

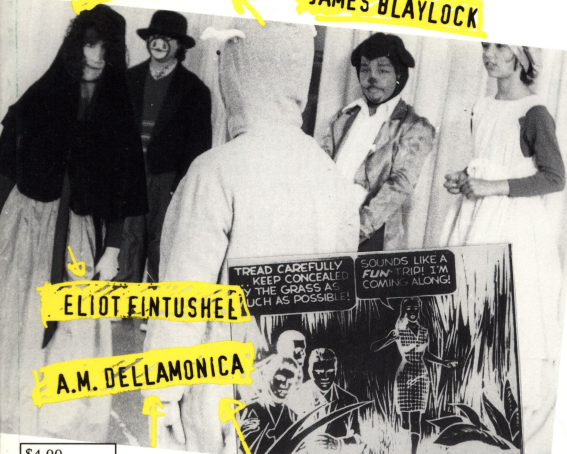
CRANK!

SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

NUMBER 7

R.A. LAFFERTY

JAMES BLAYLOCK



ELIOT FINTUSHEE

A.M. DELLAMONICA

TREAD CAREFULLY
KEEP CONCEALED
BY THE GRASS AS
MUCH AS POSSIBLE!

SOUNDS LIKE A
FUN TRIP! I'M
COMING ALONG!

A-A MONSTER CREATURE!
OVER THERE! H-HE WAS
BIG AS A HOUSE!

STEADY DOWN,
BARRY! DAN,
MARK! LET'S
TAKE A LOOK!

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CRANK!

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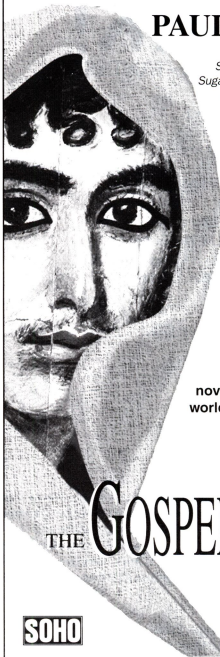
CONTENTS

Santacide • 3 • Eliot Fintushel
Homage • 10 • A.M. Dellamonica
The Magic Spectacles • 31 • James Blaylock
Goldfish • 68 • R.A. Lafferty

Bryan Cholfin • Editor

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Santacide

Eliot Fintushel

Dog shit and mud. The trees are as bare as a geezer's gums. No sun since early autumn. The clouds haven't heard that silver lining jazz; the only thing they are lined with is each other. Sky the color of pig iron. Too cold to snow.

I am not partial to December.

I am brooding by the dark casement, dreaming of the dome that used to regulate the city's weather before NY went bankrupt. My Martian cocoa – zoot-spiked, of course – is warming me from the inside out but cools at the epithelium. I glance at my wristwatch. Old habit – I had a job once. The prochrono is glowing. Someone is about to arrive.

"Chuck?" Cecil has a voice like dry heaves. I haven't seen him since before the sun – when dinosaurs roamed the Earth and I was still married to Agnes. At seven foot two with an executioner's build and a face like a pit viper's, he doesn't have to take much guff. Used to do inquiries for me (Read: knucks and bucks) when there was still some percentage in the law maven trade, before the slime (Read: Cecil's ilk) sucked my dogs to the kneecaps. We won a case or two – but not the one that counted. "Arnby, you in there?"

I hit CURRENT on my watch to cut to where Cecil and I are having cocktails. I hate salutations. I don't wear no cologne. I still have a fifth of Venusian zoot rot: 2018, a very good year. We pass the bottle back and forth – no clean glasses in walking distance. He is nattily dressed in codpiece and suspenders, his tubulars in a heap on my sleep unit. I am at ease in my cheek pin. Cecil is in excellent spirits – cause for suspicion.

"I want you to see something," he says.

"Cease-fire," says I, "the last time you had something to show me, *he* was

dead, you had a hot gat minus one slug, and I was disbarred, pending. I ain't stepping outside till midsummer."

"For this you are," he says. He reaches over to punch my watch. We are old enough buddies, altercations despite, that I do not impede him; I cried on his shoulder when Agnes left me, though I needed a stool to do it. And he kept me in zoot rot when she didn't come back.

He punches CURRENT a couple of times. We are out on the street in our tubulars; then we are jumping down the rusted-frozen escalator at his tenement, buns thawing after the transit; and finally we are in his basement crib, in his cold-as-a-dookil's-pizzle basement crib, eyeballing a closed wooden door, from when trees were being cut to build things. It has peeling whitewash, like in *Tom Sawyer*.

"You'll never guess what I got in there, Chucky."

I am not sure what is in store. Knowing Cecil, this may be some *Casque of Amontillado* action, and I am not partial to mortared stiff. I sneak a glance at my wrist. Cecil reaches to cover the watch, but he is a little late. I see on the prochrono who I'm going to see in there. "Holy dookil scats!"

"Damn! I wanted to surprise you." Cecil throws open the door, and there he is, just like my watch said –

"Ho! Ho! Ho!"

– shackled to the brick wall, the white fur trim on that apple-red suit torn and muddied, one foot bare, the boot lying just out of his reach, the sock under my heel, as it happens. Beside him lies a torn sack. Little toys, cheap thingies – "Made on the Moon" – are flung about the floor, smashed.

There is only one thing I want to do, the thing any reasonable adult would want to do, something I've been aching to do so long and so hard, Christmas after Christmas, that I've put it clean out of my mind just to be able to carry on. But it's back in my mind *now*, boy! It's in my eyes when I turn to Cecil.

"Go for it, Chuck!" says the Seesaw.

I cock my good right arm and bash Santa square in the old kazoo. When he groans, I smile.

It's wonderful how fast an eye can blacken when a sucker's circulation is good. It's all in the contrast, really. On jowly, pink Santy, brow and whiskers the color of snow blindness, the shiner sprouts like mushrooms in manure. I rub my paw and think of Agnes. (Not that I've ever gotten to *use* it on her: she has a left hook like an air hammer, and I have a glass jaw.)

"Good one!" Cecil grins. "The boys and girls in Toyland are gonna have a funeral."

"Excellent punch, son..." the big elf is saying, but I cock my arm again; his shoulders hit his ears, his knees jerk to mid-lard bucket – an elephantine finch – and he shuts his mouth. He is shaking like a bowl full of jelly.

"Cecil, my man, how in hell did you get a hold of him? He's not the real one, is he?"

"Close as makes no diff, old upChuck," – unzipping the stashhole in his tubulars and producing a small, red-enameled dingus the size and shape of a triple-seeded goober – "Ever see one of these?"

This is rhetorical. I used to own one, and Cecil knows it: a vintage dynestat, a Bull patent model, state of the art in the 2020s, that wonderfully myopic decade! Only thing was, they had all been recalled around 2032 on account of a faulty transcat chip.

"You're not supposed to have that." It is my choirboy coming out. "It's unstable. You could hurt yourself."

"*Bubbeh meisehs*, Chucky. The chip's okay. It's the *governor* that made the white collar boys at Bull Enterprises, Inc. sweat and puke in the executive john. Too easy to disable – catch my drift?"

I look at the fat man. I look at the goober. "How in hell...?"

"When Bull recalled, their PR boys threw a scare into the citizens with that 'unstable chip' bushwah, plus the *Federales* put some penal muscle behind it. I think you defended one or two of the hold-outs, ain't that so?"

"Could be. I'm not partial to the memory function these days."

"Yeah, well, there was twenty or thirty of us non-compliers. One was in Michigan; this outlaw user jimmed the governor and set up a dream brothel, as God is my witness, that put the cat houses of Venus to shame. But in the end – and I'll let you guess *which* end – they attracted the wrong sort of attention, spelled B-U-L-L, I-N-C., whose private security force is also known as the 'United States Marines.' The Bull nerds hypodyned all them fine ladies back to wet dreams, every nipple and chassis.

"Me, so happened I knew this disgruntled ex-employee of Mr. Bull's. A chug of Venusian zoot rot regruntled him okay. He showed me how to gum the governor, and quick as you can say 'hypodyne-hypostat', I was laying my dreams about me. With this little number, I was a frigging Praxiteles: thoughts to flesh, boy, dyne and stat, dyne and stat. And I don't mean little 3D movies like what the brochure touted. I mean big as life, Chucky, your wildest dreams." He points to Santa Claus. "Q.E.D."

"But why Santa Claus?"

"In a word, Arnby: money."

"Money?"

"Did you enjoy...?"

"Smacking the old fart? You bet I did. I've been laying for that gut wagger ever since my first wish list come up goose eggs. He throws it in our faces, Cecil. And then we have to bail the Fat Man out, paste smiles on our mugs for the little tots, pile debt on debt to patch their dumb dreams. Christmas music alone is enough cause to off that bloated bugger. I got dimple fatigue from here to the Magellanics. A guy can take only so much."

"Exactly. That's how I feel, too, Chuck-a-luck. And that's how every one of these eggs feels as well." From his other stashhole, Cecil pulls a fat wad of tiny green cards.

"What are those things?"

"Ticket stubs."

"Eat hot lead, fat man!"

It's *rooty-toot-toot* without the *rummy-tum-tum*. Father Christmas's little round belly jumps like dust on a jack hammer handle as the Kalashnikov rips into him. His droll little mouth curls back like a slug in the killing jar. He doesn't seem so lively and quick any more.

The little guy with the meat perforator is shaking all over – not used to the recoil. He is happy though. "I ain't afraid of you, fat boy. Them reindeer don't scare me. Them elves of yours make me laugh. And as for them toy guns, Buster, this little honey" – slapping the stock of Cecil's antique Big K – "will do me just fine." Another clip of bullets blasts across the room. The painful echo. The gunpowder smell. Modern weaponry is deadlier perhaps, but it lacks the whack.

"That's extra for the second clip, you know," says Cecil. The little guy hands back the Kalashnikov and forks over a sawbuck along with it. Cecil turns to open the door and wave in the next customer, when the guy lays a hand on Cecil's elbow.

"Mister, you're a Prince." There are tears in the little guy's eyes. "I been putting up with Mel Term and Big Crosby and Roy Rogers and my wife's mistletoe for twenty-odd years. I was ready to skip for the outer planets till February, but now, *because of you, pal*, I can face it for another year. God bless you!" He kisses Cecil on the lips and runs out, closing the door behind him.

Cecil beams at me. "God, it makes a bugger feel good to help out his fellow man!"

"Not to mention the dough. What's that – a thou already?"

"Damn near! Thirty satisfied customers!"

The knob turns and the door edges open, but I stop it.

"Hey!" – from out in the hallway, a lady's voice.

"What's the idea?" says Cecil.

"Look there," I says. Santa Claus is a gooey mess of blood and formerly internal organs.

"You certainly are a wonderful shot!" he gurgles.

"Shut up, Kringle!" Cecil suggests. Then to me: "I catch your meaning." He pulls out the dynestat, pinches the middle bulge, and squints hard. This is always a wonder to me, no matter how many times I see it. The hypostat beam lights up Cecil's noddle like a DaVinci saint. For a brief moment, I can see his neurons and synapses in dayglo pinks and green, with the ions charging around through grey matter like maggots on an old pork butt. Cecil strokes the goober, focussing the beam on the thought of Santa Claus. With the governor intact, you could never reach this far into the collective unconscious. In a flash, the Sumo elf is hohohoing again, real as income tax, all his wrinkles, rips, prolapses and perforations erased, in a word: hypostatized. The former heap has been overstruck. The new one is chained to the wall, right where Cecil thought him.

"And the Word became flesh," Cecil chirps.

That's when the lady decides to charge through. "You blasphemous pig!" Only it's no lady – it's Agnes.

She marches in, all five foot two of her, both eyes of blue on my face of red. She is wearing her hair in a businesslike bun. Her tubulars are professional, stashhole and hem to collar – she's been doing better than yours truly, it is clear. You meet a better class of clientele in *environmental* law – cleaner anyway.

I reach for my prochronon button. I am not the confrontational type; I'd rather *have done it* than *do it*, and that's what this gadget is for. Back in the 'ros when the chron shafts first opened up, I was right there, gilding pedigrees and depositing back cash for the fast samoleans; and all in an open 'hurry' – what a jalopy! But since I got the barrister's tile, a prochronon is as risky as I like to get, even with caseload zilch.

Agnes, however, knows my predilections in this regard. She intercepts my pinky en route to the left wrist. "Forget it, slimeball," – that left jab, but she pulls it, thank God, before it meets my proboscis. "I want this to be strictly present tense."

Have I told you how pretty my Agnes is? Plenty pretty. Plenty smart. Plenty simpatico in all respects. But when the chips were down, no match for a liquid lunch. I'm just a zoot rot kind of a guy, and Agnes is cocoa straight-up.

In half a second, she is gone to me; she has spotted Santa. "You poor dear, what have they done to you?" I am on the garbage heap of Aggie's

awareness. Cecil, aching to let in the next ticket-clutching, dinara-proffering, Santacidal customer, shares steerage with me in Agnes's mind.

Agnes kissing Santa Claus. Agnes's fingers running up and down that white fur collar. Googoo and poowiddow dumplin'. Pere Noel is eating up my ex's attentions: "What do you want for Christmas, sweetheart?"

I am ready to buy another ticket. "For crissakes, Ag, get off the guy's lap..." – I don't wear no cologne – "... please."

It's beginning to get ugly outside the wooden door. There is a multitude of stomping, pounding, and chanting out there. "We want the fat guy! We want the fat guy!" Others prefer: "Off the elf!" with this sustenuto: "I want mine! I want mine!"

Cecil is busting a gut, his seven two useless against Aggie's five-two-and-righteously-indignant. "C'mon, Agnes. Chucky's right. This Santa is just a hypostat. Look." He produces a bazooka from a trunk in the corner and fires point blank at Santa Claus's rosy forehead.

Agnes has jumped away. She stumbles into my arms as the jolly cranium explodes. "Dear Lord!"

"No sweat!" says Cecil. Out comes the goober, and before you know it, there's a brand new Santa manacled to the wall, and the old, loose giblets have hypodyned to neural fizz.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Agnes in my arms. I feel her trembling through her tubulars and mine. Slowly she unclenches the little fists of her eyelids and pours those baby blues into mine. I hate this action: I am in love again. I have that weak, warm feeling of having wet my bed. I'll do anything for her.

"Chuck, please make him stop. It's *Santa Claus*, Chuck. He is the embodiment of the happy dreams of all the world's children. You still have that child in you, too, Chuck, I know you do. I can't have hurt you *that* much."

"You hurt me? Oh, honey!"

Then the door breaks open, squishing Cecil flat to the wall. In struts a tough, in adman blacks, swinging his laptop like a shillelagh. "Lemme at 'im!" He slams the door behind him, delivering free nose jobs to the two guys next in line. Cecil unpeels but is counting birdies.

The shitkickers on this citizen are CEO class. His type don't like to stand in line. "I've had it with you, fat guy. You and the flood of red ink that washes in with you every goddam Exmas." He stomps forward like a seismosaurus. His tan, Hollywood jaw is working, drool brimming over the fat lower lip.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" says Santa.

The customer's eyes are blazing, crazed. With every step, he spits out an-

other phrase. "I tore open the shutters... and threw up the sash..." It's a Niagara Falls routine. "I vaulted over the sill... *and gunned the red dumpling down!*" He pulls out a gat the like of which I have never seen, a deluxe executive semi-automatic laser-system doohickey; it throws a bright red dot of light on Santy's solar plexus, where the slug will hit.

Agnes disengages from our little rapprochement long enough to introduce the belligerent to her famous left jab. His red dot blinks out. "What makes people that way?" she muses, dusting off her knucks while he joins Cecil among the birdies. "I don't like to use these tactics, Chuck. I'd much rather use persuasion."

"I'm persuaded, Agnes."

"No, you're not." Then, turning to Father Christmas: "Hell, *you* talk to him, Santa."

Claus twinkles and flashes me some tooth enamel – moonlight on an ice cove. I am not melting. He opens his fat arms. "Would you like to sit up here on Santa's lap?"

"This ain't 34th Street," says I, "and I ain't Natalie Wood."

"Listen, Chucky," the imp coos, "your friend hypostatted me from his own human mind, the same mind you share in, Chuck. Don't you know that when you castigate me, you are castigating yourself? I still have some things in my bag for you, Chucky. It's never too late to stop being naughty and to start being nice instead."

Lord, I wanted to bank him on the grill. "Get real, you big zit. You ain't checked your list twice – I can see *that*. I'm a two-bit zoot swiller, no good to nobody. I never done a good turn without an angle. Ask Aggie."

"Don't sell yourself short, Charles," she says.

You could have decked me with a feather.

Cecil has adjusted his vertical, meanwhile, and is yammering out the door at the bilious masses. They are doubling time slots out there to fit in the basement hallway and up two flights of oxide-infested escalator. "Off the elf! I want mine!"

Shoulder to the door, he peeks back at me and says between grunts, "Don't go limp on me, Chuck roast. She's just a dame, for crissakes, and *he* don't even exist!"

Santa clucks and shakes his whiskered noddle. Then he looks up at me and Aggie. "Why don't you let me take you two for a little sleigh ride? There are some things I'd love you to see."

How we get out of Cecil's basement I do not recall. Agnes has grabbed my wrist and prochnoed, leaving Cecil in an embarrassing squeeze vis-a-vis his paid-up, ticketed customers. She and I are sitting alongside the scar-

let pudgeball at about two thousand feet. The reindeer are hoofing across cloudbanks and galloping upward. Tucked between Agnes and the dumping, I hardly need my tubulars.

Suddenly the surrounding mist starts to glow and dwindle. Up ahead, I see something I have not seen for a very long time. I blink and look again. It is the sun.

"I thought you was a night person, Nick," I says.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" he says.

Agnes is holding my hand. "I had to find you, Chuck. I heard about Cecil's new racket; guy on a street corner tried to sell me a ticket. The way you've been acting since you hit the zoot..."

"... Since you walked out, you mean."

"Whatever. I figured he would get you in on it." The moon is there, faintly, the North Wind's cookie, just like the children's rhyme says, baking in the sun – middle shelf, across the wide, blue sky.

"He don't like to work alone."

"I remembered that. Cecil always needed somebody with character to back him up, Charles. Someone like *you*." Claus dips through the clouds like a gull diving for his catch – and we see these big cumuli from just below, lined with silver, the way they say.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!"

"Don't look at the clouds, Charles. Look at *me*. Why did you give up?"

This action is not my favorite. I don't wear no cologne. I figure, if a dame don't understand you, you can't be all bad. "Agnes... we are in the upper jeebasphere, and everything is beautiful. I never seen such blue. I never seen such silver."

"Ho! Ho! Ho!"

"Stop that! But down there, Agnes, in the *real* world, it's scum and maggots in the dark."

"Maggots are fly babies, Chuck," Santa Claus puts in. "I have something in my bag for them, too."

"Butt out," says Agnes. "That's it, isn't it, Charles? You couldn't take the shadows. You're a lot more sensitive than you pretend to be. Let me help you, Charles. I'll come back to you if you promise to try."

I am raining. I can't help it. Maybe it's the altitude, the dew point, the wind. Tears drip and dry, drip and dry in the upper jeebasphere. "Agnes, you know I never stopped loving you."

Her forearms on my chest – "I know."

I feel myself slipping into the world of Agnes's love – it must be meteorology. "But I can't..." I say. *Owl!* Her eyes are melting together. We are ap-

proaching osculation.

Which is when Santa Claus chooses to say, "Would you like to try the reins, little-man?" Santa is watching the jet stream; he doesn't know what he has interrupted. That fuzzy cuff between our chins. The leather strap, with its salt taste, rubbing against the lips that almost touched Agnes's.

Agnes's face lights up. She cocks her head, a sweet inch from mine. I am ready to shpritz cologne in all my little places. "Go on, dear!" she says. "For once in your life, fly!"

I take the reins. "Ho! Ho! Ho!" I say. Santa and Agnes are hohohoing, too. "On, Donder! On, Blitzen!" It's a rolly coaster ride through the jeebasphere, brother! We're leaping like dolphins in and out of those cumuli. The whee and wow of it rip laughs out my mouth and hugs from wifey.

It must be a field effect from those hypostatted reins: I can see every kid-dy on Santa's list, down through their chimneys, dancing sugarplums and all. There's Cecil with his Santacidal mob, Cecilcidal now. He's punching that goober like nobody's business, but the thing has gone out of whack. All he gets are sparks and Nat King Cole crooning *Adeste Fideles*. Santa Claus has a thing or two lined up for Cecil's stocking; who'd have thought the palooka was partial to Marcel Proust? I can see his argyles dangle and bulge with the weight of *Les Jeunes Filles En Fleurs* and a dozen madeleines.

I can see the Bar Association down there, too. They're about to reinstate me – *providing*. Lumps of coal, all around – just kidding! "You know, Ag," says I, "environmental law don't sound too bad. I always wanted to try my hand at that. *Somebody's* gotta protect the jeebasphere."

"Watch out for that flock of storks, son!" Santa touches my wrist, and we swoop below the rush of white wings, and – if it isn't the altitude pickling my sensorium – below the mewling, no-neck tots swinging in their diapers, like hammocks hung from the birdies' bills.

"So happens I know a dame in that racket as could use a decent partner," says Agnes, doing her George Raft.

"I could put her in your stocking, Chuck," says Santa – Edward G. Robinson, badly. "Ho! Ho! Ho! – *see?*"

I tear off my wristwatch, prochrono and all, and throw it to the wind. Life is too much fun, *sturm, drang*, and everything, to miss a minute of it.

I hand the reins back to the old elf.

"Home, Santa!" Agnes laughs.

"I'll drop you off on the way to the pole."

We jingle down into the city. Nobody gives us a second thought: New Yorkers! Between the clouds, lined with silver, the sky is crystalline blue. It is snowing in Manhattan. Kids turn their chins up, squeeze their eyes shut,

and open their mouths wide to taste it. Grumblers and hoods peep sunward. Grudgingly, they leak a smile. Maybe they'll give Santa another chance this year. Maybe not.

"Agnes..." says I.

"Yes, Charles...?"

Donder, Blitzen and the antlered brethren are winging the old pudgeball north. Mistletoe flutters down from the sleigh – "Ho! Ho! Ho!"

We kiss.

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Homage

A.M. Dellamonica

The gate to the Underworld was rusted through, and the guard dog was asleep.

"Mega-fabulous!" The God of Entertainment stared at Cerebus in fascination, wondering if it was safe to just sneak by. The gate would probably squeak.

Then he realized the three-headed dog was dead.

All the adventure and none of the risk, he thought. It was the best piece of luck he'd had since Francis got him out of sponsoring celebrity causes by becoming God of Charity. He smirked back across the Grove of Persephone, a dispirited group of wilting trees, and his gaze fell on the painted blue eyes of his creation, Aggie.

Behind Aggie's motionless form a river, probably the Acheron, dribbled out of a crack in the roof of the cavern. It crept across a once-mighty floodplain and disappeared near Cerebus's corpse. The cavern was huge, bigger than a stadium, the tunnel he came through merely one of hundreds of openings that led to the surface. The arc of the brook divided the caves from the gate, bubbling along the edges of the remains of Persephone's Grove. If he squinted he could see shadowy forms emerging from the caves. They waded over the river – no need for a ferryman now – and vanished into the cavern beyond the Gate, moving downstream.

"Scene two," the god boomed. Wind from his voice blew the hair off the dog's skin. Dust crumbled down from the ceiling. "The plucky young grad student and I set out together, and we find Cerebus at the Gate to the Underworld. He's gone mad. He's in agony. The poor beast attacks! I'm forced to kill him after a terrible battle."

He restored the corpse's hair, rearranged the three muzzles so they were

snarling, firmed up the gums so they'd hold in its teeth. *Poor animal dried out instead of rotting.* He warmed the corpse, filled its veins with blood, conjured foam on its lips. Then Entertainment waved a hand. One by one the dog's giant heads came off its shoulders.

The scenery needed work, too. He widened the crack in the ceiling so the Acheron poured down in a spectacular waterfall, slamming into its dried riverbed with a dust-raising roar. He changed Persephone's tinderbox back into a proper grove and dispersed the dog hair caught in the branches of the trees. *What else... it still needs something.*

"Got it," he crowed. He tore off the sleeve of his shirt and arranged it among the dog's teeth. Then he laid a hand between the eyes of the nearest head and assumed a tough but regretful expression. He took a deep breath. "Roll sidekick."

Aggie pounded through the newly restored trees and burst into the clearing in front of the Gate, her eyes flickering to and fro as she witnessed the battle Entertainment had described. He was gratified to see her expression run the spectrum from wonder to fear and then relief. "Hugh," she gasped, "Did he hurt you?"

"Stay away from the foam," Hugh said roughly.

She touched him instead, laying a tentative hand on his arm. "He was sick, Hugh. It was a mercy, really it was." Her voice was exactly what he'd wanted, youthful and clear, with the barest hint of throaty resonance. Hugh brushed a single lock of hair off her forehead and let her cajole a smile out of him.

She's flawless.

He created Aggie that morning to accompany him to the land of the dead. Toni naturally assumed she would be invited, but Hugh was too clever to bring a producer with him, girlfriend or no. Entertainment deserved a more fitting witness to his exploits, one who would stay within her role. *Besides, who would go adventuring with a sidekick who dresses like a senator?*

Aggie's part was tagalong kid sister. She was in her mid-twenties, with proportions that suggested immaturity: slim waist, adolescent hips, unfashionably small breasts. Her copper hair was bound in a ponytail and she wore khaki shorts, running shoes and a white shirt. A green backpack bounced between her shoulders.

It was the clothes that had inspired the creation. Hugh's first attempts at conjuring women from thin air came out misshapen, with warped personalities. They reminded him of the children his wife produced whenever he was stupid enough to let her near him. He tried copying actresses from the film library, but he knew people would realize they were copies, and he

couldn't bear to alter them. Finally he just locked the failures in his wardrobe and went idea-shopping. The first thing he spotted when he hit the mall were the khaki shorts.

Adventuring clothes, he thought. He dragged the mannequin into a dressing room, changed her hair, edited her physique. He etched subliminal messages into the freckles he sprayed over her nose and cheeks, tiny advertising sigils for movies, records, and TV shows. He whispered to her plaster heart, narrating her tragic past, enjoining her to be smart and resourceful, resilient and above all loyal. Then he stuffed her in a duffel bag without taking the tags off her clothes. She set off shoplifting alarms all over the mall when he left.

After a strategic retreat from the shopping center he created her an apartment, furnished with movie memorabilia and photo albums full of a dad with red hair, a tough but loving mom. He named her Agnes See, wrote her name into the records of a film doctorate program, spliced her into the memories of people at the college. And now here she was, gaping at the corpse, then ranging ahead to examine the cleft in the rock beyond the Gate.

"It's too narrow for the Jeep," she announced. "I guess we're hiking." She yanked on the rusty bars. Hugh rushed to open it for her so he could be first to venture into the tunnel. Inside, it was pitch-black, and he created a lion of gold light to lead the way.

Dripping water echoed around them and the dank smell of the river pressed against his skin. Their reflections in the water were remarkably clear, Aggie's eyes, alert and excited, his own handsome face.

If Cerebus is dead, Hades should be gone too. Persephone died ages ago, but it was possible Hades survived, that he was hearty and guarding his territory against interlopers. He might even have kids, grandchildren. Apollo and Artemis spawned Holly, nature freak and mother of the gods, because Apollo insisted that descendants of the Old Ones would ascend to a new era of glory. Apollo was down here now. He might have told Hades and Persephone his prophesy. Maybe they'd birthed a litter or two.

Wealth will kill me if I awaken any rivals.

Aggie was telling him about film school, her friends, her life, her apartment. "It's a bit of a cliché, a movie buff kind of place," she said, with so much affection Hugh could almost forget he'd copied most of it from the set of a failed sitcom. He wished he could tell her he was glad she liked it, that he was pleased with her. His franchise included all the arts, movies and television and video games and fiction, but movies were his favorite. He rated a sidekick who loved them too.

"I've always thought they should make a movie about you," she said.

"Write a script."

"After my thesis," she said, and Hugh chuckled. When she knew he was the one who'd rescued her from the streets, who'd paid for her schooling after her parents' tragic imaginary accident, she would set the thesis aside.

They descended for hours. Hugh got tired of the explorer role fast. He half-listened to Aggie while stretching his attention to the living world, checking on the supplicants who were praying about the record company takeover. He drew a morsel of strength from a young priest, a director offering a TV pilot to Entertainment's private library. In a Broadway megatemple, a weary line of dancers practiced a number in his honor while the stage crew hammered at a broken set piece. Hugh fixed the set, gorged on their thankful prayers, and changed his watch to a TV screen so he could tune in on the talk shows and the soaps.

Finally the cave widened into vastness, and they came to the riverbank where the Styx coiled in nine loops around the Underworld. Hugh conjured a sparkling bridge, curled and segmented like a roll of film. Aggie clapped and sprinted to the center to gaze around her. The glowing lion followed her, casting a haze of gold into the center of the cave. Unlike the Acheron, the Styx was black, so dark Hugh couldn't see his face. "I thought there'd be stalactites," he said, and then remembered that this was supposed to be his second trip. "I mean, when I was here before." Last year he announced that he'd come to the Underworld.

"Limestone caves have stalactites," Aggie said. "This is more of a breach along the fault line."

"I know," he said, miffed. "I realized that right off...last time."

"It's beautiful," Aggie said. "In a creepy sort of way. Like being inside the night sky."

"We didn't come for the scenery." This trip was going to actualize Hugh's fondest dream, to finally be the hero of a big-budget adventure movie. He wanted to attend the premiere, give interviews about the differences between the screen version and the way it really was. He wanted actors to fight each other to play him. For years he cajoled his faithful, hinting at what he wanted, even offering bribes. They never quite said no. Deals went into pre-production, but inevitably miscarried.

Even gods, it seemed, could fail auditions.

This place is becoming a mega-yawn. What would happen if this was a movie?

Aggie wasn't bored. She was still talking. "I recognized you checking out that cave entrance, and I knew you were going back to the Underworld," she said. "I have all the clippings, you know, from when you went down to

prove that You Know Who really was dead. I thought about how the tabloids whined that it was just your word against theirs, so I figured I'd go along as a witness." She squatted to peer at the Styx. "What's it like?"

"You'll see," Hugh promised. He'd staged an international press conference about the bogus trip. He'd only done it to get a long-dead gloryhoggish rock star off the front page of the tabs, but everyone was very impressed. The film deal almost went through until the press started getting skeptical.

In a movie the hero would have to save the sidekick, Hugh thought. He conjured a rattlesnake behind Aggie and then fried it as it was about to bite her. She squealed, jumped, and then glowered reproachfully.

"Was that some kind of test?"

"Cut!" he howled. Her eyes glazed and she froze. "Forget the snake, Aggie." He paced in the narrow cavern. "Scene," he said, sweeping her against the rock wall. "The sidekick jiggles a loose rock and causes a minor cave-in." He pulled down stones from the roof around them, arranging them in an artistic pile, tearing the back of his shirt with fragments, releasing trickles of dust onto their hair. "I tackle her, shielding her from the falling rock with my body." He glared down at her immobile form as he rained gravel onto the glowing lion. "She is appropriately grateful."

Ingratitude was a specialty of his worshippers, he thought, remembering how Toni finally told him why nobody would make his movie. "Hugh, you're a fascinating subject," she said, "But you don't do anything besides go to the parties and the premieres. You can't make an adventure movie about a guy who doesn't do anything."

"I sprang full-grown from the corpse of Zeus!"

"That's not enough to risk angering you with a bad film," she said. "You've got to up your marketability." She sat cooly, ankles crossed, tempting her Persian kitten with a string of pearls. When she finished outlining her plan, Hugh was positively sick. "Why should I risk myself to rescue people who already get more press than me?"

"They get more press because they did things," she said.

"They died young."

"Before they died they did things," Toni insisted. "Made movies, ran the free world..."

"Okay, point taken already. But do I want to be upstaged?"

She dropped the pearls, laid her head on his shoulder. "Hugh," she murmured huskily. "The public wants them. I want them. If we get them out, it will be the biggest story ever. Bigger than the Ascendance. And you'll be right in the middle of it."

Bigger than the Ascendance.

"Death," Toni said, "is what makes them so ultra-attractive. It's mysterious."

"It's not a mystery at all," Hugh said. "They're all cooling their heels in Hades."

"So you say."

"You better not be saying you don't believe me."

"Of course not, darling," she purred. "That's the beauty of it. It's a zero-risk plan. You've already been to the Underworld. Bring them back and you prove it!"

"I'm a God. I shouldn't have to prove anything," Hugh grumbled. He avoided her gaze by reaching for the strand of pearls. It was too far away, so he conjured more, joining a strand from his hand to the beads strung on the floor. The kitten pounced, tugging, and Hugh let them slip through his fingers, one by one. "What do I get out of all this trouble except more competition in the tabs?"

"Your movie," Toni said.

"That's your whole pitch?" He dropped the pearls and grew more, mulling over reasons why it wouldn't work. No way would he admit he hadn't been to Hades after all. The family might have worked it out but the mortals couldn't prove it.

"Bringing them back'll reduce the competition," Toni said, running an appraising eye over the strand. It was the length of her leg. "It's what they might have done that makes the audience deify them."

"Don't use that word. I'm the deity here," Hugh said.

"Exactly," Toni said. "So let them come back and go on the talk shows. Let them make movies and records and launch comeback campaigns. Let them have breakdowns and check into Betty Ford and go through terrible divorces. They'll age, Hugh. They'll become has-beens."

"Maybe," Hugh grumbled.

"Maybe nothing. And when they're gone, the audience will see that you're the eternal one. The divine one." She'd winked and scooped up the pearls.

It was a stroke of luck that Hugh scooped the second biggest franchise in the Ascendance sixty years before. He was skipping a family meeting about when to return to the mortals, when to make their presence known and rise again. Holly and Mona were fighting as usual, and Mona ran off, presumably to her room, to sulk. Hugh was watching TV. He was long since bored with the tactical sessions, the reiterations that 'Apollo promised, he said Hank would be War.' It was awards season, his favorite time of year.

The glitter always captivated him. He dreamed of running away, of finding a different sort of worship in celebrity. It was a damned shame he couldn't act.

While the others were squabbling about when and how to ascend, not to mention who would be in charge, Hugh, channel-surfing, had found the news bulletin about Mona.

She'd gone to a mall and conjured money for anyone who'd pray to her. Her cult was spreading like plague. The family was still fighting when Wealth returned and announced that she was in charge, that the Ascension was underway. Hugh was already on Earth, seizing the Entertainment franchise from the awards podium.

Hugh shook off the memories like flies and positioned a huge boulder in the cavern roof above his shoulders. "Roll sidekick," he said, and Aggie's eyes flickered, playing surprise and terror before she ducked her head under his waiting arms. He dropped the rock on his back, grunted as he shielded her. As he pulled her out of the rockfall he saw himself in her pupils. The mussed and dusty hair looked rugged.

The lion fought its way out from under the pebbles and Aggie giggled nervously. "Is there some reason you couldn't just put in an elevator?"

Hugh gave her a smile he hoped was enigmatic.

They proceeded in silence until the tunnel widened and the lion stopped, settling on its haunches and looking down at a glowing ball. It had the light of holy magic, just like the lion, but the glow was muted, silvery and sad like the Moon.

"What is it?" Aggie breathed.

Hugh reached for the silver orb and it twitched, rolling closer. He saw it was a bundle of wrapped cord. "I think it's Ariadne's ball of string," he said, and wished he'd sounded matter-of-fact instead of awestruck. The strand led down a black plain and vanished in the distance. They could see its silvery trail. "Somebody's got the other end," he said. The ball jumped and rolled. A span of string the length of his hand reeled away.

I hope this doesn't mean someone brought the Labyrinth down here, Hugh thought. He shuddered. *Or a Minotaur.*

Toni's plan had its points, but Hugh would have put her off indefinitely if his kids hadn't started to change. After the first uproar, the Ascendance settled into a cozy status quo that lasted 50 years. Now Wealth had transformed herself, growing older, consolidating her power. Her penthouse was sealed and Hugh knew she was up to something big. Hank shed his angst and buckled down to the business of War. Francis and Julia, the products of Hugh's two post-Ascendance truces with Holly, had grown up, cho-

sen franchises. Hugh sensed it was time to do something or lose his grip on second place in the pecking order.

Julia in particular was nipping at his heels. Her roving packs of reporters were everywhere, worrying at his followers' secrets. *Who asked her to deify Truth anyway?*

They stopped in the chamber so Aggie could rest. Hugh carved her a cup out of the rock, filling it with water from his canteen. She had iron rations in her pack, but to make up for the avalanche Hugh created a plate of sandwiches. She picked at them and watched the ball of thread as it unreeled in little jerks but did not shrink.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"I get sideaches when I walk on a full stomach," she said. She took one polite bite, chewed and swallowed. Then she dug a plastic bag out of the pocket of her shorts, frowning at it curiously. It was from the store where Hugh had found her. She packed the sandwiches in the bag and stuffed them into her backpack, as casually as if they were something she'd got out of the fridge at home instead of food conjured from the air of the Underworld.

They left the ball of string untouched and followed the strand. The thread vibrated with a strange life, flicking back and forth on the tunnel floor, occasionally jerking forward.

The air got colder as they descended, and Hugh offered to conjure Aggie a jacket. "I'm okay," she said. "I'm not cold at all."

That's my girl, Hugh thought. Toni would demand a fur.

They came out on a balcony that looked down on an oval chamber, and far away, at the other end of Ariadne's thread, they found Marilyn Monroe.

She was seated on Persephone's throne, knitting sweaters for the dead. A raised platform at one end of the room held two thrones, one an empty, shining seat of gold and white. Marilyn's chair was crumbling, but her face was beatific. A small line-up of souls waited before her, watching her shape a sleeve. Other spirits milled in and out of the chamber, some wearing long silver sweaters that dragged in the dust at their feet.

"How'd she make so many?" Aggie asked.

"Apparently Ariadne's thread is infinitely long," murmured Hugh. "You know, Aggie," he said, taking on the tone of a professor, "everyone who ever died is down here somewhere." Then he shuddered. *Even the Old Ones. Zeus.*

Aggie gazed at the souls, her ponytail flopping over one shoulder, and her look of perky excitement changed to sorrow. "I just realized," she whispered. "Mom and Dad are down here somewhere. I never even thought

about that. I might...I could...."

Had to go and make her an orphan, didn't I?

"Isn't it funny that I didn't even think of them?" she said.

"Wait here," Hugh said gruffly. "I'll see if I can find them."

Hugh turned into a lion and padded around the balcony, scenting for his family, peering into the dark corners of the land of the dead. The empty throne might not mean Hades wasn't alive and well and inspecting the reaches of his kingdom. The old god might be sneaking up on him even now. Hugh modulated his voice so only another god could hear him. "Aidoneus? Hades?" He waited. "Anyone?" There was no reply.

Aggie was moping over the balcony, scanning for the parents he'd killed in an imaginary plane crash when she was fifteen. She remembered being saved from a predatory uncle by an anonymous benefactor, who sent her to boarding school and paid for her film degree. Hugh planned a poignant scene later when he revealed, by accident, that he was her benefactor, that she was destined to be a world-class screenwriter, his chronicler.

He scanned the crowd for dead actors. He could get a couple to pretend they were Aggie's parents. *No*, he thought. *She might recognize them. Just distract her.*

"Scene," he said quietly. "The balcony gives way beneath Aggie, and she falls. I turn into a griffin, fly down, catch the back of her shirt, and land over by the thrones."

I'll do it live, he thought. *Make an entrance.*

"Did you find them?" she asked as he returned.

"Action," said Hugh, and he blew the balcony out from under her. She screamed and fell. Hugh transformed himself and gave chase. He swooped down and caught her, and her body swung against his chest, smashing the backpack between them. The smell of overwarm tuna from the sandwiches in her bag made him gag. Then Aggie's shirt tore and Hugh nearly lost his balance. He had to circle the chamber clumsily, struggling for control as Aggie howled and flailed in his jaws, before he landed on the dais in front of Marilyn.

Aggie's knees buckled as he changed himself back and helped her up. The last shreds of his shirt dropped to the floor and she threw herself against his bare chest, trembling. Her skin was icy. "You okay, Aggie?"

"Everyone's staring at us," she whispered.

The throne room was filling up with souls, pouring in from other chambers. They filed in silently, and he saw the chamber was growing to accommodate the eerie and emotionless gathering.

"Have you come to take the Throne?" asked Marilyn.

He shook his head. "I'm Entertainment," he said. "I came for you, Marilyn. You're going back." Her grip on her knitting needles tightened and a silent sense of ill will rolled through the crowd like bad weather, as if they were peasants at a tax proclamation.

A little girl stepped out of the ranks of assembled dead. "The Queen of the Underworld may only leave for part of the year," she said. "There is a precedent."

"Not so," Hugh said. "Persephone returned here only because she ate some fruit Hades gave her. Pomegranate seeds. Marilyn, you haven't eaten anything, have you?"

"Yes," she said calmly. "I had some apples the day I came."

She's lying. Hugh thought.

"Pause a sec," Aggie interrupted. "I ate some of that sandwich you gave me."

"That doesn't count." *If Marilyn returns to Hades each year it'll be a press sensation. Toni said I'd diminish these icons. An annual farewell scene will only make her bigger...* His train of thought was derailed by a yank on his arm.

"Do you see a grocery store around here, Hugh?" Aggie's voice was rising. He'd wanted her to have a bit of a temper. "Where do you think Hades got a pomegranate?"

"It wasn't from down here," Hugh insisted.

"You created the sandwich from the misty air near the Styx," said the little girl.

Aggie was staring up at the balcony. "Aggie, it doesn't matter," Hugh said.

"I can't see the way out anymore," Aggie said.

"Cut!" he yelled. "Scene. She didn't eat the sandwiches."

Aggie had not frozen. "What are you doing?"

I can't edit the past. Only what she remembers. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

"Aggie," he said. *I could make her anew when I return,* he thought, *I could leave this one here and recreate her on the surface.* He looked at his delightful day-old baby. It would be as easy as copying a video.

But I came here to be a hero.

"Death by tuna fish," she said, slamming her pack to the floor. "I don't believe it."

"Aggie, I didn't know..."

"You dumb shit you got me killed!"

"Aggie, I know the way back. I can lead you out of here. Theseus got out, and Hercules, and Orpheus."

"I hope a Y chromosome isn't mandatory." Marilyn took her hand, and she subsided.

"I tell you, they just walked out. That's why we came, remember?"

"Sure," she said sullenly.

"I'll just collect the others," Hugh said, turning downstage. "I'm seeking some others," he said. "Martyrs of Entertainment." He told them the names and four shadows began pushing their way through the crowd. *It would be more efficient with seats and aisles*, Hugh thought, and he changed the dais into a proper stage, ranged theatre seats in the huge room. The dead began to sit down. They formed a dark sky, the silver sweaters twinkling like stars in chilly darkness. He sent light lions into the crowd, hoping the dispel the gloom, but their glow shriveled like vines under a blowtorch. The chosen spirits, unimpeded now, proceeded down the aisles to the stage.

"Where's the other one?" Hugh asked. He had carefully chosen his first six martyrs, selecting two movie stars, two rock stars, and two news stars. Buddy Holly shrugged and reached for his face, as if to push up the glasses that were no longer there. James Dean, President Kennedy, and Lee Harvey Oswald kept their eyes down and didn't answer.

Marilyn kept knitting. "Where's Presley?" Hugh asked.

Again that silent sense of a murmur running through the crowd, again no answer.

Aggie started to laugh. "He's not here," she said. "We haven't seen him."

"Where else would he be?" Hugh said, and then he groaned. *All those sightings. He must be over a hundred and thirty by now.* He could see the tab headlines. "Elvis Outsmarts God." Just last year Hugh swore he'd proved Presley was truly dead. If they found out he'd lied his ratings would plummet.

"Cut!" he boomed again, making a monumental effort and freezing them all. They weren't his subjects, and there were millions of them, but the dead were weak, and Entertainment's power was vast.

"Scene," he said. "Presley steps out of the crowd and begs to be allowed to stay. I try to change his mind, but he says 'I can't go back, I must stay and confront my . . . my impersonators as they pass through the Gate.' I nod regally. Presley disappears into some secret chamber of the Underworld, which is where he's been hiding all this time."

No way in hell is that faker going to grab my headlines this time. Julia might dig out the real story eventually, but maybe Hugh could arrange a cover-up. He still wasn't convinced Truth couldn't be bought. "Action," he said.

He watched as the crowd experienced the scene. Heads turned simulta-

neously towards one of the exits, then swiveled back towards him. Aggie sat cross-legged on the stage and fished a mashed sandwich out of her pack. Hugh waited for her to say he'd done the right thing. She bit into the mashed bread. Mayonnaise trickled down her chin. "How come Elvis gets to stay and Marilyn has to come?" she said, around a rank mouthful of fish.

"Aggie, don't pick at me. I warned you coming down here would be dangerous."

"You didn't say you were," she said. "Pardon me for feeling disillusioned."

"Aggie, you're not dead. You can walk out of here," he said. "Precedents exist!"

"What do you know? You couldn't even find my parents."

"Who?"

Aggie, still chewing, threw a leg out and kicked his shin.

Hugh dragged her back behind Hades' throne where they could talk privately, and he heard the clicking of Marilyn's needles as she resumed her knitting. "Listen, Aggie, I didn't want to tell you this, but you need to know how much you mean to me."

"You only met me this morning!"

Hugh shook his head. "Aggie, I'm the guy who funded your trust."

She stepped back, her hands clapped over her mouth, and gazed at him, making little moaning noises. He took her shoulders gently. Her frozen skin chilled his palms.

"Why would you do that?" she finally managed.

"I..." Hugh fumbled, and Aggie stared at him in horror. "You killed them."

"No," Hugh said.

"You did. You made the plane crash, and the trust was to buy off your guilt!" She tried to yank away, and Hugh could only hold her with brute force.

"No, no," he said, "Aggie, come on, calm down, listen."

She hammered at him with cold fists and sobbed but shed no tears. "It was probably just another dumb accident, like feeding me spiritually toxic tuna."

"Enough," he boomed. The floor of the dais shivered. "I didn't kill anyone."

"Then what?" she demanded. "Where are they? Why can't I see them?"

He turned toward the dark throne. "I never wanted to tell you this," he said.

"Please, Hugh," she said. Her voice was tight. "Cut the dramatics."

He told her.

He made it short, restraining the urge to overact, and she wilted like one of Persephone's trees and sank to the floor behind Marilyn's throne. "I'll give you some space," Hugh whispered, and stepped out to face the dead. It's not too late to make her forget it all, he mused. I could erase everything, rewrite her anew.

The crowd had not moved. Maybe I can win these people over. He addressed the little girl. "I came here planning to return two musicians to the waking world. Since Elvis is staying behind, I wonder if this assembly can suggest a musician?"

"Howard Ashman," she said.

"The guy who wrote songs for children's movies before the Ascendance?"

The child nodded.

At last something goes right. Not only would the media love it, but Hugh would be a mega-hero with the under-ten set, and Eliza was sure to be pleased. The Goddess of Childhood was always griping about the quality of kiddie entertainment.

"Well chosen," he said. To his surprise the crowd got to its feet as a slender man made his way to the stage to join the others. He was wearing a sweater so long it came over his feet and dragged behind him like the train of a wedding dress. Aggie came out from behind the throne and stood at quiet attention with the others.

"I'm sorry," Hugh said.

"I want to live," she mumbled. "Take me back and I'll write your screenplay." She reached out her hand, and Hugh accepted it. *I made her resilient,* he thought. *I told her to recover from shocks fast.* "Only if you want," he said. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

Hugh surveyed the crowd, wondering what kind of closing gesture he might make, and as they sat back down he was reminded of an audience after an ovation. "I'll be returning," he said. "In the meantime...."

He snapped his fingers and a huge screen unfurled itself from the balcony, rolling down to within a yard of the thrones. He plucked one of the reeking tuna sandwiches out of Aggie's backpack and turned it into a remote, handed it to the little girl. "There are homes where they call this 'the power of the universe,'" he said solemnly. She bowed and melted back into the crowd and the screen came alive, lighting their faces with a wall of silver static that reminded him of the sweaters.

"Channel Two has television listings," he said. There was no response. "Okay, you six, come on." He conjured an escalator to the balcony, transparent so everyone could still see the television, and attempted to usher

them on to it.

None of them moved.

"Now what?"

"We can't leave unless the Ruler of the Underworld gives permission," Aggie said.

"There's no precedent for that," Hugh snapped. "People have escaped before."

"Before Hades died," Marilyn said, "he decreed we must await a new ruler. Nobody could leave until that ruler took his place."

"Finders keepers," Hugh said.

They looked at him blankly.

"I am ruler here," he said. "You six have leave to go." They did not move. "Concept time," he said. "Entertainment is Death. Death is Entertainment! Do as I say!"

A new shade, darker than the others, stepped to the front of the crowd. "You must take the throne," it said, and Hugh realized he was looking at the spirit of Hades himself.

Hugh assumed a stern mantle. "That's what I just did."

"You've got to ride the chair," Aggie said.

Hugh looked from the dead god to his erstwhile throne. "And if I can't?" he asked. A troubled expression slid over Aggie's face, a cloud rolling over the sun. "I'll die, won't I?"

He looked to the shadow for confirmation. "I'll die?" Hades nodded.

"Don't do it," Aggie said suddenly. She lifted her chin and crossed her arms over her chest. "It's not worth it."

"Oh Aggie," Hugh said. *This is what I get for telling you to be loyal, is it?* He swaggered to the chair and winked. "Just cast me as the reluctant hero."

"The one who comes through at the end? Hugh, you aren't strong enough!"

The shadow of Hades laughed. "Turn away, Pretender." He climbed onto the stage. "Your creature is right. You lack the strength to take this realm."

Hugh examined the throne. Persephone's throne had become dusty and decayed, but the seat of Death shone like brand new. It was gold and ivory, like teeth, and Hugh knew he couldn't playact his way around this one. He ran a finger over one armrest, sensing the power in the chair, the challenge and deadly peril. Behind him, the dead rose in infinite ranks, all leaning forward on their seats, entangled by suspense. Aggie's lips were pressed together, and her freckles stood out on her pale face. What would a hero say to her?

"Don't worry," Hugh said. "It'll take more than a brief fling with courage to finish me."

"Promise you'll go back to being a self-absorbed coward tomorrow," she whispered.

"There's a promise even I can keep." He kissed her forehead and she clung to him until Hugh handed her over to Buddy and Howard, and then she closed her eyes. Hugh felt a little thrill of strength coming from her. Aggie was praying. *Praying for a happy ending.*

Hugh sat on the Throne of Hades. The assembled dead started to clap, and as they climbed to their feet, applauding him, Hugh felt his heart stop.

A volcano erupted in his mind, a core of fire spewing images of death, all the deaths of all these people, and Hugh felt his powers failing as he tried to hang onto what he knew, his shallow world of starlets and script ventures and posing for magazine covers. The images burned it away, dispersing his strength, insisting that his followers feared death more than they loved him. The rightness of this assertion flowed through him. Wanting to do it for Aggie wasn't going to be enough.

"Did you believe you could assume the mantle of Death?" Hades boomed, and Hugh struggled to turn his eyes to the shadow. It was huge.

Draining my strength... trying to reassert his power.

"I only take what is mine," he shouted, projecting his voice past the dead god. The images cooled for a moment. "I am the heir of Zeus," Hugh cried to the dead. "I sprang from his bones long after your day had passed. I'm Hugh, God of Entertainment, and I..." Heat from the volcano dried the words in his throat.

"Entertainment," Hades scoffed. "Apollo's domain has nothing to do with this realm."

Hugh felt his body heating, burning, could envision himself losing, slipping off the throne to join the mindless crowd below. "You're out of touch," he screamed. "Death has changed. You can't run the franchise anymore!"

A moment of respite. The crowd was beginning to swing to his side. "Join us in awaiting my true heir, Entertainment." Hades' voice held a trace of uncertainty, and the heat from the throne lessened. It was no different from above. The worshippers were the ones he had to win.

Hugh scanned the demographics. Only a sliver of the massed dead were post-Ascendance. Most of them didn't know him. Worse, the fraction of the dead who were post television was only slightly larger.

Big speech time, Hugh thought. He seized control of the screen and showed them death, the carnage on the freeways filmed for dinnertime news, the movies with bodycounts higher than entire small wars. "Death is

celebrity homicide trials and assassinations on TV. It's dying celebs on the covers of the tabloids as they sneak out of the hospitals. It's true crime novels, videos of the latest military action, memorabilia from the homes of serial killers." He was running out of breath.

Hades stumbled in front of him. "What does he know of you?" he hissed, waving his arms. "What does he know of the dead? What has this to do with you?" The shadow reached for him, but Hugh knew how to answer that question, and he knew he had won.

"What do I know about the dead?" Hugh said. "Tell me one way my audience is different from yours." He took a second to time it and then switched channels with a snap of his fingers, using the last of his strength to throw it off with some flair. A commercial began.

The announcer's voice boomed out at them, and by the thousands the faces turned upward, first the new dead, the generations who were trained from birth to home in on the sound of a recorded voice. Then more and more of them looked.

"This is what the living come to me for," Hugh said to Hades. It wasn't just a pitch, either. Unable to pay attention to the gods onstage before them, the hosts of the dead watched the commercial play to its end. They waited, unmoving, as it gave way to the next. "They're all but dead before they come down here."

"The dead are weak," Hades said.

"Give me a crowd of the living and I can pull the same trick," Hugh told him.

Hades stepped back, faded into insubstantiality, and shrank. He wandered offstage, glancing backward from time to time to see what was happening on the screen. The crowd belonged to Hugh.

He tried to get his heart started again, but nothing happened. *It'll start up again whenever I'm aboveground*, he thought, clutching the arms of the throne. *Theseus got out, and Hercules, and Orpheus*. Somehow it wasn't as reassuring when it was himself, not Aggie, he was telling it to. But they walked out. That was all it took.

Should have expected it – to rule the dead, I'd have to be at least half-dead myself. The volcano in his mind was cooling to a manageable flow, a sense of the dead and dying.

Hugh felt a crowd of souls trapped behind the newly restored Acheron with no way across. *I'm going to have to build a bridge or reinstate Charon*. He could sense the Old Ones too, mixed into the crowd, watching the commercials. They were faint and faded shadows, fortunately, lacking the strength to walk out of Hades, to reemerge into life. Hades was now the

weakest of all of them.

Hugh reached for his surface worshippers, checking to make sure he hadn't lost Entertainment when he took over the Underworld. Wealth had a rule about swapping franchises, and she'd deep-fry him over this stunt in any case. But the execs and producers and actors were still feeding him power. New projects caught his attention: a docudrama on cancer, a movie about a coroner.

I did it, Hugh thought. His eyes had adjusted to the dark, and he could count the souls in the amphitheater. In the Elysian fields, the winds still blew sweet air over the just, but the riverbeds were choked with overgrown grass and the soil was turning swampy. The diamond gate of Tartarus was wrenched open. The dried bodies of two Titans, slain by each other, lay by the gate of the triple-walled prison for evil doers.

Hey, if I could renovate Tartarus and the fields I could assemble a tribunal. There must be lots of dead judges down here. We could broadcast judgments of the newly deceased as they came through the Gate. Won't that get me some ratings!

He was starting to feel like his old self. Almost.

"Hugh?"

Aggie had crept to the edge of the throne. Her face was still pale as marble, but her blood would warm again when she got out into the sun. "Hell of an audition," he said. He reached to touch her chin and she pulled away.

"Are we getting out of here?" she asked.

"You are." He angled his head to include the others. "You all have leave to depart."

"You're not coming?" Aggie asked.

"Well," he said, eyeing his cooling fingers. "I want to spruce things up around here a bit. Put in a sports lounge and a movie theatre."

"Are you sure..."

"I'll be up soon," he said brightly. "Awards season by the latest. You get an agent and get started on the screenplay, and when I've got a fax put in you can send it down."

She stared at him for a long time, her freckles like constellations on her milky face. "I'll bring it to you," she said at last. "I have to come back anyway. The tuna. Precedents."

"That's my girl." He got up and put his arm across her shoulders, leading her to the escalator. The men followed, Buddy and Jim in the lead, JFK and Oswald side by side.

Howard's sweater trailed in the dust of Persephone's throne as he brought up the rear.

"Aggie here will lead you up to the surface," Hugh said to them. He

reached down and pried the knitting bones from Marilyn's iron grip, and the light went out of her face.

"They'll be here when you get back," he told her, and she shuffled after the others, heading up to the balcony and from there to the waiting world.

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The Magic Spectacles

James Blaylock

Part two of three

Chapter 15: Upstairs in the Old House

A noise woke John up. It was a crash, like glass breaking, and then someone saying "Ow!" very loudly. Then it was quiet again.

"What was that?" Danny asked.

John sat up in bed and looked around. There was still an orange glow from the fireplace, but the room was dark and full of shadows. "I don't know," John whispered. "Maybe it's Mr. Deener, making his moon ladder."

"I think he wants to steal the glasses," Danny said. "I don't trust him."

"Maybe," John said. "Let's be careful with them." He climbed out of bed, found his jacket, and checked the pocket. There were the spectacles, safe and sound. Danny got up and stepped across to the door. He pushed it open softly. Light shined into the room from the lamp in the hallway.

"Anybody out there?" John whispered.

"No," Danny said, "but I can hear him working downstairs, dragging things around."

Danny started pulling his clothes on. Here we go again, John thought. "We better not," he said. "What if Polly or Aunt Flo wakes up and finds us messing around through the house? What are we going to tell them?"

"We're going to ask them how come they've got the Sleeper held prisoner upstairs."

"Prisoner?" John said. "He was out fishing earlier. What kind of prisoner is that?"

But Danny was tying his shoes, getting ready to go out into the hall.

"Wait!" John said, "I'm going too." He wasn't about to stay behind, even if this meant new trouble, which it probably did. He pulled his shoes on.

The house was quiet now. Even Mr. Deener had quit bumping around. The long hallway was empty and full of shadows, lit only by moonlight through the tall windows looking out toward the meadow. From outside came the sound of the wind. Floorboards creaked as they walked slowly toward the stairs that led up into the darkness of the tower. There was no moonlight on the stairs, and it was ghostly dark.

"I'm not going," John whispered.

"Afraid of the dark?" Danny asked, putting a foot on the first stair.

"No," John said. "I'm just not stupid, that's all."

Danny shrugged and started up without him. John hesitated for a moment, looked back down the empty hall, and then, holding on tight to the wooden handrail, he followed Danny up into the darkness. He held his breath. This was *really* dumb. A man lay sleeping in the room above, and they were going to walk in on him. What if the Sleeper woke up? What would they say?

The stairway brightened, and they found themselves at the edge of a large round room. Again there were windows facing the meadow. The full moon hung in the sky like a lantern, shining through the windows and casting their criss-cross shadows across the floor. They could see all the way to the woods beyond the meadow. Amid the dark trees there was the yellow glow of a goblin fire.

John shivered, suddenly cold. He glanced around the room. A bed sat against the far wall, nearly hidden by a wide chair. Someone was lying in the bed – the Sleeper. His face lay in the shadow of the chair, shaded from the moonlight that shone ghostly-white on his nightshirt and sheet. He stirred uneasily in his sleep.

On another wall sat a tall wardrobe with the door standing half open. It seemed to be full of white nightshirts, all hanging very neatly. On hooks beside the open door hung a half dozen pointed cloth nightcaps.

John took a step backward, and then another one, feeling with his foot for the top tread of the stairs. It was wrong to be there, to be snooping in someone's room. At any moment the Sleeper might awaken. Clearly the man wasn't a prisoner. There wasn't even a door on his room....

Just then Danny pressed his finger to his lips and motioned for John to follow him. Silently he stepped across to get a closer look at the man who lay in the bed. Ready to turn and run, John followed him. Just three steps more....

There were the doughnuts beside the bed on a nightstand. The Sleeper

hadn't taken a bite. There was a full water glass, too, and an unopened book that was covered with dust.

The man turned in his sleep, creaking the bedsprings. John grabbed the sleeve of Danny's shirt. And then, suddenly, as if he had been jerked forward by a rope, he sat up. Moonlight shone on his face.

It was Mr. Deener.

Chapter 16: The Sleeper Puts on His Hat and Goes Out

Danny turned and slammed into John, and they both stumbled back toward the open wardrobe and climbed in among the nightshirts. John reached out to close the door once they were inside. He left it open only a couple of inches, just so he could see the edge of the bed.

The Sleeper flopped back down and began to breathe heavily and slowly. The minutes passed. Each time John started to push open the door to slip out, the Sleeper rolled over in bed, or mumbled something in his sleep, or made smacking noises with his mouth, and John had to snatch the door shut again.

The nightshirts in the wardrobe smelled partly of mothballs and partly of the same kind of soap that had blown out of Mr. Deener's gun. On the floor lay several pairs of bedroom slippers with fur around the ankles. There were no shirts or pants or shoes or any other daytime clothes.

"No!" the Sleeper said suddenly. Then there was a long silence. John held his breath and listened. Finally, in a voice full of sadness, the Sleeper said, "I didn't *mean* to. I *would* have been there. I *should* have been there. Where was I? Oh, don't ask!" And he sobbed so hard that something rattled in his chest, as if part of him was broken.

"It's Mr. Deener!" Danny whispered.

"It *couldn't* be," John said.

"It is," Danny said. "I saw him straight on. It's Mr. Deener. The Sleeper is Mr. Deener!"

"Shh!" John whispered. The bed creaked, and the Sleeper's feet swung off the mattress and onto the floor. He stood up. John could see him clearly now. Maybe it was just the moonlight, but what he looked like was the *ghost* of Mr. Deener. He stepped into his bedroom slippers and then stood there for a moment like a man who has forgotten something but can't quite remember what. He turned toward the wardrobe, and John flattened himself against the back wall, pulling the nightshirts across in front of his face and peering between them.

Very slowly the Sleeper walked to the wardrobe door. Both his hands

reached out. For a moment they hovered there, waving in the air like the hands of a sleepwalker in a cartoon. Then the hands moved, and John heard the rattle and scrape of the fishing pole as the Sleeper picked it up from where it lay tilted against the edge of the wardrobe. Muttering, he turned and shuffled in his slippers toward the stair, carrying the fishing pole with him.

When the sound of his footsteps faded, John and Danny climbed out into the room. There were noises from below again – bumping, scraping, and the sound of Mr. Deener’s voice singing the same loony song he had sung on the road that night. So, what did that mean? That there was a Mr. Deener upstairs and a Mr. Deener downstairs? The Sleeper looked like Mr. Deener; the goblins looked like Mr. Deener; the henny-penny men looked like Mr. Deener; the whole place was full of Mr. Deeners, all of them acting like nuts.

John slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and took out the spectacles just to make sure they were safe. The moonlight through the window shone on an old pair of broken reading glasses with black plastic frames. The spectacles were gone.

Chapter 17: Making a Goblin

“They’re gone!” John said out loud.

Danny was already at the top of the stairs, ready to follow the Sleeper down. “What?” he asked. “What’s gone?”

“The spectacles. They’re gone. They were in there when I went to bed. I checked. Look.” He held out the glasses from his pocket.

“He stole them!” Danny said. “That’s what woke us up. He came into the room and stole them. Heck.”

“Maybe,” John said. “Maybe...”

“Maybe nothing,” Danny said. “It’s a good thing you were keeping them safe. Again.” He turned around and started down the stairs, into the darkness below.

“Wait,” John said. “Where are you going?”

“To get them back,” he said, not even slowing up.

John wanted to argue. It wasn’t his fault that the glasses were stolen, any more than it had been his fault when they’d broken in the woods. But there was no use arguing if Danny wasn’t there to argue back. John started down the stairs himself, hurrying to catch up. Danny was right about Mr. Deener, anyway. Mr. Deener had wanted the glasses. The goblins wanted them. The henny-pennies wanted them....

Danny went straight across the hall at the bottom of the stairs without

even looking to see if it was safe. He passed down into the darkness again, and John bolted across the hallway after him, both of them crossing another hallway at the bottom of the second set of stairs and going on down to the ground floor. There was a glow of light from the distant kitchen and another from the open doorway of Mr. Deener's laboratory, but otherwise it was dark. Mr. Deener's singing had suddenly stopped, and John could hear water splashing, as if in a sink. There was no sign of the Sleeper.

Danny slowed down, flattening himself against the wall outside the laboratory. He held his finger to his lips, as if he thought John was about to start talking. Together they peeked around the corner of the door. Mr. Deener stood with his back to them, washing his hands in a bowl of water that sat on a high wooden table. Pink bubbles floated up out of the bowl, and water slopped over the edge and onto the table. The air was full of the smell of goblin soap.

"I'm the saddest man alive!" Mr. Deener cried, and his voice shook with big, humping sobs. "I *can't* wash it out! All the soap in the world isn't enough!"

There were tall glass windows beyond him, like skinny doors, side by side in the wall. One of them was open. Its thin curtains blew inward on the night wind, and moonlight shone through it. The shadow of someone in a pointed cap and loose shirt moved through the night beyond the curtains. John could see the silhouette of the fishing pole in his hand just before he disappeared into the shadow cast by the trees.

A flurry of autumn leaves blew in through the window just then and scraped across the wooden floorboards, dancing around Mr. Deener's feet. He began to hum, but the humming had no tune to it. Like goblin music it was just a mess of sounds.

He took the bowl of water off the table and lay it on the floor. Then he stepped across to an old bookcase, reached in among the books, and pulled down a glass jar, which he set on the table. Moonlight glowed through the jar. It was filled to the top with chips of colored glass, red and green and yellow and blue, all stirred together in a circus of colors.

He reached high over his head to where a rope dangled in the air, leading up into the darkness of the high ceiling. There was a creaking noise when he pulled on the rope. He let it go with a snap, and the end of the rope flew up into the air, and there was the sound of something rushing downward like a bucket down a well. A window appeared from above, jerking to a stop in front of the table. It looked exactly like Mrs. Owlswick's window.

Danny stood up and stepped into the opened doorway. John lunged forward and grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling him back into the shad-

ows. "Wait!" John whispered into his ear.

"That's our window!" Danny whispered back to him. "He stole that too!"

"If that's our window, then good," John said. "At least it's safe. At least we know where it is. But probably it's a window just like ours. Let's see what he's up to."

Mr. Deener's humming suddenly stopped, and both John and Danny held their breath, waiting. Had he heard them? John peeked past the door frame again. Mr. Deener stood very still in front of the table. He seemed to be looking into the jar of glass chips as if it were a crystal ball. His hair blew in the wind through the open window, and his coat-tails danced.

Silver moon beams shined into the room, drifting toward the hanging window, seeping into it. As if it were an aquarium, the level of moonlight rose in the window, higher and higher, swirling around in the pale green glass until it flowed out over the top, spilling into the open jar of glass chips.

Mr. Deener stood right behind the table, still peering closely into the jar. He was no longer humming or singing or crying or talking to himself, but seemed to be hypnotized by what he saw in the jar. Rainbow-colored moonlight shone through his wispy hair, and the hanging window swung slowly back and forth in the wind.

And then, from out of nowhere, a goblin stood next to Mr. Deener.

It had happened so quickly, that John had barely seen it appear. There had been a blur of light and shadow, and then the moonlight had seemed to blink, and the goblin stood there on its skinny little legs. It was half Mr. Deener's size, – a shriveled-up Mr. Deener. It shook its head and gobbled a little bit, as if trying out its voice for the first time. Then it began to cry, sounding very much as Mr. Deener had sounded just a few minutes earlier. Mr. Deener gasped and trod backward, pushing it away from him.

"Go, foul creature," he whispered, and pointed toward the open window. It shambled across the floor and climbed out into the night. Then, strangely, John saw a mouse climb out through the window behind it – only it couldn't be a mouse, because it ran standing up, on its hind legs. Both of them were gone into the darkness outside, and Mr. Deener was left alone in the room.

Something bumped into the toe of John's shoe.

He looked down at the floor, and there lay a marble. At first he thought it was spinning, but then he could see that it was simply full of light, maybe moonlight, and it was the light that was spinning inside the marble. He bent down to pick it up.

"Oh oh," Danny said just then, and John looked up, expecting to see Mr. Deener coming to get his marble back.

But it was Mrs. Barlow, heading toward them down the hall, holding a cloth flour sack open in front of her. "I'll take that," she said, "if you don't mind."

At the sound of her voice Mr. Deener turned around and looked at the open door. On his face, pushed down very low across the bridge of his nose, were the magic spectacles, the one good lens still glowing with moonlight.

Chapter 18: The Clinker Garden

Mrs. Barlow held the flour sack open so that John could drop the marble into it. From inside the sack came a moaning noise like wind under a door, and then a noise like muttering voices. When she snatched the bag shut and tied the top with a string, it jumped and rumbled in her hand, as if it were full of live toads.

"Calm down!" she said to the sack, and shook it a little. It thumped a couple of times, like a heartbeat, and then was still.

Just then there was the sound of a door or a window slamming shut. Mr. Deener had gone outside, into the darkness. The laboratory was empty. Across the floor was a trail of what looked like glowing seafoam, as if Mr. Deener were leaking moonlight from the cuffs of his trousers.

"The glasses!" Danny said. "He took them!"

"Quick!" said Mrs. Barlow, "Follow me!" But instead of going out through the laboratory, she hurried down the hall toward the kitchen again. "We'll bring him back!" she said. "We'll tweek his nose for him!"

In the kitchen she opened a cupboard and pulled out two big watering cans. Then she shoved the flour sack into the cupboard and shut and locked the door, putting the key into her apron pocket. Too much thievery, she said, pointing at the locked cupboard.

"Goblins?" Danny asked.

"Only once," she said. "The other times it was him, the Deener. He gets into a state, like tonight, and he can't be trusted." She handed a watering can to John and another to Danny and said, "Fill these with lemonade."

"What?" Danny asked. He sounded as if he couldn't believe it. "Lemonade?"

She pointed toward the corner of the kitchen where a big crock with a wooden lid sat against the wall. "Fill 'em up," she said.

John pulled the lid off the crock. It was full of lemonade. Slices of lemon peel floated on top. Danny took a dipper from a hook on the wall and used it to dump lemonade into both watering cans.

"Poor Deener," Mrs. Barlow said, picking up a big wooden spoon and heading out into the hall again. "He's a good man. He's just gone to seed."

"If he's such a good man," Danny asked, "then how come he stole our spectacles?"

"He's what you might call a Humpty Dumpty," Mrs. Barlow said to him. "The medical men call it 'going to pieces'. That's the technical term. What it means is he's taken a fall. He's all broken up. I'm saving the pieces of him in my flour sack."

"I'll break him up," Danny said.

"No you won't," John told him. "That won't help at all. He's got to be put back together again. He just needs... something." He couldn't think of what it was, but there was something about Mr. Deener that he liked – the doughnuts, maybe. Or the talk about sea monsters and moon ladders. "We really don't know why he took the spectacles," John said. "Maybe they're his."

"Maybe," Mrs. Barlow said. "And maybe he's just a stinker." She whacked the wooden spoon into her open hand, pushed the front door open, and said, "Careful with that lemonade. She pointed across the cobblestone drive, into the deep shadows of the trees. A splotch of moonlight lay in the darkness as if someone had poured it out of a can. Even as they watched, it seemed to be disappearing, soaking into the ground and drying up.

"He went down the hill," Mrs. Barlow said. "He's working the clinker garden again." She shook her head, and her voice was tired, as if she was downright sick of Mr. Deener 'working the clinker garden', whatever that meant.

They followed the trail through the trees. John held the watering can in front of him in order to keep it steady. His hands were sticky with lemonade that had slopped over the side. A tangle of blackberry vines grew along the edges of the narrow path, and here and there, down near the ground, more little scraps of moonlight were caught in the vines where Mr. Deener had brushed against them on his way down to the clinker garden.

"Hark!" Mrs. Barlow whispered, stopping suddenly.

John listened. He could hear Mr. Deener humming somewhere ahead, but the vines were so high he couldn't see anything. The humming sounded like flies in a bag. There was a pause, followed by the sound of Mr. Deener's voice, talking to someone. John waited to hear who would speak back to him. The Sleeper? Aunt Flo? But there was nothing. No one else spoke. Mr. Deener began to hum again.

They crept forward. The path wound around toward the bottom of the hill, not far from where they'd fought with the goblins earlier that evening.

The berry vines ended at the edge of a broad patch of dirt and dead weeds. Mr. Deener stood among the weeds, bent over at the waist. Behind him, on a fallen log, sat an old wooden coffee grinder with a crank on top. He had a watering can of his own, and was pouring something out of it onto the ground, something that was blue in the light of the full moon.

"There, there, my dear," he said, standing up and moving a few feet farther on. "And here's a tasty drop for you." There were faint popping sounds like bubbles bursting. He searched in the weeds, poured more blue liquid out of the can, and said, "Aren't you looking *fabulous* tonight!"

"I *knew* it," Mrs. Barlow whispered, looking past the edge of the berry vines. "He's watering the clinkers again." She shook her head sadly and clicked her tongue.

"What's clinkers?" Danny asked.

"Charcoal," she said. "Ashes. Burnt lumps out of the fireplace. You pour salt and laundry bluing on them and they grow into a kind of fungus garden."

"Sounds okay," John whispered, trying to see through the vines. "It's like a moon garden."

Mrs. Barlow said, "Hmph!" as if it didn't sound okay to her at all.

John wondered what laundry bluing was. He would ask Mr. Deener about it, and then write the formula out in his book before he forgot it – except that his book was at home.... Anyway, that was a good way to be friendly. Maybe they were going to *have* to trust Mr. Deener in some way, no matter what Mrs. Barlow said.

Mr. Deener emptied his watering can right then, shaking the last drops out onto the ground. Then he got down onto his hands and knees, took the spectacles out of his pocket, and put them on. He put his face very near to one of the lumps in the weeds, and then cocked his head to the side, staring at it through the unbroken lens.

Just then Danny stood up, as if he were going to rush out and take the spectacles back right then and there. John grabbed him by the back of the shirt. "Wait!" he whispered. "Not yet!"

Mr. Deener stood up and took off the spectacles. He didn't act like he'd heard anything. He turned the spectacles over in his hands, as if they were a dying bird. Then, slowly and carefully, he picked up the coffee grinder from the log, snapped the lens out of the spectacles, and dropped it into the hole at the top of the grinder.

"Hey!" Danny shouted, pulling himself free and jumping out from behind the vines.

But it was too late. Shaking his head sadly, Mr. Deener ground the spectacles lens to pieces in the coffee grinder.

Book Two

Chapter 1: The Face Among the Weeds

Mr. Deener walked slowly past them, carrying the coffee grinder and the watering can and heading back up the hill. His face was blank, as if he had left his mind in a box somewhere. In the moonlight he looked more like the Sleeper than like the Mr. Deener that had defeated the goblins on the road. For a moment John thought that Danny would try to take the coffee grinder away from him. But he didn't. It was too late to do anything at all.

John didn't look at his brother. Why had he told him to wait? Why had he stopped him? John kicked a rock on the path, and it bounced away into the weeds. Danny couldn't have done anything about it anyway, he told himself. He kicked another rock. "How did I know?" he asked Danny.

"What did you think," Danny said, "that he was going to just give them back?" He shook his head, as if he couldn't quite believe John could be so stupid.

"I didn't smash them up," John said, getting mad.

"Same thing anyway," Danny said.

"No it isn't," John said. "I just wanted to give him a chance, that's all."

"And that's his *last* chance," Mrs. Barlow said. "So both of you be quiet. No one's to blame. You two are starting to sound like the Deener. He's all full of blame. Blame for this, blame for that. The whole world wants to blame something on someone else. That's why nothing ever gets fixed; everybody's too busy blaming everybody else." She thumped her wooden spoon into her hand again, as if she wanted to conk the whole world on the head, and knock the blame out of it.

"Now pick up those cans," she said, "If you boys want to help the Deener, you can start right now. But I'll warn you; sometimes helping people is like having rocks in your shoes."

"Help him?" Danny asked. "I just wanted the spectacles so that...."

"Don't worry about the spectacles," Mrs. Barlow said. "Forget the spectacles. That's the kind of trash I'm talking about. That's the Deener's way of doing things. What we want to do is put his head between two ears for him, and keep it there." She nodded hard at them, as if that was the last word she would hear on the subject of the spectacles.

The brass frames, bent and empty, lay in the dirt. John picked them up. They were junk now. When he handed them to his brother, Danny tossed them back down into the weeds without looking at them. John picked them up again and put them into his pocket.

"Here's a clinker fungus," Mrs. Barlow said suddenly, pointing at the

ground. "Watch out you don't step on it."

A mushroom-shaped rock seemed to be growing up out of the dirt, as if it were rooted there. She pulled the dead, blue-stained weeds back from around it. It was the size of a cauliflower, and would have been the same color but for the laundry bluing poured over it. At the bottom it was black as if it were dusted with ashes. The top was covered with tiny, bluish-white crystals.

"Douse it with lemonade," Mrs. Barlow said, pointing at it with the spoon. "It won't take much."

Danny poured lemonade onto it, out of his watering can. The crystals fizzled and popped, and the lemonade turned muddy blue and frothy, almost like cake frosting. There was a wheezing noise, and suddenly the whole clinker flower sank into itself like a rotten pumpkin and turned into a pool of black glop.

"Let's find the others," she said. "It's better not to look at them close. They're too awful."

But John was already looking at one. There was something weird about the pattern of little crystal flowers on top. There was a face in them, as if the thing was a head, sprouting up out of the ground. For a moment John thought it was a reflection of the face of the man in the moon.

But then he saw that it wasn't. It was a woman's face, and not any kind of reflection.

Clouds crossed the moon just then, and the eyes moved in the clinker fungus. A look came into them like the look of a person waking up scared, lost in a strange and lonesome place. They darted back and forth, looking for something but not seeing it.

John stepped backward and at down on a fallen tree trunk. He set his watering can down.

"You looked too close," Mrs. Barlow said, picking up the can and putting a hand on his shoulder. "They fool you, like those insects that look like leaves or twig. They're not what you think they are. Don't make the same mistake that the Deener makes. Don't think that there's something there when there's not."

She dumped lemonade on it, and with a sighing breath of air the clinker fungus turned to black glop just like the other one had.

"Whose face is it?" John asked as Danny and Mrs. Barlow searched for more of them among the weeds.

"Bless her poor soul," Mrs. Barlow said, shaking her head and dousing another one with lemonade, "it's Velma, the Deener's wife. She's been dead these last five years, and the old fool thinks he can fetch her back to life with clinkers and salt and pieces of broken glass."

Chapter 2: Danny Comes Up with a Plan

When he woke up next morning, John thought at first that the clinker garden had been nothing more than a bad dream. He almost reached for his jacket in order to check the pocket, but the look on Danny's face made him stop. It hadn't been a dream. The spectacles were worthless to them.

"I'm going back," Danny said.

"We can't," John said.

"So don't come. I didn't say 'we', did I? I've got a plan."

John knew straight off what the plan was. It involved the cave they'd seen beyond the fountain. Danny had talked about it last night, before they'd fallen asleep. His having a plan was a bad sign. It was a word that usually meant trouble. It had been Danny's plan to climb through the bedroom window in the first place, although there was no use mentioning that now. It was better to be logical about it.

"We don't even know where the cave goes. It's too dangerous anyway. It's full of goblins.

"How do you know?" Danny asked.

"Because I heard them in there. They were all over the place. You saw the fishbones and all."

"That doesn't mean anything. And anyway, the goblins are getting into our neighborhood somehow. I'll bet anything it's through the cave. Where else?"

"I don't know where else," John said. "So what? Because I don't know where else, then it must be through the cave?"

"Why not?" Danny asked. "It's as good as anything else."

"You can't go alone."

"I can take Ahab."

"I don't think it's as easy as that," John said. "*You're* not a goblin. How do you know you can get home through the cave even if they are getting through that way? You'd just be walking into trouble. And besides that, there's too much crazy stuff going on with Mr. Deener and all. If we just walk away, none of the problems get fixed."

"Let Mr. Deener fix his own problems," Danny said. "He sure isn't helping us fix ours. He's making them worse. Sometimes I think it's *you* that's got the problem. Just like with Harvey Chickel. You think you can change people by being nice or something, but you can't."

Someone knocked on the bedroom door. "You up?" It was Mrs. Barlow's voice.

"Yeah," John said, answering for them both. He opened the door.

"The Deener and I had a talk," she said. "He's sorry about the spectacles, and he's agreed to search for your window. I've promised him all the glazeys he can eat if he finds it, and I've got a couple of picnic baskets put together. But remember, work first, eat second, or else he'll eat himself sick, and that'll be the end of it. He's down on the meadow now, setting up his apparatus, so you'd better hurry."

"He's sorry," Danny said as they headed down the hall. "That really helps."

"He's going to find the window," John said hopefully. "Give him a break. Let him do his work."

"I've seen his work," Danny said.

John was silent. As usual, there was no use arguing.

Ahab was already out front, sniffing around on the cobblestones. Mrs. Barlow handed John a picnic basket, and then Polly came out carrying another basket along with a tiny suit of men's clothes. She laid the suit out carefully on the porch.

"Good," Mrs. Barlow said. "There's another one that won't have to run around naked. Got the glazeys?"

"Yep," Polly said. "Three dozen."

"The Deener will want them all, mind you. If you let him see them before he's done his work, he'll be all over that basket like a dirty pig."

"We won't let him be a dirty pig," Polly said.

Mrs. Barlow went back inside, and the three of them started down the hill toward the meadow. The sun was shining, and there was no sign of any fog. The woods were dark and quiet. Danny walked on ahead, as if he didn't want to talk about his plan anymore. At least he was going along to the meadow. And maybe Mr. Deener *would* find it, John thought. Maybe....

From the top of the hill they could see far and wide – down toward where the meadow fell away into the sea, up toward where the meadow turned into hills and the hills into mountains. John hadn't noticed it yesterday evening because of the fog and the darkness, but now he could see that the world seemed to be half in summer and half in autumn. The hills and meadow were brown and dry in the land beyond the house, and the lonesome trees were bare of leaves.

Nearer the house things got a little greener, and then a little greener yet, until, very near to the house itself, everything was so green that it seemed as if even the coldest winter or driest summer couldn't change things.

Water gushed from a spring that rose through a brick well at the back of the house, and turned into the little stream that cut along between the meadow and the woods. Near the well, Aunt Flo was just then pruning

rose bushes that were covered so thickly with enormous blooms that they looked from that distance like rainbow-colored clouds. She waved down toward them, and John waved back.

"Why is everything so dry up there?" John asked, pointing toward the distant hills. "Was there some kind of fire or something?"

"No," Polly said. "It's just that the land is half asleep."

"Like Mr. Deener," John said. "I mean, like him and the Sleeper."

"You met the Sleeper?" Polly asked.

"We saw him when he went out fishing last night." That was close enough to the truth. There was no use saying anything about going upstairs. "Does he ever catch any fish?"

"Never," Polly said. She fed part of a doughnut to Ahab, and John told her about the pancake and hot chocolate at Watson's, and about how he and Danny would ride down there on Saturday mornings together. It was hard to believe that they'd been there only yesterday; it seemed so far away now.

There was something lonesome and empty on the breeze, something that felt like winter coming. It was easy to imagine that even down on the meadow the wildflowers and grasses would soon begin to fall asleep too, as if the whole land belonged to Mr. Deener somehow, as if he were the king of it. More than that – as if the land *was* Mr. Deener.

"Do you have a bicycle?" John asked Polly suddenly.

She shook her head. "There's nowhere to ride one, I guess. Not around here."

"Are there any other kids around?"

"Just you two," she said.

"That's all? Ever? Who do you play with?"

"The henny-pennies mostly. I sew clothes for them and they bring me things. Treasures, you know. Pretty things they've taken away from the goblins. They love to play cards and hide and seek."

"Cards? The little men?"

"It's because Uncle Deener loves to play cards, or used to. He lost that part of him, but I think Mrs. Barlow has it in her bag of memories."

"In the flour sack?" John asked.

"Uh huh. She's saving them up for him. They're in love, I think, but Uncle Deener doesn't know it yet."

In the morning sunlight, Polly reminded John of Kimberly again, except for the pale, china-doll cast to her skin. When he tried to see Kimberly's face in his mind, what he saw was Polly's face instead. The same was true of Aunt Flo. Did she look like Mrs. Owlswick, or did Mrs. Owlswick look like her? Was that the same thing? He tried to imagine Mrs. Owlswick's face, but he couldn't. "Have you always lived here?" he asked.

"What do you mean," asked Polly. "I guess so. Where else is there?"

"Did you come from somewhere? I mean, are there, like, cities or something around here?"

She shrugged, almost as if she didn't know what he was talking about. "We stay pretty much around home. Uncle Deener can't be left alone for too long. He's always up to some kind of magic. You never know what he'll do. One time he made the whole house disappear. We were working in the vegetable garden and it was just gone. Just like that. Aunt Flo had to talk him into finding it again."

"But *are* there towns and like that? Back up in the hills maybe?"

"I guess so," Polly said. "Sometimes I see lights at night, from my window. And once I saw something flying. I guess it was an airplane, but it was so far away that it might have been a bird or something that Uncle Deener dreamed up."

"Where was the airplane going?"

"I don't know. Where do they go?"

"Places," said John. "They go to places." This kind of talk was starting to scare him. His house suddenly seemed farther away than ever, like a photograph faded by sunlight.

"How do you know about airplanes if you never see them?"

"I remember them," she said. "And there's pictures in books. And anyway, it was probably something Uncle Deener dreamed up, like I said. Do you remember when you first saw an airplane?"

John shook his head. He couldn't remember when he first had seen almost anything. Maybe it was better not to think about that. "What about Mrs. Barlow?" he asked. "Where is she from?"

Polly shrugged. "She came years ago. She knew Uncle Deener from a long time ago, and came to help one day. She just came to the door. I don't know how she got here."

The autumn wind felt chilly just then. John zipped up his jacket. What had Polly said? Just something Uncle Deener dreamed up.

"Are you and Aunt Flo *really* Mr. Deener's imaginary friends?" he asked.

"Of course we are," Polly said. She laughed then, and took off running. Over her shoulder she hollered, "Race you to the meadow," and her laughter carried back to him on the wind. He ran after her, but he couldn't catch up.

Chapter 3: Mrs. Owlswick's Window

They found Mr. Deener on the meadow, setting out his "apparatus," as he called it. There were two bottles of colored glass chips and a glass magnify-

ing lens as big as a plate. There were jars of mint tea and pond water, and three of Mrs. Barlow's china saucers and a moon-shaped green cheese. The soap gun lay in the grass over by the creek. Henny-penny men flew through the air, whooping down to say things into Mr. Deener's ears. He swatted at them, sending the leaves flying.

In the middle of the apparatus sat an open basket, and inside the basket sat the coffee grinder that Mr. Deener had used last night to grind up the spectacles' lens.

"There," Mr. Deener said, taking off his glasses and polishing them on his shirt. "I'm a stickler for arranging things just so. 'I'm...'" He looked at John and Danny, and then looked away and polished his glasses again. "I'm... dreadfully sorry that I borrowed your spectacles and ground them up. I won't do it again, I can assure you." He put his glasses back on.

"It's okay," John said. Really it wasn't okay, but so what? It was a new day. There was no point being mean about things. Danny nodded, but he didn't say anything. He walked out across the meadow looking for the place where the window should have been. The grass and wildflowers were even more smashed down than they had been last night, and there were fish bones scattered everywhere. A crowd of goblins had pretty clearly been out there snooping around.

Mr. Deener stood back and looked, first through his glasses and then over the top of them. "There's something there," he said. "Definitely something there."

"Can you see it?" John asked, excited all of a sudden.

"See what?" Mr. Deener asked.

"Why, the window," John said.

"No," Mr. Deener said. "Perhaps I'll eat a doughnut. Mrs. Barlow wants me to eat at least two dozen this morning."

"So soon?" Polly asked. "We've just finished breakfast."

Mr. Deener looked at the picnic basket and began to blink very rapidly, grabbing at the air with his hands as if he was trying to find something to hold on to.

"Steady, Uncle Deener!" Polly said.

"I think he's starting up again," John said.

"Thank you," said Mr. Deener, "I believe I will have one. And he took a tremendous bite out of a pretend doughnut and smacked his lip. "My," he said, rubbing his stomach. "I'll just have another one. I'm a big doughnut man. A big doughnut man."

"He is starting up," Polly said.

The henny-pennies darted past him, tugging on his coat, shouting at him

in tiny voices. Mr. Deener had his eyes shut and began eating imaginary doughnuts with both hands, stuffing them down his mouth.

"He can go on like this all day," Polly said. "When he eats imaginary doughnuts, he never gets filled up. Uncle Deener!" She tapped him on the shoulder.

He started to hum.

"Uncle Deener!" Polly shouted.

He shoved another imaginary doughnut into his mouth, then reached into the air beside him and found another. "Yum," he said, talking to himself.

"I knew it," Danny said. "Let's just give him the basket of doughnuts and go check out the cave."

Mr. Deener sat down heavily on the grass. The earth shook. One of the jars of pond water fell over, and for a moment the sun seemed to dim. A henny-penny man landed on Mr. Deener's shoulder and shouted into his ear. Mr. Deener brushed it away and began to grab at the air, as if he were picking doughnuts off a tree. The earth shook again. Mr. Deener hummed louder and louder.

"Give him one at least," John said. "Hurry."

Polly opened the basket, took out a doughnut, and put it into Mr. Deener's hand. When he shoved it into his mouth he sat up straighter, opening his eyes and looking surprised and happy.

"Why, someone's given me doughnut!" he said. Then he saw that Polly held the open basket and he reached in after another one. He pulled out a third and fourth, which he tried to cram into his coat pocket. Two henny-pennies flew up and snatched one of the doughnuts away, dropping it immediately. Polly caught it in the basket and closed the lid.

"Of course," Mr. Deener said, eating the second doughnut.

He breathed deeply, as if he'd just run a race. John and Danny helped him to stand up. He wiped his forehead, leaving a line of sugar glaze across it. "This is hard work," he said, "but someone's got to do it. We won't tolerate slackers, will we? Why was I sitting on the ground? Am I a slacker?"

"Of course not," Polly said. "You've just been resting."

"Good," he said, giving everyone a look and nodding his head to show that he meant it. "Who mentioned the cave?"

Nobody spoke for a moment, and then Danny said, "I did."

"Stay out of it," Mr. Deener said. "It's a terrible dark place. Nothing in there but lost things."

He held the third doughnut in front of eye like a monocle squinting through it at the meadow. "It's no good," he said, eating it. "I'm afraid I

don't see a thing. Complete waste of time coming out here, just like I said. Might as well have lunch."

"Perhaps the apparatus. . . ." Polly said to him.

"What about it?"

"You were going to use it to find the window," John reminded him.

"The window?"

"The *invisible* window," Danny said. "We've come out here to find the invisible window!"

Mr. Deener nodded. "Why didn't you say so?" he asked. "We've got a fog coming up. Pretty soon you won't see your nose on your face. If it was me who was looking for a window, I'd get at it."

"It is you that's looking for a window, Uncle Deener!" Polly said.

He looked surprised. "It is?" he asked. "Then fetch me some forked sticks and some flat rocks and quit fooling away the morning."

"That was close," Polly said to John and Danny as the three of them went off to look for sticks and rocks. She carried the doughnut basket with her. "We nearly lost him that time."

"Did he used to be better?" John asked.

"Heaps," Polly said. "You should have seen him last week."

"Last *week!*" Danny said. "You mean he's going to pieces that fast?"

"Just as fast as he can," Polly said.

They gathered sticks near the forest's edge and found rocks along the stream bed. "Let's hurry," John said, looking at the fog that drifted toward them through the woods.

Mr. Deener seemed to be caught up in his work now. He handed John a jar of mint tea and gave the jar of pond water to Danny. "Pile up some rocks over there," he said, gesturing in two or three different directions at once. "Set the jars on the rocks. And be careful. Glass has a high degree of breakability." He nodded seriously and said, "Science taught me that."

"About here?" John called. He and Danny stood on either side of where the window should be. Ahab ran from one of them to the other, then ran over and sniffed the doughnut basket, then ran to the edge of the woods and barked at the trees.

"That's right," Mr. Deener said without looking up. "That's perfect. Ship shape. Spot on. Okey-dokey. Unscrew the lids please. That's right. Now, Polly, take this jar of glass chips and carry it over yonder, in the direction of the moon."

Polly followed his instructions, ending up a little way to the east of the invisible window. "That's it," Mr. Deener called to her. "That's the ticket. Stand ready to hoist it into the moonlight!"

Hurriedly, he shoved the ends of the forked sticks into the ground and set the saucers into the forks, lining them up with the big glass lens, then standing back and looking at them over his thumb, like an artist. John and Danny walked back over and stood near Mr. Deener. Now that he was actually working, he didn't seem at all confused or tired or even hungry. John almost believed that he *would* find the window. Even Danny looked hopeful.

"Glass magic," Mr. Deener said, "always requires moonlight, and plenty of it. Moonlight and magic – it's all a matter of reflection, like looking into the water and seeing your own face. Sometimes you look pretty good sometimes you look like an ape. Do you follow me?"

"I gues so," Danny said, bending over to look through the big lens. "What about the cheese?"

"What do you mean?" Mr. Deener asked, picking the cheese up.

"What do we do with it?"

"Why, we eat it!" Mr. Deener said, then broke off a piece and fed it to Ahab before dropping it back into the nearly-empty basket.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," John and Danny said at once.

Mr. Deener snatched off the tablecloth and waved it at Polly who held her jar full of glass chips in the air. John and Danny watched through the big glass lens, waiting for the window to appear over the meadow.

Pale moonlight drifted out of the sky like soft snow. It swirled together in a little pinwheel above the jar that Polly held. The jar grew brighter and brighter, the light spinning faster and faster above it. Then, with a sound something like a wave washing across a sandy beach, the spinning moonlight shot straight through the jar and out the bottom, colored pink and green and blue by the glass chip.

Like lanterns suddenly switched on, the jars of pond water and tea glowed with colored moonlight that illuminated the three china plates, one after another, turning them pale green like seawater.

"Anything there?" Mr. Deener asked.

"Not yet," John said.

"Of course not," Mr Deener said, raising one finger into the air. "We've constructed a primary lens. Telescopic science requires us to provide a secondary lens, purely for the purpose of reflection."

He picked up the coffee grinder then, pulling out a little wooden drawer from the bottom. After setting the grinder down, he licked his finger and held it up in the air. "Wind out of the east," he said, stepping forward a few paces. "Look sharp!"

Then he dumped the wooden drawer upside down and poured out the crushed spectacles lens. And at that instant, as if illuminated by the glass dust, Mrs. Owlswick's window floated over the meadow again, hanging in the sky like a framed picture.

Chapter 4: The Battle on the Meadow

The window was open, just as they had left it yesterday evening. John could see the bunkbeds against the far wall, the circus poster, the bookshelf above the bed. It was all so clear that he could almost read the titles on the spines of the books.

Danny stood up and ran toward it, but after a few steps he slowed and stopped. The window was getting dim, fading away as if it had been painted with water on a summer sidewalk. The glass dust from the coffee grinder whirled around and around like a pale green wind devil, and then went racing off across the meadow. By then the window was gone.

John stood up and stepped away from the magnifying lens, and Polly lowered the jar of glass chips and walked slowly back toward where Mr. Deener was lifting the lid from the doughnut basket.

"Mrs. Barlow has insisted that I eat a number of these glazed doughnuts," Mr. Deener said, helping himself. "I suggest you do too."

John could see that Danny wasn't happy with the experiment. He looked as he had that morning when he was talking about going home through the cave. "At least we know it's still there," John said.

"Certainly it's still there," said Mr. Deener. "If you open a window it stays open until someone shuts it." He took a bite of doughnut – not like a pig, but very daintily, like he was eating a finger sandwich at a high tea. The doughnuts were all his now. There was no rush.

"We kind of wanted to see if we could get through it," Danny said, very slowly, as if to make sure that Mr. Deener understood him, and would quit talking nonsense.

"The moon is a window," Mr. Deener said, "gesturing with a doughnut. "Imagine that this doughnut is the sky. Now, the hole in the middle of the doughnut is the moon. From the Earth there seems to be a face on it, because actually there's a man looking through it, like this. . . ."

He held the doughnut about a foot in front of his face and looked at them through it. Then he ate the doughnut and licked the sugar off his fingers. "The trick is simply to get to the moon," he said, "which is no farther away than your window is, and to crawl through it to the other side." He pulled doughnuts out of the basket, looked at them, and put them back, as

if searching for just the right one, and all the time he talked and talked – about doors and windows, about the moon ladder, about crawling in through the moon’s ear with a flashlight and a picnic basket full of doughnuts.

None of this talk was making Danny any happier. He looked at John and made the pinwheel sign. And just as he did, there was a loud *thwack* and the big glass lens shattered into pieces. There was the sound of goblin laughter from the woods behind them, and a rock whizzed past John’s ear, smashing a jar of pond water. A shadow drifted across the sun. The fog had come up.

There were goblins on the meadow.

“My weapon!” Mr. Deener shouted, just as a rock knocked a doughnut out of his hands and into the weeds.

Four goblins were just then picking the soap gun. Three of them held onto it and a fourth pulled the trigger, spraying pink soap bubbles at Ahab as he danced back and forth barking. He leaped away, still barking, and more goblins came out of the woods, gobbling and waving and making the glasses sign with their fingers and yanking on each others’ hair and clothes. One of them picked up a stone and threw it at Mr. Deener. Another pitched a rock at one of Mrs. Barlow’s saucers, smashing it to bits.

Danny picked up a rock to throw it back, but Mr. Deener got in his way, shouting, “Here now!” and striding toward the goblins like a mad school teacher on a playground. “Give that gun to me right now!” he yelled. “This instant!”

The goblins hunched forward like firemen holding a firehose. There was the peculiar whooshing sound of the soap gun going off, and a spray of pink bubbles shot out of the barrel. Mr. Deener threw up his hands to keep the soap out of his face, and the goblins ran toward him carrying the gun, hosing him down again and shrieking and laughing. Danny picked up a rock and threw it back. It hit one of the soap gun goblins in the chest.

Mr. Deener yelled just then and sat down hard on the meadow grass, as if the rock had hit *him*. He was pink and dripping with frothy soap, and he sat there trying to clean it off his face and out of his eyes. John hit another one of the soap gun goblins with a rock, this time in the arm, and Mr. Deener yelled “Ouch!” and grabbed his shoulder. “No throwing stones!” he yelled. “No more stones!”

The goblins ran, carrying the soap gun toward the woods, where the fog was so thick now that the trees were just shadows. At the edge of the stream they dropped the gun and picked up big rocks. Mr. Deener stood up and ran toward them, waving his arms. “Wait!” he shouted. “Don’t!” But he was too late. The goblins lifted the rocks over their heads and then

smashed them down onto the soap gun.

"By golly!" Mr. Deener shouted. And with a wild cry he grabbed up a rock nearly as big as his head and threw it as hard as he could. It flew about six feet and landed in the weeds. The goblins laughed and laughed and threw handfuls of stones, half of the goblins rushing at Mr. Deener and the other half staying behind to beat the soap gun to pieces.

John and Danny and Polly ran to help him. Goblins pulled Mr. Deener's hair and hauled at his legs, snapping his suspenders and heaping dirt on the top of his bald head. John pulled a goblin away, and immediately it grabbed onto his jacket, gobbling and hooting. Two more leaped at Danny just as Ahab ran into the middle of them, barking into their faces.

There were too many of them, and all of them seemed to have gone crazy. Half of them were capering around on their hands and knees, chasing Ahab and barking. Five or six clung to Mr. Deener's back, and kicked him in the ribs as if he were a horse that wouldn't run. More goblins appeared in the fog at the edge of the woods, and John could see that a fire was burning back in among the trees.

Suddenly Polly ran into the middle of all of them, carrying the picnic basket. She reached inside, pulled out a glazed doughnut, and threw it onto the ground. Then she threw another into the air. And then another and another until Mrs. Barlow's doughnuts rained down on their heads.

The goblins fell silent. They looked at the doughnuts for a moment as if they couldn't quite believe it. And then, in a mad rush, they forgot about Mr. Deener and everything else and went scrambling over the ground, fighting and gouging and clawing and tearing doughnuts out of each other's hands.

Mr. Deener crawled into the middle of the stream and sat down, washing his hands in the water. He didn't pay any attention at all to the goblins or the doughnuts or anything else. It was as if his mind had gone to the moon.

Danny picked up the soap gun. The barrel was twisted at a funny angle where it had been slammed with a rock, so to aim it at the goblins he had to point it nearly at the stream. John and Polly and Ahab backed away, and the goblins wrestled with each other in a big knot, mashing doughnuts into the grass.

First one and then another of them noticed the soap gun and where it was pointed. They began picking up flattened doughnuts and running away with them toward the woods. Within moments the whole crowd of them was gone, and it was quiet on the foggy meadow again.

And right then the barrel fell away from the rest of the soap gun. Just like that it thumped into the grass in front of Danny's feet. Pink slime poured

out of the inside of the gun, and Danny dropped it and stepped away so that it wouldn't get on his shoes.

Mr. Deener uttered a heavy sigh and stood up, shivering with cold and soaked through with soap and creek water. He poked at the pieces of the soap gun with the toe of his shoe. Then he picked up a smashed doughnut out of the dirt, and then he shook his head sadly and said, "When Mrs. Barlow finds out about the plates, this is all I'll have to eat."

"Nonsense," Polly said to him. "You didn't break the plates. We'll tell her the truth."

"The truth!" Mr. Deener said. "I don't want any more of the truth. This is the only truth!" He held up the smashed doughnut. Dirt and bits of grass clung to it. "Alas!" he cried. "Don't worry about me any longer, Pol. I won't suffer too much."

Then he started to take a bite out of the doughnut, or pretended as if he was going to, but Polly grabbed it away from him and threw it like a saucer into the woods.

He shrugged, as if he didn't mind eating trash, as if, perhaps, it was the only thing left that he was fit to eat. "Alas," he said again, and then turned around and lumped off down the path that led toward the house on the hill, his wet pants sticking to his legs, leaving the rest of them to pick up the pieces of glass magic on the meadow.

Chapter 5: Mr. Deener Sets Out

The moonlit night was windy and loud. Leaves scraped against the laboratory windows, and John could hear the slow creak, creak, creak of moving trees outside. The air in the laboratory smelled like duty marbles. There were pieces of the moon ladder all over the place – boxes full of glass fishing floats and miles of rope tied into a ladder with rungs every foot or so, all of it heaped into enormous straw baskets.

Mr. Deener stood on top of a tall wooden step stool in the middle of the floor, weaving holly and ivy vines into the top of the moon ladder, which floated in the air as if it were hanging by a sky hook. Polly held onto a string that was tied to the top rung of the ladder. The string was pulled tight in her hand like the string of a kite.

John hoped that Danny would come downstairs. He was up in the bedroom sulking, although what he said was that he wanted to read a book. After what happened on the meadow that afternoon, he said he didn't care anymore about Mr. Deener's magic. He hated magic. John said that it wasn't the magic that mattered what mattered, somehow, was helping Mr.

Deener. And Danny had said that he was through helping Mr. Deener. It was time Mr. Deener learned how to help himself.

John looked up toward the ceiling. It seemed impossibly far away. There was a round skylight in it, like a watch crystal, and the full moon shone through it. The moon seemed to be getting bigger by the moment, as if it were slowly drifting toward the earth.

"We'll use vine magic to initiate propulsion," Mr. Deener said. "Certain vines and shrubs climb toward moonlight. Lunar moths ride to the moon on rafts woven out of pieces of ivy vine. That's a little-known fact."

"Sounds like a lot of dad-blamed gas to me, Deener," Mrs. Barlow said. She stood with her arms folded, holding a paper sack in one hand.

"That's right," Mr. Deener said. "They use helium gas when they can get it. Sometimes they try to fly there without any help at all, but the space winds blow the dust off their wings, and they've got to turn back. That's a fact. Thirteen percent of the particulate matter making up rainbows is dust from the wings of moths and butterflies. Hand me up one of those floats, Mr. Kraken."

John picked up one of the glass balls and started to give it to Mr. Deener, who said, "Not a blue one, a red one. That's it. That's the ticket." He took a red float from John and hung it into a little net bag that was woven into the rope of the ladder. Every few feet there were two more nets, right opposite each other. "Red glass is what you want for moon travel," he said, nodding seriously. "But there aren't many red floats in the boxes, so save them up. Portion them out. They're made with melted gold, believe it or not, boiled with holly berries and pearl oysters. Let's have another one."

John found a second red float and handed it to Mr. Deener, who hung it in the net opposite the first float, and then shouted, "Cast her loose, Polly."

Polly let go of the string, and the top of the ladder rose into the air toward the ceiling. It went up into the darkness ten or twelve feet, quickly and silently, and then stopped. Mr. Deener hung two more floats in the next pair of nets and it rose again, up toward where the moon filled nearly the whole skylight now.

"The higher it climbs," Mr. Deener said, stepping onto the ladder and holding on, "the more it wants to fall. Load the nets with floats, Mr. Kraken. Don't miss any, or heaven knows where we'll end up. And Polly..."

"Yes," Polly said.

"Will you sit with..." He nodded toward the door and the stairs beyond. Clearly he meant the Sleeper, who had come in from fishing only about a half hour ago, walking in his sleep, his bedroom slippers covered with river dust. "I don't expect trouble," Mr. Deener said, "but..."

"But you didn't expect trouble with the firefly lamp either," Mrs. Barlow said, "and you blew the top of the shed off with it and nearly burnt the house down."

"We'll take care of the Sleeper," Aunt Flo said.

"I'll go up there now," Polly said, and then she left the room in a hurry and climbed the stairs.

For the first time it occurred to John that something might happen to Mr. Deener. Maybe it was a dangerous thing to try to climb to the moon on a rope ladder. John didn't like climbing any kind of ladder. He didn't even like climbing over fences. There was no way he was "going home by way of the moon," as Mr. Deener had put it. He wasn't going anywhere without Danny. But then of course Mr. Deener couldn't *really* be climbing to the moon anyway. The moon was 252,970 miles away. There weren't enough baskets on earth to hold that much rope ladder.

"We're ready," said Mr. Deener and he climbed down to the floor.

"I suppose we are," said Aunt Flo. "Please don't hurt yourself. We need you, you know."

"Nobody needs an old thing like me," he said. "But I don't plan to hurt myself. I've told you, although I don't at all think you believe me or understand, that I mean to come back after all of you. I won't abandon you."

"Of course not," Aunt Flo said. "I'm only asking you to be careful, and not give yourself a knock on the head."

Mrs. Barlow cleared her throat loudly, as if she had something important to say and wouldn't put it off any longer. "Well, Deener," she said, "I guess you're going and that's it. You won't see reason. Take these glazeys, then. You'll be hungry before you're through. There's more magic in a bag of doughnuts than in all this rubbish on the floor, and if you find..."

But she didn't finish the sentence. Something seemed to catch in her throat. "My heavens," she said, and she gave Mr. Deener the paper bag full of doughnuts. Then she turned around and rushed from the room.

Mr. Deener stood there staring after her, his mouth open in wonder. For a moment it looked almost as if he would follow her. In the silence John could hear the wind crashing out in the night. The doors and windows shook, as if ghosts were rattling the knobs. Mr. Deener tucked the end of the paper bag through his belt and started hauling rope ladder out of the first of the baskets.

"Never two of the same color together, Mr. Kraken," he said. "Not unless they're red."

John dropped two floats into the nets on the moon ladder, and it rose a few feet toward the ceiling. He wished Danny was here to help. The ladder

traveled quickly. He would have to hurry to keep up. Mr. Deener stepped aboard the moving ladder, and without saying another word he disappeared upward, into the shadows.

"I'll just go see to Mrs. Barlow," Aunt Flo said. "There's no telling when he'll be back. Let's hope he finds what he's looking for up there."

She left then, and John was alone in the laboratory. For five minutes he picked up glass floats and set them in the nets, and the ladder climbed and climbed and climbed until a half dozen baskets lay empty on the floor. John hauled another box of floats across the floor and kicked the empty baskets aside, hurrying to fill the nets before they rose out of reach. Above him there was nothing but darkness and the immense white circle of the moon, patchy with the shadows of mountains and river valleys.

The moon ladder rose ever higher. John worked steadily through a third box of floats. His arms were tired, and his back was sore from bending over and straightening up. He thought about Danny, reading a book by the fireplace, but thinking about it just made him mad. He wondered what would happen if he stopped filling the nets. Would the ladder simply stop climbing? Would it fall? Mr. Deener had said something about it, but John couldn't remember what.

He picked up two red floats and slipped them into the nets, and just when he did there was a shout from upstairs. It sounded like Danny's voice. There was silence for a moment and then the sound of glass breaking, followed by goblin laughter and the patter of feet running across the wooden floorboards of the rooms overhead.

Chapter 6: What Became of the Moon Ladder

There was the sound of glass breaking again, as if someone had thrown a rock through a window. The wind howled outside, and the house shook. Ahab ran past the open door of the laboratory, followed by three goblins carrying wooden spoons and potato mashers.

"Hey!" John yelled, and he nearly dropped the floats and ran out into the hall. But just then Danny ran past, chasing Ahab and the goblins, and there was the sound of a sort of avalanche from the direction of the kitchen, followed by Mrs. Barlow's voice, yelling. Goblin cackling filled the house, upstairs and down.

Meanwhile the ladder kept rising out of the baskets, and by the time John turned around again, two of the string nets had slid away into the air without floats in them and were out of reach.

"Darn!" John shouted, trying to stuff a float into an empty net, but he

fumbled the float and it fell onto the ground and broke, and he had to reach into the box for another one as two more empty nets rose above his head. What *had* Mr. Deener said? – the higher it climbed, the more it wanted to fall....

He looked up. He could see Mr. Deener now, jut a dark speck against the white moon, like a flea on a lamp.

The ladder stopped dead. John grabbed two floats. He would have to climb the ladder himself and fill the empty nets; otherwise Mr. Deener was stuck halfway to the moon. He tucked the floats into his jacket pockets and started climbing. The ladder swayed back and forth. He didn't look down at the floor, but stared straight ahead, paying attention to each rung in the ladder, holding on tightly and wondering if his weight would yank the ladder right out of the sky.

Finally the empty nets were even with his eyes. Very carefully he looked down. The floor with its baskets and boxes was far below him. One by one he dug the floats out of his pockets and slid them into the nets, and straight-away the ladder began to rise again. He started back down as quickly as he could, but it was like walking the wrong way on an escalator, and he rose into the air almost as fast as he climbed down.

"Danny!" he yelled, and listened for a moment to the sound of banging and shouting. They wouldn't hear him. He was stuck, and would have to wait till the ladder stopped again.

But just then the laboratory window slammed open with a bang. Wind gusted through it, blowing the curtains at a crazy angle. The room swirled with flying leaves, and wind caught the ladder above the basket and blew it back toward the hall door.

A goblin looked in through the open window. He tip-toed into the room followed by more goblins. They made clucking noises and looked around. One of them picked up three fishing floats and began to juggle. When he looked up he saw John. He pointed, gobbling with laughter, and let the floats drop to the floor where they broke to pieces.

The ladder had stopped again, but by now John was high above the floor. He didn't know how high, but the goblins looked very small. He held on tight to the ladder. One of the goblins picked up a glass float from a box, looked at it for a moment, and then threw it him. It flew past him, falling to the floor and shattering.

The goblins shouted happily, and another one picked up a float and threw it straight at the wall. They all roared with laughter and excitement when it broke. One of them grabbed the bottom-most part of the ladder and held on while two of the others gave him a push. He swung across the

floor, nearly to the open window. John held on with both hands as the ladder swayed back and forth and round and round.

He felt it slip from the sky just then, and he dropped three or four feet before it caught again and held. The goblin hanging from the ladder began to climb, hand over hand, grinning up toward John and babbling nonsense that sounded like cartoon baby talk. He had a fish skeleton stuck in his hair, and his teeth were filed to sharp points. As soon as he got to the first two floats, he yanked one of them out of its net. Then he threw it at his friends below, exploding it against the floor.

The ladder jolted downward, as if someone had jerked on it. The goblin reached for the second float.

"Don't!" John yelled at him, and started down the ladder.

"Don't, don't, don't!" the goblins yelled, dancing back and forth on the floor. One of them threw a float at the goblin on the ladder, who pulled the second float out of its net and threw it back at him.

The ladder jerked downward again just as the goblins on the floor began to climb it. One of them made the glasses sign with his hands and fell straight off the ladder onto the pile of rope ladder.

The moon loomed above, big and bright white now, as if they were all in the bottom of a deep well with the moon settled over it like a lid. It was close, as if it had come down to meet Mr. Deener part way. Shapes moved across its face, like shadow pictures on a movie screen, or like the moving eyes on the clinker flower in Mr. Deener's garden.

The goblins on the ground began to whip the ladder around as if they were shaking out a rug. John lurched backward, off balance, the rope jerking out of his hand. He grabbed for it wildly, but his fingers closed on air. He spun around, the ladder twirling dizzily. His feet slipped off the rungs, and he fell.

The crowd of goblins seemed to rush upward toward him, and before he even had time to shout, he slammed down into a half-full basket of rope, smashing the straw sides of the basket and rolling off onto the floor, knocking the little men over in a wild tangle of arms and legs.

He sat up, breathing hard, scrambling to get out of the way as a goblin slammed down beside him, fallen from the sky. Another one landed on top of the first. The ladder was falling, faster and faster. Rope heaped up on the floor. Two goblins leaped up and ran out of the room, but the rest were quickly entangled in the falling ladder, which piled up on the floor, faster and faster, higher and higher.

John ran toward the door, shouting for Mrs. Barlow, for Danny, for anybody. There was a mountain of rope ladder now. Goblins tried to claw their

way out of the tangles, but the ladder piled up on their heads, burying them. And then, as if in answer to his shouting, a tiny voice drifted downward from out of the darkness overhead.

John looked up, shading his eyes. Way up in the night sky, where the moon filled the entire ceiling now, Mr. Deener came falling, down and down and down, tumbling end over end like a coin fallen out of the moon's pocket.

Chapter 7: The Sleeper Floats Away, Nearly

Mr. Deener lay on top of a mountain of cloth rope like an upside down bug, looking up at the moon. "I'm all right," he whispered when John tried to help him. Then he gestured for John to leave him alone.

Goblins crawled out from where they were trapped in the rope, and one by one ran out through the open window. Mr. Deener didn't pay any attention to them. There was broken glass everywhere, most of it smashed into little bitty chips. Hundreds of the glass floats had been broken, either by the goblins or in Mr. Deener's fall.

There was the sudden yammering of goblins. Then the front door slammed, and Mrs. Barlow's voice shouted, "And stay out!" and then the house was silent. Several goblins ran past outside the window right after that, heading away down the hill. John pushed the window shut and latched it.

"I saw her," mumbled Mr. Deener, as if he were half asleep. "I was almost home."

John knew who he meant. He remembered what Mrs. Barlow had said last night about Mr. Deener's wife, Velma.

Aunt Flo appeared in the doorway. "He fell?" she asked quietly.

John nodded. "Goblins came in and wrecked things. I tried to help, but..."

"You couldn't have helped any more than you did."

"He was close," John said. "He saw... I guess he saw his wife. I saw someone too, so it wasn't just his imagination. It was just before he fell. The moon filled the whole ceiling, and there were the shapes of things on it. I think it was a woman in a kitchen, cooking."

"Cooking up something nice," Mr. Deener said dreamily. "It was a pie. I believe it was a pie. I could smell a cherry pie cooking."

"It was *our* kitchen," John whispered to Aunt Flo.

"What was our kitchen?" Danny asked, walking into the room at last. His shirt was torn and he carried one of Mrs. Barlow's big wooden spoons.

"It was our kitchen at home," John said, "only up on the moon. I'm sure it was." He had seen it, right enough, just before Mr. Deener had fallen –

the stove, the cupboards, the glass globe over the ceiling lamp....

"It hasn't always been your kitchen, has it?" Aunt Flo asked.

"No," John said. Of course it hadn't been. The house was seventy years old.

"It was Mr. Deener's house too?" Danny asked.

"For a long time," she said. "And a very jolly house it was until things went wrong. He lived there for some years after Velma died. Finally he sold it to your parents. He couldn't stand being there without her. They had been together in that house for nearly forty years. He saw her everywhere in it, even after she had died. She had sewn the curtains and cooked the food and bought the carpets. She had sat a thousand times in all the chairs, and every night they had slept in the same bed. There she was, wherever he looked."

She stopped for a moment, as if making sure that she was telling the story right. "Of course it wasn't *really* her, left over in the house after she died, any more than it was really her on the moon just now. It was just memories of her, and that's what he couldn't stand. He wanted it to *really* be her. He sat in that empty house all day and thought about her until he began to forget how to think about anything else."

Danny said, "Why didn't he just *quit* thinking about it? Why didn't he *do* something? Go fishing or something?"

"He tried to," Aunt Flo said, "but sometimes it's not that easy to forget. He moved in with his sister, who lived down the street, and he almost never came out of his room and did nothing but experiment with glass magic. He thought now that if Velma could travel in the land of memory, then he would learn to travel there too. But he found that he couldn't just pick and choose which memories to keep. Finally he found a way to break himself in half, and he gave the Sleeper a single terrible memory that he didn't want. He's been breaking off bothersome little bits of himself ever since."

Polly and Ahab arrived from upstairs. "He's sleeping nicely now," Polly said to Aunt Flo. "Mrs. Barlow's bringing up what's left of the doughnuts. The goblins stole most of them."

There was a tiny tapping on the window just then. Polly drew the curtain back and opened the door. A scattering of sycamore leaves blew into the room, each of them bearing a hennypenny man. Polly closed the window.

The hennypennies landed and dragged their leaves into a corner, lining them up neatly. They rolled up their sleeves and started picking up pieces of glass, heaping the pieces into piles according to color.

Aunt Flo and Polly and John and Danny tiptoed out the door and went

upstairs to bed, leaving the henny-pennies to clean up the laboratory while Mr. Deener slept on his heap of rope.

The bedroom was dark except for candlelight, and the house was quiet. John wasn't sleepy at all. "So what happened upstairs?" he asked Danny, who had been quiet for the past five minutes.

"It was weird," Danny said tiredly. "The Sleeper nearly floated away."

"Floated away?"

"That's right. That's why Polly yelled. He was floating on the ceiling, bumping it with his nose. When we got up there he was almost over the stair. He was like a balloon. We had to tie a rope to him and try to pull him back in, over the bed."

John watched the flickering candle flame. "I think he was going to the moon with Mr. Deener. Mr. Deener can't get away without taking the Sleeper along. I bet he fell onto the bed when Mr. Deener fell out of the sky."

"Actually he fell onto the floor. He landed right on top of a goblin and nearly squashed him. Mrs. Barlow threw most of the goblins out the window, into the pond. They really trashed her kitchen. Me and Polly lifted the Sleeper back onto the bed. He was light, like he was made out of air or something."

John lay there for a while, not saying anything. He wondered what his brother was thinking. All day long he had been mad – about the spectacles, about the meadow. But now, even though the moon ladder hadn't worked, he didn't seem to be. Maybe he had made up his mind about something – about the cave. That was worrisome.

Finally John said, "Anyway, what I think is that..." but then he realized that Danny had fallen asleep again. "Danny," he whispered, but there was no answer. He lay there watching the moon through the window and thinking about things – about his parents and what was going on back home. Were they asleep? Were they worrying about him?

He began to worry about them worrying, and he wished that he and Danny were at home, sleeping in their own beds. And then suddenly he wished that he could work a little bit of Mr. Deener's glass magic himself, that he could turn his worrying into a goblin. He would throw it out the window into the pond. Except that then the woods would soon be full of goblins that looked like him, and that stank and wore rat shoes. That was even worse than worrying. Wishing and worrying wouldn't help. They had to *do* something.

Right then he decided. Tomorrow morning, if Danny wanted to try going home through the cave, then John would go with him.

Chapter 8: Someone Steals the Bag of Memories

In the morning Danny was gone.

John woke up to the sound of Mrs. Barlow's voice in the hallway, and the first thing he noticed was that Danny's bed was empty.

"It's been *stolen*," Mrs. Barlow shouted.

John jumped out of bed, grabbing his shirt off the chair. He saw a note on the table. "I'm going to try the caves," it read. "I'm taking Ahab. I'll be back with help. Daniel."

The candle holder was gone from the table. John opened the drawer. It was empty. Danny had taken all the candles. The backpack was gone. John jumped out of bed and started pulling on his clothes. There was no time to waste. He would go after Danny alone if he had to. . . .

He went out through the door just as Polly ran past, heading back up the hall to her own room. When she saw John she said, "Someone stole the bag of memories. We don't know who. Maybe Uncle Deener and maybe the goblins, but we've got to get them back. Uncle Deener's gone, too. We've got to find him. She pushed open the door to her bedroom and went in.

Mrs. Barlow was in the kitchen, shoving doughnuts into a sack. Through the window John could see that the rose bushes in the garden had lost most of their flowers in the night. There were some blooms left on them, but the ground beneath the bushes was carpeted with blood-red petals. Water still bubbled out of the spring, but only in a sort of trickle now, and the creek down along the meadow looked like a muddy-brown ribbon. It was as if autumn had turned to winter overnight.

Aunt Flo came in with Polly, and John showed them Danny's note. Mrs. Barlow slapped her forehead, as if the note was the last thing in the world she wanted to see. "Through the *cave!*" she said. "And on the same day that the Deener chooses to high-tail it."

There was a rumble then, and the house shook. John grabbed the edge of the counter to steady himself. He looked out the window just as a rain of petals fell from the rose bushes. The trees shook in the garden, and muddy water boiled out of the spring. The sundial toppled over into a flowerbed, and a storm of apples thudded to the ground.

And then, just for a moment, the sky went dark, like a screen in a movie theater when a film ends.

The shaking pased. Slowly the sky brightened, and everything was ghostly silent, as if waiting.

"Just a trembler," Mrs. Barlow said. "But the next one could bring the house down."

"You'll have to find both of them," Aunt Flo said. "And the sooner the better. I'll stay with the Sleeper. We don't want to lose him too."

"We won't lose any of 'em!" Mrs. Barlow said, handing John the bag full of doughnuts. "I don't care who stole the memory bag – whether it was the Deener himself or his gang of ruffians; I mean to find it and him too. And if any of those little scalawags get in my way..." She picked up the big wooden potato masher and swung it heavily through the air.

Chapter 9: In the Tunnel of the Creaking Doors

There was no sign of any goblins in the woods – no fires, no fog, no laughter, no flute noise. Everything was eerily quiet and still. There wasn't even the sound of birds. The mouth of the cave was just as it had been – dark and cool and with the wind whispering around it like ghosts around an open tomb.

The ground was still soft and wet because of the water leaking out of the fountain. There were footprints of both Danny and Ahab leading into the cave. But that was all. There was no sign of Mr. Deener.

"The Deener's gone down to the sea," Mrs. Barlow said. "I was afraid of that." She sighed, as if she was tired. "He's going to throw the bag into the ocean, just like he said he'd do, and that'll be the end of him. All my work gone to smash."

"What'll we do?" John asked.

"You'll go after your brother," Mrs. Barlow said, "and leave the Deener to me. Polly, you go with John. Take the candles. I won't be needing any. I'll take the glazeys, but I don't guess they'll help."

She opened her basket and pulled out a bag of doughnuts. Then she handed out candles and matches and candlesticks. She gave Polly the basket, which was still half full of loose candles and lunch, and said to John, "If you find Danny and bring him out, then head on back up to the house quick. But if you find your way home, then stay there and God bless you."

She put her hand on Polly's shoulder. "As for you, Pol..." She started crying then. "You're what he deserved," she said. "If you weren't, then he couldn't have invented you, and he wouldn't have known that you were his friend – imaginary or otherwise. The old fool doesn't understand that."

After saying that, she kissed Polly on the cheek and hurried away without looking back.

John only half knew what she meant. What he did know, and had known since yesterday afternoon out on the meadow, was that while Danny and he were only pretending to be Mr. Deener's imaginary friends, Polly really

was one. And sooner or later all imaginary friends, like the window in the air or like a landscape in a dream, faded away and vanished.

Real friends didn't. John looked into the cave. It was dark as midnight. His brother was in there somewhere, along with Ahab. He lit candles for both of them and then put the matches away in his pocket. Together they stepped into the darkness. The candles lit the rocks for ten feet roundabout them and threw their shadows against the cave wall, but beyond the little circle of yellow light there was a solid wall of black. Although the air was still, there was the sound of the wind even inside the cave, like someone breathing or like the sound of very distant ocean waves breaking on a rocky shore.

They walked into darkness. The glow of sunlight through the mouth of the cave disappeared behind them as the tunnel fell away, deeper into the earth. Their footsteps scuffed on the smooth stone floor, and they stopped now and then to listen. Always there was the breathing of the wind and the sound of a rushing ocean. Once John shouted Danny's name, and they stood still, listening for an answer, but there was nothing – just an echoing shout followed by a silence so deep that it seemed to John as if something was listening.

Soon the tunnel forked, but blocking the left fork was a broad wooden door set into the rock. The door had iron bands strapped across it and the bands were fixed down with big rusty bolts. The wood was cracked and old, and there was a keyhole at the edge of the door with a heavy key in it that was so rusted it clearly hadn't been turned in ages, but had become part of the iron lock around it.

Polly put her hand on the key, but then quickly drew it away, and a look of sadness came into her face. "Not that door," she said softly. "He wouldn't want us in there."

"He?" John asked. "He who?"

But right then Polly pointed toward the cave wall alongside the other fork. "Look!" she said. "A mark!" There was a black streak of soot smudging the stone, as if someone had tried to draw an arrow on the rock with smoke. On the floor beneath it were drips of candle wax.

"He's marking his way," John said.

During the silence that followed his words, John heard what might have been the sound of a flute, very faintly and far away. There were just a few echoing notes, and then silence again.

"What was that?" John asked.

"What?" Polly asked. "I didn't hear anything."

"Nothing, I guess," John said. There was no use mentioning goblins now.

He wasn't going to turn back, no matter what. If Danny had run into goblins up ahead, then he needed help more than ever.

Very shortly they came to another door, this one set right into the wall of the tunnel. John put his ear against the wood and listened. There was the sound of music on the other side, very faintly, like an old radio playing.

"I'm going to try it," he said, putting his hand on the key. It was cold and was gritty with rust, and it turned with a heavy *thunk* that echoed through the cave. The door swung slowly outward, and a cool wind blew out around it. The radio noise was louder. Carefully, they looked past the edge of the door.

The tunnel was long and straight, with more locked doors in the walls, dozens and dozens of them in a long line. There was a light at the end, very far away, like the moon through the wrong end of a telescope. All at once, like the goblin fires in the woods, the distant circle of light winked out, then suddenly winked on again, closer, then closer yet. Still it seemed to be enormously far away.

It was a lighted room. A woman moved about in it, dusting with a feather duster. John could see the edges of chairs and tables, and he could hear the woman's voice, singing along with the scratchy radio music. The tune was familiar, and he realized that it was the tune that Mr. Deener sometimes tried to hum.

The woman looked up, as if she had just then heard something. She was the same woman that had been at work in the kitchen on the moon and whose face had seemed to peer out from within the clinker flower. Then the light winked again, and was suddenly so vastly far away that it was just a pinpoint of light, like a firefly in a dark woods. John and Polly pushed the door shut, and John turned the key in the lock.

"Danny wouldn't have gone that way," he whispered. "But one of these doors might work like our window. We should check them all."

They walked deeper into the cave, holding their candles in front and playing the light on the walls and ceiling, looking for another of Danny's marks. Every tunnel that forked off from their own seemed to lead downward, deeper into the earth, and at every fork Danny had left a mark with candle smoke. They found the burned down end of one candle lying in a pool of wax.

Most of the wooden doors were locked tight, and twice the ancient keys snapped off in a shower of rust when John tried to turn them. The doors that did open revealed distant lighted rooms, just as the first had. Some rooms were empty. Some were so far away that they looked like stars in the night sky. In one they could just see the back of someone's head over the

back of a chair, and in another they saw Mrs. Deener again, just taking something out of the oven. The smell of cherry pie drifted out toward them, and somehow the smell was so sad and lonesome that they shut the door as quickly and silently as they could and went on.

"Let's try one more," John whispered.

They were deep in the cave now. He hadn't heard any more goblin music, but he had a feeling that somehow, in some strange way, the cave, or something in it, knew they were there. It was better not to talk out loud. They reached the next door, and he tried the key. It was cold in his hand, almost freezing. The rusty hinges moaned when the door opened. It sounded just as the Sleeper had sounded when he moaned in his sleep, and John thought he heard the whisper of the Sleeper's unhappy voice, talking in a nightmare. Cold air drifted from within. He set his candlestick down and held onto the edge of the door with both hands.

Beyond it lay darkness just barely lit with an eerie silver light. A door some distance down the tunnel creaked slowly open, as if stirred by the cold air. It stood just so for a moment, and then slammed shut. Then another door opened, and another, and both of those slammed shut. For what looked to be miles and miles, doors slowly opened and then slammed again, and there was the sound of heavy breathing in the air that reminded John of the Sleeper again.

And then the silvery light began to dim in the distance. The air in the tunnel grew frosty cold. Something – a vast dark shadow seemed to be advancing down the tunnel, blotting out the light. The open doors slammed shut, *bang, bang, bang* one after another. The icy wind blew in their faces, as if some great, vastly cold thing was filling the dark tunnel, pushing out the light and the air.

John saw it then – a shape as black as water in a deep well, rushing toward them. Its face was a nightmare tangle of cobweb and dust, with empty eyes and a black, gaping mouth full of dark terror and fear and pain. Polly screamed. John turned his eyes away from it as a cold surge of fear flew up into his throat. His heart pounded in his chest as both he and Polly threw themselves against the wood and iron of the door, forcing it closed.

The out-rushing cold air howled past them, trying to drive the door back open, and there was a high, wailing noise like the scream of a banshee and the *wham wham wham* of slamming doors, faster and faster and louder and louder.

"Push!" John yelled, and right then the door closed against the rock of the tunnel, and he leaned against it with his feet set behind him as Polly dropped the basket and used both hands to twist the key in the lock.

There was a last wild note to the howling then, and the thing hurtled against the wooden door, knocking John over backward even though the door was shut and locked. The iron bands bulged out in a spray of rust and creaking rivets, and there was the sound of wood cracking and splintering. With a cry of rage and despair, the thing beyond the door battered it once more, and the iron bands bulged outward again, the door straining against the ancient, rusty lock, which moaned and screeched under the desperate weight. There was a terrible grinding noise, and a bolt popped loose with a loud snap and shot across the tunnel and into the far wall.

John scrambled to his feet, knocking over his candlestick. He grabbed Polly by the hand and took off running, down the tunnel and into the darkness until the sound of smashing and screaming and slamming and tearing faded behind them.

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Goldfish

R.A. Lafferty

He didn't know how long he had been a goldfish. Probably not long. A longterm goldfish isn't afraid of drowning, nor would he be frightened of Gwendoline.

It seemed he had only gradually become conscious of that underwater state or dream.

Well, he was a goldfish now, and there was no cure for it. He was a goldfish named Cuthbert. And the damndest thing about it was that he himself (in his former guise) had, in a moment of cuteness, named that poor fish with that hideous name.

For now it began to clarify; and memory rolled over him like a green wave.

Actually he was only goldfish *per eventa* and not *per essentia*; by accident only, not by true being. In reality he was Leo Skatterly, the world's greatest scientist (with sarcastic intonation); that was the way that Mathilde always said it.

For if he were Leo Skatterly, then he had Mathilde to wife. But again, if he were Cuthbert, then just as surely was he mated to Gwendoline the goldfish, who was now rubbing noses with him. This situation may have been illicit, but bigamy was not now his largest worry.

Part of what had happened was this: – But for all the details we must wait till the afternoon of the last day when the huge angel opens the last book that shows the whole story of everyone written fine. But mostly what happened was this:

On that very day and not an hour before he had been sitting thoughtfully there in his big chair. And he had been Leo Skatterly; he had not been a goldfish. He really was the world's greatest scientist, in his own opinion, and in that of from four to six others (several of his devotees were fickle);

which is to say that in the field of Abstract Cogitational Efficacy he was the greatest; – or at least in a limited corner acre of that field, Implemented Cogitational Transference.

For in that he had done things that nobody else even thought of. Indeed, at the extreme of the thing (and this was his greatest secret), to think was to do. He had been working on it for about twenty years in whatever hours he could steal from sleep, and from the tamer pursuits of teaching and research by which he had his livelihood. And by his concentration in this field he may have neglected, to some degree, lesser things. According to his wife he neglected his wife.

He hadn't meant to neglect her; he liked her a lot; perhaps he even loved her if that was in fashion; it had been in and out of fashion several times, he couldn't keep track. But the fact is that things like that take time. One begins with the most perfunctory display of affection. Then its reciprocation is likely to entail a concatenation of events, cubicular and carnous, whereby one becomes empassioned; and the next thing that one notices is that a quarter or even a half hour has gone by. O it's fun, but how much better could limited time be spent in abstract thought and its implementation in the transfer field.

For it was in perfect detachment that Leo Skatterly excelled. Thought, he knew, was a spiritual activity. It was but accident that it had taken up its dwelling in the brain, a handy site whereby it had access to the senses of a body, but not a necessary site. He would prove Thought a detachable thing; and by perfect abstraction he would reach a state where he himself could briefly leave his body and exist in unbodied thought.

He had achieved this several times, for a few seconds, under ideal conditions. He was on the verge of being able to accomplish it all times under all conditions.

On this day his corpulent assistant, Gorden Gaster, had entered and shattered his state of abstraction.

"I had no desire for company. I was in thought," said Leo.

"There are times when company intrudes through necessity," said Gorden, "and I must tell you that you are a very selfish man."

"Of course I am. Perfect detachment is not possible to any other. Were I not consummately selfish I would not have been able to isolate Self. You insist on talking?"

"Yes. It is necessary, Leo. I have decided, along with one other, to take a certain definite step. You have neglected things that a man should not neglect. You have disregarded the amenities. To a degree I have made this up for you."

"I thank you for that. You are a good assistant. You have saved me much time and trouble."

"You have also neglected your wife shamefully. And to a degree here I also have taken care of what you neglected."

"I thank you for that too – or do I? It may be that you have gone beyond the call of duty."

"It may be that I have. And there are further things about yourself that I must tell you, since you seem not aware of them. One is that you have the golden touch. Since the time that you gave me power of attorney over your affairs I have arranged wonderfully. I have mined the goldmine of your notes, and I have marketed extensively. There has been a practical application to almost everything that you have uncovered. The three of us (for we are so incorporated) are now quite wealthy. As soon as you are dead, the two of us remaining, Mathilde and myself, will be the wealthier by one half."

"I recently had an examination. I was told that I should live another thirty years."

"We have just had an examination of another sort. We have decided that there is no point in your living another hour. We believe that life bores you."

"It does in a way. But I still need the body for a basis of operation until I have achieved perfect detachment."

"That's a pity. But we won't wait. I have often wondered why you kept a loaded gun in this little desk here. It is what we decided that I should use."

"O, that's an old continuing experiment in psychokinesis. I can, under good conditions, cause the little gun to go downstairs by itself and fire a few rounds on the pistol range there. But the experiment has not been a success. The gun fires very poor scores on the range, and I believe that it also cheats. Most of the bulls' eyes seem to have been made at almost point-blank range."

"I had no idea you had gone so far along that line. Well, this is the end for you, Leo. You have been our golden goose. But we will wait for no more eggs. There is enough already in your notebooks to keep me busy and rich for the rest of what would have been your life. And you are in the way here. You are very inconvenient."

"You mean you are going to kill me?"

"You astonish me. To find that the world's greatest mind, when enough hints are shoveled to it, can actually reach a straight conclusion, that is almost more than I expected. Yes, I am going to kill you, Leo."

"I ask you, I beg you not to."

"You beg? You? Where is your detachment?"

"Buried under my terror. I had never given death a serious thought. I always considered it a silly arrangement. Now the possibility of its finality horrifies me. Don't, Gorden! Man, don't do it!"

"I wouldn't worry, Leo. In two seconds it will be done. Oblivion has no regrets."

"I need more than two seconds, Gorden. Give me ten."

"Ten? Why?"

"An experiment with death itself I've always wanted to try. It'll take a few seconds to arrange it in my mind."

"Always the scientist, Leo. All right, ten seconds but no more. And the time has started."

It is hard to achieve perfect detachment, but also separation, and transference, and the goal not even selected. But one can hurry astonishingly in a crisis. At first Leo could not see another living thing in the room except Gordon Gaster. But yes, yes, there was another. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. He achieved detachment. He achieved separation, leaving his body to exist briefly in unbodied thought.

And he achieved not a second too soon. For Gordon Gaster, with the cruelty of his kind, jumped the gun; and he shot the body of Leo Skatterly dead.

This was precarious. Leo had never before left his body for more than a second or two. And he could not return to a dead body. He had escaped the trap, but for what? It was like a high dive he was afraid to try, a leap across an abyss. But he knew that transference was possible. He dared it, and disappeared with muted mind into the fish bowl.

That was the way that the mind of Leo Skatterly (the world's greatest scientist in a small field) entered the body of Cuthbert the goldfish. And Cuthbert himself, with no great mind in the matter, withdrew to a small drowsy corner of his own brain, and let his master reign in his place.

There is frustration in having the finest mind in the world and not being able to implement it. O, he had time enough for abstract thought now. It was just that he hadn't the means for concrete action.

There are few things you can do in a fishbowl, even if you are a goldfish. You can practice your strokes and dives and turns. You can frolic with Gwendoline. But this brought on a problem. Though now an ichthus, Leo had never been an ichthyologist. He knew little about fish. He did not even know to what species the goldfish belonged. And of the carnality of goldfish he was totally ignorant. He hoped it was not the rutting season for goldfish, if they had such. He did not want to appear ignorant. (He had al-

ways liked to do his duty in all things.)

But it was then, before he was fully acclimated to the bowl, that his old wife, Mathilda, came into the room. Leo (or Cuthbert) had doubted the statement of Gorden Gaster that Mathilde had conspired to the murder. So he was now quite interested when she approached his old dead body. She hummed a little tune. Was it – ? no it couldn't be – "I'll be glad when you're dead you rascal you!" He had no ear for music. It was likely that it was a tune that only sounded like the other. Yet she seemed very calm about finding him dead. She tidied up a few things and went over the room closely. She painted her own mouth carefully, and then ruffled her hair with a studied carelessness. She looked at herself in a mirror, and winked. Then she went to the window, opened it calmly, and began to scream.

That was an odd way for a wife to behave on finding her husband dead. Possibly a form of delayed shock, but inexplicable by any behavior pattern that Leo had ever known. So it was that a slight doubt sowed itself in the mind of Leo Skatterly concerning his human wife, Mathilde.

There were then several hours or several days that passed with a parade of broken events. A goldfish sleeps often, and on waking has no way of telling what day it is. But likely it was the same day when the men came into the room and removed the old body of Leo Skatterly. He hated to see it go. It marked the end of a certain phase of his life. And moreover he had no idea where he was ever to get another body.

He wasn't all peaceful in his mind. He possessed the body of Cuthbert in doubtful tenure. For one thing Cuthbert was still there, though, having deferred to Leo, he had agreeably gone to sleep. But there might come a time when he might not be willing to defer. And in a showdown Cuthbert knew more about being a goldfish than Leo did. It was a question whether there would be some sort of conflict with the two minds inhabiting one fish head.

But just how does a goldfish establish contact with the rest of the world? Leo had decided that he must make known to Mathilde that he was not dead, that he was inhabiting Cuthbert instead. He still trusted her in spite of her odd behavior. If a man (or a fish) cannot trust his own wife, then whom can he trust?

When she came to feed them that night he tried to catch her eye. Possibly he did catch it, but she did not understand. There was no real rapport there.

Well, if the finest mind in the world cannot find a way to communicate from a fishbowl, then he had better abdicate and let some of that silly new blood take over. But how to communicate? By code, radio, audio, graphic,

visual? Probably the visual was best. And for tools there were only the pebbles in the bottom of the bowl.

He set out to arrange them. He would arrange them to say: "Mathilde, I am Leo. I am not dead. I am temporarily in the body of Cuthbert the goldfish. I trust you, though I must say some of your recent actions are deuced peculiar. Go at once to my notebooks in the cabinet against the north wall of this room. Take out notebook 44 C 2 and read from paragraph 152 C to the end. When you have digested the information there then come to the bowl again and I will spell out further instructions."

That was what he intended to spell out with the pebbles. But an environmental limit was placed on his ambitions. The same thing had happened to him before. When he was a little boy it had happened with a gift of a ninety-eight cent Structo set with a picture on the cover of a girdered bridge that could only be built with the twelve dollar and ninety-eight cent set. There were just not enough pieces.

And there were not enough pebbles. There were only thirteen pebbles in the bottom of the bowl. And what can you spell out with only thirteen pebbles? Leo finally spelled out his name, Leo. He did it using three pebbles for the L, six for the E, and four for the O. It was a square O, but it was better than no O at all.

Now perhaps when Mathilde saw this she would partly understand, and would bring him more pebbles to spell more words. But it would be cumbersome. It took him all night just to spell Leo. For one thing, a space has to be cleared first, and then the pebbles laboriously rolled into place with the nose. This involves nosing most of the pebbles twice. And another detrimant was Gwendoline, who joined into the game and began to roll the pebbles around also, but at random.

"God rot it, Gwen," he told her in ichthyglos, "leave them alone if you don't know what you're doing."

But she could not at all understand, and she sulked and interefered. But she was also his wife in a way and had some rights. When she finally went to sleep it was too dark to spell, and he had to do it by the very early light next morening before she woke.

Then there was nothing to do but wait for Mathilde to see his sign and take action. But she did not come till mid-morning, and then she was accompanied by Gorden Gaster, the murderer.

"Angel," said Gorden, "there is really nothing to do here. And I believe the room might depress you. Let's stay out of it."

"I don't depress as easily as that, precious. And I'd like it to be at least clean. They're going to be examining it again today, darling, purely as a for-

mality, and I pride myself on my housekeeping.”

It was surely peculiar that Mathilde should be calling Gorden such names as precious and darling. It gave Leo a feeling that everything was not right.

“If you’d help, Gorden, we could get it done in no time at all and be off.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Dust. There’s the duster.”

“Impossible. My asthma you know.”

“No, I didn’t. Well, you can run the vacuum. It’s in the closet.”

“That might be dangerous. I have a bad back and any untoward effort –”

“Well, G.d., G.G. you can feed the fish then. That isn’t very heavy work.

Do you think you can manage it?”

“O yes, I can manage quite well. I have a fish of my own, you know.”

Damnation! That man was coming to the fish bowl. Leo (Cuthbert) Skatterly tried to disarrange the word he had spelled; but he was in a hurry and stubbed his nose, and then Gwendoline rolled the pebbles back into place as fast as he scrambled them.

And Gorden Gaster came to the bowl and saw the name that was spelled there.

“Ah, Leo,” he said softly. “There you are. I had wondered what your last experiment was and if it had been successful. I see that it has been, but you are at a disadvantage. There are so many things that militate against a goldfish in this world. There may be countless geniuses among them, but who would ever know? Yet a goldfish who spells could be dangerous. We may have to make other arrangements for you.”

Then Gorden put a finger in the water and stirred the pebbles, after which he called across the room to Mathilde:

“Honeybun, I have a fish of my own, as I told you. Since I will be moving in here as soon as things are settled, I thought it might be a good idea if I brought my fish over and put it in with these.”

“Will they get along?”

“O, perfectly. Goldfish are very clannish.”

“Bring it on over then.”

And Gorden bent low over the bowl and spoke to Leo:

“Skatterly, old fish, let’s see you get out of this one. You’ll like my fish, Fang. He looks like a goldfish but is part Burmese fighting fish. He isn’t very big, only a little larger than you. But he can eviscerate you in ten seconds. Good time that, what? Now this poses a problem for you, doesn’t it? We will see what taking thought will do for you now. Cheers.”

They were gone then, Mathilde and Gorden. And it did pose a problem. Leo brooded and was in a bad humor. No person has a right to kill another person twice; it is a little too much. On the other hand, Leo had the nagging feeling that if you permit a person to kill you twice, in some way you merit the second death.

And then with a feeling of horror he heard them return, and he knew that the new killer was in the room. Gorden had Fang in an ice cream box full of water. He poured the whole thing into the bowl. It left milky traces about them and had a peculiar taste.

And Fang, the goldfish who was part Burmese fighting fish, looked at Leo-Cuthbert with icy eyes, but did not attack. Not then he didn't, not while Mathilde and Gorden were still there. But already they showed signs of leaving.

"They will soon mix. Fish are always bashful at first. They'll get acquainted as soon as we leave them. Come along dear." And Gorden left with Mathilde.

Imagine a shark four inches long if you are only three inches. Imagine a lightning-killer and you in a goldfish bowl with him and no escape. Gorden had given Leo ten seconds (less two) before he killed him. How do you ask a killer fish to give you ten seconds? How do you practice detachment under the circumstances? And where in the room was there another living creature to which Leo could transfer? Yet it had to be done.

Leo-Cuthbert achieved a detachment of a sort while certain slices of his underbelly were detached from himself. And he almost achieved separation, as lengths of viscera were separated from himself. Then the introductions were over, and Fang came in for the kill; there was no doubt of it.

And once more it was like a high dive that Leo was afraid to take, like a leap across an abyss – but he must get it off to however unlikely a goal was left him. So he achieved separation.

Then Fang struck and broke the body of Cuthbert in half, and there was no life left in it at all.

He didn't know how long he had been a fly. Probably not long. A long-term fly isn't afraid of falling, and does not cling in terror to the mesh of a curtain. It seemed that he only gradually became conscious of his new state. But he was a fly, whoever he was and however he had become one.

Then it began to clarify, and memory swept over him like a diaphanous wave.



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