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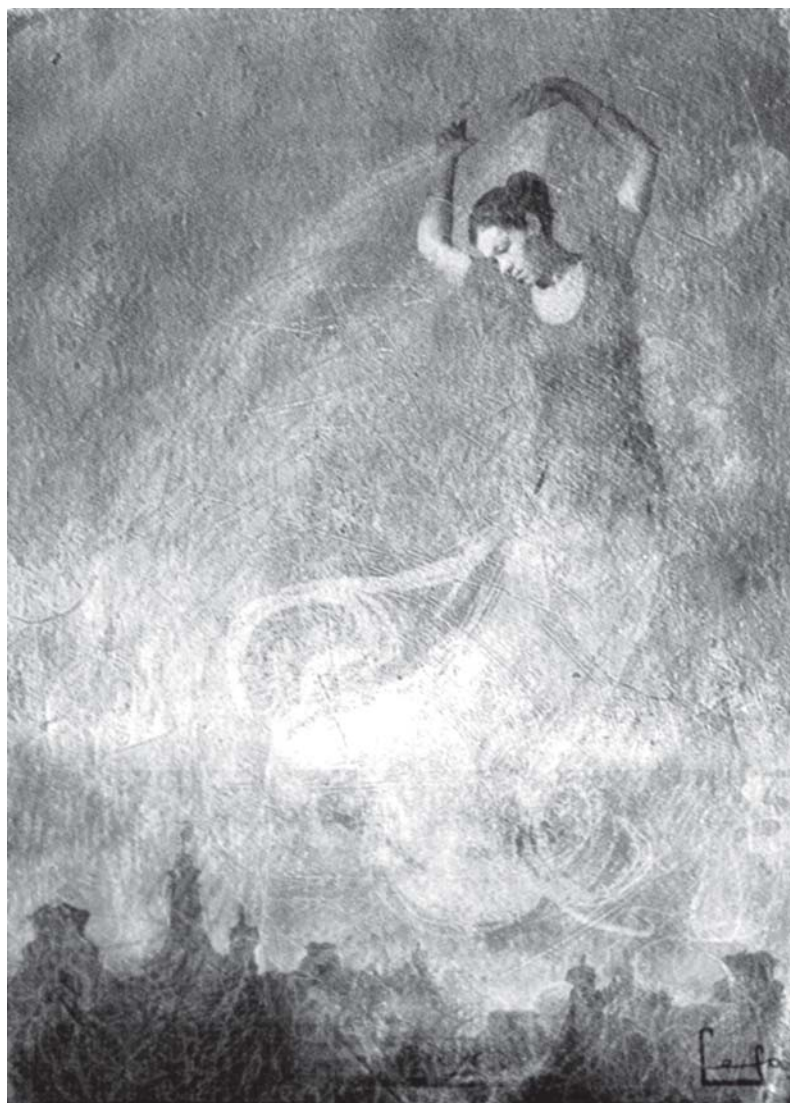


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Changing Destiny

Fefa 33

# Songs of the Dead

Sarah Singleton and Chris Butler

Light splashed bars of white on the surface of the black water in the gutter. The pale roots of violets trailed in the moist, smeared layers of soil, city dust, and greenish effluent from the market. Thin threads of blood, clogged and dark, embroidered the thicker currents of mud and slurry. So much to see.

The lowing of the beasts, distinct here, rose up in the London street to disturb the boy. He looked up, shading his eyes. The return of spring had renewed the sun's vigour. In descent, the fire wheel spilled skeins of bright gold across the shining rooftops. If he did not start back now, his mother would worry.

On a clear day, the angels could have pointed to any one of the London villages. But now, new buildings came sprouting from the soil. Curious suburban fabulations. Complete with Greek columns fashioned in plaster, already soaking up veins of damp. Pretensions, his father said, of the traders. Snatching a piece of land for a scaled-down villa. The gaps in the landscape had filled in, and the random patchwork of the cityscape stretched as far as he could see.

The boy tucked his sketch into his pocket, and set off again. He made good progress along the street. Two old men puffed past, carrying a sedan chair. A thin, white-gloved hand lolled from the window, catching his eye. The curtain was drawn, a tatty brown brocade, and the woman's fingers tapped restlessly on the faded paintwork. The sedan stopped before a coffee house. A voice. The curtain twitched. Intrigued, the boy stepped closer, keen to catch a glimpse of the woman inside. One of the porters scurried into the coffee house, shoulders stooped. When the door opened, laughter erupted, along with a tide of smoke and snuff and the hot, prickly aroma of stewed coffee.

A body banged against the door. A large man, in a jacket fashioned with burgundy, livid purple, and gold, with a face bright pink through smudged layers of white paint, the mouth soft and red, dribbles on the chin. The man's heavy torso contracted and convulsed. He pressed his hand to his mouth, an effort to contain some fierce digestive struggle. He bent double. He retched. A stream of hot, meaty vomit burst from his lips, splattering onto the pavement.

“Oh God,” the man said, his eyes fixed on the brew seeping into the mud. The seizure took him again. A second wave, less violent than the first. A vapour rose from the mess, fingers of which were caught in eddies of the water in the gutter, slowly twisting with the ribbons of blood and mud and the waste of the beasts from the market.

The boy’s eyes widened. He took a breath.

“Oh God,” the man repeated. His head twitched. Strings of vomit and saliva clung to his fingers, adding a curious glitter to the rings on his fingers. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed ineffectually at his face.

“Boy, help me, will you?” Slowly the man straightened. He pressed his left hand to his belly. The other, still clutching the soiled piece of lace, grasped the boy’s shoulder.

“Inside. Help me inside.”

The boy nodded hard. He tucked his arm around the man’s back. The man’s breath flooded the boy’s face, the hot acid smell of partially digested meat, black pepper, and mace. The man took his hand from his uncertain guts just long enough to shove back his wig, which leaned precariously. Grey powder puffed as he patted it.

“Better. Yes, much better.”

The boy guided the man through the door. The damp, smoky room engulfed them. Despite the mild weather, a huge fire blazed in the corner. The man took his place at a table.

“Bishop, are you fit?” A blubbery gentleman sitting opposite tucked into a plate of beef pudding. “Don’t let it go to waste.” He indicated Bishop’s plate, piled with strips of pork belly and kidneys in cream.

Bishop turned to the boy.

“You would like a coffee, yes?” he asked. “What’s your name?”

“Will,” the boy said. “Will Blake.”

“Will. Thank you.” Bishop signalled to a young woman, who tipped thick black coffee into a dish.

The stooped sedan porter hovered behind them, trying to catch Bishop’s attention. He shuffled from one foot to the other in an anxious dance.

“Sir,” he said. “Sir.”

“Drink up, Will,” Bishop said. He picked up a fork, considering the delicacy before him. “These good men are doctors,” he said, confidentially, signifying the company about the table with his

gaze. "Doctors of the mind. And I am a doctor too. Dr. Charles Bishop. How old are you, Will Blake?"

"Fourteen, sir," Will said eagerly. But Bishop had already turned from him, resuming some earlier conversation.

"Look, Thomas, I know you do not believe me, but I'm telling you it works."

The blubbery man snorted and shook his head, without lifting his eyes from his plate.

"Where's Edgar?" Bishop asked. "He will back me up." He dug his knife into a strip of pork, adorned it with the tassel of a kidney and a veil of cream. He stuffed it into his mouth.

"Sir," the porter tried again. "Miss Marks, sir. She's outside. She's waiting for her brother."

"Marks—damn it, Marks isn't here," Bishop said. "He's late. Tell her to wait at Silver Street."

The porter shifted, foot to foot. But Bishop resumed his dinner and the man backed away, shaking his head.

"The pictures, you see," Bishop said. "A likeness. If the picture is true, something is fixed in the medium, something is drawn from the subject, don't you see?"

"What evidence do you have?" The fat man snorted. He chased a scrap of burnt fat on his plate. His lips glistened.

"The subject is soothed. I have witnessed this, time and again. The agitation is drawn away."

Bishop had forgotten about Will. Happy to eavesdrop, the boy sipped quietly, taking in the smoky atmosphere, the steaming coffee-pots, the papers on the wall: notices of meetings and hangings, sordid newspaper accounts of political corruption and criminal sensation. The papers were overlaid, one plastered atop another.

He drew out the sketch from his pocket, unfolded the thick yellow paper, and took out a charcoal fragment. He stared at the fat man, and his hand moved to an empty space on the paper.

"Good God, he's got you!" Bishop said. Will looked up, and around. The moment of concentration had gone. The sketch was quick, and incomplete. Will stuffed it away.

"Hold, hold. Let me see." Bishop's thick, strong fingers seized his arm and tugged the paper away. Will flushed. His scribbles were examined. Bishop laughed at the likeness of his colleague.

"You have a talent, young man," he said, growing thoughtful. His brow furrowed.

“I have a commission. Your services—can they be purchased? Are you apprenticed?”

Will shook his head. No, as yet he was unattached.

Bishop hesitated a moment. Then he scribbled an address upon the corner of the boy’s sketch.

“Come and see me. Tomorrow afternoon. Off you go, now.”

Will stared at the address. Silver Street. He knew the place. A long line of towering villas with long gardens down to the river. Almost well-to-do.

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A crack in the wall, falling, jagged. Eliza has asked them for another room but they do not listen. She stands on the bed and looks out through the small window. The pane is dirty, encrusted with mould. She rubs at it with the sleeve of her gown. Outside the lawns steam as the dew takes flight. Through the haze, she sees new tulips in bloom, vivid yellows and reds. She smiles. Her sleeve is stained. She sees dark forms. Troubled, she sits down and rubs at the one sleeve with the other. The stain is now on both sleeves. They say the walls in all the rooms have cracks.

“What?” she asks.

She listens intently. She lifts a hairbrush from a drawer in the dark oak desk. She lets the others guide her hand, running the brush through long auburn strands. Years ago her mother would have helped her. The importance of one’s appearance must never be forgotten, she thinks, and nods.

“Do I look pretty?” she asks. She has no mirror in the room, but sometimes she can see a half-reflection in the window.

The door opens. Two nurses enter. Their blue uniforms blaze against the drab interior of her room.

“Morning, Eliza,” says the more senior of the two. For Mrs. Jenkins, words come lazy and slow, the years having dulled her enthusiasm. She quickly assesses the state of the room.

The other nurse, only a couple of years older than Eliza, says nothing, but at least makes eye contact and allows her a brief smile.

“Come along,” Mrs. Jenkins demands.

Eliza obeys passively, but as she walks out into the hallway, a great commotion rises up to greet her. She flinches, not wanting to hear the moans and the babble. “Cattle market,” she says, spitting out the words. She begins to raise up her hands in an effort to

cover her ears, but Mrs. Jenkins takes hold of her and leads her forward. Eliza tries to ignore the others, with their incessant prattling, focusing instead on the inanimate. The ornate fireplace with sinuous carvings; she imagines herself small enough to walk among its curves and tunnels.

"Damn you!" someone says. She looks downward, examining the ruby rug with its froth of white tassels. Then a clock ticking, its pendulum swaying back and forth, back and forth, glinting.

They lead her up the staircase where massive oil paintings hang, the dead mingling with the living. But of course that is the case everywhere.

"Not a child," a dead voice says, "a harlot!"

Eliza asks, "Where are you taking me?" She looks down from the staircase. White faces watch her and they seem to know.

"Where are we going?" she asks, urgently now. "What are you going to do to me?"

A door opens and they usher her inside.

First she sees a woman in a full-length turquoise dress, drawn in at the waist then arcing up and out like a vase from which her neck rises, a stem, her face bright. Quickly the woman comes up to her. She takes the girl's face in her hands and studies the features intently.

"How old are you, child?"

From behind her, a deeper voice comes. "I told you, she's sixteen."

Eliza looks past the woman and notices, for the first time, the two other figures in the room. "Charles!" she exclaims, as if she has not seen him in ages.

"How strange," the woman says, "to have a sister so much younger than yourself."

"Perhaps," Bishop says. "My mother was forty years old and on to her second husband by the time she had Eliza. In truth, I have been more a father than he, more of a parent than either of them. They gave her into my care some years ago."

Edgar Marks steps forward. "Hello, Eliza." He is some years older than Bishop and speaks in a soft, warm voice. "I also have a sister. Allow me to introduce Miss Jane Marks."

Eliza curtsies.

"Jane is an artist," Edgar continues, "and we've asked her to paint a portrait of you. Won't that be nice?"

Eliza gives a slight, uncertain nod.

Edgar speaks softly to his sister. "Now Jane, do not be alarmed if Eliza should speak of spirits, or any other strangeness. She can be quite fanciful—"

Bishop interjects suddenly, "No, no, Edgar, fanciful is quite the wrong word. She is anything but that."

"I merely wish to pre-warn my sister in order to avoid any alarm."

"Please do not seek to shelter me, Edgar," Jane says. "You are in no way up to the task. Now, what say I proceed with the endeavour?"

She walks away, deeper into the room, to where an easel stands, removing her white gloves in preparation for the task ahead.

Bishop gently leads Eliza to a chair and she sits down. Nervously she bites into a finger-nail. "I brushed my hair," she says. "Do I look pretty?"

Many voices murmur in response, the dead mingling with the living. But in the hours that follow, the dead grow quiet, as if they are drawn away.

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Will ran along the road, papers pressed in his pockets. To reach Silver Street he had to travel two miles from Soho, and he didn't want to be late. An old woman shambled along the pavement, mumbling and flicking back the cover of a basket, counting carrots inside. Will slowed, watching her.

"Move aside!"

Will jumped to the edge of the road as a cart lumbered past, the horses splattered with mud to their bellies. The wheels flung curls of mud onto the tail of his coat.

"Move aside," the carter bellowed again, further along the road.

Will pressed his fingers against the folded note in his pocket. His father had written, painstakingly, a polite request. He was unable to afford the expense of Will's entrance to a painter's studio, but a premium of fifty pounds might enable him to serve an apprenticeship. Will shivered, squeezing the note.

"Where's Will going?" Robert had asked, the previous evening. Robert was four, his brother, a cherub with licks of soft hair the colour of treacle.

"Where're you going, Will?" he had asked again, holding up his arms to be lifted. Will obliged. The little boy, already in his bedshirt, pressed his face into Will's neck. Will breathed in the warm sweet perfume of the child's skin.

"I'm going to do some drawing for a gentleman," he said grandly. "A fine gentleman, with a silk jacket and a wig, and a painted face."

"A macaroni," Catherine shouted. "A macaroni. Will's going visiting. He'll be dandified too. Can you get me a fan, Will? Can you?"

Catherine, three years older than Robert, picked up a stocking her mother had embroidered and flapped it in her face.

"Catherine," their mother scolded. "Put that down." But they laughed, all of them, in the room's evening twilight where one tallow candle burned to illuminate the stitching. Robert kissed his big brother.

"Be careful, Will," he admonished gravely. He reached for a lock of Will's hair, and tugged it gently.

Silver Street, Number 12, stood in a graceful crescent overlooking a park and, further down, a small arboretum where cherries flowered. A woman in a blue dress opened the front door when he knocked. She led him inside, to a drawing room on the first floor, without saying a word. As he waited, Will browsed along a shelf of calf-bound books: volumes on anatomy and medicinal herbs, classical works, midwifery.

"Master Will. Just in time. I haven't eaten this morning. Perhaps you would join me, and I can tell you what we plan to do, yes?"

Bishop entered and seated himself, pushing away a newspaper and a novel on the table. He gestured William to join him.

"Sir, I've already eaten," Will said. The woman returned with a large tray, and a maid followed behind with another. A pewter coffee-pot, a basket of toast, butter, a steaming dish of almond pudding, and a plate of stewed lamb's liver and bacon were spread across the table.

"Eat some more, then. Eat some more." Bishop tucked a napkin into the front of his jacket and helped himself to a mound of meat and pudding. Politely William took a corner of toast. Bishop ate with his mouth open. Will watched morsels of liver popping open between his teeth, the juices running over his red tongue. Bishop mopped his lips.

“You have been tutored, I think,” he said.

“Yes, sir. I studied at Henry Par’s academy, in the Strand. Four years.” Will felt his father’s letter in his pocket, but he was loath to hand it over. He remembered the careful writing, the humble request.

“And what are your plans now?”

“Well, sir. Well.” The boy faltered. “My father sent this.” He seized the note and passed it to Bishop. The man unfolded the mean piece of paper and flattened it upon the tablecloth. He read it, eating still. Will waited.

Then Bishop sat up straight, belching. He pressed his hand to his belly. Then he reached into a waistcoat pocket and took out a tiny enamel pill-box and dosed himself with three tiny tablets. Will smelled peppermint. Bishop did not mention the contents of the letter.

“I run a small private clinic,” he said. “Here, within this house. I have seven patients in residence. Now, William, the ailments afflicting these poor souls are not diseases of the body. No. I have little interest in curing the flesh. Instead, I am a leading figure in the modern science of curing the diseased mind—plucking out the thorns of mania and melancholy. Dispelling the clouds of delusion.”

Bishop spoke with a flourish, a toss of the hand. Will, the audience, nodded. His flesh contracted, shivering, to feel the weight of the unknown presences in the house, the madmen. He could hear nothing.

“Now,” Bishop said, “we arrive at the nub. During my researches, I have uncovered a curious matter. I took on an artist to paint portraits of my patients at the beginning of their treatment, planning then to make another portrait at the end so my patrons might see the difference. Yes? But we discovered the process of being painted—sitting for the artist—had in itself a therapeutic effect. The sitter becomes calm. The agitations of the mind are soothed. Now why might this be? Indeed, why? How does it work?”

Bishop rose to his feet, shedding his napkin onto the floor.

“Come,” he said. Will scrambled to his feet.

Until now he had been dazzled by the splendour of the house, but he discovered it to be effectively cut in two: the front rooms plush and fashionable, the rear sparse and unadorned. The windows overlooking the back garden had bars. Will trod bare floorboards to a small room used for the preparation of medicines.

A dark-haired man had his back to them, but turned as they entered, glancing at the boy.

"Dr. Marks," Bishop said.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Will said. Marks disregarded him. Bottles lined shelves. A small set of scales dangled from Marks' fingers, a scoop of a pepper-coloured powder on the brass bowl. Will looked about him quickly, noting the charts and tables pinned upon the wall, numbered codes beside names and dates, Latin inscriptions, weights.

"Shall I start him on Mr. Scott?" Bishop suggested. Marks furrowed his brow, his skin very thick and dull. He nodded, still engaged with the substance on the scales.

"Come along, Will," Bishop said, almost gaily. "Come along."

They climbed stairs, passed another door behind which he could hear shuffling and murmurs. Then a sudden fit of helpless laughter.

"Yes," Bishop said, confidentially. "Mr. Sturgis." He winked.

Beyond an open door, Will saw a rectangular iron tank, full of water. Too large for a bath.

They ascended another flight of stairs; Bishop hummed as he unlocked a narrow door. Inside, Will had the impression of an alcove in a museum, a dull and empty room save for the exhibit in the centre. An old man sat hunched on a plain chair. Will wondered, quickly, why the subject did not move the chair. Why not sit by the wall, in a corner? Then he noticed the chair had been nailed to the floor, and he was moved to pity the man, with a flash of contempt for Bishop and Marks for such petty cruelty, forcing their patient to sit surrounded by space.

"Mr. Scott," Bishop said gravely. "Here is William. He has come to take your likeness. He is an artist, Mr. Scott."

Will waited in the room while Bishop called the maid, instructing her to bring a stool. Bishop himself handed Will a small easel with a piece of paper already pinned in place. Mr. Scott did not move nor make any sound, gave no indication of being conscious of the people in his room.

"To work, William," Bishop said. "I will return in an hour. Is that time enough?"

Will nodded, biting his lip. Did Bishop intend to leave him alone with this man? Bishop flinched, pressing his fingers into his belly. Will focused on the old man, who appeared smartly dressed,

refined even, though a cord of spittle dangled from the left side of his mouth. His eyes, crusty about the lids, were not focused, but oddly his fingers were active, fluttering like little birds. A strange semaphore. The whole life and spirit of the man expressed in the agitation of his fingers. Will took a fragment of charcoal from a tray attached to the easel.

Bishop drew back from the door, fiddling for the key, and as he stood aside the woman in the blue dress strode past, leading a very thin young woman in a stained dress. She turned her face, catching Will's gaze for an instant. Then Bishop locked the door, leaving Will alone, confined in the room with Scott and his fingers. Will felt a moment's fear. Then he took a breath and began to draw.

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She thinks that something comes for her. A wolf perhaps. She knows of wolves from stories. Their mouths flow with saliva. A figure walks ahead of her. She wonders if it is Death she follows, but the figure glances back at her and it is a familiar face.

They walk past Mr. Scott's room; the door is open so she looks inside. She sees a boy sitting on a stool at an easel—not a rich boy, but he has finer clothes than she. Time slows around her. She steps outside the moment. On tiptoes, she enters the room to stand before him. Gracefully his head arcs up and their eyes meet. She smiles.

She says, "You needn't be afraid of Mr. Scott."

But she is still in the hallway, following the madam and causing no trouble. She wonders if she is going to meet with Miss Marks again. She is pleased when that turns out to be the case. She thinks Miss Marks is very grand.

"Hello, Eliza," the lady says. "I would like to paint your portrait again if I may."

Eliza smiles. "That would be fine," she says. "Will you let me see the picture? I do not have a mirror in my room."

"Of course. Perhaps you would like to see the portrait that I made yesterday?"

"Oh yes, please."

Jane walks away from her to where the picture leans against the wall. She picks it up, brings it back, and shows it to her. "I think it is a good likeness," Jane says.

Eliza reaches out a hand and touches the edge of the board to which the canvass is fastened. The image makes her feel strange. It is empty around the edges. "Where are the others?" she asks.

The door to the room opens and Bishop hurries in.

"What am I missing?" he blusters.

Eliza looks at the floor. Bishop takes hold of her and escorts her back to the chair where she is to sit for the portrait. The room has a bare wooden floor. It is polished and glistens, but underneath the sparkle she sees dark lines, patterns in the grain of the wood. Something stirs.

Jane says, "Good morning, Charles. How are you?"

"I am fine. And I swear, you look lovely this morning."

"I'm sure you can do better than that."

Bishop reaches forward, placing his hands at Jane's waist, and gently pulls her towards him until her face is close to his. "I would do far better," he says, "if we were alone."

"And if my brother should come in here now," she says, "as he might at any moment?"

"Edgar would interpret whatever he might see in the most benign terms possible. He has no passion of his own, and even less imagination."

"He is my brother," she says, pushing Bishop away. "And fortunately we are not alone."

"The time will come," he says, hand to brow, theatrical. Jane is amused.

She returns her attention to her subject. "Child," she says, alarmed, "are you all right?"

"They say I am not strong enough."

"Who says?"

"They say that I am only a waif."

"Charles? What is she babbling about?"

"She often talks of others. It is a symptom of her dementia, but I cannot convince her of it."

"They want to be rid of me," Eliza says, "but I will not allow it. I am all that stands between you and them. Be careful where you go from here, or..."

She stops in mid-sentence, her head jerks back suddenly, her eyes roll back in their sockets. Then her head snaps forward again and she rises to stand. When she speaks, her voice is clear, without its usual timidity.

"Something lives in the grain of the wood," she says. "It stands on legs larger than my whole body. It does not remain still. It spins. Tendrils of smoke snake out and they wrap themselves around us. I know when saliva falls from the mouth of a wolf..."

Jane Marks looks anxiously from Eliza to Bishop.

“Fascinating,” Bishop says.

Eliza’s head turns to one side. “When the fairies come in from the garden, the smoke chokes them and snuffs them out. I love the fairies but I am afraid when I see them because I do not want them to die.”

Her whole body begins to spasm violently and she falls to the floor in a fit. Her girl’s mind is snuffed out. Another part observes as Bishop pulls a wooden rule from his pocket and forces it into her mouth. Eliza is aware of her brother, kneeling over her; but, towering over them both, the darkness congeals into a bituminous figure.

“I am inside you,” it says.

But then dozens of spirits rise up in the room. Collectively they say, “We walk beside her.”

The darkness howls, disintegrates into a thousand black moths, which flutter wildly before sunlight burns them away.

Nowhere. Nothing.

When she wakes, she hears her brother talking with Dr. Marks and with Jane. She keeps her eyes closed, bathed in a sense of peace and well-being, the curious aftermath of the fit. Briefly, her mind is very still, and she wants to savour the taste of it.

“The best yet,” Bishop says, inflamed with excitement. “She was speaking with another voice. Another voice!”

Jane murmurs something in contradiction but Eliza cannot make out her words. Marks speaks in a deeper voice.

“What did she see?”

“Wolves. Fairies—something about a giant in the grain of the wood.”

Marks gives a low, dismissive laugh.

“You’re a fool, Bishop. Listen to what you are saying. Her diseased mind plunders fanciful memories of childhood story books. I’ve heard the same kind of nonsense from a dozen chlorotic young women. She needs fresh air and friends and bodily exercise.”

Marks leaves the room. Jane moves closer, peering into Eliza’s face. Eliza can feel the faint heat of her body, smell a thread of eau de cologne.

“Look, she wakes,” Jane says. But Eliza keeps her lids closed.

“You must paint what she said.” Bishop kneels beside Jane. “You must recall her features in the fit, the altered form of her face, the blank eyes. You must capture the other likeness. And the spirits she saw, the demon rising. You must pin them into your painting, Jane.”

Eliza opens her eyes. Her moment of peace has passed. Jane and Bishop are staring at each other; Bishop's face is bright with excitement. Jane is pulling back, disturbed. Then she notices Eliza.

"Eliza, my dear." Her voice is soft and insincere. She is still agitated. "How do you feel?"

Eliza smiles. "I am well, thank you, Miss Marks."

"Eliza, can you remember what happened?" Bishop asks. It strikes Eliza that her brother is a clown and she giggles. Then she cannot stop. The laughter carries her off, another seizure. A convulsion. She laughs and laughs till hot tears leak from her eyes and pour over her face. She tastes the salt on her lips.

"Bah!" Bishop ejects. "Useless. It is a consequence of her attack. She will make no sense to us now." He rises to his feet, pushing back his wig. Jane sighs, her body pressing against her stays. She looks up at Bishop, eyes wistful.

What does she see to desire? Eliza wonders, and laughs again. The thought flashes from somewhere in her mind that Jane Marks suffers the greatest delusion.

Bishop exits and returns swiftly, carrying a small curved bottle with a glass stopper and a long silver spoon. Eliza stops laughing abruptly. The room is suddenly very still.

"I don't want any," she says. Her tiny stomach curls up in anticipation of the dose.

"Come now," Bishop says sternly. "You want to be better, don't you? You want me to take you to the opera. You want to walk in the park. Be a good girl, Eliza; you will be better soon."

"No," Eliza says. But Mrs. Jenkins is behind her, holding her head between strong hands, so Eliza fears her skull will be riddled with cracks.

"Open your mouth, Eliza," the nurse says grimly. She tilts back Eliza's head. Jane looks on, trying to cover distaste at the spectacle. Eliza squeals, fighting the firm grip.

"Help us, Jane, damn it," Bishop says. Jane steps forward, very pale now, not knowing what to do.

"Sit on her legs. Keep her still." Bishop's voice is rising.

He presses the sides of Eliza's mouth, forcing her lips open. Eliza squeaks, the brute fingers bruising her skin. Bishop tips the syrup from the spoon into her mouth, but Eliza refuses to swallow and ribbons of the sugary medication rise up again, spilling stickily over her cheeks, mixing on her lips with the salt of her tears.

“God damn it, Eliza, we’re trying to help you.” He squeezes her nostrils so she cannot breathe, and she gasps. Bishop seizes the instant to tip the liquid straight from the bottle down her throat. Eliza chokes and splutters, but much is swallowed. The three adults draw back as Eliza breathes heavily on the floor. It is always the same. The medication tastes sweet as honey and roses upon the tongue. But in her stomach it is bitter as wormwood. A contamination. She wipes her cheeks with the back of her hand. Jane Marks, penitent, fumbles for a handkerchief and dabs Eliza’s face with a false expression of concern. Eliza is disillusioned. She knows, as she has always known, that Jane is an enemy too.

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Will stepped down from the carriage. His boot splashed into a muddy puddle, beads of bright mud sticking to the smooth new leather. The crisp stock itched and the jacket, which pleased his eye with its colour, stiffened across his shoulders. Bishop stepped down after him, and the carriage lurched. He looked at once distinguished and absurd.

“Are you excited, Will?”

But Will hardly heard him. The opera house rose up like a coliseum. Still slick from the downpour, it glistened in the moonlight, an elaborate stone framework, channelling enough energy to draw the stars down from the heavens like an ancient megalith. The walls of the King’s Theatre reared high into the night sky, offering the angels a place to pause and rest their wings.

Jane Marks asked, “Cat got your tongue, boy?”

Bishop offered his hand to Eliza as she, the last of the party, stepped down to join them.

She was dressed in blue silk, simple but elegant. A faint flush had risen in her cheeks beneath her eyes, but she looked nonetheless like any young girl, excited to join her elders for a night out.

Jane reached out and playfully pinched Will’s nose. “Or perhaps you actually are a cat,” she said.

Bishop asked, “Do you want to stroke him, then?”

Will blushed.

She asked, “He’s a little young for that, Charles, wouldn’t you say?”

“Indeed. Perhaps later you will try your hand elsewhere?”

She began to walk up the stone steps. "More likely you will have to do your own stroking."

Will glanced at Eliza, but she cast back an expression that suggested the conversation was unimportant.

Inside, they mingled with the other patrons. Dr. Bishop clearly knew a great many people and went about shaking hands with enthusiasm.

"Will," he asked, "would you stay here with Eliza?"

Will nodded. The crowd pressed against them, the perfume of warm human bodies mingled with the sweeter notes of artificial fragrance and the hectic odour of bright pink and white lilies adorning vases about the entrance lobby.

Left alone, Will and Eliza stood in silence for a moment. Then Eliza said, "It is I who should be charged with looking after you. I am older than you."

Will smiled in acceptance. "I have never been in a place like this."

"I would come here every night if my brother would allow it. But I have not been for the longest time."

"It is very expensive, I imagine," Will said, making excuses for the doctor, a role which he had no wish to perform.

"We have money," she said.

"Yes, of course. In any case, functions like this should be open to all. It should not be a question of money, not just something for the rich. A revolution is coming. In America, and possibly in France."

He bit his tongue, afraid he sounded pompous. But Eliza looked alarmed.

"Do you think so? I wonder if it shall reach me."

"Oh, I didn't mean.... You mustn't worry."

She took a step closer. Her breath was also perfumed. Roses and wormwood. The chemical smell caught in the back of the throat. But he could smell it too on the surface of her skin, in her hair. She looked closely into his eyes and whispered, "Aren't there... far more immediate dangers?"

"What do you mean?"

But the others returned, led them to a box above the stage where a girl served wine and sugary cakes. Eliza's face matched the glass of plain water handed to her. She thanked her brother courteously.

He said, "Now you do understand, Eliza, that you must behave with dignity during the performance."

“I shall be the only one, then. This is the opera.”

Will went straight to the front of the box and looked down. Every seat was taken, but latecomers had been allowed in to stand at the edges of the stage, making enough noise to drown the orchestra, who were tuning up, readying to play. A handful of wags strutted up and down the aisles, calling out greetings, flashing the silk of their coats.

A selection of extracts from Italian opera seria began, with a little of the lighter comic opera buffa mixed in for variety's sake. After the first two pieces, Dr. Bishop announced that he had business to attend to and retired to one of the side rooms, where he joined in a game of cards.

Will thought of his brother Robert. One day they would come to the opera together, fluent in the Italian language and able to talk knowledgeably about the stories the operas told. And everyone would know them for their great works of art and epic poems, wanting to shake their hands.

Eliza said, “Isn't it wonderful?”

Startled, Will said, “It is amazing.”

She leaned over to him and said quietly, “Don't imagine that I trust you!”

He was taken aback.

She said, “If I show weakness, it will all come out of me. None of us can afford that.”

He started to say, “I don't understand.” But then Eliza noticed Jane Marks watching her, and she returned her attention to the stage.

Through the rest of the performances, the artists dazzled and the louts fretted and shouted. They enjoyed one of the comic interludes but grew restless when the more serious tone resumed, the characters stiff and the story rather dull. Then the noise exploded, an uproar of shrieks and protests. A gang of young rowdies in the boxes began spitting at those below. The offending performance could not compete. But a lone tenor sang out an aria of such sustained passion that the noise fell away. Will was enchanted. But part way through, a small, fragile hand slipped into his. Eliza stared at the tenor; her head tilted like a sparrow, but her face went an odd dead white and a shadow fell across her.

Something seemed to take shape in front of them, or rather an absence of shape; an emptiness where there should have been

form. When Will had been five years old, the void had taken his brother Richard soon after birth. He had forgotten, but recognised it now. The floorboards underneath them began to shake, but Will said calmly, "No, you cannot have anyone here."

And the crowd were applauding the tenor on the stage. Confused, he was not holding Eliza's hand any more. Jane seemed to be unaware of anything unusual having happened. Charles Bishop had rejoined them, Will could not remember when.

"Come along," Bishop said. "It is late and Eliza needs her rest."

Will's head began to ache. Eliza's peculiar odour made him nauseous. Sensations jumbled and then fragmented, a moment's déjà vu. What had he seen? He twitched his feet, itchy with pins and needles. Everyone was leaving.

A carriage waited in the street below. First Will was delivered to Soho. In the darkness of the interior, Eliza seemed almost to vanish. When he opened the door to leave, a little light shone in. As it played across her face, she mouthed two words. He thought they were "Thank you" but he could not be sure.

He called out, "Goodnight," and his own "Thank you."

The carriage pulled away. At the end of the street it turned, quickly vanishing into the darkness.

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Eliza sits with the cat in her lap. The creature is sleek, black and white, its face thrust into the warmth of her thighs, purring beneath her hand. Eliza is tired. Her body aches, the flesh on her arms shrinking away. Her hand, in the soft coat, is strung with bones. Years weigh heavy, but she is only sixteen. The boy before her, poring over his sketch, looks very young and wholesome. Despite herself, and despite his association with Charles and Edgar Marks, Eliza warms to him. At the opera—yes, at the opera he had plucked her back. The creature had listened, heeded him.

Will looks up, clearing his throat. He wants to talk about it too. She nods.

"When I was ten," he says, "I saw hosts of angels in a tree in Peckham Rye."

Eliza laughs. She presses her hand to her mouth, seeing his face.

"Peckham Rye?" she asks. "Why would angels visit Peckham Rye?"

But he is afraid she is making fun of him.

"Will," she says. "You must help me."

Then he looks very grave.

"The spirits are preying on me," she says. "Do you understand? My brother thinks to use me to contact the spirits, because he is too blind and cloddish to see them himself. He imagines he can make me his medium."

Will still stares.

"What did the angels say?" she asks.

Will opens his mouth, closes it again. Eliza can see the thoughts running like mice in the burrows of his brain.

"Nothing," he said. "Not to me. They were singing." Then—"Are you sure?"

The medication lies heavily in her stomach. In the morning, she swallowed it without a murmur, but the fluid corrodes her body. Her chamber pot is marbled with threads of blood. The doorways of her mind bang open and shut. Her gums ache, and her tongue is slick and sweet. She is too weary to talk. But she must.

"Your brother is afraid you have a mental malady, which he is trying to correct."

She loses patience.

"Do you believe that?"

"Eliza—what can I do?"

"Help me. Help me escape."

Will stares. His hands are shaking. He puts down his charcoal, glancing over his shoulder at the door.

"Where would I take you? What would you do?"

"You would not take me anywhere. All I need is your help to escape the house."

For a moment she thinks he will agree, but footsteps thud along the passageway and his face closes. Hurriedly he takes up the charcoal again.

The door opens abruptly. Charles wears about him a cloak of spirits, if only he could see it. A patchwork of capons and cocks, lambs, suckling pigs, hogs, pigeons, pheasants, white calves, and swans. They bulge under his skin.

"Eliza, dear Eliza," he says. "How are you this morning, my darling?" He peers over Will's shoulder and frowns.

"It is not a pretty picture," he says. He lifts the sketch and turns it about.

Eliza sees a gaunt white face on the paper, an ancient, with black about the eyes. She looks at Will, and for a moment their eyes lock.

He does know. Yes, he knows. Eliza is seized by a moment's bright hope. But Will turns away, murmurs with her brother. The walls creak. The house is breaking up.

Then they are alone again. The barred window cuts up a vista of blossom and roses in the patchwork of gardens, the river a dull bronze glint between the trees. Swallows skim past. Distantly, she hears shouts, the rumble of carts. Beyond the houses fields unfold, the river slips into the sea. The tall ships drift, black and white, on the salt-water swell, and the seagulls shriek.

"Eliza—Eliza." Will is speaking to her. She switches back. Her poisoned body is locked up in the yellow room. The barriers in her mind are breaking down, but the locks about her physical self are absolute. Despair rises in a tide.

The cat digs one claw through her dress, into skin. Pain pricks.

"Have you seen my cat?" she asks.

"Of course." Will nods. "See—I have drawn him into the picture."

She lifts the cat from her lap, the warm, curled ball of it. She takes the cat's chin in her hand, lifting its face towards the boy.

"Look," she says. And William sees.

"It was my brother's idea. He wanted to know if the cat's dreams originated in its mind, or if it could see spirits beyond the limits of a man's vision. He wanted to know what would happen if he dosed the cat with opium. Would it still hallucinate once its eyes were plucked out? Charles is a cruel man, but he is also a coward. He hadn't the stomach for the job, but he instructed Edgar Marks, who has fewer fancies, but fewer qualms too. Marks put out the cat's eyes and stitched the lids shut. When I cried, Charles told me the lesser creatures were insensible to pain. He told me they reacted to the stimulation of physical damage like an automaton."

Will's face has paled. He is shocked. He licks his lips. His breath has quickened, and he runs his hand through his hair. Eliza understands how much the revelation has disturbed him. She is acute to the sensitivity of his feelings, and his outrage.

"You must help me," she says again. "Will, you must help me."

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The pebble arced away from his hand, cast out into the Thames, plopping into the glassy surface with a robust sploosh. He remembered drawing her mouth, the shape of thin lips when she said,

“Help me.” So convincing. Angrily he hurled another stone out into the water.

“Damn them all!” he said, his young face set hard.

The busy ferry boats moved back and forth across the river. At the bank below him, an empty boat waited for passengers. Its bow bobbed, splashing the shallow water.

Earlier that day he had resolved to help Eliza Rose. Even if it cost him his future, the apprenticeship he deserved.

“You must help me,” she had said. Then Bishop had appeared in the doorway. Eliza pressed her lips shut, and hummed.

“That’s enough for today, young William,” Bishop said. “Come with me.”

As he left her, Will looked back at Eliza, tried to convey that she could trust him. She smiled.

On the stairs they passed Jane Marks. Will noted a darkness around her eyes, a certain fatigue. The fingers of her left hand covertly brushed against those of Bishop’s as they passed each other.

In the garden, Edgar Marks collected flowers. The pruning shears glistened.

“The best flowers come out in the spring,” he said.

Charles Bishop waved a hand, dismissive.

Will asked, “How is one flower better than another?”

Marks raised an eyebrow. “My God. A philosopher!”

He snipped another stem and raised the flower to his nose. He slit the calyx with a scalpel, and pressed the bisected stem in a book.

“We plant a garden for our pleasure. Yet the pleasing forms and fragrance are designed to entice insects. That is all.”

“Yes, yes,” Bishop said impatiently, “that’s all very interesting, I’m sure. But now then, Will.”

Bishop sighed, composed himself. He dabbed his face with a white shirt-sleeve, but sweat glistened on the powder.

“Will, you take an interest in my patients. I am wondering if I should involve you in a new procedure. We have made preparations. Our grandest experiment yet—yes.”

Will said, “I do not think I care for your experiments.”

The sharpness of tone took Bishop by surprise.

Marks turned his attention from the plants.

“What’s troubling you?”

“So what did you use to cut out the cat’s eyes?” Will burst out.

Will had surprised himself, but the greater surprise was the look of astonishment that appeared on the face of Edgar Marks.

"Dear boy, what do you think of me? I did no such thing. Do you think us monsters?"

Will looked nervously from Marks to Bishop.

Bishop seemed unsure how to respond.

Confused, Will asked, "Then what...?"

Marks began to speak but faltered, apparently unable or unwilling to say.

"No," Will said hesitantly. A new, colder thought rose in his mind. "Not.... She wouldn't have...."

His tongue felt still and heavy in his mouth.

Marks and Bishop exchanged a glance.

"It was one of the first symptoms of her deteriorating mental state," Marks said at last.

Bishop appeared to be in pain, pressed a hand against his belly. "This talk does me no good," he complained. "Say no more, Edgar."

Will felt his knees would buckle.

Bishop laid a hand heavily on the boy's shoulder. "Do not think badly of Eliza. Edgar is painting an unpleasant version of the truth. It is my belief, my strong belief, that she is not responsible for her actions. There is a darkness inside of her. An alien spirit has taken residence, consumes her from within. All my efforts are directed towards evicting the demon. I will draw it out if it takes every ounce of my strength and knowledge. I am determined to free her and I promise you I will succeed."

Will nodded, trying to take it all in. "You said that you plan a new experiment?"

Bishop said, "I think, perhaps, in your current frame of mind, it would be better not to involve you. Eliza has confused you. Perhaps it is even the work of the demon again. I require someone focused and resolute."

"But if it is to help Eliza...."

"No. My mind is made up. We can use Edgar's sister, Jane. She may not have your flair for depicting scenes from the imagination. But she is a competent artist. And she will do whatever I ask of her."

"Will you at least tell me what you have planned?"

"No. I think not. You are very young and it was wrong of me to burden you. Clear your mind of it. Go home to your family."

And so he had been rejected. He went to collect his things. From the upstairs window he saw that Bishop and Marks were arguing. He strained to hear their words. He ran down the stairs and through to the kitchen at the back of the house. Quietly, he opened the door a fraction.

Marks was speaking. "...involve my sister. Risk your own life if you must, but not hers!"

"She can make up her own mind."

"You make up other people's minds for them. How I ever let you drag me into this I cannot fathom."

"I will free Eliza from this possession by whatever means necessary."

"She is the only one among us who still has a mind of her own."

"Calm down, Edgar. Don't be ridiculous. The demon corrupts her mind."

"And which demon are we considering now?"

"Edgar, I do not care for your tone!"

"All right, that was uncalled for. But surely we need a considered scientific approach. Have you abandoned rational thought? Perhaps we should try blistering. It worked for Mrs. Aykebourn. A constant discharge of fluids from the neck and head."

"I'll hear no more. The creature that possesses her is not a creature of science. I am convinced of it now more than ever. Science has led us so far, but now we must employ other powers. My mind is made up. Help me or stay out of my way."

Will heard heavy footsteps on the gravel pathway, coming closer then moving away. He dared to glance through a window and saw Bishop striding off. Quickly he closed the door and moved to the front of the house. Bishop almost tripped over him as he entered.

"Are you still here?"

"Y-yes, Dr. Bishop. I am sorry for what I said earlier. Perhaps you might reconsider, and..."

"Go home!"

He had wandered for hours, trying to make sense of it all. He threw another stone into the river, unsettling a gull.

There was no way to know who to believe. If he had not challenged Marks and Bishop, they would have involved him, and at least he would have known their plans. Now he could not distinguish truth from deception, sane from insane. He looked upwards to the heavens and asked for guidance. The gull swooped

down towards him, then flew off towards Soho. For a moment his thoughts lifted with the bird, throwing great wings back from his shoulders. Imagination fired, his feet lifted from the ground, and he soared into the sky. A cool breeze came up from nowhere, carrying him in the direction of home.

- - -

They take her in the night. The house creaks, rafters shifting; the stones turn and contract. The other lunatics sense the fractures in the walls and she hears them moan. Somewhere a woman is crying. On the second floor, Mr. Scott spells out a semaphore with his fingers. Worms run in the beams beneath her feet. The still surface of the house does not disguise the restless unravelling.

"Come along, Eliza." Charles is nervous. His face is white as the moon and his hands are icy on her arms. The women are faceless behind her. They usher her up and up, to the topmost room. She is sat upon a chair, and her hands are bound behind her.

"No. No." Charles has a bottle. She can smell the poison. Her body reacts, a convulsive panic.

"No more, no," she repeats. But Charles cannot see her any more. He doesn't hear. He thrusts the neck of the bottle between her lips and one of the women grips her chin.

"There," Charles says. "It is done." He dismisses the women. Then he leaves the room, locking the door behind him.

Eliza waits. The shutters are fastened but moonlight presses through the chinks in the wood. Beneath her bare feet, the rough boards are soft and warm. The liquid congeals on her chin, thick as treacle. Her teeth ache, as though the poison is eating her gums. Her tongue and lips are very cold. Her heart-beat races, and slows. So slow. The space between each beat begins to stretch.

In the corners of the room, the darkness gathers. Voices whisper but she cannot hear what they say.

"Speak up," she says. "You are of no use to me." Then, timidly, "I am losing my hair and my fingernails are yellow. What would my mother say?"

The voices hiss. The shutters rattle impatiently.

"Untie me," she says. "Untie me." Fear crawls over her, threatening to swallow her whole. But she is beyond fear.

"Now," she barks. And they crawl from the corners. They press their bodies to the floor, not daring to look at her. Quick fingers work at the rope. It drops to the floor, something dead.

Eliza walks to the window. The moonlight, tangible now, claws between the panels, the wood splintering. She steps through, past the bars and locks.

Down in the garden, an unnatural darkness reigns absolute. In front of her, the lantern moon swings back and forth. The leaves of the fruit trees rattle. She knows where to go when the streets branch away. Two men sleep on the pavement by a sedan chair, their mouths open. A carriage passes, but the hooves of the horses make no noise. A child in a house wakes up with a bad dream and roses in a garden fold their petals when she passes. Too many shadows. They fork from her feet.

The house is perfectly quiet. Eliza knocks on the door.

She knocks again.

When nobody answers, she bangs on the shuttered windows with her fist. A shift—she is hot and cold at once. The night air is heavy as water in her lungs, but perspiration burns on her face.

She bangs again. Then the door is open and Eliza steps inside.

They are all asleep. She walks among the beds. The mother and father lie against each other, the man's hand resting on the woman's hair. The boys share a bed. The warm, insensible bodies lie abandoned under the drab blankets. They are so far away.

"Will, wake up." She shakes him. "Wake up. I have escaped. Will."

But he is heavy as clay, inert as stone. She cannot rouse him. Her body begins to shake. She cannot hold out much longer.

"Wake up, wake up."

"Lady," a voice says. Eliza is startled. The small voice breaks a spell. The home solidifies, the threadbare carpet, the pictures upon the wall. A tiny boy stands in his white shirt by the side of the bed. He stares at her, eyes round as pennies.

"Lady," he repeats. "Who are you?"

"Robert?" she asks softly. "I cannot wake your brother." The little boy turns from her slowly. He places his hands on Will's face. Instantly, Will opens his eyes.

"Will," Robert whispers. "A beautiful lady has come to see you."

Will sits up suddenly. His eyes fix on Eliza standing like an angel at the foot of his bed.

"Eliza," he says. Eliza reads the questions running through his mind but she shakes her head.

"Help me now," she says. "Come with me."

Will jumps from the bed, transfixed by the unexpected presence.

"Where?" he asks. "What shall you do? Stay here. My parents will know what to do."

But Eliza shakes her head, pressing her finger to her lips. She gestures him to follow. Will looks at Robert, uncertain.

Robert says, "You must help the lady. Go now. There isn't much time." He throws himself eagerly into her arms. She holds him while Will pulls on his clothes and boots, then returns the infant to bed, where he immediately falls asleep.

Then they run out into the night together. She leads Will through the maze of streets.

"We're going back to the house," he says at last, in confusion. "Why are we going back?" His voice is anxious. He is fretting, almost in tears. But Eliza is resolute and he cannot break away. She takes him along an alleyway, into the darkness of the garden behind the house. In the garret window above, hot yellow light burns, reaching out to them. She raises her face.

"I don't understand," he moans. "What are we doing?"

Eliza is afraid he has not the resolution to help her. Like a little boy, he sniffs and wipes his nose on the sleeve of his jacket. She takes his hand. She presses the boy's palm to her chest, where the heart-beat is slow. She takes his face in her thin, cold hands and kisses him. His mouth is very moist and warm.

Then the heart-beat stops. The darkness reaches up from the ground and pulls her under. She leaves Will with empty arms.

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A short, gasping scream erupted from the garret window. Will looked up towards the light.

"Eliza?" he whispered. An impossible assumption. Had some measure of time escaped him?

He heard a low chanting, voices murmuring in unison. He felt disoriented, as if some force were bending the fabric of the world so it failed to align correctly.

He took a step towards the house. He shivered, something ice-cold rippling through him. Determined, he seized a deep breath, then ran to the house, but all the doors were securely locked. Desperately he searched for another way. He remembered a huge tree grew close to the garret. At the trunk, he scrambled in the darkness for a handhold, found a low branch, and pulled himself up.

An old apple tree; untended, it had sprawled, branches pressing and rattling against the back wall of the house. But it was no easy climb. On the first bough, Will took off his jacket. It dropped from his hand, snagging on a branch to hang like a dead bird. In the cool night air, his body sweated. Twigs scratched.

His body ached with the effort of testing and stretching. Half-way up, with fragments of bark stinging his eyes, and smarting from a hundred tiny lesions on his hands and arms, he nearly lost heart. The foliage was dense, but above he could see pearls of yellow light leaking from the garret shutters. The leaves stirred. The chanting ceased momentarily, and he strained to hear a low moan. He knew he could not turn back.

Up he climbed, his mind blanked to everything but the painful ascent. The gardens of London spread below him in the darkness, the web of walls and alleyways, the arteries of roads, the distant beads of gas-lights in a string. How peaceful it looked. How still. And yet within how many walls were children marked with hunger, blighted with overwork, how many mothers had nothing but gin to tease the palates of their infants. He looked again, seeing a hellish patchwork of need and disease, the cesspits, the mills churning in the east, scattering smoke and stink.

Hanging high above the city, he suffered a sudden vertigo. The ground seemed to drop away. The wind billowed suddenly with a slow power, catching hold of the damaged shutters and shaking them. Candlelight flickered inside, but he needed to climb higher to look down into the room.

The branches were thinning now and might not support him. Still, he inched further out until he perched no more than four feet from the window. The shroud of darkness still clung to him. He looked into the room and swallowed hard.

Eliza was laid out on a table, surrounded by dark figures dressed in long robes. Her body, held by ropes at her wrists and ankles, jerked in the throes of a fit. Will's sketches of the spirit images and Jane's portrait had been placed about her. And there were dozens of mirrors, casting the images and the candlelight back and forth, distorted and inflamed.

Bishop stood over Eliza. He forced medication into her, while the others continued chanting.

He called out, "Hear me, spirit voices! I will know you. I will know the creature that lurks inside this girl, that pulls her down into madness."

He cast handfuls of some black dust across a row of candles, a line of fire erupting as the dust burned.

Eliza screamed, straining against her bonds. As he watched, Will saw darkness visibly closing in all around the garret. He counted about seven men, besides Bishop and Jane and the poor wretch spread on the table. He could no longer discern the branches of the tree in front of him, nor the brickwork of the house. Just the light from that one room.

He looked into a cauldron, a pocket inferno in an infinite night.

Bishop circled the table, reciting incantations Will could not understand. Then Bishop called out, "I know that you can be drawn away. By capturing your likeness, we have captured you. But you escape us each time and return to the host. If mere paper does not hold you, if flesh and blood is needed, then that is what I offer."

Bishop threw off his robe. Jane Marks stepped forward. From a large wooden dish, she poured a red fluid over Bishop's shoulders. Will recoiled, thinking that it was blood. Then he whispered, "No, it is only paint."

The group continued chanting, some circling.

One of them brought forward more of the wooden dishes, placing them within Jane's reach. She dipped a rag into one and daubed a light auburn colour across Bishop's right shoulder-blade—the colour of Eliza's hair. Then away to the left, a pale pink colour, almost white, like her skin.

Eliza became calm.

With a fine brush, Jane etched in solid black lines. Will's eyes widened. Darkness crept along the floorboards in the room. Did they not see it? No, they were transfixed by the dark play enacted above Eliza's prone form. He tried to call out but his voice could not penetrate the heavy air, sounded distant even to his own ears.

Eliza's likeness grew more convincing with each passing moment. Will knew Bishop's intention; Bishop thought himself stronger than she, strong enough to contain the demon. An organic canvas. But Will suspected that Eliza had an inner strength far greater than Bishop's.

He wanted to warn them, but could only watch as the tableau unfolded.

A black shape swallowed the picture. For a moment the scene was entirely dark and all sound blotted out. The candles guttered—and rose again. A woman screamed—Jane, he thought.

He struggled to make out what was happening. A dark figure rose from Eliza's prone form. A twisting, sinuous substance, dense like fleece. It was drawn, slowly, from Eliza's mouth. She choked and struggled, her jaws strained wide. Her eyes rolled back in her skull, white as eggs. A ribbon of blood unravelled at the corner of her mouth. Against their bonds, her bones cracked and creaked.

How long, how long could she bear it? Will was gripped in an agony of indecision. The others, shocked from their ritual, stood and stared at the thick, unearthly fabric rising up from the tethered girl.

Then Eliza's mouth snapped shut. A long sigh, audible, escaped from her lips, and her body seemed to shrink upon the table. Her face was white and blue.

The spirit hovered above her, gathering substance. A face assembled itself, a suggestion of limbs, a mouth. It possessed its own faint yellowish radiance, sulphurous, which made the candles dim.

Its eyes fixed on Bishop, and the painting adorning the expanse of his upper body. Will fancied the creature smiled. But Bishop's courage failed. He drew back. Ineffectively he covered himself with his arms. He shook his head. The spirit's eyes flared, like white-hot coals. A cloak lit upon Bishop's shoulders, a menagerie of animals and birds squawking and lowing. They peeped from the bulges of Bishop's flesh, moving under the surface of his painted skin. He staggered forward, crashing into a row of mirrors, which fell to the ground, shattering. He began to cough and retch. He choked, bent over, his hands clutching his own throat. A bird pushed its way over his tongue and through his teeth. It flew from his mouth, twittering, around the room. Then another, and another. The room was full of panicked birds banging against the walls. Jane Marks shrieked again and the men fell about in disarray, waving away the birds as Bishop thrashed and writhed on the floor.

Then the birds were gone.

And Bishop sat up, breathing heavily, in a pool of fleshy red vomit. His customary wig had dropped to the floor. He had a large ulcer on the side of his head.

Then the spirit turned, its body undulating like silk. It fixed its gaze on a man visible behind Eliza's head. It was Edgar Marks, his hood fallen back. Marks shook his head, seemingly baffled. The spirit mewed. A long hand stretched from the spirit form, seizing Marks by the throat. Effortlessly it lifted him up and threw him back against the wall.

Havoc broke loose. A fat man, the gentleman Will had seen in the coffee house dining with Bishop so many weeks ago, collapsed in a curious heap on the floor, as though the knots of his joints had unfastened. Jane Marks hammered on the door, struggling with the locks, trying to escape. But the door refused to budge. Downstairs, on the lower floors, the lunatics were silent.

Jane Marks' pots of paint upturned on the table, smashed by an unseen hand, spilling pools of blue and pink and auburn. The candles fizzed and flared. The creature reared up and snapped forward. One of the men looked down in astonishment at the gaping hole in his chest.

Then darkness again. The voices ceased. Will could hear no pleas or cries. The garret was pitch black, thick as felt, blocking him out. But he could hear heavy thumps. The walls shook. The moments stretched. Inside the room the pounding went on and on. The random percussion of flesh and bone against the resistant surfaces of wood and stone. And what of Eliza, caught up inside?

Then the sound stopped. Everything was still. A single candle flame rose over the table, close to Eliza's face. Her lips were white as chalk. Her hair glittered, threads of gold.

Will gasped. His chest hurt. How long had he held his breath? The darkness shifted over her body. The spirit. It was still there, tied by a thread.

Some slight sound escaped Will's lips and the spirit looked at him through the broken shutters. It perceived his presence, perched precariously in the tree.

The creature curled. Balled like a fist it punched the broken shutters, sending splinter shards out into the night. Will screamed. He was pushed from the tree. His body reacted instinctively. Hands, fingers, nails, he grasped and clutched at the tree, scrabbling for a tenuous hold to save himself. But the spirit continued its attack relentlessly. It plucked and bit, prising his fingers from the branch. Still struggling, he fell from the tree. Down and down. He banged into branches. Twigs snagged his hair and clothes and raked his face.

"Eliza!" he shouted. He tumbled away from the branches, into open space.

He fell for a long time. He waited for the ground to rise and meet him, curiously tranquil now. Strange fingers pressed inside his skull. The being riffled through his thoughts, tipping out the draw-

ers of his memories, pawing over oddities, a day's gems, the hidden detritus at the back of his mind. The angels sang in Peckham Rye. His family laughed over stockings and tallow candles. Robert touched his face. And suddenly Will began to sense something of the creature's nature. Angrily it tried to assert itself, pushing into every corner of his mind. Like so many fragments in a window of coloured glass, Will's psyche shattered under the creature's onslaught.

He tumbled again, clutching desperately at emptiness. Was he still falling, in an unending embrace with this creature? It knew Eliza well. He could sense her presence still. He took strength. He found her memories and gathered them up. Then memories of his own. Piece by piece he reassembled himself. And he felt the creature turning away, trying to escape, driven by a desperate hunger.

The ground received him gently. The garden was soft and safe as his mother's lap. The cool grass soothed his hot, damaged skin. Way up, the moon came into focus, clear and bright. The trees curved over him. The garret was dark, the night still. Then a thin white angel slipped from the window. She looked very frail and new. Her wings were white as flour, like gauze. Treacle-coloured hair fanned.

The dark force hurtled upwards, towards the frail spirit. Will could see it, like a bull. Would it overpower her again? But it faltered and thinned, dispelled and drawn apart.

It vanished.

Eliza smiled a ghostly smile. "Goodbye, Will," she called.

She drifted on the currents of air above the city. She laughed, floating and turning, carried over the garden.

"Eliza!" he shouted out. "Will I see you again?"

He began to run, trying to keep up with the translucent being rising away from him.

"Yes, Will, yes!" she called back, her voice very tiny now. She began to sing. The delicate, joyful songs of the dead echoed in William's heart.

- - -

Will walks among the crowd—more a rowdy mob. They push and shove each other. They jeer. And laugh like the insane. He sees a gin bottle raised eagerly to a mouth missing teeth.

“Come on,” the man cries out, waving the bottle as if it were a flag. “Show us what we’ve come for.”

On this blisteringly hot day, late in August, they are here to celebrate a hanging.

He has travelled from Great Queen Street, Lincoln’s Inn Fields, if not to celebrate then at least to witness. It was good of Mr. Basire to let him leave early this day. In a curious gesture of good faith, Bishop has signed a bill for a premium of fifty guineas, enabling him to enter the workshop of the master-engraver. It was not the painter’s studio Will had hoped for, but still it was a good choice. He felt confident he could use the medium to capture his visions. So many visions, now. And some day he will be known as one of its finest craftsmen. He is sure of it.

There will be thirteen hangings this day, though only one is known to him. Dr. Charles Bishop, charged with the murder of seven fellow doctors and an artist and the poisoning of his sister, Eliza. All of them found dead in the locked garret of his home.

“Read the true story,” a voice cries out.

He buys a copy. A sensational account, printed for distribution this afternoon. Ink has spread on the soft, cheap paper and odd letters are indistinct. *A Full and True Account of A Gentleman Apprehended for Murther, the Practise of Witchcraft, The Perversion of the Honourable Profession of Science, and The Cruel and Unnatural Treatment of his Sister.*

The tale is packed with salacious details. Will reads that a young man informed on Bishop, telling the authorities exactly what to look for. The murderer will be hanged, and then buried at a crossroads so the ghost may never find a way home.

They haul the man up on to the platform. The crowd cheers. Bishop struggles. He is gaunt, all flabbiness gone. His finest suit doesn’t fit now, but he has a new wig and a clean white shirt. The months of incarceration have reduced him. Or perhaps something else has taken its toll. Will is uneasy about the justice of the sentence, considering the truth, which bears little resemblance to the account he holds in his hands. Perhaps Bishop had genuinely hoped to help his sister, the sick Eliza Rose.

Even now, he cannot decide where the true sickness lay.

“Do not torment yourself, Will,” she says. She can see the windings of his thoughts. “Do not pray for him. He doesn’t merit pity.”

“There is not a soul among us that cannot be pitied,” Will answers softly. Sometimes he tires of her.

He visited Bishop, in Newgate. The noise and stink of the prison filled him with dismay, the press of unwashed bodies in the cells, the uproar, the scraping of fetters on stone floors. For the first months, Bishop had paid the rent on a cell in Keeper's House, away from the poorer criminals. Towards the end he was moved to a plainer cell, when his money failed, though he never descended to the lower wards, to the stew of lice and typhus.

"Will, my boy," Bishop said. He was sitting behind a plain table, an uneaten cob of coarse bread on a wooden trencher before him. "I did not expect to see you here."

Will nodded. Bishop must have known he had told the authorities, but oddly he didn't seem angry. His skin was very yellow, the ulcer on his head unhealed.

"Why have you come?" Bishop asked gently.

Will twisted his hat in his hands.

"I still do not understand," Will said, all of a sudden. "I still cannot see. I wrestle, sir, with what I saw. The dark beast, you know, it rose from her body and it seized me. Yes! It knocked me from a tree and then it disappeared, and now I have...."

"And now you have Eliza instead."

Will stared at his hands.

"Yes, yes," Bishop said. "I can see her. Like a briar. Like mistletoe upon your very soul."

Will frowned, very troubled.

"I have to confess to my gross mistake, William," Bishop said. "The blood of Jane, and Edgar and the others does lie on my hands. I was held to account and I am justly sentenced. The spiritual force, you understand, was not a being in possession of Eliza; it was part of Eliza herself. And I drew it out."

"No," Will said. "No, that isn't so. I saw you, sir—I saw you feed her poison and lock her away. If she had a darkness inside her, you nursed it. You are the beast, not she."

But Bishop smiled and shrugged. Curiously, Will could not help but like him then. He had a gravity Will had overlooked.

The Old Bailey sessions were tumultuous, the newsletters gory with the lowliest details. Will testified with horror in his heart, but he didn't speak of the last night in the tree, above the garret. On the day of the hanging, the bells rang muffled from the churches. Will crept among the crowd in the Press Yard where the prisoners' chains were struck off. A procession of carts set out, Bishop's status according him a carriage at the front. How hot it was, the crowd in

a riot, stinking vegetables slung at the miserable wretches due to hang. Many were drinking gin. Dutch courage. A young girl, no older than he was, wept upon the cart with her hands on her face. The carts stopped at St Sepulchre's, for prayers, and then proceeded down Snow Hill, High Holborn, and finally to Tyburn. He pushed his way through the crowd, determined and out of breath.

"Look," she says.

Will is brought back to the moment. At the triple tree the crowd throngs. Hawkers sell refreshments. Before Will's eyes, a young ragamuffin slides a handkerchief from a man's pocket. He can sense Eliza's elation, her moment of triumph. Honey and wormwood. Sugar and bitterness. The perfume drifts about him, like a veil.

"No," he says, but he does look. Seeing Will talk to himself, frowning, an old woman beside him glances over. So he thrusts forward through the crowd as the noose is tightened around the murderer's neck.

At last he is close enough to see the doctor's eyes, drained of colour, almost totally black. The murderer sees him, returns his look, and for the briefest moment, smiles in recognition.

"Go swiftly to Hell," Will says.

But the words are not his own.

The bodies drop, and kick. A low sound rises from the assembly, like a groan. The young girl takes a long time to die. Then the noise rises again. At a signal from the hangman, an unseemly struggle breaks out as relatives seize the bodies of their loved ones. A man in a dusty black suit directs the cutting down of Bishop's corpse, to be placed in a waiting carriage.

Will sighs. He sees no ghost. Momentarily he is arrested by the spectacle of a young woman placing Bishop's lifeless hand upon her bosom.

He leaves the crowd behind. Climbs a steep hill, tiring under the sun. Eliza walks alongside him, untroubled by the heat. She sings, and speaks of visions. She is a little girl lost in a forest of beasts. She is a rose, with a worm.

At the summit he rests a moment. He reaches out and takes her hand. He presses her palm to his chest, where his heart beats fast. She concentrates, trying to feel it through her fingertips. But such physical sensations are difficult now.

"It seems I have lost your heart," she says.

“Would I have any more luck,” he asks, “if I searched for yours?”

She smiles. “Oh, it’s out there somewhere,” she says wistfully.

He lets go of her hand. He surveys the scene, London sprawled below them in all its glory.

He says, “Perhaps some day I shall go in search of it.”

Then she flies away, like a bird, through the darkening skies, letting William turn towards the close, warm hearth of his home.

# Electroencephalography

Darby Larson

## PART ONE

On a Wednesday afternoon in the middle of summer, on Seventh Street just outside his house, as he was walking home from the grocery store, he almost tripped over a cardboard box full of nuts and bolts and large metal springs. He set his groceries down and inspected the contents. Each spring was about a foot long, six inches in diameter, sturdy. The nuts and bolts were the size of fingers with rings.

At that moment, Dean decided he would build a robot, a human-sized robot that would perform tasks like loading and unloading the dishwasher and dragging the garbage cans out to the street the night before trash day. He only needed to acquire energy converters and metal skin. He set the box in his garage, because in his garage, he decided, was where the robot would be built.

The effort involved would be considerable, but the reward exquisite. He wouldn't lift a finger for the rest of his life.

- - -

Dean's house was one of only three along Seventh Street. His father owned all three houses, suburban replicas of each other painted slightly different shades of gray, and lived in the house next to Dean's. Across the street was a field of weeds, home to a family of moles. Seth, Dean's brother, lived in the third house with his wife Misty and six-year-old daughter Michelle.

Dean regarded Seth as an idiot who would rather spend his time laboring than stopping to think about what he could be doing so as to not have to labor so much.

Seth was a welder by profession and ran a small auto-body and welding shop from his garage. Dean had no profession and lived off an inheritance entrusted to him and Seth two years ago when their mother had died of heart failure.

The day after Dean found the box of parts, he went next door to his brother's house and made a deal with Seth to deliver several mangled pieces of sheet metal, taken mostly from wrecked Cadillacs, to his house the following day, in exchange for his fixing his brother's broken computer.

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The morning after he fixed Seth's computer, Dean walked outside to find a large pile of scrap metal on his driveway. A Post-It note was attached to the pile. It read:

thank you Dean for fixing my computer, it works great, you are truly a genius, here's the metal you wanted, I gave you a little extra, love your grateful brother, Seth

Dean needed the metal to be inside his garage because inside his garage was where the robot was going to be built, not out on the driveway. Did Seth think he was going to build a robot out on the driveway for all the world to see?

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Neal, their father, a skinny man with long silver hair, was a genius like himself, and so it was his father who Dean approached about energy converters.

Dean entered his father's house and found him sitting in the living room in his favorite leather recliner, reading a newspaper.

"Dad, I'm looking for some kind of converter that will produce electroencephalographic current."

"Check the basement."

- - -

Dean carried a cardboard box full of energy converters from his father's basement to his garage and set it down next to the other cardboard box full of nuts and bolts and springs. Each converter was a small metallic box about the size of a Rubik's Cube, with a tiny spindle for winding it up and several wires protruding from two opposite ends.

The scrap metal was still out on the driveway. He walked out and picked up a small piece of metal, brought it into his garage, and placed it next to the two boxes. He looked back out at the pile of metal. At that moment, he began to get a real sense of the amount of physical effort he would have to exhaust in order to build the robot. The design and schematics were in his head, no problem, but the task itself would require the use of welding tools, a hammer, wrenches, a soldering iron, forearm muscles.

He sat down at the desk he kept in his garage, rested his head on the wood surface next to his computer, and fell asleep.

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Neal and Seth were in his garage when he awoke. They were standing over the two cardboard boxes, looking down at them. He

asked them what they were doing. They said they had come to ask for a favor: would he mind watching Seth's daughter Michelle tomorrow while the two of them went to the city to salvage some metal from a recent automobile accident.

"Where will Misty be?" Dean asked. Getting her hair done. He thought quickly, then said that he would watch Michelle in exchange for them building his robot for him. He would draw up the specs, his father would have no trouble interpreting them, and Seth could weld and hammer.

"I'm in. Sounds fun," his brother said.

"What do you need a robot for?" his father said.

Dean decided he would baby-sit his niece at his father's house next door because there was more food there and Michelle, who already weighed a hundred and ten pounds, ate more than the average six-year-old. They also agreed that Dean would watch her for two days, the first day while Seth and Neal went to the city and the second day while they built his robot.

## PART TWO

On Dean's first day of baby-sitting Michelle, he let her play in the back yard of his father's house while he read a newspaper in his father's leather recliner, a piece about how corporate greed was destroying America, about how greed was one of the most primal sins.

Michelle came into the house, leaving muddy footprints all over the kitchen floor, then took a pint of strawberry ice cream from the freezer.

In the bathroom, Dean ran the bath water, took her clothes off, and set her in the tub while she ate ice cream with a large metal spoon. He went back to the living room and finished reading while she took a bath.

Hours later, he awoke on his father's couch to silence, sat up, and went to the bathroom to check on Michelle.

She was floating face-down in the tub, the empty ice cream pint bobbing next to her head. He took her wrist and felt for a pulse. Nothing.

Her heavy, soaking body dripped as he pulled her from the tub and carried her to the basement, where he laid her on her back on his father's old table saw. Sawdust and spilt motor oil covered the basement floor. Above a dusty green sofa, a few energy converters sat on a shelf next to some ancient textbooks. A large iron safe

about the size of a miniature refrigerator, with a combination lock and four little iron legs, stood next to the table saw.

Dean quickly took a couple of energy converters from the shelf, set them next to Michelle's head, picked up his father's electric drill, and switched it on.

He dug the spinning drill bit into her head a few inches above her left ear, pulled it out, then dug into her head again an inch above the first hole.

Using a soldering iron—though not entirely sure how well solder would attach to anything biological—he began to connect the wires from an energy converter to Michelle's neurons, now exposed through the holes in her head. The solder seemed to attach okay.

He made an incorrect connection and, with frustration, disconnected the entire converter. Without thinking, he set it down, wires tipped with hot solder, atop the iron safe next to the table saw. The safe suddenly came to life, turned itself around on its four stubby legs, and waddled away, up the stairs and out of sight. Dean watched it curiously, then returned to Michelle's head and began connecting a new converter to her neurons.

Every electroencephalographic energy converter is pre-wound, lasts a few hours, and then needs to be wound again. The safe would wind down eventually. So would Michelle.

Dean took off his watch—a wind-up watch—a gift from his deceased mother, and carefully disassembled it. He rigged the gears of the watch to the small spindle that stuck out of the converter, then reassembled the watch.

As he made the last connection of converter wire to the final neuron, Michelle opened her eyes.

He mounted the energy converter to the outside of her head and let her sit up. She hopped off the table and ran back up the stairs. Dean fell onto his father's dusty old green sofa and, stricken with exhaustion, fell immediately asleep.

- - -

Later that evening, when Seth came by to pick Michelle up, he asked about the large metal box attached to the side of her head.

"It's nothing," Dean said. "Just a little experiment, you wouldn't understand, and if you wouldn't mind winding up the watch attached to the box before she goes to sleep tonight, I'd appreciate it."

- - -

On his second day of baby-sitting Michelle, Dean brought her back to his house and they sat in the corner of the garage while Neal and Seth built his robot.

The noise in the garage, heavy steel against heavy steel, soon became unbearable, so he moved to the front lawn, sat down against a tree, and watched Michelle run in circles around the pile of scrap metal still in his driveway. He drifted in and out of sleep. At one point, his niece stopped running, instinctively picked up a cockroach that had scurried out from under the pile, shoved it in her mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

- - -

It was dark when Dean awoke, staring up into the tree he had fallen asleep against. He stood, stretched, and walked past the diminished pile of scrap metal in his driveway. The mood was quiet; everyone had left. He looked into his garage. His robot stood motionless in the exact center of the floor, staring back at him.

## PART THREE

When Neal's wife Angel had died of heart failure two years ago, a few weeks after the funeral, he had dug up her remains in a fury of mourning and brought her back to his house in the middle of the night. He had cut off her head, attached an electroencephalographic energy converter to her brain, attached her head to the top of an old mahogany grandfather clock, and attached the spindle of the converter to the pendulum of the clock. Since then, she had remained attached to the clock against the wall in their bedroom, unbeknownst to the rest of the family.

Early on, she was content, talking with him about current events and laughing at his jokes, but over time she grew agitated, stopped responding to him, cried violently for no reason, tried to bite his finger whenever it was in range, screamed at the sight of him.

He stopped winding her up as often as before and began to relish the time she was left unwound.

Worn out from helping Seth build Dean's silly robot, he stood in front of her now, debating whether to wind her up a little. It had been at least a few months since she had last been ticking. The last time, he had tried to gag her mouth with a sock so she wouldn't scream, but she had managed to spit it out.

He went to his dresser and extracted a sock, came back, and stuffed it in her mouth much more tightly than last time. He turned the wind-up key near the torso of the clock a few notches. The pendulum rocked and her head, which had been resting to one side, slowly lifted.

She made eye contact with him and tried to scream, but the sock did its job.

Even though there was no conversation, he found comfort in just seeing her eyes open again, her head full of motion.

Then a noise came from the living room, and he left to investigate.

- - -

As soon as Neal appeared from the hallway, Dean's robot, standing in his living room, ran toward him, its shiny metal hands open and aimed at his chest.

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While Neal was unconscious, his old iron combination safe, the one he had kept in the basement, walked toward him, opened its door, sucked the wedding ring from his finger, then closed its door and walked away.

- - -

When Neal awoke, he looked down at his chest and saw an energy converter attached to his heart.

The converter had been modified. There was a hole where the spindle ought to be. He stood up and looked around.

Back in the bedroom, Angel had spit out the sock and was looking furious, breathing heavily through her nose. Neal took the wind-up key from the grandfather clock and inserted it into the energy converter attached to his chest, wound it as tight as it would go—which wasn't very far because it was already pre-wound—then inserted the key back into the clock.

Angel screamed at him and he instantly put his hand next to the pendulum, stopping it from moving. Her head fell to the side. He grabbed a handful of her hair, ripped her head from the top of the grandfather clock, and dropped it on the floor.

He lay back on his bed and smiled at the ceiling. He was having a sudden and overwhelming realization that he was more evolved than any other human. He was a genius, had invented the

electroencephalographic energy converter on his own, had invented life, could control life.

He turned his head and caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the bathroom mirror. Admiring himself, his utter superiority, his shiny silver hair draped across the pillow, he fell peacefully asleep.

## PART FOUR

Seth lay on his back, sweaty and spent, Misty attached to his arm like a leech, licking the length of the vein bulging from his giant biceps. The wall clock in the living room struck one.

Misty's sexiness was dangerous. She relentlessly kept herself in shape, addicted to health.

Years ago, she had been professionally diagnosed as a nymphomaniac. Seth had thought it funny, that something like that was diagnosable.

Veins turned her on, she had told him, made her feel like they were animals.

She kept licking up and down the length of his vein until he asked her to cut it out, get some sleep. She got out of bed and went to the bathroom.

Seth got out of bed also and walked to the kitchen. There he found the refrigerator wide open and empty, remnants of food and containers strewn about the kitchen floor.

Michelle was passed out on the couch in the living room. Seth stood silently over her, watching her sleep. He soon realized she wasn't breathing. He held his hand to her nose and felt nothing. He poked her shoulder a few times, said her name, grabbed both shoulders and shook her back and forth.

She awoke for a moment, then passed out again.

Seth looked at the metal box attached to her head. He had forgotten to wind the watch on it like Dean had asked him to. It was now stopped.

He wound it a few times.

Michelle suddenly came to life, grabbed her father's pinky, and bit into it, down to the bone. Seth pulled his hand away quickly and shouted. Michelle hopped off the couch and ran out the front door.

"What's wrong?" Misty had come into the living room.

"Michelle bit me."

"Where is she?"

“I don’t know.”

“What happened to the kitchen?”

Together, they left the house in the warm night to look for Michelle, Seth in a blue robe and Misty in a pink nightie.

A strange metallic noise was coming from Dean’s garage. They walked next door, calling their daughter’s name.

The robot stood in Dean’s garage, exactly as Seth and Neal had left it. The noise had been coming from the robot, but it ceased whatever it was doing as soon as it made eye contact with Seth.

Dean was lying on the floor next to the robot.

Seth was momentarily awestruck on seeing the robot again, that his brother could be such a genius as to have thought of it.

“What the hell is that?” Misty asked.

When they took a few steps toward it, the robot ran at them, thrusting its hands toward their chests.

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Across the street, Michelle sat in the field of weeds and sucked the meat from the thigh of a mole she had caught.

- - -

When Seth and Misty awoke, they were sitting next to each other against the wall in the garage. Attached to their chests were energy converters, fully wound.

Misty suddenly slid to the cement floor and succumbed to orgasmic convulsions. Seth stood to move out of the way.

She finished a few minutes later, stood, and braced herself against the wall of Dean’s garage, catching her breath.

“You okay?” Seth asked.

Again, standing near the wall, she experienced inexplicable sexual intensity. She fell and crawled awkwardly out of the garage toward the lawn, where she wriggled and screamed in the grass.

Seth turned around and studied Dean’s garage. There was no sign of the robot or Michelle. Dean was still passed out on the floor.

“Dean,” he said.

Nothing.

Out on the lawn, Misty screamed, “Oh my fucking God!” then fell silent.

He looked down at his brother again, noticed a metal box attached to his chest. Then he looked down at the metal box attached to his own chest.

He walked over to Dean's desk. The computer was turned on; he sat down and jiggled the mouse a little. The screen filled with the design and schematics of the robot. Seth stared at every line, every variable, all of it mysterious and beautiful, desperately trying to understand it the way Dean did.

## PART FIVE

The robot stood motionless in the exact center of the floor, staring back at Dean.

His back aching from sleeping against the tree in his front yard, Dean stood just outside his garage and inspected it. Then he said to it, "Please take all the remaining scrap metal in the driveway back to Seth's garage, then empty and refill the dishwasher. Thank you."

The robot stood still.

Something was wrong. It would be sinful for a robot to disobey a human.

He approached the robot, opened the panel on its chest, and extracted one of several energy converters from within it. He shook it next to his ear to listen for loose parts, then let it drop to the floor. He went to his desk, where a pile of extra converters had been left, and replaced the old one with a new one. He shut the panel door to the robot's chest.

Instantly, the robot shoved its metal hand through Dean's ribcage and pulled out his heart, shook it next to its mechanical ear, then let it drop to the floor. It attached and wired up a fully-wound energy converter directly over the hole in his chest.

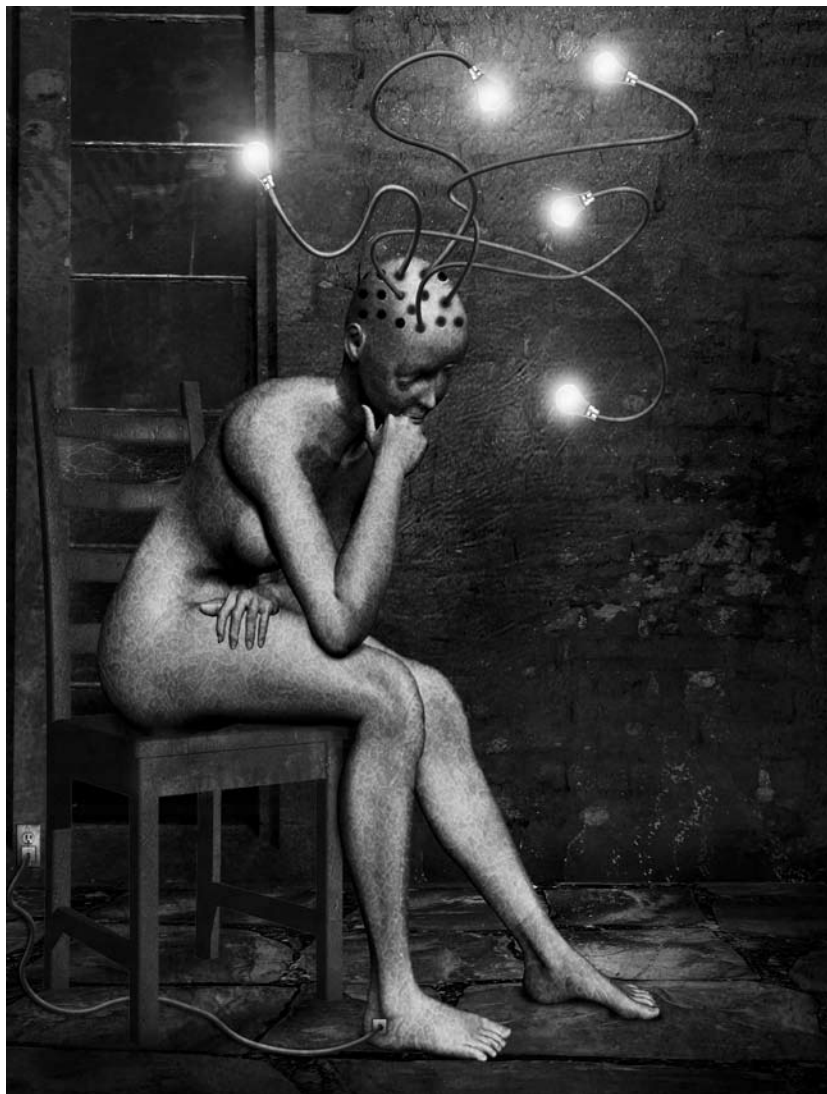
Dean fell to the floor atop his lifeless heart.

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Some time later, he awoke to the sound of heavy iron scraping over the concrete floor of his garage. His father's iron safe was standing next to him. It opened its door and Dean felt the wallet in his back pocket slip out. The safe closed its door and walked away.

His head fell back onto the concrete, eyes closed.

He fell into a deep sleep and never opened his eyes again.



Cameron Gray

Charging the Inspiration

# Baby Edward

Jeremy C. Shipp

There's more than one way to kill a dream.

My dream is a baby boy named Edward, and he's not allowed in the house. He lives in the VW Bus in my backyard. I keep the windows closed and the doors locked, which doesn't serve any real purpose, obviously. But I like to keep the key on a chain around my neck. I like to wear it under my dress shirt, coat, and tie. When I first put it on in the morning, the metal is cold against my chest. By the time I'm tapping at my keyboard, inventing new ways to politely coerce resources from suspecting citizens, I'm cold on the inside. Anytime I want, I can put the key in the lock, twist, and end this. But I don't.

You might ask, where's the mother during all this? Well, I hate to shatter your notions of family, but there is no mother.

I made Edward.

And he's mine.

Mine.

- - -

Harboring resentment is a great way to meet women. Try it. Sit down in your least favorite bar, let your eyes glaze over, frown, and put up your walls. The kind of walls you'd need to contain a plague, because most likely that's what you are.

Now see who comes knocking.

"Hi," says Annabelle.

I'm not psychic. She's wearing a nametag.

Well, maybe I am a little psychic.

"You're Ed," she says.

"How do you know that?"

It's ridiculous, but I look down at my shirt to make sure I'm not wearing a nametag too.

"I remember you," she says. "About ten years ago, I was visiting San Francisco and I heard you sing. We talked for about thirty seconds before I left. I wanted to talk with you more, but I was intimidated and shy. It's strange. I'm not usually good at remembering faces."

"Why did you want to talk to me?"

“Because your songs touched me, Ed. I told you that. Remember?”

I don't. Honestly, I don't even remember being in San Francisco.

“I remember,” I say.

“You don't have to lie to me.”

“Sorry.”

She laughs. Maybe the way I used to laugh before my VW became a cage.

“Do you ever get the feeling that a storm is coming, a bad one, and you hope to God you're wrong, and then you are wrong and you're disappointed?” This is sort of what I want to say, except I want to scream it without any words. Gutturally. Instead, we discuss her job as a manicurist or stunt woman, or whatever it is she's talking about.

- - -

If you had to hear the crying I'm listening to, you'd get a Sawzall from your basement too. You'd cut a hole in the side of your Bus so you could insert a bottle.

An couple of hours ago, I was in the bathroom, minding my own perverted business, when it started.

Actually, I'm guessing it began a while before that, before I heard any of the sobs. It sounds like one of those cries that starts out silent and then bursts. The buildup has been going on for months. Maybe even years.

After my hard-on melted away, I tried burying my head in a pillow. I tried earplugs. I tried television, ice cream, a good book, a bad book. I tried cleaning, and remembering my childhood, and burning some old photographs. I tried driving around in my new BMW and keeping an eye out for the homeless.

I even tried not giving a shit.

Nothing worked.

So I'm here, with this bottle of formula and cold sweat.

My head is killing me. I feel like fighting back.

“Just drink the damn milk,” I say.

The crying stops.

I hear sucking.

Instead of relief, I feel nausea and a trick fart that turns out to be quite a bit of diarrhea.

Good thing I'm not wearing my best pajamas.

- - -

The secret to winning a man's heart isn't food or sex. Anabelle and I have already shared those, but they're not what keeps me from running away.

That's what I do, by the way. I run and I hide, the way I did when I was a kid, except it's not a game anymore. At least not a fun one.

I used to drive around, searching for a place where I could be, for lack of a less cheesy sentiment, happy. A place where I could smell my lyrics in the air, and other such nonsense. I searched for a magical place. But I ended up here, of course, because real magic doesn't exist.

Enough of my bitching.

"How did you lose your leg?" I say.

"Trampoline accident." She pauses. "Sorry, that's a stupid joke."

"No, it's not. I didn't know you were joking, so I didn't laugh."

"How could I lose my leg on a trampoline?"

"I don't know. It could get caught on the side."

"And then what? The force of the jump rips me in two?"

"I don't know."

She laughs. Maybe the way I used to before I started taking drugs. The kind pushed by legal dealers with 401(k)s.

"It was a car accident," she says.

"I'm sorry."

"You probably don't know this, but as soon as I said 'car accident,' your face released a lot of tension."

"It did?"

"I used to be offended when I saw that in people. But instead of getting pissed off all the time, I decided to try and understand what was going on. I may be wrong, but my theory is that people don't like unexpected tragedy. Car accidents cause over a million deaths every year, and it doesn't matter, because it's normal. Like war is normal. Like malnutrition in Africa. Like.... Is that a dying animal outside?"

No. "I'll go check."

- - -

I present the food on my flattened palm, the way I did at the petting zoo when I was a kid. The first time I ever fed a goat, I was terrified that he'd chomp off my fingers and I'd never be able to play piano again.

A similar terror now molests my neck, my back, my stomach. Ed won't drink formula anymore.

“Just eat the damn cereal,” I say.

The difference between this feeding and the one at the petting zoo is that this time my fears are justified. Tiny, sharp teeth rip open my flesh and clamp down on my bone. I scream and yank as hard as I can, but only manage to further mangle my index finger.

Ed yanks back, and pulls my arm deeper into the hole I cut in the side of the Bus. We play tug of war for a while.

“Let me go!” I say.

He doesn’t.

I kick the Bus as hard as I can, and it must startle him, because he lets go.

I kick the Bus again before walking away.

Minutes later, I’m in bed, all patched up.

“What happened to you?” Annabelle says.

“I accidentally smashed my finger with the car door.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. Relieved.

- - -

Annabelle whistles while putting on her leg. She’s tone-deaf.

“Do you ever feel it?” I say.

“What?” she says.

“Your leg. The missing one. What’s that called when you can feel it?”

“Phantom limb. Yeah. My phantom used to be really painful. It felt like my leg was on fire almost all the time.”

“I’m sorry.” There’s no relief in my face.

“Nothing really helped until I started using the mirror box. It’s exactly what it sounds like. A box and mirrors. I put my good leg in one hole and my phantom in the other. With the mirror, it looked like I had two good legs. So I moved the phantom in sync with the reflection of my good leg and tricked part of my brain into believing I was controlling the phantom. The reason why my phantom hurt in the first place was because my mind considered it stuck. I had to set it free.”

By now we’re in the kitchen. The key against my chest feels colder than usual. Or maybe I’m running a fever.

108 “What happened to all the food in the fridge?” Annabelle says.

“I accidentally left the door open and a lot of it went bad.” I pause. “No, that’s a lie. I can’t keep lying to you. I’ll show you what’s going on.”

“Good,” she says, as if she’s been waiting for these words. Maybe she has.

I take her hand and lead her out of my present, into my past. We walk over the neatly-trimmed lawn, past the pawn-shaped fountain and the gnome-infested garden, to the corner of the yard exploding with weeds and wildflowers. It may only take a few moments to get here, but it’s not an easy path to travel with someone else. I squeeze Annabelle’s hand to keep myself from running away. She doesn’t complain.

“In there,” I say. I point. “He’s in there.”

The windows of the Bus are tinted, so she leans in close and cups her hands around her eyes.

She’s looking into more than a car, you know. I lived in that car. And even died a little.

When she turns back to face me, she says, “It’s just a guitar.”

“You’re a guitar,” I say.

“What?”

“Sorry. I was being defensive.”

“It’s okay.”

There’s nothing wrong with her eyes, you know. She’s just not looking the right way.

I want to tell her about Edward. I want to take off my bandages and show her my wounds. I want to let her hold my key. I would do these things, but there’s a big problem.

I’m not on stage. A hundred thousand fans aren’t singing the words with me. I’m only Ed.

So we go back inside.

- - -

Through the tinted glass, I see a dark form scampering about on the seats. He’s growling.

“No,” I say. “No more food, Edward.”

But he’s not a good boy like I used to be. He doesn’t know when to stand down. So he slams his head against the wall, over and over.

“Stop that, Edward,” I say.

He yelps with every blow.

Blood thrashes around inside me.

“I’m not going to help you anymore, Edward,” I say. “You’re nothing but a nuisance.”

He won’t stop. I hear cracking.

I punch the window with my bad hand and scream.

At this point I realize he's not trying to get my attention. He's after Annabelle.

When she peeked in before, he must have seen the kindness in her eyes. He knows she would feed him.

"It's no use, Edward," I say. "Annabelle slept through the last earthquake, and she'll sleep through you."

I smile, because I think I have him. I think, for a few fleeting moments, that he's going to lie on the seat, close his eyes, and suck his thumb.

Instead, he begins devouring the seats. His sharp little teeth tear at the upholstery, lacerate the metal, mutilate the seatbelts. He chews and swallows. Inhales.

"You're not getting any nutrients from that, Edward," I say. He doesn't care.

- - -

If your girlfriend surprises you with a romantic candle-lit picnic, you can't tell her it's a horrible idea. You can't tell her that the blanket is too close to the weeds and the Bus and you-know-who. I guess you could tell her all that, but she's gazing into your eyes, tickling inside you with her phantom toes.

So you say, "Thank you, Annabelle."

I see his massive lips pressed against the window, gushing with drool. He smiles, and I attempt to hide my fear with a smile of my own.

"I wish I could see the world through your eyes, Ed," Annabelle says.

"Why would you say that?" I say.

"Because you see such beauty around you."

"What I see is grotesque. I don't mean you."

"Your songs aren't grotesque."

"My songs aren't about the world. They're about the world in my head."

"What's the difference?"

An enormous hand crashes through the side of the Bus and wraps around Annabelle's torso.

110 She looks at me with relief on her face, as if she's always known it would come to this. Maybe she has.

As Edward pulls her into the darkness, I dive forward and try to grab her foot, but of course it's only a phantom, and my hand passes right through.

“Let her go, Edward!” I say.

I try to climb in through the hole his fist made, but a blubbery leg pushes me backward. I punch, kick, and bite, the way I never did when I was a kid. I was a good boy.

It doesn't help.

I try to yank the chain off my neck, but it doesn't break, so I lift it off instead. I put the key in the lock, twist. It's time to end this.

Immediately, a pudgy arm thrusts out of the driver's-side door and causes me to tumble onto the picnic candles. I go for the passenger-side door. This time, I dodge the arm that darts out at me. I open the door to the backseat and get kicked in the shoulder.

All of Edward's arms and legs hang outside of the Bus now, like he's some headless turtle.

I force the latch and lift the hood.

There he is. He's eaten the engine. I know that's not all he's eaten.

“Open your mouth, Edward,” I say. “Spit her out.”

He doesn't respond.

“Spit her out!”

I reach down and try to open his mouth with my fingers, wounds and all. His lips won't even budge.

When I try to use my key, he bites it in half.

I slam the hood shut and return to the picnic blanket to think. Part of it's on fire, but I let it burn.

My head is killing me. I feel like surrendering.

I feel like lying on the grass, closing my eyes, and sucking my thumb.

Instead, I walk around behind the Bus. Edward's penis dangles out of the exhaust pipe. I open the back door. I know what I have to do.

If Edward won't let me in, then I'll force myself inside.

- - -

My journey gets a lot easier when I realize I don't have to fight anymore. It's time to let go. My body surges forward, twisting and turning through the intestines. But it doesn't matter which way I go, because I'm going to end up with Annabelle.

No matter what.

She may be shredded to pieces, of course, depending on whether or not Edward swallowed her whole. I may only have a few moments to grieve over her remains before stomach acid melts my flesh.

And that's okay.

Finally I reach the stomach. I reach Annabelle. She's alive.

We embrace, and stay locked together.

Edward starts crawling, the Bus like armor around him.

The movement rocks me and Annabelle gently from side to side.

It's warm in here. Comfortable. Intimate.

I feel closer to Annabelle than I've ever felt to anyone, including myself. But we don't speak. We don't need to.

I'm excited, because I know where we're going. We're going to a place where we can be happy. Where I can smell my lyrics in the air, and other nonsense. Where magic is real.

- - -

Edward vomits us up, and we sit amidst the chunky bowels of my old home-sweet-home.

This is just an ordinary park, but my girlfriend is alive. Edward seems happy, lying on the grass with his eyes closed, gnawing on a squirrel.

I grab my upchucked guitar. Annabelle may not be a hundred thousand adoring fans, but I'm coated with puke and she still kisses me. French.

So I play.

# Painlessness

Kirstyn McDermott

Christ, not again. Hard enough to sleep with the afternoon sun sleazing through the venetian blinds, the dull ache in each and every joint of her sweat-sick body, and Faith groans as she rolls over to grab the bottle of water beside her bed. Blister pack of tablets beside that, antibiotics of some kind, and RelaxaTabs as well because the doctor refused to prescribe her any sort of decent sleeping pill; she takes two of each.

*Natural rest, my arse.*

Hard enough to sleep with the near-constant vertigo and the quilt pulled right up to her chin, sweating and itching beneath it because otherwise she'll only wake up with chattering teeth and her fingernails a disturbing shade of blue.

Hard enough without *this*: the sobs and muffled shouts pressing through the shoddy townhouse wall, the nameless thumps and, yesterday, even the sound of smashing glass.

Faith pulls the pillow over her head, but it's too hot, too close; she can't breathe properly even when she's *not* trying to smother herself. Stretches her legs instead, trying to kick the cramps from her knees, and when the shouting from next door starts up again, she raises a fist for the umpteenth time to pound against the wall.

And, for the umpteenth time, stops herself at the very last second.

It might only make things worse.

No idea who her neighbours are, after all. *A single woman*, the agent's assurance during inspection, *quiet and tidy; you'll have no trouble there*—and with that now so obviously a lie, who the hell knows *what* she's moved in next door to on a fucking twelve-month lease?

The shouting ceases, gives way to sobbing. Soft, feminine cries that Faith almost can't hear—and somehow that only makes it worse. So, two more RelaxaTabs before curling tight beneath the blanket with her chin tucked close to her chest, and no matter that it's harder to breathe through her congestion like that.

Harder still to sleep with what she can hear—and imagine—beyond that wall.

- - -

Between the opening screech of her neighbour's security door and the brash metallic clatter as it slams shut again, Faith shrugs into her dressing gown. Cinches the faded terry-cloth belt around her waist and hop-foots it down the hall wearing just the single ugg boot slipper, because god only knows where the other one's hiding and there sure isn't any time to mount a search party. White-trash Cinderella half-tripping out her own front door and, "Hey," she calls to the woman already turning away from the letterboxes. "Hey, wait up."

Whatever she may have been expecting, it isn't this. Tall, much taller than Faith herself, but certainly not much older, early thirties at most and even that would be pushing it. A sundress of faded sky blue clothing the sort of slim-hipped androgyny Faith might once have killed to possess, and something so...solid in the way she pauses, tiger-in-the-grass motionless with her face half-turned away and hidden beneath a wave of blood-bright hair.

"Can I help you?" the woman asks, blade-sharp voice with an accent too vague to place.

Faith blinks in the morning glare, one hand raised to shield her eyes. "Sorry, just wanted a word. About the...um, the...look, I'm feeling pretty crap right now and I really need to get some sleep, so..."

"I'm making too much noise."

"Well, yeah. I mean, normally—"

"Normally you wouldn't be here." The woman looks up then, looks right at her with dark eyes surrounded by even darker flesh, fist-sized bruises and a scabby, swollen cut on her lower lip, and Faith swallows, tries to find some words, any words, but the woman waves them away. "My apologies. I assumed you worked during the day. I didn't realise you were ill."

*Forget about it*, Faith wants to tell her, wants to ask if there is anything *she* needs, like maybe a hospital or several shots of morphine, but all at once it's so damn hot out here and the sunlight really is too bright, searing-white bright like the unmarred skin on the woman's face, what little there is of it, and, *how rude, when she doesn't even know me from Adam.*

So, "I'm Faith." Right hand stuck out and trembling; the woman regards it like it's a dead thing for a moment, dead or near enough. Looks at her that way too, with oil-slick eyes impossibly black and shot with colours like Faith has never seen before, colours she can't even name. "Mara," the woman says.

Mara, a bassline thrumming through the sparks that jump and scratch behind her eyelids, and Faith holds onto it, clutches it tighter than she clutches the frost-cold hand now closed around her own. *Do you hear that, she says, or maybe she doesn't after all.*

*The birds, do you hear their wings?*

- - -

If ice could boil, and still stay frozen, this is how it might burn.

The seething shiver of skin on skin, on cloth, on the bare bathroom floor as she lies spread-eagled in an effort to touch absolutely nothing, or as much of it as she can. The water that ebbs around her chattering teeth, slips into her mouth despite the cool, strong hands that hold up her head, long fingers curved firm around her chin when all she wants to do is slip beneath the surface and sink, sink, sink. The light that swells her skull, her bones, her guts, seeking to split her wide and spill itself into the world.

*blood-fever*

Barely a whisper from no one she cares to know.

- - -

*Here, drink this.*

*Can't, I'll throw up.*

*You won't. Drink it.*

The taste too strange, ginger and chamomile and something else that just doesn't belong, and—*oh god, oh christ*—the red plastic bucket still smelling of vomit from last time and this only makes her puke more, spasms so violent it hurts, until finally she rolls back onto the couch with a groan.

*Told you I'd throw up.*

The woman's smile so subtle it's almost not there at all.

*Yes, and don't you feel so much better for it?*

- - -

Three days, Mara tells her, perched stray-cat cautious on the edge of the bed. Three days since that morning when she passed out by the mailbox; Faith feels nauseous all over again. Three days, which would make today what, then, Saturday?

"Sunday," Mara says. "Your work called on Friday. I told them it was highly doubtful you'd be in next week but you would let them know once you were conscious again. Frankly, they didn't sound too concerned."

25

Unsurprising. Newbie telemarketers being more dispensable than used Kleenex, especially newbie telemarketers who are barely scratching at the lowest rung of their daily quota levels; if EzyEzcape even bothered to keep her shifts alive, it would be no minor miracle. Never mind that, after almost a week without pay, if she manages to scrape together next month's rent in time, it will be the loaves and fucking fishes all over again.

"Shit." Faith tries to sit up, fails. There isn't a part of her that doesn't ache.

"I don't think you're ready for vertical," Mara observes.

"I have to go back to work tomorrow. I can't afford to be sick any more."

Mara shrugs, a do-what-you-have-to-do sort of shrug, and rises to her feet in a motion that is at once elegant and utterly final. Jaundice, the faint shadow of a bruise on her cheekbone as she tucks her hair behind her ear, and only now does Faith remember.

"Hey, you said three days? That's how long I was out of it?" Frowning as the other woman nods, because that can't be right, can it? Faith has had coffee-table bumps take longer to fade than that and, *sorry*, she insists, *but that can't be right*.

Not three days, not *only* three.

"Why would I lie?" Mara seems amused, as though this is all some elaborate game, a prank or maybe some sick-day surprise. Like maybe everyone Faith knows is huddled out in the lounge room with party hats and sparklers and a huge hand-painted banner strung across the window: *Welcome back to the world*.

"But your face...."

Words failing as Mara lifts a hand to her own cheek, fingers falling across model-smooth lips that look as though they've never even been chapped, let alone left split and bleeding. "I heal fast. It has been three days." Said as though that were an eternity in itself; her eyes are equally desolate.

*Leave it alone, girl; you have no business with it.*

Faith swallows, throat too dry for more than a muttered apology, and the smile Mara returns is only tooth-deep. "You seem *compos mentis* now. I'll be home all day if you need something." The square set of her jaw an unspoken challenge—*but you won't need anything*—as she holds Faith's gaze for a full three seconds before walking away, three long paces to the bedroom door.

Only three days.

“Wait.” The woman pauses but doesn’t turn round, only angles her head a little, and Faith takes this acknowledgement as all she’s going to get. “Thanks, okay? Thanks for taking care of me.”

“There’s multivitamin juice in the fridge,” Mara says. “You’re dehydrated and you’re probably ravenous, but I wouldn’t recommend solid food until tomorrow. Otherwise, you know.”

A curt nod towards the red bucket in the corner, then the bedroom door closes and Mara is gone.

- - -

Friday night, and Faith sits at the kitchen table with a bottle of red wine, unopened. The same kind she left on Mara’s front step a few days ago with a thank-you note scribbled in haste after her knocks went unheeded, the kind she’d once again planned to present in person, with more thanks, tonight. She’d hoped her neighbour would invite her in, that they’d crack open the bottle and drown whatever collective sorrows they managed to scrape together—which had to be quite a few—and maybe lay the foundations of something that might one day be called a friendship.

New city, new job, and Faith is lonely. Not that she would ever admit as much with a clear head, a clean bloodstream; hence the wine.

That had been the plan, anyway.

But mice and men and smothered, broken blondes, Mara isn’t alone.

Faith can’t hear the sounds all the way out here in the kitchen. Those same whimpers and thumps she remembers from when she was ill, sounds she’d later decided—hoped?—had been amplified by delirium, fever-swollen and exaggerated beyond all measure of reality. Until now. She picks up the cordless phone for the second time tonight, index finger hovering above the 0 on the keypad.

What if Mara hates her for calling the police?

What if the...boyfriend? lover? (rapist?) takes it out on Mara herself?

What if the police don’t arrive in time, or even at all?

*Damn it.* She places the undialled phone on the table, instead creeps down the hall to the bedroom and listens. Nothing, no sound at all from beyond the wall, and is that a good thing or does it mean that something much worse is happening next door? Or has happened?

“*Bitch!*” The jagged masculine snarl so loud it might be in the same room, and Faith near jumps out of her skin, hands quickly at her mouth to stop the cry that rises in her throat.

But it’s what comes after that finally kicks her indecisive arse into gear. The muffled sobs for him to stop, to “Please just stop,” echoing in her head as she races back through the townhouse. Grabbing the wine bottle on her way—weapon? appeasement? excuse?—and then straight outside, bare feet smarting on the gravel path that joins her place with Mara’s, running so fast that by the time she’s pounding on the woman’s front door, Faith is breathless.

A small eternity until, just as she thinks no one is ever going to answer and she’s going to need that phone after all, there’s a flicker of shadow over the peephole and the door opens a couple of guarded inches.

“What do you want, Faith?”

Mara’s eye is near-shut swollen, she’s bleeding from two nasty cuts on her cheek that seem in dire need of stitches, and that’s just the side of her face that Faith can see. “Are you...are you okay?”

Only the most stupid question she could possibly have asked, but Mara actually smiles, a thin, icicle smirk accompanied by a shake of her head, that glossy red hair rippling over her face, and Faith wonders how much of that colour tastes like iron right now. “I’m fine. Go home.”

“You don’t look fine. You look like you need help.”

Mara closes her eyes and sighs, a blood-smearred hand rubbing hard against her forehead. “Faith,” she says, and, “Listen,” and then there is some scuffling behind her and the door is jerked all the way open.

He’s shorter than Mara, shorter even than Faith, whose eyes he refuses to meet as he pushes narrow-shouldered between them, shrugging into a grey suit jacket with a peacock-blue tie hanging from its pocket. Faith can see the red wedged beneath his manicured nails, the flecks of crimson on his creased white shirt.

“Phillip, wait,” Mara calls out, but the man doesn’t even pause. Just half-turns his head to mutter something that might be *forget it* or *fuck it* or something else entirely before scuttling through the little front gate like a cockroach surprised at midnight. The hazard lights on a silver Audi flash twice as he crosses the road towards it, and within seconds the man is inside and speeding away.

“Great,” Mara says. “That’s just great.” Sounding more resigned than angry, even though she’s standing there with hands on her hips

and eyebrows drawn together in a frown that just about freezes Faith's heart. As does the blood runnelling down both her cheeks, and the sticky-wet way that black satin robe wrinkles against her ribs.

Faith swallows. "He won't be back tonight, will he?"

"God, no," Mara snorts. "He won't be back." Then her gaze drops to the bottle of wine hanging uselessly at Faith's side and she sighs once again. Bitterdeep breath that holds all the cares of the world and then some.

"Come inside," she says, stepping back from the door. "You and me, we need to talk."

- - -

Of course she's going to look around, Mara having excused herself for a quick shower, leaving Faith to open the wine and wander through to the lounge room, glasses in hand and bottle tucked awkwardly beneath her arm, and surely it doesn't hurt to look. Not that there's much to see; the Spartans lived larger than this.

Big navy-blue sofa along the far wall, bare-topped coffee table, and two mismatched chairs, one with a grey pin-stripe fabric and the other the kind of patchy brownish velvet you only find in the most desperate op shops or the trendiest retro-funk café bars. Small television in one corner and a lamp standing sentry opposite, its shade almost—but not quite—the same deep blue as the sofa. But no DVDs, no CDs, no books. No little knick-knacks or photos in frames, no junk mail or shoes or shopping lists left lying around.

The only personal touch, the only hint that a human being might actually inhabit this space, is the large unframed canvas hanging adjacent to the window. A stemless scarlet rose blooming against a near-black background, petals open and weeping viscous red tears onto the once-white feather floating below it. Blood tears, blood-flowers; how did that song go again, that Cure song she left behind in Sydney along with her night-cast wardrobe and the rest of her angst-ridden trappings? Bittersad lyrics about trust, about never really knowing who you can. The feather is soaked, bedraggled, but still curves resiliently upwards, its tip pure and unsullied, so bright against the darkness that it almost glows.

Faith runs a finger across one of the glistening droplets and is almost surprised to find the canvas rough and dry, her skin unstained.

"A friend painted that for me. Do you like it?"

The question quietly asked, but Faith still jumps, fights the urge to hide her hand behind her back like a schoolgirl caught with cigarettes or something much worse. “Yeah,” she tells Mara, who has reappeared with shower-damp hair and a flock of bright-white butterfly stitches on each cheek, black satin robe swapped for jeans and a sleek grey jumper. “Yeah, I like it a lot. Might have wanted to arm-wrestle you for it once upon a time.”

Once upon a time, not so long ago.

“Not now?” Mara smiles, or almost smiles, as she crosses the room to claim her glass of wine from the coffee table. She sits down carefully, right in the middle of the sofa, one leg curled beneath her.

“I’m sort of starting over. You know, leaving the past behind me.”

“Hmm, mysterious.”

“It really isn’t,” Faith explains. “It’s just that the people I used to hang with, my *friends* or whatever you want to call them, the whole *goth* scene,”—bobbing air quotes with both hands around *that* word—“they got to be a little...poisonous.”

“Goth scene?” Mara arches an exquisitely plucked eyebrow.

“You know, black clothes, eyeliner, swanning around like they *invented* depression. Like it’s fucking *profound* or something.”

“I know. There are goths in Melbourne too, you realise.”

“Yeah, but it’s not my scene down here. And anyway, I’m....”

“Over it?”

“I’m over *me*.” Faith slumps into the brown velvet chair, licks the resulting splash of wine from her wrist. “I’m over who I was back there. I’m over feeling shitty every damn day, and *liking* the fact that I’m feeling shitty, and then really hating the fact that I *like* it, if any of that makes any fucking sense at all.”

“Perfect sense.”

Mara is good, Faith will give her that. Sitting there sipping wine and encouraging Faith to babble on about nothing like this is just some cozy girls’ night in after all, like she hasn’t been cut to pieces by her arsehole boyfriend, or whatever variety of pond scum he happens to be.

“Listen, Mara, are you okay? Really?”

“I’m fine.”

30 “Maybe I should drive you to hospital. Get someone to check you over, just to make sure there isn’t—”

“I’m *fine*.”

Her tone icier now, a note of warning clearly sounded, but

Faith plunges ahead nevertheless. “You don’t have to put up with that shit, Mara. You don’t have to be scared of getting help either, and if you need someone to be here with you when that asshole comes back—”

“He won’t be coming back,” Mara snaps. “Believe me.”

“How can you be so sure? Guys like that—”

“Do you take me for an imbecile? A victim?”

Faith swallows, searching for the right words. “I’m just... concerned. I can hear stuff through the walls, you know. Stuff that doesn’t sound too good.”

“What you do think is happening here? Do you think that man is my *lover*? That I need to be *rescued* from him?”

The sneer in her voice unmistakable despite the peculiar accent, perhaps even because of it, and all at once Faith has had enough, has had more than enough. Feels a little like she’s being kicked in the guts herself one too many times tonight and, “Oh, fuck *off*. I’m not the one sitting there with my face looking like it got pushed through a plate-glass window.”

Incredibly, Mara laughs.

“This is funny? Some sad prick beats you up a couple times a week, and it’s meant to be funny?”

“He’s not a prick,” Mara says, still smiling. “Well, he may be that, but he’s also a client. Or at least he *was*; tonight was his first visit and I doubt he left with a good impression. Lasting, perhaps, but not good.”

“What sort of a client?” Asking even as the pennies start to tumble.

“The kind who pays for *services rendered*.”

It’s not like Mara is the first prostitute Faith has ever encountered. Hell, half her former friends could be considered whores in kind, a blow job or a sleight of hand casually swapped for half a tab of speed-spun bliss almost any night of the week, a gram or two of pot any given morning after.

Faith takes another mouthful of wine, its flavour grown acidic and sharp.

“Look,” she says. “That doesn’t matter. Just because a guy pays you doesn’t mean he gets to hurt you.”

Mara shakes her head. “Sweet girl, that’s what they pay me *for*.”

- - -

Except that they don't.

Pay her, definitely. Pay her enough that she only has to work when she wants, and can afford to be choosy about who she sees and how often.

But they never actually *hurt* her.

The disorder has a complicated name and an even more complicated diagnosis, but what it boils down to is her nervous system is defective, has been all her life. What it boils down to is she can't feel any kind of pain, can't feel extremes of hot or cold either for that matter, can't feel much more than pressure and touch.

What it boils down to is this: Mara can be slapped and bruised and cut and burned and left broken in more ways than any human being should ever have cause to know, and none of it will hurt. All of it will heal, and most of it will heal very fast.

This makes her special.

This makes her *expensive*.

- - -

Faith hasn't bothered setting up an internet connection at home yet—no one she cares to email and too many who'll be wanting to email her—so she's McSurfing through her thirty-minute lunch break instead. Greasy hamburger in one hand, fritzzy trackball mouse in the other, and nothing but frustration on the screen in front of her. Loads of words, masses of infocrap—Googling *can't feel pain* gets her more than seventeen million results just to start with—but nothing really useful. *Sensory neuropathy* and *congenital insensitivity* and *Riley-Day syndrome*, and every time a piece seems to fit, it turns out she's just been holding it upside down.

Mara doesn't fit anywhere. Not precisely.

Unless it's on one of the forbidden pages, with the family-friendly blockerbots insisting she maintain a minimum safe distance.

Yet another click to bring up *congenital analgia*, and maybe this is it at last: *a syndrome characterized by a global insensitivity to physical pain*. Following the links to find, not a perfect fit, but the best one so far, even with the short life expectancy, the high rates of undiagnosed infection, the frequency of scratched corneas, amputated fingers, and tongue-tips bitten clean off in infancy. List after list of predictable injuries, obviously-accidental wounds without pain to give notice, but so what?

Maybe Mara just knows how to take care of herself.

Rattle of ice from the boy behind her who's slurping the dregs of his drink right in her ear, and Faith takes the hint. Five minutes late already, and they'll dock her for that, dock her but still demand that she make up the sales, push her quota of crappy holiday deposits onto pensioners who only leave their homes every second Thursday to punch the pokies and dream of rolling over those three magic bars.

- - -

Mara has brought fruitcake. A large, moist lump of a thing that crumbles when Faith tries to cut too thin a wedge, her butter knife clearly not up to the job.

"Don't feel obliged to eat it. I didn't."

The cake left by one of Mara's clients last Christmas, and Faith wonders at the type of men who take pleasure in first reducing a woman to tears and bruises and bloody wounds, and then in bringing her gifts.

"It's good; I like fruitcake. You sure you don't want a piece?"

Mara wrinkles her nose. "Thank you, no." She's only come to say there'll be company at her place tonight, from eight until ten, give or take half an hour depending on how things develop. In case Faith would rather not be here.

"Thanks for the warning."

"I don't mind if you play loud music. That's what Matthew used to do."

"Who?"

"The tenant who lived here before." That midnight gaze sliding over the kitchen where the two of them sit at the wonky little table Faith picked up for twenty dollars at St Vinnie's along with three matching wooden chairs. "Not as neat as you, but better furniture."

"Right." Faith wonders just what sort of man he really was. The bury-your-head-in-the-stereo kind, or the kind who angled for a free sample. She breaks off a sizeable corner of cake and pops it into her mouth, chews very slowly, and tries to ignore the thought that emerges yet again from some sick little hollow of her mind.

Sneaking up on Mara with a needle, just to see what would happen.

Just to see if she could make her flinch.

"Come on, then," Mara says, and Faith almost chokes on a chunk of maraschino cherry. "You obviously have questions. Ask away."

The cake now dry as unbuttered toast on her tongue, too much of it to swallow quickly, so Faith chews and chews, but Mara is already flicking a dismissive hand in the air. Never mind the questions, those cautious-curious inquiries posed by so many others in not so many ways. She knows them all by rote anyway, so how about they just skip straight to the answers?

The clients, these men who come to see her, they each have their reasons: sadistic power trip or erotic wish fulfillment, extreme role-playing or morbid curiosity plain and unadorned. In some, the reason dwells deep below the surface, inscrutable even to themselves, and there is only the *need*, a desire pure and compulsive and absolute that draws them to her. Some she only sees the once before they retreat ashen-faced from her door, the experience not quite what they'd expected, or else too much more. Some are regular as the new moon. *All* of them want to hurt her; an uncommon few wish the favour returned. The clients, they're complicated.

For Mara, it's simple. She does it for the money.

And for the record, there is no sex involved; she's not that kind of whore. On occasion, for a certain kind of client, she'll use her hands to finish things off. But that service costs extra, quite a bit extra, and, in any case, most of those who need it prefer to relieve themselves.

What she does, it's not about sex.

And never mind the soundtrack; every good girl knows how to fake it.

"So you don't get hurt?" No matter how many websites she looks at, Faith can't really get her head around this. Pain doesn't *cause* damage, it heralds it, and if someone can't feel pain, then how can they judge if they're hurt, or how badly?

"I see a specialist," Mara says. "Regular check-ups."

"Does he know? How they happen, I mean, all your...injuries?"

That greyhound smile again, swift and lean and borderline dangerous. "He should do. He causes his fair share."

"Okay." Faith swallows, hard. Pushes the rest of her fruitcake away. "I'm not even gonna pretend that I understand—"

"I don't *need* you to understand," Mara cuts in sharply. "I don't even need you to care. I'm not a puzzle; I'm not something you need to solve. Or rescue. I've told you this so you know what's happening and you won't come hammering at my door again in the middle of a session and cost me a client."

“I already said I was sorry—”

“I don’t need *that*, either.”

The two of them glaring at each other until at last Mara pushes back her chair and gets to her feet. “I realise you’re lonely, Faith. But I don’t do friendship.”

“Even if I paid you for it?”

A cheap shot instantly regretted, but Mara only laughs. “Even then, Faith. Especially then.”

- - -

She doesn’t leave. Doesn’t turn on any music or even the lights. Just sits on her bed in the dark with her cheek pressed against the wall and listens.

To nothing very much, in the end. Random sounds of movement and the occasional murmur of voices, low-key and indecipherable. Not every psycho likes his girl to scream, apparently, and Faith wonders why she doesn’t feel more relieved.

(Or less disappointed?)

Awkwardly bent, her left leg has fallen so deeply asleep that she needs both hands to straighten it out. Heavy-numb lump of flesh below her knee, and only the vaguest sensation of pressure as she digs a fingernail into the muscle of her calf, digs hard enough to leave a little red smiley behind.

Is that what Mara feels or, rather, what she doesn’t? Ever?

Faith tries to imagine what it would be like to have your whole body cocooned in this way, to have never known even the incidental pain of stubbed toes, torn fingernails, and paper cuts, never mind anything more profound. Might it be so bad, if you were careful? Thinking of the reasons she left Sydney, left the people *in* Sydney, what was left of them, Faith grimaces.

Painlessness, on both sides of her skin: she could wish for worse.

- - -

Sometimes Mara leaves a note. A little scrap of powder-blue paper wedged into the screen door at eye level with a handwritten date and time, three or four days’ notice for Faith to make other plans if she feels the need.

(Mostly she doesn’t.)

But more often lately, it’s a personal appearance, a handful of words or perhaps a whole cryptic, fractured conversation about

spoiled milk, lost languages, or the tribe of magpies that wander along the street each morning, spotting grubs in the nature strip and marking each passerby with a polished-marble glare.

“Friend of the crows,” Faith murmurs.

“Pardon me?”

“I used to know someone who said that whenever she saw a magpie: *friend of the crows*, and she’d point two fingers at it and then back at herself. So they wouldn’t dive-bomb her come spring.”

“And was she?”

“What?”

“A friend of the crows.”

Mara sounding so serious that Faith has to laugh. “Geez, I don’t know, maybe. Never did get swooped on, not that I remember.” And Mara nods, once, and turns on her heel, and that’s the end of that yet again. Two steps forwards, three steps back, like someone braving herself to jump from the high-dive board, and Faith wonders what it is that Mara is after. Why she can’t come out and say straight up that maybe she is just as lonely as Faith, that a friend might actually be what she needs?

And yet.

There is definitely something not quite right about the woman. Not drugs or drink or any other kind of mundane madness—and Faith has known enough of those in recent times to be able to tell—but something else she can’t identify.

Mara is just...not right.

- - -

Middle-of-the-night phone calls are never a good thing, and Faith swears loudly as she lurches from her bed, tripping over a boot and bumping her knee on the corner of the dresser on her way to the door. Three months in the townhouse and she still can’t find her way in the dark, so it’s a speedy zombie-shuffle down the hall with arms outstretched to fumble for the lounge-room light switch while she tries to pinpoint the handset’s location from its shrill, persistent ring.

Who the fuck could be calling at this hour?

No one has this number except work and her mum, and she’s sworn, she’s *sworn*, that no matter who turns up on her doorstep or what they say or plead or promise, she won’t let them know where Faith has gone.

Of all people, she *knows* the importance of that.

The phone is under a couch cushion. Faith's stomach tightens as she presses the Talk button, lifts the thing cautiously to her ear. "Hello?"

Someone breathing, or just static on a crappy line? *Hey babygirl, when you gonna come back to us?* She can almost hear Livia crooning the words, and she swallows hard. Please, not her, not Liv—the one person in the whole damn world she can refuse nothing, even when those brilliant green eyes are cracked and scattered and ice-locked, or perhaps especially then—and *hello*, she says again. *Hello?*

"Faith? Faith, it's me."

"Mara?" The was voice so scratchy-faint that for a second she thinks she's guessed wrong. Thinks she should hang up right now before it's too late, because she really doesn't have the strength to do this all over again, but *please* the voice whispers, *please come get me*, and her heart falls back from her mouth just a little.

"Mara, what's wrong? Where are you?"

- - -

She must have misheard, or miswritten, because Grafton Avenue only goes up to Number 119 and then it's nothing but parkland. Close-huddled shrubs and knee-high grasses, with a wan yellow streetlight illuminating the sign that tries to pass this place off as *Urban Forest*. *Yeah right*, and Faith checks the envelope where she scribbled down the address. Definitely 141, but maybe it should be 114? Or perhaps not Grafton Avenue, but Street or Crescent or Road, if such a beast exists?

Unclipping her seatbelt, she reaches across for the Melways on the passenger seat and flips to the index. The interior light in the old Toyota hasn't worked for two years, and she's squinting her way through the G's when something taps at the driver-side window. Little scared mouse-tap still sudden enough to startle: Mara standing out there in the night with a half-curved fist and a face bleached whiter than Faith has ever seen on someone still living, pointing at the locked rear door with her other hand, her mouth moving soundlessly beyond the glass.

Three frozen seconds before Faith finally gets her arse up and out of the car. Mara is wrapped in something that looks like a sheet, a low-budget toga costume hanging in thick folds from her shoulders, the dull fabric dark in patches—and Faith doesn't want to think too much about those just yet. More concerned with getting Mara into the car, Mara who shakes her head when Faith tries to lead

her around to the passenger side, who wants to lie down instead, who says she *needs* to lie down, so Faith opens the back door and helps her crawl inside.

Even with legs loosely curled, Mara takes up the whole length of the seat. This tall, lean woman not so solid now, and the way she shivers in her goosepimpled skin almost breaks Faith's heart. One bare foot sticks out from beneath the sheet with toes clenched tight, pallid little piggies turning their backs to the world, and Faith tugs a corner of the fabric over them.

"Mara, don't go to sleep on me, okay?" Leaning in and over the woman, pushing damp-matted hair from her face. "Listen, I don't know this area. Where do I go, where's the nearest hospital?"

A cobra could not have struck as quickly.

"No hospitals!" Hand closing rat-trap tight around Faith's wrist, pupils so dilated they make the whole of her eyes glow black. "No," she hisses again. "No hospitals."

"Fuck that, Mara. You need—"

"No! If you even *drive past* a hospital, I swear to—" Turning her head aside as she starts to cough, brutal as broken glass, and when it's over her chin is smeared with blood. "I swear I will get out of this car. I'll get out right now, if that's what you're planning." And she almost does, pushing herself up off the seat and sliding towards the door until Faith wrestles her back down, or tries to, tells her not to be so fucking stupid, but she already knows the battle is lost. No way she can take this woman anywhere against her will, and she'd bet both tits that Mara really would throw herself from a moving vehicle if she so much as *smelled* an Emergency Room sign.

"All right. All *right*, fuck!"

A long, tense moment before Mara nods and finally releases her grip. "Just get me out of here. Please."

"Where to?" Faith asks bitterly. Fresh handprint of blood on her arm and she wipes it on her shirt, navy-blue fabric none the worse for such a stain. "Home to warm milk and jim-jams?"

"No, not home." Mara closes her eyes, sinks back against the cheap vinyl upholstery. "Get us onto the highway and drive south. There's a motel about twenty minutes from here."

38 Faith is done arguing. So when she spots the bright-lit storefront of a twenty-four-hour pharmacy—*Because Your Health Shouldn't Have To Wait!*—after only a few kilometers, she doesn't even ask. Just flicks on the indicator and pulls into the near-deserted carpark.

“Don’t even start,” she tells the rear-view mirror, Mara’s instantly suspicious gaze catching hers in the glass. “Unless you reckon you can put yourself back together with whatever this cruddy motel of yours has in its mini-bar, I’m picking up some stuff here. That okay with you?”

Not really a question, and Mara doesn’t answer it, doesn’t say another word until Faith returns to the car. Two small plastic bags rustling with bandages and Dettol and surgical tape and anything else she thought might come in handy. Paracetamol too, for the headache that looms at her temples, and she presses a couple of these into her palm straight away. Dry-swallows and turns to flash the box at the woman in the back seat. “Don’t suppose *you* want some....”

Mara’s laughter splinters to a wet and ragged cough. “Rainbows End.”

“What?”

“The motel, it’s called Rainbows End. Keep driving, you’ll see it.”

- - -

She almost didn’t. Almost sped right past the place, with its tall pine trees half-hiding the vacancy sign out front, and now that she’s standing in the cramped reception area, she wishes she’d done just that. The night manager pushes a form across the counter and Faith hesitates for a second, pen in hand. She doesn’t know Mara’s last name and is reluctant to use her own because...well, just *because*, and so, *Courtney Love*, the first words that pop into her head and now nothing else will, but the man doesn’t even blink when she slides the form back.

Made-up name, made-up address, the tariff paid with cash. Two nights in advance because otherwise they’ll have to be out by ten this morning and it’s already almost four, and Faith feels sick.

Sick and scared and royally pissed off.

Their twin-share room is right at the end of the complex, no neighbours if the absence of cars is any indication, so thank fuck for small mercies. Faith parks at the front and gets out to open the car door for Mara, chauffeur duties never grimmer than this as her passenger extends an arm for support, stares up at her with eyes deeply shadowed but still burning bright. Tiger eyes, savage and regal, and how it must sting for Mara to have to lean against Faith like this.

Beneath the pine-sharp patina of disinfectant, the room smells of strangers and stale cigarettes. Faith helps Mara over to one of the beds, dumps the pharmacy bags beside her, and then goes back to

sling the *Shhh! Guest Sleeping!* sign onto the doorknob. Flimsy chain latch on the inside and she pulls that across as well.

“I want some water,” Mara says.

“Let’s have a look at you first.”

Mara shakes her head, clutches her toga-sheet with both hands. “I can look after myself.” Weighty blue-green cotton like you’d find in an operating theatre, far too much of it soaked magenta by now, and Faith has well and truly had enough of this shit.

“Fuck you, then.”

Four long strides to the door of the room, fishing the car keys from her pocket with one hand while the other reaches for the security chain, because this isn’t her problem and never was and—

“Wait,” Mara whispers. “Please.” Little-girl-lost voice Faith has never heard before, little girl lost *forever*, and somehow that’s more frightening than all the blood. A voice to stop her dead, and she turns to see Mara rising carefully to her feet. “Look then,” Mara says. “Look if it matters so much to you.” And she lets the sheet fall.

*Bride of Fucking Frankenstein* the first thing that comes to mind, but it’s so much worse than that.

Black-bristled sutures winding their jagged way from clavicles to pelvis, vaguely Y-shaped like an autopsy incision and crowded by an ugly patchwork of cuts that could only in these circumstances be thought lesser wounds. Ribs and belly and the almost non-existent swell of her breasts all bearing the mark of knife or scalpel, some stitches torn apart and bleeding fresh crimson rivulets to join the dark and clotted mess that cakes her body from the waist down.

“Christ.”

The word little more than appalled, astonished breath, but Mara just grins. “Nothing to do with *him*,” she says, as a thin trickle of blood slides down her calf and around her ankle, pools on grotty grey carpet that has seen better days—though surely not worse ones.

For an entire precarious minute, Faith just stares, car keys digging sharply into her palm. She can still leave, can still turn her back on this whole fucked-up mess and just walk away, drive away and try very hard to pretend that she never even heard the phone ring tonight, *because this is not her problem*. This is Mara’s nightmare, but if Faith doesn’t leave right now, if she doesn’t open the motel door right this second, then it will become her nightmare as well and god only knows when—or if—either of them will wake up.

Mara wobbles a little, unsteady on her feet, then half-sinks, half-falls back onto the bed. “Can I have that water now?”

And even as Faith closes her eyes, even before she takes her first resigned step towards the ensuite, a shored-up space within her cracks and splits and breaks wide open, and something far too familiar worms its way out, uncurls its long and greedy limbs, and laughs.

- - -

The scant, thin hour before dawn, and Mara seems to have fallen asleep at last. Her shallow breathing has deepened, become more regular, and there's not the slightest response when Faith calls her name. No movement, no murmur, not even the semi-conscious flutter of an eyelid, but Faith thinks she'll wait a little while longer just to be sure.

Wet, bloody-pink wads of cotton wool litter the floor, and a stained towel huddles at the end of the bed where Faith left it once Mara finally pushed her away. *Enough, enough for now*, after Faith finished washing the dried and crusted blood from her chest, her stomach, her ribs. Pale fists bunched in the sheet around her hips, clenching tighter when Faith tried to pull that down as well, tried to see the damage lurking below but *there's nothing*, Mara said. *Just blood from everything else*, and clean or dirty, what she really needed was rest.

The smell of antiseptic fills the room, and Faith worries what Mara might look like beneath her sutured skin.

Or even just beneath the sheet.

Finally, careful to make not the smallest telltale sound, Faith slips from her bed and pads over to Mara's. She takes hold of the stained and crumpled fabric and peels it slowly back, wincing at the whisper-soft crackle of dried blood as she draws it all the way to Mara's parted knees, morbid magician flourish, to reveal—

Just what, it takes Faith a second or two to fathom.

Nothing left of what should be found between a woman's legs. Only several deep cuts cleaving flesh right down to the glisten of bone, vicious wounds like someone put a fucking axe to work, and filled with so much dried and crusted blood that Faith tastes bile rising fresh to her throat. So much blood that maybe it seems worse than it is—nothing Band-Aids are gonna fix, sure, but still maybe not as horrendous as she thinks either—and she forces herself to lean forwards, to look closer.

Too close. Not enough time to withdraw as Mara suddenly twists sideways and draws up her legs. Kicks out and catches Faith full in the chest with enough force to send her spinning across the

room, winded and gasping like she's been kicked by a frightened horse. Tacky carpet beneath her hands as she lands and scuttles backwards on her arse, more than a little frightened herself now with Mara getting up from the bed and stalking naked towards her. Amazon-tall and stitched together like a broken doll, a piece of her too large—too *chunky*—to be simply skin flapping open between her legs, slapping against her thigh with each determined step.

Faith barely makes it to the toilet before she throws up.

“Hey.” Hands on her back, her shoulders, reaching around to pull the hair from her face. “You shouldn’t have seen that; you should have trusted me. You should have listened when I said I was fine.”

“You’re not *fine*.” Turning to find Mara with a motel towel wrapped close around her waist, greyish-white and already spotted scarlet. “Can you even see yourself, can you see what he’s...*done* to you? What he’s....” The image of torn, bloodied flesh still stark behind her eyes, blinding, and Faith stuffs a fist into her mouth. *Mara*, she whispers, and *oh christ*, and then *Mara* again.

They’re all the words she can summon.

Mara sighs and sinks heavily to the floor, knees pressed tight together. “You don’t understand, Faith. You don’t even know the half of it.”

- - -

The story is, last night was a game of Doctors & Nurses. More precisely, Doctors & Doctors—Mara’s *specialist* friend with some friends of his own along for the ride, medical degrees decidedly optional. A room done up as an operating theatre, and Mara the star attraction.

A patient who would remain fully conscious while you sliced and prodded and poked around inside her. A patient who would speak on command, who would weep or gasp or not speak at all if that’s what you preferred. Eyes wide and bright and completely aware, even as you curved a hand around her heart to feel its rhythm against your awestruck palm.

Even as you stitched her closed again, your fingers sweating, trembling, inside their surgical gloves.

The story is, even this was not enough. Sex never in the contract, but one of them had pulled down her bikini briefs anyway, the others circling close like leering wolves with the scent of blood thick in their nostrils. Until they forced apart her legs and saw what wasn’t there.

As for what was, well. Nothing any of them could ever have seen before.

Simply, *nothing*.

Mara thinks they used a cleaver. They'd brought all sorts of tools, all kinds of implements to play with. A cleaver, or some other heavy-bladed knife.

But the story is, Mara gave far better than she ever might have gotten and by the end, not all of the blood spilled had been hers.

Not even most of it.

- - -

Faith doesn't want to know exactly what that means. What any of it means. Is only too grateful to be sent in search of the small, combination-locked suitcase Mara has left in care of the management for precisely such an occasion.

"Should have told us you was with her, love." A different man than before, tall and hollow-cheeked, leaning towards Faith with both forearms flat on the counter. "She stays as long as she needs, tell her. No charge."

Then, with genuine concern, "She okay, you reckon?"

And Faith, who knows nothing about anything any more and is trying very hard to feel just the same, merely nods. "I think so. She says so."

Back in the room, Mara thanks her for the suitcase and disappears with it into the ensuite. There is the sound of the door locking and, after a few minutes, the rhythmic patter of the shower. Faith flops onto the bed—*her* bed, not the other one—and throws an elbow over her eyes to block out the morning sun now squeezing slantways through the not-so-vertical blinds.

Thoughts of Sydney crowd forwards and, for the first time in a long time, she doesn't automatically push them away. Livia and Ben and all the others she left behind, one thousand kilometres worth of behind, because who knew how wide that particular vortex yawned. *We're, like, exploring Antarctica here*, someone had mused late one night. Russ, or maybe Corin; she couldn't recall. Wedged in her memory instead, the wired exultation in Liv's reply: *Baby, no, there's dirt and rocks and shit under there. This is the fucking Arctic circle, nothing but ice all the way down.*

Livia, raccoon eyes perpetually smudged with day-old eyeliner, her dyed-black hair overgrown with greasy blond.

Livia, finding veins in her ankles so she can still go sleeveless in summer.

Livia, scratching herself to ruin in the search for subcutaneous life.

Faith had fled. No dramatic watershed moment, no death or overdose or even accidental injury to propel her into the harsh light of day, just waking up one winter morning with frozen toes and the even colder realisation that if she dragged herself off to Livia's that night she might never, ever find her way back home.

Four weeks at her mum's instead. Best mother in the whole damn world to keep her under lock and key like that, self-imposed house arrest in suburbia while she cleaned up, thawed out, thankful that she hadn't really even begun to plumb the sort of depths that Livia and the rest had so eagerly dived to. Surfacing from that level might have—almost certainly *would* have—been impossible. Would have been impossible regardless, if she hadn't picked up and moved to Melbourne with barely a pause for breath or the burning of all her address books. Faith had proven herself stronger than she'd thought, but no way would she ever be strong enough to close a door in Livia's face if that girl decided to come knocking.

Only now there's Mara, and Faith wonders if she doesn't have some sort of subconscious freak-compass guiding her every movement.

The ensuite door swings open, spilling forth steam, fluorescent light, and someone Faith almost doesn't recognise. Mara has cut her hair, a close-cropped schoolboy style slicked back from her forehead with gel, or maybe just water from the shower. Dressed in black jeans and a baggy black T-shirt, she even seems to move differently. Loose-hipped, almost a swagger, with pale arms swinging by her sides as though buffeted by a careless breeze.

"Still here?" The surprise in her voice, no matter how mild, is just too much. This is impossible, *Mara* is impossible. Pain or no pain, no one gets cut open like that and walks around so effortlessly the very next day; no one gets *butchered* the way this woman has been and walks around *at all*, never mind in fucking *jeans*. Faith realises that if she weren't so furious, so well and truly *fed up*, she'd most likely be terrified out of her wits right now.

"What are you, Mara?" Anger definitely the preferred option, and she lets it all the way loose. "What the *fuck* are you?" Launching herself from the bed, reaching for Mara with no clear intention

beyond doing some sort of violence of her own, but it hardly matters. Mara catches her wrists in hands too strong to be human, crosses them over, then pushes her away. Hard.

Faith lands on the corner of the mattress and topples straight to the floor, terror now sliding into prominence as she rubs her wrists together, so sore the bones themselves seem bruised.

Mara regards her in silence for a few seconds, then nods, as though arriving at some kind of decision. She sits down on the bed opposite, legs apart and elbows resting on her knees. "I'm not sure what I am," she says quietly, staring at a point between her bare, blue-veined feet. "You have so many stories, it becomes difficult—confusing—to hold onto the truth."

Faith swallows, not daring to move.

"I did not fall." Mara glances up, her tear-glazed eyes still sharply focused. "But neither did I choose a side. And more than that, I can't remember."

She winces, hand moving swiftly to her waist, where it rubs in smooth, slow circles just below her ribs. "Not all of them doctors, then." And to Faith's wordless, uncomprehending shake of the head, "The liver, I think. Rearranging itself to the proper position."

"But you.... It looked like that hurt. *Did* that hurt?"

Mara shrugs.

"You told me you didn't...that you couldn't..." Not finishing, not wanting to finish. Not wanting to say the words to make it real, so Mara says them for her.

"I feel pain, Faith. I feel everything that's ever done to me, while it lasts." Half a smile, half a grimace curving her thin, pale lips. "But think, would you really feel a mosquito bite if your leg had just been severed? Or would you want to feel it even more? Would you long for that bite, that almost insignificant sting, because the other pain—the loss, the *absence*—was just too unbearable?"

Faith gets to her knees, gets oh-so-slowly to her feet. "Mara...."

"No." Even with half a room between them, the raised hand snaps her frozen to the spot. "It's too late for *Mara* now. Whatever she had, you can have. Or not. I won't be returning to that place."

*Run. Run. Run.* Each beat of her heart imploring escape, but Faith can't seem to move. Finds her mouth opening instead, asking if there is something she can do, because if there is anything at all that might help—

“What can you do?” the woman that was Mara snaps. “You and your kind who know nothing but selfishness and cruelty.” Rising from the bed, one hand lifting her shirt as if to illustrate the point. Jagged central incision that actually does look markedly better, even after these few brief hours—until two long fingers dig their way beneath the stitches and tug, pulling out half a dozen with a sickening, wet pop. Gaping, bleeding wound in her belly big enough for a hand to slip into, and it does, emerging again scarlet and dripping and offered to Faith like a promise. “Tell me, what can any of you do?”

Faith feels the motel-room door against her shoulder blades, though she can't recall backing into it.

And the woman, the *creature* that was Mara, stalks towards her, taller than ever with bitter-black eyes darker than the despair of stolen souls. “Cruel. Selfish. Arrogant beyond sufferance.” But that hand, with those blood-soaked fingers, is unexpectedly gentle as it caresses Faith's cheek, slides down to cup her chin.

“Yet you are loved,” the creature that was Mara whispers. “You are *all* loved.”

Faith can only hope the taste of salt on her lips comes from her own tears.

“Leave.” The hand loosens, those terrible eyes close. “Leave now.”

And for once, Faith does not need to be told twice.

- - -

The door to Mara's townhouse stands slightly ajar, slightly crooked. Half-off its hinges, Faith sees when she approaches, and inside the place, the damage is worse. Furniture broken, upholstery torn. Smashed crockery and glassware turning the kitchen into a glittering minefield, and the bedroom reeking from the dozens of bottles of perfume that have been spilled onto the stripped and blood-stained mattress. In the wreck of a home still almost devoid of intimate possessions and personal touches, the saddest thing is the painting of the floating red rose. The canvas now cut to pieces, palm-sized scraps scattered over the lounge-room floor, and the wooden frame upon which it had been stretched cowering in a corner like some skeletal, broken-backed beast.

By her foot, a bit of canvas lies face-down, *arest Mar* scrawled on its back in a small but confident hand, and Faith gets down on her knees to find the rest of the inscription. Oversized, paint-stiff

jigsaw with too many blank pieces, but finally she has all the ones she needs.

*For My Timeless Love, My Dearest Marguerette, who waits for no man. Arthur. New Orleans, July 1928.*

And Marguerette may not be Mara. And Mara may have lied about the artwork being done for her by a friend. And Arthur, whoever he was, may have painted this canvas for a woman who did decide to wait for him after all, a woman with whom he grew old and lined, a woman who was mortal and human and who did not look up at the stars at night and remember what it was like to walk above them.

But Faith doesn't think so.

Especially when she turns the pieces of canvas over to see that they show the curved, blood-draggled feather. Long and thin and silver-white, the feather of an eagle or albatross, or some other creature equally glorious and skybound and doomed.

Arthur, whoever he was, he had known.

Faith curls up on the carpet, knees drawn close to her chest, and wonders when she'll stop crying. *Don't you ever forget how strong you are, sweetheart*, her mum had said. *You got yourself through this, you can get yourself through anything.*

But right now, all she wants is Livia's arms around her, Livia murmuring meaningless shit in her ear. All she wants is not to feel the weight of a new day, the weight of new knowledge too frightening to consider except from the most oblique of angles. Never mind how she gets there.

Never mind if she never, ever finds her way out again. *You are loved*, it had said, blood running down its slender wrist.

Right now, the scraps of canvas clutched in her desperate, desolate fists, Faith thinks love never burned colder than this.

# Chica, Let Me Tell You a Story

Alex Dally MacFarlane

I was a door, once.

One night a year I put down my poultices and many-scented herbs, my spindle and clumps of tangled sheep-hair, I covered my sun-tanned, pock-marked flesh with a dress of moonlight, and I opened.

How can I describe such a thing?

Like unlocking an attic door fallen into long disuse, tugging it open on its rusted hinges and feeling the weight of cobwebs and shadows and gorged boxes suddenly pressed memory-thick upon the senses—but it was not quite like that. Or going to the riverside, where the cold waves, the slippery weeds and darting fish all brush against exposed skin, where the eye is treated to ripples and reflections and the ear takes in the wind's whisper, the river's murmur, the call of wild things. But again, not quite that.

I opened, Chica.

- - -

You sip your beer and I know what you think— She is mad, but harmless so far, and I have time to hear her silly tale. Well.

- - -

And when I opened, through they came.

The spirits and fey folk, all fools and kings and nightmare dead things—a picture book of terrible beauty, a bestiary of the darkly strange. I was their door, a stepping-through from one world to the next, and they crossed in their thousands. On my grassy mound I stood, open, bones and veins and muscle-strings each an archway, a gate for a chuckling shape.

I could not stop it, nor did I ever think to.

At first it did not occur to me that what stepped through would not be welcome. I did not think, Chica. I merely opened, as I always had.

60

They found me, eventually, the people of this world. There were many quests, I later heard, with heroes and maidens and all the rest, until they reached my brick-and-mound home and began slowly to bind me.

- - -

No, Chica, don't go. Is my tale so bad?

Please.

I was a door, once. Will you not listen to the rest?

Ah, thank you so much. Have another beer, share my pork scratchings. I ask such a simple thing of you, this listening.

- - -

They bound me with dresses.

One of them pinned my legs while two others held an arm each, manoeuvring a white chiffon gown over my head, pushing my arms through the sleeves, letting snowy fabric whisper down to my slipper-caught feet. The veil covered my face, curtain-thick. Thus blinded, I was wed to the Saints and my Name became theirs, all theirs, and on that same day each year they forced me to honour my husbands and their host of blood-gilded Names.

I was still a door, I still opened, but gradually my portico shrank and the traffic through me lessened.

The spirits fought back, briefly. Growing teeth like knives and spells like poison, they tried to tear aside my captors, and naively I thought they might win. Before long, though, they were overcome.

I played no part in the fighting. All I could do was sit on my grassy mound, bound in white, a sagging door.

Then came the Forgetting Dress.

Its folds and frills seemed to shimmer, to shift under my gaze, making it more beautiful than any dress I had ever seen, but the winking foolery could not conceal its true nature. From across my mound of grass, I felt it like seedlings must feel the frost—a fist, cold and strong, with the desire only to tighten around me.

Once again my arms and legs were held, once again a dress dropped over my head and down my thin body, and I felt its vice-grip instantly. I could not fight it; I was just a door, no more cunning than anything of wood and metal.

Years passed. My archways and gates shrank as the dress worked its magic—the dark, difficult magic of Forgetting. I felt my real Name slide away from tongues and minds like rain slides from an oiled umbrella, and as I faded from memory I grew weaker, smaller yet. This was a battle the fey folk and spirits could not muster enough numbers to fight.

When the people of this world came finally to imprison me, I could not resist. A shadow of me floated through memory, no more than a broken remnant, my new, empty Name honoured only by

children wearing gaudy imitations of those things that once stepped through me. I was fastened tight. My hinges rusted.

Such a pathetic thing, a door that no longer opens.

With a final dress, an overgarment of chains to adorn the Forgetting Dress and its wedding-dress petticoat, they bound me into my prison: Calendar. A prison of paper, sometimes glossy and other times matte, where my cell lies under pictures or beside them. I hang from walls in a thousand million places, as powerless as any other ornament, or sit on shelves in the gummed binding of a diary.

I have come to know my prison well, its faces and its trickeries. How it whimsically changes its paper-shape, from thin rectangle to ink-rimmed square to no larger than a number. How writing comes and goes, staying for weeks or just a fleeting moment. When the words first stained my skin, my dress, my hair, I would be scrubbing them away from myself long after they faded from my walls—until eventually I conceded defeat and became a thing coloured by countless tattoo-phrases.

- - -

You are thinking—If you are imprisoned, how can you be sitting here?

A good question, Chica.

- - -

There are still doors in this world. They are smaller, these days, to better evade a fate like mine, and they never remain in one place for long—but they do exist, in shadows and corners and quick winds.

Sometimes they come to me. Slipping into my prison, they croon over a captured, weakened sister; they comb my writing-stained hair and then they open their little bodies for me.

Calendar pursues me, of course, and before long cages me again. But there is time enough for me to step into the world and spread my tale. We take happiness where we can, we broken doors, and we are very patient.

- - -

Ah, here he is.

I was a door, once, and now I am held in Calendar. Chica, do not forget me.

# Think Fast

Michael Greenhut

Pick an alternate timeline and you'll find my corpse. October 2, 2004: I came home from work and interrupted a burglar rummaging through my kitchen drawers; he shot me six times in the stomach. June 15, 2005: a rapist's buddy stabbed me in that alley between the fish market and the Chinese restaurant; I'd run after the rapist as he dragged off some poor college girl, but I hadn't seen the buddy in time. November 8, 2006: gunned down in three possible realities during a botched bank robbery, along with nineteen other customers.

Each time, my life began to fade like the color from a broken dream. My eyes closed as I tasted blood and numbness bore down....

Death waited, but my thoughts raced. That's how they escaped. That's how I survived.

- - -

My sister Melanie's last words to me were, "Think fast." It was the day I turned six. She tossed me a football, then ran across the lawn to catch up with her friends. The football smelled brand-new.

Melanie never came home. A week later, the police found her torn, bloodstained clothes in the river.

Several months after that, I won the class prize for worst penmanship, since I could no longer write a single coherent word. The teacher called me slow. My mother called me beautiful. The doctor made me speak what I had tried to write, and then he called me fast. He said my thoughts raced so quickly when I picked up a pen that they became a blur and my hands couldn't catch up. As he told me this, I smelled my brand-new football, even though I'd buried it in the yard at the spot where I'd been standing that morning.

64 Melanie had once called me gullible, and I'd believed her. I also believed everybody else. I concluded that I was slow, beautiful, and fast, all at the same time—a fly with a turtle's body and a king's diamond on my shell. Everybody in school smiled at me, talked to me as if their words were axes and I were stained glass.

Once I learned how to cheat death, words became sharper than knives or bullets. Words became life.

- - -

“Your wife is at my shelter for battered women,” I tell him.

I am thirty-two, but I haven’t forgotten Melanie’s face. The punk standing before me in his doorway looks about nineteen. He wears a hoodie, a lip ring, and a mohawk that’s almost grown over. I’ve decided that Melanie’s killer looked like this guy. He’s out of place in this suburban New York community. Somewhere, a trailer park and six feet of dirt are competing for his occupancy.

“Who the fuck are you?” He fidgets with something in the pocket of his hoodie. The slime in his voice makes me feel the dirt under my nails. “Are you lookin’ for money or something?”

“David Spar,” I say. “Asshole Accounts Payable. Founder, President, Treasurer.”

He pulls out a handgun.

- - -

There are only two ways to kill me. One is to take me by surprise with a bullet through the back of my head. The other is to talk me into committing suicide.

Twice, I’ve gone out to play the suicide game. Each time, I stumbled across a football at a crucial moment. In the parking lot of the old shopping center where the toy store used to be, I sat and remembered the days when Melanie had taken me there. I wondered if sweet memory had gone sour. As I thought about this, both times, a football rolled in from nowhere. Different balls with different logos on the pigskin. They looked old and smelled new.

Now, whenever my employees at the women’s shelter think I’m suicidal, they invite me to a football game.

- - -

“That’s it. Give me the gun,” I tell the punk. “Handle first, please.”

*He’sGonnaShoot. MoveLeft.* My thoughts, but I don’t control them. At least, not from this point in time.

“I said, handle first.”

*MoveLeft. GrabTheGunAndTwist. HisGriplsSlippery.*

He grunts as I disarm him. “Fuckin’....” he mutters as I break his index finger.

I see blood on the floor. It's brown. Is it mine? An echo from a discarded future?

- - -

I believed in time travel the way most children believe in Santa Claus. My parents pretended to believe with me. When I asked to try it, my mother ruffled my hair and my father said, "Not today, David." Melanie said she'd take me once she could afford a flying car.

Then, on my seventh birthday—a year after Melanie's death—I met the old man in the park who drank from a bag. That morning, I had excused myself from class and climbed out of the bathroom window. I ran to the park where Melanie used to jog every day. She had always taken bread crumbs for the pigeons, so I took the crust off my cheese sandwich and crumbled it up. I threw bits of it in the grass and ran in the same little circle for thirty minutes, pretending I could jog like Melanie.

The old man reclined on a bench, sipping from a bottle in a brown paper bag. His head tilted upside-down as he stared at me.

"You're not very fast," I think I remember him saying, though he may not have actually spoken.

"I can *think* fast," I answered. "I think so fast I can hardly move."

"You think that fast, you can think into the past," he said. At least, he said something that sounded like that. He looked like he wanted to eat me.

I ran back to school, all the while imagining he was two steps behind me, chasing me on all fours and drooling.

Think fast, think into the past. I let those words marinate for years. My speed of thought, I pondered, must be faster than the speed of light. I should be able to send my thoughts back through time, to an earlier self. To ex-David, my thoughts would sound like a little Jiminy Cricket or feel like a gut instinct. The more aware my ex-Davids became of this ability, this hindsight, the more they would listen.

- - -

"Your wife is a pretty woman," I tell him as he clutches his finger and winces. "I want her to forget you. Maybe I should buy her a gift, but I'm never good with gifts and the whole gift-card thing

is getting old. I could use trial and error, but it would be simpler to ask you. What kind of things does she like?"

"What the fuck are you saying?" He can't seem to speak more than seven words at once. The word "fuck" comprises over fifteen percent of his conversation.

"I said I want to buy your wife a gift. Yes, I know, it's hardly professional, but this is hardly a profession."

"Go fuck yourself, you fuck." Twenty-one percent.

- - -

At thirteen, I used hindsight for the first time. Richard Dunn, who played lacrosse with the high schoolers and once made a retarded boy smoke pot, beat me until my bones felt like broken glass. He'd caught Patricia Anderson kissing me in the school cafeteria.

To this day, I suspect she planned it. I couldn't tell if she was crying or laughing as Richard broke my face in six different ways. She begged him to stop, called him an asshole. After he gave me that final kick in the ribs, she told him, "I didn't know you were that strong."

"Shut up," Richard answered. "When we get to my place, you're next. I'll teach you to screw around like that."

"Oh, stop it," she said. Through my swelling, half-shut eyelids, I watched Patricia wrap her arms around him. "I knew you still loved me."

I thought back to the David of five minutes earlier as I moaned on the floor. *TurnAround*, I commanded. I sent my thoughts back to the end of that kiss. *TurnAround TurnAround TurnAround. He'sGonnaSneakUpBehindYou.*

Suddenly, the beating dissolved into a daydream as I stood outside the school, contemplating ghost pains from an attack that had almost happened.

Later, older and somewhat wiser, free of the social anxieties that had been my burden, I thought back to the beginning of Patricia's kiss. I gave ex-David a new instruction. *UseYourTongue.*

- - -

"Where's her stuff?" I hold the punk down by his greasy hair. My other hand reaches instinctively for a handkerchief.

He goes for my legs. I grab the back corner of his head and shove him to the ground, then pin him with my knee.

“Fuck you,” he repeats.

Through the window in the front door, I see a police car with lights flashing. Either I made too much noise or they were already after this guy.

- - -

Whenever I’ve tried sending back a thought-command to keep Melanie from leaving home that day, a brown turtle has invaded my thinkspace and stopped me in my tracks. My thinkspace becomes solid, as if I’ve fallen into a dream without growing sleepy. With a twist of its head, the turtle beckons me across a green field with red and white flowers and a trail of brown stains. The turtle’s invitation drives me to flee, and, when I do, Melanie retreats to the back of my mind.

- - -

I turned on the TV one Sunday morning while my parents were sleeping. I expected cartoons, but I found a preacher instead. He talked as if he were about to sing. He spoke about the pleasures of Heaven that awaited us, and I believed him. I wanted to pack my Optimus Prime action figure and go.

But when I shoved my tongue down Patricia’s throat, I decided Heaven could wait a little while. Dating had been too much of a puzzle until that boost in confidence. After that day, I learned how to walk with my shoulders back and smile at a girl until she melted.

- - -

“I’m going to bring you back,” I told Melanie one night, watching the sky and tracing my own constellations. Rabbits, lynxes, shooting stars frozen in time. “I just don’t know when. I don’t know what’ll happen.”

I toyed with a thought-command, holding Melanie’s last morning in my memory. The brown turtle interrupted, watching me with red-diamond eyes. Come with me, it cried in its non-voice. Come with me and turn me red.

68

I knew the turtle had to remain brown. Only my blood would turn it red.

- - -

The police are here. They handcuff me, but I am water.

“David Spar, you have the right to remain silent,” yada yada. They have a warrant on me for five murders, but they got lucky and caught me red-handed here.

The burglar in my home, who ate his gun with the wrong fingerprints. The rapist and his friend, who I turned against their own knives. The two bank robbers I shot the day before the heist. This punk on the floor with the broken neck makes six.

They don't know about number seven. Number seven happened first.

- - -

“Richard,” I called.

Eight hours after the beating that had no longer occurred, I stood outside the open door of his parents' garage, watching him lift his father's weights. An old maroon Volkswagen was parked beside him.

“Richard,” I repeated. On the fringe of puberty, I sounded like a bullfrog.

He dropped the weights on his lap. “Jesus Christ! What the—”

“Did you hit Patricia?” I walked into the garage and leaned against the Volkswagen. I hoped she was okay, but I wanted him to say yes.

“You're fuckin' dead, you little faggot.” He charged at me and swung his fist.

I ducked. His fist crashed through the car's window. He screamed and I pushed him to the ground. I kicked him in the stomach. This was probably the kind of hooligan who killed Melanie, I thought. I pulled my leg back to kick him again, this time in the face.

But instead, I turned around and counted backwards from ten. This isn't me. I'm not a bully.

*He'sComingUpBehindYou. Move.*

I jumped to the side. He charged into the broken window and fell against the shards of broken glass.

He trembled there, pulling glass out of his neck. Then he slid to the ground.

I ran outside and found a pay phone. I began to dial 9-1-1, then stopped. I looked over my hands, my coat, my pants, to make sure I was clean.

I hung up the phone and headed home. I smiled; it felt like 2:45 p.m. on the last day of the school year.

- - -

The police on my trail are as constant as gravity. My wings are my thoughts.

The urge to save Melanie returns like an alcoholic's craving. I think back to that morning, the football bouncing in my hands as I try to catch it properly. "Think fast!"

As always, the brown turtle invades and beckons me across that imaginary field, red and white flowers and green grass stained brown. It says, Here lies the road to an unmurdered Melanie. The turtle speaks with my thoughts, the way Hollywood killers clip words out of newspapers to construct their messages. All you have to do, it says, is turn me red.

But I've always known what will happen if I follow the brown turtle. My penmanship at age six will improve. If I turn the turtle red, there will be no park and no old man with his brown paper bag.

When the turtle disappears from the path, when the brown stains vanish, when I think of a way to save Melanie without undoing the tapestry, I'll try again. Somewhere, she waits for me as I step off the school bus.

# Long Winter by Night

D. Elizabeth Wasden

"It's settled. You will go." Iosif Stalin tapped on the bowl of his pipe as he spoke. He pointed the tip at Lavrenti Pavlovich Beria and jabbed it towards him. "Don't fuck up."

The thick scent of sweet wine permeated the air, lined Beria's nostrils, the back of his throat.

Beria licked his lips as he stared at the map that covered his legs. A red triangle in the Ukraine, southeast of Kiev, marked his destination. He pinpointed where the line of engagement had been an hour ago and calculated where it would stand now based on how fast the Germans had been advancing since Operation Barbarossa began. "The Ukraine. That is Khrushchev's territory."

A match scraped against a rough surface, and then the bowl crackled to life. Stalin's yellow eyes flared with red as they captured the flame. He puffed away at his pipe, smoke plumes expanding and multiplying. It reminded Beria of a lamb roasting, of Minsk on fire.

"You are the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs. Khrushchev has enough to swallow," Stalin said, shoving a file at Beria. "You will go."

Beria straightened the papers in the file, cramming the ones that threatened to escape back into the sleeve.

Stalin's voice grew louder. "Get out, then! Don't come back unless you find the old bitch."

Beria enveloped the file with the map. He pressed the bundle against his chest, holding it in place with his left hand, and strode out of the room. He maintained his pace downstairs. Outside. To his car. The door opened. He slipped inside and dropped the materials on the back seat next to him. He unfolded the map on the seat and then lifted the folder.

"Baba Yaga," he read. He gave the Kremlin a final glance through the car's darkened windows as the Packard roared out of the gates and onto the dark, wary Moscow streets.

Within the hour, three black ravens—NKVD cars, iridescent in the brightening Moscow dawn—and a detachment of guards in an equally black ZiS-5 cargo truck were rolling southward. Beria

rode in the third car, with the truck immediately following. The road spread before them like scrawled ink slashes.

- - -

In the back of his car, Beria slumped down and laid his head against the dark leather seat. The last lingering glow of light had retreated to the west. His fingers worked at the clasp of his collar, and he pulled it apart and undid the first button of his tunic. The scattered photostats covered the rest of the seat like manically-placed tiles on a floorboard. His thick lips curled into a smile.

*Have so many been duped?* He sat up again, regathered the papers, and thumbed through them. A joke, a conspiracy, an act of desperation—he could not be certain which description fit this particular fool's errand. A letter from Skuratov to Ivan the Terrible. One from Potemkin to Ekaterina the Great. A series of memos from Third Department heads and Okhranka chiefs to tsars. Dzerzhinski's reports.

He paused at one of Dzerzhinski's papers detailing the elimination of Makhno's anarchists in the Ukraine.

"Sergo," he snapped, still gazing at the paper.

There was a yawn. "Yes, Boss," Sergo replied, his voice dry and hoarse. Beria heard him adjusting and fumbling in the front seat.

"You know of Frunze?"

A click sounded and then a steady stream of air infiltrated the car. Burning tobacco mingled with the scent of summer. "Yes, Boss," Sergo said, his voice clearer.

"Died during a stomach operation, yes?" Beria asked.

"Yes."

Beria removed his pince-nez and pinched his nose. He could see two versions of himself, one in mufti, seated in a chair, and the other in uniform, reclining against the desk in his office. The one in civilian clothing always spoke first.

*Stalin's orders.*

*The operation or the death?*

*The former.*

*Both?*

*Possibly.*

He replaced the pince-nez and the two Berias dissolved. "Do you believe in fairy tales, Sergo?"

“Of course not, Boss. They are superstitions. Created by the Church to control the population. Like a narcotic.” Sergo turned his head; Beria could see one of his dark eyes. It seemed to shine in the low-lit car.

Not content, Beria leaned forward so that he could capture the other man’s gaze fully. “How do you think Makhno escaped? There were multiple orders for his assassination. He was known for retribution against the Chekists.”

Sergo blinked slowly. “The Red Army dispatched his group. What else would he do but flee?”

Beria’s eyebrows hitched upwards. *Not exactly what I wanted.*

*You can’t be surprised.*

*A ricocheting bullet sometimes hits a target.*

*Sometimes it hits the shooter. Or the man standing next to him.*

*Other times the trajectory is correct, but there’s something else beyond the target.*

*Follow the path, then. But don’t be surprised if the bullet explodes in your face.*

“Frunze made his move in 1920. The Red Army surrounded Makhno. Targeted him. Still, he fought. Took prisoners. Escaped in 1921. Perhaps he made some kind of deal.” He paused. “Or was he simply a coward?”

“Anarchists are cowards. Were cowards. Enemies of the people.” Sergo looked down.

Beria ran his hand over his skull and massaged the scruff of his neck. “No. No, Makhno was a fanatic. Not a coward. He believed in his cause. Did he not?”

Sergo shifted in his seat. Beria continued to stare at him. “Did he not?” Beria repeated.

Sergo glanced up. His eyes had dimmed, drowned in the darkness inside the vehicle. “Yes, Boss.”

“Fanatics never give up anything.” *The Bolsheviks never did.* “So how did Makhno survive in the Ukraine? What protection did he receive? Who helped him? There’s another explanation.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Beria sighed, slumped down, and leaned his head back. If his own son Sergo had been in the front seat, he could have helped. Or even Nina, his wife. This Sergo? Only good for his willingness to give his life for Beria. If that.

*Frunze was capable. Makhno was an anarchist, had assisted him, had his own legion of contacts and supporters.*

*How many assassination attempts were there? Several. He survived every one. Escaped. Then, nothing.*

*Perhaps he had too much local support. The Bolsheviks, not enough. Besides, the group at least was destroyed; Makhno fled to Paris. What good was he there? That could have been enough for the Politburo. Most of them.*

*Not for me. What good was Trotsky in Mexico City? His fucking mouth. His ideas. And at the least, Dzerzhinski would have wanted justice for his Chekists. Makhno should have been shot.*

*Dzerzhinski had other concerns. But this nonsense—superstitions. A witch assisting him? Protecting him? All it takes is one highly-placed, sympathetic traitor. Or many supporters. Luck. The boy must be right about that at least.*

*If he's not?*

*Better to not know.*

*Better to find some random old hag instead and to speak to her.*

He reached for the front seat and pulled himself forwards. "Where are we?"

"Just west of Rostov-on-Don, Boss," Vasili replied. He kept his eyes on the road, a bonus in a driver.

"Nothing from the wireless?"

"The clouds are low tonight," Sergo said. "More rain, possibly. We have excellent cover. Consistently reported for our route."

Beria reclined and pressed his hand to the back of his neck. His knuckles rubbed against the starchy, loose tunic collar.

*Excellent cover.*

*He would never know.*

*He has eyes everywhere. This fool, this Sergo, he's one of Stalin's, not ours.*

*He can't even read a map.*

*Doubtful that he would be so stupid. Predictable, yes.*

*We don't have the luxury of time. No turning back, soon.*

*This is mad. Whether these papers are true or not. We alter our course now.*

Even as his lips parted and his tongue began to form the first syllable, a loud crack reverberated in the air. A shockwave rattled the car. Beria rolled down the window. His neck craned as he

peered towards the sky, as the gray clouds above transformed and curled into thick white cottonballs. As if a hand had gathered them and sorted them on either side, an opening appeared, then widened. Bright streaks of moonlight streamed through. Within a few seconds, the beams joined and bloated into a wide oval that illuminated the convoy. They had been pinpointed, as if caught in a spotlight.

Beria ducked his head inside the vehicle. He continued to glance upwards at the shifting sky and lick his lips. "The wireless?"

Sergo fumbled again and tried to crank the device to life. "No reception. Nothing."

A trio of very dark patterns formed. Long wings stretched against the backdrop of light. Doubled wings. Biplanes. Distinguishable for a few seconds were iron crosses on the undersides of the wings.

"Floor it," Beria said as he furiously wound up the window.

Sergo continued to crank the wireless and then speak into the receiver. He wound the machine faster each time.

The ghostly shadows behind them dived towards the earth. Beria stared straight ahead. What use was there in looking? What sense could be made of any of it? He had seen those same planes in 1917 on the front.

Another crack sounded. Orange flared as the car took to the air for a few seconds, plummeted to the pavement, and then bounced a couple of times. The tires squealed and the car angled side-to-side.

Clutching the edge of the seat, Beria finally turned his head. Behind his car, plumes of smoke arose from the pavement. The truck pushed through the billowing screen behind them and then skidded towards the opposite side of the road.

As they slid to a stop, Sergo dropped the wireless receiver and gripped the door frame. Beria's fingers slid from the seat. He launched forwards, and his knees hit the floorboard. His left shoulder dug into the back of Vasili's seat, which softened the blow when his head made contact. His pince-nez popped from the bridge of his nose and arched upwards and into the front seat.

The car's engine continued to chug. Beria lifted his head and shook it. He squinted as he attempted to locate Sergo, but

anything beyond a foot away blurred. He pushed off Vasili's seat with his shoulder and was assaulted by an incendiary reek.

"Sergo. Vasili," he called as he oriented himself, pulling himself halfway up. He gripped the backs of their seats, hunched, and peered over. Empty. He licked his lips as he felt around Sergo's seat and caught his pince-nez between his fingers. He immediately replaced it on the bridge of his nose and reexamined the front seat. Still empty. Even the wireless radio had disappeared without a sound.

He eased back onto his seat and turned the door handle. After flinging the door open, he slipped outside. The sky had darkened again, although ripples of white swirled through the gray like cresting surf in a dull sea. He leaned against the driver's door, glanced ahead of him and then behind, looking for the two other cars, the truck. Nothing. No one but him.

He slid to the ground, hunched on his heels, his back against the car, and patted his holster. The well-oiled Tokarev bulged inside.

*Perfect for neck shots.*

*But what of head shots?*

*Our head.*

*Yes.*

*Could you?*

*Could you not?*

*If something were worse.*

*A last resort.*

He slid his hand over the holster. His fingers circled the buttoned clasp, then he dropped his hand to the ground, pushed himself up, and stepped away from the car. As he scanned the roadway and the sky, a flicker of light, as of flint touching metal, caught the corner of his eye.

He spun around. The car had vanished.

He glanced down at his holster. Still there.

When he looked up, an illuminated, bright-yellow dacha sat in the middle of the road, like a daffodil sprouted from a bulb beneath the pavement. He studied it for a few moments as he rubbed the top of his head. Lush green grass overran the black of the road; one lemon tree formed, then another. He began to move towards the dacha and its garden before he realized it, and he forced himself to stop.

The tangy, acidic scent of citrus. A slithering hiss as grapevines wrapped around trellises. The plump lemons bending the branches of the trees towards the grass.

The smell of salt air rushed into his nostrils as a red carpet, which had rolled from the dacha's doorway, collided with his boot.

He dragged the tip of his boot across the end of the carpeting. It did not move. He knelt down and ran his fingers over the red fabric. Iron stirred in the air, and his fingertips felt moist. The carpeting looked as if it had melted and melded into the roadway.

He rose to his full height and strode towards the door, stopping to retrieve a pair of lemons from the tree nearest the red path. He dug his thumbnail into one of them; the lemon squirted into his hand, filling the air with its sharp, pleasant scent. The juice pooled in his palm and tumbled to the ground.

After dropping the lacerated lemon, he ran his thumb over the other one. The bumps in the peel. The round yet firm curve. A squeeze, and the lemon's pliant softness. He pocketed this lemon in a tunic pocket. He reached into the other pocket, withdrew a white handkerchief, and wiped the sticky fluid from his palm.

He deposited the cloth back into his pocket and continued to the door. He raised his arm to knock, then hesitated. His fist was curled, knuckles jutting out, prepared for contact.

After a few seconds had passed, he tapped on the door. It immediately swung open.

Beria peered inside the well-furnished dacha. The red carpeting curved around a corner. Cut flowers adorned a quartet of tables, and plush burgundy chairs decorated the front room. Light descended from the ceilings; candles flickered in the high crystal chandeliers. A number of oil portraits hung on the far wall, including those of Skuratov, Benkendorf, and Makhno. To the right of the painting of Makhno, an empty frame held a barely-silver shimmer. Beria moved towards it, passing from the front room and into the dining room. Leaning forwards until his face was but inches away, he tried to decipher the pattern within. As he watched, the translucent image swirled and formed into a very familiar face—Stalin's.

Behind him, the door clicked shut. He eased back until he stood on the red carpeting. Until he could see *her*. Dressed in a

loose white gown with a low neckline, fair, slim, athletic, her blue eyes sparkling in the candlelight. A string of pearls encircled her neck.

“Lavrenti Pavlovich,” she said, and then curtsied.

Beria licked his lips, which had gone quite numb. “Baba Yaga,” he said.

“It only sounds strange to say it the first few times,” she assured him. She came towards him and slipped her fingers around his forearm.

He stared at her long, thin fingers and then took a deep breath. “Koba said you were an old bitch. I disagree.”

She laughed. “He hasn’t changed.” She faced him and placed her other hand on his chest.

“You know him?” He remained still, rigid.

“I have for quite some time,” she answered. “I’ve been expecting you, Lavrenti Pavlovich. To think that you were considering not fulfilling your obligation. That disappointed me.” She leaned forwards, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply, sniffing a trail upwards to his partially-exposed neck. “Yes. I can bargain with you. The intelligence doesn’t always give the full story, as you know.”

Baba Yaga lowered her hands, turned, and moved towards the chairs. She settled into one of them, burgundy now draped with white, and crossed her legs. Her fingers glided across the thin, silky fabric on her thigh.

Beria’s eyes followed her, the pit of his stomach ever warmer and tighter, its heat fueled by her movements.

“Come sit, Lavrenti Pavlovich.” She swept her hand at a chair. “Let us discuss war.”

“How much can you do?” Beria asked, maintaining his position.

Baba Yaga smiled. The tips of her canines gleamed. “The better question would be how much would I be willing to do. But I cannot strike directly. I cannot kill a single man.” She stretched towards an adjacent chair and ran her fingers up the arm. “Sit. Please. I’ve always preferred comfortable negotiations. We’re not at your Lubyanka, now are we?”

“No,” Beria said. He walked to the chair next to hers and sat. “Where are we? And when did a hut with a chicken leg become a dacha with a garden?”

"All things to all people, Lavrenti Pavlovich," she said. Her fingers rested on the arm of his chair still. "We are safe. That is what matters. Any explanation beyond that would be meaningless."

"I think an explanation would be in order," Beria said. The back of his head pressed against the chair's soft, plush covering. "Where are my men?"

"Safe in a moment of time. As are we," Baba Yaga replied. "It does require a lot of power. I should thank you for Katyn. All of your good work. We all have need for fuel."

"Fuel," Beria repeated. "The legends say that you are a cannibal."

"Not completely true."

"That implies it's not completely false."

"The dead alone interest me. Their passing. That is what is important to me. That is all you need to know." She leaned across her chair towards him. "That is all you will know." Her breath, strikingly cool, caressed his forehead.

"That is your payment."

"Yes."

He broke her gaze and studied the room. "What of the paintings?"

"Remnants. A small part of each of them. A memory. A minor price for my works."

"Koba's painting?"

"Incomplete."

"Why?" His eyes locked onto hers.

"Only with death do the paintings congeal. As blood flows through his veins, so does it flow within the painting." She eased back, but her fingers continued to press against the arm of his chair. "The Wehrmacht moves across your territories as we speak. There is war. I have a bounty to feast upon—with or without a bargain on your part. I wonder if you could afford to return to Moscow without an agreement."

Beria's fingers found the back of his neck. "The orders were to find you."

"You believe that will suffice for Koba?"

Beria gazed upwards. The candles cast dancing shadows on the ceiling. "I thought this a mad errand. Who would believe such a thing?" His narrowed eyes met hers. "He set me up, didn't he?"

She gave a hearty laugh. “That’s a strong phrase, isn’t it? I believe he sent the best man for the job. Besides, he cannot return. This is a one-time affair.”

The two sat in silence. Finally, Beria said, “The Germans are not equipped for long-term maneuvers. It will be some time before supplies can reach them.”

“The quick victory, yes,” Baba Yaga said. “That is their plan.”

Beria took off his pince-nez and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “We must increase the time of engagement. Slow them down.”

She ran her index finger across her lips and then folded her hands in her lap. “How do you propose to accomplish this?”

He resettled the pince-nez. His eyes gleamed. “The skies split for you. Do they follow your bidding in all ways?”

She nodded.

“Rain. Bring the rains, and then...a long winter. A very brutal winter.”

Baba Yaga smiled. “An agreement has been made.” She stood; her dress glittered in the light. “There remains a final act.”

Beria pushed himself up from the chair. Her cool breath lashed at his skin, wave after wave, as he approached her. “A final act?”

Smiling, she leaned into him. Her hand glided up his chest, around the back of his neck. He pulled her towards him, pressed his lips against hers. Despite her toned appearance, his fingers grasped only hard bone. He could taste only bitter frost on her tongue.

She ran the back of her fingers against his cheeks, and then, suddenly, pressed her thumb against his forehead. The coldness of her touch, winter in her very fingertips, forced Beria to shiver as he pulled back from her. On the wall, next to Stalin’s still-incomplete portrait, a new frame appeared as Baba Yaga, her gleaming canines, and the dacha faded, grew increasingly transparent, and dissolved.

Beria stared at the back of Sergo’s head once more. His lips twisted as he undid the remaining buttons of his tunic. He slipped out of it and tossed it on the seat next to him, covering his papers and jolting the lemon from the pocket. It rolled across the seat and tapped against his thigh.

Beria picked up the fruit, examined it, squeezed it in his palm. Still soft. A pattering on the car top sounded, joined quickly by the swish of wiper blades.

Beyond Vasili and Sergo, he could see the two lead cars. He shifted his head enough to glimpse the truck's lights.

"Turn around," he ordered.

The two men in the front seat exchanged glances but said nothing. Sergo wound the radio and communicated with the other vehicles as Vasili slowed the car. He swung it around and fell in line once the leading cars had turned north.

"Everything's okay, Boss?" Sergo asked.

"Winter," Beria said, rolling the lemon between his hands. "A very long winter, even in the Russian summer."

The car sped towards the north, towards Moscow, under the cover of gray night and rain.

# Unfinished Stories

J[ae] Brames

Before Albert can crack open the rebirth canal, we have to scrape a suitable body off the road. *Suitable* means no burst eyeballs, no pancaked skulls, no severed limbs. No spat-up stomachs or tire-tread tattoos. Alive, twitching but not fighting; some internal damage is expected, but no jellified innards—sick of the ghost, unable to afford the ghost, considering cold-turkey ghostlessness, but not giving it up just yet. And as long as we're cruising the route, Albert says, we might as well be delivering the mail.

Albert creeps the truck up to Ira and Nancy Chartier's mailbox, which is shaped and painted like a rusty-breasted mallard. A mallard can live more than twenty years. I pass Albert the envelopes, careful not to drool on them.

"Bills," he says, giggling.

I only twitch a grin, because even redemption can't make me muster the will to laugh aloud at that pun every damn day. As we drive off I can hear Ira inside his house, quacking to us.

The rough road is a series of humps, a monstrous snakeskin draped across rolling hills, a woodland fatality waiting to happen. Albert straddles the shoulder and coasts, foot hovering above the brake, toward the Dolans' mailbox, which is shaped like a squatting squirrel. Squirrels, if well cared for, can live sixteen years before their bodies quit.

"Story needs an ending," Albert says. Now he's anxious. We're three from zero hour and have yet to scrape up a proper quasicadaver, but no rush, let's do our federal duty; it's an unfinished story that finally gets Albert's ticker tocking.

"It'll have an ending soon," I assure him.

"She ain't gonna finish the story today. Would you have wanted to?"

I'm a fan of redemption. Call it a communicable disease. Steal my lunch, and I'll buy you dinner. Steal my life, and I'll be your best friend. Even so, my first priority upon waking had been to scratch and slide my drippy carcass out of Albert's cradled claws—Gallup polls say mortal terror trumps Story Time nine rescues out of ten.

The mail truck drifts across the double yellow. Sweat beads on Albert's greasy noggin. He tenses his brutish bulk, as though losing a soul-size battle to the steering wheel or to his own urge to become a psychotic *Geisterfahrer*.

A car shoots over the crest of the hill and honks and doesn't slow. I snap at Albert's forearm—it's like gnawing on a tree trunk—and he gasps to life and jerks the wheel. The car honks, swerves across the shoulder, clips the tall grass. Honks and whips by like a low-flying aircraft shattering a pathetic sound barrier. Honks, locates the lane, and cruises on.

Albert parks at the side of the road and laughs. When movie directors want their actors to blast a maniacal cackle, they demonstrate with a tape of Albert's everyday laugh. And his face, for the duration of the laughter, is a sharp crease of hatred and horror. To meet Albert relishing a punch line is to double-check all window locks and deadbolts before bed for the rest of your life.

As we watch the unfamiliar car climb the hill behind us, framed in the side mirror, a small gray animal darts out into the road, rethinks the decision, re-rethinks, oscillates in the middle of the car's lane as though bouncing off invisible hands closing in for the kill. The car screeches, fishtails, and then gives up the impression of remorse; the brake lights go out like angry eyes squeezing shut to bear the impact. We hear a Styrofoam thud and see the gray animal skip into the grass, a linty tumbleweed. Albert stops laughing. The car keeps on going.

"People...." Albert says, a simmering cliffhanger that implies the characteristic ending, "should have their heads bashed in with a hammer." He looks like he might cry.

"Maybe we've found our quasicadaver, Albert."

"It's not supposed to happen like that."

But that's how it happens. Always. Animals don't die of old age here. They don't succumb to cancer in the soft shoulder. They don't give their lives for a greater good. Drivers get too relaxed about the hills and high speed limit, and unprepared animals eat bumper. And no one stops. No one pulls over for a possum; no one weeps over a skunk. Very few drivers will seek out the owner of a flattened doggy. People hit and run. It's a wonder an angel like Albert feels any guilt.

We turn back and park where the accident took place. *Accident* is a hell of a word for what cars do to living things. Look

at the splattered accidents scattered across a windshield—poor soaring insects. The twisted legs of a dog. The crushed teeth, the leaky gray matter. The rusty-red smear on the pavement. Fresh from the rebirth canal, when I thought I was in Hell, Albert called it an “accident.”

“Hilton,” Albert says, climbing out of the truck, “please do something for me.”

“Sure, Albert.” Call it a disease, or a purpose.

“Tell the rest of the story, please.” He sifts through the waist-deep grass. I hop out the driver’s-side door and sniff around with him, find the prize before he does. Albert mats down the grass around it, as though clearing room for it to breathe, the way a lifeguard would for a half-drowned swimmer. This victim, this roadkill, this accident is a mottled-gray cat, curled into a bloated asterisk of mussed fur, blinking slowly. It makes no effort to fight or bolt when we squat in the grass, evaluating the state of its unsustainable body.

“Superpuss. The Dolans’ kitty,” Albert says, like a priest delivering last rites. “She loved the outdoors, and she was good at crossing the road, and she was well cared for. She let me scratch her behind the ears.”

“On a positive note, I think she liked to chase squirrels.”

Albert gives me a disapproving glare. Slowly, it eases. “I guess.”

“She’s a goner,” I say. “Look, her ribs are crushed.”

Albert agrees. We play God. Maybe she’d be back stalking squirrels by next week if we got her some veterinary aid. We make choices. We’re part of the accident, and what does life really mean? It’s the souls we’re worried about.

Albert scurries to the back of the truck and returns with a wide wooden paddle, formerly used to handle pizzas. (The pizza place went belly-up. We’re good at recycling.) He slides the business end of the paddle through the grass, under the Dolans’ cat, who doesn’t gripe or twitch. Albert carries her to the back of the mail truck and slips her gently onto a drawn-and-quartered cardboard box, beside a tray of computer-sorted envelopes, a bin of hand-sorted magazines, and a bloodstained claw hammer. Purring in sympathy, he pats Superpuss’s head. Scratches her behind the ears.

The unfinished story. Yesterday, Greta Reynolds began thrilling her mail carrier with the tale of a witch who was raised to be wicked, but who wanted nothing to do with it. She lived in a gingerbread house (the witch did; Mrs. Reynolds lived in a Dutch Colonial), but only because she had inherited it. She owned a big kid-cooker, but she used it to broil chickens and wild pigs, which she caught with a handy sleep spell. And yet, at her core was a voice generations old urging her to spread plagues, tyrannize townspeople, gobble up unsuspecting children. This instinct wasn't difficult to suppress, though, because she lived deep in the woods and encountered neither villager nor voyager.

"It should end happy," he says, as we stuff junk mail into the Dolans' metal squirrel. Albert has childlike sensibilities, an innocent attachment to the gentler twists and turns. Unfairness worries him. Unhappiness is an aberrant state and must be alleviated immediately.

Norman Dolan is out spraying his apple trees with insecticide. His loss won't break him—Superpuss was more sacrifice than pet.

One day, a child came to the witch's house, a rotund gobstopper of a boy, but polite—he knocked on her door instead of just munching away on the sugary siding. When the witch saw his pudgy cheeks and round belly, that pesky evil instinct kicked in. She invited him inside and stuffed him with boar, corn, and plates of chocolate-glazed shingles and rock-candy windows and gummy sugar-caulk, the whole time telling herself she was simply playing the proper host and would never endanger this little boy. But every time she thought *little boy*, and whenever she would glance at his bulging belly, her mouth would water, and her deeper nature would force her thoughts back to that huge oven behind the boy's chair, door agape as though waiting to feed.

"All she had to do was push." Those were Mrs. Reynolds' final words in this world. A cliffhanger. Then Albert succumbed to his deeper nature and killed her.

The average life span of a human living on this rural through road, in this patch of cursed forest: maybe fifty years, before the cliffhanger. Albert told me that he used to be a handyman, half a century ago. Before that, he lived in a cave. He lurked through these woods at night, in a time pre-dating deadbolts. His eerie laughter caused wary farmers to stoke their fires. He told me

that his eyes used to blaze red in the dark, and that it's possible to hear a soul scream.

The Ismaels' mailbox is a five-point buck. The antlers are real, last season's. In the front yard, a herd of white-tailed deer plucks cherries from one of several fruit trees. Deer will live a maximum of twenty years. They stop to watch Albert, who flaps envelopes at them ingenuously. Mrs. Ismael is hanging a birdfeeder from the side deck, where a bug zapper strung from a post is noisily frying its latest victims. Albert waves her over. She waves him off, chuckling, her neck jerking, eyes attentive like a cautious doe's. Albert jabs the mail into the box, suddenly sullen.

"All the witch had to do was push," I say, and he perks up. The cat mewls. "Finally, the boy, plugged with fatty foods and sugary sweets, let out an appetizing belch that shattered the witch's willpower and threw her into a delirious hunger frenzy. She tipped the boy's chair back, cackling, consumed by his sweaty, delectable boyishness, maddened by his shocked screams. She tipped him back toward the monstrous oven."

Albert's breath quickens. He stops at Byron and Edna Dzewski's mailbox, a woodchuck facsimile. Woodchucks don't live past ten years. I can't talk while I'm giving him the small stack of letters and a *National Wildlife* magazine.

Then we cruise on to my box, a dog—golden retriever, specifically. Thirteen-year life span, if I'm lucky. Death occurs because the body quits, whether the soul is ready or not. Albert designed the mailbox for me, the same day he buried my collection of hunting trophies: mounted bucks, stuffed sage grouse and bobwhite—a taxidermic game preserve.

"The witch tried to regain her rational side," I continue, "but her evil side was too strong, and killing the boy was as simple as tipping him backward. He cooked, shrieking at first, his clothes bursting into flames, as though he had been delivered straight into Hell. The witch caught hold of her cackle, then, and doused the oven fire, but it was too late. She had destroyed an innocent, God-fearing boy."

Albert nods. His forehead is creased and his eyes look big, his gaze distant as though seeing a truth that no one else can. "Shouldn't have had to die," he whispers.

"But he did die. He crossed the wrong lane, stood in the way of the wrong speeding human. It wasn't his fault, and the witch felt

immediate remorse. She had let her evil win. A soul had suffered. The odor of the roasted flesh made her sick even as it made her salivate. She vowed to kill herself.”

“She couldn’t,” Albert says, straddling the white line, staying vigilant for darting animals.

Mosquitoes and butterflies and bumblebees with shoddy timing are pasted on the windshield. Ahead is a mailbox built to look like a striped skunk: a fifteen-year body. Beyond, a possum mailbox, with a salt lick to lure deer to the road—possums live only a few years.

“The witch climbed inside her oven, remorseful, longing for Hell. Her hair burned, and her skin blistered, but she survived. She couldn’t stand it—why should she be invincible, while innocents suffered and died? She caught sight of her hideously scarred face in a mirror. She looked like a true wicked witch. Gazing at herself, seeing what she was, she had a revelation.”

Albert nods. We pull into a driveway. The mailbox reads “REYNOLDS”; it’s shaped like a mailbox. Albert excuses himself and gets out, rings the front doorbell.

Mr. Reynolds bursts out of the front door like a cat dashing after a mouse, his face scorched by wrath. He tackles Albert, who allows him to—Albert is a big guy, a beast in a federal uniform, and Mr. Reynolds is gray-haired and frail, slashing with a butcher knife. Albert holds the knife by the blade. Blood jots a line down his wrist. On his back, in the grass, he explains his curse, Greta’s damnation, what he can do about it. He tells Mr. Reynolds, “I had to borrow your hammer.” He tells him to buy a pet, let it run freely.

I have to go to the bathroom, so I dash into the woods. Running calms me; I can’t say how. I run until the other urge takes precedence, then I squat.

The Palma boy sees me. He’s burning ants with a magnifying glass. He waits for me to finish, then he comes over and pets me. I don’t like his scent. He tugs my tail, and it hurts all the way up to my teeth. I want to nip at him, but he’s a boy; later, he’ll regret the evil that made him do that. “Stay clear of the road,” I say, and he bursts into terrified tears and scampers toward home, as though fleeing a wicked witch.

Back at the truck, Mr. Reynolds is bandaging Albert’s hand.

What Albert tells you, after he wakes you up, is basically the behind-the-scenes history of mankind. Gods, angels, devils,

demons. Contests for souls—you can be morally immaculate and still go to Hell. But the main thing Albert tells you is that he can't abide being a demon, and also he can't help it. So he learned how to do the work of the angels, and now he's his own cosmic balance. He doesn't mention his general preference for animals.

We wrap up our route. Mr. Reynolds lends a hand, sparing the envelopes my tooth marks. Then on to Albert's.

"And put up birdfeeders," Albert is telling Mr. Reynolds. These are the commandments. "And your pets can't be spayed or neutered, because animals need babies. And plant fruit trees, and keep the bugs off. Soon as you see a caterpillar tent, hit it with a broom. No more mousetraps or stuffed kill. You've got deer targets out back, I saw yesterday. With arrows sticking out."

"I'll throw them away," Mr. Reynolds promises.

"Bury them."

At Albert's house, which has an orchard in the front yard and a metropolis of birdhouses and feeders in the trees out back, Mr. Reynolds plays human gurney for Superpuss and follows us into a corrugated-metal garage. Albert has worn himself out with repeating the rules, the way I'd imagine God would get tired of punishing humanity—which, one might speculate, is why He left us with Albert, who squints down at me, unable to sustain eye contact, and asks me to finish the story.

"The witch realized that she had spent a lifetime craving human meat—only a withdrawal from civilization could have curbed it, and civilization was growing. She was bound to meet another little boy. She had been eating animal meat for these many years, never enjoying it, always spiting herself in the eating, destroying one innocent creature to preserve another because cannibalism was worse than carnivorousness. As she looked in the mirror, though, she realized that she wasn't, after all, human. She was a witch. She was vile, inescapably vile, made to be. She had destroyed innocent animals in trying, fruitlessly, to deny her nature.

"But she had power. She could make up for her destruction. She could consume the meat and save the life."

Mr. Reynolds watches me, horrified. I'm not sure if it's the story or the body. Albert, grinning, leads Mr. Reynolds around the chalked pentagram on the concrete floor. An aquarium sits on a table, surrounded by flickering candles in tiny jars, like vigil lights for a hundred victims. At Albert's behest, Mr. Reynolds lays

the dying cat in the shallow water of the aquarium. Superpuss shifts weakly, drowning. Albert herds Mr. Reynolds into the back corner and arranges himself into a meditative position at the hub of the pentagram.

He says he must act at a certain time in order to snag a captive soul from Hell—about one day after he sent it there—but the timing is never precise. We're roughly twenty-three hours clear of his last accident, but the moment he closes his eyes, the water in the aquarium begins to churn ferociously, as though the cat were being mauled by demonic piranha. "I'm still listening, Hilton," Albert says, so I continue, speaking over the boiling water and the ineffable hum of a cracking cosmos.

"The witch pored over her books of spells and located the proper one, and she found a dying bird that had fallen from its nest."

The water churns, and Mr. Reynolds quavers in the corner, and Albert might for all the world be a placid monk; like the incarnation of a clear conscience, like an angel, he is no longer touching the ground.

"She prepared her herbs, her incantations, set the fading bird on an altar, and performed the spell. The witch, evil, a murderer but not a permanent one, reached into the beyond and rescued the boy, deposited him into the bird. The bird's body, bolstered by a spare soul, healed, and boy melded with bird."

It would be easy to kill him right now. Never let Albert cause another death, not a fly nor a deer nor a human. But I remember Hell, even if I only remember it as a hit and run, my body quitting at the side of the road, and Albert's arms.

A pale fireball of preternaturalism swells from the quitting body of Superpuss. The rebirth canal. The candles are snuffed out, the water boiled off. Mr. Reynolds screams like a deer that has been shot in the flank with a thirty-ought-six bolt-action rifle. The room goes dark, except for a green ball of ghost light burned onto my retinas.

"The witch had found balance between desires and scruples. She had her evil and her redemption. She feasted on the boy. Never before had she tasted such savory meat—and she didn't need to feel guilty, for as the flesh digested in her belly, the soul continued on. When she had eaten him all up, she flew to the nearest village and, using her handy sleep spell, snagged another child, and she

cooked him, then returned his soul to the body of a wounded roe. The bird-boy and the roe-boy forgave her, as did the rest of the children and the villagers, in time. And the witch moved into the village and lived with the animals, accepted, forever. The end.”

I nudge the lights on with my nose. Mr. Reynolds is weeping, but he springs up when Albert calls him. Superpuss is supine in the empty tank, blinking. “Oh god,” she says, over and over, in the voice of Greta Reynolds. I know how she feels.

Albert lifts her and hands her to Mr. Reynolds, who blinks away tears, cries his wife’s name in a crackling contralto—a genuine souls-reunited moment. Mrs. Reynolds will be fine. So will Superpuss.

And, soon, Albert will be forgiven. This is the big finish, the point in the story where I metaphorically soul-meld him to the witch and applaud him for balancing his born-and-bred evil with kindness—but, honestly, I don’t think Albert’s eyes ever glowed. I think Albert is a mortal man, exploiting a found loop-hole in eternity. I think he’s a nearly-ordinary nutcase, who likes animals and loathes people, who lives to overcome his humanity, and then lives to succumb to it. I wish I had it in me to kill him. But he rescued me. He murdered me, and he saved me. Show me redemption, prove the presence of sin and salvation, and I’ll be your best friend. Prove there’s more to life than eating, sleeping, and chasing my tail.

Albert spots an ant crawling across the floor, smooshes it between his fingers, and pops it into his mouth, chews the crunchy exoskeleton. Scratches behind my ears. “The witch lady’s an angel,” he says, “to defeat her evil like that. Right?”

“Complete angel,” I agree.

Call it a disease.