in your sorry life your inadequacies as a being—whether living or dead—is perhaps doing you service.”

“You put things in the sweetest way, Doc.”

“You have his one warning, this one opportunity for discretion in your pitiful life,” said the vampire in his rumbling, Balkan-accented tones.

While I’m not particular pals with pure Good, it’s nice to know the pure Evil despises me.

“I’m listening.”

“Perhaps you’d better not just listen, Jack. Perhaps you should heed. Enjoy your time in this town, on this haunted isle. Dig up what strangeness and charm you care to. However, meddle not in my affairs. And Jack...” I could see a hint of tooth and sharpness. “My reach extends easily across the Atlantic. I shall be watching your pitiful journal. Print what you care to about vampires—but it had better not hinder my operation!”

The eyes full of red and dread, and I thought I felt a hint of heat in his last hiss.

With that he was gone, leaving only a shiver on my spine in his horrible wake.

I was grateful for the extra beer in front of me. It didn’t last long, I’ll tell you. I had something a little stronger to chase it with, and then I walked home to the Holiday Inn while there were more people than shadows in the streets.

Maybe it was time to start working on my novel again. They tell me romance is selling very well indeed. That sounds like a safe subject.

As I passed Trinity College, I looked up at old King Henry glowering above his primordial gate, and for the first time I knew without a doubt why he preferred that sharpened wood chair leg in his hand to a scepter or a bicycle pump.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Fat Farm

An unpleasant trip for an unpleasant man.

Wilfred Henley watched, glowering, as the panoramic vista of tundra and glaciers unfolded beneath him. A rocky coast, half in summer, half in winter, reared up ahead.

Again he asked himself what in heaven’s name he was doing in Alaska, of all places, when he hated the northern climes, even in spring or summer, almost as much as he hated his dank homeland of England.

And the answer ballooned all too solidly below his eyes, hanging below his chin and generally making the English expatriate director a veritable blimp.

His extra pounds.

He sighed, and examined the frightening vistas ahead. Eventually, after too much time for comfort, the beginnings of civilization showed. A stretch of buildings huddled on the rough coastline, clinging like boxy, colorful lichen on the lip of Mother Nature.

The helicopter zeroed in on a flat expanse of concrete marked with a huge circle, centered with the design that had come on the establishments brochures: a trim polar bear sporting tux and tails. Henley grimaced at the crudity of the caricature, but he had to admit it was not only effective, but quite apt.

The Boeing helicopter landed in a flurry of blade winds stirring up dust on the edge of the field. The pilot tipped his Seahawks cap ironically. “End of the road, Mr. Henley. You have a real nice stay, you hear?”

Henley grunted. He scooped off the seat, dewlaps aflap, and impatiently fiddled with the door. A technician wearing ear guards ducked under the slowing blades and let the new guest out. No red carpet, he thought. Just as well, really. Not a high profile place, this. *A large* profile place, perhaps...

Henley waddled out to where a man wearing a fresh blue blazer and red tie waited for him. The rotund man himself was wearing his usual garb: a dark gray suit and blue bow tie upon a white linen shirt, dark gray sunglasses emerging from his mane of longish dyed black hair.

The man waiting for him had an Eskimo Indian cast to his eye and cheekbone with rich brown eyes. “Welcome to Polar Spas, Mr. Henley. I hope you had a pleasant trip.”

“I despise helicopters,” said the fat man in the withering tone he usually reserved for underlings on a movie set.

The smile remained on the host’s face. “Ah—yes. But unless you want to take the dog sled, there’s no other way here.”

Henley raised a bushy eyebrow. “I had contemplated that mode of travel. Unfortunately, I despise dogs as well. Helicopters, at least, are faster.”

The host, a man named Williams who Henley had dealt with before via phone and correspondence, led him to the spa’s reception area.

Despite himself, Henley was impressed. The place was top drawer. All the trappings of wealth, from first-rate beige carpet to the art demurely hanging upon the walls, shimmered subtly, immaculate yet casual. From the properly coordinated drapes it emanated as well, and from the Scandinavian furniture.

Still, the smile from the host as he gestured a hand as though to introduce the facilities to the august personage who’d just made his arrival. “It is indeed a great honor to welcome such a great film director as yourself to our facilities. We sincerely hope that your six-week stay with us will be as rewarding for you as *we know* it will be for us!”

“Rewarding indeed at the rates you charge.” Henley sniffed, admiring a Picasso despite himself. “No, my doctor informs me that I must drop at least sixty pounds or die not much past my current age of fifty.” He tapped his chest. “Heart, you know. I am here as a last resort, Mr. Williams. I am seeking redemption for years of overindulgence—not rewards.”

He felt his stomach quease uneasily at the very notion.

Suddenly, an unpleasant visage swam into his ken—one that he had hoped to avoid. A man walked up to them, dressed in causal but expensive clothing, and interrupted them. He flashed Kirk Douglas teeth and Michael Douglas eyes.

The abhorred name flashed through Henley’s brain:

Howie Fiske.

Spelled S-L-I-C-K.

“Well, well, well,” said Fiske. “Look who’s here. The suspense-meister himself! Hello, Willie. Come for the cure, eh?”

Henley turned, incensed, to Williams. “I was expressly assured that this man would have *left* by now!”

Fiske grinned. “Oh, don’t give Joe a hard time, Will. I just decided to take an extra week.” He patted his stomach. “Three weeks, thirty pounds. How’s that for *adissolve*, Mr. Hot Shot Director?”

Henley cocked the infamous eyebrow. “I’m overwhelmed,” he said dryly.

“Glad you warmed the chopper seat for me, Will.” He turned to Williams. “When’s the ETD, Joe Baby?”

“3:15 p.m., sir,” said Williams, smile fixed as firmly as the sheen on a bit of plastic fruit.

“Whaddya know! I got an hour to kill! What say I buy the only other Oscar winner north of Anchorage a drink? Just to show there are no hard feelings.”

Henley looked at the man with open scorn. “You must forgive my skepticism, Fiske. As a connoisseur of the cinema, you must admit that, as a character in my celluloid experience you have ample motivation for enmity.”

Fiske winked. “All corpuscles under the carpet, Will. C’mon. My treat.”

“Your luggage will be taken to room. Suite G, Mr. Henley.” The Indian proffered a key, dangling in the sunlight like a jewel. “Your key, sir.”

Henley grumped, accepted it and then stared challengingly at the man who had offered him the drink.

“Why not?”

* * * *

“I’m sorry, sir. We don’t serve carrot juice.”

The Eskimo waiter stood straight and spoke in a surprisingly dignified manner for a soul not far from savagery, thought Henley. Nonetheless, the director felt pique at the answer.

Fiske, though, was extremely amused. “What do you think this is, Willie? Death Valley? At these prices, you drink what you want.”

Henley sniffed. “I had the distinct impression that this was an establishment of self-denial.”

Fiske shook his tousled blond locks. “Sheesh—Do you think I shelled out enough money to balance the national deficit for nothing? Hell no.” He leaned over and gave a minty conspiratorial whisper. “Secret formula here, guy.”

Henley nodded. “Ah yes. That was what I was lead to believe.”

Fiske turned preemptively to the waiter. “Two triple Beefeater martinis. Heavy on the beef.”

Despite his usual iron control, Henley could not help but betray alarm. “See here, Fiske!”

Fiske leaned back in his chair with an unusually benign smile. “Why is the man buying a drink for the Limey jerk who stole his wife, swiped his production company and perhaps even molested his teenage daughter?”

Henley raised an eyebrow. “An absurd rumor.”

Fiske looked at him appraisingly for a moment and then nodded. “Yeah. Annie’s got far better taste. Maybe I’ve just decided to let sleeping mongrels lie. Maybe I’ve just got some extra credit to cash in. And again, maybe it’s just good business. LA’s a big city, but it’s a small town. I’d be happy to piss on your grave, Will, but I’d rather make money on you. You’re an Alfred Hitchcock who can write and produce as well as direct.”

Henley had heard the comparison before. “I am far more talented than Hitchcock,” he said

contemptuously. "And I get the cold blondes as well as the Oscars. But as far as business goes, I need no longer wade in the shark tank, Fiske. You, alas, seem stuck there." He coughed, a form of dismissing punctuation he enjoyed. "Fortunately, as is the wont of your breed, you never stop moving."

Fiske waved off the comparison good-humoredly. "Whatever. I got a few things in development that might interest you. My people will call your people." The faint sound of rolling wheels turned his head. "Ah, feeding time for the Fat Director and Mister Jaws!"

The Eskimo waiter pushed up a tray holding drinks and a royal spread of treats. He served the martinis and then pointed at caviar, cheese, nuts, fruits and cake with a hunting knife.

"May I serve you a nice piece of fruit cake, sir?"

The knife was uncomfortably close to Henley's ear.

The familiar horrid fear invaded the director, the uncontrollable panic. He pushed back the slashing images with pure will power.

"For God's sake, man! Have a care with that thing!" gasped Henley.

The Eskimo apologetically put the knife down on the tray.

"My friend," said Fiske, "is a little nervous about sharp objects. I take it that's why you didn't go liposuction?" He sipped noisily at his martini, then grinned. "Sorry. Tasteless. Thanks, friend," he said to the waiter. "But I think this will be a liquid high tea today."

Henley used the same control over his terror of blades to leash his rage at this awful man. The ice of rigid calm rimed him as he lifted his martini and sipped. It was very good, and the alcohol helped tremendously. He was glad there was more of it.

The waiter rolled the cart away.

"Are they all ... native here?" he finally asked in a cool voice.

Fiske nodded. "Yes. Just about. Enterprising bunch. Figured out an old fat cure was suddenly a hot property. Went out for financing and publicity, but wanted an exclusive setting." Fiske scratched his nose and gazed out at the staff with a faint disdain. "Odd people, though. Sometimes I wonder just where the civilization ends with them, and where the tundra begins. Their own ancestral land here, you know. Beautiful. Peaceful. My weeks were quite wonderful."

Henley's stomach rumbled queasily. "How nice to hear that. I, on the other hand, still am not looking forward to mine."

"No," said Fiske. "You're got a bit longer stretch, bub. But it's guaranteed effective, no? You've got yourself the normal spa stuff and plenty of time to write or read or what-have-you. And let me tell you—" Fiske winked. "The food is dee-lish!" Fiske tossed off the last of his drink, got up.

"Oh dear," said Henley, not without irony. "How time flies when one is having fun."

"Yeah. Have another drink, Henley. On me. I got a nice little tab here and I'm gonna try not to have to come back anytime soon, so you might as well dig into it, hmmm? Maybe by the time you bounce outta this Snow-and-Sun land—I can just see you, in Air Jordans, twirling a squash racket—you'll be read to talk turkey." Wink. "White meat, of course."

Henley sneered. “Ah yes. I shall breathlessly anticipate that watershed deal. However, perhaps it would be best not to pause your respiration for any significant period of time.”

“No, I won’t hold *my* breath, either. Have fun, asshole.”

Fiske gave a brief tip-of-a-non-existent hat salute and trotted off, wearing a Jack Nicholson kind of grin. Henley sipped his drink, unsettled at this encounter. Fiske was one of the LA sorts he traveled around in a darkened stretch limo to avoid. Henley had known Fiske would be up here, and had taken steps to avoid running into him.

Insufficient preparation, apparently. Oh well. Unpleasantness over. Henley ordered another drink, then turned to look at the landing pad, where the helicopter presently stood.

By god, he was going to sit right in this spot until that damned thing lifted off, and with Fiske inside.

* * * *

The helicopter left, and Fiske indeed had gotten on it.

Lightened both by this fact and the several large martinis he’d drunk, Henley decided to have a look about.

First stop was the dining room, adjacent to the lounge.

Quite nice. Gorgeous teak and walnut paneling, tasteful drapes. Stainless linen table settings, resplendent chandelier. The silverware fairly sparkled in the setting sun. Elegant china was set out for dinner. Eskimo waiters bustled about, getting things ready for service.

Curiosity gnawed at the director.

Just what was the kitchen like?

There seemed to be no effort to curtain it from the patrons. There were the swinging doors, windows like portholes into the back rooms.

He couldn’t resist checking it out. He half expected something nasty as he pushed open the doors—stacks of rice cakes, cartons filled with diet soda. Instead, inside the immaculately clean facilities, Eskimo chefs busily worked, stuffing capons complete with dainty holders on the drumsticks. They were ladling on liquid from containers marked “Polar Spa” as they readied dinner from the large bank of ovens.

Elsewhere, knives flashed as the Chefs worked on more poultry.

Henley blanched and hastily departed.

At the end of the hall beyond the kitchen, a sign on a door read Employees Only. Henley tried the door, but couldn’t get in. Curious, he tried to pick the lock.

A waiter passed nearby, a little too close for the director’s comfort. No reason to overantagonize the natives on the very first day of his visit!

It was time to check his place of lodging, anyway.

He went to his room.

The room was consistent with the rest of his lodging. It was big, sumptuous and quite tastefully

decorated, with Matisse prints casting subtle color into any earth-toned environment. Henley bellied to the window and pulled aside silken drapes to disclose a stunning Alaskan panorama. His sense of pictorial grandness was effect. Yes, he would indeed have to use this landscape for one of his movies one day. Vast tundra, with spectacular mountains in the distance.

In the harbor, two Eskimos in kayaks were paddling about.

How quaint, he thought.

After changing into more comfortable, more casual clothes—still black, of course—he followed the signs to an exercise room. There he found the typical high tech, high-gloss exercise machines you find in all upper-caste spas. Late model Stairmasters and Nautilus equipment, et cetera.

The odd thing about the place was that it was totally deserted.

Hmm, thought Henley. The No-Sweat Weight Loss Spa. How intriguing.

His next stop was the pool and this was a definitely different kettle of penguins. Henley entered with a bemused look on his face that slowly melted into an amused smile. This was certainly where the action was. Here was a tropical motif within the tundra. Palm trees hovered, wavering in the breeze from hidden wind machines. Sunlamps kicked up the radiation quotient. People lounged and frolicked everywhere. An Eskimo quartet played nonstop cocktail jazz.

A flash of bikinied flesh caught his eye.

A hand touched his shoulder from behind, causing him to start.

He swung around to find Joe Williams, his dutiful host, standing before him.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Williams, “I’ve been looking for you—I want to show you around our facilities....”

Henley’s eyes narrow nastily. “I took the Cook’s tour.”

Williams’ smile was unfailing. “A drink then, perhaps.”

To this the director was more amenable.

At a table he was served another gigantic martini to his exact specifications. “Not shaken, not stirred, sir,” said the waiter.

Williams directed his guest’s attention. “Please avail yourself of our buffet, Mister Henley.” He was gesturing to a table laden with a feast of fruit and canapés. To one side of this table stood a quite attractive thirtyish young lady, just on the right side of plump, helping herself to caviar and crackers. She turned and noticed his frank admiration. She smiled at him, then took her dish and strode away.

Henley turned back to Williams, and pulled out the long toothpick from his drink. “I think I’ll do the Olive Diet for now.”

* * * *

Dark.

He awoke, disoriented. The darkness hung freshly about him, though, and Henley remembered where he was. Almost immediately realized why he’d awoken. Sounds were coming from beyond his window. Curious, as always, he rallied. His silk pajamas hung from him like a tent as he bellied over to the curtains.

His view of the beach was touched with the first pale light of dawn. Upon the edge of water, in the shadows, a group of people clustered.

Something was going on.

Henley's curiosity grew. He put on a thick fur robe and slippers he'd been supplied and went outside, joining the group of people there. A small whale had been beached there, stuck with harpoons. Excited Eskimos were flensing it of its blubber with tools that shone sharply in the growing light.

Flensing knives, red with blood. Real blood, not the stuff he used in his films, the stuff he could deal with—indeed, worked out his terrors with.

Terror rushing through him, Henley turned away. He was about to hurry off when a woman's voice stopped him.

"Local color."

He turned. It was the attractive woman he'd noticed collecting caviar and crackers by the pool.
"Pardon?"

The woman gestured grimly toward the goring goings on at water's edge. "Looks like Century City after an Arbitron ratings report."

Henley couldn't help smiling at the analogy. "You're from Los Angeles, then. Television?"

"Oh, yeah. They had one these whales last week, a little bigger. Must be the season, huh? Can you imagine ... Living off blubber ... fat ... all year?"

"My dear. How different is *our* business?"

The woman regarded him a moment. "*I thought* I recognized you. You're William Henley, are you? *Night Slash? They Came to Die?*"

"Yes, that's right."

"Agnes Connor." She shook his hand. Her grip was warm. "Right now I'm Polar Spa's Cosmetic Department. A little talent I'm parlaying into weight loss. My participation in the TV biz is on ... hiatus."

She turned to watch the flensing with unabashed interest. Henley couldn't look. However, he developed an interest in the woman, so he didn't leave.

After a moment's consideration, Connor spoke. "Jack London stuff here, Mr. Henley. Man against nature. What it must take to get into one of those kayaks and poke sharp sticks at giants!"

"Rather like the early advent of cable, no?"

She looked back at him in an assessing fashion. "Oh, the cable companies have flensed the networks pretty well already, Mr. Henley." She smiled. "What's a rotten guy like you doing in a nice place this?"

Henley laughed. "Ah. My reputation precedes me. Nice to know my PR people earn their money." He sniffed. Mornings had a bit of a bite to them still, despite the season. "I suppose at this juncture I should ask you for a nice jog or a splash in the pool—but I really think breakfast is more in order."

"Count me in! I'm famished!"

* * * *

It was all going swimmingly.

“...and so then I told Tartikoff, well the Fat Lady’s sure singing now!”

“Hence Polar Spa.” He took a bracing sip of the black coffee. He could feel the color returning to his cheeks.

“After a long succession of fat farms squeezed into vacation breaks. I’ve gained and lost husbands as well as pounds at these places, Mr. Henley.”

“Please. Call me William.”

She gave him a sly look. “I’m honored to thus be in the company of your agents and your mother.”

“My agents call me ‘sir.’ My mother doesn’t call anymore.”

“Wives?”

“They call my lawyers.”

“I don’t see why you need Public Relations. Your life seems to be a walking advertisement for your films.”

“I learned early in life, Agnes ... If I may presume to call you Agnes...”

“Just don’t call me ‘Doctor Livingstone’ ...”

“I learned very early in life that there were two kinds of people. People who knew there were bad and people who thought they were good. The former, my dear, are by far the most trustworthy. They are at least honest with themselves. Human nature varies little. I am no better or worse than anyone. I merely do not hide behind any kind of American myth of ‘niceness.’”

“But you seem ... civilized.”

“Civilization is merely a clever invention of barbarism in order to dress itself a little better and enjoy better plumbing.”

“My god, do you have a quotation for everything?”

“Alas, no. I left my Bartletts in my room.”

The wheeling sounds of the tray and the delicious smells attendant attracted his attention around to the arrival of the waiter, who uncloaked vast quantities of scrambled eggs, bacon, muffins and pancakes. The Eskimo obliging served them precisely what they had ordered. Agnes Connor immediately began digging in. Even though he was hungry, Henley found himself a little astonished at the amount of food before him.

“Yum,” said the TV lady. “Must say with all that fresh air this morning I certainly worked up an appetite!”

Henley shook his head. “I must confess, I had expected a soft-boiled egg and a piece of dry toast. But then, Fiske said there was some sort of secret formula involved.”

“Fiske? Oh yes, I met him a couple weeks ago at a bridge game. Slick fellow. Friend of yours?”

“No,” said Henley.

The waiter was still there, making sure that everything was to satisfaction. “Oh yes ... which reminds me,

sir. This breakfast is on Mr. Fiske's tab as well."

Agnes Connor seemed a bit confused. "But he's *not* your buddy?"

"He lusts for my business. I'm quite willing to spend his money." He lifted a forkful of fluffy eggs to his mouth, chewed. Hmm. How odd. "Quite delicious. But I must confess there is a different flavor ... Not unpleasant..."

"That secret formula," suggested Agnes Connor.

"Quite possibly. Whatever works, I must say. Would you believe, Agnes, that before my metabolism changed at the age of 40, I had a thirty-two inch waist?"

"Tell me about it. Only *my* metabolism changed before I was born. I've been battling the bulge since I first tried to get into a prom dress."

"I hope you were successful"

"Oh, I got into the dress all right. The trauma was my date didn't want to get me out of it!"

Henley laughed honestly. "It sounds as though you have been a great deal more successful with men afterwards."

"Maybe. Anyway, here we are. Two civilized barbarians out of a twisted Noel Coward play. *Lither Spirits* ..." She toasted him with her glass of orange juice. "May you lose yours and may I keep mine off."

"I'm afraid I haven't got the luxury of wishing ... Doctor's, and heart's, orders, all this."

Connor's brow furrowed. "And they're letting you eat all this cholesterol? Hmm. Maybe you should take that heart of your for walkies instead!"

Henley looked down at his food, then looked up at Agnes Connor.

Not a bad idea.

"I'll just take along the muffin, eh?"

* * * *

They were walking outside the back of the spa, a beautiful panorama of mountains stretched out before them. Henley found himself in that rarest of states ... not quite on guard. Almost even relaxed.

"I guess when my company died, I kind of died too. I blimped up to 200 pounds."

"A depressingly familiar experience," said Henley.

"It's different for a famous man with money than for a single woman who's just lost her livelihood."

"Ah."

"They say you fail upward in TV. But it's still failure. I was offered something but I didn't take it."

Henley nodded. "Money, but precious little satisfaction?"

"You know that tune?"

Henley was thoughtful for a moment, and then he spoke. "In my early days I was a lyricist. I burst from the brow of Cambridge ready to bring the world of letters to its papery knees. I ended up writing copy for the BBC. I learned the nuts and screws of cinema then, intent upon a career of sublime art films. Instead, the only jobs I could get were in Hollywood on Grade Z films." He scratched his nose and studied for a moment what appeared to be an eagle, soaring above. "Culture and education, alas, do not always pay the bills. I had less claim to any financial inheritance than aristocratic genes ... My father owns a fish and chips shop in Newcastle. Hence, my brilliant career. Is it any wonder that so many people are killed in my films?"

"I believe you went through a period when you were called 'the Hitchcock of Splatter.'"

"Is that true?" Henley cringed slightly. "I avoid reviews."

"No. Your fans called you that. That's the title of a three part series in *Fangoria* magazine."

Henley raised an eyebrow. "Discussing cinematic ancestry, Biblical allusions and thematic motifs, doubtless."

"No. Probably just an excuse to run pictures of the gory parts."

They both laughed.

"You have quite the impish sense of humor," said Henley. "I take it you have adjust to life here ... Forgotten the past?"

Connor shrugged. "It's a process."

It came out calm and measured a trademark of his. "I find you startlingly attractive Agnes ... But I do not pretend to be in courting trim. Perhaps a couple of weeks from now ... a dozen pounds ... I mean do you think..."

"That's flattering, but I'm afraid I don't date Polar Clients."

"Well, then. Perhaps when I am no longer a client."

Connor looked at him. "You are a persistent fellow, aren't you? I wouldn't think you'd need Polar Spas. I mean a contract to promise to shed weight using the Secret Polar Eskimo Method ... Didn't you try somewhere else?"

"Why?" replayed Henley sharply. "I hired a man specifically to study the spas and the methods ... I need to lose my pounds fast and efficiently."

"LA is bursting with that kind of doctor..."

Henley found himself stiffening. "No liposuction. No intestinal bypass—These things are *not* options."

Connor backed off. "I see.... Well, Polar helped me..."

"I'm sorry." He rapidly recovered his aplomb. "Speck of childhood trauma there in the old eye of being."

"No need to be sorry, Mr. Henley. Your films are an open book." She checked her watch. "I think I have a makeover session coming up."

Henley could not help but feel quite disappointed. "Bridge ... or something like that, then, sometime?"

“Maybe,” she said. “I’m in room 124A. Call me. That is, for anything but a date.”

She wandered off, and he could not help but feel extraordinary intrigue.

* * * *

A week later, Henley sat by the pool, amidst the usual flurry of activity.

He was reading a leather-bound copy of *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyesky, a book he felt appropriate to tote along and force himself to read in this climate. He was feeling profoundly odd, and he knew precisely why.

When Williams wondered by eventually, Henley lay in wait.

“Pardon me ... Williams!”

Williams turned and immediately approached his guest.

“Sir?”

“I’ve been here almost a week. I’ve seen precious few results.”

“Have patience, sir. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” Williams was polite but preemptory.

“I haven’t lost a bloody pound!”

He’d raised his voice a bit, but who could blame him. This was really bothering. He noticed heads turning his way.

A scene! He almost relished it. It was like a day on the set!

“Please, Mr. Williams...”

“Look. The food here is plentiful and outrageously delicious and I’m a compulsive eater, damn it! This isn’t a luxury cruise, man, it’s *afat farm!*”

Williams’s politeness was unfailing. “Mr. Henley, perhaps you’d like to register your complaints to my office.”

“Damned right I would!”

As Henley rose to follow the administrator, he could not help but notice the white coated security men hovering, a definite threat in the present tense.

As they walked past the kitchen toward the office, an Eskimo chef, holding a sharp gleaming knife stepped out and eyed him. Alarm bloomed, but he controlled it. Incidental, surely.

Williams ushered him into the office.

It was pleasant and Spartan, with most interesting decorations. Eskimo artifacts, Henley noted. Kayak parts. Igloo models. Totems. Beads. Costumes. It was like a museum room!

Williams turned, maintaining his politeness. However, as he spoke there was an edge to his voice. “Mr. Henley, my family has spent entirely too long developing our reputation as a fine health spa to allow outbursts like that one. We assumed that as an Englishman you’d have manners.”

“I am not here for fun and frolic, Mr. Williams. I am here to lose weight. I rather fancy living a few more

miserable years.”

Williams nodded. He sat on the edge of his desk. “I see we should have had this talk much earlier, Mr. Henley.”

“You mean you’re actually going to reveal your precious secret?”

“You signed a contract, Mr. Henley. You promised total cooperation.”

“And *you* signed one as well. I lose thirty pounds in one month. Forty five in six weeks.”

“And so you shall.” Williams got up and started walking amongst his trinkets and cultural heirlooms. “Fat, Mr. Henley. My people have dealt with fat for millennia. It is our life. It’s the very stuff of God for us. It keeps us ... alive. Whale blubber ... Polar bear fat ... the fat of other creatures ... Ah yes. We of this clan treasure strains of fat like a fine vintner treasures his fields, his aging cellars, his wine. I wonder, Mr. Henley, if you’ve a true grasp that fat, for Father Nature, is survival. Warmth, energy...” He smiled sadly. “You can imagine the cultural shock of the discovery of people for whom fat was anathema.”

“A Twentieth Century aberration, doubtless.”

Williams went to a rack of photographs.

“My grandfather started this resort, Mr. Henley. He was the first of his tribe to discover the essence of capitalism. It was his work that mad my people wealthy and maintained our identity despite the onslaught of the quicksand of American values.”

“A real sump hole, isn’t it?”

“Compared of course to the sterling behavior of the British.”

“I’m not paying cold hard cash for irony, Mr. Williams.”

“No. We are a proud people. Although we were not trample by the white man, we have take our blows. Now we take your money.”

“For services rendered.” Henley sniffed. “Precious few so far, I must say.”

“Oh we render ... Fat, as well as services. I’m sure your lawyers vetted the contracts. You don’t lose the weight, your precious money is returned. Which is why that outburst at the pool lounge was so unwarranted.”

Henley was a bit confused. “Fat ... rendered?”

“Allow me to show you...”

* * * *

They went through the kitchen.

Henley was glad they didn’t linger. The head chef was slicing a hunk of beef with that huge knife of his and it made the director feel quite uneasy.

“Just past the kitchen we have,” Williams was saying, “our laboratory.”

“Laboratory.”

“Yes.” The man went to the door that Henley had almost entered the first day at the spa. Beyond the door, there was a full-fledged laboratory, with tubing and beakers, Bunsen burners and computers, replete with Eskimo scientists in smocks, working.

Henley was quite taken aback. “Good grief! It looks like bloody Proctor and Gamble!”

“I’m sorry, but the rules don’t permit a tour of our lab. You can be sure that every meal you eat is chemically adjusted for our clients’ metabolism.”

“Those tests you asked for from my Doctor...”

“This way, please.” Williams guided him back to a large walk in refrigerator. He opened the heavy door and gestured Henley inside. Hanging from the ceiling were large cuts of meat. On shelving were round tin cans marked with names.

One, Henley noticed, was marked, Mr. Fiske.

He pointed at it. “Fiske’s specialized formula? How come it’s still here?”

“An oversight, probably,” said Williams.

Henley scanned. He stepped over to the can marked Mr. Henley. He tapped it. It rang hollowly. “Mine’s empty.”

“Due for a refill.”

“I’m still perplexed,” said Henley. He rubbed his belly. “If anything, I’ve *gained* weight.”

“Have faith, Mr. Henley,” said Williams. “Have faith.”

* * * *

He tried to play bridge, but his heart just wasn’t in it. Something still bothered him, something nagging at the back of his mind.

It had been a whole day since Williams had given him the tour, and he still worrying.

“Excuse me, I just can’t play any more,” he told the other bridge players, throwing his cards down. With no further explanation, he left them. He walked a ways, stewing, and then noticed a house phone. Impulsively he went to the shadowed nook and made a call to Agnes Connor. He would like some company, he said. How about a drink, or maybe even dinner.

That would be fine, she said.

He sighed. He felt better already. A drink. Yes, all he needed was a drink...

* * * *

In the restaurant, waiting for Agnes, he ordered drinks.

As the waiter was leaving, Henley had a second thought.

“Oh ... and waiter ... Maybe I am just a bit peckish myself. I’ll have an omelet.”

The waiter scribbled on his pad. “Very good, sir.”

The waiter left. Henley fidgeted. He looked at his watch.

Agnes wasn't due for a while. She had something to deal with first.

Henley wondered just what it was they put in his food. Suddenly, curiosity overwhelmed him. He had to know.

He gave the waiter time to deliver the order. They should be working on it just about now...

Henley got up and went into the kitchen, quietly and unobtrusively.

There, beside the stove, two Eskimos performed an odd rite. Nearby a chef was working away, cutting up celery and onions and cheese for his omelet. The head chef mixed this up into a bowl with eggs, then opened up a tin and ladled out a gooey white oleaginous liquid onto the grille. Cooking fat.

Henley looked closer.

It was marked "Mr. Fiske."

Horried, he rushed in even as the stuff was spattering onto the grille.

"See here, man," he cried. "You're using the wrong formula!"

The Chef looked surprised to see him. "You are not supposed to be back here!"

"But that's *not* the right formula!" He indicated the tin.

"That's the one I was instructed to use for you ... Mr. Henley, right?"

"Instructed. By whom?"

"By one of the owners. Mr. Fiske, of course."

"Fiske? An owner? What is this?"

"I think you'd better go back to your table, Mr. Henley." The chef signaled a co-worker. One trotted to a phone. Another arrived on the sign, clearly there to give any aid necessary.

Henley was flabbergasted and distraught. "What *is* this stuff?" Before they could stop him, he knocked over a couple of cans. Viscous white and pink gunk spilled out on to the floor. The cooks came for him, but slipped in the stuff, flopping onto the floor.

Henley took off, puffing back out to the restaurant floor, hoping to find Agnes. The only thing at his table was his half-full drink which he grabbed and guzzled on his hurried way to that fortunate house phone. He pounded out her number and she answered almost immediately. She listened for a moment and told him to come up to her room.

It was a damned good idea.

An even better idea was the nice tall glass of Scotch over ice that she poured for him as soon as he got in, puffing and disconcerted, telling his tale.

"What *was* that stuff?" he gasped, feeling the liquor do its competent work. "And it had *Fiske's* name on it!"

"Feel better now?" Agnes Conner asked.

"Yes, I suppose so. But this doesn't change what I saw. I haven't lost any weight, Agnes ... And what ...

what *is* that frightful stuff they put in your food?"

"The Formula, of course!"

"But why *Fiske's* can of formula? I tell you, something's terribly wrong. I shall leave on tomorrow's helicopter. This place is part owned by Fiske! Who didn't tell me ... I shall forfeit the money. I don't care. I have to get out!"

"Finish your drink. You're imagining things."

Henley bolted the rest of his drink, not really noticing what he was doing. His heart was pounding, and there was a terrible pain all over him. He felt flushed, felt like he had a heart attack coming on...

He sat down heavily on the couch.

A knock on the door. He started. "What's that?"

"Must be room service." She went to answer it.

Room service? he thought. She was coming down to see *him!*

He turned to the opening door.

There he found a frame full of Williams, the Eskimo chefs, and Eskimo scientists.

He tried to get up. To run perhaps, to do *something*.

He couldn't move! All his muscles felt ... paralyzed.

The drink! There was have been something in the drink.

He turned to Agnes, and she was smiling.

Suddenly, the crowd at the door parted and Fiske himself stepped through, holding his labeled can in one hand and a fried chicken drumstick in the other.

"I would have thought you'd have recognized it, Henley," said the smirking man. "A scene from one of your own films. *Sin's Sacrifice*, I think."

Somehow, only his lower body was paralyzed. He could move his mouth still. He could yet talk. "Fiske! I should have *smelled* you. My lawyers should have smelled you. You can't do this to me!"

"Do what, pal? Nothing illegal, I promise you." He held out the drumstick. "Care for a snack? Cooked especially for you. My own private recipe!" He waved the drumstick under Henley's nose. It smelled rancid.

"What *is* that stuff?" demanded Henley.

"Haven't you guessed?" said Fiske. "It's *me*. Or rather, it used to be..."

He patted his stomach, where there used to be a paunch. Henley turned green. He felt as though he would vomit or pass out with revulsion and horror.

"Oh my God!"

He turned to Agnes, his expression entreating help. But she was cold, that smiling turning so very cold...

This business ... This business was pushing him over the edge! His doctor's had warned him ... his heart was under strain...

"Haven't you figured it out yet, Henley," said the woman. "You're the asshole that killed my company. You're the reason I gained weight. You're the reason I'm here!"

Williams, forever polite, continued. "And now, I think that it's time to make good on that quick weight loss we promised in the contract! Only we'll make it even quicker than you expected!"

A drop of sweat ran down the side of Henley's face. There was only one way he knew of that he could shed pounds *that* quickly!

"The contract specified no liposuction!" he brayed.

Williams face split into a smile. "Oh? Who said anything about—"

The Eskimo scientists pulled out hypodermics.

The Eskimo chefs pulled out gleaming flensing knives.

"... liposuction?" finished Williams.

The collective advanced.

Henley's heart retreated.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Joy to the World

Yes, I was there that fateful night, but on reflection I'm not sure if I was one of the Wise Men or one of the asses.

Christmas is a Festive Time to be in Cambridge, England. Christmas Crackers and funny hats are distributed at lunch in the University Library. Boughs of evergreen and carolers make the medieval colleges, churches and streets look all the more ancient and picturesque. The smell of roasted chestnuts hangs in the air like an echo out of Charles Dickens. Damp cold dances in the fog on the Backs. It had just snowed, bringing down the odds for a White Christmas at Ladbrokes Betting shops to three to one, and I was damned happy to have a warm building outside and a cup of cheer inside.

I sat at High Table at St. Rumwold's College that night with colleagues, some of the most famous computer scientists in the world, eating swan stuffed with snipe, comfits, jugged hare, duck, wood pigeon, pheasant, syllabub, spotted dick, and finally a wheel of the best Stilton cheese I'd ever tasted. A different wine was served with every course.

I could almost feel myself widening, I ate so much. Anyway, the hard bulge in my belt and well hidden by shirt and jacket was starting to cause me discomfort.

Jim Tilton from MIT was beside me, and across was Abe Zuckerman from CalTech—old drinking buddies both of them. They'd even gotten Steve Turtledove in on the fun and he sat down at the end of the table listening in his wheelchair, singing "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" on his computer. I'd flown in from Seattle two days before and had been having a grand old time of it. All very odd, but I had my

orders from on high. Check this out. See what's going on. Then, make a decision as to what to do. Before I was a computer scientist, I did a stint in the Army, and the special skills I learned there served me well with my new employer.

Still, I couldn't help but feel apprehensive here and uneasy about the strangeness of my employment. I just hoped that we'd all been summoned to celebrate a new knighthood or maybe some *Cambridge University Frolics* CD-ROM hitting the market.

This was, I was assured, a season that would be remembered here in Cambridge, a season that would truly kick off the new millennium in the proper manner. Servants collected our cheese plates. The Latin benediction, "Dominus isto discos benediceat," was recited and we were ushered into an ancient oak-paneled room for coffee and port. The group's attitude was not of lethargic satiation, but rather twinkled with expectation.

Doctor Joseph Riventhal and Doctor Mary Wheaton-Smith, head scientists of Cambridge Computer Research, looked particularly sprightly that evening, chatting gaily with the guests. Riventhal was wearing that damned bow tie of his over top his college robes, the red tie he'd worn to every single computer conference in the States, dribbling liquor on it like nobody's business for half the night. How the hell he'd developed something worthwhile drunk or hung over most of the time, no one was quite sure. Probably because of his partner, Doctor Wheaton-Smith. My people in Seattle had tried to snap up Wheaton-Smith years ago for "The Highway Ahead" project, flapping lots of green in her face. No thank you, she'd said. She wanted to stay at Cambridge. La di da, and all that.

Not long after the coffee and port were poured, Riventhal was tapping at his glass.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, if I may have your attention, please," he said. As though he could hide himself with that hideous tie! "Thank you all for coming. As promised this will indeed be a momentous evening and I'm so glad you could be here with us tonight. However, the unveiling will not be here, but at our laboratory. So if you would kindly procure your coats we will now brave the English Winter. Oh and you needn't carry along the bottles of port. We've a case of champagne waiting."

We got our coats handed out and were herded off.

Outside snow drifted down crystalline and soft, and the stone streets of Cambridge seemed to hold eternity in a grain of now. There were taxis lined up, with special security (Security men in Cambridge—an odd sight if you ever saw one!) selected the passengers for each one.

Well, it was a short ride, since the research lab was just a mile out of town. Nothing's very far in Cambridge. But my cab mates and I agreed that we'd rather have had our Christmas pudding amongst the traditional bounty of King Henry's St. Rumwold Trinity than in the dowdy and drab sterility of the Lab lunchroom.

We were herded into the pre-warmed vastness of the labs.

We entered the main room, where the banks of computer monitors sat neatly adorned with Christmas ornaments.

Trolleys of treats along with the promised champagne were wheeled out, nor was any pause taken in getting to the serious business of celebration before us. In a trice, corks were popped and the bubbly was flowing, effervescent and spritzing gaily in the bright light brought to bear on the proceedings. First rate French champagne. Crisp and sparkling, dry and cold on the tongue, an explosion of warmth through the system.

“Please,” said the chief scientist, eyes atwinkle and that damned bow tie abob on his Adam’s apple. “You’ll forgive me if I’m slightly preemptory in this business, but I would like to keep the drink flowing in this time of great celebration. And you’ll see what I mean in a moment. Dr. Wheaton-Smith—perhaps it would be properly auspicious if you would make the toast, since in the most important way you conceived this project.”

“Why yes, thank you.” Doctor Wheaton-Smith replied. “I’d be quite happy to.” She raised her glass, and it caught the light in lustrous harmony with the glint of her glasses. “To the world—may it be free, may it be brave—and may God bless this new twist upon the theme of salvation.”

“Here here!” and “Jolly good!” were the general responses and I found my own voice chime in with a “Hurrah” or two. As soon as the cries died down, though, a murmur crawled through the august audience of observers. The metaphors must have just sunk in.

“Good Lord,” said Dr. Worthington, Head of St. Rumwold’s. “Does this mean we had a Last Supper tonight.” He chortled gaily. “Now surely someone here will betray someone!”

“Is it I, Master?” I said.

Worthington laughed uproariously at that, almost spilling his drink.

As soon as the Doctor marched back to the centrally placed computer console, however, that murmuring ceased and it was silent night once more.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Doctor Riventhal. “Meet ‘Project Jesus.’”

He turned and tapped two simple letters.

Scintillation sparked across the computer monitor and powerful speakers pumped out Handel’s Halleluiah Chorus. In a spark worthy of Industrial Light and Magic’s latest SFX effect, the monitor blew into a three dimensional version of some Renaissance Master’s painting of Jesus Christ, heavily haloed and holding out his robed arms toward all.

“Greetings,” said Jesus, the face animating, mouth moving, perfectly synced with his words. “You’ll forgive the divine metaphors, but what with these names and the season, my dear colleagues could not restrain themselves. I am the Jesus Programme and I am here to save the world.”

Jaws dropped open. I heard a gasp or two.

I just scratched my nose, unbuttoned my coat and moved my shoulders around a bit to get the kinks out.

“Well, maybe I exaggerate a bit, but you’ll get my drift in a moment or two,” said the graphic, eyes glittering and halo twirling gently and majestically above His head. “You see, what I really am is a disk operating system, as well as a new form of computer program that is the nearest thing to AI that my colleagues can come up with. I am adaptable to every computer in existence now, and can expand upon need. I contain knowledge, education, patience and love. At the touch of a key, my accessors can use me to intercede with the largest and most sophisticated computers in the world today, utilizing the Internet. I can answer questions, I can bring information, I can unite the world in peace and harmony. And best of all—I will be distributed free to the needy. The funds earned by those who can afford me shall be used to manufacture computers for those who cannot. I am a self-regenerating and duplicating program. I can be passed from person to person, computer to computer, adapting myself to the needs of each individual or group who have accepted me. With my special revolutionary properties I can heal sick circuit boards and cure faulty monitors. I have every language on Earth at my command.”

The haloed savior lifted two fingers. “I come in peace to make peace. I bring with my artificial intelligence the cures to heal psyches and souls with truth, charity, knowledge and three dee video games. I am the Way, the Truth and the Circuit that shall make this wounded world One.

“Amen.”

The group just stood there, goggling for a moment. Drs. Riventhal and Wheaton-Smith turned and regarded us with satisfied smiles and gleams in their eyes. This was not only revolutionary stuff, they well knew. If any part of this programme could do what they claimed it would do, not only would the world change—They would be as famous as Watson and Crick—no, as lauded through the ages as Newton or Einstein, or any other great scientists. But more than that—they would win Nobel Peace Prizes and have conferences named after them and host television shows and write best-selling books and have a movie made about their story.

I’d seen enough.

In the lull of astonishment between the programme’s graphic’s song and dance and the flood of Q and A that would surely ensue, I pulled the Glock automatic from its holster in the small of my back. Riventhal got it first, right through his red bow tie. I only got a peripheral view of the blood and brains slashing against the neutral gray of the computer terminal. I stitched each individual’s forehead with explosive bullets, “pops” of cartridges exploding rhyming with “plops” of braincases bursting. A quick clip change and black and white of dinner jackets and evening dresses blasted into festive seasonal crimson.

I stepped over a spasming body of a man I’d often bought drinks for on my company’s tab and hopped to the computer console.

The Jesus Programme graphic stared out onto this scene of holocaust, maintaining his serene benedictory air. It may have been a trick of a pixel, but I thought I saw a slightly consternated look appear in His eyes.

I leaned over and kissed His cheek.

Then from my pocket I pulled the Depth Charge program on a hyper density disk, slotted it, and keyed in the command. No crucifixion this time—just a wipe of screen and the “Jesus Programme” was gone. The DC program had a rotor-rooter effect, racing through the entirety of the mega-collection of chips that constituted this state-of-the-art system and wiping every shred of code out, and all records. I’d already checked—this was the only copy of the JP.

The machines began to shake. Smoke began to steam up from fissures. Little flames licked up.

With remarkable aplomb and ease, I stepped to the scientists’ office, where all other records and such on the project were kept.

I pulled a small grenade from my pocket and lobbed it. Seconds later, after removing myself from the immediate vicinity, the area was consumed in a ball of fierce destruction.

I skipped over the bodies, careful not to slip in any of the Christmas gore, and ran down the steps and then to the street. It had been cleared, as per plan, except for the black Vauxhall waiting there to drive me to a private jet at Stansted Airport that would whisk me back to the welcoming—uhm—gates of my company in Seattle.

I got in the front seat.

“Damned Libyan terrorists!” I said as the driver accelerated toward my avenue of escape.

He was a heavy set middle-aged Irishman, formerly with the IRA and now with a far better funded organization.

“Yes,” he said, eyeing the flames that were beginning to gush from the shattered windows of the building. In the distance, the sound of fire brigade sirens skirled through the aborted Christmas night.

No, Drs. Mary and Joseph, I thought glumly.

The world already has a Computer Savior.

And he is a jealous God.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Vicious Wishes

When Peter Thorn threw the tennis ball into the brush Killer, his black Labrador retriever, chased after it. Predictable enough. When she scampered out of the dusty path, however, she carried not the ball in her mouth, but a little man.

Thorn was walking her in Tree People Park, just above Studio City in the Santa Monica Mountains. He usually tried to get up here and get them both some exercise every weekend, but his show, *Vice Cop*, had gotten to be such hell that even his weekends were consumed. This bright Sunday, though, he’d just said to hell with the rewrite that was due Tuesday. He’d scorch the midnight oil Monday night, if necessary. He needed to get out and get some air. True enough, it wasn’t exactly *fresh* air, since it was LA air ... he didn’t need to get away from the word processor, commune with dusty nature and play with his dog some.

The smog hung low over the San Fernando Valley, practically obscuring the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains northward. The sun was high and obscured by shreds of clouds.

The little man was dressed in boots, a rainbow Mohawk and a green leather jacket.

“Geez! Get those canine jaws offa me!” he squeaked, glaring up at Thorn. “Or out comes the switchblade and I’ll cut the bastard, I *swear* I will.”

After twenty years of working in Hollywood, nothing much came as much of a surprise to Peter Thorn. The day his agent shed a tear at an advance showing of *ET*—that was a surprise. A ten-inch tall man with a nasty attitude. Not really.

“Heel, Killer,” said Thorn. “Little problem with that threat, fellow. Seems like Killer’s got your arms pinned. Killer—don’t bite. Yet.”

Little eyes bugged as a decided look of fear came over the little creature’s face. “*Killer*? What kind of name is that?”

“Accurate. You should see him get the rabbits. Must not like the taste of you though, or he’d have your head by now. He likes guts the best, I think.”

“Oh, *damn*! I knew I shouldn’t have come over the hill today! The runes warned me!” He squirmed a little, and the retriever clamped down harder. Drool lathered down from the sides of her mouth, and a growling rolled deep in her throat. “Good Killer, good Killer! I’ll get you a bloody nice rabbit if you like.

Or a nice bloody rabbit, whatever you like!”

Peter Thorn was considering. This was certainly too small a man to be a midget. It was something supernatural, no question about it, he decided. It looked like something from a Disney film—“Honey, I Shrunk the Punk” maybe. Thorn was well read enough to have a grip on the situation.

“You’re a fairy, aren’t you?”

“Bite your lip, bastard!”

“I think you’re the one who has to worry about a biting. Not a fairy? Something close to fairy. A gnome?”

Hmmm. There had to be an angle on this. Maybe take this runtish thing here, team up with John Hughes and McCauley Caulken and make *Gnome Alone*.

“Give me a break, buster. Gnomes have got faces like fireplugs. I got babes enough to beat off with a stick.”

“Hmm. Not if my dog starts ripping at certain part of your anatomy.”

The green the studded leather jacket suddenly spread to the creature’s skin. As though to underline the dilemma it was in, Killer gave the thing a little shake and growled hungrily. It looked up at Thorn with a look in its eye that seemed to say, “You want this piece of meat ground or chunky style. And can I have the bones?”

“Look, chum. I’m on important business. I got powerful folks to report back to!”

A revelation flashed through Thorn.

“You’re a leprechaun, aren’t you?”

“Sheesh. Lame names. That’s not what I’m called where I come from, but if it makes you happy I’ll cop to it. Now will you call your beast off before it perforates? This jacket cost me five gold pieces, and believe me, I ain’t the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow kind of leprechaun.”

“More like a leper-con. Diseased and crooked.” Thorn prided himself on being a quick study. It was part of the reason he’d been able to claw his way to the middle.

“Yeah yeah, whatever. Just tell your mutt to cease and desist! I’ll be on my way. I’m just an LSD flashback from the sixties, guy. Forget about me.”

Thorn, however, knew his fairy stories.

Besides, *Darby O’Gill and the Little People* had been one of his favorite movies as a child.

“Whatever you are, you can grant me three wishes, right?”

“No way! Pure fantasy!”

“Killer! Chew!”

“No! Wait. Yeah, yeah, so I can alter reality flow three times in this reality to save my butt. You don’t want it, take my word for it.”

“So, I tell Killer to drop you and you won’t disappear. You’ll stick around for awhile, give me three wishes.”

“Yeah, okay. But just until sunset tomorrow. That’s all the time I can spare.”

“Swear?”

“Shit. Piss. Damn!”

“You know what I mean.”

“On the grave of my mother!”

“Okay, Killer, let the nice little man go.”

The obedient dog dropped the little man onto the ground. He got up and dusted himself off, checking for holes in his jacket and jeans.

“Actually I’m not so nice.”

“I believe was employing irony. Still, you have to stick to your vow.”

“Yeah. Got me on that.” Seeing that he was relatively unscathed, the cocky little man leaned nonchalantly against a rock and pulled out a tiny pack of cigarettes. He pulled one out, fired it up, and let go a puff of smoke. “Little warning though, bud.” His eyes looked up, dark and wicked. “If I’m any kind of leprechaun, I ain’t no normal leprechaun.”

“Well, you certainly don’t have an Irish brogue.”

“I only grant vicious wishes.”

Peter Thorn stroked the black fur on the top of Killer’s head. “That’s exactly the kind I had in mind.”

* * * *

The Executive Producer of *Vice Cops* leaned back in his chair, face immobile, thinking deeply as he stared at the female intern’s large tight rear end provocatively fitted in her jeans as she bent over to chalk up the latest plot point on the beat board.

“What’s next, what’s next. We’ve got the beginning of Act Five to fill and I want a rousing climax on this one,” said Phil Teneglia, checking his Rolex watch. “Anyway, it’s almost lunch time.”

Typical thought Peter. A two-hour plot meeting had been scheduled. Teneglia spent the first hour and a half taking calls on some independent TV movie project he was planning, then pulling power plays and ego trips with the staff. Then, with a half-hour left, we’ve got to make poor Dot scribble like hell, because Mr. T. had lunch with one of the development executives at Paramount.

“How about a big car chase,” said Peg, a story editor, clearly in bad need of a cigarette, verboten during this meeting, her fingers fairly dancing with each other nervously.

“That works for me,” said Eva Morton, a producer, slumped morosely on the couch.”

Teneglia slapped a hand on the production sheet, scanned some figures and shook his head. “Nope. We’ve spent too much money this year. We need something cheap.”

“A chase on Santa Monica Pier. Picturesque and they’re renting it for a song,” suggesting Alan

Zinmeister, supervising producer hopefully.

“No.” Teneglia toyed with the beak of his San Diego Padre’s baseball cap. “No, I want something with a greater *character* feel. Something that will show our boys at their most dynamic and exciting. Come on, you numbskull. You get paid thousands of dollars a week, and you can’t come up with something better! Maybe we should send this out to a freelancer, hmm?”

The asshole, thought Teneglia. The pier idea was fine, it just wasn’t Teneglia’s. He watched and the others eyes and saw the little glitter of fear behind the contact lenses, between the mascara and the TV burnout wrinkles. “Freelancer” was Teneglia’s code word for—“possible new staffer” which would mean kicking out one of the *old* staffers.

It was up to Producer Thorn to bail everybody out, and he knew just how to do it.

“I think the picturesque idea is great, but I agree about the Pier. Anyway, I saw the Pier on *Hollywood Blues* a couple of weeks ago anyway. But since we’ve got an environment theme these time, it should be outdoors and there’s no reason it can’t be on foot, within budget constraints.” He grinned. “What about Vasquez Rocks?”

Everyone laughed, loosening up the meeting considerably. Vasquez Rocks, of course, was a famous park up near Palmdale in the desert where half the Westerns ever made had shot. Abrupt, gigantic rock formations....*Star Trek* had used them. So had *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure, Part Two*.

“No. We’ll save those for a two-episode cliffhanger.” He tapped his pencil on the desk. C’mon, Teneglia, thought Thorn. I fed it to you ... Go for it.

“Griffith Park! We’ll shoot up a couple of Sierra Club people, and get an environmental speech in the end. The bad guy gets shot and falls off the Griffith Observatory. I love it!” He got up grabbed his bomber jacket from his coat rack and put it on. “Zinmeister, you’re good at those kind of speeches. I want you to do that act. Just work on the details, I’m out of here. Got myself a—”

The phone rang. The Executive Producer picked it up, listened for a moment. His grin dropped to a scowl.

“Damn! Okay, tell ’em I’m be there.” He slammed down the phone. “Problem in Studio C. That prick Reynolds doesn’t like his lines. He want to make some changes. Thorn, you’re our dialogue devil. You come with me. You other folks, block out the beats for number five, and Dot I want the sheet on my desk when I get back from lunch.”

I got up, feigning weariness, but in truth looking forward to what I suspected was coming next. Exactly what it was I wasn’t sure, but it would be good, I knew.

Studio C was just down the way from the writer’s offices, and I got an earful of Teneglia’s ego along the way. Projects, sexual conquests, along with the usual nasty tearing downs of mutual acquaintances. Teneglia was a verbal terror. He was an ace at studio politics who could tear out your heart with a couple of phrases. He was hated by a lot of people, and with good reason—he was a real jerk. He made people’s lives hell.

Me, though, I didn’t hate Teneglia any more than I hated a lot of other people in the industry.

He was just in my way.

The set was the precinct house for *Vice Cop*, and the people were milling around—sipping coffee and looking disgusted.

“There he is, over there!” I said, pointing to where a burly balding man sat morosely behind a desk. Dan Reynolds, our lead actor. I saw him swivel those penetrating eyes toward Teneglia and flash the man a challenge. “That son of a bitch—I don’t know what his problem is. I wrote those lines myself.”

Teneglia was stomping across the set toward the stubborn actor, ready to lock horns. Peripherally, Thorn noticed a movement above. He glanced up.

Caught a glimpse of movement.

A shiver and quiver; a sparkle. The punk leprechaun, prancing over a catwalk.

Thorn paused, then proceeded, several judicious several paces behind his boss.

“You son of a bitch,” Teneglia started. “You just get more and more unprofessional. Don’t you know that time is money? Don’t—”

The klieg light descended with incredible swiftness. It struck Teneglia on the top of his cranium, crushing his skull. Spurting blood splattered across Thorn’s face. He wiped it off just in time to enjoy the sight of Teneglia, lying in a pool of brains and gore, twitching and gasping out the last of his much-despised life.

He hoped a camera had been on to preserve the sight for posterity.

* * * *

“Wish enough for you?” said Mick the sort-of leprechaun.

“Vicious enough for *you*?” asked Peter Thorn, pouring them both tots of Irish whiskey.

“Nice. Very nice indeed. Must admit, I’m enjoying the time I’m spending in these climes.”

“Yes. Not only have I already received the Teneglia’s job—to the betterment of the show ... the first thing I did was to reassign the script that was due tomorrow. Hence, I have tonight free. To carouse, if you like.”

“Hmm. But you’ve got another two wishes, Thorn—and limited time in which to use them.”

“That’s all right ... I know exactly what the next one will be.”

“Wish on, my man!” said Mick, digging crusted blood from beneath his fingernails with the tip of a switchblade. “Wish on.”

* * * *

Peter Thorn had not always been so cold-blooded. In fact, he was rather astonished at the ease with which he was making these vicious wishes that were certain to come true. In fact, in the early part of his career as a writer in Hollywood, he nothing much vicious in him at all.

Back when he’d still been attending UC Northridge, he went to a screening at the Burbank studios of a television network, where he met his next girlfriend, who was the daughter of a union man there. That led to a job as a part-time page, evenings and weekends. He got to know people. Soon, he was a production assistant on a cartoon show. This lead to short cartoon stories ... and once he got the hang of the form, animation scripts.

Years later, his agent used a speculative screenplay to get him a pitch at a TV show so desperate for fresh ideas it was even willing to consider them from animation writers (lowest of the writing food chain in Southern California). He sold a story, however, was not allowed to write the script. However, during the

pitch meeting, he met his new girl friend, a story editor on the show. Soon he had a new partner, in bed and at the typewriter. This arrangement led to actual live action script work with bigger money, to say nothing of residuals and respect and WGA membership. Peter Thorn was a happy, successful man.

He bought a small house in Glendale, played tennis and softball with colleagues and walked his black Labrador retrievers in Tree People Park in the Santa Monica Mountains.

Till he and his girlfriend parted ways, it never occurred to him that his ladder to success was carpeted with willing female flesh. At a party, he met Sylvia, a woman with beautiful eyes, large breasts and a deep love for cats. Sylvia, however, was a paralegal, and had absolutely nothing to do with show business. She was sharp enough, however, to parlay Thorn's sexual obsession with her into marriage. Unhappy with his accommodations (not enough room for her or her cats—and really, Glendale!) she'd talked him into giving up his casual freelance writing life and accepting a staff position on a drudge cop show, in order to make sufficient money for a more suitable level of living. They bought a nice house in Studio City.

Previously protected from the harsh realities of life by the pleasant membrane of his freelancer's bubble, Peter Thorn was thrust into the jabbing, popping reality of office politics, Hollywood studio style—a form that makes a pool of starving piranhas look like goldfish. And although he loathed cop shows, his ability to turn out scripts for them pegged him as a cop show writer, and he could not break out.

Well, anyway, it was a good living.

A few years passed, and Peter Thorn's thoughts slowly turned jaded and mean. He seldom had a nice word for anyone in the industry, and he went out of his way to say nasty, (albeit funny) things about others in the business. People began calling him "Thorny." Behind his back, though, people called him "Prick."

Sylvia left him, socking him for half the money he'd made in their five years together, along with hefty alimony payments and "pet support." With the settlement, she bought a house near the San Gabriels and bred Persians and dated real estate lawyers. Thorn had been able to maintain his lifestyle and his house and his dog only by landing the supervising producer job on *Vice Cop*, a place where he'd clung precariously for five years.

The odd thing about television writing was that it was more about power than actual creativity. The successful people tended to be mediocre writers who were gifted with glib, sharklike attributes and were attracted to the field not by the notion that they might contribute wisdom and fictional inspiration to the commonweal, but by the egoistic aspects, the ample money, and the power over others. This is why most American television tends to be so bad. Shows were merely stitched together hunks of gnawed-on protoplasm from the shark-tank.

And so Peter Thorn became the bitter person who'd found the punk leprechaun in Tree People Park in the Santa Monica Mountains, and thus he'd developed into a person capable of "vicious wishes."

With nary a trace bad conscience concerning it.

* * * *

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you?" Mick asked, as he prepared to dematerialize and take off to accomplish his second grim task.

Thorn took a sip of his cognac, then relaxed in his lounge. He picked up the remote control and tapped down the volume on his state-of-the-art speaker system, from which wafted the gentle saccharine gusts of the new Yanni album.

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Hmmm.” Mick clicked his heels thoughtfully on the table. “Watched some of your shows, read some of your scripts. You’re pretty good.”

“Thanks. I do my best. People call me a hack, but I try to put some life in what I write. I was an English major in college, you know.”

“Then you’re familiar with Goethe’s *Faust*, Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* —”

“Interesting train of thought there, Mick, but you’re no Mephistopheles.”

“Oh no, no. Shit, who’d want your soul anyway?” He turned his narrow-featured face. His pinprick eyes surveyed the collection of books on the walnut shelves. “That’s why you weren’t particularly surprised by me, Peter Thorn. J.R.R. Tolkien ... David Eddings ... Stephen Donaldson ... C.S. Lewis. All those books are fantasies.”

“Bit of a hobby of mine. Collecting as well ... lots of first editions there.”

“You’re an interesting guy. We’re two of a kind, you know.”

“Are we?”

“You haven’t asked why I was up in the hills ... Why I’m even here. Like I say, I’m not of this world.”

Thorn leaned forward, curiosity brimming. “You’re going to tell me about where you’re from?”

“No. Not unless that’s one of your wishes.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’ll let it linger on in the realm of my imagination.”

“Yeah. Whatever. Nonetheless, you know, I think we’re quite a pair. ’Fact, I think I kinda like you. Tell you what. You want to actually *see* the second wish accomplished. I could spirit you there invisibly. No one would see you. You could view the whole thing quite safely.”

For a moment, Peter Thorn’s heart quickened. His fancy was tickled.

Actually *see* it.

But, as heartless, as satisfied as he felt about the actual *death* of Teneglia, in truth, as he was washing the blood off of himself, he’d felt a thrill of horror, a nagging sense of wrongness in his heart.

His bitterness toward his target might be softened by being on the spot. No—perhaps his conscience was gone, but he still had feelings. He was not totally dead.

“Bad idea,” he said. “Just do it. I’d rather stay here and relax.”

The punked-out leprechaun shrugged. “It’s your wish. Just tryin’ to let you get full value.”

With a scowl and a twitch of his darkening features, the leprechaun disappeared.

Thorn pondered his volumes of fantasy for a moment.

Then he thumbed up the volume on the New Age music, leaned back in his lounge, tossed back the rest of the cognac and took a little snooze.

* * * *

“Tell you what, Jack,” said Mick the punk leprechaun as he buttered his hung of whole wheat tossed and sipped on his thimble of breakfast beer. “You got a nice writer’s sense of irony.”

Thorn nodded, grinning back a yawn as he unfolded the LA Times, looking for the Metro section.

Sure enough, there it was on page B2:

Woman Mauled and Partially Eaten by Mountain Lion

“They come out of the hills sometimes, you know,” said Thorn. “Not many fatalities ... but not impossible. She *did* see it first, didn’t she?”

“Oh yes. She was taking a walk. An easy target. Fact, there was a bit of a chase, back to the house. She made it back to her backyard. Oh yes, she knew what was happening.”

Ah, poor Sylvia. A fitting end.

Offed by a great big *cat*.

“And you changed her will?”

“Easier than conjuring up a mountain lion, that’s for sure!” said Mick.

“Excellent—and not a thing to link any of it to me!”

“Just like with your executive producer. I do a tidy job, don’t I?”

With his bitter need for revenge somewhat abated, for the first time Thorn actually looked at the leprechaun with more than just opportunism on his mind. What a creature, what a little marvel—a perfect little homunculus of the human form. From what exotic world ... All those fantastic notions, those legends, those wives tales ... Did that mean that they were true?

But then he remembered that he had a third wish coming, and all the wonder and awe that he had felt as a young boy reading the classics of fantasy (he hardly ever actually *read* them anymore ... he just collected them) died and the tantalizing future of reality erupted before him, shiny and exciting with a mere whisper of his third and final wish.

He looked at his watch.

“I’m running out of time, it would seem.”

“You know, I like you. I’ll give you an extension, if you like. Maybe we should talk...”

“No. Nothing personal, but I’d just as soon let you go back to where you came from.” Peter Thorn stood. “Come on, let’s go back to where we met.”

“Sure thing, guy ... but without Killer this time okay?”

* * * *

The view was spectacular.

The very first time Peter Thorn had seen it, he was reminded of that Bible story where Satan tempted Jesus. The Devil had taken Jesus up to a mountaintop with a worldwide view and offered it to all to him, if he’d simply bow down and worship him.

This must have been the place. From here you could see much of the Valley and part of LA proper. All the studios were down there, riches and glamour and power.

“Kinda pretty view,” said Mick, perched upon a rock, nonchalantly. “Good idea to come here. I can just grant you your wish, and then be off!”

A niggling curiosity touched Thorn, but his overwhelming ambition elbowed it out of his mind. “Third wish then—I want to be a very powerful man in the entertainment business! It doesn’t have to come quickly, but I want there to be a definite ascent.”

The punk leprechaun cocked his head. “Vicious wishes. I said, vicious wishes!” He frowned, scratching his head.

“Oh, I’ll be vicious enough, don’t worry!”

“A very general wish, after your wonderfully specific ones before.”

“I’ve got the talent, I’ve got the drive ... all I need is the luck and the opportunity!”

“Hmm. Okay, I think I’ve got the idea of what you want. And I believe that I can provide it. Consider your third wish granted.”

He didn’t know what he’d expected. A frisson, a thrill, an electric charge. Or maybe simply a surge of immense self-satisfaction.

In any event, he didn’t expect the profound fade to black that he got.

* * * *

When he awoke, it was almost dusk.

A basilisk slithered by on the trail just beneath him, into a cave. In the distance, over the Hollywood Freeway, an immense dragon wheeled, dove, and came up with a mangled BMW in its claws, leaking people and blood. A shiver of sparkling dust hung in the smog that draped the San Gabriel foothills—like Disneyoid magic.

Mick the punk leprechaun was nowhere to be seen.

He staggered back to his car, hurrying because he heard ominous stirrings in the bushes. What was going on? Had Mick’s granting of his wish somehow backfired? He only knew that he felt the desperate need to be safe and secure past the threshold of his own home.

He got into his green Jaguar and speed down the canyon road to Studio City. What the hell was going on? Had he been slipped some kind of drug? Was it wearing off now? Laurel Canyon Road seemed normal enough.

He turned off onto Laurel Terrace, sped to his house. He garaged his car. Everything as usual ... except that strange tint to the sky. A weird cast, an odd tint of fiery purple that he’d never seen before in the sky...

And there was a tremble of something else in the air ... hovering and expectant.

“Killer!” he called. “Come on, boy!” He unlocked the gate and went into the back yard.

The dog’s body lay in the middle of the back yard. A gargoyle-like creature, its wings flapping in gratification, was nibbling on the poor creature’s guts.

Stunned and sickened, Thorn turned away. The gargoyle swung a lazy, horned look his way, then turned back to its bloody feast.

Hands trembling, Thorn unlocked the back door and then, much swifter, re-locked it. He staggered to his den, where he kept a gun. He opened the drawer where he kept it, but found it empty.

Over his mantelpiece was his father's saber. The man had been a Marine, and had it to Thorn when he'd graduated college. Thorn unsheathed it, meaning to go out and kill whatever what had gotten Killer ... but found he could not. He was shaking too hard.

He turned a few more lights on, went to the bar and poured himself a stiff whiskey. Downed it, poured another.

What was happening to the *world*!

What had happened to his *wish*?

Thorn went back to the den. He turned on the television set. The Evening News was on.

Tom Brokaw had pointed ears.

"...King Bush today decreed a raise in spell tax. In his remarks after his speech, he condemned the violent actions of the Orcs for Equal Rights...."

The phone rang.

"Peter! My friend! It's Mick. How ya doin'?"

"What the hell is going on?" Thorn screamed into the phone. He slopped some of his drink onto his shoes.

"A huge success story! Yours! Pal, I've got deals for you that you won't believe. You're going to be a *huge* celebrity here. Get this ... first gig—Executive Producer, *Elf Cops*. 'He's a demi-God; she's a witch. They're *recops*.' And that's only the beginning! Breakfast tomorrow, I map it out for you! Oh, and lock your doors, though, and don't go out. I've installed an automatic protective spell. It's a little wild and wooly here, sometimes, but you'll get used to it."

"I—I don't understand," was all Thorn was able to gasp out.

"What not to understand?" said the leprechaun cheerfully. "It's your third wish. And guess what! I'm your agent! I get 10 percent!"

"But this ... this isn't Hollywood!"

"Of course it is ... just *my* Hollywood! And guess what I was doing in yours. Looking for fresh ideas. Instead, I got myself a fresh client. We both win!"

"But my dog!"

"Oh, forgot to tell you. Watch out for the gargoyles. I'll give you a special charm to ward them away tomorrow. Meanwhile, there are scripts on your bedside table you've got to read. Sleep tight. Caio!"

The "click" of disconnection.

Although a hundred questions, a thousand fears rushed into Peter Thorn's mind, he could not call back.

He didn't have the phone number. And did phones even *use* numbers here? Or did they use spells?

He took a several deep breaths, got himself another drink and then went to the living room.

Across the way, a troll was mowing his lawn.

Peter Thorn thought about the whole business a moment.

Had things really changed that much from the LA he knew and loathed?

Naw.

He went to get the scripts.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Side Effects

ONE

It started as a noise in the night.

The sound came from the other side of the house, seemingly from Paul's room. Like the wind, snarling through gutters and branches, screaming an elemental fury, scratching claws on shingles. Glissando on the tail end, dying into animal bathos: trying to get in, or trying to get *out*.

The commotion woke Kathy Sayers up immediately. She was very sensitive to sounds from her eight-year-old's room. She would have preferred that his sleeping place was closer to hers, but the way the frame house was built, the master bedroom was on the ground floor and the other smaller rooms were upstairs. Besides, as Chet would always remind her, a single mother needed her privacy from time to time. Especially when she had her boyfriend over.

The sound got under her skin, and raked fingers of ice up her back. She hopped out of bed immediately, not bothering to put on her slippers or a robe, just making do with her old cotton nightgown inherited from her mother. The cold wood floor woke her up further as she stumbled to the light switch—click!—letting the illumination guide her out into the foyer and through the living room, toward the stairs.

The odor of the ham she'd baked last night hung in the cool air, all cloves and sizzling fat, homey and sweet. The familiar outlines of the living room furniture reassured her as she traipsed over the rug. As she reached the base of the staircase, however, the sound swelled again—more immediate and visceral, and this time Kathy sensed danger, and all her maternal instincts and her love well up into one great clot of fear.

The sound was more animal this time. Cat hiss. Tiger growl. The wind whistling through night bones as it marched past gravestones.

She switched on the light, her need to go to her son driving back any fear or trepidation, and then she hurried up the stairs.

He was her only child, the product of a marriage turned sour five years ago. When Robert had asked to take the three-year-old Paul for a weekend, she had complied. She didn't see Paul for a month, and only then because she'd obtained a court order to get him back. It had been the worst month of her life.

When Paul came back, he was close to catatonic. He still referred to that period as “The time when I was dead, Mommy.” There had been a long, nasty custody battle, but Kathy had won finally, and now she lived alone with her son in their house in the countryside near Owings Mills, Maryland.

The cry came halfway up. “Mommm—mmeeeeee!”

“Paul!” She stopped, leaning on the rail for support. “Paul, are you all right?”

Nothing, just that wailing sound, drifting away like a shushing wave from a shore.

“Paul!” She hurried up the rest of the way on the stairs, her heart pounding and life closing about her like a fist. After she had lost him for that month, she’d sworn she’d never lose him again. He would have all the love and attention and support and child can get from his mother. All the very best....

When she reached his door, all was silent again.

At the end of the hall, a window looked out onto their side yard, and she saw for the first time that it was raining. Droplets splattered against the separated panes, blurring the shadow of the old elms, shaking with the wind.

The wind ... Yes, that was the sound she’d heard. Only the wind....

“Paul?”

Silence.

His bedroom door was closed.

Taking a deep breath, she went to the door and opened it, praying that it *wasn’t* Paul making that hellish noise, praying that it wasn’t some kind of side effect to the medication.

TWO

“Attention Deficit Disorder,” pronounced the teacher, enunciating the words professionally. “I see there were indications of it last year while Paul was in first grade. Also some restlessness. This year, however, it has become a definite and pronounced problem. I’m afraid, Mrs. Sayers, that Paul is hyperactive. That’s why I scheduled this conference. To talk with you about solutions to this problem.”

Her name was Mrs. Hurt.

She wore a severe black dress—long, with stiff creases. Its sharp angles complemented the narrowness of her face as its blackness matched the darkness of her eyes. Those eyes fixed upon Kathy Sayers now with intensity, self-possession, and total conviction. Only her voice showed any trace of compassion or understanding. The voice was soft and musical and compelling, almost hypnotically so. Kathy estimated that she was forty years old, but the way she talked, the way she wielded her pedagogical authority made Kathy feel like she was in grade school receiving a disciplinary lecture.

“I see. Well, children are bound to have problems. I’ll be glad to work with you in the best way that I can? As you probably know, I’m a working, single mother. I don’t spend as much time as I would like with Paul. Perhaps if I spent more time with him on his homework? Took an extra hour or so a day to make sure he was loved and cared for?”

Right now, Paul was in his afternoon daycare session the school provided for working parents—for a healthy financial consideration. In fact, most of the child-support payments she got from her ex-husband Robert Sayers went to cover Paul’s daycare and his summer care. Oh, her Dad helped out once in

awhile, and her boyfriend Jerry could be counted on in a tough spot, but she didn't know what she would have done without the services offered by Robinwood Elementary.

Mrs. Hurt smiled. "Mrs. Sayers.... Kathy, if I may call you that ... From what I can see, Paul is a psychologically well-adjusted child. He's a real delight, frankly, in many ways—and I thoroughly enjoy his artwork. I really think you've got a terrific artist there in the making."

"Thank you. My father is a professional artist, and I do a little bit of watercolor myself from time to time. But if you think that Paul's okay—what causes this hyperactivity or Attention Deficit Disorder or whatever you call it?"

"Some children occasionally lag in the development of their central nervous system, but I'm really not qualified to go into that. Which is why I've asked Mrs. Martin, the school nurse, to participate in this conference. Will you excuse me? I'll just go next door to the infirmary and get her."

"Of course," said Kathy in a muted voice.

Mrs. Hurt left the conference room, allowing Kathy to get a hold on herself. This really couldn't be *that* serious, though. Sure, Paul was *avery* active kid. Some days he was all over the place, especially if he was in a good mood. And he never could sit still at a dinner table, something which had disrupted many a family gathering. But with a child like Paul, this was just a detail—he was such a good, loving, *sweet* child in so many other ways that a little restlessness was very easy to deal with.

This was really not a good time for problems with her only child, though. Kathy Sayers had just changed jobs. She now had a demanding position at a computer company in the Hunt Valley Technical Park, and at least for the first few months she was going to be sore-pressed for time to deal with problems with Paul. *Oh well*, she thought. *I'll just have to sleep a little less*. When the choice was between her boy's welfare and a stupid little bit of rest, Paul won hands down.

She was an attractive woman, perhaps a little less so (or she thought so, anyway), since she'd put on a few extra pounds. She kept her hair in a short shag not because she liked short hair especially—indeed, she longed for the long brunette tresses of her youth—but because long hair made her look older. She was thirty-five years old, and despite all the creams she used, she was beginning to detect crow's feet clawing around her brown eyes, along with a telltale chin sag. Otherwise, she was in pretty good shape, having weathered childbirth without too much resulting droop. She'd caught herself a pretty satisfactory boyfriend—he was a little gun-shy about marriage, but certainly placable enough to stick with for a while longer to see what developed. Yes, a typical enough contemporary single Mom, and life had gotten better and better in that last couple of years.

She just hoped this business with Paul wasn't serious.

A minute later Mrs. Hurt came back, accompanied by a black woman in a white nurses outfit. She didn't wear a nurse's cap, but looked starched and efficient nonetheless.

"Kathy, this is Winona Raphael. Winona's our school nurse. Winona, this is Kathy Sayers, Paul's mother."

"That's quite a little artist you have there, Mrs. Sayers."

They shook hands.

"Thanks. I think so. I encourage Paul to express himself. I'm sorry he's expressing himself in a negative way."

“You mustn’t think of it in that manner, Mrs. Sayers,” said Winona, sitting down. She was a handsome woman in her thirties, resembling Oprah Winfrey halfway into her diet, but without the professional makeup and hairstyle.

“Winona’s here to tell you a little bit about the medical facts,” said Mrs. Hurt.

“Well, Attention Deficits aren’t exactly an area with a lot of facts. Did you know that at one time, the problem was thought to be minimal brain damage suffered at birth? Well, of course Paul’s a fine, healthy young boy. I don’t think I’ve had him sick in the infirmary once. But the problem, researchers think, *is* a physical one.” She cleared her throat and smiled. “I’m sorry to lecture, Mrs. Sayers. Kathy. Please interrupt with any questions...”

“I’m sure that Mrs. Sayers expects a lecture, don’t you. She *is* in a school!” Mrs. Hurt smiled mildly at her own lame joke, but Kathy could only manage a nod. This had the makings of a mother’s nightmare: *I’m sorry, madam, but the light of your life, the joy of your heart, has a nasty, incurable disease that will cause you and him immense pain and grief.*

No it wasn’t *that* bad. But why was her pulse hammering so?

“Yes. A simple physical problem. Are you aware, Mrs. Sayers, of all the stimuli that pour through our senses every minute of every day? Think about it. Sights, sounds, tastes, smells—all leading the mind in different directions. In fact, one of the human brain’s first duties after a full development of sensory awareness is *to block off* some of that awareness. We wouldn’t be able to concentrate on driving, on cooking, doing our jobs, paying our bills, talking to people, if we couldn’t *concentrate*. Now, some children, like Paul, have brains that are a little slow in developing this ability. Their central nervous systems are apparently underdeveloped. If you just leave them alone, once they hit puberty their bodies adjust and everything is just fine. However, in the interim, imagine all they haven’t paid attention to!”

“To say nothing of the disruption in their classes,” said Mrs. Hurt coolly.

“Well, some children with these problems don’t necessarily cause classroom difficulty. And I’m sure that although Paul’s been in trouble from time to time, he’s really not a bad boy ... However, he’s apparently not learning what he should learn, and this is the curse of ADD. Kids get left behind. They lose face before their peers, they lose self-esteem—and they aren’t prepared for their proper functioning places in society.

“But there is hope, Mrs. Sayers. Researchers have discovered that by *stimulating* the central nervous system, children can lead normal lives both at school and at home—and they can reach their full learning and developmental potential.”

“What, I let Paul drink coffee?”

Mrs. Raphael shook her head. “No. It’s a little more controlled than that. There’s a chemical compound called methylphenidate. The manufacturer’s name is ‘Pumpamine.’ It’s been discovered that a daily dosage of ‘Pumpamine,’ determined by the child’s pediatrician, does absolute marvels.”

Mrs. Hurt nodded emphatically. “I don’t know what I would have done without it.”

“You’re suggesting medication for Paul?”

“That’s correct,” said Mrs. Hurt. “But only if your pediatrician allows it, and only in the dosage he recommends, to be administered only by a trained official here at school. In this case Mrs. Raphael—and of course yourself at home.”

Kathy thought about this a moment. It sounded too simple. She'd heard about Pumpamine before, and she wasn't pleased about the idea of giving a child drugs beyond cough medicine or booster shots. When she'd heard the word Pumpamine, she'd said, "Not *my* baby!" But then again, when Paul was newly born, she'd also sworn that he'd be allowed to eat only wholesome things—no junk food! Now, of course, he craved the stuff, from Twinkies to Fruit Loops, and usually got it when he wanted it, because she was either too tired in the morning or after work to fix him something from scratch or too tired to say "No!"

"This all sounds very glowing ... Too good ... A simple pill a day and Paul will be a straight-A student."

"We didn't say that, Mrs. Sayers. Pumpamine is only a tool that we've found most valuable. It's not really a cure for hyperactivity or any aspect of ADD, which takes care of itself as the child matures."

Kathy Sayers took a breath and asked the question that had been sticking in her throat near her heart like a lump of peanut butter.

"Are there any side effects?"

THREE

As soon as she opened the door, Kathy felt the blast of cold wet air. At the far side of the room, the window was up, and the curtains billowed in the wind like the robes of some priest of the night. Rain splatted in upon the box of toys in the corner, ringing hollowly on a tin drum. The air smelled of dampness, of dead leaves and of something else—something that raised Kathy's skin into goose bumps.

"Paul?"

She turned on the light.

"Mommy!"

His bed was around the corner, past the jut of wall that contained the closet. He was lying in the middle of the single bed, shivering, his flannel Pluto the Dog pajamas wet, his long dark hair pasted down into his face. He looked up at her blearily, and his teeth were chattering with cold.

"Mommy?"

"Paul ... Paul darling. What happened?"

"I don't know. I just woke up, and I was all wet."

It took only a quick mother's examination to make sure that he was otherwise all right. She went quickly to close the window. Beyond, barely perceivable in the density of the night, she saw the maple tree's branches tapping against the slope of the roof, clanking dully against the gutter. The cold and the wet slapped at her until she closed the window against them. Her feet squished on the sodden rug.

"Why did you open the window, honey? It's raining outside."

"I didn't open the window, Mommy."

"Here, we've got to get you out of those clothes."

She went to the linen closet outside and got two large plush cotton towels. By the time she'd gotten back, Paul had already worked his way out of his pajama tops. He was large for his age and overweight, and his skin, pale at the best of times, deathly white. She rubbed him with the familiar comforting firmness

that she used after his bath, whispering soft reassurances. She let him take off his own pajama bottoms and towel himself there while she went to get fresh PJs and his woolen robe.

She was cleaning off his feet when she noticed that bits of dead leaves and a small twig clung to his sole.

“Paul. How did your feet get dirty?”

“I don’t know.” He seemed better now. His teeth had stopped chattering, and he’d stopped shivering, and he seemed to be sucking up warmth like a sponge. But he’d gone a bit aloof, a bit vacant, like he did at times when he was upset. Like he was when she’d finally gotten him back from his father after that month of hell. Distant.

“What you like a cup of warm hot chocolate?”

“Okay.”

“With or without marshmallows?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Bad sign. He usually loved the little funny button marshmallows she dropped into his cocoa. *Give the poor guy a break, gal!* she thought. *He’s been sleepwalking—clearly he’d opened the window and for some reason just stood there while the rain and a gust of dead leaves poured in. That’s how his feet must have gotten dirty. He must’ve tromped in stuff that had fallen in the window.*

She turned her head.

Sure enough, there was a whole pile of detritus littered on the wet spot. That’s what had happened.

“Mommy?”

“That’s me.”

“Mommy, when I have my cocoa...”

“Yes dear.”

“Mommy, when I have my cocoa, can I have a Good Pill too?”

FOUR

“We call them Good Pills, champ,” said Doctor James Larsen, Paul Sayers’s pediatrician.

Quiet and still, Paul sat on the papered examination table, his chest bare, quiet, his eyes wide and averted from the sterile white cabinets filled with stainless steel medical equipment. The Doctor had just finished “uhming” and “ahhing” as he’d placed the chill flat side of his stethoscope against the boy’s chest and back. He’d already run through the other rituals of the exam. Now he was issuing his proclamation.

“So you agree with Nurse Raphael then,” said Kathy, standing near a corner of the room, her arms folded.

“There you go, Paul. The old ticker is just fine. In fact, you’re healthy as a horse.”

“Am I gonna get a shot?”

“No, no, Paul. No shots today.”

Paul actually smiled, looking relieved.

Doctor Larsen tucked the gleaming stethoscope back beneath the folds of his long white coat. "Well, Mrs. Sayers, it's really not a matter of agreement. Hyperactivity is an established condition." He tapped the official school behavioral checklist on the table. "According to this, it's definitely been observed in Paul, to the detriment of his learning and the learning of others. My job is to determine if Paul is healthy enough to take it, and what the dosage should be."

"Wait a minute. Don't I get a voice in the matter?"

"Hmmm? Oh, of course. Absolutely." He turned his attention back to Paul. "Yes, Paul. We call them Good Pills. You know how you get restless in class, and it's hard to do your work and the teacher gets upset with you?"

Paul nodded, a dead-serious expression on his face. "Boy. Yeah!"

"Well, when you take the Good Pills that your Mom or the Nurse give you, that will stop, and you'll be able to pay attention. That is, of course, if your mother says it's okay."

"Mom, can I have Good Pills?"

"We'll see, dear. Doctor, don't you think we ought to have *aprivate* conference?" She was feeling a little annoyed. Dr. Larsen was a new pediatrician. Dr. Adams, who had administered *her* shots and pills and reassurances when she was a child, had retired and Dr. Larsen had taken over his practice.

"Yes, certainly. Paul, can you get that shirt back on by yourself? Good fellow. Then, I want you to go out to Nurse Wilkins and tell her that you're to get a great big lollipop and a book to read. Your mother and I are going to talk a little bit."

Paul, certain now that no needle was going to pierce his backside today, returned to normal, bouncing over to get his shirt and jumping about happily. Shirt untucked, he ran out of the room, hollering for his lollipop, which *had* to be grape and nothing less.

Dr. Larsen turned to Kathy, an eyebrow raised. "I don't suppose that Paul is the little guy Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes* is modeled on?" In other words, "Are you trying to tell me that this little devil isn't hyperactive?"

"Doctor, I'm just trying to be careful. I don't like the idea of giving drugs that aren't really necessary to my son."

"Of course you aren't. That's an understandable position to take. I hear it constantly, Mrs. Sayers. Constantly! And you know, I'd only worry if I *didn't* hear it!"

Dr. Larsen was a tall, younger man with blonde hair and a cowlick, who looked like a Jimmy Stewart who'd been a hippie when in the sixties. He had a faint Southern accent which he used to full effect in counseling parents, acting like a homey sage dispensing wisdom and good advice. He scratched his nose thoughtfully as though engaged in some internal

"Come on into my office, won't you, and I'll give you some literature on the subject that you can read at your leisure."

Well, thought Kathy as she followed him back to his office. *This isn't so bad*. At least she wasn't getting the kind of pressure she'd been served at Robinwood. Mrs. Hurt and Mrs. Raphael had stopped short of saying, "You're a rotten mother if you don't give your son Pumpamine," but not by much.

The Doctor pulled open a file cabinet and handed Kathy two large pamphlets. "There you go. Read those, and I think they'll answer your questions. In the meantime, I can only say that Paul is perfectly well enough to take a moderate dosage of Pumpamine, twice a day. I recommend, oh, about fifteen milligrams each."

Kathy blinked. "But Doctor. I thought ... And Doctor, what about side effects!"

"You know, Mrs. Sayers," he said, sitting down and pulling his prescription book out. "This is not something that would have to be permanent. Pumpamine medication can have side effects, true. Insomnia, headaches, nausea and tearfulness are sometimes evident. If you find this happening to Paul, report to me immediately and we'll either lower his dosage or stop it all together. This isn't exactly what you could term radical treatment. Happens all the time!" Nodding pleasantly to himself he started to fill out a prescription.

"Doctor—Paul's father had.... had difficulties with drugs."

"Oh yes? What kind?"

"There was a period in which Bob did everything he could get his hands on. He's part Cherokee.... I don't know if his Indian heritage has anything to do with it..."

Dr. Larsen looked at her through his glasses perched at the end of his nose; the effect was pure patronizing authority lecturing to the unwashed. "Mrs. Sayers ... Kathy ... You don't seem to understand ... The brain is a stew of chemical reactions and interactions. Neuroreceptors, endorphins, what have you—all controlling the flow and nature of electrical energies through synapses and ganglia. Now, I'm not condoning drug abuse, mind you. Sounds like that was your ex-husband's problem. Unsupervised self-medication. But medical science has grown in leaps and bounds in just the past half-century, and we're starting to understand how we can make ourselves function *normally*. You see, that word is the key here. Paul is functioning abnormally—he's not manufacturing enough interior stimulants to allow his central nervous system to take the load it needs to take. Pumpamine helps. If Paul didn't get the right amount of Vitamin C, for instance, he'd be quite vulnerable to scurvy. You'd have no problem giving him Vitamin C then, would you?"

Kathy shook her head. "Doctor, the thing is ... well, this is a powerful stimulant, this Pumpamine—right? I mean, we're talking about *speed* here. Bob took speed.... and it made him hell to live with."

Dr. Larsen smiled condescendingly. "Yes, you certainly wouldn't want to take Pumpamine. I wouldn't take it—but we're adults. Our chemistry works in different ways than child's does."

"What would happen if *I* took too much?"

"Goodness. I never thought about that—if you had a heart problem, it would probably kill you. But remember, Kathy—children are effected differently, and we only intend to administer a small amount to Paul. Any other questions?"

Kathy said nothing.

"Good." The Doctor ripped off the prescription paper, tendered it to her. "Now, I recommend against generic methylphenidate. Pumpamine is purest, and best, I think, even though it is a little more expensive. However, I have an arrangement with Randall Drugs down the road for a significant discount for patients. I've written in the dosage as well. Good luck, Mrs. Sayers. He's a fine young man, and he deserves only the best. Please give me a report after the first two weeks of dosage."

Kathy Sayers reached out reluctantly and took the paper.

Dr. Larsen winked at her. "Try it, Kathy. I think this could well be just what Paul needs to lead a normal healthy life, and to get the absolute most he can out of school. And in the unlikely event there are side effects ... just call me immediately."

The Doctor closed his prescription book with the reverence a minister closes his Bible after doing a scripture reading.

FIVE

Kathy told Dr. Larsen about the sleepwalking incidents.

No insomnianauseaheadachestearfulness then, Mrs. Sayers? Well, I wouldn't worry. It's not the Pumpamine that's causing these incidents. Must be something else. And from all reports, Paul is turning into a model student. The last checklist I got reports no restlessness, no hyperactivity and a definite improvement on concentration during schoolwork. Congratulations, Mrs. Sayers. The medication is doing exactly what it's supposed to. Goodbye.

Only in fact that wasn't the whole story.

Paul's artwork had suffered.

In fact, he'd all but lost interest in drawing or finger-painting or coloring that had so absorbed the little boy before. No more dragons and knights, cowboys and Indians, no more army men and tanks in their wild and wacky combinations. In fact, lately, Paul just tended to sit in front of the television and stare at it vacantly.

Chet had commented on this. He started calling Paul "Little Spud of Couch Potato Land" which irked Kathy, but in truth she had to admit that Paul, in his medicated state, was much easier to take care of.

And he hardly even cried when the cat was killed.

"Jesus," said Chet, staring down at the mess in the backyard. "Jesus Christ! Honey, don't look...."

But of course Kathy had to look.

Pedro was a big black and white tom that Paul and Kathy had adopted and called their "guard cat." He was a ferocious mouser, a nasty street fighter—and yet he was as gentle as a kitten with Paul. Now, he lay behind the walnut tree in the backyard, just short of the forest, quite dead.

Kathy only looked at him for a moment, but that was enough to imprint the image in her mind forever. Pedro's skull had been split open as though it had been caught in a vise, and bloody brains were squeezed out like a giant wart growing from its head. The rest of its body was mauled and torn as though by claws, bones showing through the ripe flesh and guts like teeth sprouting from a field of gore.

Kathy let Chet bury Pedro. She told Paul that the cat had run away, and that it probably wouldn't come back. Paul had cried for a full hour, and he was sad for a day or two, but then he bounced back.

Chet was only one of a number of people who noted how calm and different the boy was. This was fine with Chet, who'd always had a bit of a problem with Paul's antsy-ness. This probably was because that now, when Chet took out his guitar and played a song that he'd just written to Kathy and her son, Paul actually sat and listened attentively, often even clapping at the end. Chet Rickard professionally was a math teacher at the local community college, but he wrote country-western songs in his spare time and his dream was move to Nashville someday and *sell* those songs to Kenny Rogers or Dolly Parton or better

yet, record them himself.

Kathy knew that this was a bit of a pipe dream. Although Chet was a good enough guitar player, his voice was thin, and his songs were very standard sounding. The only one she actually thought was good was a sad one about a wife dying of cancer while her husband picked up women in bars. Anyway, he got along much better with Paul now, and they were even chumming around a lot—apparently yet another plus for the Pumpamine.

Chet was a slender, average sized fellow with red hair and a generally jocular manner, except for odd moments when he would get dead serious. Chet was dead serious after he had to bury poor Pedro. “Must have been some kind of animal,” he told Kathy out of the blue a few days later. “Maybe we’d better notify the police. Anyway, you shouldn’t let Paul go out into the woods until we know that nothing like this is going to happen again. In fact, I’d even discourage him playing in the back yard for a while.”

Kathy agreed, and she was quietly pleased about Chet’s almost fatherly concern. They were definitely becoming more of a family, there was no question about that!

Chet duly reported the incident to the police, and came back slightly ashen.

“There’s been a spate of these incidents,” he told

Kathy. “Lots of cats and dogs have been killed in similar ways. They’re wondering if its some kind of wild bear or panther or something.”

“What, *here*?”

“I know. Must have come down from Pennsylvania or Western Maryland—or maybe it fell off a carnival truck or something. They’ll find it, though. Anyway, they said that a lot of people’s pets have been killed, and there’s a lot of pressure....”

“All right, all right, we’ll just keep Paul in for a while. He won’t mind.”

“Yes, you know, that Pumpamine is making him almost human!” said Chet, grinning.

She grimaced at him. “He’s just a little boy, and a lot better than *you* were when you were his age, I bet.”

“What? My mother says I was the best little boy that ever was!” Chet’s blue eyes twinkled, his good humor suddenly fully returned. “Hey, that reminds, me, darling. I just wrote a new song. You and Paul want to hear it tonight after this delicious dinner that you’re cooking?”

She thought about that for a moment. “I’ll make a deal with you. We’ll listen.... But I need a favor, Chet. *Abig* favor....”

SIX

The favor amounted to a simple babysitting task.

Two weekends later, Kathy had to go to a computer conference up in New York City. Her father had initially agreed to watch Paul that weekend, but then he had to travel to Iowa to take care of some family matters. Kathy needed Chet to stay at her house and watch Paul Friday night, Saturday, and Sunday until the early evening when she got back. Before, Chet might have balked. He was a nice enough guy, and she did love him, but he had a hard time with things like commitment and responsibility, and he cherished his Friday and Saturday nights out on the town, and often came to resent Paul for keeping Kathy from enjoying them with him. After all, babysitters were frightfully expensive these days.... Now, though, that Paul had calmed down, and especially now that Paul was showing musical curiosity and a definite liking

for Chet's silly songs, well, Paul was an okay fella, yes sir!

When she called from the New York Penta on Saturday afternoon, there was no answer. She tried again after dinner, and found them watching a Walt Disney movie on the VCR. They'd been to a fair that day, and had had a great time. There'd been a show by a group called The Desert Rose Band, and Chet was absolutely beside himself. He'd gotten an album autographed by most of the band, and he'd actually talked awhile to Chris Hillman.

"He used to be in the *Byrds*, Kathy. You know, 'Mr. Tambourine Man,' and 'Eight Miles High' and oh geez, Gram Parsons. They started country-rock, and Chris is doing pure country and blue grass now...."

"That's nice, dear," said Kathy, just relieved that everything was okay.

"Mommy, when I grow up, I want to be a country and western guitar player!" Paul said when he got on the phone.

"Well, I warn you, Paul. That's fine, but I'm *not* going to let you grow up to be a cowboy."

Chet laughed at that allusion to the Waylon Jennings-Willie Nelson song when Paul told him. They seemed to be having a high-old time, so Kathy promptly turned off her worry-machine and got back to work, able to concentrate again.

The next day, however, was something else again.

SEVEN

"It must have been so traumatic for him that he's just withdrawn," said the doctor as he led Kathy Sayers into the small room, lit by a low light. Paul was huddled in a corner, sitting on a cot, staring into space, arms folded about himself as though he were terribly, terribly cold. Inside, she felt that way herself, but she had to act normal if only for him.

"Paul. Paul, honey. It's Mommy."

She put his arms around him and he began to rock gently against her.

"He's clearly in shock, Mrs. Sayers. It's just a wonder that he was able to hold himself together enough to go to the neighbors for help after he found the body."

"He's not hurt?"

"Physically, he's just fine. Mentally—well, it will take a few days, I think, for him to pull out of it fully. I suggest that you keep him at home, watch him, before you let him go back to school."

"Yes, yes, I will. I don't think ... I don't think I'll be able to go to work, anyway."

She held him that way for a time, murmuring reassurances, until they came to ask her to identify the body.

The barracks morgue was chilly, and smelled of antiseptic and preservatives and refrigeration, just as Kathy had always suspected it would.

"This is never pleasant at best, Ms. Sayers," said the young officer as he led her to the metallic walls.

"And in this case, it's a formality. But as Mr. Richard has no relatives in the area, we're going to have to ask you for positive identification."

Still feeling numb, Kathy nodded. She'd cried at first, and her eyes were still red and swollen. But as soon as the patrol car reached the police station, a coolness, a protective distance flowed over her,

allowing her to cope, to get through this unbelievable evening.

The policeman, an Officer Tompkins, grabbed the drawer and pulled it open. Slowly, he peeled back the bloody sheet exposing a pale, torn and ripped face ... a recognizable face.

“Yes,” she whispered. “That’s him. That’s Chester Richard.”

She was about to turn away from the sight, having done her duty, when the corpse’s eyes suddenly opened and Chester reached out an arm stripped bare of most of its flesh. “Kathy!” it cried, blood bubbling from between its lips. “Kathy, help me!”

Kathy Sayers woke up, springing to a sitting position.

A dream.... A nightmare ... The same one she’d had last night. Chet ... Chet was dead ... But what had happened?

Instinctively, he thoughts returned to Paul. She got out of bed, put on her robe and slippers, and went to check on him.

“Killed by some sort of animal,” the police had said. “Horribly mauled. His lower body was torn to pieces. We still can’t find it all ...*eaten*, we think. Must have gone out to the woods for some reason. You son found him at the very edge. Poor guy.”

An animal ... The same animal that had killed Pedro?

“We think so. The claw marks were in similar patterns. It appears to be some kind of mountain cougar. We think it’s somehow found it’s way down from the Adirondacks. We’ve got records that something similar happened a few decades ago. Had to shoot the beast.”

“Paul?” She turned on the light in the room. Paul was in bed, sleeping, and seemed just fine ... but what was wrong with this picture?

It took her a moment, but she found it. The window was open. She’d closed it when she’d put Paul to bed. She hadn’t noticed at first, because the night was still outside.

She went to close it and a curious feeling danced widdershins across her skin, her backbone. She turned around and Paul was sitting up in bed, staring at her, and she caught her breath ... His eyes.... She shook her head and quickly closed the window, then looked back.... Must be the light ... A trick of the light....

But no. His eyes *were* different. The pupils. The pupils were slits, running like sidewise cut sapphires standing on end. The eyes were large ... much too *large* ...

“Mommy? Mommy, I’m scared....”

She thought, then, about the boy’s father. What had he said once. He was part Cherokee ... Yes ... part Indian ... And he’d always carried a curious small animal sculpture ... Kept it locked away in a box filled with cotton. She’d only seen it once. It was crude, but it was recognizably feline. A mountain lion, Kathy. *Mytotem*.

And he’d said, Robert Sayers had, he’d said....

“Paul, Paul, honey, it’s going to be okay.”

And she went to him.

She stepped on something near the end of the bed. Something soft and alarmingly giving. She stopped and looked down.

It had been in the shadows before, just peeking out from below the bed. Bloody and raw.

It was a male penis. A penis, complete with dangling scrotum, pubic hair clotted and sticky with blood from the chunk of decaying meat it clung to.

And Kathy Sayers recognized it.

EIGHT

Robert Sayers had said, one night, quite drunk, "You know, Kathy, my father warned me about drinking and drugs. He said it was a curse on our people, brought by the White Men. Well, hell, I like it ... and I guess I'll pay..."

"I remember, once, we went to visit my Grandfather? What? No, he wasn't on a reservation. Made a nice living with his own ranch out west. Nice old guy. Saw him just before he died. He's the one who gave me my totem. Said it had something to do with our family or tribe or something. I don't remember, I guess I never really got much into my Native American heritage.

"Anyway, I remember the night before we left. I couldn't have been more than six years old then, and he'd made a campfire behind the house, and we were just sitting there, looking up at the stars, and he said, 'Robert. There are spirits that haunt this family, evil spirits. We must keep our guard up. Remember this, and tell it to your children. Keep up our guard. Keep your soul clean and prepared, untainted by the impurities that flow amongst the cities like foul rivers.' Or something like that, anyway. And then he told me the story of the deathless cougar or something like that. I don't remember much about it, except that it scared me.

"Anyway, maybe I should pass that on to Paul, huh? Maybe it means no booze and drugs, huh? We'll hasn't hurt me more than it hurts anyone I guess. The one thing that bothers me the most, I guess, is the blackouts I get sometimes. Maybe I should stop. I know you think I should.... Yeah, I'll stop. Maybe next year sometime, when things get a little easier to handle.

"Yeah. Next year would work out good."

NINE

She took him off the Pumpamine the very next day.

Next week, Paul came home from school with a stack of drawings and paintings he'd been doing, along with a note from his teacher.

"Darling, these are just *wonderful!*" she told him as she stretched the papers over the dining room table and admired them. Again, the basic motifs were the usual boyhood fantasies—armored knights and complex tanks and aircraft, ninja warriors squaring off against cowboys and Indians. However, somehow Paul had learned how to make his drawings more three-dimensional and lifelike—with not a little clear and direct influence from the cartoons he'd been reading lately. And the colors—they blended and complimented the drawings with subtleties and shadings he was incapable of before.

"Yeah! Thanks!"

"I'm glad to see you drawing again Paul. And you've gotten so good!"

He jumped around the room, he was so pleased with his mother's praise, and he could hardly sit still for his favorite dinner, steak and peas and baked potatoes and applesauce.

It wasn't till she'd finally managed to get him in bed that she got to read the note he'd brought home.

Dear Mrs. Sayers—

I'm afraid that your decision to stop Paul's medication is not working very well. His schoolwork and attitude have dived sharply. All he seems to want to do is his silly drawings, and he's disrupting class again with his antics. Could you call immediately to plan a conference on this subject?

Yours, Amelia Hurt

"Mommy," said Paul the next morning. "I think Mrs. Hurt wants me to start taking my Good Pills again."

"Paul, I've decided that those pills aren't Good Pills after all. I think they're Bad Pills. For you anyway. We're just going to have to find some other way to make Mrs. Hurt happy."

Paul shook his head. "Sheesh, Mom, that's no good. Mrs. Hurt is *never* happy!"

"Well, you're not going to be getting any more Good Pills."

Paul looked away, a momentary haunted expression in his gaze. "Yeah, Mommy. That's a *good* idea."

It was good to have the old artistic Paul back. Kathy didn't even mind the renewed hyperactivity and the mess he made of things. In fact, it took her mind off the loss of her boyfriend—that, and the way she plunged into her work. It would take a while for the scars to heal. But she still had her son, she still had Paul and that was all that really mattered. Paul was her night and day. She would keep him and protect him, no matter what. Now that she'd stopped the Pumpamine, things were back to normal. She still had the nightmares, but everything else was—well, buried. She could live with the nightmares. She couldn't live without her son.

The next week, she had her conference with Mrs. Hurt. She had a long talk with Dr. Larsen. They had argued long and hard with her, trying to convince her to put Paul back on Pumpamine, but to no avail. Kathy Sayers was adamant; her son would not go back on medication again. She was going to put him on the Feingold Diet, she said—perhaps it was the additives in food that was making him hyperactive.

The Feingold Diet doesn't work, both teacher and doctor assured her. Why are you being so stubborn, Kathy? You didn't report any side effects, no insomniaheadachesnauseatearfulness. Just a small bit of sleepwalking at first. Right.

Kathy said nothing.

Well, isn't that correct?

He doesn't *draw* when he's on that stuff, she said. He loves to draw. He's somebody else when he takes Pumpamine. I'm sorry if you can't accept him. Maybe I'll have to put him in a special school, I don't know. I just know that I am not going to have my child *drugged* any more. Do you hear me?

No more!

Of course, she dare not tell them the *real* reason.

Two weeks later, after a flurry of notes from school, and a terrible slump in grades, she was already looking into private schools for gifted children. Surely his artwork was special enough to qualify Paul. She was so preoccupied with thinking about this when she picked up that she did not notice how quiet he was.

Later, after dinner, she had to go through a bunch of pamphlets describing the schools she was examining as possibilities. She didn't care to listen to the television prattling away tonight, so she sat Paul down with the new set of special magic markers she had bought him (over fifty colors) along with his sketchpad and

then went into her study to get to work. When she got back, half-decided that she would send him to a small but reputable school in Towson, close enough to where she worked that she could drop him off on the way and pick him up when she was finished work, Paul was still sitting at the table where she left him. He was staring into space.

“Paul, let’s see what you’ve been doing.”

Paul grunted, falling passively back into the chair. “Mommy, can I watch TV?”

On the paper Paul had drawn a single solitary and quite primitive stick man.

She knew at once what had happened. Looking closer at Paul only confirmed it. They’d given him the pills! Oh my God, against her orders, Nurse Raphael and Mrs. Hurt had give him Pumpamine!

Paul’s eyes had changed. Feral glints. Slanted pupils—a red, deep as the lust for blood.

“Paul,” she said softly. “Paul, I don’t think you should watch TV. I think we should play a little game.”

“A game? I don’t ... want ... to....”

“I really think we should play this game so you don’t get in trouble. You don’t want to get in trouble, do you. You don’t want to hurt anybody.”

“No.” Dully.

“Okay. The game goes like this.”

She’d planned for this, just in case taking him off the Pumpamine didn’t work. The house had a basement which had once been a storm cellar and could be easily locked and secured. She would put Paul down in the basement. The doors to the outside were already locked and there were no windows. There was an old bolt on the thick oak door.

“First, Paul, you hide in the basement. I’m going to change something about the living room. When you come back up, you have to tell me what’s different. Then it will be your turn to change something while I hide. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

“I don’t want to go in the basement, Mommy. It scares me.”

“Come on Paul, please. For me?” Her voice betrayed her fear and worry despite herself. She reached out and grabbed hold of his arm. She let it go immediately and looked at it horror. Thick bristly hair was beginning to grow near the elbow. Paul was beginning to change already. She had to get him down in the cellar while she still could.

With a whimper of grief, she grabbed her son and hauled him to the open basement door in the kitchen and pushed him onto the landing, careful not to throw him down the steps. He cried and he wailed and fought, but she managed to get the door closed on him.

Closed and locked.

“Mommy! Mommy! It’s dark here. It’s dark! You didn’t turn the light on! Let me out! *Let me out!*”

Kathy could feel her heart breaking at the wail of her only son. But she had no choice. If she let him out, he’d turn into that thing ... that Pumpamine thing that would kill again ... and maybe they’d catch him or kill him ... and she wouldn’t have that ... No, she had *protect* Paul. Protect him from himself and from the others.

Paul pounded on the door, wailing and crying.

Slowly, the wails turned into growls, and the pounding stopped. A skitter of claws on wood, a chuff of feral breaths in the darkness, a clatter of sharp teeth....

He would be okay, she thought. She would keep Paul down there until this curse wore off. Then she'd never let him go back to that hateful chemical jungle again, and he'd never take those dreadful pills again, and people would never know that it was her son who had killed Pedro and all those other animals, Paul who had torn Chet Rickard apart...

She stepped back away from the door, getting her breath.

It's going to be okay, now, she told herself. Okay...

The middle of the door exploded in a hail of splinters. A hairy, clawed arm reached out and unlocked the door. Before a horrified Kathy could do anything, the door swung back on its hinges and the thing that had been Paul Sayers scrambled out, slobbering and snapping.

The only resemblance that it had to the mountain lion that Kathy had expected was its long canines and its distended claws and sandy tail. Otherwise, it was neither human nor animal, but totally demonic with scales and horns and prickly thorns running down its back. It smelled of something dead, and as it advanced on Kathy Sayers, two more mouths opened in its chest cavity, pushing out teeth like a lamprey's.

"Stay away!" Kathy Sayers cried. "Paul, stay away! I'm your mother!"

The thing lunged toward her. Stiletto claws ripped across her arm, slashing her sleeve to ribbons and cutting into her arm with a deep alarming pain. Instinct tore a scream from her and she kicked the thing with all her might. With a harsh and guttural whimpering, it fell back its limbs and mouth working violently, the crimson eyes filled with sub-animal hatred and hunger.

"Stay away!" she cried, backing into the kitchen. "Paul! This is your *mother!* Stay away from me! Go back into the basement!"

A momentary quiver of intelligence passed through those large demonic eyes. A flicker of memory? A trace of childlike love and attachment. It's hellish slash of a mouth worked as though to create words. A bent, awkwardly twisted arm unwound from its bloated, armored body, pointing a sharp nail toward her. It's breath was like wind through a tunnel of razor blades. A breath that sounded like, "Mommy?"

"Paul! Yes, Paul! It's *Mommy*. I love you Paul. I love you very much. But you must go back down to the basement. This is a bad dream. Go back down to the basement until it's over!"

A tongue like a snake being devoured by worms issued from its mouth, and the eyes lit up again with infernal hatred. "I have no Mommy. I'm dead." The ragged breath voice again. "*Dead! My Mommy left me!*"

She held her wounded arm, the blood flowing down onto the floor and her pants, and the pain that ripped at her now was far deeper and more real than the pain she felt from that ripped-up arm. "No! No Paul! I didn't leave you. Your father took you away. I fought to get you back!"

The voice whispered away like the last breath of the dying. "Dead.... dead.... dead..." The coals of the eyes lit up again and the creature advance again toward Kathy.

"No! Stay away. Paul, stay away!"

Any vestige of the thing that had been Paul, however, was gone. The thing came on, pure bloodlust the only thing written in its terrible face.

“I said, *stay away!*”

On the kitchen counter was a wooden block holding a number of kitchen knives in self-sharpening sleeves. Without even thinking what she was doing, Kathy pulled the largest of the knives and brandished it before her. The blade gleamed in the kitchen light.

“*Stay away!*”

Breathing raggedly, the thing scrabbled forward, looking straight through the knife as though it didn’t see it.

“Go back to the basement!” Kathy said hopelessly. Her pulse hammered in head thunderously, and her instincts for survival, the flight-or-fight adrenaline loosed from her glands, surged over whatever was left any maternal feeling for the thing advancing toward her.

With a roar, the thing leaped.

It came at her with an awful keening sound like live steam escaping the jaws of Hell. Its claws raked out toward her to tear more of her flesh. Reflex brought the knife up to fend it off, and the creature ran full upon its blade, piercing its wattled neck. Gurgling and screaming in maniacal pain, the thing pulled itself off the blade. A claw whipped down, tearing a long gash in Kathy’s leg. Another banged against her head, crashing her against a cabinet. Cookies and potato chips fell out, crushing under her feet. The thing gurgled as greenish red blood squished and spilt over the thing’s hide onto the linoleum. Screeching, it leaped again toward Kathy, but slipped on its own gore, banging against the dishwashing machine. The claw reached out lightning-quick, grabbing Kathy by the hair, ripping at her scalp. Screaming, Kathy Sayers lost the last of her reason. Pure instinct took over and she brought the bloody knife down again and again and again, through the things chest, neck and face, ripping and tearing at it even as it sought to shred her.

With a final “thunk” she plunged the knife full into the thing’s left eye. Clear fluid spurted, followed soon by the gush of brains. The thing spasmed, rocking back and forwards like a dying cockroach. Kathy slipped in the slime from its wound, falling back against the sink and then the floor. Her consciousness seemed about to ebb away, but even as she thought she was about to black out, a voice brought her to.

Paul’s voice.

She opened her eyes, saw that the bloody horror before was beginning to congeal, to transform. Claws became mere fingernails; unearthly horned armor, mere flesh. The face before her was ruined, a butcher’s parody of a human child, the kitchen knife still stuck through the orbit of the socket, half an eyeball hanging down from a twisted nerve-string. The other eye, smeared with blood, opened. Pain and total confusion looked out, and Paul flickered there like the last trembles of a candle.

“Mom-meee,” the words bubbled in blood at his torn little mouth, drenched with the agony of betrayal, abandonment. “I’m dead, Mommy. Dead...”

One more spasm, then stillness but for the drip of blood.

The shriek that ripped from Kathy Sayers’ mouth was a poor approximation of the sound of her soul, shredding.

“My goodness. I was just in the principal’s office, and I heard the most terrible news.” Winona Raphael hovered over the Mr. Coffee tentatively, as though deciding whether or not she should pour herself a cup.

Amelia Hurt already had her cup. Black. Strong. The way she liked it, the way she *needed* it. This was her afternoon planning period and after a morning of those unholy brats back there in the classroom, doing their music lesson now, she needed definite fortification. “Oh, what’s wrong?” She hardly bothered to look up from her crossword puzzle.

“It’s Doctor Larsen. My consulting pediatrician. He’s had a heart attack.” She picked up the coffee pot but had to put it back down, her hand was trembling so. “A terrible heart attack. There’s a lot of confusion over at his office. I happened to call over to ask a question. His nurse only had time to tell me about the heart attack ... and that the Doctor is dead.”

Amelia Hurt raised an eyebrow. “Physician, heal thyself.”

Mrs. Raphael managed to settle down long enough to pour herself some coffee, some sugar, some cream.

“Still and all,” said Mrs. Hurt thoughtfully. “It’s a shame. Dr. Larsen was one of the most cooperative area physicians in certain areas.”

Mrs. Raphael nodded. “Yes. Maybe it’s for the best. You know I don’t really like that stuff. Feeding children drugs ... messing with their glands and nervous system ... Too much can go wrong.”

“*It works*,” said Amelia Hurt. “It shuts them up and it helps them *learn*.”

“Still, I don’t like it. And you know, I feel really bad about losing that bottle of pills. I reported it, naturally, but nothing’s come of it.”

Amelia Hurt smiled faintly to herself. “Mrs. Raphael, I wouldn’t worry too much. There are far worse drugs going around school yards these days that Pumpamine.”

“It’s a powerful stimulant. If an adult takes it...”

“Yes, yes, I know ... we’ve discussed that.”

The nurse shook her head. “Poor Dr. Larsen. I always liked the man. A whole lot.” She walked slowly away back to the infirmary, leaving Amelia Hurt alone in the teacher’s room. She’d arranged it this way, so she could have a full thirty-five minutes to herself. She was a woman who valued her privacy, her peace, was Amelia Hurt.

Which was why she had taken those pills out of Nurse Raphael’s cabinet. There were certain problem children that had to be dealt with, and now that the county had those stupid laws preventing teachers from giving the little monsters a good whipping, a teacher had to have *something*. ...

She was four words short of finishing her puzzle when the door opened and someone shuffled in.

“Nurse Raphael? That you again?” she muttered, staring down, trying to figure out a particularly troublesome configuration.

“No,” said a monotone voice. “It’s *sme*.”

Amelia Hurt looked up.

Standing only two yards away was someone she did not recognize at first. It took a few moments of staring to get past the bandages and the cuts and black-and-blue contusions on her face. “Ms. Sayers! My goodness, what happened to you!”

“You gave them to him, didn’t you? You gave him the Pumpamine when I told you not to!” Amelia Hurt was startled to see the expression in those eyes—dead and cold, but for the coals of hatred that burned lowly in them.

“What are you talking about? Paul ... That’s right, Paul is not here today. I hope he’s all right.”

“He’s dead.” The words dropped like stones from her mouth.

“What?” Amelia Hurt made to rise from the chair she sat in, but stopped instantly when she saw the small automatic that Kathy Sayers took out of the light raincoat she wore.

“Admit it. You gave him those pills, didn’t you?”

“Mrs. Sayers.... Kathy.... I don’t really think that a gun is necessary. I *didnot* give your child anything. As I told you, I do not have the authority to distribute medication.”

With her free hand, Kathy Sayers fumbled with something in her pocket. “That’s all right. I made a trip to the people who *are* authorized to distribute medication. Yes, indeed.” Her eyes began to heat up, growing wide and wild. “Oh yes, especially Dr. Larsen, the glib bastard....”

Amelia Hurt gasped.

Kathy Sayers smiled and nodded. “That’s right, teacher. You must have heard.” She fished out a large bottle, filled to the top with tiny pills and set it on the table. “Oh yes, it was you all right. I know, I know. Well, I’ve got something for you today, you *bitch*. ”

Her heart began pump wildly, and she felt the telltale twinges of pain from her chest.

“Mrs. Sayers, really! I’m telling you whatever happened is *not* my fault!”

Kathy Sayers pushed the bottle of pills into the teachers lap. “I want you to eat them,” she said, training the muzzle of the gun at Amelia Hurt. “Eat them *all!*”

“What! That’s ridiculous!”

Kathy Sayers shot her in the foot. The gun was silenced and made only a coughing sound. Blood splattered on the floor. Kathy raised the gun, aiming at an arm.

Amelia Hurt opened the bottle of pills and began to gobble.

It was only then that Kathy Sayers allowed herself to smile.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

About the Author

David Bischoff was born in Washington D.C. in 1951. He graduated from the University of Maryland in 1973. He sold his first SF story in 1974. After six years at NBC Washington, he retired to write full time. Bischoff has written close to eighty books, a hundred and fifty stories, sixty-five magazine articles, and

ten produced teleplays. After spells in Baltimore, New York and Los Angeles, Bischoff presently lives in Eugene, Oregon where he hosts *Soundscapes*, a weekly progressive-rock radio program.

Visit <http://www.wildsidepress.com/index2.htm> for information on additional titles by this and other authors.