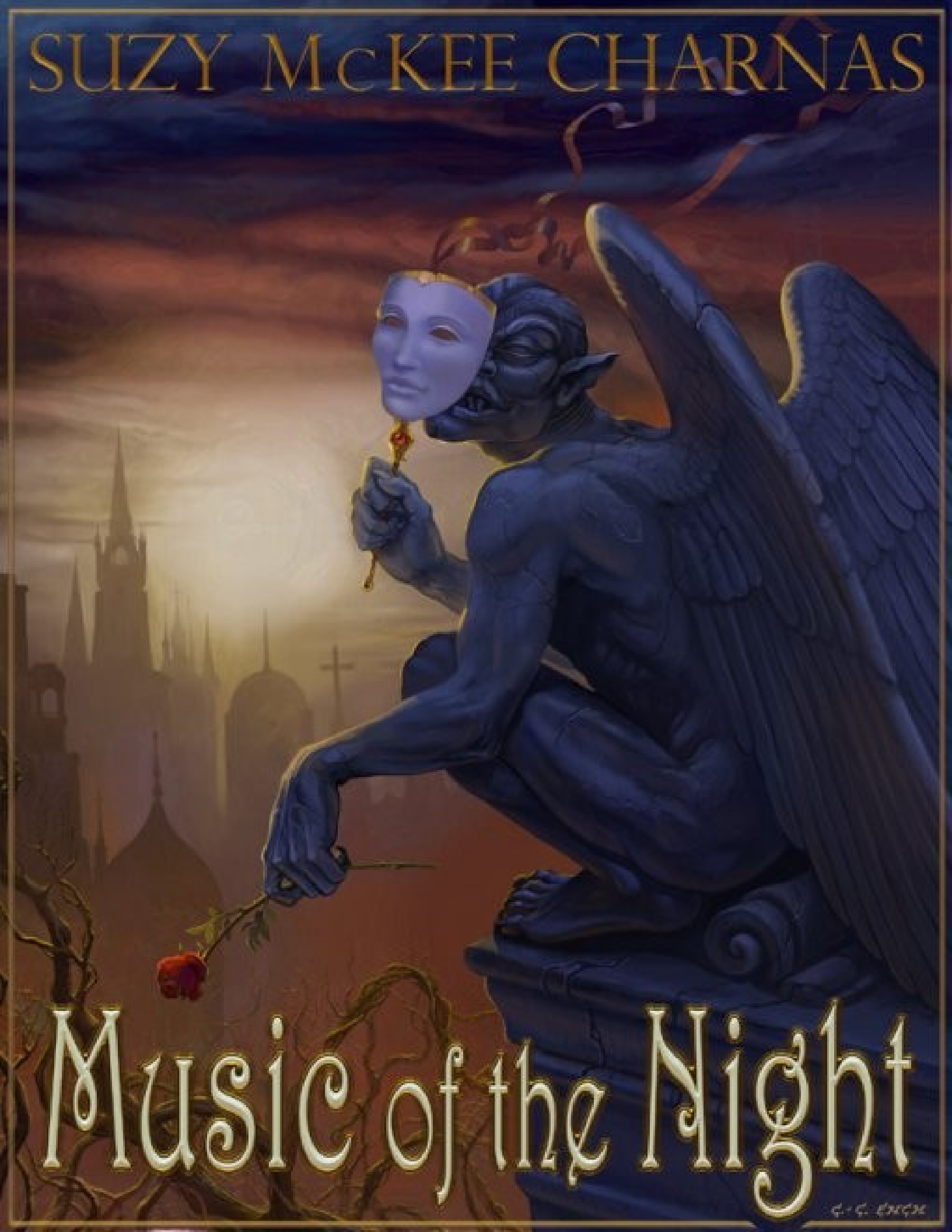


SUZY MCKEE CHARNAS



Music of the Night

C. C. CHARNAS

MUSIC OF THE NIGHT

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By Suzy McKee Charnas



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Unicorn Tapestry

“Hold on,” Floria said. “I know what you’re going to say: I agreed not to take any new clients for a while. But wait till I tell you—you’re not going to believe this—first phone call, setting up an initial appointment, he comes out with what his problem is: ‘I seem to have fallen victim to a delusion of being a vampire.’ ”

“Christ H. God!” cried Lucille delightedly. “Just like that, over the telephone?”

“When I recovered my aplomb, so to speak, I told him that I prefer to wait with the details until our first meeting, which is tomorrow.”

They were sitting on the tiny terrace outside the staff room of the clinic, a converted town house on the upper West Side. Floria spent three days a week here and the remaining two in her office on Central Park South where she saw private clients like this new one. Lucille, always gratifyingly responsive, was Floria’s most valued professional friend. Clearly enchanted with Floria’s news, she sat eagerly forward in her chair, eyes wide behind Coke-bottle lenses.

She said, “Do you suppose he thinks he’s a revived corpse?”

Below, down at the end of the street, Floria could see two kids skidding their skateboards near a man who wore a woolen cap and a heavy coat despite the May warmth. He was leaning against a wall. He had been there when Floria had arrived at the clinic this morning. If corpses walked, some, not nearly revived enough, stood in plain view in New York.

“I’ll have to think of a delicate way to ask,” she said.

“How did he come to you, this ‘vampire’?”

“He was working in an upstate college, teaching and doing research, and all of a sudden he just disappeared—vanished, literally, without a trace. A month later he turned up here in the city. The faculty dean at the school knows me and sent him to see me.”

Lucille gave her a sly look. “So you thought, aha, do a little favor for a friend, this looks classic and easy to transfer if need be: repressed intellectual blows stack and runs off with spacey chick, something like that.”

“You know me too well,” Floria said with a rueful smile.

“Huh,” grunted Lucille. She sipped ginger ale from a chipped white mug. “I don’t take panicky middle-aged men anymore; they’re too depressing. And you shouldn’t be taking this one, intriguing as he sounds.”

Here comes the lecture, Floria told herself.

Lucille got up. She was short, heavy, prone to wearing loose garments that swung about her like ceremonial robes. As she paced, her hem brushed at the flowers starting up in the planting boxes that rimmed the little terrace. “You know damn well this is just more overwork you’re loading on. Don’t take this guy; refer him.”

Floria sighed. “I know, I know. I promised everybody I’d slow down. But you said it yourself just a minute ago—it looked like a simple favor. So what do I get? Count Dracula, for God’s sake! Would you give that up?”

Fishing around in one capacious pocket, Lucille brought out a dented package of cigarettes and lit up, scowling. “You know, when you give me advice I try to take it seriously. Joking aside, Floria, what am I supposed to say? I’ve listened to you moaning for months now, and I thought we’d figured out that what you need is to shed some pressure, to start saying no—and here you are insisting on a new case. You know what I think: you’re hiding in other people’s problems from a lot of your own stuff that you should be working on.

“Okay, okay, don’t glare at me. Be pigheaded. Have you gotten rid of Chubs, at least?” This was Floria’s code name for a troublesome client named Kenny whom she’d been trying to unload for some time.

Floria shook her head.

“What gives with you? It’s weeks since you swore you’d dump him! Trying to do everything for everybody is wearing you out. I bet you’re still dropping weight. Judging by the very unbecoming circles under your eyes, sleeping isn’t going too well, either. Still no dreams you can remember?”

“Lucille, don’t nag. I don’t want to talk about my health.”

“Well, what about his health—Dracula’s? Did you suggest that he have a physical before seeing you? There might be something physiological—”

“You’re not going to be able to whisk him off to an M.D. and out of my hands,” Floria said wryly. “He told me on the phone that he wouldn’t consider either medication or hospitalization.”

Involuntarily, she glanced down at the end of the street. The woolen-capped man had curled up on the sidewalk at the foot of the building, sleeping or passed out or dead. The city was tottering with sickness. Compared with that wreck down there and others like him, how sick could this “vampire” be, with his cultured baritone voice, his self-possessed approach?

“And you won’t consider handing him off to somebody else,” Lucille said.

“Well, not until I know a little more. Come on, Luce—wouldn’t you want at least to know what he looks like?”

Lucille stubbed out her cigarette against the low parapet. Down below a policeman strolled along the street ticketing the parked cars. He didn’t even look at the man lying at the corner of the building. They watched his progress without comment. Finally Lucille said, “Well, if you won’t drop Dracula, keep me posted on him, will you?”

* * *

He entered the office on the dot of the hour, a gaunt but graceful figure. He was impressive. Wiry gray hair, worn short, emphasized the massiveness of his face with its long jaw, high cheekbones, and granite cheeks grooved as if by winters of hard weather. His name, typed in caps on the initial information sheet that Floria proceeded to fill out with him, was Edward Lewis Weyland.

Crisply, he told her about the background of the vampire incident, describing in caustic terms his life at Cayslin College: the pressures of collegial competition, interdepartmental squabbles, student indifference, administrative bungling. History has limited use, she knew, since memory distorts; still, if he felt most comfortable establishing the setting for his illness, that was as good a way to start off as any.

At length his energy faltered. His angular body sank into a slump, his voice became flat and tired as he haltingly worked up to the crucial event: night work at the sleep lab, fantasies of blood-drinking as he watched the youthful subjects of his dream research slumbering, finally an attempt to act out the

fantasy with a staff member at the college. He had been repulsed; then panic had assailed him. Word would get out, he'd be fired, blacklisted forever. He'd bolted. A nightmare period had followed—he offered no details. When he had come to his senses he'd seen that just what he feared, the ruin of his career, would come from his running away. So he'd phoned the dean, and now here he was.

Throughout this recital she watched him diminish from the dignified academic who had entered her office to a shamed and frightened man hunched in his chair, his hands pulling fitfully at each other.

"What are your hands doing?" she said gently. He looked blank. She repeated the question.

He looked down at his hands. "Struggling," he said.

"With what?"

"The worst," he muttered. "I haven't told you the worst." She had never grown hardened to this sort of transformation. His long fingers busied themselves fiddling with a button on his jacket while he explained painfully that the object of his "attack" at Cayslin had been a woman. Not young but handsome and vital, she had first caught his attention earlier in the year during *afestschrift*—an honorary seminar—for a retiring professor.

A picture emerged of an awkward Weyland, lifelong bachelor, seeking this woman's warmth and suffering her refusal. Floria knew she should bring him out of his past and into his here-and-now, but he was doing so beautifully on his own that she was loath to interrupt.

"Did I tell you there was a rapist active on the campus at this time?" he said bitterly. "I borrowed a leaf from his book: I tried to take from this woman, since she wouldn't give. I tried to take some of her blood." He stared at the floor. "What does that mean—to take someone's blood?"

"What do you think it means?"

The button, pulled and twisted by his fretful fingers, came off. He put it into his pocket, the impulse, she guessed, of a fastidious nature. "Her energy," he murmured, "stolen to warm the aging scholar, the walking corpse, the vampire—myself."

His silence, his downcast eyes, his bent shoulders, all signaled a man brought to bay by a life crisis. Perhaps he was going to be the kind of client therapists dream of and she needed so badly these days: a client intelligent and sensitive enough, given the companionship of a professional listener, to swiftly unravel his own mental tangles. Exhilarated by his promising start, Floria restrained herself from trying to build on it too soon. She made herself tolerate the silence, which lasted until he said suddenly, "I notice that you make no notes as we speak. Do you record these sessions on tape?"

A hint of paranoia, she thought; *not unusual*. "Not without your knowledge and consent, just as I won't send for your personnel file from Cayslin without your knowledge and consent. I do, however, write notes after each session as a guide to myself and in order to have a record in case of any confusion about anything we do or say here. I can promise you that I won't show my notes or speak of you by name to anyone—except Dean Sharpe at Cayslin, of course, and even then only as much as is strictly necessary—without your written permission. Does that satisfy you?"

"I apologize for my question," he said. "The . . . incident has left me . . . very nervous; a condition that I hope to get over with your help."

The time was up. When he had gone, she stepped outside to check with Hilda, the receptionist she shared with four other therapists here at the Central Park South office. Hilda always sized up new clients in the waiting room.

Of this one she said, "Are you sure there's anything wrong with that guy? I think I'm in love."

* * *

Waiting at the office for a group of clients to assemble Wednesday evening, Floria dashed off some notes on the “vampire.”

Client described incident, background. No history of mental illness, no previous experience of therapy. Personal history so ordinary you almost don't notice how bare it is: only child of German immigrants, schooling normal, field work in anthropology, academic posts leading to Cayslin College professorship. Health good, finances adequate, occupation satisfactory, housing pleasant (though presently installed in a N.Y. hotel); never married, no kids, no family, no religion, social life strictly job-related; leisure—says he likes to drive. Reaction to question about drinking, but no signs of alcohol problems. Physically very smooth-moving for his age (over fifty) and height; catlike, alert. Some apparent stiffness in the midsection—slight protective stoop—tightening up of middle age? Paranoiac defensiveness? Voice pleasant, faint accent (German-speaking childhood at home). Entering therapy condition of consideration for return to job.

What a relief: his situation looked workable with a minimum of strain on herself. Now she could defend to Lucille her decision to do therapy with the “vampire.”

After all, Lucille was right. Floria did have problems of her own that needed attention, primarily her anxiety and exhaustion since her mother's death more than a year before. The breakup of Floria's marriage had caused misery, but not this sort of endless depression. Intellectually the problem was clear: with both her parents dead she was left exposed. No one stood any longer between herself and the inevitability of her own death. Knowing the source of her feelings didn't help: she couldn't seem to mobilize the nerve to work on them.

The Wednesday group went badly again. Lisa lived once more her experiences in the European death camps and everyone cried. Floria wanted to stop Lisa, turn her, extinguish the droning horror of her voice in illumination and release, but she couldn't see how to do it. She found nothing in herself to offer except some clever ploy out of the professional bag of tricks—dance your anger, have a dialog with yourself of those days—useful techniques when they flowed organically as part of a living process in which the therapist participated. But thinking out responses that should have been intuitive wouldn't work. The group and its collective pain paralyzed her. She was a dancer without a choreographer, knowing all the moves but unable to match them to the music these people made.

Rather than act with mechanical clumsiness she held back, did nothing, and suffered guilt. *Oh God, the smart, experienced people in the group must know how useless she was here.*

Going home on the bus she thought about calling up one of the therapists who shared the downtown office. He had expressed an interest in doing co-therapy with her under student observation. The Wednesday group might respond well to that. Suggest it to them next time? Having a partner might take pressure off Floria and revitalize the group, and if she felt she must withdraw he would be available to take over. Of course, he might take over anyway and walk off with some of her clients.

Oh boy, terrific, who's paranoid now? Wonderful way to think about a good colleague. God, she hadn't even known she was considering chucking the group.

Had the new client, running from his “vampirism,” exposed her own impulse to retreat? This wouldn't be the first time that Floria had obtained help from a client while attempting to give help. Her old supervisor, Rigby, said that such mutual aid was the only true therapy—the rest was fraud. What a perfectionist, old Rigby, and what a bunch of young idealists he'd turned out, all eager to save the world.

Eager, but not necessarily able. Jane Fennerman had once lived in the world, and Floria had been incompetent to save her. Jane, an absent member of tonight's group, was back in the safety of a locked ward, hazily gliding on whatever tranquilizers they used there.

Why still mull over Jane? she asked herself severely, bracing against the bus's lurching halt. Any client was entitled to drop out of therapy and commit herself. Nor was this the first time that sort of thing had happened in the course of Floria's career. Only this time she couldn't seem to shake free of the resulting depression and guilt.

But how could she have helped Jane more? How could you offer reassurance that life was not as dreadful as Jane felt it to be, that her fears were insubstantial, that each day was not a pit of pain and danger?

* * *

She was taking time during a client's canceled hour to work on notes for the new book. The writing, an analysis of the vicissitudes of salaried versus private practice, balked her at every turn. She longed for an interruption to distract her circling mind.

Hilda put through a call from Cayslin College. It was Doug Sharpe, who had sent Dr. Weyland to her.

"Now that he's in your capable hands, I can tell people plainly that he's on what we call 'compassionate leave' and make them swallow it." Doug's voice seemed thinned by the long-distance connection. "Can you give me a preliminary opinion?"

"I need time to get a feel for the situation."

He said, "Try not to take too long. At the moment I'm holding off pressure to appoint someone in his place. His enemies up here—and a sharp-tongued bastard like him acquires plenty of those—are trying to get a search committee authorized to find someone else for the directorship of the Cayslin Center for the Study of Man."

"Of People," she corrected automatically, as she always did. "What do you mean, 'bastard'? I thought you liked him, Doug. 'Do you want me to have to throw a smart, courtly, old-school gent to Finney or MaGill?' Those were your very words." Finney was a Freudian with a mouth like a pursed-up little asshole and a mind to match, and MaGill was a primal yowler in a padded gym of an office.

She heard Doug tapping at his teeth with a pen or pencil. "Well," he said, "I have a lot of respect for him, and sometimes I could cheer him for mowing down some pompous moron up here. I can't deny, though, that he's earned a reputation for being an accomplished son-of-a-bitch and tough to work with. Too damn cold and self-sufficient, you know?"

"Mmm," she said. "I haven't seen that yet."

He said, "You will. How about yourself? How's the rest of your life?"

"Well, offhand, what would you say if I told you I was thinking of going back to art school?"

"What would I say? I'd say bullshit, that's what I'd say. You've had fifteen years of doing something you're good at, and now you want to throw all that out and start over in an area you haven't touched since Studio 101 in college? If God had meant you to be a painter, She'd have sent you to art school in the first place."

"I did think about art school at the time."

"The point is that you're good at what you do. I've been at the receiving end of your work and I know what I'm talking about. By the way, did you see that piece in the paper about Annie Barnes, from the

group I was in? That's an important appointment. I always knew she'd wind up in Washington. What I'm trying to make clear to you is that your 'graduates' do too well for you to be talking about quitting. What's Morton say about that idea, by the way?"

Mort, a pathologist, was Floria's lover. She hadn't discussed this with him, and she told Doug so.

"You're not on the outs with Morton, are you?"

"Come on, Douglas, cut it out. There's nothing wrong with my sex life, believe me. It's everywhere else that's giving me trouble."

"Just sticking my nose into your business," he replied. "What are friends for?"

They turned to lighter matters, but when she hung up Floria felt glum. If her friends were moved to this sort of probing and kindly advice-giving, she must be inviting help more openly and more urgently than she'd realized.

The work on the book went no better. It was as if, afraid to expose her thoughts, she must disarm criticism by meeting all possible objections beforehand. The book was well and truly stalled—like everything else. She sat sweating over it, wondering what the devil was wrong with her that she was writing mush. She had two good books to her name already. What was this bottleneck with the third?

* * *

"But what do you think?" Kenny insisted anxiously. "Does it sound like my kind of job?"

"How do you feel about it?"

"I'm all confused, I told you."

"Try speaking for me. Give me the advice I would give you."

He glowered. "That's a real cop-out, you know? One part of me talks like you, and then I have a dialog with myself like a TV show about a split personality. It's all me that way; you just sit there while I do all the work. I want something from you."

She looked for the twentieth time at the clock on the file cabinet. This time it freed her. "Kenny, the hour's over."

Kenny heaved his plump, sulky body up out of his chair. "You don't care. Oh, you pretend to, but you don't really—"

"Next time, Kenny."

He stumped out of the office. She imagined him towing in his wake the raft of decisions he was trying to inveigle her into making for him. Sighing, she went to the window and looked out over the park, filling her eyes and her mind with the full, fresh green of late spring. She felt dismal. In two years of treatment the situation with Kenny had remained a stalemate. He wouldn't go to someone else who might be able to help him, and she couldn't bring herself to kick him out, though she knew she must eventually. His puny tyranny couldn't conceal how soft and vulnerable he was . . .

Dr. Weyland had the next appointment. Floria found herself pleased to see him. She could hardly have asked for a greater contrast to Kenny: tall, lean, that august head that made her want to draw him, good clothes, nice big hands—together, a distinguished-looking man. Though he was informally dressed in slacks, light jacket, and tieless shirt, the impression he conveyed was one of impeccable leisure and reserve. He took not the padded chair preferred by most clients but the wooden one with the cane seat.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Landauer," he said gravely. "May I ask your judgment of my case?"

"I don't regard myself as a judge," she said. She decided to try to shift their discussion onto a first-name basis if possible. Calling this old-fashioned man by his first name so soon might seem artificial, but how could they get familiar enough to do therapy while addressing each other as "Dr. Landauer" and "Dr. Weyland" like two characters out of a vaudeville sketch?

"This is what I think, Edward," she continued. "We need to find out about this vampire incident—how it tied into your feelings about yourself, good and bad, at the time; what it did for you that led you to try to 'be' a vampire even though that was bound to complicate your life terrifically. The more we know, the closer we can come to figuring out how to insure that this vampire construct won't be necessary to you again."

"Does this mean that you accept me formally as a client?" he said.

Comes right out and says what's on his mind, she noted;no problem there . "Yes."

"Good. I too have a treatment goal in mind. I will need at some point a testimonial from you that my mental health is sound enough for me to resume work at Cayslin."

Floria shook her head. "I can't guarantee that. I can commit myself to work toward it, of course, since your improved mental health is the aim of what we do here together."

"I suppose that answers the purpose for the time being," he said. "We can discuss it again later on. Frankly, I find myself eager to continue our work today. I've been feeling very much better since I spoke with you, and I thought last night about what I might tell you today."

She had the distinct feeling of being steered by him;*how important was it to him* , she wondered,*to feel in control?* She said, "Edward, my own feeling is that we started out with a good deal of very useful verbal work, and that now is a time to try something a little different."

He said nothing. He watched her. When she asked whether he remembered his dreams he shook his head, no.

She said, "I'd like you to try to do a dream for me now, a waking dream. Can you close your eyes and daydream, and tell me about it?"

He closed his eyes. Strangely, he now struck her as less vulnerable rather than more, as if strengthened by increased vigilance.

"How do you feel now?" she said.

"Uneasy." His eyelids fluttered. "I dislike closing my eyes. What I don't see can hurt me."

"Who wants to hurt you?"

"A vampire's enemies, of course—mobs of screaming peasants with torches."

Translating into what, she wondered—young Ph.D.s pouring out of the graduate schools panting for the jobs of older men like Weyland? "Peasants, these days?"

"Whatever their daily work, there is still a majority of the stupid, the violent, and the credulous, putting their featherbrained faith in astrology, in this cult or that, in various branches of psychology."

His sneer at her was unmistakable. Considering her refusal to let him fill the hour his own way, this desire to take a swipe at her was healthy. But it required immediate and straightforward handling.

"Edward, open your eyes and tell me what you see."

He obeyed. "I see a woman in her early forties," he said, "clever-looking face, dark hair showing gray; flesh too thin for her bones, indicating either vanity or illness; wearing slacks and a rather creased batik

blouse—describable, I think, by the term ‘peasant style’—with a food stain on the left side.”

Damn! Don't blush. “Does anything besides my blouse suggest a peasant to you?”

“Nothing concrete, but with regard to me, my vampire self, a peasant with a torch is what you could easily become.”

“I hear you saying that my task is to help you get rid of your delusion, though this process may be painful and frightening for you.”

Something flashed in his expression—surprise, perhaps alarm, something she wanted to get in touch with before it could sink away out of reach again. Quickly she said, “How do you experience your face at this moment?”

He frowned. “As being on the front of my head. Why?”

With a rush of anger at herself she saw that she had chosen the wrong technique for reaching that hidden feeling: she had provoked hostility instead. She said, “Your face looked to me just now like a mask for concealing what you feel rather than an instrument of expression.”

He moved restlessly in the chair, his whole physical attitude tense and guarded. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Will you let me touch you?” she said, rising.

His hands tightened on the arms of his chair, which protested in a sharp creak. He snapped, “I thought this was a talking cure.”

Strong resistance to body work—ease up. “If you won’t let me massage some of the tension out of your facial muscles, will you try to do it yourself?”

“I don’t enjoy being made ridiculous,” he said, standing and heading for the door, which clapped smartly to behind him.

She sagged back in her seat; she had mishandled him. Clearly her initial estimation of this as a relatively easy job had been wrong and had led her to move far too quickly with him. Certainly it was much too early to try body work. She should have developed a firmer level of trust first by letting him do more of what he did so easily and so well—talk.

The door opened. Weyland came back in and shut it quietly. He did not sit again but paced about the room, coming to rest at the window.

“Please excuse my rather childish behavior just now,” he said. “Playing these games of yours brought it on.”

“It’s frustrating, playing games that are unfamiliar and that you can’t control,” she said. As he made no reply, she went on in a conciliatory tone, “I’m not trying to belittle you, Edward. I just need to get us off whatever track you were taking us down so briskly. My feeling is that you’re trying hard to regain your old stability.

“But that’s the goal, not the starting point. The only way to reach your goal is through the process, and you don’t drive the therapy process like a train. You can only help the process happen, as though you were helping a tree grow.”

“These games are part of the process?”

“Yes.”

“And neither you nor I control the games?”

“That’s right.”

He considered. “Suppose I agree to try this process of yours; what would you want of me?”

Observing him carefully, she no longer saw the anxious scholar bravely struggling back from madness. Here was a different sort of man—armored, calculating. She didn’t know just what the change signaled, but she felt her own excitement stirring, and that meant she was on the track of—something.

“I have a hunch,” she said slowly, “that this vampirism extends further back into your past than you’ve told me and possibly right up into the present as well. I think it’s still with you. My style of therapy stresses dealing with the now at least as much as the then; if the vampirism is part of the present, dealing with it on that basis is crucial.”

Silence.

“Can you talk about being a vampire: being one now?”

“You won’t like knowing,” he said.

“Edward, try.”

He said, “I hunt.”

“Where? How? What sort of victims?”

He folded his arms and leaned his back against the window frame. “Very well, since you insist. There are a number of possibilities here in the city in summer. Those too poor to own air-conditioners sleep out on rooftops and fire escapes. But often, I’ve found, their blood is sour with drugs or liquor. The same is true of prostitutes. Bars are full of accessible people but also full of smoke and noise, and there too the blood is fouled. I must choose my hunting grounds carefully. Often I go to openings of galleries or evening museum shows or department stores on their late nights—places where women may be approached.”

And take pleasure in it, she thought, if they’re out hunting also—for acceptable male companionship. Yet he said he’s never married. Explore where this is going. “Only women?”

He gave her a sardonic glance, as if she were a slightly brighter student than he had at first assumed.

“Hunting women is liable to be time-consuming and expensive. The best hunting is in the part of Central Park they call the Ramble, where homosexual men seek encounters with others of their kind. I walk there too, at night.”

Floria caught a faint sound of conversation and laughter from the waiting room; her next client had probably arrived, she realized, looking reluctantly at the clock. “I’m sorry, Edward, but our time seems to be—”

“Only a moment more,” he said coldly. “You asked; permit me to finish my answer. In the Ramble I find someone who doesn’t reek of alcohol or drugs, who seems healthy, and who is not insistent on ‘hooking up’ right there among the bushes. I invite such a man to my hotel. He judges me safe, at least: older, weaker than he is, unlikely to turn out to be a dangerous maniac. So he comes to my room. I feed on his blood.

“Now, I think, our time is up.”

He walked out.

She sat torn between rejoicing at his admission of the delusion’s persistence and dismay that his condition was so much worse than she had first thought. Her hope of having an easy time with him vanished. His initial presentation had been just that—a performance, an act. Forced to abandon it, he

had dumped on her this lump of material, too much—and too strange—to take in all at once.

Her next client liked the padded chair, not the wooden one that Weyland had sat in during the first part of the hour. Floria started to move the wooden one back. The armrests came away in her hands.

She remembered him starting up in protest against her proposal of touching him. The grip of his fingers had fractured the joints, and the shafts now lay in splinters on the floor.

* * *

Floria wandered into Lucille's room at the clinic after the staff meeting. Lucille was lying on the couch with a wet cloth over her eyes.

"I thought you looked green around the gills today," Floria said. "What's wrong?"

"Big bash last night," said Lucille in sepulchral tones. "I think I feel about the way you do after a session with Chubs. You haven't gotten rid of him yet, have you?"

"No. I had him lined up to see Marty instead of me last week, but damned if he didn't show up at my door at his usual time. It's a lost cause. What I wanted to talk to you about was Dracula."

"What about him?"

"He's smarter, tougher, and sicker than I thought, and maybe I'm even less competent than I thought, too. He's already walked out on me once—I almost lost him. I never took a course in treating monsters."

Lucille groaned. "Some days they're all monsters." This from Lucille, who worked longer hours than anyone else at the clinic, to the despair of her husband. She lifted the cloth, refolded it, and placed it carefully across her forehead. "And if I had ten dollars for every client who's walked out on me . . . Tell you what: I'll trade you Madame X for him, how's that? Remember Madame X, with the jangling bracelets and the parakeet eye makeup and the phobia about dogs? Now she's phobic about things dropping on her out of the sky. Just wait—it'll turn out that one day when she was three a dog trotted by and pissed on her leg just as an over-passing pigeon shat on her head. What are we doing in this business?"

"God knows." Floria laughed. "But am I in this business these days—I mean, in the sense of practicing my so-called skills? Blocked with my group work, beating my brains out on a book that won't go, and doing something—I'm not sure it's therapy—with a vampire . . . You know, once I had this sort of natural choreographer inside myself that hardly let me put a foot wrong and always knew how to correct a mistake if I did. Now that's gone. I feel as if I'm just going through a lot of mechanical motions. Whatever I had once that made me useful as a therapist, I've lost it."

Ugh, she thought, hearing the descent of her voice into a tone of gloomy self-pity.

"Well, don't complain about Dracula," Lucille said. "You were the one who insisted on taking him on. At least he's got you concentrating on his problem instead of just wringing your hands. As long as you've started, stay with it—illumination may come. And now I'd better change the ribbon in my typewriter and get back to reviewing Silverman's latest bestseller on self-shrinking while I'm feeling mean enough to do it justice." She got up gingerly. "Stick around in case I faint and fall into the wastebasket."

"Luce, this case is what I'd like to try to write about."

"Dracula?" Lucille pawed through a desk drawer full of paper clips, pens, rubber bands, and old lipsticks.

“Dracula. A monograph . . .”

“Oh, I know that game: you scribble down everything you can and then read what you wrote to find out what’s going on with the client, and with luck you end up publishing. Great! But if you are going to publish, don’t piddle this away on a dinky paper. Do a book. Here’s your subject, instead of those depressing statistics you’ve been killing yourself over. This one is really exciting—a case study to put on the shelf next to Freud’s own wolf-man, have you thought of that?”

Floria liked it. “What a book that could be—fame if not fortune. Notoriety, most likely. How in the world could I convince our colleagues that it’s legit? There’s a lot of vampire stuff around right now—plays on Broadway and TV, books all over the place, movies. They’ll say I’m just trying to ride the coattails of a fad.”

“No, no, what you do is show how this guy’s delusion is related to the fad. Fascinating.” Lucille, having found a ribbon, prodded doubtfully at the exposed innards of her typewriter.

“Suppose I fictionalize it,” Floria said, “under a pseudonym. Why not ride the popular wave and be free in what I can say?”

“Listen, you’ve never written a word of fiction in your life, have you?” Lucille fixed her with a bloodshot gaze. “There’s no evidence that you could turn out a bestselling novel. On the other hand, by this time you have a trained memory for accurately reporting therapeutic transactions. That’s a strength you’d be foolish to waste. A solid professional book would be terrific—and a feather in the cap of every woman in the field. Just make sure you get good legal advice on disguising your Dracula’s identity well enough to avoid libel.”

The cane-seated chair wasn’t worth repairing, so she got its twin out of the bedroom to put in the office in its place. Puzzling: by his history Weyland was fifty-two, and by his appearance no muscle man. She should have asked Doug—but how, exactly? “By the way, Doug, was Weyland ever a circus strong man or a blacksmith? Does he secretly pump iron?” Ask the client himself—but not yet.

* * *

She invited some of the younger staff from the clinic over for a small party with a few of her outside friends. It was a good evening; they were not a heavy-drinking crowd, which meant the conversation stayed intelligent. The guests drifted about the long living room or stood in twos and threes at the windows looking down on West End Avenue as they talked.

Mort came, warming the room. Fresh from a session with some amateur chamber-music friends, he still glowed with the pleasure of making his cello sing. His own voice was unexpectedly light for so large a man. Sometimes Floria thought that the deep throb of the cello was his true voice.

He stood beside her talking with some others. There was no need to lean against his comfortable bulk or to have him put his arm around her waist. Their intimacy was long-standing, an effortless pleasure in each other that required neither demonstration nor concealment.

He was easily diverted from music to his next favorite topic, the strengths and skills of athletes.

“Here’s a question for a paper I’m thinking of writing,” Floria said. “Could a tall, lean man be exceptionally strong?”

Mort rambled on in his thoughtful way. His answer seemed to be no.

“But what about chimpanzees?” put in a young clinician. “I went with a guy once who was an animal handler for TV, and he said a three-month-old chimp could demolish a strong man.”

“It’s all physical conditioning,” somebody else said. “Modern people are soft.”

Mort nodded. “Human beings in general are weakly made compared to other animals. It’s a question of muscle insertions—the angles of how the muscles are attached to the bones. Some angles give better leverage than others. That’s how a leopard can bring down a much bigger animal than itself. It has a muscular structure that gives it tremendous strength for its streamlined build.”

Floria said, “If a man were built with muscle insertions like a leopard’s, he’d look pretty odd, wouldn’t he?”

“Not to an untrained eye,” Mort said, sounding bemused by an inner vision. “And my God, what an athlete he’d make—can you imagine a guy in the decathlon who’s as strong as a leopard?”

When everyone else had gone Mort stayed, as he often did. Jokes about insertions, muscular and otherwise, soon led to sounds more expressive and more animal, but afterward Floria didn’t feel like resting snuggled together with Mort and talking. When her body stopped racing, her mind turned to her new client. She didn’t want to discuss him with Mort, so she ushered Mort out as gently as she could and sat down by herself at the kitchen table with a glass of orange juice.

How to approach the reintegration of Weyland the eminent, gray-haired academic with the rebellious vampire-self that had smashed his life out of shape?

She thought of the broken chair, of Weyland’s big hands crushing the wood. Old wood and dried-out glue, of course, or he never could have done that. He was a man, after all, not a leopard.

* * *

The day before the third session Weyland phoned and left a message with Hilda: he would not be coming to the office tomorrow for his appointment, but if Dr. Landauer were agreeable she would find him at their usual hour at the Central Park Zoo.

Am I going to let him move me around from here to there? she thought. *I shouldn’t—but why fight it? Give him some leeway, see what opens up in a different setting.* Besides, it was a beautiful day, probably the last of the sweet May weather before the summer stickiness descended. She gladly cut Kenny short so that she would have time to walk over to the zoo.

There was a fair crowd there for a weekday. Well-groomed young matrons pushed clean, floppy babies in strollers. Weyland she spotted at once.

He was leaning against the railing that enclosed the seals’ shelter and their murky green pool. His jacket, slung over his shoulder, draped elegantly down his long back. Floria thought him rather dashing and faintly foreign-looking. Women who passed him, she noticed, tended to glance back.

He looked at everyone. She had the impression that he knew quite well that she was walking up behind him.

“Outdoors makes a nice change from the office, Edward,” she said, coming to the rail beside him. “But there must be more to this than a longing for fresh air.” A fat seal lay in sculptural grace on the concrete, eyes blissfully shut, fur drying in the sun to a translucent water-color umber.

Weyland straightened from the rail. They walked. He did not look at the animals; his eyes moved continually over the crowd. He said, “Someone has been watching for me at your office building.”

“Who?”

“There are several possibilities. Pah, what a stench—though humans caged in similar circumstances smell as bad.” He sidestepped a couple of shrieking children who were fighting over a balloon and headed out of the zoo under the musical clock.

They walked the uphill path northward through the park. By extending her own stride a little Floria found that she could comfortably keep pace with him.

“Is it peasants with torches?” she said. “Following you?”

He said, “What a childish idea.”

All right, try another tack, then: “You were telling me last time about hunting in the Ramble. Can we return to that?”

“If you wish.” He sounded bored—a defense? Surely—she was certain this must be the right reading—surely his problem was a transmutation into “vampire” fantasy of an unacceptable aspect of himself. For men of his generation the confrontation with homosexual drives could be devastating.

“When you pick up someone in the Ramble, is it a paid encounter?”

“Usually.”

“How do you feel about having to pay?” She expected resentment.

He gave a faint shrug. “Why not? Others work to earn their bread. I work, too, very hard, in fact. Why shouldn’t I use my earnings to pay for my sustenance?”

Why did he never play the expected card? Baffled, she paused to drink from a fountain. They walked on.

“Once you’ve got your quarry, how do you . . .” She fumbled for a word.

“Attack?” he supplied, unperturbed. “There’s a place on the neck, here, where pressure can interrupt the blood flow to the brain and cause unconsciousness. Getting close enough to apply that pressure isn’t difficult.”

“You do this before, or after any sexual activity?”

“Before, if possible,” he said aridly, “and instead of.” He turned aside to stalk up a slope to a granite outcrop that overlooked the path they had been following. There he settled on his haunches, looking back the way they had come. Floria, glad she’d worn slacks today, sat down near him.

He didn’t seem devastated—anything but. *Press him, don’t let him get by on cool.* “Do you often prey on men in preference to women?”

“Certainly. I take what is easiest. Men have always been more accessible because women have been walled away like prizes or so physically impoverished by repeated childbearing as to be unhealthy prey for me. All this has begun to change recently, but gay men are still the simplest quarry.” While she was recovering from her surprise at his unforeseen and weirdly skewed awareness of female history, he added suavely, “How carefully you control your expression, Dr. Landauer—no trace of disapproval.”

She did disapprove, she realized. She would prefer him not to be committed sexually to men. *Oh, hell.*

He went on, “Yet no doubt you see me as one who victimizes the already victimized. This is the world’s way. A wolf brings down the stragglers at the edges of the herd. Gay men are denied the full protection of the human herd and are at the same time emboldened to make themselves known and available.

“On the other hand, unlike the wolf I can feed without killing, and these particular victims pose no threat to me that would cause me to kill. Outcasts themselves, even if they comprehend my true purpose among them they cannot effectively accuse me.”

God, how neatly, completely, and ruthlessly he distanced the homosexual community from

himself!“And how do you feel, Edward, about their purposes—their sexual expectations of you?”

“The same way I feel about the sexual expectations of women whom I choose to pursue: they don’t interest me. Besides, once my hunger is active, sexual arousal is impossible. My physical unresponsiveness seems to surprise no one. Apparently impotence is expected in a gray-haired man, which suits my intention.”

Some kids carrying radios swung past below, trailing a jumble of amplified thump, wail, and jabber. Floria gazed after them unseeingly, thinking, astonished again, that she had never heard a man speak of his own impotence with such cool indifference. She had induced him to talk about his problem all right. He was speaking as freely as he had in the first session, only this time it was no act. He was drowning her in more than she had ever expected or for that matter wanted to know about vampirism. What the hell: she was listening, she thought she understood—what was it all good for?*Time for some cold reality*, she thought;*see how far he can carry all this incredible detail. Give the whole structure a shove.*

She said, “You realize, I’m sure, that people of either sex who make themselves so easily available are also liable to be carriers of disease. When was your last medical checkup?”

“My dear Dr. Landauer, my first medical checkup will be my last. Fortunately, I have no great need of one. Most serious illnesses—hepatitis, for example—reveal themselves to me by a quality in the odor of the victim’s skin. Warned, I abstain. When I do fall ill, as occasionally happens, I withdraw to some place where I can heal undisturbed. A doctor’s attentions would be more dangerous to me than any disease.”

Eyes on the path below, he continued calmly, “You can see by looking at me that there are no obvious clues to my unique nature. But believe me, an examination of any depth by even a half-sleeping medical practitioner would reveal some alarming deviations from the norm. I take pains to stay healthy, and I seem to be gifted with an exceptionally hardy constitution.”

Fantasies of being unique and physically superior; take him to the other pole.“I’d like you to try something now. Will you put yourself into the mind of a man you contact in the Ramble and describe your encounter with him from his point of view?”

He turned toward her and for some moments regarded her without expression. Then he resumed his surveillance of the path. “I will not. Though I do have enough empathy with my quarry to enable me to hunt efficiently, I must draw the line at erasing the necessary distance that keeps prey and predator distinct.

“And now I think our ways part for today.” He stood up, descended the hillside, and walked beneath some low-canopied trees, his tall back stooped, toward the Seventy-Second Street entrance of the park.

Floria arose more slowly, aware suddenly of her shallow breathing and the sweat on her face. Back to reality or what remained of it. She looked at her watch. She was late for her next client.

* * *

Floria couldn’t sleep that night. Barefoot in her bathrobe she paced the living room by lamplight. They had sat together on that hill as isolated as in her office—more so, because there was no Hilda and no phone. He was, she knew, very strong, and he had sat close enough to her to reach out for that paralyzing touch to the neck—

Just suppose for a minute that Weyland had been brazenly telling the truth all along, counting on her to treat it as a delusion because on the face of it the truth was inconceivable.

Jesus, she thought,*if I’m thinking that way about him, this therapy is more out of control than I*

thought. What kind of therapist becomes an accomplice to the client's fantasy? A crazy therapist, that's what kind.

Frustrated and confused by the turmoil in her mind, she wandered into the workroom. By morning the floor was covered with sheets of newsprint, each broadly marked by her felt-tipped pen. Floria sat in the midst of them, gritty-eyed and hungry.

She often approached problems this way, harking back to art training: turn off the thinking, put hand to paper and see what the deeper, less verbally sophisticated parts of the mind have to offer. Now that her dreams had deserted her, this was her only access to those levels.

The newsprint sheets were covered with rough representations of Weyland's face and form. Across several of them were scrawled words: "Dear Doug, your vampire is fine, it's your ex-therapist who's off the rails. Warning: therapy can be dangerous to your health. Especially if you are the therapist. Beautiful vampire, awaken to me. Am I really ready to take on a legendary monster? Give up—refer this one out. Do your job—work is a good doctor."

That last one sounded pretty good, except that doing her job was precisely what she was feeling so shaky about these days.

Here was another message: "How come this attraction to someone so scary?" *Oh ho*, she thought, *is that a real feeling or an aimless reaction out of the body's early-morning hormone peak? You don't want to confuse honest libido with mere biological clockwork.*

* * *

Deborah called. Babies cried in the background over the Scotch Symphony. Nick, Deb's husband, was a musicologist with fervent opinions on music and nothing else.

"We'll be in town a little later in the summer," Deborah said, "just for a few days at the end of July. Nicky has this seminar-convention thing. Of course, it won't be easy with the babies . . . I wondered if you might sort of coordinate your vacation so you could spend a little time with them?"

Baby-sit, that meant. Damn. Cute as they were and all that, damn! Floria gritted her teeth. Visits from Deb were difficult. Floria had been so proud of her bright, hard-driving daughter, and then suddenly Deborah had dropped her studies and rushed to embrace all the dangers that Floria had warned her against: a romantic, too-young marriage, instant breeding, no preparation for self-support, the works. Well, to each her own, but it was so wearing to have Deb around playing the empty-headed *hausfrau*.

"Let me think, Deb. I'd love to see all of you, but I've been considering spending a couple of weeks in Maine with your Aunt Nonnie." *God knows I need a real vacation*, she thought, *though the peace and quiet up there is hard for a city kid like me to take for long*. Still, Nonnie, Floria's younger sister, was good company. "Maybe you could bring the kids up there for a couple of days. There's room in that great barn of a place, and of course Nonnie'd be happy to have you."

"Oh, no, Mom, it's so dead up there, it drives Nick crazy—don't tell Nonnie I said that. Maybe Nonnie could come down to the city instead. You could cancel a date or two and we could all go to Coney Island together, things like that."

Kid things, which would drive Nonnie crazy and Floria too, before long. "I doubt she could manage," Floria said, "but I'll ask. Look, hon, if I do go up there, you and Nick and the kids could stay here at the apartment and save some money."

"We have to be at the hotel for the seminar," Deb said shortly. No doubt she was feeling just as impatient as Floria was by now. "And the kids haven't seen you for a long time—it would be really nice if you could stay in the city just for a few days."

“We’ll try to work something out.” Always working something out. *Concord never comes naturally—first we have to butt heads and get pissed off. Each time you call I hope it’ll be different*, Floria thought.

Somebody shrieked for “oly,” jelly that would be, in the background—Floria felt a sudden rush of warmth for them, her grandkids for God’s sake. Having been a young mother herself, she was still young enough to really enjoy them (and to fight with Deb about how to bring them up).

Deb was starting an awkward goodbye. Floria replied, put the phone down, and sat with her head back against the flowered kitchen wallpaper, thinking, *Why do I feel so rotten now? Deb and I aren’t close, no comfort, seldom friends, though we were once. Have I said everything wrong, made her think I don’t want to see her and don’t care about her family? What does she want from me that I can’t seem to give her? Approval? Maybe she thinks I still hold her marriage against her. Well, I do, sort of. What right have I to be critical, me with my divorce? What terrible things would she say to me, would I say to her, that we take such care not to say anything important at all?*

* * *

“I think today we might go into sex,” she said.

Weyland responded dryly, “Might we indeed. Does it titillate you to wring confessions of solitary vice from men of mature years?”

Oh no you don’t, she thought. *You can’t sidestep so easily*. “Under what circumstances do you find yourself sexually aroused?”

“Most usually upon waking from sleep,” he said indifferently.

“What do you do about it?”

“The same as others do. I am not a cripple, I have hands.”

“Do you have fantasies at these times?”

“No. Women, and men for that matter, appeal to me very little, either in fantasy or reality.”

“Ah—what about female vampires?” she said, trying not to sound arch.

“I know of none.”

Of course: the neatest out in the book. “They’re not needed for reproduction, I suppose, because people who die of vampire bites become vampires themselves.”

He said testily, “Nonsense. I am not a communicable disease.”

So he had left an enormous hole in his construct. She headed straight for it: “Then how does your kind reproduce?”

“I have no kind, so far as I am aware,” he said, “and I do not reproduce. Why should I, when I may live for centuries still, perhaps indefinitely? My sexual equipment is clearly only detailed biological mimicry, a form of protective coloration.” *How beautiful, how simple a solution*, she thought, full of admiration in spite of herself. “Do I occasionally detect a note of prurient interest in your questions, Dr. Landauer? Something akin to stopping at the cage to watch the tigers mate at the zoo?”

“Probably,” she said, feeling her face heat. He had a great backhand return shot there. “How do you feel about that?”

He shrugged.

“To return to the point,” she said. “Do I hear you saying that you have no urge whatever to engage in

sexual intercourse with anyone?”

“Would you mate with your livestock?”

His matter-of-fact arrogance took her breath away. She said weakly, “Men have reportedly done so.”

“Driven men. I am not driven in that way. My sex urge is of low frequency and is easily dealt with unaided—although I occasionally engage in copulation out of the necessity to keep up appearances. I am capable, but not—like humans—obsessed.”

Was he sinking into lunacy before her eyes? “I think I hear you saying,” she said, striving to keep her voice neutral, “that you’re not just a man with a unique way of life. I think I hear you saying that you’re not human at all.”

“I thought that this was already clear.”

“And that there are no others like you.”

“None that I know of.”

“Then—you see yourself as what? Some sort of mutation?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps your kind are the mutation.”

She saw disdain in the curl of his lip. “How does your mouth feel now?”

“The corners are drawn down. The feeling is contempt.”

“Can you let the contempt speak?”

He got up and went to stand at the window, positioning himself slightly to one side as if to stay hidden from the street below.

“Edward,” she said.

He looked back at her. “Humans are my food. I draw the life out of their veins. Sometimes I kill them. I am greater than they are. Yet I must spend my time thinking about their habits and their drives, scheming to avoid the dangers they pose—I hate them.”

She felt the hatred like a dry heat radiating from him. *God, he really lived all this!* She had tapped into a furnace of feeling. And now? The sensation of triumph wavered, and she grabbed at a next move: *hit him with reality now, while he’s burning.*

“What about blood banks?” she said. “Your food is commercially available, so why all the complication and danger of the hunt?”

“You mean I might turn my efforts to piling up a fortune and buying blood by the case? That would certainly make for an easier, less risky life in the short run. I could fit quite comfortably into modern society if I became just another consumer.

“However, I prefer to keep the mechanics of my survival firmly in my own hands. After all, I can’t afford to lose my hunting skills. In two hundred years there may be no blood banks, but I will still need my food.”

Jesus, you set him a hurdle and he just flies over it. Are there no weaknesses in all this, has he no blind spots? Look at his tension—go back to that. Floria said, “What do you feel now in your body?”

“Tightness.” He pressed his spread fingers to his abdomen.

“What are you doing with your hands?”

“I put my hands to my stomach.”

“Can you speak for your stomach?”

“ ‘Feed me or die,’ ” he snarled.

Elated again, she closed in: “And for yourself, in answer?”

“ ‘Will you never be satisfied?’ ” He glared at her. “You shouldn’t seduce me into quarreling with the terms of my own existence!”

“Your stomach is your existence,” she paraphrased.

“The gut determines,” he said harshly. “That first, everything else after.”

“Say, ‘I resent . . . ’ ”

He held to a tense silence.

“ ‘I resent the power of my gut over my life,’ ” she said for him.

He stood with an abrupt motion and glanced at his watch, an elegant flash of slim silver on his wrist. “Enough,” he said.

* * *

That night at home she began a set of notes that would never enter his file at the office, notes toward the proposed book.

Couldn’t do it, couldn’t get properly into the sex thing with him. Everything shoots off in all directions. His vampire concept so thoroughly worked out, find myself half believing sometimes—my own childish fantasy-response to his powerful death-avoidance, contact-avoidance fantasy. Lose professional distance every time—is that what scares me about him? Don’t really want to shatter his delusion (my life a mess, what right to tear down others’ patterns?)—so see it as real? Wonder how much of “vampirism” he acts out, how far, how often. Something attractive in his purely selfish, predatory stance—the lure of the great outlaw.

*

Told me today quite coolly about a man he killed recently—inadvertently—by drinking too much from him. *Is* it fantasy? Of course—the victim, he thinks, was a college student. Breathes there a professor who hasn’t dreamed of murdering some representative youth, retaliation for years of classroom frustration? Speaks of teaching with acerbic humor—amuses him to work at cultivating the minds of those he regards strictly as bodies, containers of his sustenance. He shows the alienness of full-blown psychopathology, poor bastard, plus clean-cut logic. Suggested he find another job (assuming his delusion at least in part related to pressures at Cayslin); his fantasy-persona, the vampire, more realistic than I about job-switching:

“For a man of my apparent age it’s not so easy to make such a change in these tight times. I might have to take a position lower on the ladder of ‘success’ as you people assess it.” Status is important to him? “Certainly. An eccentric professor is one thing; an eccentric pipe-fitter, another. And I like good cars, which are expensive to own and run.” Then, thoughtful addition, “Although there are advantages to a simpler, less visible life.” He refuses to discuss other “jobs” from former “lives.” We are deep into the fantasy—where the hell going? Damn right I don’t control the “games”—preplanned therapeutic strategies

get whirled away as soon as we begin. Nerve-wracking.

*

Tried again to have him take the part of his enemy-victim, peasant with torch. Asked if he felt himself rejecting that point of view? Frosty reply: “Naturally. The peasant’s point of view is in no way my own. I’ve been reading in your field, Dr. Landauer. You work from the Gestalt orientation—” Originally yes, I corrected; eclectic now. “But you do proceed from the theory that I am projecting some aspect of my own feelings outward onto others, whom I then treat as my victims. Your purpose then must be to maneuver me into accepting as my own the projected ‘victim’ aspect of myself. This integration is supposed to effect the freeing of energy previously locked into maintaining the projection. All this is an interesting insight into the nature of ordinary human confusion, but I am not an ordinary human, and I am not confused. I cannot afford confusion.” Felt sympathy for him—telling me he’s afraid of having own internal confusions exposed in therapy, too threatening. Keep chipping away at delusion, though with what prospect? It’s so complex, deep-seated.

*

Returned to his phrase “my apparent age.” He asserts he has lived many human lifetimes, all details forgotten, however, during periods of suspended animation between lives. Perhaps sensing my skepticism at such handy amnesia, grew cool and distant, claimed to know little about the hibernation process itself: “The essence of this state is that I sleep through it—hardly an ideal condition for making scientific observations.”

Edward thinks his body synthesizes vitamins, minerals (as all our bodies synthesize vitamin D), even proteins. Describes unique design he deduces in himself: special intestinal microfauna plus superefficient body chemistry extracts enough energy to live on from blood. Damn good mileage per calorie, too. (Recall observable tension, first interview, at question about drinking—my note on possible alcohol problem!)

Speak for blood: “ ‘Lacking me, you have no life. I flow to the heart’s soft drumbeat through lightless prisons of flesh. I am rich, I am nourishing, I am difficult to attain.’ ” Stunned to find him positively lyrical on subject of his “food.” Drew attention to whispering voice of blood. “ ‘Yes. I am secret, hidden beneath the surface, patient, silent, steady. I work unnoticed, an unseen thread of vitality running from age to age—beautiful, efficient, self-renewing, self-cleansing, warm, filling—’ ” Could *see* him getting worked up. Finally he stood: “My appetite is pressing. I must leave you.” And he did.

Sat and trembled for five minutes after.

New development (or new perception?): he sometimes comes across very unsophisticated about own feelings—lets me pursue subjects of extreme intensity and delicacy to him.

*

Asked him to daydream—a hunt. (Hands—mine—shaking now as I write. God. What a session.) He told of picking up a woman at poetry reading, 92nd Street Y—has N.Y.C. all

worked out, circulates to avoid too much notice any one spot. Spoke easily, eyes shut without observable strain: chooses from audience a redhead in glasses, dress with drooping neckline (ease of access), no perfume (strong smells bother him). Approaches during intermission, encouraged to see her fanning away smoke of others' cigarettes—meaning she doesn't smoke, health sign. Agreed in not enjoying the reading, they adjourn together to coffee shop.

"She asks whether I'm a teacher," he says, eyes shut, mouth amused. "My clothes, glasses, manner all suggest this, and I emphasize the impression—it reassures. She's a copy editor for a publishing house. We talk about books. The waiter brings her a gummy-looking pastry. As a non-eater, I pay little attention to the quality of restaurants, so I must apologize to her. She waves this away—is engrossed, or pretending to be engrossed, in talk." A longish dialog between interested woman and Edward doing shy-lonesome-scholar act—dead wife, competitive young colleagues who don't understand him, quarrels in professional journals with big shots in his field—a version of what he first told me. She's attracted (of course—lanky, rough-cut elegance plus hints of vulnerability all very alluring, as intended). He offers to take her home.

Tension in his body at this point in narrative—spine clear of chair back, hands braced on thighs. "She settles beside me in the back of the cab, talking about problems of her own career—illegible manuscripts of Biblical length, mulish editors, suicidal authors—and I make comforting comments; I lean nearer and put my arm along the back of the seat, behind her shoulders. Traffic is heavy, we move slowly. There is time to make my meal here in the taxi and avoid a tedious extension of the situation into her apartment—if I move soon."

How do you feel?

"Eager," he says, voice husky. "My hunger is so roused I can scarcely restrain myself. A powerful hunger, not like yours—mine compels. I embrace her shoulders lightly, make kindly-uncle remarks, treading that fine line between the game of seduction she perceives and the game of friendly interest I pretend to affect. My real purpose underlies all: what I say, how I look, every gesture is part of the stalk. There is an added excitement, and fear, because I'm doing my hunting in the presence of a third person—behind the cabby's head."

Could scarcely breathe. Studied him—intent face, masklike with closed eyes, nostrils slightly flared; legs tensed, hands clenched on knees. Whispering: "I press the place on her neck. She starts, sighs faintly, silently drops against me. In the stale stench of the cab's interior, with the ticking of the meter in my ears and the mutter of the radio—I take hold here, at the tenderest part of her throat. Sound subsides into the background—I feel the sweet blood beating under her skin, I taste salt at the moment before I—strike. My saliva thins her blood so that it flows out, I draw the blood into my mouth swiftly, swiftly, before she can wake, before we can arrive . . ."

Trailed off, sat back loosely in chair—saw him swallow. "Ah. I feed." Heard him sigh. Managed to ask about physical sensation. His low murmur, "Warm. Heavy, here—" touches his belly "—in a pleasant way. The good taste of blood, tart and rich, in my mouth . . ."

And then? A flicker of movement beneath his closed eyelids: “In time I am aware that the cabby has glanced back once and has taken our—‘embrace’ for just that. I can feel the cab slowing, hear him move to turn off the meter. I withdraw, I quickly wipe my mouth on my handkerchief. I take her by the shoulders and shake her gently; does she often have these attacks, I inquire, the soul of concern. She comes around, bewildered, weak, thinks she has fainted. I give the driver extra money and ask him to wait. He looks intrigued—‘What was that all about,’ I can see the question in his face—but as a true New Yorker he won’t expose his own ignorance by asking.

“I escort the woman to her front door, supporting her as she staggers. Any suspicion of me that she may entertain, however formless and hazy, is allayed by my stern charging of the doorman to see that she reaches her apartment safely. She grows embarrassed, thinks perhaps that if not put off by her ‘illness’ I would spend the night with her, which moves her to press upon me, unasked, her telephone number. I bid her a solicitous good night and take the cab back to my hotel, where I sleep.”

No sex? No sex.

How did he feel about the victim as a person? “She was food.”

This was his “hunting” of last night, he admits afterward, not a made-up dream. No boasting in it, just telling. Telling me! Think: I can go talk to Lucille, Mort, Doug, others about most of what matters to me. Edward has only me to talk to and that for a fee—what isolation! No wonder the stone, monumental face—only those long, strong lips (his point of contact, verbal and physical-in-fantasy, with world and with “food”) are truly expressive. An exciting narration; uncomfortable to find I felt not only empathy but enjoyment. Suppose he picked up and victimized—even in fantasy—Deb or Hilda, how would I feel then?

Later: Truth—I also found this recital sexually stirring. Keep visualizing how he looked finishing this “dream”—he sat very still, head up, look of thoughtful pleasure on his face. Like handsome intellectual listening to music.

* * *

Kenny showed up unexpectedly at Floria’s office on Monday, bursting with malevolent energy. She happened to be free, so she took him—something was definitely up. He sat on the edge of his chair.

“I know why you’re trying to unload me,” he accused. “It’s that new one, the tall guy with the snooty look—what is he, an old actor or something? Anybody could see he’s got you itching for him.”

“Kenny, when was it that I first spoke to you about terminating our work together?” she said patiently.

“Don’t change the subject. Let me tell you, in case you don’t know it: that guy isn’t really interested, Doctor, because he’s a fruit. A faggot. You want to know how I know?”

Oh Lord, she thought wearily, *he’s regressed to age ten*. She could see that she was going to hear the rest whether she wanted to or not. What in God’s name was the world like for Kenny, if he clung so fanatically to her despite her failure to help him?

“Listen, I knew right away there was something flaky about him, so I followed him from here to that hotel where he lives. I followed him the other afternoon too. He walked around like he does a lot, and

then he went into one of those ritzy movie houses on Third that opens early and shows risqué foreign movies—you know, Japs cutting each other's things off and glop like that. This one was French, though.

"Well, there was a guy came in, a Madison Avenue type carrying his attaché case, taking a work break or something. Your man moved over and sat down behind him and reached out and sort of stroked the guy's neck, and the guy leaned back, and your man leaned forward and started nuzzling at him, you know—kissing him.

"I saw it. They had their heads together and they stayed like that a while. It was disgusting: complete strangers, without even 'hello.' The Madison Avenue guy just sat there with his head back looking zonked, you know, just swept away, and what he was doing with his hands under his raincoat in his lap I couldn't see, but I bet you can guess.

"And then your fruity friend got up and walked out. I did, too, and I hung around a little outside. After a while the Madison Avenue guy came out looking all sleepy and loose, like after you-know-what, and he wandered off on his own someplace.

"What do you think now?" he ended, on a high, triumphant note.

Her impulse was to slap his face the way she would have slapped Deb-as-a-child for tattling. But this was a client, not a kid. *God give me strength*, she thought.

"Kenny, you're fired."

"You can't!" he squealed. "You can't! What will I—who can I—"

She stood up, feeling weak but hardening her voice. "I'm sorry. I absolutely cannot have a client who makes it his business to spy on other clients. You already have a list of replacement therapists from me."

He gaped at her in slack-jawed dismay, his eyes swimmy with tears.

"I'm sorry, Kenny. Call this a dose of reality therapy and try to learn from it. There are some things you simply will not be allowed to do." She felt better: it was done at last.

"I hate you!" He surged out of his chair, knocking it back against the wall. Threateningly, he glared at the fish tank, but, contenting himself with a couple of kicks at the nearest table leg, he stamped out.

Floria buzzed Hilda: "No more appointments for Kenny, Hilda. You can close his file."

"Whoopee," Hilda said.

Poor, horrid Kenny. Impossible to tell what would happen to him, better not to speculate or she might relent, call him back. She had encouraged him, really, by listening instead of shutting him up and throwing him out before any damage was done.

Was it damaging, to know the truth? In her mind's eye she saw a cream-faced young man out of a Black Thumb Vodka ad wander from a movie theater into daylight, yawning and rubbing absently at an irritation on his neck . . .

She didn't even look at the telephone on the table or think about whom to call, now that she believed. No; she was going to keep quiet about Dr. Edward Lewis Weyland, her vampire.

* * *

Hardly alive at staff meeting, clinic, yesterday—people asking what's the matter, fobbed them off. Settled down today. Had to, to face him.

Asked him what he felt were his strengths. He said speed, cunning, ruthlessness. Animal strengths, I said. What about imagination, or is that strictly human? He defended at once: not human only. Lion, waiting at water hole where no zebra yet drinks, thinks “Zebra—eat,” therefore performs feat of imagining event yet-to-come. Self experienced as animal? Yes—reminded me that humans are also animals. Pushed for his early memories; he objected: “Gestalt is here-and-now, not history-taking.” I insist, citing anomalous nature of his situation, my own refusal to be bound by any one theoretical framework. He defends tensely: “Suppose I became lost there in memory, distracted from dangers of the present, left unguarded from those dangers.”

Speak for memory. He resists, but at length attempts it: “ ‘I am heavy with the multitudes of the past.’ ” Fingertips to forehead, propping up all that weight of lives. “ ‘So heavy, filling worlds of time laid down eon by eon, I accumulate, I persist, I demand recognition. I am as real as the life around you—more real, weightier, richer.’ ” His voice sinking, shoulders bowed, head in hands—I begin to feel pressure at the back of my own skull. “ ‘Let me in.’ ” Only a rough whisper now. “ ‘I offer beauty as well as terror. Let me in.’ ” Whispering also, I suggest he reply to his memory.

“Memory, you want to crush me,” he groans. “You would overwhelm me with the cries of animals, the odor and jostle of bodies, old betrayals, dead joys, filth and anger from other times—I must concentrate on the danger now. Let me be.” All I can take of this crazy conflict, I gabble us off onto something else. He looks up—relief?—follows my lead—where? Rest of session a blank.

No wonder sometimes no empathy at all—a species boundary! He has to be utterly self-centered just to keep balance—self-centeredness of an animal. Thought just now of our beginning, me trying to push him to produce material, trying to control him, manipulate—no way, no way; so here we are, someplace else—I feel dazed, in shock, but stick with it—it’s real.

Therapy with a dinosaur, a Martian.

*

“You call me ‘Weyland’ now, not ‘Edward.’ ” I said first name couldn’t mean much to one with no memory of being called by that name as a child, silly to pretend it signifies intimacy where it can’t. I think he knows now that I believe him. Without prompting, told me truth of disappearance from Cayslin. No romance; he tried to drink from a woman who worked there, she shot him, stomach and chest. Luckily for him, small-caliber pistol, and he was wearing a lined coat over three-piece suit. Even so, badly hurt. (Midsection stiffness I noted when he first came—he was still in some pain at that time.) He didn’t “vanish”—fled, hid, was found by questionable types who caught on to what he was, sold him “like a chattel” to someone here in the city. He was imprisoned, fed, put on exhibition—very privately—for gain. Got away. “Do you believe any of this?” Never asked anything like that before, seems of concern to him now. I said my belief or lack of same was immaterial; remarked on hearing a lot of bitterness.

He steepled his fingers, looked brooding at me over tips: “I nearly died there. No doubt my

purchaser and his diabolist friend still search for me. Mind you, I had some reason at first to be glad of the attentions of the people who kept me prisoner. I was in no condition to fend for myself. They brought me food and kept me hidden and sheltered, whatever their motives. There are always advantages . . .”

*

Silence today started a short session. Hunting poor last night, Weyland still hungry. Much restless movement, watching goldfish darting in tank, scanning bookshelves. Asked him to be books. “ ‘I am old and full of knowledge, well made to last long. You see only the title, the substance is hidden. I am a book that stays closed.’ ” Malicious twist of the mouth, not quite a smile: “This is a good game.” Is he feeling threatened, too—already “opened” too much to me? Too strung out with him to dig when he’s skimming surfaces that should be probed. Don’t know how to do therapy with Weyland just have to let things happen, hope it’s good. But what’s “good”? Aristotle? Rousseau? Ask Weyland what’s good, he’ll say “Blood.”

Everything in a spin—these notes too confused, too fragmentary—worthless for a book, just a mess, like me, my life. Tried to call Deb last night, cancel visit. Nobody home, thank God. Can’t tell her to stay away—but damn it—do not need complications now!

* * *

Floria went down to Broadway with Lucille to get more juice, cheese, and crackers for the clinic fridge. This week it was their turn to do the provisions, a chore that rotated among the staff. Their talk about grant proposals for the support of the clinic trailed off.

“Let’s sit a minute,” Floria said. They crossed to a traffic island in the middle of the avenue. It was a sunny afternoon, close enough to lunchtime so that the brigade of old people who normally occupied the benches had thinned out. Floria sat down and kicked a crumpled beer can and some greasy fast-food wrappings back under the bench.

“You look like hell, but wide awake at least,” Lucille commented.

“Things are still rough,” Floria said. “I keep hoping to get my life under control so I’ll have some energy left for Deb and Nick and the kids when they arrive, but I can’t seem to do it. Group was awful last night—a member accused me afterward of having abandoned them all. I think I have, too. The professional messes and the personal are all related somehow, they run into each other. I should be keeping them apart so I can deal with them separately, but I can’t. I can’t concentrate; my mind is all over the place. Except with Dracula, who keeps me riveted with astonishment when he’s in the office and bemused the rest of the time.”

A bus roared by, shaking the pavement and the benches. Lucille waited until the noise faded. “Relax about the group. The others would have defended you if you’d been attacked during the session. They all understand, even if you don’t seem to: it’s the summer doldrums, people don’t want to work, they expect you to do it all for them. But don’t push so hard. You’re not a shaman who can magic your clients back into health.”

Floria tore two cans of juice out of a six-pack and handed one to her. On a street corner opposite, a violent argument broke out in typewriter-fast Spanish between two women. Floria sipped tinny juice and watched. She’d seen a guy last winter straddle another on that same corner and try to smash his

brains out on the icy sidewalk. The old question again: what's crazy, what's health?

"It's a good thing you dumped Chubs, anyhow," Lucille said. "I don't know what finally brought that on, but it's definitely a move in the right direction. What about Count Dracula? You don't talk about him much anymore. I thought I diagnosed a yen for his venerable body."

Floria shifted uncomfortably on the bench and didn't answer. If only she could deflect Lucille's sharp-eyed curiosity.

"Oh," Lucille said. "I see. You really are hot—or at least warm. Has he noticed?"

"I don't think so. He's not on the lookout for that kind of response from me. He says sex with other people doesn't interest him, and I think he's telling the truth."

"Weird," Lucille said. "What about Vampire on My Couch? Shaping up all right?"

"It's shaky, like everything else. I'm worried that I don't know how things are going to come out. I mean, Freud's wolf-man case was a success, as therapy goes. Will my vampire case turn out successfully?"

She glanced at Lucille's puzzled face, made up her mind, and plunged ahead. "Luce, think of it this way: suppose, just suppose, that my Dracula is for real, an honest-to-God vampire—"

"*Ohshit!*" Lucille erupted in anguished exasperation. "Damn it, Floria, enough is enough—will you stop futzing around and get some help? Coming to pieces yourself and trying to treat this poor nut with a vampire fixation—how can you do him any good? No wonder you're worried about his therapy!"

"Please, just listen, help me think this out. My purpose can't be to cure him of what he is. Suppose vampirism isn't a defense he has to learn to drop? Suppose it's the core of his identity? Then what do I do?"

Lucille rose abruptly and marched away from her through a gap between the rolling waves of cabs and trucks. Floria caught up with her on the next block.

"Listen, will you? Luce, you see the problem? I don't need to help him see who and what he is, he knows that perfectly well, and he's not crazy, far from it—"

"Maybe not," Lucille said grimly, "but you are. Don't dump this junk on me outside of office hours, Floria. I don't spend my time listening to nut-talk unless I'm getting paid."

"Just tell me if this makes psychological sense to you: he's healthier than most of us because he's always true to his identity, even when he's engaged in deceiving others. A fairly narrow, rigorous set of requirements necessary to his survival—that's his identity, and it commands him completely. Anything extraneous could destroy him. To go on living, he has to act solely out of his own undistorted necessity, and if that isn't authenticity, what is? So he's healthy, isn't he?" She paused, feeling a sudden lightness in herself. "And that's the best sense I've been able to make of this whole business so far."

They were in the middle of the block. Lucille, who could not on her short legs outwalk Floria, turned on her suddenly. "What the hell do you think you're doing, calling yourself a therapist? For God's sake, Floria, don't try to rope me into this kind of professional irresponsibility. You're just dipping into your client's fantasies instead of helping him to handle them. That's not therapy; it's collusion. Have some sense! Admit you're over your head in troubles of your own, retreat to firmer ground—go get treatment for yourself!"

Floria angrily shook her head. When Lucille turned away and hurried on up the block toward the clinic, Floria let her go without trying to detain her.

* * *

Thought about Lucille's advice. After my divorce going back into therapy for a while did help, but now? Retreat again to being a client, like old days in training—so young, inadequate, defenseless then. Awful prospect. And I'd have to hand over W. to somebody else—who? I'm not up to handling him, can't cope, too anxious, yet with all that we do good therapy together somehow. I can't control, can only offer; he's free to take, refuse, use as suits, as far as he's willing to go. I serve as resource while he does own therapy—isn't that therapeutic ideal, free of "shoulds," "shouldn'ts"?

Saw ballet with Mort, lovely evening—time out from W.—talking, singing, pirouetting all the way home, feeling safe as anything in the shadow of Mort-mountain; rolled later with that humming (off-key), sun-warm body. Today W. says he saw me at Lincoln Center last night, avoided me because of Mort. W. is ballet fan! Started attending to pick up victims, now also because dance puzzles and pleases.

"When a group dances well, the meaning is easy—the dancers make a visual complement to the music, all their moves necessary, coherent, flowing. When a gifted soloist performs, the pleasure of making the moves is echoed in my own body. The soloist's absorption is total, much like my own in the actions of the hunt. But when a man and a woman dance together, something else happens. Sometimes one is hunter, one is prey, or they shift these roles between them. Yet some other level of significance exists—I suppose to do with sex—and I feel it—a tugging sensation, here—" touched his solar plexus "—but I do not understand it."

Worked with his reactions to ballet. The response he feels *topas de deux* is a kind of pull, "like hunger but not hunger." Of course he's baffled—Balanchine writes that the *pas de deux* is always a love story between man and woman. W. isn't man, isn't woman, yet the drama connects. His hands hovering as he spoke, fingers spread toward each other. Pointed this out. Body work comes easier to him now: joined his hands, interlaced fingers, spoke for hands without prompting: " 'We are similar; we want the comfort of like closing to like.' " How would that be for him, to find—likeness, another of his kind? "Female?" Starts impatiently explaining how unlikely this is— No, forget sex and *pas de deux* for now; just to find your like, another vampire.

He springs up, agitated now. There are none, he insists; adds at once, "But what would it be like? What would happen? I fear it!" Sits again, hands clenched. "I long for it."

Silence. He watches goldfish; I watch him. I withhold fatuous attempt to pin down this insight, if that's what it is—what can I know about his insight? Suddenly he turns, studies me intently till I lose my nerve, react, cravenly suggest that if I make him uncomfortable he might wish to switch to another therapist—

"Certainly not." More follows, all gold: "There is value to me in what we do here, Dr. Landauer, much against my earlier expectations. Although people talk appreciatively of honest speech they generally avoid it, and I myself have found scarcely any use for it at all. Your straightforwardness with me—and the straightforwardness you require in return—this is healthy in a life so dependent on deception as mine."

Sat there, wordless, much moved, thinking of what I don't show him—my upset life, seat-of-pants course with him and attendant strain, attraction to him—I'm holding out on him while he appreciates my honesty.

Hesitation, then lower-voiced, "Also, there are limits on my methods of self-discovery, short of turning myself over to a laboratory for vivisection. I have no others like myself to look at and learn from. Any tools that may help are worth much to me, and these games of yours are—potent." Other stuff besides, not important. Important: he moves me and he draws me and he keeps on coming back. Hang in if he does.

*

Bad night—Kenny's aunt called: no bill from me this month, so if he's not seeing me who's keeping an eye on him, where's he hanging out? Much implied blame for what *might* happen. Absurd, but shook me up: I did fail Kenny. Called off group this week also; too much.

No, it was a good night—first dream in months I can recall, contact again with own depths—but disturbing. Dreamed myself in cab with W. in place of the woman from the Y. He put his hand not on my neck but breast—I felt intense sensual response in the dream, also anger and fear so strong they woke me.

Thinking about this: anyone leans toward him sexually, to him a sign his hunting technique has maneuvered prospective victim into range, maybe arouses his appetite for blood. *I don't want that*. "She was food." I am not food, I am a person. No thrill at languishing away in his arms in a taxi while he drinks my blood—that's disfigured sex, masochism. My sex response in dream signaled to me I would be his victim—I rejected that, woke up.

*

Mention of *Dracula* (novel). W. dislikes: meandering, inaccurate, those absurd fangs. Says he himself has a sort of needle under his tongue, used to pierce skin. No offer to demonstrate, and no request from me. I brightly brought up historical Vlad Dracul—celebrated instance of Turkish envoys who, upon refusing to uncover to Vlad to show respect, were killed by spiking their hats to their skulls. "Nonsense," snorts W. "A clever ruler would use very small thumbtacks and dismiss the envoys to moan about the streets of Varna holding their tacked heads." First spontaneous play he's shown—took head in hands and uttered plaintive groans, "Ow, oh, ooh." I cracked up. W. reverted at once to usual dignified manner: "You can see that this would serve the ruler much more effectively as an object lesson against rash pride."

Later, same light vein: "I know why I'm a vampire; why are you a therapist?" Off balance as usual, said things about helping, mental health, etc. He shook his head: "And people think of a vampire as arrogant! You want to perform cures in a world which exhibits very little health of any kind—and it's the same arrogance with all of you. This one wants to be President or Class Monitor or Department Chairman or Union Boss, another must be first to fly to the stars or to transplant the human brain, and on and on. As for me, I wish only to satisfy my appetite in peace."

And those of us whose appetite is for competence, for effectiveness? Thought of Green, treated eight years ago, went on to be indicted for running a hellish “home” for aged. I had helped him stay functional so he could destroy the helpless for profit.

W. not my first predator, only most honest and direct. Scared; not of attack by W., but of process we’re going through. I’m beginning to be up to it (?), but still—utterly unpredictable, impossible to handle or manage. Occasional stirrings of inward choreographer that used to shape my work so surely. Have I been afraid of that, holding it down in myself, choosing mechanical manipulation instead? Not a choice with W.—thinking no good, strategy no good, nothing left but instinct, clear and uncluttered responses if I can find them. Have to be my own authority with him, as he is always his own authority with a world in which he’s unique. So work with W. not just exhausting—exhilarating too, along with strain, fear.

Am I growing braver? Not much choice.

*

Park again today (air-conditioning out at office). Avoiding Lucille’s phone calls from clinic (very reassuring that she calls despite quarrel, but don’t want to take all this up with her again). Also, meeting W. in open feels saner somehow—wild creatures belong outdoors? Sailboat pond N. of 72nd, lots of kids, garbage, one beautiful tall boat drifting. We walked.

W. maintains he remembers no childhood, no parents. I told him my astonishment, confronted by someone who never had a life of the previous generation (even adopted parent) shielding him from death—how naked we stand when the last shield falls. Got caught in remembering a death dream of mine, dream it now and then—couldn’t concentrate, got scared, spoke of it—a dog tumbled under a passing truck, ejected to side of the road where it lay unable to move except to lift head and shriek; couldn’t help. Shaking nearly to tears—remembered Mother got into dream somehow—had blocked that at first. Didn’t say it now. Tried to rescue situation, show W. how to work with a dream (sitting in vine arbor near band shell, some privacy).

He focused on my obvious shakiness: “The air vibrates constantly with the death cries of countless animals large and small. What is the death of one dog?” Leaned close, speaking quietly, instructing. “Many creatures are dying in ways too dreadful to imagine. I am part of the world; I listen to the pain. You people claim to be above all that. You deafen yourselves with your own noise and pretend there’s nothing else to hear. Then these screams enter your dreams, and you have to seek therapy because you have lost the nerve to listen.”

Remembered myself, said, Be a dying animal. He refused: “You are the one who dreams this.” I had a horrible flash, felt/ was the dog—helpless, doomed, hurting—burst into tears. The great therapist, bringing her own hangups into session with client! Enraged with self, which did not help stop bawling.

W. disconcerted, I think; didn’t speak. People walked past, glanced over, ignored us. W. said finally, “What is this?” Nothing, just the fear of death. “Oh, the fear of death. That’s with me all the time. One must simply get used to it.” Tears into laughter. Goddamn

wisdom of the ages. He got up to go, paused: “And tell that stupid little man who used to precede me at your office to stop following me around. He puts himself in danger that way.”

Kenny, damn it! Aunt doesn't know where he is, no answer on his phone. Idiot!

*

Sketching all night—useless. W. beautiful beyond the scope of line—the beauty of singularity, cohesion, rooted in absolute devotion to demands of his specialized body. In feeding (woman in taxi), utter absorption one wants from a man in sex—no score-keeping, no fantasies, just hot urgency of appetite, of senses, the moment by itself.

His sleeves worn rolled back today to the elbows—strong, sculptural forearms, the long bones curved in slightly, suggest torque, leverage. How old?

Endurance: huge, rich cloak of time flows back from his shoulders like wings of a dark angel. All springs from, elaborates, the single, stark, primary condition: he is a predator who subsists on human blood. Harmony, strength, clarity, magnificence—all from that basic animal integrity. Of course I long for all that, here in the higgledy-piggledly hodgepodge of my life! Of course he draws me!

*

Wore no perfume today, deference to his keen, easily insulted sense of smell. He noticed at once, said curt thanks. Saw something bothering him, opened my mouth seeking desperately for right thing to say—up rose my inward choreographer, wide awake, and spoke plain from my heart: Thinking on my floundering in some of our sessions—I am aware that you see this confusion of mine. I know you see by your occasional impatient look, sudden disengagement—yet you continue to reveal yourself to me (even shift our course yourself if it needs shifting and I don't do it). I think I know why. Because there's no place for you in world as you truly are. Because beneath your various façades your true self suffers; like all true selves, it wants, needs to be honored as real and valuable through acceptance by another. I try to be that other, but often you are beyond me.

He rose, paced to window, looked back, burning at me. “If I seem sometimes restless or impatient, Dr. Landauer, it's not because of any professional shortcomings of yours. On the contrary—you are all too effective. The seductiveness, the distraction of our—human contact worries me. I fear for the ruthlessness that keeps me alive.”

Speak for ruthlessness. He shook his head. Saw tightness in shoulders, feet braced hard against floor. Felt reflected tension in my own muscles.

Prompted him: “‘I resent . . .’”

“I resent your pretension to teach me about myself! What will this work that you do here make of me? A predator paralyzed by an unwanted empathy with his prey? A creature fit only for a cage and keeper?” He was breathing hard, jaw set. I saw suddenly the truth of his

fear: his integrity is not human, but my work is specifically human, designed to make humans more human—what if it does that to him? Should have seen it before, should have seen it. No place left to go: had to ask him, in small voice, Speak for my pretension.

“No!” Eyes shut, head turned away.

Had to do it: Speak for me.

W. whispered, “As to the unicorn, out of your own legends—‘Unicorn, come lay your head in my lap while the hunters close in. You are a wonder, and for love of wonder I will tame you. You are pursued, but forget your pursuers, rest under my hand till they come and destroy you.’ ” Looked at me like steel: “Do you see? The more you involve yourself in what I am, the more you become the peasant with the torch!”

* * *

Two days later Doug came into town and had lunch with Floria.

He was a man of no outstanding beauty who was nevertheless attractive: he didn’t have much chin and his ears were too big, but you didn’t notice because of his air of confidence. His stability had been earned the hard way—as a gay man facing the straight world. Some of his strength had been attained with effort and pain in a group that Floria had run years earlier. A lasting affection had grown between herself and Doug. She was intensely glad to see him.

They ate near the clinic. “You look a little frayed around the edges,” Doug said. “I heard about Jane Fennerman’s relapse—too bad.”

“I’ve only been able to bring myself to visit her once since.”

“Feeling guilty?”

She hesitated, gnawing on a stale breadstick. The truth was, she hadn’t thought of Jane Fennerman in weeks. Finally she said, “I guess I must be.”

Sitting back with his hands in his pockets, Doug chided her gently. “It’s got to be Jane’s fourth or fifth time into the nuthatch, and the others happened when she was in the care of other therapists. Who are you to imagine—to demand—that her cure lay in your hands? God may be a woman, Floria, but She is not you. I thought the whole point was some recognition of individual responsibility—you for yourself, the client for himself or herself.”

“That’s what we’re always saying,” Floria agreed. She felt curiously divorced from this conversation. It had an old-fashioned flavor: Before Weyland. She smiled a little.

The waiter ambled over. She ordered bluefish. The serving would be too big for her depressed appetite, but Doug wouldn’t be satisfied with his customary order of salad (he never was) and could be persuaded to help out.

He worked his way around to Topic A. “When I called to set up this lunch, Hilda told me she’s got a crush on Weyland. How are you and he getting along?”

“My God, Doug, now you’re going to tell me this whole thing was to fix me up with an eligible suitor!” She winced at her own rather strained laughter. “How soon are you planning to ask Weyland to work at Cayslin again?”

“I don’t know, but probably sooner than I thought a couple of months ago. We hear that he’s been

exploring an attachment to an anthropology department at a Western school, some niche where I guess he feels he can have less responsibility, less visibility, and a chance to collect himself. Naturally, this news is making people at Cayslin suddenly eager to nail him down for us. Have you a recommendation?"

"Yes," she said. "Wait."

He gave her an inquiring look. "What for?"

"Until he works more fully through certain stresses in the situation at Cayslin. Then I'll be ready to commit myself about him." The bluefish came. She pretended distraction: "Good God, that's too much fish for me. Doug, come on and help me out here."

* * *

Hilda was crouched over Floria's file drawer. She straightened up, looking grim. "Somebody's been in the office!"

What was this, had someone attacked her? The world took on a cockeyed, dangerous tilt. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, sure, I mean there are records that have been gone through. I can tell. I've started checking and so far it looks as if none of the files themselves are missing. But if any papers were taken out of them, that would be pretty hard to spot without reading through every folder in the place. Your files, Floria. I don't think anybody else's were touched."

Mere burglary; weak with relief, Floria sat down on one of the waiting-room chairs. But only her files? "Just my stuff, you're sure?"

Hilda nodded. "The clinic got hit, too. I called. They see some new-looking scratches on the lock of your file drawer over there. Listen, you want me to call the cops?"

"First check as much as you can, see if anything obvious is missing."

There was no sign of upset in her office. She found a phone message on her table: Weyland had canceled his next appointment. She knew who had broken into her files.

She buzzed Hilda's desk. "Hilda, let's leave the police out of it for the moment. Keep checking." She stood in the middle of the office, looking at the chair replacing the one he had broken, looking at the window where he had so often watched.

Relax, she told herself. There was nothing for him to find here or at the clinic.

She signaled that she was ready for the first client of the afternoon.

* * *

That evening she came back to the office after having dinner with friends. She was supposed to be helping set up a workshop for next month, and she'd been putting off even thinking about it, let alone doing any real work. She set herself to compiling a suggested bibliography for her section.

The phone light blinked.

It was Kenny, sounding muffled and teary. "I'm sorry," he moaned. "The medicine just started to wear off. I've been trying to call you everywhere. God, I'm so scared—he was waiting in the alley."

"Who was?" she said, dry-mouthed. She knew.

"Him. The tall one, the faggot—only he goes with women too, I've seen him. He grabbed me. He hurt

me. I was lying there a long time. I couldn't do anything. I felt so funny—like floating away. Some kids found me. Their mother called the cops. I was so cold, so scared—”

“Kenny, where are you?”

He told her which hospital. “Listen, I think he’s really crazy, you know? And I’m scared he might . . . you live alone . . . I don’t know—I didn’t mean to make trouble for you. I’m so scared.”

God damn you, you meant exactly to make trouble for me, and now you’ve bloody well made it. She got him to ring for a nurse. By calling Kenny her patient and using “Dr.” in front of her own name without qualifying the title she got some information: two broken ribs, multiple contusions, a badly wrenched shoulder, and a deep cut on the scalp which Dr. Wells thought accounted for the blood loss the patient had sustained. Picked up early today, the patient wouldn’t say who had attacked him. You can check with Dr. Wells tomorrow, Dr.—?

Can Weyland think I’ve somehow sicced Kenny on him? No, he surely knows me better than that. Kenny must have brought this on himself.

She tried Weyland’s number and then the desk at his hotel. He had closed his account and gone, providing no forwarding information other than the address of a university in New Mexico.

Then she remembered: this was the night Deb and Nick and the kids were arriving. *Oh, God.* Next phone call. The Americana was the hotel Deb had mentioned. Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Redpath were registered in room whatnot. Ring, please.

Deb’s voice came shakily on the line. “I’ve been trying to call you.” Like Kenny.

“You sound upset,” Floria said, steadying herself for whatever calamity had descended: illness, accident, assault in the streets of the dark, degenerate city.

Silence, then a raggedy sob. “Nick’s not here. I didn’t phone you earlier because I thought he still might come, but I don’t think he’s coming, Mom.” Bitter weeping.

“Oh, Debbie. Debbie, listen, you just sit tight, I’ll be right down there.”

The cab ride took only a few minutes. Debbie was still crying when Floria stepped into the room.

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Deb wailed, shaking her head. “What did I do wrong? He went away a week ago, to do some research, he said, and I didn’t hear from him, and half the bank money is gone—just half, he left me half. I kept hoping . . . they say most runaways come back in a few days or call up, they get lonely . . . I haven’t told anybody—I thought since we were supposed to be here at this convention thing together, I’d better come, maybe he’d show up. But nobody’s seen him, and there are no messages, not a word, nothing.”

“All right, all right, poor Deb,” Floria said, hugging her.

“Oh God, I’m going to wake the kids with all this howling.” Deb pulled away, making a frantic gesture toward the door of the adjoining room. “It was so hard to get them to sleep—they were expecting Daddy to be here, I kept telling them he’d be here.” She rushed out into the hotel hallway. Floria followed, propping the door open with one of her shoes since she didn’t know whether Deb had a key with her or not. They stood out there together, ignoring passersby, huddling over Deb’s weeping.

“What’s been going on between you and Nick?” Floria said. “Have you two been sleeping together lately?”

Deb let out a squawk of agonized embarrassment, “*Mo-ther!*” and pulled away from her. *Oh, hell, wrong approach.*

“Come on, I’ll help you pack. We’ll leave word you’re at my place. Let Nick come looking for you.” Floria firmly squashed down the miserable inner cry, *How am I going to stand this?*

“Oh, no, I can’t move till morning now that I’ve got the kids settled down. Besides, there’s one night’s deposit on the rooms. Oh, Mom, what did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything, hon,” Floria said, patting her shoulder and thinking in some part of her mind, *Oh boy, that’s great, is that the best you can come up with in a crisis with all your training and experience? Your touted professional skills are not so hot lately, but this bad?* Another part answered, *Shut up, stupid, only an idiot does therapy on her own family. Deb’s come to her mother, not to a shrink, so go ahead and be Mommy. If only Mommy had less pressure on her right now*—but that was always the way: everything at once or nothing at all.

“Look, Deb, suppose I stay the night here with you.”

Deb shook the pale, damp-streaked hair out of her eyes with a determined, grown-up gesture. “No, thanks, Mom. I’m so tired I’m just going to fall out now. You’ll be getting a bellyful of all this when we move in on you tomorrow anyway. I can manage tonight, and besides—”

And besides, just in case Nick showed up, Deb didn’t want Floria around complicating things; of course. Or in case the tooth fairy dropped by.

Floria restrained an impulse to insist on staying; an impulse, she recognized, that came from her own need not to be alone tonight. That was not something to load on Deb’s already burdened shoulders.

“Okay,” Floria said. “But look, Deb, I’ll expect you to call me up first thing in the morning, whatever happens.” *And if I’m still alive, I’ll answer the phone.*

* * *

All the way home in the cab she knew with growing certainty that Weyland would be waiting for her there. *He can’t just walk away*, she thought; *he has to finish things with me. So let’s get it over.*

In the tiled hallway she hesitated, keys in hand. What about calling the cops to go inside with her? Absurd. You don’t set the cops on a unicorn.

She unlocked and opened the door to the apartment and called inside, “Weyland! Where are you?”

Nothing. Of course not—the door was still open, and he would want to be sure she was by herself. She stepped inside, shut the door, and snapped on a lamp as she walked into the living room.

He was sitting quietly on a radiator cover by the street window, his hands on his thighs. His appearance here in a new setting, her setting, this faintly lit room in her home place, was startlingly intimate. She was sharply aware of the whisper of movement—his clothing, his shoe soles against the carpet underfoot—as he shifted his posture.

“What would you have done if I’d brought somebody with me?” she said unsteadily. “Changed yourself into a bat and flown away?”

“Two things I must have from you,” he said. “One is the bill of health that we spoke of when we began, though not, after all, for Cayslin College. I’ve made other plans. The story of my disappearance has of course filtered out along the academic grapevine so that even two thousand miles from here people will want evidence of my mental soundness. Your evidence. I would type it myself and forge your signature, but I want your authentic tone and language. Please prepare a letter to the desired effect, addressed to these people.”

He drew something white from an inside pocket and held it out. She advanced and took the envelope

from his extended hand. It was from the Western anthropology department that Doug had mentioned at lunch.

“Why not Cayslin?” she said. “They want you there.”

“Have you forgotten your own suggestion that I find another job? That was a good idea after all. Your reference will serve me best out there—with a copy for my personnel file at Cayslin, naturally.”

She put her purse down on the seat of a chair and crossed her arms. She felt reckless—the effect of stress and weariness, she thought, but it was an exciting feeling.

“The receptionist at the office does this sort of thing for me,” she said.

He pointed. “I’ve been in your study. You have a typewriter there, you have stationery with your letterhead, you have carbon paper.”

“What was the second thing you wanted?”

“Your notes on my case.”

“Also at the—”

“You know that I’ve already searched both your work places, and the very circumspect jottings in your file on me are not what I mean. Others must exist: more detailed.”

“What makes you think that?”

“How could you resist?” He mocked her. “You have encountered nothing like me in your entire professional life, and never shall again. Perhaps you hope to produce an article someday, even a book—a memoir of something impossible that happened to you one summer. You’re an ambitious woman, Dr. Landauer.”

Floria squeezed her crossed arms tighter against herself to quell her shivering. “This is all just supposition,” she said.

He took folded papers from his pocket: some of her thrown-aside notes on him, salvaged from the wastebasket. “I found these. I think there must be more. Whatever there is, give it to me, please.”

“And if I refuse, what will you do? Beat me up the way you beat up Kenny?”

Weyland said calmly, “I told you he should stop following me. This is serious now. There are pursuers who intend me ill—my former captors, of whom I told you. Who do you think I keep watch for? No records concerning me must fall into their hands. Don’t bother protesting to me your devotion to confidentiality. There is a man named Alan Reese who would take what he wants and be damned to your professional ethics. So I must destroy all evidence you have about me before I leave the city.”

Floria turned away and sat down by the coffee table, trying to think beyond her fear. She breathed deeply against the fright trembling in her chest.

“I see,” he said dryly, “that you won’t give me the notes; you don’t trust me to take them and go. You see some danger.”

“All right, a bargain,” she said. “I’ll give you whatever I have on your case if in return you promise to go straight out to your new job and keep away from Kenny and my offices and anybody connected with me—”

He was smiling slightly as he rose from the seat and stepped soft-footed toward her over the rug.

“Bargains, promises, negotiations—all foolish, Dr. Landauer. I want what I came for.”

She looked up at him. “But then how can I trust you at all? As soon as I give you what you want—”

“What is it that makes you afraid—that you can’t render me harmless to you? What a curious concern you show suddenly for your own life and the lives of those around you! You are the one who led me to take chances in our work together—to explore the frightful risks of self-revelation. Didn’t you see in the air between us the brilliant shimmer of those hazards? I thought your business was not smoothing the world over but adventuring into it, discovering its true nature, and closing valiantly with everything jagged, cruel, and deadly.”

In the midst of her terror the inner choreographer awoke and stretched. Floria rose to face the vampire.

“All right, Weyland, no bargains. I’ll give you freely what you want.” Of course she couldn’t make herself safe from him—or make Kenny or Lucille or Deb or Doug safe—any more than she could protect Jane Fennerman from the common dangers of life. Like Weyland, some dangers were too strong to bind or banish. “My notes are in the workroom—come on, I’ll show you. As for the letter you need, I’ll type it right now and you can take it away with you.”

She sat at the typewriter arranging paper, carbon sheets, and white-out, and feeling the force of his presence. Only a few feet away, just at the margin of the light from the gooseneck lamp by which she worked, he leaned against the edge of the long table that was twin to the table in her office. Open in his large hands was the notebook she had given him from the table drawer. When he moved his head over the notebook’s pages, his glasses glinted.

She typed the heading and the date. How surprising, she thought, to find that she had regained her nerve here, and now. When you dance as the inner choreographer directs, you act without thinking, not in command of events but in harmony with them. You yield control, accepting the chance that a mistake might be part of the design. The inner choreographer is always right but often dangerous: giving up control means accepting the possibility of death. *What I feared I have pursued right here to this moment in this room.*

A sheet of paper fell out of the notebook. Weyland stooped and caught it up, glanced at it. “You had training in art?” Must be a sketch.

“I thought once I might be an artist,” she said.

“What you chose to do instead is better,” he said. “This making of pictures, plays, all art, is pathetic. The world teems with creation, most of it unnoticed by your kind just as most of the deaths are unnoticed. What can be the point of adding yet another tiny gesture? Even you, these notes—for what, a moment’s celebrity?”

“You tried it yourself,” Floria said. “The book you edited, *Notes on a Vanished People*.” She typed: “. . . temporary dislocation resulting from a severe personal shock . . .”

“That was professional necessity, not creation,” he said in the tone of a lecturer irritated by a question from the audience. With disdain he tossed the drawing on the table. “Remember, I don’t share your impulse toward artistic gesture—your absurd frills—”

She looked up sharply. “The ballet, Weyland. Don’t lie.” She typed: “. . . exhibits a powerful drive toward inner balance and wholeness in a difficult life situation. The steadying influence of an extraordinary basic integrity . . .”

He set the notebook aside. “My feeling for ballet is clearly some sort of aberration. Do you sigh to hear a cow calling in a pasture?”

“There are those who have wept to hear whales singing in the ocean.”

He was silent, his eyes averted.

“This is finished,” she said. “Do you want to read it?”

He took the letter. “Good,” he said at length. “Sign it, please. And type an envelope for it.” He stood closer, but out of arm’s reach, while she complied. “You seem less frightened.”

“I’m terrified but not paralyzed,” she said and laughed, but the laugh came out a gasp.

“Fear is useful. It has kept you at your best throughout our association. Have you a stamp?”

Then there was nothing to do but take a deep breath, turn off the gooseneck lamp, and follow him back into the living room. “What now, Weyland?” she said softly. “A carefully arranged suicide so that I have no chance to retract what’s in that letter or to reconstruct my notes?”

At the window again, always on watch at the window, he said, “Your doorman was sleeping in the lobby. He didn’t see me enter the building. Once inside, I used the stairs, of course. The suicide rate among therapists is notoriously high. I looked it up.”

“You have everything all planned?”

The window was open. He reached out and touched the metal grille that guarded it. One end of the grille swung creaking outward into the night air, like a gate opening. She visualized him sitting there waiting for her to come home, his powerful fingers patiently working the bolts at that side of the grille loose from the brick-and-mortar window frame. The hair lifted on the back of her neck.

He turned toward her again. She could see the end of the letter she had given him sticking palely out of his jacket pocket.

“Floria,” he said meditatively. “An unusual name—is it after the heroine of Sardou’s *Tosca*. At the end, doesn’t she throw herself to her death from a high castle wall? People are careless about the names they give their children. I will not drink from you—I hunted today, and I fed. Still, to leave you living . . . is too dangerous.”

A fire engine tore past below, siren screaming. When it had gone Floria said, “Listen, Weyland, you said it yourself: I can’t make myself safe from you—I’m not strong enough to shove you out the window instead of being shoved out myself. Must you make yourself safe from me? Let me say this to you, without promises, demands, or pleadings: I will not go back on what I wrote in that letter. I will not try to recreate my notes. I mean it. Be content with that.”

“You tempt me to it,” he murmured after a moment, “to go from here with you still alive behind me for the remainder of your little life—to leave woven into Dr. Landauer’s quick mind those threads of my own life that I pulled for her . . . I want to be able sometimes to think of you thinking of me. But the risk is very great.”

“Sometimes it’s right to let the dangers live, to give them their place,” she urged. “Didn’t you tell me yourself a little while ago how risk makes us more heroic?”

He looked amused. “Are you instructing me in the virtues of danger? You are brave enough to know something, perhaps, about that, but I have studied danger all my life.”

“A long, long life with more to come,” she said, desperate to make him understand and believe her. “Not mine to jeopardize. There’s no torch-brandishing peasant here; we left that behind long ago. Remember when you spoke for me? You said, ‘For love of wonder.’ That was true.”

He leaned to turn off the lamp near the window. She thought that he had made up his mind, and that when he straightened it would be to spring.

But instead of terror locking her limbs, from the inward choreographer came a rush of warmth and energy into her muscles and an impulse to turn toward him. Out of a harmony of desires she said swiftly, “Weyland, come to bed with me.”

She saw his shoulders stiffen against the dim square of the window, his head lift in scorn. “You know I can’t be bribed that way,” he said contemptuously. “What are you up to? Are you one of those who come into heat at the sight of an upraised fist?”

“My life hasn’t twisted me that badly, thank God,” she retorted. “And if you’ve known all along how scared I’ve been, you must have sensed my attraction to you too, so you know it goes back to—very early in our work. But we’re not at work now, and I’ve given up being ‘up to’ anything. My feeling is real—not a bribe, or a ploy, or a kink. No ‘love me now, kill me later,’ nothing like that. Understand me, Weyland: if death is your answer, then let’s get right to it—come ahead and try.”

Her mouth was dry as paper. He said nothing and made no move; she pressed on. “But if you can let me go, if we can simply part company here, then this is how I would like to mark the ending of our time together. This is the completion I want. Surely you feel something, too—curiosity at least?”

“Granted, your emphasis on the expressiveness of the body has instructed me,” he admitted, and then he added lightly, “Isn’t it extremely unprofessional to proposition a client?”

“Extremely, and I never do; but this, now, feels right. For you to indulge in courtship that doesn’t end in a meal would be unprofessional, too, but how would it feel to indulge anyway—this once? Since we started, you’ve pushed me light-years beyond my profession. Now I want to travel all the way with you, Weyland. Let’s be unprofessional together.”

She turned and went into the bedroom, leaving the lights off. There was a reflected light, cool and diffuse, from the glowing night air of the great city. She sat down on the bed and kicked off her shoes. When she looked up, he was in the doorway.

Hesitantly, he halted a few feet from her in the dimness, then came and sat beside her. He would have lain down in his clothes, but she said quietly, “You can undress. The front door’s locked and there isn’t anyone here but us. You won’t have to leap up and flee for your life.”

He stood again and began to take off his clothes, which he draped neatly over a chair. He said, “Suppose I am fertile with you; could you conceive?”

By her own choice any such possibility had been closed off after Deb. She said, “No,” and that seemed to satisfy him.

She tossed her own clothes onto the dresser.

He sat down next to her again, his body silvery in the reflected light and smooth, lean as a whippet and as roped with muscle. His cool thigh pressed against her own fuller, warmer one as he leaned across her and carefully deposited his glasses on the bed table. Then he turned toward her, and she could just make out two puckerings of tissue on his skin: *bullet scars*, she thought, shivering.

He said, “But why do I wish to do this?”

“Do you?” She had to hold herself back from touching him.

“Yes.” He stared at her. “How did you grow so real? The more I spoke to you of myself, the more real you became.”

“No more speaking, Weyland,” she said gently. “This is body work.”

He lay back on the bed.

She wasn’t afraid to take the lead. At the very least she could do for him as well as he did for himself, and at the most, much better. Her own skin was darker than his, a shadowy contrast where she browsed over his body with her hands. Along the contours of his ribs she felt knotted places, hollows—old healings, the tracks of time. The tension of his muscles under her touch and the sharp sound of his

breathing stirred her. She lived the fantasy of sex with an utter stranger; there was no one in the world so much a stranger as he. Yet there was no one who knew him as well as she did, either. If he was unique, so was she, and so was their confluence here.

The vividness of the moment inflamed her. His body responded. His penis stirred, warmed, and thickened in her hand. He turned on his hip so that they lay facing each other, he on his right side, she on her left. When she moved to kiss him he swiftly averted his face: of course—to him, the mouth was for feeding. She touched her fingers to his lips, signifying her comprehension.

He offered no caresses but closed his arms around her, his hands cradling the back of her head and neck. His shadowed face, deep-hollowed under brow and cheekbone, was very close to hers. From between the parted lips that she must not kiss his quick breath came, roughened by groans of pleasure. At length he pressed his head against hers, inhaling deeply; taking her scent, she thought, from her hair and skin.

He entered her, hesitant at first, probing slowly and tentatively. She found this searching motion intensely sensuous, and clinging to him all along his sinewy length she rocked with him through two long, swelling waves of sweetness. Still half submerged, she felt him strain tight against her, she heard him gasp through his clenched teeth.

Panting, they subsided and lay loosely interlocked. His head was tilted back; his eyes were closed. She had no desire to stroke him or to speak with him, only to rest spent against his body and absorb the sounds of his breathing, her breathing.

He did not lie long to hold or be held. Without a word he disengaged his body from hers and got up. He moved quietly about the bedroom, gathering his clothing, his shoes, the drawings, the notes from the workroom. He dressed without lights. She listened in silence from the center of a deep repose.

There was no leave-taking. His tall figure passed and repassed the dark rectangle of the doorway, and then he was gone. The latch on the front door clicked shut.

Floria thought of getting up to secure the deadbolt. Instead she turned on her stomach and slept.

* * *

She woke as she remembered coming out of sleep as a youngster—peppy and clearheaded.

“Hilda, let’s give the police a call about that break-in. If anything ever does come of it, I want to be on record as having reported it. You can tell them we don’t have any idea who did it or why. And please make a photocopy of this letter carbon to send to Doug Sharpe up at Cayslin. Then you can put the carbon into Weyland’s file and close it.”

Hilda sighed. “Well, he was too old anyway.”

He wasn’t, my dear, but never mind.

In her office Floria picked up the morning’s mail from her table. Her glance strayed to the window where Weyland had so often stood. God, she was going to miss him; and God, how good it was to be restored to plain working days.

Only not yet. *Don’t let the phone ring, don’t let the world push in here now.* She needed to sit alone for a little and let her mind sort through the images left from . . . from the *pas de deux* with Weyland. *It’s the notorious morning after, old dear*, she told herself; *just where have I been dancing, anyway?*

In a clearing in the enchanted forest with the unicorn, of course, but not the way the old legends have it. According to them, hunters set a virgin to attract the unicorn by her chastity so they can catch and kill him. My unicorn was the chaste one, come to think of it, and this lady meant no treachery. No,

Weyland and I met hidden from the hunt, to celebrate a private mystery of our own. . . .

Your mind grappled with my mind, my dark leg over your silver one, unlike closing with unlike across whatever likeness may be found: your memory pressing on my thoughts, my words drawing out your words in which you may recognize your life, my smooth palm gliding down your smooth flank . . .

Why, this will make me cry, she thought, blinking. And for what? Does an afternoon with the unicorn have any meaning for the ordinary days that come later? What has this passage with Weyland left me? Have I anything in my hands now besides the morning's mail?

What I have in my hands is my own strength because I had to reach deep to find the strength to match him.

She put down the letters, noticing how on the backs of her hands the veins stood, blue shadows, under the thin skin. *How can these hands be strong?* Time was beginning to wear them thin and bring up the fragile inner structure in clear relief. That was the meaning of the last parent's death: that the child's remaining time has a limit of its own.

But not for Weyland. No graveyards of family dead lay behind him, no obvious and implacable ending of his own span threatened him. Time has to be different for a creature of an enchanted forest, as morality has to be different. He was a predator and a killer formed for a life of centuries, not decades; of secret singularity, not the busy hum of the herd. Yet his strength, suited to that nonhuman life, had revived her own strength. Her hands were slim, no longer youthful, but she saw now that they were strong enough.

For what? She flexed her fingers, watching the tendons slide under the skin. *Strong hands don't have to clutch. They can simply open and let go.*

She dialed Lucille's extension at the clinic.

"Luce? Sorry to have missed your calls lately. Listen, I want to start making arrangements to transfer my practice for a while. You were right, I do need a break, just as all my friends have been telling me. Will you pass the word for me to the staff over there today? Good, thanks. Also, there's the workshop coming up next month. . . . Yes. Are you kidding? They'd love to have you in my place. You're not the only one who's noticed that I've been falling apart, you know. It's awfully soon—can you manage, do you think? Luce, you are a brick and a lifesaver and all that stuff that means I'm very, very grateful."

Not so terrible, she thought, but only a start. Everything else remained to be dealt with. The glow of euphoria couldn't carry her for long. Already, looking down, she noticed jelly on her blouse, just like old times, and she didn't even remember having breakfast. *If you want to keep the strength you've found in all this, you're going to have to get plenty of practice being strong. Try a tough one now.*

She phoned Deb. "Of course you slept late, so what? I did, too, so I'm glad you didn't call and wake me up. Whenever you're ready—if you need help moving uptown from the hotel, I can cancel here and come down. . . . Well, call if you change your mind. I've left a house key for you with my doorman.

"And listen, hon, I've been thinking—how about all of us going up together to Nonnie's over the weekend? Then when you feel like it, maybe you'd like to talk about what you'll do next. Yes, I've already started setting up some free time for myself. Think about it, love. Talk to you later."

Kenny's turn. "Kenny, I'll come by during visiting hours this afternoon."

"Are you okay?" he squeaked.

"I'm okay. But I'm not your mommy, Ken, and I'm not going to start trying to hold the big bad world off you again. I'll expect you to be ready to settle down seriously and choose a new therapist for yourself. We're going to get that done today once and for all. Have you got that?"

After a short silence he answered in a desolate voice, “All right.”

“Kenny, nobody grown up has a mommy around to take care of things for them and keep them safe—not even me. You just have to be tough enough and brave enough yourself. See you this afternoon.”

How about Jane Fennerman? No, leave it for now, we are not Wonder Woman, we can't handle that stress today as well.

Too restless to settle down to paperwork before the day's round of appointments began, she got up and fed the goldfish, then drifted to the window and looked out over the city. Same jammed-up traffic down there, same dusty summer park stretching away uptown—yet not the same city, because Weyland no longer hunted there. Nothing like him moved now in those deep, grumbling streets. She would never come upon anyone there as alien as he—and just as well. Let last night stand as the end, unique and inimitable, of their affair. She was glugged with strangeness and looked forward frankly to sharing again in Mort's ordinary human appetite.

And Weyland—how would he do in that new and distant hunting ground he had found for himself? Her own balance had been changed. Suppose his once perfect, solitary equilibrium had been altered too? Perhaps he had spoiled it by involving himself too intimately with another being—herself. And then he had left her alive—a terrible risk. Was this a sign of his corruption at her hands?

“Oh, no,” she whispered fiercely, focusing her vision on her reflection in the smudged window glass. *Oh, no, I am not the temptress. I am not the deadly female out of legends whose touch defiles the hitherto unblemished being, her victim.* If Weyland found some human likeness in himself, that had to be in him to begin with. Who said he was defiled anyway? Newly discovered capacities can be either strengths or weaknesses, depending on how you use them.

Very pretty and reassuring, she thought grimly; but it's pure cant. Am I going to retreat now into mechanical analysis to make myself feel better?

She heaved open the window and admitted the sticky summer breath of the city into the office. *There's your enchanted forest, my dear, all nitty-gritty and not one flake of fairy dust. You've survived here, which means you can see straight when you have to. Well, you have to now.*

Has he been damaged? No telling yet, and you can't stop living while you wait for the answers to come in. I don't know all that was done between us, but I do know who did it: I did it, and he did it, and neither of us withdrew until it was done. We were joined in a rich complicity—he in the wakening of some flicker of humanity in himself, I in keeping and, yes, enjoying the secret of his implacable blood hunger. What that complicity means for each of us can only be discovered by getting on with living and watching for clues from moment to moment. His business is to continue from here, and mine is to do the same, without guilt and without resentment. Doug was right: the aim is individual responsibility. From that effort, not even the lady and the unicorn are exempt.

Shaken by a fresh upwelling of tears, she thought bitterly, *Moving on is easy enough for Weyland; he's used to it, he's had more practice. What about me? Yes, be selfish, woman—if you haven't learned that, you've learned damn little.*

The Japanese say that in middle age you should leave the claims of family, friends, and work, and go ponder the meaning of the universe while you still have the chance. *Maybe I'll try just existing for a while, and letting grow in its own time my understanding of a universe that includes Weyland—and myself—among its possibilities.*

Is that looking out for myself? Or am I simply no longer fit for living with family, friends, and work? Have I been damaged by him—by my marvelous, murderous monster?

Damn, she thought, *I wish he were here; I wish we could talk about it*. The light on her phone caught her eye; it was blinking the quick flashes that meant Hilda was signaling the imminent arrival of—not Weyland—the day’s first client.

We’re each on our own now, she thought, shutting the window and turning on the air-conditioner.

But think of me sometimes, Weyland, thinking of you.

Boobs

The thing is, it's like your brain wants to go on thinking about the miserable history midterm you have to take tomorrow, but your body takes over. And what a body: you can see in the dark and run like the wind and leap parked cars in a single bound.

Of course, you pay for it next morning (but it's worth it). I always wake up stiff and sore, with dirty hands and feet and face, and I have to jump in the shower fast so Hilda won't see me like that.

Not that she would know what it was about, but why take chances? So I pretend it's the other thing that's bothering me. So she goes, "Come on, sweetie, everybody gets cramps, that's no reason to go around moaning and groaning. What are you doing, trying to get out of school just because you've got your period?"

If I didn't like Hilda, which I do even though she is only a stepmother instead of my real mother, I would show her something that would keep me out of school forever, and it's not fake, either.

But there are plenty of people I'd rather show that to.

I already showed that dork Billy Linden.

"Hey, Boobs!" he goes, in the hall right outside homeroom. A lot of kids laughed, naturally, though Rita Frye called him an asshole.

Billy is the one that started it, sort of, because he always started everything, him with his big mouth. At the beginning of term, he came barreling down on me hollering, "Hey, look at Bornstein, something musta happened to her over the summer! What happened, Bornstein? Hey, everybody, look at Boobs Bornstein!"

He made a grab at my chest, and I socked him in the shoulder, and he punched me in the face, which made me dizzy and shocked and made me cry, too, in front of everybody.

I mean, I always used to wrestle and fight with the boys, being that I was strong for a girl. All of a sudden it was different. He hit me hard, to really hurt, and the shock sort of got me in the pit of my stomach and made me feel nauseous, too, as well as mad and embarrassed to death.

I had to go home with a bloody nose and lie with my head back and ice wrapped in a towel on my face and dripping down into my hair.

Hilda sat on the couch next to me and patted me. She goes, "I'm sorry about this, honey, but really, you have to learn it sometime. You're all growing up and the boys are getting stronger than you'll ever be. If you fight with boys, you're bound to get hurt. You have to find other ways to handle them."

To make things worse, the next morning I started to bleed down there, which Hilda had explained carefully to me a couple of times, so at least I knew what was going on. Hilda really tried extra hard without being icky about it, but I hated when she talked about how it was all part of these exciting changes in my body that are so important and how terrific it is to "become a young woman."

Sure. The whole thing was so messy and disgusting, worse than she said, worse than I could imagine, with these black clots of gunk coming out in a smear of pink blood—I thought I would throw up. That's just the lining of your uterus, Hilda said. Big deal. It was still gross.

And plus, the*smell* .

Hilda tried to make me feel better, she really did. She said we should “mark the occasion” like primitive people do, so it’s something special, not just a nasty thing that just sort of falls on you.

So we decided to put poor old Pinkie away, my stuffed dog that I’ve slept with since I was three. Pinkie is bald and sort of hard and lumpy, since he got put in the washing machine by mistake, and you would never know he was all soft plush when he was new, or even that he was pink.

Last time my friend Gerry-Anne came over, before the summer, she saw Pinky laying on my pillow and though she didn’t say anything, I could tell she was thinking that was kind of babyish. So I’d been thinking about not keeping Pinky around anymore.

Hilda and I made him this nice box lined with pretty scraps from her quilting class, and I thanked him out loud for being my friend for so many years, and we put him up in the closet, on the top shelf.

I felt terrible, but if Gerry-Anne decided I was too babyish to be friends with anymore, I could end up with no friends at all. When you have never been popular since the time you were skinny and fast and everybody wanted you on their team, you have that kind of thing on your mind.

Hilda and Dad made me go to school the next morning so nobody would think I was scared of Billy Linden (which I was) or that I would let him keep me away just by being such a dork.

Everybody kept sneaking funny looks at me and whispering, and I was sure it was because I couldn’t help walking funny with the pad between my legs and because they could smell what was happening, which as far as I knew hadn’t happened to anybody else in Eight-A yet. Just like nobody else in the whole grade had anything real in their stupid training bras except me, thanks a lot.

Anyway, I stayed away from everybody as much as I could and wouldn’t talk to Gerry-Anne, even, because I was scared she would ask me why I walked funny and smelled bad.

Billy Linden avoided me just like everybody else, except one of his stupid buddies purposely bumped into me so I stumbled into Billy in the lunch-line. Billy turns around and he goes, real loud, “Hey, Boobs, when did you start wearing black and blue makeup?”

I didn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing that he had actually broken my nose, which the doctor said. Good thing they don’t have to bandage you up for that. Billy would be hollering up a storm about how I had my nose in a sling as well as my boobs.

That night I got up after I was supposed to be asleep and took off my underpants and T-shirt that I sleep in and stood looking at myself in the mirror. I didn’t need to turn a light on. The moon was full and it was shining right into my bedroom through the big dormer window.

I crossed my arms and pinched myself hard to sort of punish my body for what it was doing to me.

As if that could make it stop.

No wonder Edie Siler had starved herself to death in the tenth grade: I understood her perfectly. She was trying to keep her body down, keep it normal-looking, thin and strong, like I was too, back when I looked like a person, not a cartoon that somebody would call “Boobs.”

And then something warm trickled in a little line down the inside of my leg, and I knew it was blood and I couldn’t stand it anymore. I pressed my thighs together and shut my eyes hard, and I did something.

I mean, I felt it happening. I felt myself shrink down to a hard core of sort of cold fire inside my bones, and all the flesh part, the muscles and the squishy insides and the skin, went sort of glowing and free-floating, all shining with moonlight, and I felt a sort of shifting and balance-changing going on.

I thought I was fainting on account of my stupid period. So I turned around and threw myself on my

bed, only by the time I hit it, I knew something was seriously wrong.

For one thing, my nose and my head were crammed with these crazy, rich sensations that it took me a second to even figure out were smells; they were so much stronger than any smells I'd ever smelled. And they were—I don't know—*interesting* instead of just stinky, even the rotten ones.

I opened my mouth to get the smells a little better, and heard myself panting in a funny way as if I'd been running, which I hadn't, and then there was this long part of my face sticking out and something moving there—my tongue.

I was licking my chops.

Well, there was this moment of complete and utter panic. I tore around the room whining and panting and hearing my toenails clicking on the floorboards, and then I huddled down and crouched in the corner because I was scared Dad and Hilda would hear me and come to find out what was making all this racket.

Because I could hear them. I could hear their bed creak when one of them turned over, and Dad's breath whistling a little in an almost-snore, and I could smell them too, each one with a perfectly clear bunch of smells, kind of like those desserts of mixed ice cream they call a medley.

My body was twitching and jumping with fear and energy, and my room—it's a converted attic-space, wide but with a ceiling that's low in places—my room felt like a jail. And plus, I was terrified of catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I had a pretty good idea of what I would see, and I didn't want to see it.

Besides, I had to pee, and I couldn't face trying to deal with the toilet in the state I was in.

So I eased the bedroom door open with my shoulder and nearly fell down the stairs trying to work them with four legs and thinking about it, instead of letting my body just do it. I put my hands on the front door to open it, but my hands weren't hands, they were paws with long knobby toes covered with fur, and the toes had thick black claws sticking out of the ends of them.

The pit of my stomach sort of exploded with horror, and I yelled. It came out this wavery *wooo* noise that echoed eerily in my skull bones. Upstairs, Hilda goes, "Jack, what was that?" I bolted for the basement as I heard Dad hit the floor of their bedroom.

The basement door slips its latch all the time, so I just shoved it open and down I went, doing better on the stairs this time because I was too scared to think. I spent the rest of the night down there, moaning to myself (which meant whining through my nose, really) and trotting around rubbing against the walls trying to rub off this crazy shape I had, or just moving around because I couldn't sit still. The place was thick with stinks and these slow-swirling currents of hot and cold air. I couldn't handle all the input.

As for having to pee, in the end I managed to sort of hike my butt up over the edge of the slop-sink by Dad's workbench and let go in there. The only problem was that I couldn't turn the taps on to rinse out the smell because of my paws.

Then about 3:00A.M. I woke up from a doze curled up in a bare place on the floor where the spiders weren't so likely to walk, and I couldn't see a thing or smell anything either, so I knew I was okay again even before I checked and found fingers on my hands instead of claws.

I zipped upstairs and stood under the shower so long that Hilda yelled at me for using up the hot water when she had a load of wash to do that morning. I was only trying to steam some of the stiffness out of my muscles, but I couldn't tell her that.

It was real weird to just dress and go to school after a night like that. One good thing, I had stopped bleeding after only one day, which Hilda said wasn't so strange for the first time. So it had to be the

huge greenish bruise on my face from Billy's punch that everybody was staring at.

That and the usual thing, of course. Well, why not? *They* didn't know I'd spent the night as a wolf.

So Fat Joey grabbed my book bag in the hallway outside science class and tossed it to some kid from Eight-B. I had to run after them to get it back, which of course was set up so the boys could cheer the jouncing of my boobs under my shirt.

I was so mad I almost caught Fat Joey, except I was afraid if I grabbed him, maybe he would sock me like Billy had.

Dad had told me, "Don't let it get you, kid; all boys are jerks at that age."

Hilda had been saying all summer, "Look, it doesn't do any good to walk around all hunched up with your arms crossed; you should just throw your shoulders back and walk like a proud person who's pleased that she's growing up. You're just a little early, that's all, and I bet the other girls are secretly envious of you, with their cute little training bras, for Chrissake, as if there was something that needed to be *trained*."

It's okay for her, she's not in school, she doesn't remember what it's like.

So I quit running and walked after Joey until the bell rang, and then I got my book bag back from the bushes outside where he threw it. I was crying a little, and I ducked into the Girls' Room.

Stacey Buhl was in there doing her lipstick like usual and wouldn't talk to me like usual, but Rita came bustling in and said somebody should off that dumb dork Joey, except, of course, it was really Billy that put him up to it. Like usual.

Rita is okay except she's an outsider herself, being that her kid brother has AIDS, and lots of kids' parents don't think she should even be in the school. So I don't hang around with her a lot. I've got enough trouble, and anyway, I was late for math.

I had to talk to somebody, though. After school I told Gerry-Anne, who's been my best friend on and off since fourth grade. She was off at the moment, but I found her in the library and I told her I'd had a weird dream about being a wolf. She wants to be a psychiatrist like her mother, so of course she listened.

She told me I was nuts. That was a big help.

That night I made sure the back door wasn't exactly closed, and then I got in bed with no clothes on—imagine turning into a wolf in your underpants and T-shirt—and just shivered, waiting for something to happen.

The moon came up and shone in my window, and I changed again, just like before, which is not one bit like how it is in the movies—all struggling and screaming and bones snapping out with horrible cracking and tearing noises, just the way I guess you would imagine it to be, if you knew it had to be done by building special machines to do that for the camera and make it look real—if you were a special-effects man, instead of a werewolf.

For me, it didn't have to look real, it was real. It was this melting and drifting thing, which I got sort of excited by it this time. I mean, it felt—interesting. Like something I was *doing*, instead of just another dumb body-mess happening to me because some brainless hormones said so.

I must have made a noise. Hilda came upstairs to the door of my bedroom, but luckily she didn't come in. She's tall, and my ceiling is low for her, so she often talks to me from the landing.

Anyway, I'd heard her coming, so I was in my bed with my whole head shoved under my pillow, praying frantically that nothing showed.

I could smell her, it was the wildest thing—her own smell, sort of sweaty but sweet, and then on top of it her perfume, like an ice pick stuck in my nose. I didn't actually hear a word she said, I was too scared, and also, I had this ripply shaking feeling inside me, a high that was only partly terror.

See, I realized all of a sudden, with this big blossom of surprise, that I didn't have to be scared of Hilda, or anybody. I was strong, my wolf-body was strong, and anyhow, one clear look at me and she would drop dead.

What a relief, though, when she went away. I was dying to get out from under the weight of the covers, and besides I had to sneeze. Also I recognized that part of the energy roaring around inside me was hunger.

They went to bed—I heard their voices even in their bedroom, though not exactly what they said, which was fine. The words weren't important anymore, I could tell more from the tone of what they were saying.

Like I knew they were going to do it, and I was right. I could hear them messing around right through the walls, which was also something new, and I have never been so embarrassed in my life. I couldn't even put my hands over my ears because my hands were paws.

So while I was waiting for them to go to sleep, I looked myself over in the big mirror on my closet door.

There was this big wolf head with a long slim muzzle and a thick ruff around my neck. The ruff stood up as I growled and backed up a little.

Which was silly of course, there was no wolf in the bedroom but me. But I was all strung out, I guess, and one wolf, me in my wolf body, was as much as I could handle the idea of, let alone two wolves, me and my reflection.

After that first shock, it was great. I kept turning one way and another for different views.

I was thin, with these long, slender legs but strong, you could see the muscles, and feet a little bigger than I would have picked. But I'll take four big feet over two big boobs any day.

My face was terrific, with jaggedy white rip-saw teeth and eyes that were small and clear and gleaming in the moonlight. The tail was a little bizarre, but I got used to it, and actually it had a nice plummy shape. My shoulders were big and covered with long, glossy-looking fur, and I had this neat coloring, dark on the back and a sort of melting silver on my front and under parts.

The thing was, though, my tongue hanging out. I had a lot of trouble with that, it looked gross and silly at the same time. I mean, that was *my tongue*, about a foot long and neatly draped over the points of my bottom canines. That was when I realized that I didn't have a whole lot of expressions to use, not with that face, which was more like a mask.

But it was alive; it was my face and those were my own long black lips that my tongue licked.

No doubt about it, this was *me*. I was a werewolf, like in the movies they showed over Halloween weekend. But it wasn't anything like your ugly movie werewolf that's just some guy loaded up with pounds and pounds of makeup. I was *gorgeous*.

I didn't want to just hang around admiring myself in the mirror, though. I couldn't stand being cooped up in that stuffy, smell-crowded room.

When everything settled down and I could hear Dad and Hilda breathing the way they do when they're sleeping, I snuck out.

The dark wasn't very dark to me, and the cold felt sharp like vinegar, but not in a hurting way.

Everyplace I went, there were these currents like waves in the air, and I could draw them in through my long wolf nose and roll the smell of them over the back of my tongue. It was like a whole different world, with bright sounds everywhere and rich, strong smells.

And I could run.

I started running because a car came by while I was sniffing at the garbage bags on the curb, and I was really scared of being seen in the headlights. So I took off down the dirt alley between our house and the Morrisons' next door, and holy cow, I could tear along with hardly a sound, I could jump their picket fence without even thinking about it. My back legs were like steel springs and I came down solid and square on four legs with almost no shock at all, let alone worrying about losing my balance or twisting an ankle.

Man, I could run through that chilly air all thick and moisty with smells, I could almost fly. It was like last year, when I didn't have boobs bouncing and yanking in front even when I'm only walking fast.

Just two rows of neat little bumps down the curve of my belly. I sat down and looked.

I tore open garbage bags to find out about the smells in them, but I didn't eat anything from them. I wasn't about to chow down on other people's stale hotdog-ends and pizza crusts and fat and bones scraped off their plates and all mixed in with mashed potatoes and stuff.

When I found places where dogs had stopped and made their mark, I squatted down and pissed there too, right on top, I just wiped them *out*.

I bounded across that enormous lawn around the Wanscombe place, and walked up the back and over the top of their BMW, leaving big fat pawprints all over it. Nobody saw me, nobody heard me; I was a shadow.

Well, except for the dogs, of course.

There was a lot of barking when I went by, real hysterics, which at first I was really scared. But then I popped out of an alley up on Ridge Road, where the big houses are, right in front of about six dogs that run together. Their owners let them out all night and don't care if they get hit by a car.

They'd been trotting along with the wind behind them, checking out all the garbage bags set out for pickup the next morning. When they saw me, one of them let out a yelp of surprise, and they all skidded to a stop.

Six of them. I was scared. I growled.

The dogs turned fast, banging into each other in their hurry, and trotted away.

I don't know what they would have done if they met a real wolf, but I was something special, I guess.

I followed them.

They scattered and ran.

Well, I ran too, and this was a different kind of running. I mean, I stretched, and I raced, and there was this joy. I chased one of them.

Zig, zag, this little terrier-kind of dog tried to cut left and dive under the gate of somebody's front walk, all without a sound—he was running too hard to yell, and I was happy running quiet.

Just before he could ooze under the gate, I caught up with him and without thinking I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him off his feet and gave him a shake as hard as I could, from side to side.

I felt his neck crack, the sound vibrated through all the bones of my face.

I picked him up in my mouth, and it was like he hardly weighed a thing. I trotted away holding him up off the ground, and under a bush in Baker's Park I held him down with my paws and I bit into his belly, which was still warm and quivering.

Like I said, I was hungry.

The blood gave me this rush like you wouldn't believe. I stood there a minute looking around and licking my lips, just sort of panting and tasting the taste because I was stunned by it, it was like eating honey or the best chocolate malt you ever had.

So I put my head down and chomped that little dog, like shoving your face into a pizza and inhaling it. God, I was *starved*, so I didn't mind that the meat was tough and rank-tasting after that first wonderful bite. I even licked blood off the ground after, never mind the grit mixed in.

I ate two more dogs that night, one that was tied up on a clothesline in a cruddy yard full of rusted out car-parts down on the South side, and one fat old yellow dog out snuffling around on his own and way too slow. He tasted pretty bad, and by then I was feeling full, so I left a lot.

I trotted around in the park, shoving the swings with my big black wolf nose, and I found the bench where Mr. Granby sits and feeds the pigeons every day, never mind that nobody else wants the dirty birds around crapping on their cars. I took a dump there, right where he sits.

Then I gave the setting moon a goodnight, which came out quavery and wild, *Loo-loo-loo!* And I loped toward home, springing off the thick pads of my paws and letting my tongue loll out and feeling generally super.

I slipped inside and trotted upstairs, and in my room I stopped to look at myself in the mirror.

As gorgeous as before, and only a few dabs of blood on me, which I took time to lick off. I did get a little worried—I mean, suppose that was it, suppose having killed and eaten what I'd killed in my wolf shape, I was stuck in this shape forever? Like, if you wander into a fairy castle and eat or drink anything, that's it, you can't ever leave. Suppose when the morning came I didn't change back?

Well, there wasn't much I could do about that one way or the other, and to tell the truth, I felt like I wouldn't mind; it had been worth it.

When I was nice and clean, including licking off my own bottom which seemed like a perfectly normal and nice thing to do at the time, I jumped up on the bed, curled up, and corked right off. When I woke up with the sun in my eyes, there I was, my own self again.

It was very strange, grabbing breakfast and wearing my old sweatshirt that wallowed all over me so I didn't stick out so much, while Hilda yawned and shuffled around in her robe and slippers and acted like her and Dad hadn't been doing it last night, which I knew different.

And plus, it was perfectly clear that she didn't have a clue about what I had been doing, which gave me a strange feeling.

One of the things about growing up which they're careful not to tell you is, you start having more things you don't talk to your parents about. And I had a doozie.

Hilda goes, "What's the matter, are you off Sugar Pops now? Honestly, Kelsey, I can't keep up with you! And why can't you wear something nicer than that old shirt to school? Oh, I get it: disguise, right?"

She sighed and looked at me kind of sad but smiling, her hands on her hips. "Kelsey, Kelsey," she goes, "if only I'd had half of what you've got when I was a girl—I was flat as an ironing board, and it made me so miserable, I can't tell you."

She's still real thin and neat-looking, so what does she know about it? But she meant well, and anyhow, I was feeling so good I didn't argue.

I didn't change my shirt, though.

That night I didn't turn into a wolf. I laid there waiting, but though the moon came up, nothing happened no matter how hard I tried, and after a while I went and looked out the window and realized that the moon wasn't really full anymore, it was getting smaller.

I wasn't so much relieved as sorry. I bought a calendar at the school book sale two weeks later, and I checked the full moon nights coming up and waited anxiously to see what would happen.

Meantime, things rolled along as usual. I got a rash of zits on my chin. I would look in the mirror and think about my wolf-face that had beautiful sleek fur instead of zits.

Zits and all I went to Angela Durkin's party, and next day Billy Linden told everybody that I went in one of the bedrooms at Angela's and made out with him, which I did not. But since no grown-ups were home and Fat Joey brought grass to the party, most of the kids were stoned and didn't know who did what or where anyhow.

As a matter of fact, Billy once actually did get a girl in Seven-B high one time out in his parents' garage, and him and two of his friends did it to her while she was zonked out of her mind, or anyway, they said they did, and she was too embarrassed to say anything one way or the other, and a little while later she changed schools.

How I know about it is the same way everybody else does, which is because Billy was the biggest boaster in the whole school, and you could never tell if he was lying or not.

So I guess it wasn't so surprising that some people believed what Billy said about me. Gerry-Anne quit talking to me after that. Meantime Hilda got pregnant.

This turned into a huge discussion about how Hilda had been worried about her biological clock so she and Dad had decided to have a kid, and I shouldn't mind, it would be fun for me and good preparation for being a mother myself later on, when I found some nice guy and got married.

Sure. Great preparation. Like Mary O'Hare in my class, who gets to change her youngest baby sister's diapers all the time, *yick*. She jokes about it, but you can tell she really hates it. Now it looked like it was my turn coming up, as usual.

The only thing that made life bearable was my secret.

"You're laid back today," Devon Brown said to me in the lunchroom one day after Billy had been 'specially obnoxious, trying to flick rolled-up pieces of bread from his table so they would land on my chest. Devon was sitting with me because he was bad at French, my only good subject, and I was helping him out with some verbs. I guess he wanted to know why I wasn't upset because of Billy picking on me. He goes, "How come?"

"That's a secret," I said, thinking about what Devon would say if he knew a werewolf was helping him with his French: *loup. Manger*.

He goes, "What secret?" Devon has freckles and is actually kind of cute-looking.

"A secret," I go, "so I can't tell you, dummy."

He looks real superior and he goes, "Well, it can't be much of a secret because girls can't keep secrets, everybody knows that."

Sure, like that kid Sara in Eight-B who it turned out her own father had been molesting her for years,

but she never told anybody until some psychologist caught on from some tests we all had to take in seventh grade. Up till then, Sara kept her secret fine.

And I kept mine, marking off the days on the calendar. The only part I didn't look forward to was having a period again, which last time came right before the change.

When the time came, I got crampy and more zits popped out on my face, but I didn't have a period.

I changed, though.

The next morning they were talking in school about a couple of prize miniature schnauzers at the Wanscombes that had been hauled out of their yard by somebody and killed, and almost nothing left of them.

Well, my stomach turned a little when I heard some kids describing what Mr. Wanscombe had found over in Baker's Park, "the remains," as people said. I felt a little guilty, too, because Mrs. Wanscombe had really loved those little dogs, which somehow I didn't think about at all when I was a wolf the night before, trotting around hungry in the moonlight.

I knew those schnauzers personally, so I was sorry, even if they were irritating little mutts that made a lot of noise.

But heck, the Wanscombes shouldn't have left them out all night in the cold. Anyhow, they were rich; they could buy new ones if they wanted.

Still and all, though—I mean, dogs are just dumb animals. If they're mean, it's because they're wired that way or somebody made them mean, they can't help it. They can't just decide to be nice, like a person can. And plus, they don't taste so great, I think because they put so much junk in commercial dog-foods—anti-worm medicine and ashes and ground-up fish, stuff like that.*Ick.*

In fact, after the second schnauzer I had felt sort of sick and I didn't sleep real well that night. So I was not in a great mood to start with; and that was the day that my new brassiere disappeared while I was in gym. Later on I got passed a note telling me where to find it: stapled to the bulletin board outside the Principal's office, where everybody could see that I was trying a bra with an underwire.

Naturally, it had to be Stacey Buhl that grabbed my bra while I was changing for gym and my back was turned, since she was now hanging out with Billy and his friends.

Billy went around all day making bets at the top of his lungs on how soon I would be wearing a D-cup.

Stacey didn't matter, she was just a jerk. Billy mattered. He had wrecked me in that school forever, with his nasty mind and his big, fat mouth. I was past crying or fighting and getting punched out. I was boiling, I had had enough crap from him, and I had an idea.

I followed Billy home and waited on his porch until his mom came home and she made him come down and talk to me. He stood in the doorway and talked through the screen door, eating a banana and lounging around like he didn't have a care in the world.

So he goes, "Whatcha want, Boobs?"

I stammered a lot, being I was so nervous about telling such big lies, but that probably made me sound more believable.

I told him that I would make a deal with him: I would meet him that night in Baker's Park, late, and take off my shirt and bra and let him do whatever he wanted with my boobs if that would satisfy his curiosity and he would find somebody else to pick on and leave me alone.

"What?" he said, staring at my chest with his mouth open. His voice squeaked and he was practically

drooling on the floor. He couldn't believe his good luck.

I said the same thing over again.

He almost came out onto the porch to try it right then and there. "Well, shit," he goes, lowering his voice a lot, "why didn't you say something before? You really mean it?"

I go, "Sure," though I couldn't look at him.

After a minute he goes, "Okay, it's a deal. Listen, Kelsey, if you like it, can we, uh, do it again, you know?"

I go, "Sure. But Billy, one thing: this is a secret, between just you and me. If you tell anybody, if there's one other person hanging around out there tonight—"

"Oh no," he goes, real fast, "I won't say a thing to anybody, honest. Not a word, I promise!"

Not until afterward, of course, was what he meant, which if there was one thing Billy Linden couldn't do, it was to keep quiet if he knew something bad about another person.

"You're gonna like it, I know you are," he goes, speaking strictly for himself, as usual. "Jeez. I can't believe this!"

But he did, the dork.

I couldn't eat much for dinner that night, I was too excited, and I went upstairs early to do homework, I told Dad and Hilda.

Then I waited for the moon, and when it came, I changed.

Billy was in the park. I caught a whiff of him, very sweaty and excited, but I stayed cool. I snuck around for a while, as quiet as I could—which was *real* quiet—making sure none of his stupid friends were lurking around. I mean, I wouldn't have trusted just his promise for a million dollars.

I passed up half a hamburger lying in the gutter where somebody had parked for lunch and ate in their car next to Baker's Park. My mouth watered, but I didn't want to spoil my appetite. I was hungry and happy, sort of singing inside my own head, "Shoo, fly, pie, and an apple-pan-dowdie . . ."

Without any sound, of course.

Billy had been sitting on a bench, his hands in his pockets, twisting around to look this way and that way, watching for me—for my human self—to come join him. He had a jacket on, being it was very chilly out.

Which he didn't stop to think that maybe a sane person wouldn't be crazy enough to sit out there and take off her top leaving her naked skin bare to the breeze. But that was Billy all right, totally fixed on his own greedy self and without a single thought for somebody else. I bet all he could think about was what a great scam this was, to feel up old Boobs in the park and then crow about it all over school.

Now he was walking around the park, kicking at the sprinkler-heads and glancing up every once in a while, frowning and looking sulky.

I could see he was starting to think that I might stand him up. Maybe he even suspected that old Boobs was lurking around watching him and laughing to herself because he had fallen for a trick. Maybe old Boobs had even brought some kids from school with her to see what a jerk he was.

Actually, that would have been pretty good, except Billy probably would have broken my nose for me again, or worse, if I'd tried it.

"Kelsey?" he goes, sounding mad.

I didn't want him stomping off home in a huff. I moved up closer, and I let the bushes swish a little around my shoulders.

He goes, "Hey, Kelse, it's late, where've you been?"

I listened to the words, but mostly I listened to the little thread of worry flickering in his voice, low and high, high and low, as he tried to figure out what was going on.

I let out the whisper of a growl.

He stood real still, staring at the bushes, and he goes, "That you, Kelse? Answer me."

I was wild inside, I couldn't wait another second. I tore through the bushes and leaped for him, flying.

He stumbled backward with a squawk—"What!"—jerking his hands up in front of his face, and he was just sucking in a big breath to yell with when I hit him like a demo-derby truck.

I jammed my nose past his feeble claws and chomped down hard on his face.

No sound came out of him except this wet, thick gurgle, which I could more taste than hear because the sound came right into my mouth with the gush of his blood and the hot mess of meat and skin that I tore away and swallowed.

He thrashed around, hitting at me, but I hardly felt anything through my fur. I mean, he wasn't so big and strong laying there on the ground with me straddling him all lean and wiry with wolf-muscle. And plus, he was in shock. I got a strong whiff from below as he let go of everything right into his pants.

Dogs were barking, but so many people around Baker's Park have dogs to keep out burglars, and the dogs make such a racket all the time that nobody pays any attention. I wasn't worried. Anyway, I was too busy to care.

I nosed in under what was left of Billy's jaw and I bit his throat out.

Now let him go around telling lies about people.

His clothes were a lot of trouble and I really missed having hands. I managed to drag his shirt out of his belt with my teeth, though, and it was easy to tear his belly open. Pretty messy, but once I got in there, it was better than Thanksgiving dinner. Who would think that somebody as horrible as Billy Linden could taste *sogood*?

He was barely moving by then, and I quit thinking about him as Billy Linden anymore. I quit thinking at all, I just pushed my head in and pulled out delicious steaming chunks and ate until I was picking at tidbits, and everything was getting cold.

On the way home I saw a police car cruising the neighborhood the way they do sometimes. I hid in the shadows and, of course, they never saw me.

There was a lot of washing up to do in the morning, and when Hilda saw my sheets she shook her head and she goes, "You should be more careful about keeping track of your period so as not to get caught by surprise."

Everybody in school knew something had happened to Billy Linden, but it wasn't until the day after that that they got the word. Kids stood around in little huddles trading rumors about how some wild animal had chewed Billy up. I would walk up and listen in and add a really gross remark or two, like part of the game of thrilling each other green and nauseous with made-up details to see who would upchuck first.

Not me, that's for sure. I mean, when somebody went on about how Billy's whole head was gnawed down to the skull and they didn't even know who he was except from the bus pass in his wallet, I got a

little urpy. It's amazing the things people will dream up. But when I thought about what I had actually done to Billy, I had to smile.

It felt totally wonderful to walk through the halls without having anybody yelling, "Hey, Boobs!"

There are people who just plain do not deserve to live. And the same goes for Fat Joey, if he doesn't quit crowding me in science lab, trying to get a feel.

One funny thing, though, I don't get periods at all anymore. I get a little crampy, and my breasts get sore, and I break out more than usual—and then instead of bleeding, I change.

Which is fine with me, though I take a lot more care now about how I hunt on my wolf nights. I stay away from Baker's Park. The suburbs go on for miles and miles, and there are lots of places I can hunt and still get home by morning. A running wolf can cover a lot of ground.

And I make sure I make my kills where I can eat in private, so no cop car can catch me unawares, which could easily have happened that night when I killed Billy, I was so deep into the eating thing that first time. I look around a lot more now when I'm eating a kill; I keep watch.

Good thing it's only once a month that this happens, and only a couple of nights. "The Full Moon Killer" has the whole state up in arms and terrified as it is.

Eventually, I guess I'll have to go somewhere else, which I'm not looking forward to at all. If I can just last until I can have a car of my own, life will get a lot easier.

Meantime, some wolf nights I don't even feel like hunting. Mostly I'm not as hungry as I was those first times. I think I must have been storing up my appetite for a long time. Sometimes I just prowl around and I run, boy do I run.

If I am hungry, sometimes I eat garbage instead of killing somebody. It's no fun, but you do get a taste for it. I don't mind garbage as long as once in a while I can have the real thing fresh-killed, nice and wet. People can be awfully nasty, but they sure taste sweet.

I do pick and choose, though. I look for people sneaking around in the middle of the night, like Billy, waiting in the park that time. I figure they've got to be out looking for trouble at that hour, so whose fault is it if they find it? I have done a lot more for the burglary problem around Baker's Park than a hundred dumb "watchdogs," believe me.

Gerry-Anne is not only talking to me again, she has invited me to go on a double-date with her. Some guy she met at a party invited her, and he has a friend. They're both from Fawcett Junior High across town, which will be a change. I was nervous, but finally I said yes. We're going to the movies next weekend. My first real date! I am still pretty nervous, to tell the truth.

For New Years, I have made two solemn vows.

One is that on this date I will not worry about my chest, I will not be self-conscious, even if the guy stares.

The other is, I'll never eat another dog.

Evil Thoughts

The crazy lady's goddamn dogs were barking again. Fran shunted the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher (what had won her to the new house was that dishwasher) and swore under her breath.

"What's the matter?" said Jeffrey, as he went on carefully layering books and notepads into his backpack.

Dear Jeffrey. He so charmingly lived in his youthful mind and was so tolerant even when you pointed out to him the things that should be driving him nuts the way they drove you nuts, even though you weren't an old married couple, only live-togethers, slightly mismatched. By age, anyway.

"I said I wish somebody would run over those damn dogs of hers," Fran growled. "Save me, Lord, from little dogs! Everybody knows little dogs are crazy, from being so much smaller than everybody else that they're scared all the time. And in this case their owner is crazy too."

"Who, Whatsername next door?" Jeffrey said. "I thought she was a nurse. Do they let crazy people be nurses?"

"No, dummy, not that one. I mean Whatsername up the street two or three houses, toward the park," Fran said, glaring at the window over the sink; it was stuck again, and would have to be worked on by somebody (not Jeffrey, who was not handy). "That's where the dogs are. God, Jeff, don't you hear them?"

"Sure," he said equably, "but heck, they're probably the only company she's got if she's as nutty as you think. I can't find my torts text."

"Nuttier." Fran rooted under the sink for the dishwashing fluid. "She really is nuts, no kidding. Did I tell you? She yelled at me for walking past her place, in the back. Around twilight yesterday, while the oven was heating up to make dinner, I took a stroll up to the park. As I passed her place, all of a sudden these dogs started yapping and a floodlight came on, if you can believe that, at the corner of the house; and she started screaming from inside. Waving her arms at me through the front window. It was the damndest thing."

Jeffrey patiently lifted up the piles of old newspapers, mail, bills, catalogs, and so on, looking for his book. He would be late for class again, but did he get nervous or rushed? Not him. It was one of the things she loved about him, one of the things that had made the move bearable. When she wasn't feeling completely jangled herself, and resenting his calm.

"Screaming what?" he said. "What did she say?"

"I don't know, exactly. I could only catch a few words. It was all so violent and wild—something about burglars. Do I look like a burglar to you? I was just an ordinary, undangerous woman walking along a public thoroughfare in broad daylight, and you'd have thought it was the hordes of Genghis Khan, come to rape and pillage or something."

"Thought you said 'twilight,' " he observed mildly, pausing to read something from the heap of junk mail.

"All right, twilight, but good grief, Jeff, it was ridiculous! What did she think I was going to do? I could hear her shrieking, and those damn little dogs of hers yipping, all the way to the end of the street."

“Maybe she’s been burgled a lot,” Jeffrey said, putting the paper down, “or pestered to death by commercial solicitations. What was I looking for?”

“Torts.”

He was probably right. Their own house had been equipped at some recent point with a fancy burglar alarm (much too complex, a nuisance to use), which indicated something about the neighborhood, she supposed. Hell, give the crazy lady in 408 the benefit of the doubt. At least the damned dogs had quit yelping at last.

Jeffrey rolled his bike outside, carrying his book-stuffed pack slung on his back. “Hey, Fran?” he called.

“Um?” she said, reading the directions on the inside of the dishwasher cover again.

“How often are you watering the grass? Look: there’s a bunch of mushrooms sprouting on the lawn.”

Fran tied her bathrobe belt more tightly around her waist and padded outside to stand barefoot on the cement front step and look where he was pointing. She saw a clutch of pale, striated bubbles clustered on a little rise in the grass. The raised place was a writhe of half-buried root that had reached far from the thick-trunked mountain cottonwood that leaned toward the house. Roots showed like gnarled dolphins surfacing all over the lawn.

“I’ve been watering three times a week, just as you said to,” she said, “because it’s been so hot, for September.”

“But sometimes it drizzles at night,” Jeffrey replied. “Too much moisture could be bad for the grass. Let’s try cutting down a little.”

“Sure,” she said. She went to the curb on the concrete path and hugged him, and he almost fell over, bike and all. They giggled and made a minor spectacle of themselves, and then he pedaled away up the quiet suburban street toward the university.

Take that, neighbors, Fran thought, palming her hair back from her face. She almost regretted her youthful looks, which kept it from being obvious (at any distance, anyway) that she was older than Jeffrey. “Older Woman Kisses Law School Lover Goodbye.” Yum.

Never mind, she would show any watching neighbors that she was a worthy householder no matter what. She would tend to her front lawn.

The smooth slope of grass from the front wall of the house down to the sidewalk really was a source of pleasure, roots and all. The sprinkler system was a thrill—all that control, at the mere turn of a handle! All that grass, under the high, dappled canopy of the one large tree. It was a far cry from the little apartment with the tiny brick patio where they had started living together.

She picked her way across the wet grass (alert for deposits left by wandering neighborhood dogs) and inspected the little stand of mushrooms.

They must have popped up overnight; they certainly hadn’t been there yesterday. How nice if they should prove to be edible: sautéed mushrooms, fresh picked, some rare type stuffed with healthful and exotic vitamins, no doubt.

But they didn’t look edible. Seen up close, each mushroom was about as big as a knuckle of her hand, round, and of a particularly unattractive greasy pallor that made her wrinkle her nose. They looked—well, *fungoid*, anything but fresh and wholesome; alien, actually. Alien to the dinner table, anyway, unless it was some French dinner table regularly graced with sauced animal glands and such.

Well, sunlight would no doubt kill the pallid little knobs. People grew mushrooms in cellars, didn’t

they? Her newly acquired southwestern lawn was hardly a dark cellar. She was no gardener, but this much she could figure out.

She typed medical transcripts from her tape machine until the dishwasher made a weird sound and vomited dirty water onto the floor. A session with an outrageously expensive plumber, plus his doltish (also expensive) apprentice, followed, and there went the rest of the morning.

At least her ancient and rusted Volks started without fuss. But when Fran delivered the transcript pages she had finished, Carmella, her supplier, informed her that two of the doctors were going on vacation (at the same time, of course). There would be less work for a while.

Fran cursed all the way home. If only Carmella had told her sooner that this was coming! If only Fran herself had remembered this seasonal problem from last year (it was exactly the same in Ohio). What could she have done about it, though? Not bought that little rug for the front hallway at the flea market, that's what.

A package had been left for her with her neighbor on the north, a plump girl who brought it over and introduced herself as Betsy. As Jeff had mentioned, she was a nurse with a late shift at a nearby hospital. To Fran she seemed awfully young and feather-headed to be taking care of sick people.

Betsy wandered around admiring the rather scanty furniture and the posters Fran had hung on the walls while she answered Fran's delicate soundings about the neighborhood around Baker's Park.

Yeah, the "convenience" store down on Rhoades Avenue was a rip-off joint, but the shoemaker next door to it was okay if the work wasn't anything complicated. And it was a good idea to keep your car doors locked even when it was parked in your driveway. They did have burglaries sometimes, which was why so many people had dogs. Not that the dogs did much good. No, Betsy didn't have dogs herself and neither did her housemates, one an elementary school teacher, one in social work, all three renting from the older couple (retired now to Florida) who owned the house.

"Anyway," she added, "those two little monsters in 408 are more than enough for the whole neighborhood!"

Fran laid aside the totally inappropriate blouse her sister had sent her for her birthday (*I'm not a little old biddy yet*, she thought irritably, but her sister was a decade younger and clearly still had a child's view of anyone over thirty) and offered Betsy tea. "Whatabout that woman?" she said, sitting down across the kitchen table from her visitor. "The one with the dogs?"

"Oh, she's weird," Betsy said with cheerful enthusiasm. "Nutty as a fruitcake, if you ask me. I hear her screaming in her place all the time, just yelling like—well, like my mother used to yell at me when I was giving her a really hard time. At first I thought she had kids or something living in there with her, and me and my roommates seriously considered calling the cops in case the old loon was abusing a child or something. It always sounds so *violent*."

She sat back, shrugging in the oversize shirt she wore in a vain attempt to minimize her sizable bust. "But I've never seen anybody else go in or out, not in a year and a half of living here. So I guess she's just screaming at the dogs, or the TV. I bet she drinks. Female alkies are thin. They drink instead of eating."

Fran admitted that she hadn't had a good look at the crazy lady yet but had mostly just heard her.

"Oh, she looks okay, sort of," Betsy said cautiously. "But boy, is she nuts."

Fran laughed. "Then I guess it's lucky that Jeff and I didn't end up living right next to her. Poor you, being so much closer!"

"I'll say," Betsy said vehemently. "She's craziest of all about men. Watch out, Fran. If that cute guy I

saw leaving this morning was your Jeff, she'll be after him in no time."

"Then she'll have a fight on her hands," Fran retorted. "Jeffrey is mine, as in significant other, life partner, whatever they call it these days."

In the evening before dinner, while the stew simmered, Fran and Jeffrey walked up the block toward the uneven triangle of green that was Baker's Park. Passing the crazy lady's house on the stroll back, Fran looked across the street and saw the bluish glimmer of a TV screen inside the big front window. The house itself was pretty from the front, with a shapely porch, and two jauntily nautical porthole-shaped windows flanking the recessed doorway.

Suddenly a report like a gunshot snapped out from the porch: the screen door, banging hard against the front wall. Two little dogs came skittering down the brick walk, barking wildly, and skidded to a dancing halt at the edge of the crazy lady's lawn.

"Jeez!" Jeffrey said, protectively grabbing Fran's arm and picking up their pace, "what did she do, sic them on us? We're not even on her side of the street!"

"I told you," Fran said. "The woman is bonkers, and everybody knows it."

"Well, at least they're not Dobermans," he said, looking back over his shoulder at the bouncing, yammering animals.

"Shh," said Fran, "you don't want to give her any ideas."

Secretly, she was relieved to have the little dogs come after her and Jeffrey like that, validating what she had told him about the woman and her animals. And after what Betsy had said, better the dogs than the woman herself, with Jeffrey there.

She cut the grass the next day with the old hand-mower they had found in the tool shed. The mower kept sticking on the raised roots that veined the turf, and she gave up with the job half-done (it was a lot harder than she had imagined).

But she made sure to drag the machine back and forth a couple of times over the bubbly clot of white mushrooms, like greasy blisters, which had expanded rather than drying up and blowing away as she had hoped. Under the grinding blades the mushrooms disintegrated with satisfying ease.

The tape she transcribed after lunch was from Doctor Reeves, a plastic surgeon who specialized in burn patients. His dry, dispassionate notes on two children who had been caught in a burning trailer out on the west edge of town made her feel sick.

She quit (there was no rush, with the volume of work slowed to an impoverishing trickle) and went for a walk, hands jammed in her jeans pockets.

Her new neighborhood was made up of small, sturdy houses in an unexpectedly whimsical mixture of styles, most of them several decades old by the look of them. Some showed endearing turns of fantasy, like the two with roofs of tightly layered green tiling cut like the thatched roofs of English cottages, and a small white house higher on the hill that had a miniature fairy-tale tower for a front hallway. There was nothing like the bland sameness of the city's newer developments; Fran's spirits lifted.

She found herself at the foot of her own street, and out of sheer devilment—and to see what would happen this time—instead of going in she walked up the lane that ran behind the houses on her street, back toward Baker's Park.

The sandy wheel-track was choked with weeds, vines, and branches hanging over from adjacent yards. The lanes, she knew, had once been used for garbage pickup. Then the city had bought a whole new fleet of garbage trucks which were only afterward discovered to be too wide for the lanes, which now

served the purposes of kids, gas men who read your meter with binoculars from their truck windows, the occasional pair of discreetly parked lovers, and (to judge by the crazy lady, anyway) burglars.

As Fran swung boldly toward the head of the lane, a sharp rapping sound snapped at her from the back of the crazy lady's house. A lean figure in a flowered housecoat hovered behind the closed kitchen window: the crazy lady herself, presumably, in a beehive hairdo, banging her fist on the glass in a kind of manic aggression.

Fran smiled and waved as if returning a friendly greeting and walked on, managing not to flinch from the incredible racket of the little dogs shrilling at her back. The crazy lady must have let the dogs into the side yard just so they could rush to the back wall and bark at Fran.

Jesus, Fran thought, striding quickly around the corner and back down the street toward her own place. *I shouldn't have waved at her, I should have fired a rock through her damned window! Who the hell does she think she is, the witch! The lanes are city property, I can walk in them if I like.*

What if she has a gun? A paranoid like that, she probably does. Hell, I bet she could shoot me and say she thought I was a burglar and get away with it! People like that shouldn't be allowed to live on their own. The woman should be in an institution.

The mushrooms were back the next morning, but they were different. Fran couldn't help noticing them when she went out on the porch to look for the mail. They were brown and flat, growing in overlapping layers along the shaggy arm of root that seemed to be the seat of the infestation.

She went over to squat down and examine them. They were wet from the overnight showers and their frilled edges glistened a pallid pink.

"Yuch!" she said aloud. "What evil-looking mushrooms!" She prodded them gingerly with a twig dropped by the huge old cottonwood above her.

"They're your evil thoughts."

It was a hoarse voice from the sidewalk, the voice of the crazy lady (Fran knew this before she looked up; who else could it be, saying that, in that voice?). There she stood, disconcertingly thin and slight in a pastel pantsuit, a cigarette smoldering between two of her sharp-knuckled fingers. She had enough lipstick on for six mouths, and she wasn't smiling.

Fran gaped at her, at a loss for words. The woman looked like a bona fide witch out of a modern fairy tale, and what do you say to a witch who comes calling? With intense satisfaction Fran said to herself, *She's older than I am. She's older, old, like an old witch is supposed to be!*

The crazy lady said, "Have you seen a little dog? He's about a foot high, with black and white spots."

"No, sorry," Fran said with forced heartiness. "I've been in the back of the house, working."

"He got out this morning," the crazy lady said, looking around with a frown. Did she think the dog might pop up at any moment from under Fran's lawn?

Fran said, "If I do see him, I'll be sure and let you know."

"Thank you," the crazy lady said, as if she had never banged on the window or screamed at Fran—maybe she didn't recognize her? She walked away, holding her cigarette out from her side at an elegant angle that she must have picked up from Bette Davis or some other glamour queen from the days of black-and-white movies.

Fran stared at the mushrooms. "*Those are your evil thoughts*"? What kind of a thing was that to say to her?

The woman was a crackpot just as Betsy had said, one step short of being a bag-lady talking to herself on the street. She must be living on an inheritance or the pension left by a dead husband, so she could keep a roof over her head. A person like that couldn't possibly hold down a job.

But the mushrooms really did look evil, old and wrinkled and evil. They looked like—

Fran sat back on her heels, blushing. What an idea! They looked like an exaggerated parody of the folds of her vagina, that was what they looked like. No, not hers, some old hag's swollen and discolored sex.

She scrambled to her feet muttering, "Don't be an idiot, you idiot," and with the back of the straight rake she whacked the new crop of fungus to flying fragments.

Over pizza that night with a few of Jeffrey's friends from law school, she didn't mention the conversation with the crazy lady. She didn't feel altogether comfortable with Jeffrey's friends, except for a woman a little older than herself who had begun law school after a divorce.

On her way next day to pick up some tapes from a backup source who sometimes gave her work, Fran saw the crazy lady's dog, or anyway it might have been the crazy lady's dog, jittering back and forth on the far side of Rhoades Avenue. It made one mad dash to cross, was honked at by an approaching car, and dodged back again to the far side where it hopped up and down furiously on its stiff little legs and barked ferociously at the traffic.

She considered driving back to tell the crazy lady, but she had lost time over the pizza and beer last night and she was in a hurry now. And when she did get back, she didn't see the dog again and besides the crazy lady was occupied.

She was having an altercation with a jogger, from the safety of her porch. Fran parked and sat in the Volks and watched.

The jogger marked time at the curb, his head turned toward 408 with its two round windows flanking the open doorway. "I'm not doing anything in your yard, lady," he declared. "I didn't touch your yard."

On the porch the crazy lady stood with her hips shot to one side in an aggressive slouch and shouted furiously, "I saw you on my grass! You ran over my grass!"

"I don't run on grass," he answered. "It's slippery, and you can't see your footing." He was middle-aged and a bit flabby around the middle, but he held his ground, running in place while he argued.

"I saw you!" the crazy lady yelled. Her remaining dog shot past her ankles, barking. It made mad little dashes in the direction of the jogger, none of which carried it more than halfway across the lawn. "This is private property! You stay off it!"

"Gladly," the jogger retorted. "Lady, you're nuts, you know that?" He headed on up toward the park, shaking his head, elbows pumping, pursued by the barking of the dog. The crazy lady began screaming at the dog, which finally gave up barking and skulked back into the house, whereupon the screen door gave another mighty bang, and all grew quiet.

Oh the hell with it, Fran thought, I'm not going to say a thing about the other dog. Someone like that shouldn't even have pets, any more than she should have kids. The little beast is probably better off in the traffic.

She locked the car and walked up onto her own patch of grass, where she automatically checked the mushroom site. A new crop, and a different type again, seemed to have sprouted there overnight.

There were six of them, tallish, on spindly stalks, and they had elongated, domed caps with dark, spidery markings along their lower fringes. Like odd, tiny lampshades trimmed with black lace, or six

otherworldly missiles waiting to be launched.

Evil thoughts.

Oh, bull, Fran thought, looking up the street at the crazy lady's house. What about *ther* evil thoughts, where were they displayed?

She didn't touch the new crop. Let them just sit there and do whatever mushrooms did until they reached their natural term and died. She was tired of beating them to bits and then having them show up again. It was too much like losing some kind of struggle, which was ridiculous, because there was no struggle. You don't have a struggle with a bunch of mushrooms.

She blew up at Jeffrey about the records he brought home that night. She hated salsa for starters, and then there was the expense. It didn't help that they were used, of course, very cheap, from the secondhand bookstore on Rhoades.

Of course they made up, and made love. He was forgiving by nature, and she had no defense against his lanky charm. Look at the gangly length of him, the lively tumble of his auburn hair, his intent young face. *How did I get so lucky? Oh, how did I get so lucky, to have this lovely boy to love me?*

Fran couldn't sleep right away afterward. She lay on her back and amused herself wondering which of her evil thoughts those slender, silvery mushrooms represented.

She paid for the sleepless hours, as usual. In the morning she looked haggard-out. She always checked herself in the bathroom mirror when she woke up, searching for the dry skin and branching wrinkles that Jeffrey was bound to see someday, someday.

Not yet, though.

She crawled back into bed and stayed there while he made himself breakfast, so that he wouldn't see her without the repairs of makeup. She looked too awful, sagging and bruised around the eyes.

She was gratified to see that the overnight chill seemed to have killed some of the damned mushrooms. Four of the six had withered so that their caps hung upside-down from stalks that looked as if they had been pinched hard in the middle. The flattened caps drooped inside-out, exposing the blue-black slits of their undersides to the sky. She thought of the gills of strange fish, dead and decaying in the cool morning air, fossil remains of ancient forms from prehistoric seas.

On the other hand, several new growths had come up.

It hadn't rained for two nights. The grass looked a little dry, but she didn't turn on the sprinklers.

That afternoon Fran took a welcome break from unpacking books and organizing them on the brick-and-board shelves Jeff had made (she had to re-set everything for balance, of course) and observed the crazy lady in what seemed at last like civilized conversation with a man out in front of 408.

He was a heavy guy in gray work clothes and he stood with his head bent, listening to her. Then he would crouch down and examine something in the grass, and stand up and talk and listen some more, and they would move over a little and do it all again. For a moment Fran thought, *My God, she's got mushrooms too*. She felt a tilt of vertigo (more evil thoughts, out on show—hers? Or Fran's, on some kind of northward mushroom-migration? The Thoughts That Ate Baker's Park).

Then she realized that the man was examining the heads of the crazy lady's sprinkler system. You would never have guessed this from the way she minced and preened and waved her cigarette. Her voice, if not her words, carried: a high, artificial mewling tone like the voice of Betty Boop, while her red mouth twisted in a parody of a fetching smile.

She was positively grotesque. Fran watched from her own porch, fascinated and repelled, until the

crazy lady sashayed back up to her front steps, trilling over her shoulder in an impossibly arch manner at the workman, and opened her screen door. Then came a flurry of screams, presumably at the little dog (it must be trying to get out), and finally the customary door-slam.

The man in gray headed for a truck parked in front of Betsy's house.

"Excuse me!" Fran waved.

He ambled over.

"You're a lawn-man, right?" she said. God, he was massive as a steer; she caught a whiff of stale tobacco and beer on his breath. This was what the crazy lady had been flirting with?

She felt a sudden stab of deep, embarrassed pity. After all, the crazy lady couldn't be all that much older than Fran was herself, and Fran only had Jeffrey by wild, undeserved, and unpredictable good luck.

"Maybe you can advise me about this mess that keeps coming up over here." She showed the man the mushrooms.

He hunkered down and stared at them. "I only do sprinklers," he said. "Don't know much about grass. But it's been wet this fall, and it looks like you got a dead root running along under here. Mushrooms like to grow on old dead wood."

Today the cluster had a new addition. There was a grayish round one, a small gourd-like shape, trailing a snaky little stalk like a withered umbilical cord. She preferred the silvery ones with their inky hems, which by comparison at least had a sort of gleaming style about them, the polished perfection of bullets aimed up at her out of the crooked elbow of the exposed root.

"That's a dead root?" she said uncertainly. "I thought all these roots belonged to the big tree, there."

He shook his head and looked around. "Nope. This one's dead, and that root there looks dead too. Must have been another tree here once that got took out."

"Oh," she said. "I've never had a lawn before, I don't know a thing about this. The mushrooms aren't likely to spread, then, and crowd out the grass?"

"What, these fellers?" he said, drawing a blunt fingertip along the edge of one of the silvery ones.

"Heck, no, they're real fragile. Soon as it gets a little colder you won't see no more of them."

Fran suddenly saw the similarity of the silver mushrooms to penises, polished metal phalluses with a delicate tracery of dark veins under their thin skins. The lawn man's grimy finger touching one of them made her skin prickle.

"Oh, right, sure, I noticed that myself," she stammered, straightening up quickly. "They only last a day or two, and they just sort of wilt and shrivel up—"

Like an old man's cock, she thought, though these words didn't get out, thank God. Worse and worse. She stood there smiling sickly and thinking, *I'm as loony a spectacle as the crazy lady herself, in my own way.*

As the sprinkler man drove off, Fran saw cigarette smoke curling up from the shadows under the porch of 408.

Jeffrey only had time for a short stroll that night, up to and around the park where a couple of dogs were chasing each other, no owners in sight. He remarked that people sure didn't take care of their pets around here, letting them run loose like that. Fran thought about having seen the crazy lady's other dog and not saying anything to her. She drew Jeffrey home along a parallel street two blocks away, so as

not to pass the crazy lady's house.

"Too bad we can't eat those mushrooms," Jeffrey said as they walked back up toward their front door. "We've sure got a lot of them."

The uplifted caps shone like pewter in the lofty radiance of the corner street light. Fran found herself oddly relieved that Jeffrey noticed them too, that he *saw* them. What would he say if she told him he was seeing her evil thoughts?

"What are you smiling about?" he said.

"Nothing," she said. "A secret joke too dumb to say out loud." She dug her keys out of her pocket and unlocked the front door. "I hate those damned mushrooms. I think I'll see if I can buy something somewhere, some kind of poison I can use to get rid of them once and for all."

Jeffrey laughed. "You want to poison some mushrooms? That's cute. Speaking of food, by the way, my mom wants us to come for Thanksgiving."

"What, already?" Fran said, instantly deflated and anxious. They stood in the dark little hall. "It's still September, for God's sake!"

He took her hand and squeezed it softly, thumbing her knuckles with sensuous pleasure. "She just wants to make sure we don't make other plans first."

"But I want to make other plans," Fran said, shrinking from the prospect of an evening of being delicately put down by Jeff's blue-haired and protective mother for being an "older woman" instead of some fresh young thing.

"She's not going to be around forever, you know," Jeffrey said a bit plaintively, "and I've gotten to be, well, better friends with her now that we're living in the same city." He turned on the hall light, and they trailed through the house getting ready for bed and wrangling in a desultory way about Thanksgiving.

I look like shit, Fran thought, staring despondently at her haggard reflection in the cabinet mirror as she brushed her teeth. *He's getting fed up with me.*

Had that vein been there before, a bluish-gray pathway under the skin of her neck? *Just wait till his mom sees that!*

Later on in bed, in a wave of guilt and self-disgust Fran pushed him away when he touched her breast. They slept with their backs to each other.

Two more of the rounded, gourd-like things lay among the dangling corpses of the silver bullets next morning. Fran interrupted her work several times to go look at them, unhappily walking around and around the small, cursed spot on the lawn.

Last night she had dreamed of Jeffrey sleeping splayed on his back, a bullet-shaped metallic mushroom growing upright between his legs.

And these roundish ones, moored to their twisted scrap of vine and showing faint dark patterns under their greenish skins: were they her evil thoughts about Jeffrey's mother?

The crazy lady must see the mushrooms when she minced down the street with her one dog from time to time, smoking and throwing her hips from side to side like an old cartoon whore. No doubt she looks and tells herself, *Goodness me, look at that—my new neighbor has some very evil thoughts.*

"What's the matter?" Jeffrey said at dinner. "I've got cases to work on and you're pacing around like a panther. Please, Fran, I can't concentrate."

“Carmella returned some of my work today,” Fran said angrily. “Too sloppy, the doc said, do it better. He should try making out all that slurred muttering he puts on there.”

“Why don’t you go watch TV for a little while?” Jeffrey said.

“Thanks,” she snapped, “have you looked at what’s on tonight? Just because I’m not in school, that doesn’t mean I’m an idiot, you know, to sit glassy-eyed in front of an endless parade of sit-coms and game shows.”

“Jeez, I never said—”

He stared up at her, open-mouthed, and for a second she stared back in blazing contempt. God, what a whiny, moon-faced child he was! No wonder he clung so hard to his mother’s apron-strings!

Then the hurt in his expression melted her into a shuddering confusion of fear and contrition—what in the world was *wrong* with her?—and she hugged him and apologized. They ended up in front of the TV together, murmuring and kissing on the couch, neither of them watching the screen.

“I think moving here was harder on you than you realize,” he said. “You look tired, Fran. I wish I could have been around more to help you with the details of settling in, but with starting school and all . . .”

She wished he hadn’t noticed the marks of strain in her face, the ones she noticed every morning.

Age, real age, so soon? She was only thirty-four, for Christ’s sake! It had to be just strain, as he said. And he was so sweet about it, how could she resent his remark?

But she did.

It turned really cold that night for the first time that fall, and the wind blew. Leaves covered much of the lawn in the morning, and all of the mushrooms had withered and vanished, except for one of the ovoid ones. Its sibling on the same desiccated vine had shrunk to a wrinkled brown nut, but the survivor was now the size of a tennis ball and shone livid white in the dark, rough-cut grass.

Like an egg, Fran thought uneasily, studying it. A green nest with a giant, monstrous egg in it—a bad egg (naturally). Already a dark veining of decay was visible, like crazing in old porcelain.

No other growths had appeared. Pretty soon the frost would kill this one too, and Fran’s evil thoughts would be private again, invisible even to the greedy, smoky gaze of the crazy lady in 408.

Fran asked Betsy and her housemates to a Thanksgiving party, and Carmella too. Jeffrey said he didn’t know what Fran was doing or why, but he meant to go across town to his mother’s on Thanksgiving. Fran had a lot of evil thoughts about that, but no more mushrooms came up.

The next time she looked, the one remaining fungus was as big and white as a baseball, and marbled all over with black. There was a delicacy of great antiquity about it now, an almost ethereal look, as if the bluish-white and shining shell glowed coldly from within, silhouetting the darker tracery.

“I’ve had enough of this,” she muttered, and she gave the thing a sharp kick.

The pale shell disintegrated without a sound, releasing a puff of thick black dust. In the wreckage stood a sooty stub, a carbonized yoke, which yielded, moist and pulpy, when she kicked at it again, frantically, in a rush of horror and disgust.

The shrunken black knob emitted another breath of inky powder under the impact of her shoe, but clung to its twist of vine. She had to trample it for long moments before she was able to flatten the whole mess into a dark stain on the earth, through which splinters of the rotten root beneath protruded palely like shards of bone.

She gasped and realized that she had been holding her breath to keep from inhaling the spores, or

whatever the black dust was that had been packed between the decayed center and the outer shell.

Who was watching, who had seen her mad dance on the front lawn under the old cottonwood?

No one. Betsy's house was quiet, the people across the street were doing whatever they did all day. The crazy lady's driveway was empty, her old gray Pontiac absent.

How ridiculous, that a person as crazy as that was allowed to drive!

No more mushrooms sprouted.

"It's too cold for them," Jeffrey said. "Don't tell me you miss the ugly things! A little while ago you wanted to poison them."

No, Fran didn't miss them. But she found herself wondering, in a nagging, anxious way, where her evil thoughts were growing now that they weren't showing up on the lawn.

After all, the thoughts didn't stop.

Like when she saw Jeffrey with Betsy one evening while he was setting out the bagged garbage on the curb. The two of them stood chatting there, and Fran saw a spark of easy warmth between them and cursed it to herself.

He said, "Maybe we should drive somewhere over the Thanksgiving break, to hell with your party and dinner at Mom's and the whole thing. This is a tough term for me, I'm all frazzled. And you're not in top shape yourself, Frannie. Look at yourself in the mirror. I'm afraid you might get sick."

She did look, and she knew it wasn't that she was getting sick. She was worrying too much. She was becoming more sensitive to noise, too, and woke up often at night. She would get up alone, careful not to disturb Jeffrey, pour herself a glass of wine in the kitchen, and go look at herself in the bathroom mirror until she'd drunk enough to stumble back to bed and fall asleep again.

Carmella said, "You better pull yourself together, Fran. I've had some complaints from the docs you type for."

The docs who mumbled, the docs who paid too little out of their immense incomes for the services they couldn't get along without, the docs who rattled along about burned kids and dying old people and all the rest as if the sufferers were sides of meat. The docs should feel the pain their patients felt.

That was an evil thought, wasn't it?

Fran ordered a turkey at the supermarket, for her Thanksgiving party. Jeffrey wasn't going to his mother's for Thanksgiving dinner after all. His mother had had a fall and was in the hospital with a broken hip. Jeffrey spent a lot of time there with her now, which Fran resented. She soothed herself with dark imaginings of death, an ending between Jeffrey and his mother once and for all.

But where were these evil thoughts? The dead roots on the lawn stayed bare, like bones worked to the surface of an old battlefield.

The turkey was ready to pick up well in advance of Thanksgiving. She hoped it would fit; she had only the freezer compartment of the mid-sized fridge that had come with the house to store it in.

On her way back from the supermarket, Fran pulled up in the street. The crazy lady was on the steps of her porch, screeching dementedly, "Get back here, you hear me? You get back here this minute, you filthy thing!"

The one little dog she had left was down at the edge of her ragged brown lawn, alternately turning its rear to the questing nose of a brisk gray poodle, and sitting down to avoid being sniffed. The poodle pranced and wagged with delight, and darted at the smaller dog with stiffened front legs, trying to turn

it, mount it, hump it there in the gutter.

“Get away, get away from her!” shrieked the crazy lady, waving her hands wildly, though apparently she was afraid to run down there and chase the poodle away. She thrust her head forward and screamed at the poodle from a rage-distended mouth, “Don’t even think about it!”

Fran knew she would explode if she had to hear that raw, mad voice for another second. She leaned out of the window of the Volks and yelled, “For Christ’s sake, lady, will you shut up? Let them screw if they want to screw, they’re just dogs, that’s what they do!”

The crazy lady stood still and lifted one bony hand to shield her eyes from the bright fall sunlight. Her other hand stayed at her hip, cocked at an angle, a butt smoking between the thin fingers.

Fran recoiled from the unseen glare of those shadowed eyes. She drove quickly on to her own driveway, where she sat afraid to move for some time. She watched in her rearview mirror until the crazy lady, trailed by the little dog once the poodle had lost interest, withdrew into 408 without another word.

Jeffrey said, “I got an A. You’ve brought me luck! I love you.”

They were up late, kissing and sighing and stretching against each other’s warm skins. A steady breeze blew all night, hissing and seething like surf. Fran listened and drowsed, lulled by the sound, but not sleeping.

Jeff left early for class, bouncing with energy. Fran lay in bed late, luxuriating in the languor of the night’s long loving and heartened by the shimmer of sunshine glowing through the drapes: not winter yet.

After a steamy shower, she stationed herself in front of the mirror to rub moisturizer into her damp skin. And stopped, staring, frozen by the hammering recognition of something that could not be.

Her skin was an unearthly pearly color, moist and shining, like the skin of a soprano dying endlessly in Act Three of consumption, like the skin of a delicate Victorian lady vampire, like the skin of a guest made up for a Halloween party. But Halloween was past.

The lines and smudges the mirror had been showing her for weeks had spread and joined each other in a flowing network of shadowy tributaries that covered her features from her throat upward and spread away past her hairline, onto her scalp. The lines were mauve and blue and gray, and when she turned her agonized face so that sunlight fell on her cheek, there was a slightly greenish tinge of iridescence to those veinings under the translucent surface of her skin.

She ran to the mirror in the bedroom, and the one in the little bathroom near the kitchen, her eyes glaring in disbelief out of smoky pits in the horrible mask. Her voice creaked and wheezed desperate protests in her throat, her hands fluttered nervelessly—her own pink-knuckled, flesh-tinted, still youthful hands that didn’t dare touch the ancient, marbled pallor of her face.

This was where the evil thoughts had been growing, in their true home, their natural seat, their place of origin. Nothing lay ahead but inevitable disintegration of the outer shell, exposing the blackened, shrunken ruin of the brain still damp and clinging with feeble persistence to the quivering stem, the living body.

On the wild winds of her panic she tossed to and fro in the sunlit rooms of the house, screams dammed in her throat by her own terror of what the force of them would do to her fragile shell of a face.

Stifling, she flung open the front door and plunged outside into the cool, bright morning. She stumbled across the lawn, past the big tree with its leaves rustling in the soft breeze, and flung herself down at the dead root on which her evil thoughts had first appeared.

As soon as her forehead touched the bleached, bare wood, she felt the eggshell of her face soundlessly break and fall away. A swirl of sooty powder choked her breath as darkness broke in her and from her and bore her down into bottomless night.

Beauty and the Opéra

Or

The Phantom Beast

For the first few months it was very hard to take my meals with him. I kept my gaze schooled to my own plate while he hummed phrases of music and dribbled crumbs down his waistcoat. His mouth, permanently twisted and swollen on one side, held food poorly; unused to dining in company, he barely noticed.

But to write of such things I must first set the stage. No more need be known, I think, than anyone might learn from Gaston Leroux's novel, *The Phantom of the Opéra*, which that gentleman wrote using certain details he had from me in the winter of 1907 (he was a convivial, persuasive man, and I spoke far too freely to him); or even from this "moving picture" they have made now from his book.

M. Leroux tells (as best he can in mere words) of a homicidal musical genius who wears a mask to hide the congenital deformity of his face. This monstrous prodigy lives secretly under the Paris Opéra, tyrannizing the staff as the mysterious "Phantom" of the title. He falls in love with a foolish young soprano whose voice he trains and whose career he advances by fair means and foul.

She, thinking him the ghost of her dead father or else an angel of celestial inspiration, is dominated by him until she falls in love—with a rich young aristocrat, the Vicomte Raoul de Chagny (the name I shall use here also). The jealous Phantom courts her for himself, with small hope of success however, since, according to M. Leroux, he sleeps in a coffin and has cold, bony hands which "smell of death."

Our soprano, although pliant and credulous, is not a complete dolt: she chooses the Vicomte. Enraged, the Phantom kidnaps her—

It was the night of my debut as Marguerite in *Faust*. I replaced the Opéra's Prima Donna who was indisposed, due perhaps to the terrible accident that had interrupted the previous evening's performance: one of the counterweights of the great chandelier had unaccountably fallen, killing a member of the audience.

Superstitious people (which in a theatre means everyone) whispered that this catastrophe was the doing of the legendary Phantom of the Opéra, whom someone must have displeased. If so that someone, I knew, was me. Raoul de Chagny and I had just become secretly engaged. My eccentric and mysterious teacher, whom I was certain was the person known as the Phantom, surely had other plans for me than marriage to a young man of Society.

Nervously, I anticipated confronting my tutor over the matter of the fatal counterweight when next he appeared in my dressing room to give me a singing lesson. I was sure that he would come when the evening's performance was over, as was his habit.

But just as I finished my first number in Act Three, darkness flooded the theatre. Gripped in mid-breath by powerful arms, I dropped, a prisoner, through a trap in the stage.

I was mortified at being snatched away with my performance barely begun, but knowing that I had not sung well, I also felt rather relieved. It is possible, too, that some drug was used to calm me. At any rate I did not scream, struggle, or swoon as my abductor carried me down the gloomy cellar passages at an odd, crabwise run which was nonetheless very quick. I knew it was the Phantom, for I had felt the cool smoothness of his mask against my cheek.

No word passed between us until I found myself sitting in a little boat lit by a lantern at the bow. Opposite me sat my mentor, rowing us with practiced ease across the lake that lies in the fifth cellar down, beneath the opera house.

"I am sorry if I frightened you, Christine," he said, his voice echoing hollowly in that watery vault, "but 'Il etait un Roi de Thule' was a disgrace, wobbling all over the place, and you ended a full quarter tone flat! You see the result of your distracting flirtation with a shallow boy of dubious quality, titled though he may be. I could not bear to hear what you would have made of 'The Jewel Song,' let alone the duet!"

"My voice was not sufficiently warmed up," I murmured, for indeed Marguerite does not truly begin to sing until the third act. "I might have improved, had I been given time."

"No excuses!" he snapped. "You were not concentrating."

I ought to have challenged him about the lethal counterweight, to which my concentration had in fact fallen victim; but alone with him on that black, subterranean water, I did not dare.

"It was nerves," I said, cravenly. "I never meant to disappoint you, Maestro."

We completed the crossing in silence. In some way that I could not quite see he made the far wall open and admit us to his secret home, which I later learned was hidden between the thick barriers retaining the waters of the lake.

In an ordinary draped and carpeted drawing room, amid a profusion of fresh-cut flowers and myriad gleaming brass candlesticks and lamps, my teacher swore that he loved me and would love me always (despite the inadequate performance I had just attempted in *Faust*). He knelt before me and asked me to live with him in the city above as his wife.

Now I was but a girl, and even down on his knee he was an imposing figure. He always wore formal dress, which flatters any tall man; carried himself with studied grace and dignity; and had (till tonight) behaved impeccably toward me. I had imagined the features behind the white, half-face mask he always wore as sad and noble, concealed for a vow of love or honor, or both.

But he had always seemed much older than I was and, acting as the opera's demonic spirit, must live at best a highly irregular life. I had simply never imagined him as a suitor. In fact, I had named him from the first my "Angel of Music," not because I thought he was some sort of heavenly visitor—I was a singer, not a convent-school girl—but to both state and remind him of a standard of conduct that I wished him to uphold in his dealings with me (it had not escaped my notice that he asked no payment for my lessons).

Taken aback by his proposal—and with Raoul's ring hanging hidden on a chain 'round my neck!—I temporized: "I am flattered, Monsieur. As my father is dead, you must speak with my guardian. But, forgive me, I do not even know your name, or who you are."

The side of his mouth that I could see curved in a smile. "Your guardian is both deaf and senile; it is no use talking to him. As for me, I am the Opéra Ghost, as you surmise. My name is Erik." He paused, breathed deeply, and added, "There, I have told you who I am; now I shall show you."

With a sudden, extravagant gesture, he swept off his mask and with it all of his thick, dark hair—a wig!

I gasped, hardly believing my eyes as he displayed to me the full measure, the positively baroque detail and extraordinary extent, of his phenomenal ugliness.

Large and broad, with bruise-colored patches staining the pallid skin, his head resembled nothing so much as an overripe melon. The fully revealed face was a nightmare. One eye was sunk in a crooked socket, the nose was half-formed and cavernous, and his cheek resembled a welter of ornamental plasterwork, all lumps and hollows and odd tags of skin. His mouth spread and twisted on that same side into a shocking blur of pink flesh, moist and shining. Only his ears were fine, curled tightly to the sides of his freckled crown with its scanty dusting of pale, lank hair. In short, he was a stomach-turning sight.

Abject and defiant at once this monster gazed up at me, clearly apprehending how I recoiled but bearing it in silence while he awaited my answer.

In that blood-freezing instant all my childish fancies and conceits—that with his teaching I would become a great singer, that he and my dear Raoul would gladly join forces to that end—were swept away. Words from the interrupted third act of *Faust* came unbidden to my mind: “Oh, let me, let me, gaze upon your face!” I nearly burst into shrieks of hysterical laughter.

Instead, I managed to say, “I think you must be mad, Monsieur, to ask me to accept you!”

“Mad? Certainly not!” He sprang to his feet and glared down at me. “But I am every bit as dangerous as Opéra gossip makes me out to be. Do you remember the stagehand Joseph Buquet, who supposedly hanged himself last Christmas? In fact, he died at my hands, to stop his chattering about me. You may look to me also in the death caused by the fallen counterweight. I was *very* displeased with your behavior on the roof of my theatre the other evening with the importunate young man whose ring you wear secretly even now; and I made my protest.

“Also that crash, with certain communications from me, is what persuaded Madame Carlotta to step aside tonight and give you your chance to sing Marguerite, of which you made so little. I tell you these things so that you will believe me when I say that your Vicomte’s life depends upon your answer, and other lives also.”

My heart dropped. “You haven’t hurt Raoul! Where is he?”

“Why, he is here, unharmed. Only his fine feathers are somewhat ruffled.” He drew a heavy curtain, revealing a window into an adjoining room.

There sat the Vicomte de Chagny, struggling wildly in a chair to which he was lashed by a crisscrossing of thin, bright chains. His clothes were all awry from his wrenching to get loose, his opera cape was rucked up on the floor at his feet, and his top hat lay on its side in a corner.

Seeing me, Raoul began shouting mightily, his face so reddened that I feared an attack of apoplexy. The Phantom pressed some switch in the wall and Raoul’s voice became audible, bawling out my name: “Christine! Christine, has he touched you, has he insulted you? Charlatan! Scoundrel! Let me go! You ugly devil, I will break you in pieces, I will—”

The curtain fell again. Raoul’s yells subsided into frustrated grunting as he renewed his attempts to free himself.

I was horrified. I loved Raoul for his (normally) ebullient and affectionate nature and I dreaded to see him hurt. Of course, he was as artistically sensitive as a large veal calf, but we cannot all serve the Muses; nor is it a capital offense to be a Philistine.

I sank onto a velvet-seated chair, trying to collect myself. The Opéra Ghost stepped close and said darkly, “His life is in your hands, Christine.”

Now I understood his meaning, and I was aghast; yet my heart rose up in exhilaration at the grant of such power. That love of justice found mainly in children burned in my breast. Feeling at fault for the death of the counterweight victim at least, I longed to do right. The Phantom's words seemed to mean that right lay within my grasp—if I had the courage to seize it.

Gripping the arms of my chair, I looked up into his awful face with what I hoped would seem a fearless gaze. "Monsieur Erik, I see in you a man of violence and cruelty. You wish to hurt Raoul because he loves me, and from what you say you plan some wider gesture of destruction as well if I refuse to be your wife."

A vindictive gleam in his eyes confirmed the truth of this. I trembled for myself, and for Raoul who groaned and struggled in the next room. Clearly he could not rescue me; I must rescue him and with him, apparently, others unknown to me but equally at risk.

In fact, this great goblin in evening dress who called himself Erik, whom I had rashly taken for a friend and mentor, offered me a role grander than any I had yet sung on stage (this was the spring of 1881; *Tosca* had not yet been written), a challenge of breathtaking proportions. Still costumed as honest Marguerite and bursting with her unsung music, I determined to meet the test. I was very young.

"Here is my answer," I said. "If you let Raoul go and swear, moreover, to commit no further violence so long as you live, I will stay with you—for five years."

One does not survive in the arts without learning to bargain.

"Five years!" exclaimed the Ghost, fine spittle spraying from his twisted mouth.

"Monsieur Erik," I replied, "I mean what I say: I offer my talent, such as it is, for you to shape and train as you choose, as well as my acceptance of your love—" My throat nearly closed on these words, and I was afraid I might vomit. "—on the terms I have stated, for five years."

In fact, I had chosen the number out of the air; five years was the length of time I had spent at the Paris Opéra.

How well prepared I was for that moment I understood only upon later reflection. A French music professor had seen my father and me performing in our native Sweden, and, thinking my father a rustic genius on the violin, had brought us both to France. But my father—more at ease, perhaps, as an exhibitor of my talents than as someone else's prize exhibit—had before long gone into a steep decline.

Extremity makes a monster of any dying man to those who must answer his incessant, heart wringing, and ultimately vain demands for help and comfort. I did not begrudge the duty I owed, and paid; but I learned in those long months the price of yielding to another person unbounded power over my days and nights. In life as in art, limitation is all.

The Phantom scowled, plainly perplexed by a response he had not foreseen. I added hurriedly, "And we must live here below, not out in the everyday world. The strain of pretending to be just like other people would be more than I could bear. That is my offer. Will you take it?"

He showed wolfish teeth. "Remember where you are. I can take what I want and keep what I like, for as long as I wish."

"But, my dear Angel," I quavered, "you may not like to have me with you even as long as five years. You are accustomed to your own ways, untrammelled by considerations of the wants of a companion. And we will not be honing my talents for public performance but only for our own satisfaction, which may lessen your pleasure in my constant company."

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "I have promised from the first to make a famous diva of you!"

“Maestro,” I said, “please understand: you have allowed your passions to drive you too far. I doubt that the Opéra managers would accept your direction of my career now on any terms. You have just said that you killed a stagehand and loosed the counterweight on the head of a helpless old woman. In the world above, you are not a great music master but a callous murderer.”

“‘In the world above—’” he repeated intently. “But not here below? Then you forgive me?”

“I do not presume to forgive crimes committed against others,” said I, with the lofty severity of youth. “Still, neither can anything you or I might do bring back your victims alive and well, so what use is blame and condemnation? You have treated me—for the most part—with consideration and respect, and I mean to respond in kind. But I can accept no more advancement of my career by your efforts. I must reject a success made for me by the heartless criminality of the Opéra Ghost.”

He wrung his hands, a poignant gesture when coupled with his ghastly head and threatening demeanor. “But what have I to offer you, except my knowledge of music and my influence here at the Opéra?”

“That we must discover,” I replied more gently, for his question had touched me. As the answer to it was “nothing,” I dared to hope that my arguments might induce him to acknowledge the futility of his plans and release Raoul and me. “But making a career for me is out of the question now. Please put that possibility from your mind.”

Drawing a square of cambric from his pocket and patting his lips dry with it, he stared gloomily at the floor. No apology, no instant grant of liberty was forthcoming. I saw that he would not reconsider, and it was too late for me to do so.

“So,” I finished dejectedly, “my choice is to join you in exile and obscurity, not fame and glory.”

“Then you won’t sing in my opera, when it is staged?” he protested, sounding near to tears himself. “But I composed it for you!”

He had previously told me that he had been working on this opus for twenty years and that it was too advanced for me in any case; but I judged his emotion honest enough.

“And I will sing it for you if you wish,” I said quickly, “here in your home. Won’t that suffice? Can it be, my angel and teacher, that you do not want me at all, just my voice for your opera? Is it only my talent, put to use for your own recognition, that you love? I am sorry, but you must give that up. Guiltless as I am of your crimes, if I let you raise me up with hands tainted by murder I shall be as bloodstained as you are yourself.”

He blinked at me in pained bafflement. “How is it, Christine, that I love you to the depths of my soul, but I do not understand you at all? You are scarcely more than a child, yet you speak like a jurist! What do you want of me? What must I do?”

Taking a deep breath of the warm, flower-scented air, I repeated my terms: “You must release the Vicomte, unharmed. You must swear to do no more violence to him or to anyone. And five years from now you must let me go too.”

He flung away from me and began to pace the carpeted floor, raising puffs of dust with every step (for he had no servants, and like many artistic people he was an indifferent housekeeper). Freed from his oppressive hovering, I arose from my chair and surreptitiously breathed in the calming way that he himself had taught me.

“I have said that I love you,” he said sulkily over his shoulder, “and I mean love that lasts and informs a lifetime—not the trifling fancy of an Opéra dandy whose true loves are the gaming tables and the racetrack!”

This jeer, spoken with deliberate loudness, provoked renewed sounds of struggle in the next room,

which I resolutely ignored.

"I am young yet, Maestro," I said meekly. "Five years is a very long time to me." He sighed, crossed his arms on his breast, and bowed his dreadful head. "But I can school myself to spend that time with you so long as I know there is an end to it; and if you will promise to sing for me, often, in your splendid voice that I have never heard equaled."

"With songs or without them, I can keep you here forever if I choose," he muttered.

"As a prisoner filled with hatred for you, yes," I dared to reply, for I saw that he was losing heart. "But prisoners are the chains of their jailers, and they often pine and die. If I were to perish here, my poor dead body would stink and rot like any other. You would be worse off than you are now. I offer more than that, dear Angel; for five years, no less and no more."

I think that no one had argued with Erik, face to face, for a very long time. He certainly had not expected reasoned opposition from me. He was on the verge of giving way.

Raoul chose this moment to issue a challenge at the top of his lungs from next door: "Fight me like a man, if you *are* a man, you disgusting freak! Choose your weapons and fight for her!"

The Phantom's head came sharply up and he rounded on me so fiercely that I could not keep from flinching.

"Liar!" he shouted. "It's a trick! You maneuver to save your little Vicomte, that is all! Do you think he would wait for you? Do you think he would *want* you, after I have had you by me for even your paltry five years? You would be sadly disappointed, Ma'amselle. Or do you mean to coax and befool me, and then escape in a month or two when my back is turned and run to your Raoul? I will kill him first. You lying vixen, I will kill you both!"

"I am not a liar!" I cried, my eyes brimming over at last.

"Prove it!" he screamed, in a very ecstasy of grief and rage. "Liar! Little liar! Prove it!"

I stepped forward, caught him 'round the neck and kissed him. I shut my eyes, I could not help that, but I pressed my mouth full on his bloated, glistening lips and leant my breast on his. My trembling hands fitted themselves to the back of his nearly naked head, holding his face tight to mine; and he was not cold and toadlike to the touch as I had anticipated, but vigorous and warm.

How can I describe that kiss? It was like putting my mouth to an open wound, as intimate an act as if I had somehow slipped my hand in among his entrails.

After a blind and breathless moment I stepped away again, much shaken. He had not moved but had stood utterly rigid from head to foot in my embrace. We looked one another in the eyes in shocked silence.

"So be it," he said at last in a hoarse voice. "The boy goes free, and I will submit my hatreds to your authority." His eyes narrowed. "But you must marry me, Christine. I will have no shadow cast upon your name or character on my account; and there must be no misunderstanding between us as to the duties owed whilst you live with me."

"I accept," I whispered, although I quailed inwardly at the mention of those "duties."

He left me. There came some muffled, unsettling sounds from the next room, during which I had time to wonder wretchedly how my Raoul had fallen into the hands of this monster.

But according to Opéra gossip the Phantom was supremely clever, while I had reluctantly noticed in Raoul flashes (if that is the word) of the obdurate, uncomprehending stupidity of the privileged. I was familiar with this quality from my childhood days of entertaining, with my father, the wealthy farmers

and burghers who hired us to make music for them. Apparently, the addition of noble blood only exacerbated the condition.

In a few moments Erik reappeared, holding his rival's limp body in his arms like that of a sleeping child. Raoul had recently begun growing a beard, and he looked very downy and dear. The sight of him all but undid me.

"He is not hurt," said the Phantom gruffly. "Bid him goodbye, Christine. You shall not see him again in my domain."

I longed to press a parting kiss to Raoul's flushed and slackjawed face, for he looked like Heaven itself to me. But my kisses were pledged now, every one. I must wait, in an agony of mingled terror and queasy anticipation, for their claimed redemption—not by Raoul, but by the Opéra Ghost.

I slipped off the little gold chain with Raoul's ring on it, wound it 'round his hand, and stood back helplessly as Erik bore him away.

Left alone, I rushed about the underground house like a bird trapped in a mineshaft. Fear drove me this way and that and would not let me rest. I was locked in, for Erik quite correctly mistrusted me; had I found a way out, I would have taken it.

The rooms of his secret house were modest, snug, and warm, with lamps and candles burning everywhere. The furniture, apart from a pair of pretty Empire chairs in the drawing room, consisted of heavy, dark, provincial pieces. A few murky landscape paintings hung on the walls. There were shelves of books and of ornamental oddments—a little glass shoe full of centime pieces, some carved jade scent bottles, a display of delicate porcelain flowers—which I dared not touch lest I doom myself forever, like Persephone eating the pomegranate seeds in Hades.

In my distraction I intruded into my captor's bedroom, which was hung with tapestries of hunting scenes and pale green bedcurtains dappled in gold like a vision from the life of the young Siegfried. The sylvan effect was diminished by the presence of a number of elaborate, gilded clocks showing not only the hour but also whether it was day or night. I did not own a clock, being unable to afford one; clearly I was not in the home of a poor man.

There was no mirror in which to see my frightened face (nor even a windowpane, for behind the drapes lay blank walls). The only sound was the ticking of the clocks.

At last I sank onto a divan in the drawing room and gave way to sobs of misery and bitter self-reproach. I could scarcely believe myself caught in such a desperate coil. Yet here I was, a foreigner, a poor orphan with no family but my fellow-workers at the Opéra. I had made friends among the ballet rats, but no one listens to an alarm raised by a clutch of adolescent girls. My guardian, the old professor, was only intermittently aware of my existence these days. Who would miss me for more than a few hours, who would search?

Raoul was my one hope. I had met him years before, during a summer I had spent with my father at Chagny. Grown to be a handsome, lively man of fashion, the young Vicomte had turned up lately in Paris as the proud new owner of a box at the Opéra. I had been flattered that he even remembered me.

His proposal of marriage was typical of his impetuous and optimistic nature. In my more realistic moments, I had not truly believed that his family would ever permit such a joining. Now I had not even his ring to remember him by.

But he would save me, surely! I told myself that Raoul loved me, that he would lead an attack on the underground house and never give up until he had me back again.

How he might overcome the obstacle of my having spent—however long it was to be—unchaperoned

in the home of another man, I could not imagine. Raoul's people were not Bohemians. His brother the Comte had already expressed displeasure over the warm relations between Raoul and me, and that was without a kidnapping.

Still, my cheerful and enthusiastic Vicomte would not allow me to languish in captivity (I tried to blot out the image of him, red-faced, roaring, and chained to a chair). I had only to stand fast and keep my head, and he would rescue me.

Erik, returning at long last, showed me to a very pretty little bedroom with my meager selection of clothing already hanging in the wardrobe and my toiletries laid out on the table.

He behaved from this point as a gracious host, always polite, faultlessly turned out, and considerately masked. This surface normality was all that enabled me to keep my own composure. At night I slept undisturbed (when I did sleep) although there was no lock on my door. Daytimes the Phantom spent absorbed in composition, humming pitches and runs under his breath, pausing to play a phrase on the piano or to stab his pen into a large brass inkwell in the shape of a spaniel's head.

I continued my own work as best I could. Each morning he listened to me vocalize, but he made no comment. When I ventured to ask him for a lesson, trying to restore our relationship to some semblance of its old footing, he said, "No, Christine. You must see how you get along without the aid of your Angel of Music."

So I saw that my initial rejection still rankled, and that he was inclined to hold a grudge.

The third morning after *Faust*, I burst into tears over breakfast: "You said you would free Raoul! He would come back for me if he were alive! You monster, you have killed him!"

Erik tapped his fingers impatiently upon the smooth white cheek of his mask. "Why should I do such a thing? He is an absurd young popinjay with no understanding of music, but I do not hate him; after all, you are here with me, not run off with him."

I flung down my napkin, knocking over my water glass. "You murdered poor Joseph Buquet for gossiping about you. I daresay you did not *hate* him, but you killed him all the same!"

Frowning, Erik moved his knee to avoid the dripping water. "Oh, Buquet! One deals differently with aristocrats. I assure you, the boy is alive and well. His brother has taken him home to Chagny. Now eat your omelette, Christine. Cold food is bad for the throat."

That evening he brought a ledger from the Opéra offices and set before me a page showing that the Vicomte de Chagny had given up his box two days after the night of *Faust*. Raoul had signed personally for his refund of the remainder of the season's fee. There was no doubt; I recognized his writing.

So in his own way Erik *had* chosen his weapons, had fought for me—and won. At least no blood had been shed. I ceased accusing him and resigned myself to making the best of my situation.

I spent two weeks as his guest, solicitously and formally attended by him in my daily wants. He even took me on a tour of the lake in the little boat, and showed me the subterranean passage from the Opéra cellars to the Rue Scribe through which he obtained provisions from the outside world.

Then, during the wedding procession in a performance of *Lohengrin*, the Opéra Ghost and I exchanged vows beneath the stage. He placed upon my finger a ring that had been his mother's, or so he supposed since he had found it in a bureau of hers (most of his furniture he had inherited from his mother, he told me; and that was all the mention he ever made of her).

He solemnly wrote out and presented to me a very handsome and official-looking civil certificate, and said that having had his first kiss already he would not trouble me for another yet, since he was so ugly

and must be gotten used to.

Thus began my marriage to the Phantom of the Opéra.

In M. Leroux's story the Phantom's heart is melted by the compassion of the young singer. He releases the lovers and dies soon after, presumably of a morbid enlargement of the organ of renunciation. The soprano and her Vicomte take a train northward and are never heard of again.

But that is not what happened.

* * *

When he said "first kiss," Erik may have spoken literally. Like any man in funds he could buy sexual favors and had certainly done so in the past. But with what wincing, perfunctory haste those services must have been rendered! And he was proud and in his own way gallant, or at any rate he wished to be both proud and gallant. I thought then and think still that although more than twice my age at least, he was very inexperienced with women.

For my part, I was virginal but not completely naïve. Traveling with my father I had observed much of life in its cruder aspects, in particular that ubiquitous army of worn-out, perpetually gravid country girls through whose lives we had briefly passed. My own mother, whom I scarcely recalled, had died bearing a stillborn son when I was two years old.

I regarded sexual matters as I did the stinks and wallowings of the pigsty. Before Raoul's reappearance I had determined to remain celibate, reserving all my energies for my art. Even my dalliance with him had been chaste, barring a kiss or two. In any case, I had no idea what to expect from a monster.

No expectation could have prepared me for what followed.

For two nights Erik came and sat silently in a chair by my bed. I sensed him listening in the dark to my breathing and to the small rustlings I made as I shifted and turned, unable to sleep. I felt observed by some nocturnal beast of prey that might claw me to pieces at any moment.

On the third night he brought a candle. I saw that he was masked and wore a long robe of crimson silk. His feet, which like his hands were strong and well shaped, gleamed palely on the dark Turkish carpet.

He set the candle on the little table by my bed and said in a hushed tone, "Christine, you are my wife. Take off your gown."

In those days decent women did not show their nakedness to anyone, not even their own husbands. But I had stepped beyond the pale; no convention or nicety protected me in Grendel's lair.

He turned away, and when I had done as he said and lain down again in a trembling sweat of fear, he leaned over me and folded back the sheet, exposing the length of my body to the warm air of the room. Then he sat in his chair and looked at me. I stared at the ceiling, tears of shame and terror running from the corners of my eyes into my hair, until I fell into an exhausted sleep.

Next morning I lay a long time in bed wondering how much more I could bear of his stifled desire. I thought he meant to be considerate, gentling me to his presence as a rider gentles an unbroken horse, little by little.

Instead, he was crushing me slowly to death.

The following night he came again and set the candle down. "Christine, take off your gown."

I answered, "Erik, you are my husband. Take off your mask."

A frozen moment passed during which I dared not breathe. Then he tore off the mask, in his agitation dropping it on the floor. He managed not to snatch after it but stood immobile under my scrutiny, his

face turned away only a little.

When I could gaze on that grotesque visage without my gorge rising, I knew I was as ready as I could ever be. I shrugged out of my nightdress, and taking his hand I drew him toward me. With a sharp intake of breath, he reached to pinch out the candle.

“No,” I said, “let it burn,” and I turned down the sheet.

After that he always came to my bed unmasked. He would lie so that I looked straight into his terrible face while his hands touched me, rousing and warming the places where his mouth would soon follow, that hideous mouth that devoured without destruction all the juices, heats, and swellings of passion.

He proved a barely banked fire, scorched and scorching with a lifetime of need. And I—I went up like summer grass; I flamed like pitch, clasped to his straining breast. As beginners, everything that we did was unbearably disgusting to us both, and so frantically exciting that we could not stop nor hold back anything. My God, how we burned!

Knowing himself to be only a poor, rough sketch of a man, he had few expectations and never thought to blame me for his own shortcomings (or, for that matter, for mine). He was at first too swift for my satisfaction, but he soon set himself to master the gratifications of lust as he might a demanding musical score. Some very rare books appeared on his shelves.

He studied languor, lightness of touch, and the uses of raw energy. I discovered how to lure him from his work, to meet his advances with revulsion and open arms at once, and to invite to my shrinking cheek his crooked kisses that came all intermixed with moans and whisperings and that seemed to liquefy my heart.

I learned to twine my legs ’round his, guiding him home to that secret part of myself, the odorous, the blood-seeping, the unsightly, puckered mouth of my sex. To whom else could I have exposed that humid breach in my body’s defenses, all sleek with avidity? With what other person could I have shared my sweat, my spit, my rising deliriums of need and release filled with animal cries and groans?

Initially, I suffered the utmost, soul-wringing terror and shame. But then came an intoxication which I can only compare to the trance of song, and this was the lyric of that song: my monster adored the monstrous in me.

Oh, he enjoyed my pretty face, my good figure, and my long, thick hair, all the simple human handsomeness denied him in his own right. But what he craved was the Gorgon under my skirts. His deepest pleasure depended on the glaring difference between my comely outward looks and the seeming deformity of my hidden female part. He loved to love me with his twisted mouth, monster to monster, gross and shapeless flesh to its like, slippery heat to slippery heat, and cry to convulsion.

We awoke new voices in one another. To the slow coiling of our entangled limbs we crooned like doves. His climax wrung from him half-strangled, exultant cries like those of a soul tearing free from its earthly roots. In my turn, I sang for him the throaty songs of a body drowning rapturously in its own depths.

I commanded, praised, begged, and reviled him, calling him my loathsome demon, my leprous ape, my ruined, rutting angel, never stooping to the pretense that he was other than awful to look at. I felt that if I treated his appearance as normal, he would begin by being grateful; but in time he would come to hate and despise me for accepting what he hated and despised in himself. A man who feels this way will beat the woman who shares his life, whether he is a handsome man or an ugly one.

Erik did strike me once.

It was quite early in our life together. We were studying Antonia’s trio with her mother’s ghost and Dr.

Miracle, from *The Tales of Hoffmann*, which Erik had heard at its Opéra Comique premier some three months earlier. From memory, he played Dr. Miracle's diabolical music on the piano; and he sang the dead mother's part, transposed downward, with an otherworldly sweetness and nobility that greatly moved and distracted me.

I struggled vainly with Antonia's music (which he had written out for me), until Erik's largely unsolicited advice spurred me to observe rather tartly that he was very arrogant in his opinions for an ugly man who lived in a cellar singing songs and writing music that no one would ever hear.

He leaped to his feet and, sharp as a whip, he slapped me. I stood my ground, my cheek hot and stinging, and said, "Erik, stop! By the terms of our bargain, you are not to be that sort of monster."

"Am I not?" he snapped, glaring hatefully at me. "You go tripping out onstage in your finery and you open your mouth and everyone throws flowers and shouts the house down. I have twice the voice of any singer in Paris, but as you so kindly remind me, no audience will ever hear me and beg me for an encore! If you write a little song that is not too terrible, they will say what a clever creature you are to be able to sing songs and make them too. But they will never be brought to their knees in tears by my music. So what sort of monster will *you* allow *me* to be, Christine?"

"I am sorry for what I said," I muttered. I could not help but see how his lips gleamed with the saliva sprayed out during this tirade; repelled, I thrust my handkerchief toward him.

He snatched it from me and blotted his mouth, snarling, "Oh, spare me your so-called apologies! Why should you care for the feelings of a miserable freak?"

"I have said that I am sorry for my words," I retorted with some heat. "I have not heard you say that you are you sorry for your action. Do you understand that the next time you strike me, whatever the provocation, I will leave you and I will never, ever come back? You will have to kill me to stop me; and then I will be revenged in the pain it will cost you if I die in your house, at your hands, which are beautiful and strong and that wish only to love me."

He stared down at the handkerchief clenched in his fingers, and I saw by the droop of his shoulders that the perilous moment was past. Still I forged recklessly onward, for my heart was in a turmoil of confused and painful emotion. "If you must hit something go and beat the couch cushions until your rage is spent. But never raise your hand to me again!"

In low tones he began, "Christine, I—"

"It is all your fault!" I burst out. "You should not have sung her music, the dead mother's music!"

"Ah," he said. "The dead mother's music."

I stiffened, seized with dread that I had exposed a weakness to him that he would savagely exploit. But he only raised his head and sang once more, unaccompanied and more gloriously than before, that same lofty music of the ghostly mother urging her daughter to sing.

"Now," he said afterward, "if you are moved to say cutting things to me, say them. I will endure it quietly."

My eyes stung, for the music had again affected me deeply. So had the realization that he of all men knew why it did so, for surely his own mother had been dead to him from the day she first saw his terrible face. In his way, he was offering a very handsome apology indeed.

I shook my head, not trusting my voice.

He nodded gravely. "Very good, your restraint is commendable. After all, Christine, it is our task to master the music, not to let the music master us. Now, let us begin again."

We began again.

Other crises arose, of course. His habitual cruelty and malice inclined him toward outrageous gestures of annoyance, as when I found him one afternoon preparing to burn alive a chorus girl's little poodle that he had lured away for the purpose. The animal's backstage yapping had disturbed an otherwise unusually good *Abduction from the Seraglio*.

I tore the matches from his unresisting hands. With my shawl I blotted as much lamp oil as I could from the dog's coat. Then I carried the terrified creature up to the appropriate dressing area and left it there, its muzzle still tied shut with Erik's handkerchief (the dog was not seen, or heard, at the Opéra again).

Returning, I found Erik in an agony of penitence, offering to drink lamp oil himself or to wear a tightly tied gag for as long as I wished, to redeem his transgression. He showed no remorse for the agonies he had meant to inflict on the dog and its owner, but he was deeply agitated at having once more nearly failed his promise to me, and in such a spectacular fashion.

I approved the gag as a fitting punishment. That night the Opéra Ghost cried like a cat into the layered thicknesses of cloth crushing his lips, while on my knees I ignited our own sweet-burning immolation.

Don't misunderstand: in music he was my master and would be my master still if he stood here now. His talent and learning were broad, discriminating, and seemingly inexhaustible. It was he who led me to the study which came to absorb me, of the sorts of chromatic and key shifts that irresistibly evoke powerful emotions in the listener.

But his violence was mine to rule, so long as I had the strength and the wit to command it, by the submission I had won from him with that first kiss.

Between us we sustained a steep pitch of passion despite the muting effects of familiarity, I think because of the time limit I had set. "Never repeat even the prettiest melody more than thrice at a go," my father used to say. "Knowing it must end enhances its beauty and prevents boredom in its hearers."

* * *

Domestic chores gave Erik's life a sense of normality; he yielded them only reluctantly to me. Nor did I wish to become his drudge.

However, his standards of housekeeping and cooking (two areas in which he had no talents whatsoever) were far below mine; and I did not expect him to wait upon me as he had when I was his guest. I had chosen a life (albeit a truncated one), not an escape.

We wrangled cautiously over household duties and came to a rough arrangement, with many exceptions and renegotiations as circumstances required. When his compositional impulse flagged, if he could not relieve his frustration by prowling the upper floors of the opera house, I did not hesitate to assign him extra chores down below. More than once I sent him out of the house with a dusty carpet, a beater, and instructions to vigorously apply the latter to the former.

Having had none of the normal social experience that matures ordinary people, he could behave very childishly. This lent him an air of perennial youthfulness at once attractive and extremely trying. His emotions, when tapped, poured from him like lava, and he had great difficulty mastering the molten flow once it began. Physical work, like the demands of operatic singing, helped to bleed off at least some of his ungovernable energy.

In our leisure time I ventured to inquire about his past. His answers surprised me. I had thought him an aristocrat, but his arrogance was that of talent, not of blood. He was the son of a master mason in Rouen. When he was still a child his parents had either given or sold him (he did not know which) to a

traveling fair.

As a young man he had ranged far and wide, living by his wits and his abilities as an artificer of ingenious structures and devices. He regaled me with tales of his exotic travels before he had settled in Paris, where, commanding some Turkish laborers (whose language he spoke) at work on Garnier's great opera house, he had secretly constructed his home in its bowels. He had always worn a kerchief over his nose and mouth "for the dust," but his workmen had been less interested in his hidden face than in the extra wages he had paid for their clandestine labor.

Given my knowledge of his character, I guessed that he omitted much repellent detail from these lively narratives. Though troubled I never pressed him, reasoning that such matters lay between him, the souls of those he had harmed, and God.

In my turn, I read aloud to him from the biographies and travel books that he favored, or repeated anecdotes of café life and gossip (no matter how stale) about composers and performers whose names he knew. I taught him some Swedish, a language of interest to him because of its strong tonal element, and he enjoyed hearing songs and legends of the northern lands, which he had never visited. As a child I had absorbed many tales, from folk tradition and from books, which now stood me in good stead. People raised in countries with long winters treasure stories and tell them well.

Outside of music, Erik was not so widely read as I had supposed. Many of the volumes on his shelves had only a few of their pages cut, for though he hungered for books he was impatient with their contents once he had them. In the first place, he was sure that he knew more about everything than anyone else did because he was a prodigy and well traveled in the world.

And then, he spent far more time roaming "his" opera house, or working on the various small mechanical contrivances that he was always inventing and refining, than he did reading. Indeed, he was in a continual ferment of activity of one kind or another, from the orbit of which I sometimes had to withdraw simply to rest myself.

I came to regard him as a flood of notes and markings falling in a tempestuous jumble upon the blank page of his life. He had instinctively tried to create order in himself through composing, with limited success: a well orchestrated life is not typified by ferocious obsessions and quixotic crimes. I believe he submitted to my scoring, as it were, in order to experience his own melody, in place of a ceaseless chaos of all but random noise.

Weeks and months passed, bringing our scheduled parting closer by increments almost too small to notice, and never spoken of. Even inadvertent allusions to my future departure sent Erik storming off to work on the darkest of his music, with its plunging, wheeling figures of mockery and despair.

It hurt me, that music. I think it hurt him. I never tried to sing any of it, nor, despite his previously stated intentions, did he ask me to.

In his opera, *Don Juan Triumphant*, Don Juan seduces an Archangel who helps him to master the Devil in Hell. From this position of power, the Don decrees a regime of true justice on Earth that wins over Heaven also to his side; whereupon God, dethroned, pulls down Creation in a mighty cataclysm in which all are swallowed up. A moral tale, then (as operas tend to be), the music and lyrics of which combined wild extremes of fury, yearning, and savage satire.

Of its quality, I will say this: Erik's music was magnificent but too radical to have been accepted, let alone admired, in its own time (as he often said himself). Some days, his raw, raging chords drove me out to walk beside the underground lake in blessed quiet. Some days I sat weak with weeping for the extraordinary beauty and poignancy of what I heard. His music offered nothing familiar, comforting, or merely pretty. Parisian audiences would not have stood it.

Nonetheless, he spent hours planning the premier of his opera, which he projected for the turn of the century. All the great men of the world would be invited, and all would come (or else). The experience would change their lives. The course of history itself would be altered for the better by Erik's music.

My lessons resumed soon after the night of *Lohengrin*. Erik taught me the rudiments of composition, which I spent many hours refining in practice. In particular, he had me sing and play my own alternate versions of musical figures from the works of the masters, by comparison with which I learned the measure of true genius (as well as the best direction of my own modest talents). This, he said, was how he had taught himself.

He was critical of men like Bizet, Wagner, Verdi, and Gounod, and fiercely envious of their fame. Yet he worked long and hard with me on their music, for he did not deny greatness when he heard it. At leisure, he would play Bach on the piano with a stiff but sure touch; and then his eyes often glittered with tears—of gratitude, I think, for the sublime *order* of that music.

It was a terror and a joy to sing for him. I have never known anyone to whom music was so all-absorbing, so demanding, and so painfully essential.

His vocal instruction was founded on carefully designed drill and on breathing techniques that he had learned in the Orient. Freed from constriction, my voice began to show its natural qualities. I saw that I might move from the bright but relatively empty *soubrette* repertoire to the lower-lying, richer, lyric roles. Erik agreed with my assessment.

"Your voice will darken as it ages," he said, "but you have the vocal capacity for some of the great lyric roles already, I can hear it. And the emotional capacity, too; you are not the child you were, Christine. Your Marguerite is much improved, and you will soon be ready to attempt Violetta."

Under his tutelage my range expanded downward with minimal loss of agility above, and I gained a certain sumptuosity of tone overall. I would hear myself produce a beautifully floated *pianissimo* and wonder how on earth I had done it.

Of course, the next day it was unattainable—these achievements torment singers by their evanescence. Erik would not permit me to overwork my voice striving to retake such heights. "Wait," he said. "Rest. It will come." About such things he was almost always right.

I bitterly missed performing in public with my improved skills. But in my heart I knew this sacrifice to be well suited to my collusion (however innocent) in Erik's most recent crimes, which he had committed at least in part on my behalf.

There was much that I was incapable of learning from him, for he was gifted with a degree of musicality that I simply did not possess. I came to prefer hearing him sing for me (as he did often, true to his promise) to producing the finest singing of which I myself was capable. One's most glorious tones are inevitably distorted out of true inside one's own head.

Also, I came to realize that I had a very good voice but not a great one. He said otherwise; but he was in love. And I think that, in his heart, he was well content to train up an exceptional voice that was still not quite as fine as his own.

For he sang like a god, with a beauty that cannot be imagined by those who never heard him. He had a tenor voice of remarkable power, flexibility, and range, which because of his superb musicianship was never merely, monotonously, perfect. I was reminded of descriptions I had read of the singing of the great *castrati* of the previous century.

Without apparent effort Erik produced long, flowing lines of thrilling richness, like molten gold pouring improbably from the mouth of a stony basilisk. Joyous, meditative, amorous, wild, or sad, his

singing enraptured me; I could not hear enough of it. As we worked together, he increased the bolder, rougher, more dramatic capabilities of his own voice, producing song expressive enough to pierce a heart of steel.

Or to calm a heart in panic. I had been prey to night terrors from an early age; when I cried out in my sleep Erik would come to me with a candle to remind me that I lived with a veritable walking nightmare of flesh, so how could I allow mere dreams to trouble me? Then he would sit by my bed and sing to me. Often he chose “Cielo e Mar,” from *Gioconda*, which he rendered with a tender serenity that soon sent me drifting off again.

How his moisture-spraying travesty of a mouth could produce song of such precision, versatility, and lustre, I never understood. He ought not even to have sung tenor; tall men are almost always baritones. But he was anomalous in so many respects that I gave up trying to account for him. Every time I heard him sing I reminded myself that from the first I had named him an angel.

Sometimes he talked of traveling together, singing for our supper like gypsies as each of us had in our youth. He was fascinated by the resemblances in our respective upbringings, I as a child-performer accompanying my peripatetic father, he as a circus freak astonishing audiences with feats of legerdemain and song, and, of course, with his shocking appearance.

But I saw the differences, which were stark.

My father was a country fiddler with no education, a hard drinker, and a fanatical gambler. He had not hesitated to exploit my pretty face and voice at the fairs, fine homes, and festivals where we performed. He played, I sang. Ours was not a sentimental relationship. Yet while he lived I never went hungry or found myself thrown naked upon the spiny mercies of the world.

Erik, expelled from his childhood home like a leper, had ranged the earth in the isolation to which his repulsive face condemned him. Escaping the circus he had traveled eastward, hiring his talents out to despots who half the time would have murdered him instead of paying him for his services, had he not outwitted them like some branded Odysseus. He had taken the name “Erik,” he said, because he liked its bold, Viking sound.

Occasionally, wondering how I had come to this strange new life, I fantasized that he and I were magical siblings, the ugly one and the pretty one, the “bad” one and the “good” one, joined at the soul by music. Parted early through mischance, we were now drawn close again—voluptuously, unlawfully close—by that indissoluble bond.

I did not share such fancies with Erik. He was stubbornly conventional about some things, family among them. But I was mated to a monster: what better occasion for my most perverse imaginings?

Erik’s own imaginings were far more dangerous.

One day when I called him to our noon meal, he sprang up from his writing desk and made me come sit down in his place. Pressing a pen into my hand and closing my fingers hard upon it, he tried to force me to shape letters on the blank page before me.

“Write,” he said harshly in my ear. “Surely there is some message you wish to send? Write to Raoul, at Chagny. You let him kiss you that night on the roof. Don’t you think about those expert kisses of his? Of course you do—you think of them when my clumsy mouth kisses you. Write and tell him, make him glad!”

The wildness of his accusations, the painful grip of his fingers on mine, and the palpable heat of jealous rage pouring off him all combined to scare me half out of my wits.

“Let me go!” I cried. I managed to raise my hand a little and fling the pen away. My arm knocked

down the inkwell, which fortunately was nearly empty and did not break.

Erik stooped to retrieve it, muttering furiously, "Now see what you have done!"

"See what *you* have done," I answered, still trembling. "You have raised your hand."

"Coward!" he spat. "I barely touched you!"

"Your words are blows, just as you intend them to be," I said. "I have told you what I will do if you abuse me."

"Go or stay, it is all the same!" he shouted. "Your promise is a sham! Do you think me such a fool? You lie in my arms and dream of your pretty Vicomte, and in your heart you mock me!"

His face was dark with hatred—hatred of *me*, for my power to cause him pain. It meant nothing that I intended him no ill and in truth had no such power, save what he himself assigned to me. I saw that I was lost, for his fury was fed not by any actions of mine but by his own inner demons, that only he could master.

Terror closed my throat; injustice drove me to speak.

"Now you have clenched your fist," I choked out. "Very well. Hit hard, Erik, punish the fraud you wrongly say I am. But strike to kill, for living or dead I shall be lost to you for good."

In his rage he may not have heard my words; but he heard their music (for it welled from the same dark sources as his own) and he could not help but stop and listen.

"*Why do you prevent me?*" He struck his fist hard upon his thigh. "It is the pretext you long for, the blow that will free you! Why do you thwart me? Why?"

Even as he spoke I saw the answer dawn upon him (as it dawned upon me at the same moment): that I did not wish to be freed, but to live out my commitment to the end.

The frenzied glare died from his face, leaving it pale and haggard. "Oh, Christine," he said. "Sometimes I imagine horrible things, and now I have nearly made them come true."

"Do you think you have not?" I said, savage in my turn. "I warned you!"

I did not truly mean to leave him, now that his fury was in retreat. But I did mean to hurt him, and I succeeded. He stared at me with a stricken look.

Then he cast himself down before me, stretched prostrate upon the floor in a posture of such limitless submission that in the West it is only ever displayed before God. At one stroke he had transformed himself from a cultured, willful man of my own world (albeit outcast in it) into a faceless beggar groveling before some barbarian conqueror or the lawless caprice of Fate.

It was a vertiginous moment, appalling, piteous, and thrilling. I longed to stoop at once, all merciful forgiveness, and lift him up again; or else to grind my heel into the nape of his neck until he writhed at my feet. Paralyzed, I stared down at him, scarcely breathing.

In a muffled voice he begged my pardon. I stammered that I would pardon him when I could, for he had wronged me very deeply. He accepted this, rising without a word and withdrawing from the room.

He would not look me in the face or touch even the sleeve of my dress afterward. Two dismal days passed thus. Then I bade him to my bed, where we fell desperately upon one another as if deprived for two years, not two nights.

Resting beside him while our hearts' tumult slowed, I said, "You were thinking of someone just now, Erik; who?"

“I thought of you,” he whispered. “There is no other.”

With the lightest touch I cupped my hand to his twisted cheek, encompassing as much as I could of what his mask normally concealed. “It is just the same for me. If you can believe me when I say so, then you are forgiven.”

He groaned and pressed his face blindly into my palm, wetting my fingers with his tears.

Raoul’s name was never spoken between us again.

Otherwise (and apart from his run-of-the-mill sulks and fits of spleen), Erik continued to show me the most constant and ardent regard. This was not as pleasant as it sounds. Worship from afar is flattering, but to be loved with consuming intensity by a person who lives cheek by jowl with all one’s frailties and failings is not only exhilarating but tremendously exhausting.

For my part, I continually reminded him what a triumph of character it was (his character as well as mine, since he managed for the most part to fulfill his side of our agreement) for me to keep my word and stay with him. Even when his deformity had acquired a strange beauty of its own in my eyes, I still called upon him (while we fervidly plundered each other’s bodies) as my disgusting incubus, my foul and greedy gargoyle, my lecherous ogre.

I must have been a wise child. I knew that love worthy of the name gives not what the beloved needs, but what the beloved wants.

What Erik needed was recognition of his full humanity, in spite of his repulsive looks and criminal behavior, from another human being who addressed him as an equal. What he *wanted* was to worship a woman exalted by both quality and attainment who could be repeatedly persuaded to descend to the level of his own base and hideous physicality, thus demonstrating again and again her exceptional love for him.

As for me, I exulted in each leap from my pedestal. What lesser achievement could be worth such a plunge into the bestial, ecstatic depths?

Well, we were opera folk. Only extremes would do.

So I continued to merit his devotion and my own self-respect, despite and because of the fact that I lived for that shudder of delicious horror when he laid his hand on me, and the exquisite creeping of my skin into tiny peaks at the touch of his wet, misshapen lips. In my eager body he took his revenge many times over on all the well made men in the world. I suppose I had my vengeance too, although I do not know upon whom.

Perhaps I harp on this “distasteful” subject. Perhaps I should refer more circumspectly to the craving of my ghastly Caliban for the delights of the flesh. Or is Caliban’s craving acceptable but not his gratification? And what of *my* desires and delights? I can guess what Raoul de Chagny would have said had I begged of him certain kisses thought in his world to be proper only between men and their whores.

Between the Opéra Ghost and myself nothing was “proper” or “improper.” “Morality” meant my dictum that he must not express his artistic judgment by murdering people who annoyed him.

For the rest, we consumed each other with willful abandon, two starvelings at a feast.

* * *

After an early phase of keeping me close (I had expected this and endured it patiently), he began to open his world to me. He showed me the trapdoors and passages he used to get quietly about the Opéra. The Phantom patrolled “his” theatre often, omnipresent, watchful, and intensely critical of all that

occurred there. He seemed pleased that I found my own uses for his private pathways.

He routinely helped himself to fresh clothes from the costume racks, altering garments to fit and returning them to be cleaned with the rest (the wardrobe mistress, grown weary of constantly undoing his tailoring, now left a selection of clothing at the very back of the racks to be worn only by the Opéra Ghost).

Taking a leaf from his book, I filched the more tattered costumes of the little chorus and ballet rats, mended them in my leisure time (for I had been taught that idleness is both wasteful and a sin), and stealthily returned them again.

The Opéra girls, struggling along in their difficult and demanding world, took to leaving chocolates for their “good fairy” as well as the occasional pretty ribbon or fresh-cut bloom. If they guessed my secret, they kept it.

I pitied their passions and their pains. They had no potent Angel of Music to inspire and encourage them. There was only one such being, and he devoted himself to me alone.

In time Erik ventured outside with me. I always wore a veil and he went masked and covered in cloak and wide-brimmed hat. Some evenings he would hire a carriage and take me driving in the Bois de Boulogne to hear the gypsy music played in the restaurants there. Or we would take a night train out of town for a country walk. An eager amateur astronomer, he taught me to recognize not only the constellations but many stars by name.

In the city we spent fine evenings strolling the *grandes boulevards*. We even attended, anonymous in costume, the lavish masquerade balls given at the Opéra itself, although for us these were not precisely *social* occasions.

We always came late, and left early to avoid the midnight supper after the gala. As we danced together in the crush or looked on from some quieter vantage point, Erik would murmur in my ear a stream of comments on the flirtations, machinations, and vendettas that he claimed to observe transpiring around us. These vitriolic, often scurrilous remarks always made me laugh, despite my resolve not to encourage the exercise of his more malevolent humor.

On our first anniversary he gave me my own key to the iron gate of the passage to the Rue Scribe. I made frequent use of it, for living as we did we needed time out of each other’s company.

Most of the daily marketing he did himself, being very pleased with his skill at passing unremarked (as he imagined) among ordinary folk. Closely muffled even in warm weather, he was not, I am sure, so inconspicuous as he thought. But he was both proud and jealous of his self-sufficiency, and I took care not to intrude upon it. He often returned with a gift for me—a book of poetry, a pair of gloves, a pretty bit of Meissen, or fresh flowers.

For my part, I brought back reports of the day and what occurred in it, and perhaps a colorful poster to replace one of the dreary pictures on his walls, a book from the stalls along the Seine, or a box of the little sweet meringues that he loved.

I took upon myself the task of posting the mail. I wrote to no one, but Erik was an enthusiastic, if menacing, correspondent to whoever caught his attention in the world of music. We attended most Opéra performances, seated in a sort of blind he had built in the shelter of a large, carved nymph on the wall (I always noted with a pang the strangers seated in Raoul’s old box). Afterward, Erik often addressed pages of venomous criticism to the managers, the newspapers, and to composers and artists as well.

Many of these missives I intercepted. But sometimes he mailed a letter himself while he was out, for

there were occasional replies to be picked up addressed to “Erik Rouen,” *Poste Restante*. He did not share their contents with me.

We were always replenishing our stocks of candles and coal oil; it took great quantities of fuel to heat and light Erik’s home. He could well afford it; we lived on the spoils of years of extortion from the Opéra managers. In fact, by means of threats enforced by ingenious acts of sabotage, Erik had accumulated a small fortune.

He exhibited a lordly carelessness about money, mislaying sizable sums with evident unconcern; but in the normal course of things he spent modestly on books, wine, and other minor luxuries. It was apparent that he had extracted large payments from the managers primarily to demonstrate his power over them. Thus, I was always free to draw what cash I needed for my errands abroad.

Herbs and medicines were staples on my shopping list. Erik was prey to recurrent fevers contracted during his youthful travels, and to other ailments stemming perhaps from distortion of his internal organs. He had learned, of necessity, to doctor himself.

A deformity of the pelvic bones affected his carriage and his gait. His sinewy body was prodigiously strong, but the strain of holding himself straight and moving with a fluidity not natural to him caused him severe muscular tension and cramping. To quell his most intractable pains I kept a supply of laudanum, which he hated because it clouded his mind; but he accepted it from me when all else failed.

Thinking to help ease his lesser, chronic discomforts, I brought home one day an almond-scented rubbing oil. But I had hardly begun gliding my slippery palms down the long muscles on either side of his spine when he began to tremble, then to shake with dreadful, racking sobs. I was bewildered that I could have hurt him so. My touch was light, and in any case he was normally stoical, being accustomed to chronic aches and pains.

Now he gasped, “No, don’t!” and twisted desperately away. He sat rocking and crying, his clenched hands wedged tight between his knees as if to prevent even his own touch on his body.

This was not pain. It was grief.

I saw that while in my bed sheer lust carried him triumphant on its tide, the everyday intimacy of casual contact was more than he could bear. Even as an infant he must have been rarely *touched* by anyone, let alone touched kindly. The undemanding pressure of my hands had wakened in him the vast, deep-rooted anguish of that irremediable loss.

I could no more withstand this upwelling of sorrow—a child’s sorrow, ravaging a man’s body—than he could. All childhoods leave scars. Old hurts of my own throbbed in bitter sympathy with his. I fled to walk by the lake, filled with impotent rage against the common cruelty and indifference of humankind. And I cursed my own deficiency in that same cruelty and indifference; placed as I was, how much pity could *I* afford?

But I could not let the matter rest. The next day, with great difficulty, I persuaded him to let me try again on the understanding that he must stop me when his emotions threatened to overpower him. He did so, saying in a strained whisper, “Thank you, Christine!” Persevering in this fashion we extended his endurance to well over an hour at a time. Rubbing him down became a welcome routine for which I searched out fine oils and salves in my forays above ground.

It was strange, how the slow, wordless process of kneading the knots and torsions out of his muscles wove a spell of peace over us both. In those placid hours of mute, almost animal tranquility nothing was to be heard but our breathing, mine effortful and deliberate, his marked by the occasional painful gasp or deep, surrendering sigh.

I had no great experience at massage, and, as I discovered, no healing gift. I could soothe and sweeten, but I could not mend. Yet in the attentive handling of his gnarled and canted body I could express my tenderer feelings without putting myself at his mercy, which quality I knew to be in short supply and that unreliable at best.

Abroad alone in the noisy streets, I looked at the tradesmen bustling about their business, the ladies with their parasols or their muffs, the swaggering gentlemen swinging their canes, the very sparrows pecking the pavements; and I considered escape. Once or twice I thought I saw Raoul, but this was only fancy. Nor did I need his help, nor anyone's.

At any time I might have betrayed Erik to the authorities. Or I might have silently slipped away with enough of his money to buy my passage back to Sweden, or to anywhere.

But what could it mean to wander freely in the wide, inhospitable world, when the dark angel whose life I shared owned all Paris at night? How could drawing room wit or the giggling gossip of friends rival the joy of spinning melody out of empty air, with Erik standing rapt like some lightning-struck Titan, or else raising his awful head to embrace my song and lift it with his own supple and ravishing voice?

Whenever I seriously contemplated flight, I had only to remind myself that beyond the Rue Scribe gate I was just another woman going about her domestic business. In the house under the Opéra, I was someone potent enough to raise fallen Lucifer into the splendor of Heaven, again and again. Underground, we soared.

And I had given my word.

I cannot pretend to know all that he felt. My absences seemed to increase his attachment to me. Perhaps the risk brought him to the sharpened edge of life, reminding him of his own younger, more adventuresome years. Surely he dreaded that one day I would fly for good, lured by some stranger's wholesome beauty. It need not be Raoul. Any man was handsomer than Erik.

Often he followed me clandestinely through the streets. I made no objection. I had observed how lovers of pretty singers imagined treachery where there was none. So long as Erik could see for himself how I comported myself when I was abroad "alone," he would be better able to hold his fears and suspicions in check.

I always knew he had been tracking me when he questioned me upon my return: whom had I seen or spoken to; by what route had I gone to the stationer's? At my answers (which he knew by his own furtive observation to be true) he exuded such a vibrancy of relief and joy that my own heart was invariably lightened.

But I wondered sometimes whether it was right and good to make him happy, for by any sane standard he was a wicked man.

I could not deny that it gratified me deeply to dissolve his rages, griefs, and anxieties into something approaching, and sometimes far exceeding, contentment. My doing so made my life with him pleasanter, of course; but beyond that, such ease as I could grant him seemed all the sweeter in the giving for being completely gratuitous.

Was I, then, wicked too? I went into a church one damp afternoon and prayed for guidance on this point. As usual in my experience, none was forthcoming, so I used the time to assess my spiritual situation, and, insofar as it was perceptible to me, his.

All that I had been taught told me that in due course God must condemn Erik to the torments of Hell. Pardon would be outrageous: apart from all else, what of Joseph Buquet, whose murder cried out to

Heaven? Or the woman crushed beneath the counterweight, which Erik had thrown down in a fit of piqué? “Thou shalt not kill”; having made that law, God must surely punish a murderer.

Not being God, however, I could do otherwise, like disobedient Eve. I already had: I had comforted the wicked, and gladly.

As I saw it, I could repent of my error and henceforth grudgingly yield up only the bare minimum of my promise. Or I could willfully continue to offer to Erik, for whom life in this world was already Hell and always had been, the fullest, richest measure of solace that I had power to confer.

This latter course, for good or ill, was the one I chose. How could I not, when it might be all the mercy there is?

That evening he sat behind me brushing my hair as I read aloud from the *Revue Musicale* about a new production of *Tristan and Isolde*. He interrupted me to remark on how my long tresses glowed in the lamplight; had I taken off my hat and veil to enjoy the sunshine, chancing recognition and exposure?

“It was raining,” I said. “I spent much of the day sheltering in a church, and, of course, I kept my hat on. But the softened air is doubtless healthy for the hair even so.”

With a sigh he pressed his naked face to the back of my neck. My blood leaped, and he knew; he always did. He began to stroke my skin, tracing with slow fingertips the beat of that thick pulse which shook me softly from root to crown.

“How can you give up the freedom of the day,” he murmured, his breath hot along my nape, “and come back to this dim grave where neither sunlight nor rain ever falls?”

What could I answer that he did not already know? Wordless, I leant my throat into his hand, the warm, muscular, bloodstained hand of the Minotaur of the Opéra labyrinth.

“But I forget,” he added in low and husky tones, “you are a northern girl and used to darkness from your childhood. Turn and kiss your darkness, Christine; he loves and misses you.”

The sun’s finest glories—its corona and its great, flaring prominences—only show when the moon eclipses it completely; he had told me that. I meant to remind him of it as he bent close over me, shrouding my face in his shadow. But I had already given up my mouth and my breath, and later, I forgot.

Another time, having been delayed an hour past when I had said I would be back, I found unlocked the door to the gunpowder room (which he had planned to blow up, obliterating himself along with the Opéra and everyone in it, if I had refused him). While I was gone he must have paced among the neatly stacked little barrels of death, goading the sleeping demon of his fury to make sure it was still alive and purposeful in case I failed to reappear.

I did not become pregnant. God cannot admire brainlessness in his creatures to whom he has gone to the trouble to give very good brains indeed. In all likelihood Erik was sterile, like most sports of Nature. Still, I regularly used certain preparations to subdue my fertility as best I might. Erik agreed wholeheartedly with this practice. He said he had no wish to foist the horrors of his own childhood off on some poor newcomer. Nor, I believe, did he wish to share my attention with a helpless and demanding infant.

We did quarrel sometimes, as couples do. The newspapers were a constant provocation, for Erik’s political views were barbaric.

I maintained that the world would benefit from rather more kindness and mutual care than from less, as he himself had good reason to know. He espoused brutal notions of social order, supporting his opinions with blood-curdling accounts of punishments and tortures he had seen on his travels. As men

are both wicked and foolish, he said, they must have priests to make them penitent and kings to keep them obedient, and the harsher the better.

Sometimes he mocked my “naïveté” and “tenderheartedness” so pitilessly that I left the room in tears. It always ended in his kissing my hands and begging a penance for having upset me; but his Draconian ideas never changed.

He deplored the new freedom of the press from government censorship yet devoured news of sensational crimes, which excited his most wrathful responses: “Listen to this, Christine! A watercarrier in Montmartre has beaten his infant daughter to death, having first burnt her in the kitchen fire. He threw her body into a bucket of slops and went to sleep in his bed. The French working man is the only brute beast in the world with the vote!”

Looking up from my sewing I replied as steadily as I could, “Then what a good thing that now, by law, his surviving children must go to school where they can learn to be less brutal than their father and to use their votes intelligently.”

“You cannot teach an ass to sing,” he said scathingly, casting the newspaper down at his feet. “Republicanism is no more than government by brutes representing brutes.”

I could not resist answering. “Yet some say that poor people are better off now, and that your ‘brutes’ do no worse than all the monarchs and dictators France has had in this century.”

“Precisely the problem!” he said triumphantly. “There has been no political stability since the Terror, and there never will be so long as the mob is encouraged in rebellion. Without public order no nation can prosper, but your common man hates nothing so much as the rule of law.”

I said, “Can you speak of the ‘rule of law’?”

Bending upon me a very knowing and ironic glance he said, “Why, I think I know a little about it.”

I saw that he referred to the rule of *my* law that he had accepted over his own conduct; and I had no ready answer.

He nodded approvingly. “Good, you had best not argue further. You are a fine student of music, but careless and ill-informed when it comes to other matters.”

“I do the best I can,” I responded, “having little education except in music.”

“Weak,” he said, “a very weak answer, Christine. But you are of the weaker sex, so I suppose I must allow it; which is how your weakness weakens me.” He held up his hand to check my objection. “This is implicit in our bargain, by which you secured the right to wind me ’round your little finger. I make no complaint. But do not imagine your authority to be absolute, however compliantly I may bend to your will; I am an ugly man, not a stupid one.”

“Erik,” I said, “you know perfectly well that the last word I would ever apply to you is ‘stupid.’ Will you tell me plainly what you mean?”

“No more than I have said,” he replied, and with that he got up and returned, humming to himself, to a project which he had recently begun behind locked doors.

A few days after this exchange, he invited me to accompany him to the public execution of a convicted murderer outside La Roquette Prison. I accepted. I had never witnessed this degrading spectacle but felt that I was sworn to share Erik’s life as fully as I might. And I did not like him saying that I was weak.

As we joined the crowd of spectators (which was dismayingly large for such a happening, and on such a cold dawn), someone hissed, “Look, Death-mask is here!” and they all drew aside before us. Erik strode the path thus made for him with princely hauteur, and I saw people reach furtively to touch his

cloak as he passed. We ended much nearer to the guillotine than I wished to be.

Of what followed, the less said the better. The curious can still see such things for themselves.

My companion offered no comfort. Erik's scorn for the doomed criminal, the presiding officials, and the watching crowd was boundless, his approval of the execution itself unclouded by any hint of empathy or horror. He clearly did not imagine himself pinned beneath the roaring blade, for all that he was guilty of extortion, two killings at least, and, I was sure, much else.

On the way home, profoundly distressed by what we had witnessed, I said accusingly that the people had seemed to know him there as if by his repeated presence.

"Yes, the habitués see me often," he replied, his mask gleaming pale as bone in the dimness of the carriage. "But they do not know me. No one knows me but you, Christine."

"Yet I *do not* know," I said, "why you join the mob you profess to despise in this depraved and disgusting diversion!"

"To see done such justice as is to be had in this world," he said, "and to remind myself what death is. Also, I like to think that my presence lends some distinction to the proceedings. They miss me when I am absent, and sometimes call upon the executioners to wait a little in case I am only delayed."

I never discovered whether he was joking about this. He was fully capable of it.

After that I always went with him to La Roquette. I never grew used to it; yet I went. The satisfaction he took in these gruesome displays forced me to acknowledge that subjection of his crueler impulses to my ban was not the same thing as change in his own character. It is very tempting to overestimate one's own influence upon another when it is passion that binds you to one another.

It must also be said that disdaining everyone equally, Erik did not share the common prejudices of the time. He did not hate the English or the Germans more than citizens of other nations, and he taught me to recognize the ingrained anti-Semitism of the French (which I had taken for granted) for the spiteful, willful ignorance that it was and is.

But he was no champion of the downtrodden; his sympathies were reserved entirely for himself. He frequently worked up a keen resentment over the availability to others of advantages that he had never enjoyed. There was nothing to do but wait out these moods of bitter self-pity.

Nor could I persuade him away from the vengefulness his life had taught him. Given the nature of that life, it was perhaps arrogant of me to have tried.

As for the secret project conducted behind locked doors, it proved to be his gift to me that Christmas. I gave him a dressing gown sewn of velvet patches I had cut from discarded costumes. He gave me a replica in miniature of the Taj Mahal that he had carved and painted in wood. He had once visited that monument to lasting love and had examined and memorized every detail, an adventure in itself that he recounted zestfully to me over our holiday meal.

Indeed, a whole lifetime of hitherto unshared incident was lavished upon me during my years with him, like fine wine eagerly poured only for my delectation and delight.

Had I been older and more experienced, I might have tried to reply in kind. This would have been an error. He did not need *apart* from me, having a rather over-rich one of his own. It was my *present* that he desired, all the immediate hours and days that I had promised him. And these I gave with open hands.

No doubt some would rather hear that we fought incessantly, that I tired of him or he of me, that we failed each other and parted in mutual hatred and disillusion. Had we lived in some suburb or narrow

street of Paris, or worse yet on some grand boulevard, we might have come to that. Many marriages are stoven and sunk on the rocks of Parisian life.

Now and again he reminded me that he had intended for us to vacate the Opéra cellars and lead a “normal” life like everybody else. I was always quick to point out that he was not in the least like everybody else, and for that matter, on the evidence at hand, neither was I; and eventually these objections ceased.

* * *

As the end of our time together drew near, he became markedly morose and irritable. I saw that he was already grieving.

For my part, I walked through the streets and squares in the chilly rain and fitful sun of that last winter chafing unbearably for my freedom, now that it loomed so close. More than once I nearly flung the key to the Rue Scribe gate into the Seine. I longed to be borne quietly away on some gliding river-barge, empty-handed and friendless perhaps, but bound by no pledge or passion.

At the same time I struggled to find some way to extend my life with Erik, for I could not imagine a life without him. Restless and distraught, I thought of every possibility a hundred times over and rejected them all as many times.

It seemed to me that any meddling with the deadline I had set would undercut and cheapen all that we had achieved together, making a liar of me and a fool of him. With our mutual respect thus diminished, sooner or later our hard-won mastery of ourselves must decline into a wretched and debasing struggle for mastery of each other.

Moreover, I had first pledged myself to him in ignorance; now I knew the enormity of the task, and the thoughtless self-confidence of youth was spent. How much longer could I trust myself to be bold enough, quick enough, steady enough, my instincts true enough, for both of us?

Whole lifetimes spun out in my mind as I searched for a different conclusion. But I could find nothing acceptable other than to keep to the terms of our bargain. It is when Faust tries to fix the transient moment beyond its natural term, saying, “Stay, thou art fair!” that he is lost.

I wandered miserably through Erik’s rooms, touching papers and furniture and books when what I ached to do was to touch him, to press him close with feverish possessiveness. I often felt his gaze upon me now, scalding with similar, unspoken anguish.

He now began to suffer odd spells of lassitude, sitting for long periods with the newspaper in his hands yet scarcely turning a page, his face as white as marble and his forehead moistly gleaming. My questions about the nature of this unwonted fatigue were met with withering rebuffs. But when I came upon him mixing up a dose of laudanum for himself, I demanded an explanation. He admitted that for some time he had been experiencing severe pains in his teeth.

The condition must have begun years before. Still, I blamed myself. If I had not got in the habit of bringing down the dainties left me by the dancers and chorus girls, he might not have indulged so immoderately his taste for sweets.

Now abscesses had developed, this much I could determine; and I was very worried. But Erik flatly refused to go to a dentist, who must of necessity see his face. So these sieges of toothache came and went, borne by him with his customary fortitude.

We continued our studies although I was in poor voice, being easily brought to tears by emotional music (and there is no other kind in opera). The last piece which he sang through for me was “Why do you wake me?” from *Werther* (we had been discussing the French insistence upon verbal articulation at

the expense of beauty of tone when singing in that language).

At the end, he rose abruptly from the piano and clapped shut its lid. The spell of Werther's plaint was cut off as if Erik had cracked the neck of a living thing between his hands.

"When you know that I am dead," he said, "—and I will make certain that you learn of it, Christine—I beg you to come back here to bury me. I hope you will continue to wear my ring until that time, when I ask that you be good enough to return it to me with your prayers before you cover me over."

He meant his mother's ring, a wreath of tiny flowers in pale gold which I had worn since the night of *Lohengrin*. I turned the ring on my finger, trying to take comfort from the fact that he spoke as though he meant to go on living in my absence. But living in what manner? I could no longer avoid that question, which had been burning in my thoughts.

"When I have gone, will you keep to your promise to be good?"

"Why should I?" he growled, shooting me an evil look. Then he quoted the monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (a book he had read many times over by the look of its pages), " 'Misery made me a fiend. Make me happy and I shall again be virtuous.' "

My heart pounded. Suddenly we stood at the edge of a precipice. "Erik, you gave your word!"

"I am not some titled nobleman," he sneered. "I have no honor to preserve."

I said, "You wrong yourself to say so. You have held to our agreement as only an honorable man would."

He turned away without replying, dabbing at his mouth with his handkerchief, and fell to moodily rearranging the porcelain flowers on their shelf. I heard every tiny tick and brush of sound of these small actions, for I was listening harder than I ever had in my life. In my mind a cowardly voice said, *Fool, have you forgotten that he is a monster? Look at him! He will never let you go! You should have fled when you had the chance!*

"So you think I have behaved honorably?" he said at length, his back still turned to me. "Well, if I have I am sorry for it."

Stung out of my fearful reverie I answered heatedly, "You have no right to be! You have been happier these past years than most men are in a lifetime. Deny it if you can!"

"I do not deny it!" He swung sharply 'round to face me, eyes inflamed and hands clenched at his sides. "For pity's sake, Christine, must I beg? *Don't leave*. I love you. I need you. Stay with me!"

I had been braced for sarcasm and threats; this naked entreaty pierced me through. I shook my head, unable to speak.

"Set new terms, make any rules you like," he urged. "I will keep to them, you know I can!"

"No," I said, "no, Erik. It is time for you to see how you get along without your Angel of Conscience. I want my freedom, which I have won fairly."

He stared at me with those burning eyes. The walls of his house pressed in upon me like dungeon walls and I felt a fierce passion for my liberty, sparked by the dread of losing it again before ever regaining it. In my fear, I hated him.

He said, "What if I say you must return to live here with me for six months of every year? It is a nice, classical solution."

"It is no solution at all!" I cried, my mouth as dry as ashes.

"I don't care." His voice rose toward the loss of control that I—and perhaps he, too—dreaded. "I want *more*!"

"Erik," I said, with all the steadiness I could command, "you are above all a musician, and musicians know better than anyone that at some point there *is* no 'more'—no more beats to the measure, no more notes to the phrase, no more loudness or softness or purity or vibrato—or else music becomes mere noise, incoherent, worthless, and ugly."

I saw him flinch, as I did, inwardly, but he said nothing.

"You know this to be true," I finished desperately.

Of course he knew it. On this principle was based all his instruction and all our achievement together, and I saw him trapped and struggling in his own inescapable awareness of it. I wished to Heaven that he had been wearing his mask, for it was torture to watch his face.

At length he said bitterly, "You have had too good a teacher." He shielded his eyes with his hand, as he did when he wished to listen closely to my singing without visual distraction. "Have you been happy here, Christine?"

"I have been happy," I answered. "I am not happy at this moment, but *I have* been happy."

"Well, that is a good thing," he said in that same bleak and distant tone, still keeping his eyes hidden from me; and I went away to weep my tears of victory alone.

We spent those last nights stroking and kissing one another between fitful sleeps, pressed so tight together that we bruised each other. He stayed till the mornings in my bed instead of withdrawing to his own room. I would have held him back had he tried to go, but once he slept I quickly put the candle out. I dared not look long at his face, open and unguarded in sleep (his utmost, cleverest plea and offering), for fear that my resolve would crumble to nothing.

He was a wise child too, but I was wiser. I had learned how to defend us from each other and protect us from ourselves.

A week before I was to leave I came in from a long, troubled walk and saw him slumped at his writing desk. When I spoke to him, he answered faintly in a language that I did not know. Alarmed, I hurried to him and caught hold of his arm to bring him to himself again.

Involuntarily, my hand flew back: his whole body quaked with massive, deep-seated shudders. At my touch he collapsed, seized by such violent chills that I thought he was having convulsions.

I held him close to keep him from injuring himself and to warm him as best I could; and because I had to do something and could think of nothing else. When the shaking subsided, I helped him to his bed. I saw that the infection in his jaws had attacked again with terrifying virulence: his face was swollen, his skin was searingly hot, and it was evident that he did not know me.

In his first lucid moment I implored him to let me fetch a doctor. He was adamant against it, made me swear to bring no one, and would not be persuaded otherwise by anything I said.

He had committed no crimes since my taking up residence with him, of that I am certain; but he still had old deaths to answer for, and he was absolutely unwilling to risk exposure to the claims of the law. Perhaps now he could imagine his own goblin-head under the blade at La Roquette, before the greedy eyes of the crowd.

I imagined it; and I could not bear the thought.

So I nursed him as best I could, with drugs, folk remedies, and treatments which I found described in the medical texts on his shelves. It was not enough.

He had no pain, the nerves in his teeth being destroyed by then, but fever devoured him before my eyes. He ate nothing and kept down little of the medicines I prepared for him. At last he sank into a heavy sleep from which he rarely roused.

Late one afternoon he said, "I am so thirsty, Christine; the Devil is coming for me, and his fires are very hot!"

"No," I said, "God is coming to apologize to you for your afflictions. It is His burning remorse that you feel."

"What angel shall I send to comfort and befriend you when I am gone?" he asked. "The Angel of Death?"

"Don't talk, it only tires you." I poured him some water, spilling more than went into the cup.

"Never mind," he muttered when he had taken a few dribbling sips, "that angry angel has not done my bidding for some time now. But I should curse you somehow before I die."

"Curseme?" I cried. "Oh, Erik, why?"

His febrile gaze fastened hungrily upon my face. "Because you will be alive and abroad in the world, and I will be dead, down here. Your hair will glow like polished chestnuts in the sunlight when at last you throw off your hat and veil. If I had had such hair, I would have ventured onto the stage despite everything. With careful makeup, would it have been so bad?"

"I hate my hair!" I said. "I'll cut it off."

"It will grow back," he answered dreamily. "As many times as you cut it, it will grow back more beautiful than ever, for the delight of other men."

I answered, "Well, go on and curse me, then!" But other words echoed in my thoughts: *I will not let thee go, unless thou bless me*. Fresh, amazing tears flooded my eyes; I had thought myself drained dry as the Gobi by then.

"Oh, don't cry," Erik said with feeble exasperation. "What have you to cry about? You have won all, for now I cannot fail my promise. Look, I will make you another: should this 'honor' you have required of me earn me a few hours' respite from Hell, I will spend them singing for you. Stop and listen sometimes and you may hear me." Then he exclaimed, "My opera! Where is my *Don Juan*?"

He struggled to sit up, gazing around the candle-lit room with that huge-pupiled stare which I remembered from my father's deathbed. It is an unmistakable look, and seeing it again all but drove the heart right out of me.

"Your work is safe," I rushed to assure him. "I will get it published—"

"No, no," he broke in, with some force. "Leave it. I have told you, that music is not for this epoch. You will not let them come picking and clucking over my miserable carcass, will you? Be as kind toward my music. Bury it with me; bury it all."

He caught my hand and pressed it to his malformed cheek, and only when I agreed to do as he asked did he release me. Then he sank back, white-faced and panting, on his pillows. I saw that his time was near, and that he knew it.

"Let me at least fetch you a priest," I said, for I knew that he had been born into a Catholic household.

He said, "What for? I would only frighten him to death, adding to my burden of sins. You be my priest, Christine."

So I lay down beside him in his bed, and he breathed new, horrific details of his past into my ear. I told

him that I had no power to absolve him, but that if he truly repented of the evil he had done he must surely be forgiven.

He said, “Just *listen*, Christine.” So I did; though I dozed through much of this grim catalog, being very tired by then.

The chiming fugue of his clocks all striking woke me (it was eight at night). I opened my eyes to find him quietly watching me, his face—that freakish face which was now better known to me than my own—mere inches from mine. His lips were crusted from the fever and his poisoned breath fouled the air between us.

“Good, you are awake in time to see a wonder,” he whispered. “This hideous monster, the Phantom of the Opéra, will make himself vanish before your very eyes; and before the eyes of everyone else there will appear, as if out of nowhere, a beautiful young woman of passion, talent, and valiant character.”

I said something, “Oh, don’t,” or “Please.” It makes no difference what I said.

His eyelids drooped and the shallow rasping of his breathing grew more regular. Unable to keep my own aching eyes open, I slept. At some later point I heard him remark in a surprised and drowsy tone, “Do you hear birds singing, Christine? Imagine, songbirds, in a cellar! Open a door, let them out.”

That night he died.

Left alone with the cooling remains of the singular creature with whom I had spent a lifetime’s passion in a handful of incandescent years, I thought I would die myself. I wished that I might, stretched out beside his corpse in that damp and fetid bed with its curtains of fresh forest green.

In a while I rose, and found that I could scarcely bear to look at him. Absent the faintest animation, his face was a repulsive parody of a human face in a state of ruin and decay. I closed his eyes and set his mask in place to hide the worst.

I said no prayers then; I was too angry and too weary and could barely drive myself to do what needed doing. I washed him and dressed him in the formal attire that he had always favored and put the ring of little flowers on his finger.

My choice would have been to turn him adrift on the lake in his boat, a hundred candles flaming on the thwarts; or to build him a pyre on the bank, like Shelley’s pyre. But by then I was exhausted from tending to him, from grief, and from the not inconsiderable labor of preparing his lifeless body for its last rest.

So, with strength drawn from I know not where, I disposed him decently upon his fresh-made bed with his musical manuscripts piled ’round him as he had wished. I covered him with his opera cloak and used the patchwork robe that I had given him to cushion his head. Against his lunar skin the velvet folds glowed rich and deep, like a sumptuous setting for some pale, exotic gem.

Seeing his face so remote and stony on that makeshift pillow, I understood that we touched no longer, he and I. We sped on invisible, divergent trajectories, driven farther apart by every passing instant. Nothing remained to keep me there.

In a trance of exhaustion I packed a few belongings and keepsakes, left the underground house, and tripped the concealed triggers he had shown me. A long, deep thundering sound followed, and I tasted stone-dust in the air.

Panic flooded me: how like him it would be, to contrive beforehand to bring the whole Paris Opéra crashing down in ruins upon his grave!

But all was as he had told me, according to his design: granite blocks placed within the walls rumbled

down into their chiseled beds, sealing off every entrance and air-shaft of the Phantom's home. Erik slept in a tomb more secure than Pharaoh's pyramid.

I paced beside the underground lake, spent and weeping. Now I prayed. I was afraid for him. Apart from everything else, if he had somehow willed himself to die then that was the sin of suicide, which grows from the sin of despair.

Yet this possibility is implicit in every strong union. Someone departs first, and the one left behind decides whether to die, or to stay on awhile chewing the dusty flavor of words like "desolate," and "bereft."

In the end, fearing that somebody had heard the noise or felt the reverberations and was even now descending through the cellars to investigate, I roused myself to the final task of sinking the little boat in the lake. Then I let myself out by the Rue Scribe gate for the last time, five years and eleven days from the night of my debut in *Faust*.

Rain had fallen overnight; puddles gleamed on the cobblestones. A draggled white cat sheltering in a doorway watched me go.

* * *

Of my life since there is little to tell. My aged guardian having died, I was able to make arrangements to live quietly in Paris under my own name. Hardly anyone remembered the Phantom of the Opéra and the deeds attributed to him, for great cities thrive on novelty and their citizens' memories are short (that is why M. Leroux felt free to publish his nonsense later on).

I tried to avoid knowledgeable or inquisitive people. To those who knew me I said that I had been driven away by the family of a noble admirer, and had been singing since in opera houses in distant lands (Raoul, I learned, had emigrated to America in the spring of 1881, shortly after my own disappearance).

While reestablishing myself I found I could live well enough. During my years underground I had had published a number of vocal pieces under my father's name. I continued to sell new compositions, and drew investment income as well from the remains of Erik's fortune.

But singing on the stage again disappointed me. My own voice seemed dull, and audiences—no matter how they applauded—even duller. Without an edge of fear and a need for approval, no singer can bring an audience, or a performance, to life. Having resumed my career with some success, I retired early and advertised for students. I found that I loved teaching and did it well.

Thus, I did not go on to become a great diva (one whose name has quietly dropped out of operatic history); sometimes I regret this, most often I do not. Must a life be so publicly celebrated to be accounted worthy? Besides, I had already been distinguished enough by Fate for a hundred lifetimes, even if that distinction was unknown to anyone, now, but myself. How I relished my ordinary days, my calmly unexceptional nights!

Rejoicing daily in my freedom, I was nonetheless lonelier than I could bear all by myself. I took comfort where I could; there are good men from that time of whom I still think fondly. But none ever came to me trailing the clouds of sinister and turbulent glory in which the Opéra Ghost had enfolded me.

During the Great War I volunteered as a nurse. Not surprisingly, I dealt calmly with the most frightful facial wounds. Erik's awful countenance would not have been out of place on those wards, just as his music would suit perfectly the emerging character of the new century. Perhaps he was a true phantom after all, as well as a brilliant, cruel, afflicted man: a phantom of this brilliant, cruel, afflicted future.

My hospital work brought me to the admiring attention of a doctor several years my junior, and I married late in life for the first time, or so it seemed. The marriage was good, being founded in the shared trials and mutual respect of wartime service. To the day he died, René never knew the truth of my life before. If God holds that deception against me, I stand ready to answer for it along with everything else.

Nowadays I coach voice at the Opéra, although my own instrument has of course decayed with time. A gratifying number of well-known singers have trained with me over the years. My students are like my children and I help them as I can, awarding to the needier ones small stipends out of Erik's money. He would not approve.

Does it seem incredible, to have gone from such a bizarre, outlaw existence to a placid one indistinguishable from millions of others? Yet many people walk through the world hiding shocking memories. I look sometimes at a man or a woman in a shop or a gallery, at a friend or a student sitting over a coffee with me, and I wonder what towering joys and howling depths lie concealed behind the mask of ordinary life that each one wears.

Even extraordinary lives are not entirely as they seem. Recently I discovered that Erik's spaniel inkwell (into which I have just now dipped my pen) contains a secret drawer. Inside I found a sheaf of receipts all dated early in April 1881, made out to "Erik Rouen" for large cash payments from him to various men, in settlement of the formidable debts of a third party: Raoul de Chagny.

Underneath lay a pile of bank drafts running from that time until June 1885, four or five of them per year, for considerable amounts of money. Each had been signed by Erik in Paris, and some weeks later cashed by Raoul de Chagny in the city of New Orleans.

Finally, my shaking fingers drew out an envelope, posted from New Orleans and addressed to Erik. It contained a yellowed news clipping in English, dated July 17, 1885, announcing the marriage of Raoul de Chagny, a rising young dealer in cotton, and Juliet Ravenal, daughter of a prominent local broker and businessman. With this notice was enclosed a final bank draft (for yet another of those large sums which Erik had been in the inexplicable habit of mislaying), returned uncashed. There was no letter.

The message was clear enough: Raoul did not come back for me because Erik paid him not to. My Vicomte had gone to America as a Remittance Man! At least he had had the decency (or pride or whatever it was) to refuse further bribes once financially established in his new country.

I wept over those papers and all that they implied. But I smiled, too, at the resourcefulness, the cunning, and the sheer determination of my incomparable monster, who had thus firmly secured his victory without breaking his promise to me.

Age robs me of easy sleep, and many nights I lie awake remembering the little glass shoe full of centimes; and the shivering poodle stinking of lamp-oil; and the brush being drawn through my hair by a man who sits behind me, where I cannot see his face until I turn. In the dark I listen for some echo of the radiant voice of my teacher, my brother, my lover and accomplished master of my body's joys, that dire, disfigured angel with whom I wrestled for over a thousand days and nights, in all the youthful vigor of my hunger and my pride.

My hair is short now, in the modern style. It has turned quite white.

The Comte de Chagny (Raoul's title since his elder brother's death) arrived this month from America to see to his French holdings. He came to the Opéra asking after me. I avoided him, and he has gone away again.

Awaiting my own exit, I live my days in this brash and cynical present as other people do. But I nourish my soul on the sweet pangs of looking back, more than forty years now, to the time when the

Opéra Ghost and I lived together underground, in a candle-lit world of passion and music.

I have thought of writing an opera about it, but time seems short and I know my limitations. Someone else will write it, someday. They will get the story wrong, of course; but perhaps, all the same, the music will be right.

A Few Parting Words

Not an essay, just some thoughts

Like most of the writers I know, I learned to write by reading, and by going to plays and movies (stories in dialog and pictures—good training for the visual imagination and the plot-and-action sector of the brain). I always adored fantasy and horror, even though—or maybe because—they gave me nightmares; literally. For six months after an older cousin took me to see *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, I would wake up at six in the morning and lie petrified in my bed, certain that the Frankenstein monster was about to lurch around the corner from the hall and into my bedroom. And that was *Abbott and Costello*, folks.

Well. And Frankenstein's monster. And the wolfman, and Dracula, come to think of it. But it was *Abbott and Costello*. What can I say; I have always been rather impressionable. It comes with the territory.

At any rate, just like everybody else (albeit in fear and trembling and with my hand ever ready to whip off my eyeglasses so that the screen became safely blurred and vague) I kept up with the monster movies and the monster reading, too, because I couldn't stay away (Bud Abbott and Lou Costello have a lot to answer for). I saw poor old "Larry Talbot" turn into what looked like a gummy bear that had rolled on the floor of a hair salon before clean-up time; I read Mina Harker's journal and saw all the film-Draculas ever played; I read the Oz books and watched Judy Garland's Dorothy with her witches, both friendly and evil; and I read Leroux's fusty, goofy, clumsy novel about the Paris Opéra and went to Andrew Lloyd Webber's stage version of that story (once on each coast).

In fact I went so far as to visit the Paris Opéra last time I was in that city, just for its "Phantom" associations.

So it's perfectly natural that from time to time I should turn to writing stories with strong horror elements, some borrowed, some made up fresh (or what I think is fresh, anyway). I always have a wonderful time doing it and am sorry when the story is finished. Still, I feel like a bit of a fraud when people refer to me as a "horror writer," because I'm not—not in my mind, and probably not in anybody else's either.

To start at the lowest end of the "horror" scale, I have to admit that I don't even read there; I am easily bored and irritated by tales (onscreen or on paper) of victimized, terrified women, or victimized men for that matter; or towns with evil black gunkus oozing out of the light fixtures; or whole "secret" communities of languorous vampires exhibiting all the ennui of confirmed French persons (excepting only the endless smoking of cigarettes and the long, long silences).

Afflicted priests rushing around chasing or being chased by demons (or angels) that speak in funny voices do not turn me on, gangs of cannibal zombies bore me blind, and when I read Steve King I usually skip the blood and gore and look for the social observation, which he does better than anybody else. Frankly, I've reached a stage in my life where the drama, the tension, the *interest* of a story is what happens *between* the action-packed moments of mayhem. I mean the pauses for breath, when the characters, if they are worth their salt to begin with, understand and attempt to grapple with what the "action" means to them, for them, and about them and those close to them.

Remember a strange little movie called "The Sweet Hereafter"? A school bus crashes into a frozen lake, and the kids are killed. That's the horror element. The *story* is of a townful of people left behind and trying to deal with the event in some way that will make it less horrific (and failing). The crash is

glimpsed now and again, mostly from afar. It is a glyph, a sign of ruin and despair, but it's the ruin and despair that are interesting. The bus-crash is just an incident, too sudden and too shocking and too swiftly complete to reverberate much in and of itself.

That, to my mind, is a fine horror-story, albeit of a quotidian kind—no ghosts to speak of, no dripping child-zombies. Except that they are all there, of course—in the voices, the blank or twisted faces, the shocked eyes of the parents. If you perceive them there, and you should.

So I guess the usual run of horror fiction is not my *métier*.

On the other hand: I love to play. What I love to play with most is some stodgy cultural trope that needs a good shaking to get the dust out of its ears, e.g., a planet of women, say a society of Amazon warriors—only what kind of life would that *really* be in and of itself, not just as an exotic and perverse locale for our intrepid hero to stumble into, strut his stuff, and teach them (oh, rapture!) how to kiss? How would they, seeing themselves not as perverse at all but as the norm, order their politics, their economy, and their personal lives?

Or the world ends, but suppose all our unhoused souls are indestructible and have to go somewhere else to continue evolving. Or here's this dashing space pilot with flexible ethics, only she's driven to seek help on a planet settled not by engineers and scientists but by African market women with deep-rooted customs (and shrewdness) of their own.

Turn 'em upside-down and see what falls out of their pockets, that's what I say; otherwise you're just putting hoary old basic ideas through their time-honored paces yet again, and what's the point of that?

Hence, my forays into what gets classed as horror. I am drawn to fascinating characters or beings that have most often been presented—your monster, your vampire, your werewolf, your witch—as shock material, something to give us a good jolt in the perfect safety of the movie theatre or the chair in the living room beside the good reading light. Nothing falls out of their pockets if they're not wearing something like their usual clothes (rags; fur; cape). We all know there's more to them than just the jolt, or they wouldn't persist in our cultures with such immense verve and color.

So sometimes I get curious about the rest of the baggage your teen werewolf, say, is carrying with her, or your twisted musical genius with the awful face and violent habits.

Luckily, the stories of this type that I love best always set up questions in my mind (maybe that's *why* I love them). They are not dead, perfect objects, all shiny and cold, but fertile and warm and messy, fermenting away in my mind long after “the end” has come and gone. I turn the problems of “Dracula,” say, over and over mentally, for the sheer pleasure of remembering how it went and where it was at its most tasty for me.

I think about the answers offered—poor old Larry can never escape his fang-and-fuzz destiny, the Phantom gives Christine to his rival out of sheer nobility—and after a while other possible answers occur to me, and other questions that weren't asked. Or questions with no answers at all.

Like most writers who work in an exploratory rather than an outlined fashion, I come up with a situation that will bring the questions in my mind to bear on the characters, and then I stand back and let my imaginary people work out their own answers.

What's being a werewolf *good* for?

Why would a schoolgirl be really, *really* angry?

How might a child use great power if she had it?

What is “enough” punishment for the torments of the schoolyard?

The “idea” of “Boobs” is that a schoolgirl turns into a werewolf instead of getting her period; but the questions about that situation are what generate the plot, the story itself. All I had to do was to make up Kelsey, out of memories of my own childhood, of other kids I’ve known and observed as a teacher, even of kids I’ve read about, and give her an ordinary family in an ordinary American suburb, and then turn her loose to create the story for me.

Maybe I don’t particularly like all her answers, but if they ring true, they stay. That’s really what the character is for: to chart an interesting course through the possible answers, a course that hangs together and adds up to the illusion of a real mind and soul and heart grappling with extreme situations. The character is the test of the questions and vice versa, and if it works, that’s success; you don’t mess with it to placate others’ tastes or preferences, if you can help it.

Which is what writers mean when they say the characters “come to life” or “just take over the story.” Fictional characters are not real and they can not take over anything, but if they are well made and have a spark of vitality, they do acquire a powerful coherence that an author tramples over—for reasons of plot, or to make a particular effect, or to avoid developments that will offend some readers—at her peril.

To create a character with this kind of integrity is most authors’ great desire and ambition, because these are the characters who live on in readers’ memories and bring those readers back to read more of that author’s work. These are the ones readers (and writers) talk to each other about. But characters like this—the “quick” ones, the vivid ones with quirks of their own that I don’t consciously know about till they surface on the page—are not manipulable in the same way that flat characters are—I mean the spear-carriers here.

If you push quick characters around they will go dead on you and create dead spots in your story. Right there, a sensitive reader will pull back out of your story (just what you *don’t* want to happen) and say, “Whoa, wait, why would he do *that* ?” or “Huh? She’d never say such a thing. Did I miss something?” Or your reader will just close the book, wondering why the story has suddenly lost all its fizz.

So you let the character fly through your first draft, and that tells you where her vitality lies, and what to leave alone or even to heighten as you go back over the work, revising for clarity, for smoothness (or roughness, or dreamy disjunction, etc.). That first-draft rush is for me the art-part, the release of the characters, be they monsters or just folks, to show me what they’ve got; then it’s my job to present what they bring me in the best way I can, which is the exercise of whatever craft I have developed for this work.

I’ve had readers object that Kelsey is too mean and cold. I remind them of everything we all know about the intense pain of suffering in childhood, whatever that suffering is, before we have racked up enough experience to put the wounds of insult and humiliation into what adults call perspective (in order to be able to maintain what adults call civilization, and because eventually time lays on so many of these moments that you grow calluses). I remind them of the tight horizons of the youthful mind (except for the dreamy parts, that float free), the narrowness of the focus (“I need exactly *this* right *now*”), and the paucity of empathy. I wouldn’t change Kelsey even if I could.

Is she a monster? Certainly, in the eyes of some—if only because she killed those dogs. You’d be amazed at the number of readers who can accept the murder of Billy but rant and rave about the deaths of assorted mutts and the Wanscombes’ miniature schnauzers (well, that’s in there because it shocks, because it feels true to events and conveys the uglier realities of what Kelsey has become, and because it will help you, the reader, believe that she *could* go on to do what she does to Billy Linden). And by the way, I got some interesting reviewer-comments on this aspect of the story when it was first published; people seemed to feel that while it’s okay for any male author to splash blood around for acres and pages, a couple of short, grim paragraphs by a woman are shocking, simply shocking!

Odd, isn't it?

Anyway, if Kelsey doesn't become a monster, if she runs into someone who jump-starts a more sensitive ethical system in her, what kind of future will she have, given this story as her past? Maybe she's a victim in the making. Or maybe she'd become a hero, or a even saint, later in her life.

As I said, the stories that I like tend to raise as many questions as they answer. It's that cusp of possibility that I love, pathways of potentiality zigzagging off in all directions; and I like leaving them as potential, giving the reader those possibilities to play with in imagination. Why should creativity stop at the page, or at the story's end? Stories make other stories, and we all have at least some idea of how to do that, developed from when we were little kids and didn't know or care about copyright and didn't hesitate to take our favorite characters and write them new adventures, on paper or in the mind's eye. To some readers, this is an exciting, intriguing prospect; to others, it's lack of "closure" or "resolution" or "satisfaction," and believe me, writers worry about that.

A story may be experimental, it may be deliberately ambiguous, it may be intended to disturb by leaving some elements unresolved; but it had damned well better feel *satisfying* to the reader when it's over.

I've read somewhere that women authors in particular are partial to "open" endings: resolutions that set some questions to rest but launch others, in a kind of unconscious mirroring of the common cultural experience of women—you get the kid's fever down, and then it's the cut knee, and then it's the braces, and then all of a sudden it's the anorexia, etc., etc., endless problems unfolding, sometimes right out of the previous problems' solutions.

Women's experience, so this theory goes, is not perceived by women the way most men perceive their experience (problem, struggle, solution, phew that's done, now let's watch the game—or get on to a whole new project that advances us toward our Big Goal/climax). A woman's work is never done—it just pops up again in another guise, needing to be done all over again because so much of it is chores, which are by their nature endlessly repetitious. So maybe it's true that women authors, like me, get to see the world that way; that nothing really ends, events and situations just develop one after the other (in overlapping bunches, actually). It all may stop in a satisfying place for a bit, but that's not an ending, only a pause before the next convolution of the ongoing story.

Whatever its source and its disposition between the sexes, you can acquire a real inclination toward this open-endedness. I know I have. I like stories that extend beyond the last page. It feels like getting a prize in the crackerjack box: there's more than you bargained for.

I'm not talking, mind you, about the clichéd non-ending that became all but ubiquitous for a while there in dark fantasy—the monster is dead (but no, he isn't, that baby of the heroine's *ishis*), the virus is gone (but survives secretly, being carried around the world in the dog's paw-sweat), the dinosaurs are left on their island (but their eggs are floating out to sea), etc. That was a sort of gesture of ironic awareness by the author that *he knows* that evil can never be truly banished or destroyed; and he gets a kick out of reminding you of that, just to jerk your chain and add that last little shiver (which very soon became a shrug; so what else is new?).

"Boobs" is the prelude to a further phase of Kelsey's life that I leave the reader to imagine. In "Unicorn Tapestry," we end with two adult lives parting ways after a moment of hot fusion, going off in unknowable directions (well, one of them; the other continues, the vampire's own tale that is, in further chapters of a novel called THE VAMPIRE TAPESTRY).

What will Weyland do now? Can he carry on successfully as he has done in the past, or is he subtly altered, even derailed? Is his comfortable human identity still viable for him? Will he come back to Floria, is he hooked on her, is his neat pattern of living disguised as a human being hopelessly

compromised?

This story began with questions about the viability of being truly unique, alone, and secret in a world of social beings; and about intimacy as an exchange of truths, and the power of truth to bind souls together. And, I guess, about the corrosive power of memory, in a human history so fraught with horror, loss, and pain. I wanted to know how these elements would fit into the outline of the thing we call “vampire,” only presented as a natural being, not a ghost or a revived dead man, and how such a creature would adapt, in his solitude, to this modern life that we speak of as so isolating to the individual.

And, of course, I just wanted to play around with the idea of the vampire in love: what would that be? What could stand for “love” to a saber-toothed tiger engaged with its prey outside of the ordinary boundaries of predation? I wanted to put him to the test as hard as I could, to see how well he could weather and survive something that for him counts as love.

At the end, the auguries are, to say the least, ambiguous, as Floria has the wit to understand. In order for her to be a worthy opponent/ally of my clever monster, I made her smart, I made her sensitive, I made her formidable enough to test him truly, and I think she does her work with flair and effectiveness.

And, by the way, what the Hell is Floria going to do with the rest of *her* life? Her professional reputation is shot, but her paralyzing fear of death has been confronted and beaten back (for the moment anyway). She looks as if she’s about to take on the problems she has with her daughter—problems she’s been avoiding for years because they’re so painful, and so intractable, and she doesn’t know what to do. But she trusts herself more now to come up with workable solutions, because she’s just found a way to survive close and perilous contact with a lethal predator in her own life. Under threat of death, she’s found her strong, inventive, daring inner self again, and her confidence is beginning to return. Out of that confidence, and the basic honesty that prevents her from trying to just go on as if nothing significant has happened, she’s about to start building a new life for herself.

As what, as who? What do you think? I left the question open because it’s open to her, she has no brilliant ideas about this—yet. That’s how it would be for someone like her, so the choice to leave matters like that is a choice about verisimilitude as well as about my own tastes in fiction.

The ending of “Beauty and the Opéra” is *almost* a full stop. The great love is long over, the life of the narrator is very close to over too, and she is leaving us an account of something that happened almost half a century before the time the tale is supposedly set down on paper. The story-frame is meant to be 1927 or ’28, just after the release of the Lon Chaney film, which (along with Raoul’s recent visit) has presumably been the stimulus that sends Christine to her writing desk and the inkwell in the shape of a spaniel’s head. Her marriage to the Phantom occupied the first five years of the decade of the 1880s, forty years before the post-war Bohemianism and high living of the nineteen-twenties; back then, where she’s looking, Europe was still in its Fin de Siècle stage, horse-drawn, unrefrigerated, and gas-lit.

So we have a long, long perspective here, which in part I tried to indicate by the deliberate use of old-fashioned language that today’s readers are meant to find a bit stilted; a word about that—it is also the only language that I think I could have used for the more lush and outré parts of this story. That language simply came as needed, thanks to what I had soaked up from all my youthful reading of Dumas and Wilde and Buchan and Elliot and Stevenson and Sabatini and all. Around the time of its first publication, I did some live readings of this entire story at fantasy and science fiction conventions, and audiences stayed put in utter silence for the nearly hour-and-a-half that this takes; so I know how well it works. Try reading some aloud, in a thoughtful, quiet, adult voice, and I think you’ll hear what I mean.

At any rate, in the present frame around this long look backward we have old matters that have re-emerged with new resolutions, like the whole question of Raoul's character and actions. And we have the unavoidable necessity that our aged, reminiscing Christine will lay down her pen before long, and fade quietly out of existence, her life well and truly spent to the last passionate drop. Doesn't that sound like a rounded, finished, even polished ending?

But I couldn't resist a tiny glance forward, far forward, to the time when her story, gentrified and cranked up into melodrama, becomes the armature for a wildly successful musical staging. The future is already unfolding on the last page of the story: the future without the living Christine in it anymore, yet one that she can foresee because she is an intelligent woman, an experienced woman, a woman with secrets she has kept for decades. I mean the future in which the stage musical of Leroux's novel is a worldwide hit.

I did that little forward stab because I didn't want to just end Christine and her demon lover there, as if the waves we make in the world stop when we stop or when a particular phase of our life stops. This is not true of real people, and one way of giving convincing life to fictional people is to make it not true of them, either.

Christine was very real to me, partly because of that steady, reflective voice (not mine, I assure you!). She sprang from a very precise set of questions provoked by what I saw of reactions to the stage musical, in particular to the character of Erik, the Phantom. There were (and still are) many Internet pages devoted to Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber's show, most of them put up by adolescent girls. By and large, they are steeped in the most idealized romanticism: Erik is just a poor, misunderstood, tormented creature, sweet and soft within, who just needs a persistent, bold, completely devoted woman (me, oh, me, please!) in order for him to become a contented husband with a normal home life.

I found this formulation alarming. It's the kind of notion that leads women in the real world to attach themselves to spoiled, abusive men whom they are sure will reform if surrounded with true love. Spoiled, abusive men thrive on this drivel; romantic girls drown in it, and bob up years later—if they bob up at all—worn out, scarred, embittered, and, often as not, trailing skeins of kids they didn't particularly want but thought would somehow “fix” their bad relationship with their spoiled, abusive man.

When you add the idea of genius, the idea of the man as truly gifted as well as deeply wounded by cruel circumstance, you get not a story but a truth: the lives of the real women who stuck by exploitive, drunken, syphilitic, or just plain crazy men of talent, women we know about because of who they paired up with. The wife of Frederic Delius comes at once to mind; the first wife of Richard Wagner, and the wives and mistresses of many 19th-century composers, sculptors, and painters, not to mention 20th century artists and intellectuals as well.

This is not a benign cultural pattern; it's seductive and destructive, and it still operates in the world real women and men live their lives in.

I meant to put this template under the microscope and see what was really in it; not just the attractive, stimulating high drama of kidnapping and obsessive love, but the harder truths of daily life in the “happily ever after” that so many young “Phans” sighed over in the '90's, writing fictions of their own in which Christine decides to stay with Erik instead of running away with Raoul.

So I thought, first of all, what kind of guy would this Erik be, at best, given the life he has led? We know a little about what happens to people who endure great suffering; these days we call it post-traumatic stress syndrome. Ever hear of handing on suffering to your helpless dependents in turn, whether you mean to do this or not? Alas, one hears far too much about it. Saints are the people who take their lumps without turning mean, paranoid, and selfish. Saints are, understandably, rare (and they

don't make very interesting characters usually; there are exceptions, though). Abused people who become abusers in turn are all too common.

So here's our Erik, genius, freak, and world traveler: he's demonstrated, by the time the story starts, some pretty savage traits. Is there any sweetness left in him, and how might it be got at and expressed? Let's dispense with the wailing cries of thwarted love and look at him as a whole human being, not a cardboard cut-out of a desperate lover: what does he think about, what are his politics, how does he run his secret life, who is his tailor for pete's sake?

And what kind of woman would you have to be to live with him and *not* just be his victim? That was the major question that led me to Christine, the young Christine, the Christine who finds herself in an impossible and hair-raising situation and makes of it the glory of her life because of how she responds to it. She takes control of as much of her circumstance as she can and finds that in so doing she can love her madman *and* survive his madness; just. It's by no means a foregone conclusion; it's an ongoing struggle, and I wanted to explore that struggle in detail.

I hope this story leaves its female readers with a question: could *I* be that strong? Am *I* that steady, that resilient, that sharp and perceptive? Could I be that brave, and would I want to be? And how much honorable behavior can I really expect from a man like this, genius or not? I'd like to think that the story raises these questions, without denying the powerful hold that male suffering has on susceptible female souls. That power is real; but so are the limitations, in real women, of the courage, resilience, and hope it takes to cope with badly twisted men. Real, too, is the need for women to master their own lives, instead of choosing male masters to run—and ruin—their lives for them.

Christine is a monster herself in some ways because it takes one to match one; but she's also a child of my heart. So, of course, is Erik, but I know whose side I'm on when we come down to the wire.

It's not so easy with the women in "Evil Thoughts"; matters are murkier here, and this is to my mind the one true "horror" tale in this collection.

It came to me not as a response to somebody else's story, but with the sproutings of mushrooms that popped up one rainy spring on our lawn. I'd never had a lawn before, big city kid that I was, so I kept whacking the mushrooms down because they looked nastily leprous, and they kept coming back (and yes, there was a crazy lady who lived up the street and who used to screech at people from her porch or her kitchen window when they passed by her house).

I pointed out those recurrent fungi to my husband, saying, "What the hell *are* those damned things, that they just keep coming back?"

"Oh," he said with a mischievous grin, "those are your evil thoughts."

And a story grew from that remark like—like a fungus, very fast. This one has an ending, no two ways about it: our poor heroine is blown away in a puff of fungal spores (or loses her mind in this imagined event), driven by sexual insecurity over the age-gap between herself and her innocent young husband. At the end of the story, one way or another, she is ended, gone, destroyed.

So there, I did it: a real horror story suffused with real, old-fashioned, creeping horror, and with a "real" ending, because that's where the story was headed from word one. Fran is doomed from the get-go by her own weakness and her fears. Her adversary remains closed and enigmatic to us, as to her.

Not all questions need to be answered, or ought to be answered. For example, who is the witch here, the crazy lady or Fran (or both)? Who is caught up in a snare of evil imaginings, who is haunted by paranoid hatred and deformed longings? If one of these women, surely the other also. Perhaps the *only* witch here is Fran, as an "unreliable narrator," i.e., self-deluded liar, her barbed emotions and ill-wishings circling endlessly inside her own skull until they extinguish the human soul living there. And

extinguished she undoubtedly is. Her life is exploded, her soul smothered in powdery blackness.

Never let it be said that this author always sees women as positive, as heroines, as the good—guys. Although the questions I start out with are often occasioned by my feminist consciousness of the way the cultural dice are loaded, once in motion I see what my characters show me and report it as best I can. That's the job, that's why I feel I have a right to call upon your attention with my stories: I'll tell you entertaining lies, but they'll *bet* true lies, as true as I can make them.

Authors are not originators, for the most part; we cruise through our times like basking whales, sieving the Zeitgeist for ideas, for impressions and stereotypes and concerns, fears and longings, goals and regrets. Those who stray too far from the central stream of a culture risk being stranded in some forgotten ox-bow of too-original thought, self-observed and forgotten. Perhaps we keep our endings open as part of the effort to keep ourselves open, as creatives, to the shifting gradations of cultural interest and concern, for as long as we can.

One way of keeping a grip on the Zeitgeist, of course, is to hitch our stories to the avatars of permanent fascination, the creatures of mythology who may shift shapes but who still retain some measure of their ancient forms in order to keep their power in changed times. They are the shadows of our imaginative heritage: the monsters of depravity and of genius, the border-runners of cultural values, the ancestors of our deep and vigorous inner lives. They are the gold that artists mine, the bogeys that we long to outgrow, the angels of inspiration and creativity.

This work is meant to honor these eminences of the deep cultural mind even as it makes playful use of them, invades them and exposes them. Vampire, werewolf, witch, and monster: they are our siblings and our teachers, our mirrors and our guardians. Enjoy them, learn from them, treat them with respect, because where we go, these unreal beings will go with us until we have evolved into different creatures ourselves.

And maybe even then.

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