

Strange Birds

Inspired by the
artwork of Lisa
Snellings-Clark

BY GENE WOLFE





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PAINTINGS & SCULPTURE BY
LISA SNELLINGS-CLARK

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STRANGE BIRDS

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ON
A
VACANT
FACE
A
BRUISE





THE SOUNDS OF THE ANIMALS drew Tom in. Not the lights nor the music, nor even the smell of food. Not the dolls, for he did not know about the dolls then. Not even the birds, for he did not know about them either. No, it was just the animals, animals in general, the sounds and smells of the animals.

It was a dark night of the sort that seems sacred and perhaps is. He had been tramping along head down, hungry and tired, tramping down a dirt road leading to a town whose name he did not know. He had not seen the lights nor smelled the food yet, but he heard a leopard cough.

The sound stopped him in his tracks. He raised his head and looked around, his fatigue forgotten. A faint radiance glowed behind the hill to his left. He waited, listening.

A pig grunted. He had heard pigs often, and they had been real ones. Leopards, as far as his direct experience went, existed only as digital recordings.

An elephant trumpeted. He walked again, faster now, with longer strides, his head up. A side road appeared to lead behind the hill. A lion roared. After that, all was silence. The sacred stars winked down, unchanged; but it almost seemed that two of Herehome's circling moons smiled.

There were wagons parked in the fields on either side of the road, many with people sitting silently on the seat. Others stood chatting in small groups. Lanterns hung from every wagon, but rung-oil was expensive, and few of those lanterns were lit. Horses were harnessed to every wagon, scrubby horses that waited in silence for something to happen, for food, water, or sleep, and never thought of freedom.

Tom joined one of the groups for a while, but heard only talk of the weather, and what the weather might do to the price of corn. The odor of horses and horse droppings hung over everything.

Nearer the lights, the breeze was freighted with new smells: sawdust and hay, frying food, roasting peanuts, and a hundred others. He walked faster, his fatigue forgotten.

"Here you are, son!" The prancing figure at the gate wore strange, bright-colored clothes and flourished a long, slender stick with a ribbon at the top. "Just one cred to get in, and there's lots of free shows. That includes the big one!"

He leaped into the air and seemed to hang there for a moment, mouth and eyes wide, in defiance of gravity. "Just one cred, and you'll never regret it. Why—"

"I don't have any money," Tom said, and the prancing figure lost all interest in him.

The fence was of transparent film supported by steel poles. Touching the film brought a flash of pain, but through it Tom could see milling crowds and high platforms upon which figures far stranger than the one at the gate stood talking. He knew something of fences and walked this one slowly, hoping for a low spot that would let him crawl under.

He found a tree instead. It was on the side opposite the gate, a big white doak someone had been saving until building timber was needed, a towering king among trees — one of whose level limbs stretched above the fence. He knew trees, too, and climbed this one.

It was a show almost better than the circus to sit up there in the dark, seeing while unseen himself. Elephants were lining up to go into the big tent, and the last and biggest had two trunks and four tusks. It raised its huge head, and raised both trunks higher still, and trumpeted again; and for a moment the whole circus fell silent.

Listening.

"Magic," Tom heard the word before he realized that the voice was his own. "I don't care if I *don't* get a thing to eat here. Magic's better."

His voice disturbed a bird higher in the tree. There was a faint moan, like the moaning of a dove.

A naked woman wrapped in a dragon had taken the stage at the tent nearest his tree. The dragon writhed, hissed steam, and a moment later belched smoke and flames. The woman whirled, apparently delighted by her audience's fear. Mouth to mouth, she kissed it — then wiped her own and said something to the people watching her that made them laugh.

A capering doll, near sister to the showman at the gate, pretended to be angry; her posture spoke louder than any words: YOU OUT-RAGE DECENCY!

Leaping into the air, she came to earth in a new position: BEGONE, VILE WENCH!

The audience laughed louder than ever.

Another leap: I SHALL DEAL WITH YOU SUBSEQUENTLY.

The dragon-woman left to applause, and the doll (whose tattered demalio clothing might once have been a clown's) bowed with spread hands.

She had no sooner straightened up than three girls in transparent gowns pranced onto the stage. To music Tom could scarcely hear, they danced with disciplined gaiety, skipping with their knees above their waists and kicking their heels higher than their heads, dancing as one at some times, and as three at others.

"Red, Yellow, and Brown," Tom muttered. And then, "I like Red the best."

A voice above him muttered, "Are those their names?" It spoke slowly, and a little sadly.

Tom looked up and whispered, "You're watching, too?"

"Watching you."

"I'm not doing anything," Tom said.

"That's good," the slow, sad voice told him.

Yellow and Brown gestured gracefully while their feet flew. Red danced with them, and blew Tom a kiss.

The voice above him said, "She saw you."

He nodded. "Will she tell anybody?"

"She might."

"Will they chase us?"

"Don't believe they will." The voice above Tom sounded thoughtful.

He turned his attention back to the stage. The dancers had gone, replaced by a man who juggled torches, catching them by the burning ends.

"They might chase *you*," the voice above Tom said. "Not me. Probably. Do you eat birds?"

Tom, who was very hungry indeed, licked his lips. "I like chicken."

"Well, if you *like* chickens you wouldn't *eat* chicken, would you? You'd have to kill it to keep it from moving, wouldn't you? And you wouldn't want to kill it if you liked it. Are you a cat?"

Tom who had found both earlier questions confusing, answered only the last. "No, I'm not."

"That's good. Cats eat birds like me."

"Magic," Tom said.

"Magic?" inquired the bird.

Tom nodded without bothering to wonder whether the other

could see him. "Yep, magic. I heard one time about a talking bird. Only I didn't believe it."

"What about talking cats?"

"I've never heard of one. Have you?"

"Have you looked behind you?"

Tom turned, thinking there might be a talking cat there. There was none; but through the leaves, faintly, he could make out something – a squat dome like the lid of a pot made large – so big that it seemed it must certainly occupy the whole of a meadow.

"If ever you go in there," the bird told him, "you may meet talking cats. Don't listen to them."

"I don't want to go in there," Tom said. The squat dome seemed dark and threatening. "I want to get into the circus. I could crawl out onto this limb and drop down, but lots of people would see me."

"The dancers have already seen you," the bird told him. "So have I."

"Are you going to tell?"

The bird (if it was a bird) did not reply.

After some minutes had passed, Tom said, "You could just fly down there."

"Don't want to."

The cooking smells were making Tom's mouth water. He wiped it with his shirtsleeve. "I'd like to get something to eat."

"So'd I," the bird told him.

"If I could get down there and not be kicked out, I'd get something and throw some out for you."

"Would you really do that?" the bird asked.

"Sure!"

"The lights will go off if you wait long enough. When there are fewer people, there will be fewer lights. When there are none, there will be no lights at all. You could drop down then."

"How long?" Tom asked; but there was no reply.

It seemed a long time, and in the end Tom did not wait for the last lights to go out. When the circus lot grew dim, and farmers and farmwives, grandparents and tired and irritable children were streaming out the gate, Tom crawled along the limb, hung from it for half a second, and let himself drop.

"I don't like to hook things," he told a vendor. "And those sausages you've got left aren't going to be any good after tonight anyhow. If you'll give me one now – just one, mind – I promise I'll never, ever, hook anything from you."

"I'm not giving you a goddam thing," the vendor told him.

It was what Tom had been expecting. As soon as the words were out of the vendor's mouth, he snatched two sausages and ran.

He ate one, finding it still warm and very good, and ate half the other more slowly. He threw the remaining half over the fence and into the leaves of the big white doak. It fell out again, stirring the leaves as it came down; but Tom had the satisfaction of seeing a large, dark bird follow it. It seemed (or at least it *almost* seemed) that the large dark bird was wearing a hat, although Tom knew it could not be true.

After that, he decided that a drink of water would be good, and a place to sleep even better. He recalled the red-haired dancer who had blown him a kiss. She might, he thought, show him kindness. He circled the small tent from which she – with the other dancers, the dragon charmer, and the juggler had emerged – and crawled beneath the edge of a strange, thin cloth that was certainly not canvas.

It was darker in the tent than it had been outside, and the lot outside was becoming dimmer by the minute. Tom explored with his hands, finding a long box like a coffin and a low and splintery structure that might have been a small stage. When he noticed the hum – a tuneless humming that might have been mechanical – he tried to decide whether it had been there the whole time or had begun after he entered. In the end he decided it had been present the whole time, though he was far from sure of it.

"Hello?" he called softly. Then a little more loudly, "Is there anybody in here?"

There was no answer. The hum persisted.

"I'm just looking for a place to sleep." Ready to run, he watched the darkness. "I won't take anything or do any harm if you'll let me sleep in here. It would be just for tonight."

There was no answer, as before.

"I – I'm a friend of the bird's." Tom wished now that he had asked the strange bird's name. "I think he'll tell you I'm a nice person."

Emboldened by the quiet dark and the flat, unvaried humming, Tom grew almost conversational. "I've left home, and I'm never, ever going back. I saw this, and – and it smelled wonderful . . ."

The hum altered, if only by the merest trifle. It was now higher pitched.

"All the lights, so I thought somebody might help me."

A single blue bulb kindled on the other side of the tent, which was by no means large.

"I'm a hard worker, and I'll work hard for anybody who'll help me. I can hoe and milk."

A green bulb kindled above Tom's head. And the humming stopped.

By the light of the two bulbs, he could see the interior of the tent quite well. There were indeed long boxes like coffins scattered here and there: five of them, and several other boxes, too. A steep and narrow flight of metal steps led from the entrance up to the stage outside, which was higher than Tom himself. The ground was covered with wood shavings and sawdust, as the ground outside had been. It looked clean, and to Tom (who by that time was very tired) it looked deliciously soft as well.

"The red-headed one . . ." Tom paused, at a loss for words. "She . . . Well, she looked nice, and I thought maybe she wouldn't mind if I slept in here. And maybe I could help her tomorrow. Or you, or both of you."

A red bulb kindled at the middle of the tent. The lid of one of the long boxes flew open and someone who had been inside the box sat up as though jerked upright. It took Tom a second or more to identify the strange person who leaped from the box.

It was Red. "Leave! Go at once, or I'll call the lion tamer." Her voice was soft and sweet, belying her words.

"I was watching you from the tree," Tom explained. "You blew me a kiss and looked so nice and the way you danced was wonderful. So I thought, maybe, . . ."

"Naturally I danced wonderfully." Red patted her hair and looked down her nose at Tom. "Then I was possessed by Stromboli the Great, the envy of the profession and a man who might make a clothespin dance as well as I. Now, alas . . . Alas . . . At present, alas . . ." The other hand wiped her eyes with the hem of her transparent gown.

"Don't cry."

Red bent until she was not much taller than Tom himself. "Do you know who possesses me now? It's only the wretched Maria, his wife, a rag empty of all understanding. A fool bereft of talent. Thus you see me for what I am."

A score of fresh lights kindled.

"A contemptible assemblage of sticks and servos, a poor, vile, mechanical toy."

"You're beautiful," Tom said. His voice rang with sincerity. "You're really, truly beautiful."

Another box opened, and the head of the dragon peeped out. "She is not!"

"She is too!"

"Is not!" the dragon roared.

"Is too!"

For a second or more the dragon was silent. Then it said, in a threatening tone, "I'll bite you."

"Just you try it!"

Red tapped Tom's shoulder. "He won't really. Don't worry."

"Who was worried?" Tom snapped.

"I'm glad you weren't," Red told him. "As for me, I'm only a wooden doll. Feel my hand." She held it out.

Tom did.

"You see? An ugly wooden doll. Her husband made me."

"A beautiful wooden doll," Tom asserted. Privately, he decided that such a doll was the most magical thing he had ever seen – more magical even than the moons.

"You have seen me," Red told him, "and did not think me beautiful then."

"I saw you dance," Tom said. "You wanted to kiss me, and you're beautiful."

"If only you knew. . . ."

There was a fluttering of many wings as three large birds flew through the entrance. Tom watched them, open mouthed, as they perched upon the wires that held the colored lights. The feathers of these strange birds were dark, all three, and their bills were like the bills of crows; but their faces were naked of feathers, as naked and pale as the faces of new-hatched doves.

Nor was this all. Small arms that ended in something like hands could be glimpsed beneath their wings; and they had been dressed – those arms and their fronts, at least – in frilled evening shirts.

One even wore a diminutive hat. It was not quite a homburg, and not quite anything else. But to Tom, who knew nothing of men's hats, it looked elegant. "Are you the bird from the tree?" he asked.

"S'pose I must be." The bird's voice was slow and a little sad.

"Then please tell Red she's beautiful."

Neither the bird nor Red said anything.

"We're sort of having a fight," Tom explained. "She says she's ugly and so does the dragon. But she's not, and anybody can see she's not. She's beautiful." Tom looked around for the dragon, but it was nowhere in sight, and the box from which it had peeped was closed. "It's scared," he finished.

Another bird, the one who had diamond studs in its evening shirt, said, "We can't judge. We know nothing of your kind."

The third bird, the one without a little black tie, added, "Save that you are cruel, clever, and willful."

"I'm not! I'm not mean at all."

Red bowed, spreading her hands in a way Tom felt he had seen before. "I am tempted to believe you."

"It's the truth!" Tom took a deep breath. "Please, Miss Red – that's what I call you. I don't know your real name."

"Maria," muttered the bird from the tree.

"Red is fine," Red told Tom. "You may call me that."

"Then please, Miss Red, can't I sleep in here tonight? I'm tireder 'n a wilted flower." (It was something his mother had said before her death.) "In the morning I'll do anything you want me to."

Sadly and slowly, the bird without a tie said, "Except go away."

Tom nodded. "That's right."

Red bent above him. Wooden or not, she was much taller than he. "Can you tame lions?"

"I don't know," Tom admitted. "I've never tried."

"If Stromboli finds him in here, he'll surely be beaten," Red told the birds. "Will you please take him to Jungle Julia? It will be a very great favor, and I'll be exceedingly grateful, I promise you."

The bird with the sparkling studs said, "There are cats."

The one without a tie bobbed in agreement. "Horrible cats, Maria, and they are very large."

The one from the tree added, "You'll have to do it yourself."

"The controller doesn't have enough range."

None of the birds replied to that. One by one, they flew out of the tent.

"I'll risk it," Tom told Red. "Just let me lay down."

She did not reply, but lay down herself, returning to her box and closing the lid. A moment after it snapped shut, the tatterdemalion doll whose antics had so amused Tom while he was still in the tree emerged from under the stage. A device with levers and buttons was suspended from her neck by a cord.

They left the tent together and went to another, much larger, tent on the other side of the largest tent of all. "The cats are awake," she told Tom, "and they'll stay awake all night. They're hungry and cranky, but they can't get at you unless you stick your hand through the bars."

"I won't," Tom promised.

"Lie down under one of the cages, so you won't be stepped on in the dark."

"You're Maria, aren't you? The bird said that."

She nodded. "I'm Maria Stromboli, and I'll tell Julia you're here. You can help feed in the morning, and she'll give you something to eat."

That was how Tom became a lion tamer – or at least, an assistant lion tamer. Under Julia's direction, he fed the cats in the morning and hosed down their cages. He sold tickets in front of Julia's tent, and listened attentively when she lectured the tips who bought them to hear her and see her cats up close. He drove the ponies that pulled the cages to the big top, returned the cages to Julia's tent after the show, and did a great many other things.

And when the day was over, and they had eaten supper in the cook tent, he volunteered that he would sleep in the cat tent again and work the next day if that would be all right. When he finished saying it (for it took him some time), Jungle Julia hugged him and announced for everyone present to hear that he was with it.

After that, he helped her every day, and was fed for it and permitted to sleep in the tent with her cats: three lions, two leopards, a cougar, and a tiger.

At the end of the third week, he helped her load their cats into the threatening dome – a star ship that proved noisy, smelly, and terribly crowded. He helped take down the big center-ring cage in which they performed and load that as well, with Julia's luggage and much else. No one asked whether he wanted to go to Acoran Three, yet that was where he went and where he spent the next half year.

No one asked whether he wanted to go to Gabija Five after that, either; but had he been asked, he would have said he did. This although he had not the slightest idea what Gabija Five might be like.

It proved to be a world not very much like Earth, a world cold even at its equator on which the native races were sleek and fat until death came very near, and on which they died in sections when it did, each individual being a composite of four lesser creatures. There the circus moved from place to place for almost a year. For almost a year; but whether it was a sidereal year or a Gabija Five year, Tom neither knew nor cared.

Somewhere Jungle Julia had found him a red jacket with brass buttons he had to keep polished, and a red hat with a white plume. After that he helped outside the big cage, driving the ponies as before (for Tom knew something of horses), and prodding the cats with a pole to make them leave their cages and go into the big one where Jungle Julia waited with her whip and chair.

On Etemmu Six, there came a day when he and Jungle Julia were

late for breakfast, the feeding having gone badly. They were lingering over none-too-hot oatmeal, salt-cured palabear, coffee, and toast, and discussing the advisability of shooting the old leopard and replacing it with a ghost cat, when one of the birds from the bird show perched on the back of an empty chair.

"Did you get loose again?" Tom asked it.

"He has to let them loose," Julia told Tom.

The bird bobbed agreement.

"They get depressed as their flying muscles begin to atrophy. If they get too depressed, they rebel and won't perform. He has to let them fly to counter that, and they hope—"

"Someday," the bird said sadly and slowly, "he, or another he, will let us fly home."

"On their own planet, you see."

Tom said thoughtfully, "Maybe we ought to let the cats out to hunt now and then."

Jungle Julia nodded. "I wish we could."

That night, after the big top had emptied for the last time, Tom slipped into the doll tent to watch the last show, the show timed to catch those few lingering circus-goers (both native and human) who were not quite ready to go home.

When the dragon-charmer had exhibited all her dragons, when the dancers had danced, when the juggler had juggled each of the three dancers in turn and the last native mark had straggled out of the tent, Tom remained.

Stromboli came out from under the stage then, and the tatter-demalon, who had been leaping and capering between acts and introducing the acts between caperings, sprang between them.

"I want to speak to your wife for a few minutes," Tom told Stromboli. "It's about the birds, and she made their costumes. One of them told me that today."

"You want my Maria?" Stromboli was large and fat, and had a thick black beard.

"Not the way you mean," Tom told him. "I just want to ask her about the birds in the bird show."

"You want my Maria," Stromboli repeated. He caught the tatter-demalion's arm and spun her around. The blow delivered by his open hand sounded like a pistol shot, and she fell. "You may have her."

Stromboli's left arm blocked Tom's first punch, and Stromboli's big right fist knocked Tom backward. Tom came at him again, fists flying.

After that, somehow, Tom was lying on trampled rast-straw; and

the tatterdemalion was dabbing his face with a wet towel. He shook his head and tried to sit up.

"Lie down," she told him.

"I'm all right."

She held out her hand. "How many fingers?"

"Six?"

"No. There were two."

Tom sat up. "You never smile, do you?"

"No," she repeated.

"Never?"

"I grin when my performance requires it." She demonstrated.

"But you don't smile."

"I was a mime. So were my mother, my father, and my brother. Our faces were fixed . . ."

Tom shook his head again, trying to clear it. "Yes? Tell me."

"Save when our performances required fear, glee, rage, or disappointment." She demonstrated each as she spoke. "Those were permitted in our art. No more. Otherwise our faces were always vacant. Impermissible expressions would detract from our art. So I was taught, and I learned it well."

"I think I understand," Tom said.

"In order that I might learn it, I was beaten whenever an expression appeared unbidden upon my face. Do you think my parents cruel?"

"Really, really cruel. I was beaten, too. I know what it's like. That was why I ran away."

"They weren't. They were artists, and they taught me as they themselves had been taught. They did not want me to starve, you see. If I learned their art, I would not starve. I did, and have not starved. Do you still want to talk about the birds?"

"In a minute. Do you know, I've never seen you without your makeup. It makes you look like a doll."

"You'll see me without it now," Madame Stromboli told him. "I'm about to take it off." She opened one of the smaller boxes and from it produced more towels, a big white jar of cream, and a hand mirror.

Tom said, "They beat you when you were a kid, just like me. Now Stromboli beats you."

"Seldom." She was dabbing at her face. "He knows I'm true to him." As her makeup was transferred from face to towel, a large bruise appeared.

"I'm going to free the birds," Tom told her. "You made their

costumes, so I thought you might know what we call their world. They just say 'home.'"

"You want to free them?" Madame Stromboli turned her bruised, expressionless face toward him. "Really?"

"I'm going to do it," Tom said, "but there isn't any use doing it until we get to their home planet. They don't think their owner will let them fly there."

"He won't," she said.

"He won't." Tom was testing his jaw and finding it unbroken. "But I will."

"They are from Afi Five," Madame Stromboli told him; and abruptly she was half in his lap and kissing him. When they parted she said, "I'll never cheat on you, either."

Not long afterward, Tom was scratching the ears of Stripes the tiger when A. K. Acres strode into the cat tent. "You're Tom?"

Tom nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

"I'm the owner," A. K. Acres told him.

Tom nodded again. "I know that, sir. You've been pointed out to me."

"Good." A. K. Acres got out an engraved cigar case, flipped it open, and selected a cigar. "Want one?"

Tom shook his head. "Julia doesn't like for people to smoke, sir. It's because of all the straw."

"Julia's right." A. K. Acres clamped his own cigar between his teeth, but did not light it. "You work for her."

"Yes, sir. I do."

"I've been waiting for you to come to me and ask me for a salary." A. K. Acres paused, and when Tom did not reply he added, "You haven't, so I've come to you. Julia's paying you?"

"Yes, sir. She is."

"How much?"

Tom took his hand out of Stripes' cage, finding that he needed to run both hands through his hair; one was not enough. "Since she's paying me, sir," he said at last, "and you're not, I think you ought to ask her, sir."

At this A. K. Acres roared with laughter, slapped Tom's back, and went out.

Twenty months later, when they were on Vritra, Stripes sprang at Jungle Julia. And quite suddenly, Jungle Julia was no longer a big small-featured woman with graying blond hair pulled tight in a knot at the back of her head, but a small and helpless middle-aged woman who screamed and bled.

As he might have watched himself from a front row seat, Tom saw himself open the big cage and step inside. The sound of the barred door shutting behind him ended that – or perhaps it was Stripes' snarl.

Tom flourished his stick, hearing Nero roar behind him and knowing that if even one other cat became involved it was all over.

"Up!" Tom shouted. "Up!" He pounded Stripes' tub with his stick as he had so often watched Julia pound it with the handle of her whip. Still snarling, Stripes obeyed.

Flicking a switch lit the hoop of fireworks, and Stripes jumped through it to balance, still snarling, on a second tub. By that time there were a dozen men with poles and hoses outside the big cage, two native medics with high voices were begging him help Julia out of it, and Julia had pulled herself erect and was stumbling toward the door.

It was then that the ghost cat sang. Tom had been told that they sang at times, though only rarely. He smiled at the wild melody of it, and heard below it the thunderous roar of the crowd growing louder and louder, and bowed.

Once. Twice. Three times.

They were on Hanumat and he had only just finished putting the big ther he had gotten on Amentet Two through its paces when Giorgio and the head kinker brought in the new kid.

"I threw him out," Giorgio said. "After that, I caught him again and whacked him good."

The head kinker said, "I caught him this time. I brought him to Mr. G. here, and we talked it over and decided you might wanna feed him to your cats."

"Maybe I will." Looking at the kid, Tom felt an emotion he had nearly forgotten. "Or maybe not. Let me talk to him."

They left and Tom said, "What you got under your shirt?"

"Nothin'."

"Yes, you do. You're boosting something. What is it?"

"It's me." The kid's bruised face was stony. "I'm not like you."

"You're not normal?"

The kid shook his head.

"Somebody's been beating on you."

"Him. The ticket man."

"Because you snuck into the show. Only the show's over. What were you sneaking in for. To steal?"

"I want to be . . ." The kid swallowed audibly.

Tom laid a hand on his shoulder. "Be what? You can tell me."

"Like you. Like them."

"You want to join the show. Work here. Don't let the glitz fool you, kid. It's hard work."

"I'm a hard worker."

"No shit. Okay, kid, I've been wanting to put Simba through his paces again, and so you and me will do that and we'll see. Cats you've got to work just about every day. Ever been in a cage?"

The kid shook his head.

"You're going to be." Tom gestured toward the big cage. "Cats are in cages all the time. It drives them nuts. Working them helps a little – it's a bigger cage, and they've got something to do. Help me drag Simba's cage over, and we'll get him out of it."

They did. As the door of the big cage clanged shut behind them, Simba eyed the kid balefully. "He doesn't like you because you're new. Cats never trust anybody new. They're not very smart, but they're smart about that. Up here, Simba! The high stand."

Tom tapped it with his whip, and Simba jumped onto it.

"He's a great lion." Tom's tone was conversational. "There's three kinds of lions – bad lions, good lions, and great lions. Great lions look great, they're big cats with big, thick manes, and they're almost as smart as dogs. Why do you think he jumped up there?"

"Cause he likes you."

"Wrong. He does, but he did it because he knew I'd keep badgering him until he did. Simba! Through the hoop!" Tom tapped the hoop.

There were no fireworks now, but Simba looked at the kid and snarled instead.

"He doesn't like you. Aren't you scared? You ought to be."

"Sure," the kid said.

"You don't look it. Know the door we came through? It's got a simple latch. Go on out and go up in the seats. Don't run off. I'm not through with you."

To Tom's surprise, the kid was still there when he had finished putting Simba through his part of the act. "You want to be a lion tamer?"

The kid shook his head.

"That's good. We've got one – me. You want to join up. Okay, what do you think you could do?"

"Freak show?"

"Really?" Tom looked at him. "Because of what's under the shirt?"

The kid nodded.

"Show me."

"Please . . . Can I tell first?"

"You don't cry much, do you?"

"Never."

"Not even when Giorgio beat you?" Tom sat down beside the kid. "Giorgio's the ticket man."

"I can't. I can't cry or smile. Can I tell?"

"Yeah. I think you'd better."

"We were here before you came. You had a name for us. I don't know it, but it means something that changes."

"I don't know it either," Tom said. "Go on."

"We change, but not fast." The kid sighed. "An' we can't change everythin'."

"You're a native. That's what you're saying."

The kid nodded. "I'm one of them. You think we're all dead. And we are, just about. We don't fit with you, even if we look like you now. We don't fit very well. But I thought . . ."

"You might fit in here. You could be right. We'll see."

"I can't cry and I can't laugh. Not really. I make noises." The kid demonstrated, hiding his face and seeming to giggle. "I just breathe funny. That's all it is, but you think I'm laughing."

"I don't think you're going into the freak show," Tom said. "I've got something else in mind. But if you do, you're going to have to show people what's underneath your shirt. There's more than you've told me."

The kid showed him.

When Tom had gotten over the shock and they had talked about it a bit, Tom got his controller. The lid of a long box popped open and Red jumped out. While his fingers flew, she pirouetted, leaped into the air, and took a bow.

The kid stared, uncomprehending, until she pointed at him and said, "Did you like that?"

He nodded slowly.

"When I talk, it's Tom. Look at him. He's whispering into a mike. Could you do that?"

The kid nodded again.

Red sat on one of the cat tubs and crossed her legs. "We used to have a man here named Stromboli. He was good. He could work three of us at once. It's so hard it should be impossible, but Stromboli could do it. His wife helped him in his act. She can work the dolls, too. One at a time, but better than Tom can. A computer can help, but it can screw things up something awful, too. And it's too rigid. Even when it's good, a computer's too rigid. You want the dolls to react to the audience."

"Is this about me?"

"I think so." Red cocked her head to study him. "You told Tom you could use all four at once."

"I can!"

"Right. So it's about you. Stromboli split. Left his wife and all of us dolls except Calypso and her dragon. Tom and Maria have been doing the act – sometimes – with a little help from a computer."

The kid nodded; and it seemed to Tom that there was a smile in his voice, though his face showed no expression at all. "Can you tell me about the strange birds?"

Red's eyebrows shot up, and her eyes grew large. "What birds?"

"Talking birds. One told me to come here."

Red rose, returned to her box, and shut the lid.

As they were walking to the tent that had been Stromboli's, Tom said, "The birds are in the bird show. The man who owned it then had bought them, so he treated them like animals. I did, too, for a while."

"Why did they tell me to come here?"

"After I'd talked with them maybe twenty times, I wised up. They were people. Little people with feathers. The next time we hit their home world – this is my partner, Art Acres, and me – we turned them loose and told them we wanted to hire them. Most of them stayed with the show."

As he pulled back the door of the tent, Tom added, "The circus gets in your blood by-and-by."

A week later, he went to the doll show. All three girls danced while the juggler juggled. Red winked at him and did a solo turn while Brown and Yellow clapped and sang. And when the show was over and the marks had gone, the kid hugged Tom with all four arms.

A few days after that, Maria was waiting in his little doss tent. She had done that before, but this time she had her clothes on. "He's better than Stomboli," she told Tom. "He doesn't need me." A lot of other things were said, but that was the one that mattered.

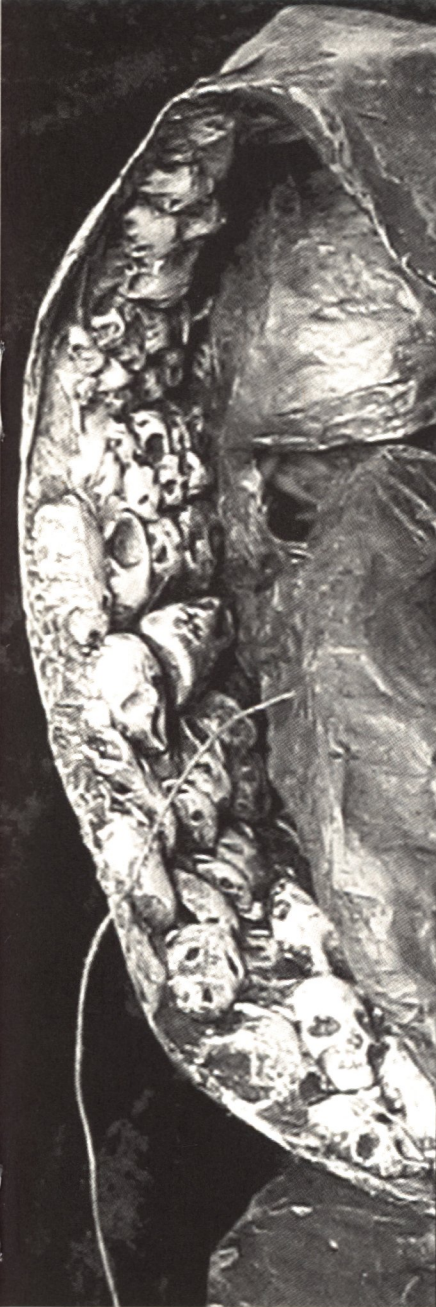
Tom tried to fight against it, even as he wondered when it would happen. Which, as things turned out, was much sooner than he expected.

"She's gone to look for her husband," he told the bird on his shoulder – the bird that had once talked to him in a white doak tree. As he said it, he realized that he and the bird were the only ones who would really care. This, though Giorgio might, a little. Also that the bird would care only because he, Tom, did.

Much later, sitting alone in the cat tent listening to all four leopards pace, he tried to summon up the faces of various girls with the

show. Girls who were not attached at the moment, or were more or less unattached.

He tried, but they would not come. The only face that would come to him (and it reappeared in his thoughts again and again) was lovely and vacant, and had a livid bruise on one cheek.



SOB IN
THE
SILENCE





"THIS," THE HORROR WRITER TOLD the family visiting him, "is beyond any question the least haunted house in the Midwest. No ghost, none at all, will come within miles of the place. So I am assured."

Robbie straightened his little glasses and mumbled, "Well, it looks haunted."

"It does, young man." After teetering between seven and eight, the horror writer decided that Robbie was about seven. "It's the filthy yellow stucco. No doubt it was a cheerful yellow once, but God only knows how long it's been up. I'm going to have it torn off, every scrap of it, and put up fresh, which I will paint white."

"Can't you just paint over?" Kiara asked. (Kiara of the all-conquering pout, of the golden hair and the tiny silver earrings.)

Looking very serious, the horror writer nodded. And licked his lips only mentally. "I've tried, believe me. That hideous color is the result of air pollution – of smoke, soot, and dirt, if you will – that has clung to the stucco. Paint over it, and it bleeds out through the new paint. Washing–"

"Water jets under high pressure." Dan was Robbie's father, and Kiara's. "You can rent the units, or buy one for a thousand or so."

"I own one," the horror writer told him. "With a strong cleaning agent added to the water, it will do the job." He paused to smile. "Unfortunately, the stucco's old and fragile. Here and there, a good jet breaks it."

"Ghosts," Charity said. Charity was Mrs. Dan, a pudgy woman with a soft, not unattractive face and a remarkable talent for dowdy hats. "Please go back to your ghosts. I find ghosts far more interesting."

"As do I." The horror writer favored her with his most dazzling smile. "I've tried repeatedly to interest psychic researchers in the old place, which has a – may I call it fascinating? History. I've been persuasive and persistent, and no less than three teams have checked this old place out as a result. All three have reported that they found

nothing. No evidence whatsoever. No spoor of spooks. No cooperative specters a struggling author might use for research purposes."

"And publicity," Kiara said. "Don't forget publicity. I plan to get into public relations when I graduate."

"And publicity, you're right. By the time you're well settled in public relations, I hope to be wealthy enough to engage you. If I am, I will. That's a promise."

Charity leveled a plump forefinger. "You, on the other hand, have clearly seen or heard or felt something. You had to have something more than this big dark living-room to get the psychics in, and you had it. Tell us."

The horror writer produced a sharply bent briar that showed signs of years of use. "Will this trouble anyone? I rarely smoke in here, but if we're going to have a good long chat – well, a pipe may make things go more smoothly. Would anyone care for a drink?"

Charity was quickly equipped with white wine, Dan with Johnnie-Walker-and-water, and Robbie with cola. "A lot of the kids drink beer at IVY Tech," Kiara announced in a tone that indicated she was one of them. "I don't, though."

"Not until you're twenty-one," Dan said firmly.

"You see?" She pouted.

The horror writer nodded. "I do indeed. One of the things I see is that you have good parents, parents who care about you and are zealous for your welfare." He slipped Kiara a scarcely perceptible wink. "What about a plain soda? I always find soda water over ice refreshing, myself."

Charity said, "That would be fine, if she wants it."

Kiara said she did, and he became busy behind the bar.

Robbie had been watching the dark upper corners of the old, high-ceilinged room. "I thought I saw one."

"A ghost?" The horror writer looked up, his blue eyes twinkling.

"A bat. Maybe we can catch it."

Dan said, "There's probably a belfry, too."

"I'm afraid not. Perhaps I'll add one once I get the new stucco on."

"You need one. As I've told my wife a dozen times, anybody who believes in ghosts has bats in his belfry."

"It's better, perhaps," Charity murmured, "if living things breathe and move up there. Better than just bells, rotting ropes, and dust. Tell us more about this place, please."

"It was a country house originally." With the air of one who

performed a sacrament, the horror writer poured club soda into a tall frosted glass that already contained five ice cubes and (wholly concealed by his fingers) a generous two inches of vodka. "A quiet place in which a wealthy family could get away from the heat and stench of city summers. The family was ruined somehow – I don't recall the details. I know it's usually the man who kills in murder-suicides, but in this house it was the woman. She shot her husband and her stepdaughters, and killed herself."

Charity said, "I could never bring myself to do that. I could never kill Dan. Or his children. I suppose I might kill myself. That's conceivable. But not the rest."

Straight-faced, the horror writer handed his frosted glass to Kiara. "I couldn't kill myself," he told her. "I like myself too much. Other people? Who can say?"

Robbie banged down his cola. "You're trying to scare us!"

"Of course I am. It's my trade."

Dan asked, "They all died? That's good shooting."

The horror writer resumed his chair and picked up his briar. "No. As a matter of fact they didn't. One of the three stepdaughters survived. She had been shot in the head at close range, yet she lived."

Dan said, "Happens sometime."

"It does. It did in this case. Her name was Maude Parkhurst. Maude was a popular name back around nineteen hundred, which is when her parents and sisters died. Ever hear of her?"

Dan shook his head.

"She was left penniless and scarred for life. It seems to have disordered her thinking. Or perhaps the bullet did it. In any event, she founded her own church and was its pope and prophetess. It was called – maybe it's still called, since it may still be around for all I know – the Unionists of Heaven and Earth."

Charity said, "I've heard of it. It sounded innocent enough."

The horror writer shrugged. "Today? Perhaps it is. Back then, I would say no. Decidedly no. It was, in its own fantastic fashion, about as repellent as a cult can be. May I call it a cult?"

Kiara grinned prettily over her glass. "Go right ahead. I won't object."

"A friend of mine, another Dan, once defined a cult for me. He said that if the leader gets all the women, it's a cult."

Dan nodded. "Good man. There's a lot to that."

"There is, but in the case of the UHE, as it was called, it didn't apply. Maude Parkhurst didn't want the women, or the men either. The

way to get to Heaven, she told her followers, was to live like angels here on earth."

Dan snorted.

"Exactly. Any sensible person would have told them that they were not angels. That it was natural and right for angels to live like angels, but that men and women should live like human beings."

"We really know almost nothing about angels." Charity looked pensive. "Just that they carry the Lord's messages. It's Saint Paul, I think, who says that each of us has an angel who acts as our advocate in Heaven. So we know that, too. But it's really very little."

"This is about sex," Kiara said. "I smell it coming."

The horror writer nodded. "You're exactly right, and I'm beginning to wonder if you're not the most intelligent person here. It is indeed. Members of the UHE were to refrain from all forms of sexual activity. If unmarried, they were not to marry. If married, they were to separate and remain separated."

"The University of Heaven at Elysium. On a T-shirt. I can see it now."

Charity coughed, the sound of it scarcely audible in the large, dark room. "Well, Kiara, I don't see anything wrong with that if it was voluntary."

"Neither do I," the horror writer said, "but there's more. Those wishing to join underwent an initiation period of a year. At the end of that time, there was a midnight ceremony. If they had children, those children had to attend, all of them. There they watched their parents commit suicide – or that's how it looked. I don't know the details, but I know that at the end of the service they were carried out of the church, apparently lifeless and covered with blood."

Charity whispered, "Good God. . . ."

"When the congregation had gone home," the horror writer continued, "the children were brought here. They were told that it was an orphanage, and it was operated like one. Before long it actually was one. Apparently there was some sort of tax advantage, so it was registered with the state as a church-run foundation, and from time to time the authorities sent actual orphans here. It was the age of orphanages, as you may know. Few children, if any, were put in foster homes. Normally, it was the orphanage for any child without parents or close relatives."

Dan said, "There used to be a comic strip about it, 'Little Orphan Annie.'"

The horror writer nodded. "Based upon a popular poem of the nineteenth century."

“ ‘Little Orphant Annie’s come to our house to stay,
An’ wash the cups an’ saucers up,
 an’ brush the crumbs away,
An’ shoo the chickens off the porch,
 an’ dust the hearth an’ sweep,
An’ make the fire, an’ bake the bread,
 an’ earn her board an’ keep.
An’ all us other children,
 when the supper things is done,
We set around the kitchen fire an’ has the mostest fun
A-list’nin’ to the witch tales ’at Annie tells about,
An’ the Gobble-uns ’at gets you
 Ef you
 Don’t
 Watch
 Out!’

You see,” the horror writer finished, smiling, “in those days you could get an orphan girl from such an orphanage as this to be your maid of all work and baby-sitter. You fed and clothed her, gave her a place to sleep, and paid her nothing at all. Despite being showered with that sort of kindness, those girls picked up enough of the monstrosity and lonely emptiness of the universe to become the first practitioners of my art, the oral recounters of horrific tales whose efforts preceded all horror writing.”

“Was it really so bad for them?” Kiara asked.

“Here? Worse. I haven’t told you the worst yet, you see. Indeed, I haven’t even touched upon it.” The horror writer turned to Dan. “Perhaps you’d like to send Robbie out. That might be advisable.”

Dan shrugged. “He watches TV. I doubt that anything you’ll say will frighten him.”

Charity pursed her lips but said nothing.

The horror writer had taken advantage of the pause to light his pipe. “You don’t have to stay, Robbie.” He puffed fragrant white smoke, and watched it begin its slow climb to the ceiling. “You know where your room is, and you may go anywhere in the house unless you meet with a locked door.”

Kiara smiled. “Secrets! We’re in Bluebeards cashel – castle. I knew it!”

“No secrets,” the horror writer told her, “just a very dangerous cellar stair – steep, shaky, and innocent of any sort of railing.”

Robbie whispered, “I’m not going.”

"So I see. From time to time, Robbie, one of the children would learn or guess that his parents were not in fact dead. When that happened, he or she might try to get away and return home. I've made every effort to learn just how often that happened, but the sources are contradictory on the point. Some say three and some five, and one says more than twenty. I should add that we who perform this type of research soon learn to be wary of the number three. It's the favorite of those who don't know the real number. There are several places on the grounds that may once of have been graves – unmarked graves long since emptied by the authorities. But—"

Charity leaned toward him, her face tense. "Do you mean to say that those children were killed?"

The horror writer nodded. "I do. Those who were returned here by their parents were. That is the most horrible fact attached to this really quite awful old house. Or at least, it is the worst we know of – perhaps the worst that occurred."

He drew on his pipe, letting smoke trickle from his nostrils. "A special midnight service was held here, in this room in which we sit. At that service the church members are said to have flown. To have fluttered about this room like so many strange birds. No doubt they ran and waved their arms, as children sometimes do. Very possibly they thought they flew. The members of medieval witch cults seem really to have believed that they flew to the gatherings of their covens, although no sane person supposes they actually did."

Charity asked, "But you say they killed the children?"

The horror writer nodded. "Yes, at the end of the ceremony. Call it the children's hour, a term that some authorities say they used themselves. They shot them as Maude Parkhurst's father and sisters had been shot. The executioner was chosen by lot. Maude is said to have hoped aloud that it would fall to her, as it seems to have done more than once. Twice at least."

Dan said, "It's hard to believe anybody would really do that."

"Perhaps it is, although news broadcasts have told me of things every bit as bad. Or worse."

The horror writer drew on his pipe again, and the room had grown dark enough that the red glow from its bowl lit his face from below. "The children were asleep by that time, as Maude, her father, and her sisters had been. The lucky winner crept into the child's bedroom, accompanied by at least one other member who carried a candle. The moment the shot was fired, the candle was blown out. The noise would've awakened any other children who had been sleeping in that

room, of course; but they awakened only to darkness and the smell of gun smoke."

Dan said, "Angels!" There was a world of contempt in the word.

"There are angels in Hell," the horror writer told him, "not just in Heaven. Indeed, the angels of Hell may be the more numerous."

Charity pretended to yawn while nodding her reluctant agreement. "I think it's time we all went up bed. Don't you?"

Dan said, "I certainly do. I drove one hell of a long way today."

Kiara lingered when the others had gone. "Ish really nice meeting you." She swayed as she spoke, though only slightly. "Don' forget I get to be your public relations agent. You promised."

"You have my word." The horror writer smiled, knowing how much his word was worth.

For a lingering moment they clasped hands. "Ish hard to believe," she said, "that you were dad's roommate. You sheem – seem – so much younger."

He thanked her and watched her climb the wide curved staircase that had been the pride of the Parkhursts long ago, wondering all the while whether she knew that he was watching. Whether she knew or not, watching Kiara climb stairs was too great a pleasure to surrender.

On the floor above, Charity was getting Robbie ready for bed. "You're a brave boy, I know. Aren't you a brave boy, darling? Say it, please. It always helps to say it."

"I'm a brave boy," Robbie told her dutifully.

"You are. I know you are. You won't let that silly man downstairs fool you. You'll stay in your own bed, in your own room, and get a good night's sleep. We'll do some sight-seeing tomorrow, forests and lakes and rugged hills where the worked-out mines hide."

Charity hesitated, gnawing with small white teeth at her full lower lip. "There's no nightlight in here, I'm afraid, but I've got a little flash-light in my purse. I could lend you that. Would you like it?"

Robbie nodded, and clasped Charity's little plastic flashlight tightly as he watched her leave. Her hand – the one without rings – reached up to the light switch. Her fingers found it.

There was darkness.

He located the switch again with the watery beam of the disposable flashlight, knowing that he would be scolded (perhaps even spanked) if he switched the solitary overhead light back on but wanting to know exactly where that switch was, just in case.

At last he turned Charity's flashlight off and lay down. It was hot in the too-large, too-empty room. Hot and silent.

He sat up again, and aimed the flashlight toward the window. It was indeed open, but open only the width of his hand. He got out of bed, dropped the flashlight into the shirt pocket of his pajamas, and tried to raise the window farther. No effort he could put forth would budge it.

At last he lay down again, and the room felt hotter than ever.

When he had looked out through the window, it had seemed terribly high. How many flights of stairs had they climbed to get up here? He could remember only one, wide carpeted stairs that had curved as they climbed; but that one had been a long, long stair. From the window he had seen the tops of trees.

Treetops and stars. The moon had been out, lighting the lawn below and showing him the dark leaves of the treetops, although the moon itself had not been in sight from the window.

"It walks across the sky," he told himself. Dan, his father, had said that once.

"You could walk. . . ." The voice seemed near, but faint and thin.

Robbie switched the flashlight back on. There was no one there.

Under the bed, he thought. They're under the bed.

But he dared not leave the bed to look, and lay down once more. An older person would have tried to persuade himself that he had imagined the voice, or would have left the bed to investigate. Robbie did neither. His line between palpable and imagined things was blurred and faint, and he had not the slightest desire to see the speaker, whether that speaker was real or make-believe.

There were no other windows that might be opened. He thought of going out. The hall would be dark, but Dan and Charity were sleeping in a room not very far away. The door of their room might be locked, though. They did that sometimes.

He would be scolded in any event. Scolded and perhaps spanked, too. It was not the pain he feared, but the humiliation. "I'll have to go back here," he whispered to himself. "Even if they don't spank me, I'll have to go back."

"You could walk away. . . ." A girl's voice, very faint. From the ceiling? No, Robbie decided, from the side toward the door.

"No," he said. "They'd be mad."

"You'll die. . . ."

"Like us. . . ."

Robbie sat up, shaking.

* * *

Outside, the horror writer was hiking toward the old, rented truck he had parked more than a mile away. The ground was soft after yesterday's storm, and it was essential – absolutely essential – that there be tracks left by a strange vehicle.

A turn onto a side road, a walk of a hundred yards, and the beam of his big electric lantern picked out the truck among the trees. When he could set the lantern on its hood, he put on latex gloves. Soon, very soon, the clock would strike the children's hour and Edith with the golden hair would be his. Beautiful Kiara would be his. As for laughing Allegra, he neither knew nor cared who she might be.

"Wa' ish?" Kiara's voice was thick with vodka and sleep.

"It's only me," Robbie told her, and slipped under the covers. "I'm scared."

She put a protective arm around him.

"There are other kids in here. There are! They're gone when you turn on the light, but they come back. They do!"

"Uh huh." She hugged him tighter and went back to sleep.

In Scales Mound, the horror writer parked the truck and walked three blocks to his car. He had paid two weeks rent on the truck, he reminded himself. Had paid that rent only three days ago. It would be eleven days at least before the rental agency began to worry about it, and he could return it or send another check before then.

His gun, the only gun he owned, had been concealed in a piece of nondescript luggage and locked in the car. He took it out and made sure the safety was on before starting the engine. It was only a long-barreled twenty-two; but it looked sinister, and should be sufficient to make Kiara obey if the threat of force were needed.

Once she was down there . . . Once she was down there, she might scream all she liked. It would not matter. As he drove back to the house, he tried to decide whether he should hold it or put it into one of the big side pockets of his barn coat.

Robbie, having escaped Kiara's warm embrace, decided that her room was cooler than his. For one thing, she had two windows. For another, both were open wider than his one window had been. Besides, it was just cooler. He pulled the sheet up, hoping she would not mind.

"Run . . ." whispered the faint, thin voices.

"Run . . . Run . . ."

"Get away while you can . . ."

"Go . . ."

Robbie shook his head and shut his eyes.

Outside Kiara's bedroom, the horror writer patted the long-barreled pistol he had pushed into his belt. His coat pockets held rags, two short lengths of quarter-inch rope, a small roll of duct tape, and a large folding knife. He hoped to need none of them.

There was no provision for locking Kiara's door. He had been careful to see to that. No key for the quaint old lock, no interior bolt; and yet she might have blocked it with a chair. He opened it slowly, finding no obstruction.

The old oak doors were thick and solid, the old walls thicker and solidier still. If Dan and his wife were sleeping soundly, it would take a great deal of commotion in here to wake them.

Behind him, the door swung shut on well-oiled hinges. The click of the latch was the only sound.

Moonlight coming through the windows rendered the penlight in his shirt pocket unnecessary. She was there, lying on her side and sound asleep, her lovely face turned toward him.

As he moved toward her, Robbie sat up, his mouth a dark circle, his pale face a mask of terror. The horror writer pushed him down again.

The muzzle of his pistol was tight against Robbie's head; this though the horror writer could not have said how it came to be there. His index finger squeezed even as he realized it was on the trigger.

There was a muffled bang, like the sound of a large book dropped. Something jerked under the horror writer's hand, and he whispered, "Die like my father. Like Alice and June. Die like me." He whispered it, but did not understand what he intended by it.

Kiara's eye were open. He struck her with the barrel, reversed the pistol and struck her again and again with the butt, stopping only when he realized he did not know how many times he had hit her already or where his blows had landed.

After pushing up the safety, he put the pistol back into his belt and stood listening. The room next to that in which he stood had been Robbie's. Presumably, there was no one there to hear.

The room beyond that one – the room nearest the front stair – was Dan's and Charity's. He would stand behind the door if they came in, shoot them both, run. Mexico. South America.

They did not.

The house was silent save for his own rapid breathing and Kiara's slow, labored breaths; beyond the open windows, the night-wind sobbed in the trees. Any other sound would have come, almost, as a relief.

There was none.

He had broken the cellar window, left tracks with the worn old shoes he had gotten from a recycle store, left tire tracks with the old truck. He smiled faintly when he recalled its mismatched tires. Let them work on that one.

He picked up Kiara and slung her over his shoulder, finding her soft, warm, and heavier than he had expected.

The back stairs were narrow and in poor repair; they creaked beneath his feet, but they were farther – much farther – from the room in which Dan and Charity slept. He descended them slowly, holding Kiara with his right arm while his left hand grasped the rail.

She stirred and moaned. He wondered whether he would have to hit her again, and decided he would not unless she screamed. If she screamed, he would drop her and do what had to be done.

She did not.

The grounds were extensive, and included a wood from which (long ago) firewood had been cut. It had grown back now, a tangle of larches and alders, firs and red cedars. Toward the back, not far from the property line, he had by merest chance stumbled upon the old well. There had been a cabin there once. No doubt it had burned. A cow or a child might have fallen into the abandoned well, and so some prudent person had covered it with a slab of limestone. Leaves and twigs on that stone had turned, in time, to soil. He had moved the stone away, leaving the soil on it largely undisturbed.

When he reached the abandoned well at last, panting and sweating, he laid Kiara down. His penlight showed that her eyes were open. Her bloodstained face seemed to him a mask of fear; seeing it, he felt himself stand straighter and grow stronger.

"You may listen to me or not," he told her. "What you do really doesn't matter, but I thought I ought to do you the kindness of explaining just what has happened and what will happen. What I plan, and your place in my plans."

She made an inarticulate sound that might have been a word or a moan.

"You're listening. Good. There's an old well here. Only I know that it exists. At the bottom – shall we say twelve feet down? At the bottom there's mud and a little water. You'll get dirty, in other words, but you

won't die of thirst. There you will wait for me for as long as the police actively investigate. From time to time I may, or may not, come here and toss down a sandwich."

He smiled. "It won't hurt you in the least, my dear, to lose a little weight. When things have quieted down, I'll come and pull you out. You'll be grateful – oh, very grateful – for your rescue. Soiled and starved, but very grateful. Together we'll walk back to my home. You may need help, and if you do I'll provide it."

He bent and picked her up. "I'll bathe you, feed you, and nurse you."

Three strides brought him to the dark mouth of the well. "After that, you'll obey me in everything. Or you had better. And in time, perhaps, you'll come to like it."

He let her fall, smiled, and turned away.

There remained only the problem of the gun. Bullets could be matched to barrels, and there was an ejected shell somewhere. The gun would have to be destroyed; it was blued steel; running water should do the job, and do it swiftly.

Still smiling, he set off for the creek.

It was after four o'clock the following afternoon when Captain Barlowe of the Sheriff's Department explained the crime. Captain Barlowe was middle-aged and heavy-limbed. He had a thick mustache. "What happened in this house last night is becoming pretty clear." His tone was weighty. "Why it happened . . ." He shook his head.

The horror writer said, "I know my house was broken into. One of your men showed me that. I know poor little Robbie's dead, and I know Kiara's missing. But that's all I know."

"Exactly." Captain Barlowe clasped his big hands and unclasped them. "It's pretty much all I know, too, sir. Other than that, all I can do is supply details. The gun that killed the boy was a twenty-two semi-automatic. It could have been a pistol or a rifle. It could even have been a saw-uffed rifle. There's no more common caliber in the world."

The horror writer nodded.

"He was killed with one shot, a contact shot to the head, and he was probably killed for being in a room in which he had no business being. He'd left his own bed and crawled into his big sister's. Not for sex, sir. I could see what you were thinking. He was too young for that. He was just a little kid alone in a strange house. He got lonely and was murdered for it."

Captain Barlowe paused to clear his throat. "You told my men that

there had been no cars in your driveway since the rain except your own and the boy's parents'. Is that right?"

The horror writer nodded. "I've wracked my brain trying to think of somebody else, and come up empty. Dan and I are old friends. You ought to know that."

Captain Barlowe nodded. "I do, sir. He told me."

"We get together when we can, usually that's once or twice a year. This year he and Charity decided to vacation in this area. He's a golfer and a fisherman."

Captain Barlowe nodded again. "He should love our part of the state."

"That's what I thought, Captain. I don't play golf, but I checked out some of the courses here. I fish a bit, and I told him about that. He said he was coming, and I told him I had plenty of room. They were only going to stay for two nights."

"You kept your cellar door locked?"

"Usually? No. I locked it when I heard they were coming. The cellar's dirty and the steps are dangerous. You know how small boys are."

"Yes, sir. I used to be one. The killer jimmed it open."

The horror writer nodded. "I saw that."

"You sleep on the ground floor. You didn't hear anything?"

"No. I'm a sound sleeper."

"I understand. Here's my problem, sir, and I hope you can help me with it. Crime requires three things. They're motive, means, and opportunity. Know those, and you know a lot. I've got a murder case here. It's the murder of a kid. I hate the bastards who kill kids, and I've never had a case I wanted to solve more."

"I understand," the horror writer said.

"Means is no problem. He had a gun, a car, and tools. Maybe gloves, because we haven't found any fresh prints we can't identify. His motive may have been robbery, but it was probably of a sexual nature. Here's a young girl, a blonde. Very good-looking to judge by the only picture we've seen so far."

"She is." The horror writer nodded his agreement.

"He must have seen her somewhere. And not just that. He must have known that she was going to be in this house last night. Where did he see her? How did he know where she was going to be? If I can find the answers to those questions we'll get him."

"I wish I could help you." The horror writer's smile was inward only.

"You've had no visitors since your guests arrived?"

He shook his head. "None."

"Delivery men? A guy to fix the furnace? Something like that?"

"No, nobody. They got here late yesterday afternoon, Captain."

"I understand. Now think about this, please. I want to know everybody – and I mean everybody, no matter who it was – you told that they were coming."

"I've thought about it. I've thought about it a great deal, Captain. And I didn't tell anyone. When I went around to the golf courses, I told people I was expecting guests and they'd want to play golf. But I never said who those guests were. There was no reason to."

"That settles it." Captain Barlowe rose, looking grim. "It's somebody they told. The father's given us the names of three people and he's trying to come up with more. There may be more. He admits that. His wife . . ."

"Hadn't she told anyone?"

"That just it, sir. She did. She seems to have told quite a few people and says can't remember them all. She's lying because she doesn't want her friends bothered. Well by God they're going to be bothered. My problem – one of my problems – is that all these people are out of state. I can't go after them myself, and I'd like to. I want have a good look at them. I want to see their faces change when they're asked certain questions."

He breathed deep, expanding a chest notably capacious, and let it out. "On the plus side, we're after a stranger. Some of the local people may have seen him and noticed him. He may – I said *may* – be driving a car with out-of-state plates."

"Couldn't he have rented a car at the airport?" the horror writer asked.

"Yes, sir. He could, and I hope to God he did. If he did, we'll get him sure. But his car had worn tires, and that's not characteristic of rentals."

"I see."

"If he did rent his car, it'll have bloodstains in it, and the rental people will notice. She was bleeding when she was carried out of her bedroom."

"I didn't know that."

"Not much, but some. We found blood in the hall and more on the back stairs. The bad thing is that if he flew in and plans to fly back out, he can't take her with him. He'll kill her. He may have killed her already."

* * *

Captain Barlowe left, Dan and Charity moved into a motel, and the day ended in quiet triumph. The experts who had visited the crime scene earlier reappeared and took more photographs and blood samples. The horror writer asked them no questions, and they volunteered nothing.

He drove to town the next morning and shopped at several stores. So far as he could judge, he was not followed. That afternoon he got out the binoculars he had acquired years before for bird-watching and scanned the surrounding woods and fields, seeing no one.

At sunrise the next morning he rescanned them, paying particular attention to areas he thought he might have slighted before. Selecting an apple from the previous day's purchases, he made his way through grass still wet with dew to the well and tossed it in.

He had hoped that she would thank him and plead for release; if she did either her voice was too faint for him to catch her words, this though it seemed to him there was a sound of some sort from the well, a faint, high humming. As he tramped back to the house, he decided that it had probably been an echo of the wind.

The rest of that day he spent preparing her cellar room.

He slept well that night and woke refreshed twenty minutes before his clock radio would have roused him. The three-eighths inch rope he had brought two days earlier awaited him in the kitchen; he knotted it as soon as he had finished breakfast, spacing the knots about a foot apart.

When he had wound it around his waist and tied it securely, he discovered bloodstains – small but noticeable – on the back of his barn coat. Eventually it would have to be burned, but a fire at this season would be suspicious in itself; a long soak in a strong bleach solution would have to do the job – for the present, if not permanently. Pulled out, his shirt hid the rope, although not well.

When he reached the well, he tied one end of the rope to a convenient branch and called softly.

There was no reply.

A louder "Kiara!" brought no reply either. She was still asleep, the horror writer decided. Asleep or, just possibly, unconscious. He dropped the free end of the rope into the well, swung over the edge, and began the climb down.

He had expected the length of his rope to exceed the depth of the well by three feet at least; but there came a time when his feet could find no more rope below him – or find the muddy bottom either.

His pen light revealed it, eight inches, perhaps, below the soles of

his shoes. Another knot down – this knot almost the last – brought his feet into contact with the mud.

He released the rope.

He had expected to sink into the mud, but had thought to sink to a depth of no more than three or four inches; he found himself floundering, instead, in mud up to his knees. It was difficult to retain his footing; bracing one hand against the stone side of the well, he managed to do it.

At the first step he attempted, the mud sucked his shoe from his foot. Groping the mud for it got his hands thoroughly filthy, but failed to locate it. Attempting a second step cost him his other shoe as well.

This time, however, his groping fingers found a large, soft thing in the mud. His pen light winked on – but in the space of twenty seconds or a little less its always-faint beam faded to darkness. His fingers told him of hair matted with mud, of an ear, and then of a small earring. When he took his hand from it, he stood among corpses, shadowy child-sized bodies his fingers could not locate. Shuddering, he looked up.

Above him, far above him, a small circle of blue was bisected by the dark limb to which he had tied his rope. The rope itself swayed gently in the air, its lower end not quite out of reach.

He caught it and tried to pull himself up; his hands were slippery with mud, and it escaped them.

Desperately, almost frantically, he strove to catch it again, but his struggles caused him to sink deeper into the mud.

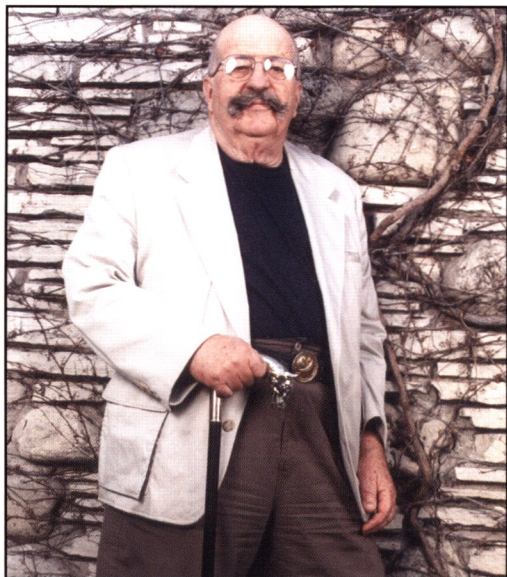
He tried to climb the wall of the well; at his depth its rough stones were thick with slime.

At last he recalled Kiara's body, and by a struggle that seemed to him long managed to get both feet on it. With its support, his fingertips once more brushed the dangling end of the rope. Bracing his right foot on what felt like the head, he made a final all-out effort.

And caught the rope, grasping it a finger's breadth from its frayed end. The slight tension he exerted on it straightened it, and perhaps stretched it a trifle. Bent the limb above by a fraction of an inch. With his right arm straining almost out of its socket and his feet pressing hard against Kiara's corpse, the fingers of his left hand could just touch the final knot.

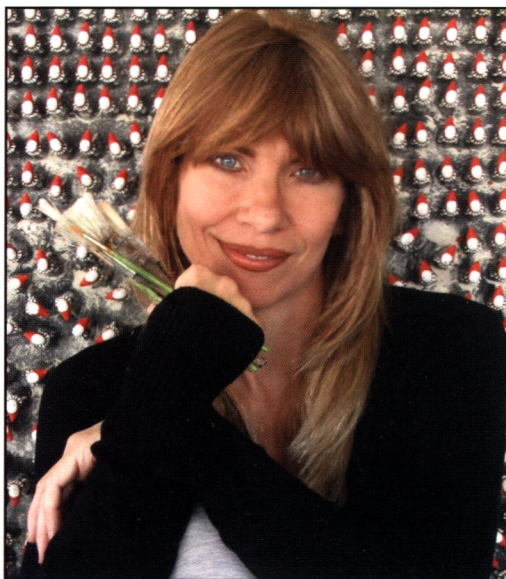
Something took hold of his right foot, pinning toes and transverse arch in jaws that might have been those of a trap.

The horror writer struggled then, and screamed again and again as he was drawn under – screamed and shrieked and begged until the stinking almost liquid mud stopped his mouth.



Gene Wolfe (born May 7, 1931) is acclaimed for his dense, allusion-rich prose. He is a prolific short story writer as well as a novelist, and has won two Nebula Awards and three World Fantasy Awards. He has been described as being "simultaneously the Dickens and the Nabokov of the speculative genres". He lives in Barrington, Illinois.

Lisa Snellings-Clark charms viewers with deceptively whimsical images, then draws them deeply into the darker layers that imbue her work. Typically her work blurs the lines between two and three dimensions, painting and sculpture, art and words. Her "frozen stories" inspired long-time collaborator Neil Gaiman's *Harlequin Valentine*, as well as a number of other stories. *The Strange Attraction* anthology (2000) features art-inspired stories by a score of authors including Jack Dann, John Shirley, Charles DeLint, Neil Gaiman, Gene Wolfe and Harlan Ellison. She sculpts, paints, writes and lives in the desert of Southern California with her family and a gray cat named Gurtie.



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