

POSTSCRIPTS

SPRING 2006

NUMBER 6



# Postscripts

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

## A SPARK IN THE DARKNESS

by Juliet McKenna

Plus Stephen Baxter  
Steven Erikson  
Rhys Hughes  
Garry Kilworth  
Conrad Williams  
and others



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## Contents

### Fiction

- A Spark In The Darkness  
*Juliet E. McKenna* .....11
- The Farouche Assemblage  
*Matthew Hughes* .....35
- The Mermaid Of Curitiba  
*Rhys Hughes* .....69
- The Hotel Room *Zoran Živković* .....90
- The Long Road *Stephen Baxter* .....107
- 12 Men Born Of Woman  
*Garry Kilworth* .....110
- The Veteran *Conrad Williams* .....120

### Non Fiction

- Editorial *Steven Erikson* .....3
- An Interview with Elizabeth Hand  
*Iain Emsley* .....56
- The Houdini Chain *Mike Ashley* .....80

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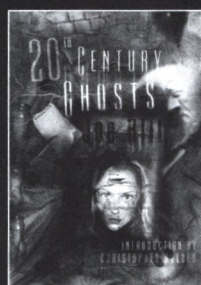
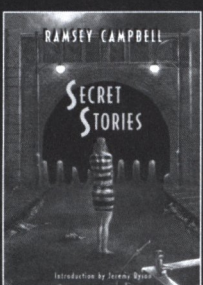
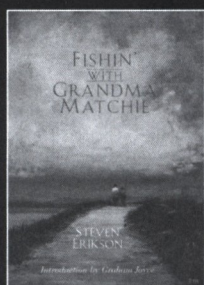
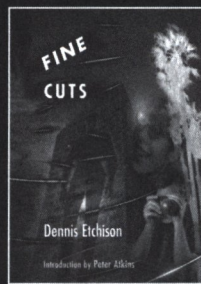
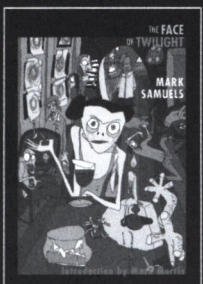
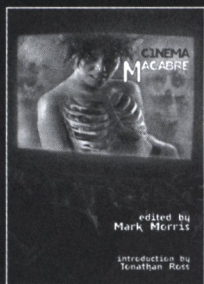
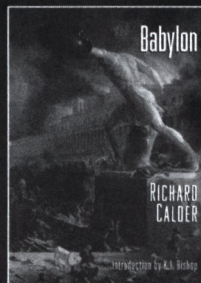
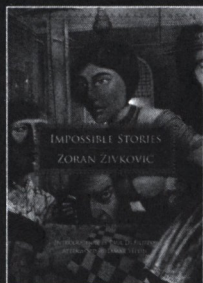
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THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

# PS PUBLISHING

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*A graduate of the celebrated Iowa Writer's Workshop, archaeologist/anthropologist Steven Erikson has wowed PS readers with two novellas featuring the irrepressible Bauchelain and Korbal Broach (Blood Follows and The Healthy Dead), plus a distinctly offbeat short SF novel (The Devil Delivered) and the wondrous tall tale that is Fishin' With Grandma Matchie. The third Bauchelain and Korbal Broach novella proceeds apace even as you read this (with the intention being to launch it at next year's World Horror Convention in Toronto) but fans of Steve's The Malazan Book of the Fallen should rest easy in the knowledge that none of this moonlighting activity has caused him to slow down that epic ten-volume series. Of course, after such diversity, you may think you're ready for anything Mr. Erikson could possibly think of to throw at you. Well, you may think that . . .*

---

# Editorial

## Steven Erikson

**V**oicing some kind of Trojan warcry, Max ran into the flames. We stared. We waited. Until the smoke closed in on all sides.

Well, seemed like a good place to start, but maybe a little exposition would help. Many years ago, somewhere in my late teens, I'd set out with three friends on a canoe trip into the wilds of the Whiteshell Park in Manitoba (now, before I go on and at the risk of pedantry, let's get our terminology straight: a 'canoe' is an open-topped craft usually navigated by two paddlers, each with a single-bladed paddle. One paddler sits at the bow and one at the stern. It was traditionally made using birch bark. Shaking your head? The word 'canoe' is from the First Nations linguistic family called the Algonquin—these people lived in boreal forest—pine and spruce forests in a landscape dotted with lakes and rivers. Canoes were used as a means of transportation and for the harvesting of wild rice, which involved sliding the canoe into reed beds, bending the long stalks and beating the hell out of them with sticks so that the rice grains filled the bottoms of the canoes. 'Kayak' is an Inuit word and is the name for a sea-going craft, traditionally made with hides and skins. Closed tops, except where the centrally positioned paddler sits. Usually propelled with a double-bladed paddle. Now, I have no idea why the terms are commonly reversed in the UK and among the event organizers in the Olympic Committee, but man, it drives me mad!)

Paddling two canoes in Whiteshell Provincial Park. In the company of a high school friend and two Cree against whom I'd played ice hockey a couple times. One of these Cree was a seminary student—but you'll get more of him shortly.

We were in our third day. Parking the cars at Big Whiteshell Lake, paddling

across that shallow nightmare (3 hours). Carrying packs and canoes on the straight-up-straight-down one-klick portage into Crowduck Lake (1.5 hours). Onto this gorgeous, huge, clear-watered lake that cannot be reached by any roads. Avoid Wood Tick Island and settle on Mouse Island for the night—unofficial names, but we'd done this lake before—Wood Tick Island was dominated by oaks, and wood ticks breed in oaks. So, nice place to pitch tents, provided you don't mind getting swarmed by vampire insects. Mouse Island is just that, an island seething with mice that arrive at dusk and proceed to invade every pack in search of improperly sealed foodstuffs (it's hard to explain, but mice can be a source of serious fear to the wilderness camper. They invade in the pitch black of night, skittering everywhere; the sound surrounds you as you lie in your tent, a constant susurrations—that suddenly freezes. Leaving dead silence. Something has spooked them, and, if one is an imaginative type, that dark world out there now has a new visitor. True, could be an owl. Just as likely it's a skunk, or a black bear. Skunks are not so bad. Bears can be very bad indeed, and while camping on an island reduces the risk, well, bears aren't afraid of swimming).

Second day. Paddle up the length of Crowduck Lake, the same lake that killed seven young canoers a year earlier—struck by lightning in a sudden storm—to reach a short portage that took us into Eaglenest Lake (5 hours), which is actually one of a chain of linked lakes comprising Winnipeg River—the one and only course available in this region to the Voyageur fur-traders a couple hundred years ago (and on the portage tracks skirting nasty rapids, one can still find plum trees, born of pits cast to the trailside by guys with names like Jacques Olat). A short hook this time round in Eaglenest, as we cut back to the west shore and a particularly ugly, long portage (3 hours) down into three small lakes, Saddle, Sidesaddle and Echo—where the walleye fishing is very fine indeed. Reward for the grueling portage: sizzling fillets of walleye in the pan.

That night, a haze settled on the forest to the west and north, creeping down onto the lake and eventually reaching the small island on which we were camped. Woodsmoke. We'd known the fire-risk was high—the signs posted the obvious at the park entrance—weeks and weeks of dry, hot weather, thunderstorms beating across the horizons . . . .

Years later, working in the same kind of region as a field archaeologist, the chance of being recruited to fight a fire came with the territory, and in our camp supplies we'd have the required kit in anticipation of that possibility. I remember being damned near blasé (in the peculiar bravado of youth, though I think I lost that when, on one dig, we were all crop-dusted with Malathion two days running).

Third day, back out into Eaglenest Lake. Then, as we contemplated a swing back south—reversing our route—eyeing the wreaths of smoke to the northwest, down

comes a Norseman, pontoons drumming the waves, and before we knew it we were grounding our canoes in the bush and climbing aboard. Press-ganged to take on the 'smoke'—although even from the air we couldn't make out much in the way of flames. A jaw-rattling pounding on a stretch of the Winnipeg River, the pilot swinging the Juicy-Fruit-painted plane in towards the base camp, the water visible through the smudged windows a thick soup of ashes and floating, blackened brush.

Surprise. Half the crew in this camp were young women—university students working for credit in the forestry service. Our teenaged sojourn of morose celibacy (well, it wasn't morose until just then) now seemed happily at an end.

Crash course in firefighting, with the promise of a new pair of boots as our reward at the conclusion. Our tools: brush-hooks, axes, machetes, and these aluminium water-tanks one strapped to the back—like one of those flamethrower things used in the Second World War. The hose was held in both hands and pumped like a shotgun, or, for those with filthier minds, something else. Weighed something fierce, and the canvas shoulder-straps were designed for some prototype cyborg firefighter still in the blueprint stage.

With these simple but effective instruments, we were told, we would stop a thirty-thousand hectare forest fire. Before it jumped Winnipeg River—before it reached our side, that is.

In defence of propriety (probably unnecessary but what the hell) we'll call my high school buddy . . . Buddy. We'll call our seminary student Cree Indian Robert and his bone-bruising fellow Cree, William.

We were Squad Eight and introduced to our squad leader, this grizzled bow-legged ogre with a mad glint in his eyes. Max.

Hut hut hut to an aluminium sixteen foot Lund boat. Max pulls the cord on the forty horse Evinrude outboard motor like he was garroting his third wife (I base this alarming simile on remembered pieces of Max's monologues afterward), then, teeth bared, he guns the engine and we're off, into smoke and ashes, eastward.

A half-mile later we can see neither shore—just smoke. We're still running with the current, and William mentions the set of killer rapids he seems to recall as somewhere close on this stretch. Rapids that had swallowed fur traders—their huge York Boats, their tonnes of cargo, their hapless selves. We discuss this. We note the absence of lifejackets. We observe the ogre's squinting black marble eyes and his ash-flecked teeth.

As the first wave of serious heat slams into us.

Fire's jumped the river. This observation comes from Robert, who as a student of God is, atypically, a paragon of brevity. Robert's idea of God doesn't quite jive with that of his many mentors. Robert's God is a many-headed thing. It has tentacles. It has crawled up from the lifeless sands of the Mideast, trying to find rem-

nants of the tribe it spawned five thousand years ago. It is a God with all the vindictive malice and rage of a desert sandstorm. It is a God that, he now notes, usually cannot cross open water. But . . .

Reminded of vampires by his terse observations, I look back at Max, and decide that my instincts were correct—Max is not human. He's glaring at the smoke, engine toned down and bow turned into the current to keep us in one place . . . maybe. And he's talking. Telling us about once finding his legs on fire, pulling out his whatsit (yes, he called it that) and pissing the flames out. He says he's bald only because of having his hair burnt away too many times. That and his natural virility. Vi as in die. Vi-rility.

Fire's jumped the river. It's a big river. Max grins then guns the boat for the south shore . . . maybe.

Buddy's at the bow. He yells, then dives straight forward. The rest of us, barring Max who holds fast to the outboard's throttle, are all flung off our benches, landing in various awkward positions among unforgiving equipment. I find myself staring at the nicked and notched edge of a brush-hook, the blade's cold metal pressed against my nose.

We made shore. We crashed shore. There's a dent the size of Max's squarish head in the Lund. Buddy is lying on bedrock just beneath a toppled tree. His nose is broken. The lower half of his face is crimson and leaf-matter and twigs.

Gusts of heat assail us.

Max bellows incomprehensible commands—seems he's bitten his own tongue almost in half, so blood is spraying with every word.

Grabbing equipment, stumbling onto shore—we can hear the fire, a roar punctuated by sharp explosions—spruce trees, all that sap, the poor things detonate like gunshots (they do the same during cold-snaps in winter—*crack!* I have always felt sorry for black spruce). Max rushes past us. We think he says: let's find this beauty, boys!

Water-tanks strapped on, brush-cutting tools in gloved hands, we follow.

He's out there, says Robert.

Who?

God. He's in this forest, tearing up trees with His holy tentacles. It does no good to stand tall.

Now that's loquacious for Robert. We're pushing through deadfall, our eyes feeling brittle and dried out, sinuses stinging, we're coughing, we can barely see Max surging ahead like a moose in blackfly season—no obstacle brooked in the mad, crazed charge.

William punches Robert in the arm. Only William can do this—we saw Robert take a cue stick in both hands once, at a small-town bar where we'd been kicking the asses of the local lads at *their* pool table, lads who decided they didn't like us,



especially those Indian bastards—Robert may belong to God, but even a gentle soul has limits. William punches and says: What the hell you talking about?

We're in God's world now, Robert replies, calm as you like. And continues: He's given up on Creation, you see. He ate our people alive, you know. He took the language from our throats. He took the buffalo from the plains. He's making a new desert. You'll see.

Pragmatic me says: It's a forest fire, Robert. Some lightning strike—  
Yes.

I shut up.

He's here. Close. I can feel him.

I can't breathe—my nose. That cry is from Buddy, he's straggling, gasping, thick threads of blood swinging down from his face.

William turns, halts Buddy. Places the heels of his hands to either side of Buddy's nose, then straightens it.

Buddy reels back, falls on his butt, stares up at William with an expression of agony. The blood coming from his nostrils froths. He coughs, then climbs to his feet.

We continue on.

But Max is nowhere in sight.

Still no sign of actual flames. Smoke and ash and heat, roar and gunshots.

We stumble ahead.

Find a clearing, a boggy depression in the folds of Precambrian Shield bedrock. This rock is one of the oldest exposed surfaces on the planet. Three billion years. It's felt the weight of more ice ages than we can count, the last one ending ten thousand years ago. It's in rebound, rising now that a mile's worth of ice is gone. Its grey, black and pink surface is visible on all sides round the edges of the glade. That stone is hot to the touch.

We stand in the clearing, vaguely damp muck at our ankles.

And there, before us, high goutts of fire above the trees.

The heat is overwhelming, the air swirling, spinning the wreaths of grey smoke.

Max plunges into view. We think he says, There's the fire, boys. Start cutting a line.

He points left. He points right.

Then he spins round and charges into the fire. Voicing his tragic warcry.

In those days of primitive communications, each squad has a walkie talkie. It's strapped to Max's belt. He hasn't used it once.

We watch him disappear. Stare into the smoke, then eye our machetes, brush-hooks, axes, our one spade.

Crouching, Buddy uses the river water in his tank to wash his face. He hacks and spits.

Robert finds this the right time to take a piss.

William walks to one side, eyes the bank of bedrock, then scrambles up it and starts chopping at a spruce tree.

I head the other way, sliding the machete I'd been holding back into its pathetic vinyl sheath. I draw an axe I'd strapped to one side of my water tank, and carefully remove its leather cover. There's a tree that I decide needs taking down. It should take me maybe thirty minutes. I wonder if I am being overly ambitious.

We don't know it at the time, but our thirty thousand hectare fire is now a sixty-thousand hectare fire. Spanning the Winnipeg River. Not a jump, but another lightning strike. God doesn't like crossing open water, but He takes long strides.

Someone back in the park office has just picked up the phone to call in the army. Planes are in the air. Bombing co-ordinates relayed. In lake after lake big planes descend to skim the surface, scooping up water, loons, ducks and white bass. And, if there's any truth to that forest-fire-fighter legend, at least one scuba diver.

Max has run into hell. We don't expect to see him again. William is knocking down black spruce trees and dragging them back. Buddy is taking a machete to the elm thickets and the alder and birch saplings skirting the glade. Robert joins me at my giant pine—he watches for a moment, then he wanders past.

My lungs are burning. I find swinging an axe while wearing a water-filled tank is a little too much like hard work, so I take the pack off, then resume my efforts. When in the bush, I wear contact lenses instead of glasses—I know that sounds strange—and I am now regretting it. When all this is done I will have to throw those contacts away, and both my eyes will be infected and slightly burned, requiring a week of gooey application with some kind of analgesic antibiotic. At the moment, I begin to fear the plastic lenses have melted onto my eyeballs.

Pausing for a cough, I glance to my right and see God's red tentacles, lashing through the tops of trees. Robert walks back to me and points with his brush-hook. More flames, ahead, and back on my left. I turn to face the route we'd taken in. Is that fire? I am trying to look through milky clouds.

We're surrounded, says Robert, leaning on his brush-hook. The Fates have come for us.

What Fates? I demand. You're a seminary student!

My grandfather said I would burn in hell. I was seven. Then he said he was sending me to a school for Christians where I could learn all about hell.

Liar.

That's not the point.

I gave up on the tree and dragged my sloshing water-tank one handed back into the centre of the clearing. Robert followed, brush-hook tilted on one shoulder.

Buddy and William had made similar discoveries and both were trudging over to join us.

William dropped suddenly to one knee and gingerly picked up a leopard frog. Like us, it had nowhere to go. He slips the catatonic creature into his shirt pocket.

A demon of ash and sparks and smoky tendrils charges into the glade. It's yelling something, waving its hands. In one of those hands is a walkie talkie.

Above the roar, now, a new sound. A heavy droning, swiftly escalating to drown out all else.

A source of argument forever after, which among the four of us clued in first. I remain convinced it was me, since I hit the dirt without even seeing the others make a move, but even then I'll grant it was a close run thing.

A lake landed on us.

We came very close to drowning in a forest fire. Robert said God took a moment to heave a gob of spit our way. Not mercy. More like contempt.

We walked out on a sodden river, straight back to our hapless Lund.

We never even used our water-tanks, with the exception of Buddy. I hacked into a pine tree maybe a sixth of the way through, not even to its heartwood. It's probably still there, some knot of twisted bark scabbed over the wound (do they do that? I hope so). William released the leopard frog with complete lack of ceremony—we didn't even see him do it. The Cree are real bastards when it comes to stuff like that—they tell you nothing (it was months before William mentioned, in passing, that he was about to marry for the third time and that he already had three children, all this at twenty years of age). Buddy was breathing through his nose again, somewhat loudly, but it did heal more or less straight. And at the sexfest at base-camp (a new base-camp) that night, Robert reiterated the fact that he'd yet taken no vows, barring the one about one day strangling God with his own two hands.

Max probably went on to fight other fires, or start them. Guys like that you can never tell. We never heard a word about him either way.

Years later, I walked the fire's path for a time. The three billion old bedrock was bright pink. Lichen and moss gone, a few scattered deer antlers. Skeletal trees rose here and there. God had indeed scoured it down to the stone. But low growth had just begun to appear in pockets and folds and insects buzzed in the air. Downstream on the Winnipeg River, at a place called Sturgeon Falls, a team of underwater archaeologists were bringing up artifacts from at least six separate disasters of the fur trade era. I stayed upstream a ways (see one dig . . .). Eating plums on the trail.

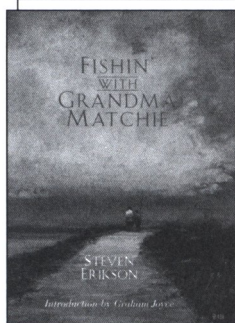
The story's done. Nothing special or inventive in the crafting. Maybe the kind I'd relate in a pub after a few pints. There's a rather surreal version appearing in a novel I wrote a couple years back (*When She's Gone*, under my 'other' name). Some might even, upon hearing it, shake their heads and think *tall tale*. So I will leave it as it is, saddling Pete with a most peculiar editorial for this edition of *Postscripts*.

One last thing, though. All you writers out there, machetes and brush-hooks in hand, water-tanks on your backs, facing this quadrillion hectare fire, how are you all doing?

I sometimes think on Robert's vow, the only vow he ever related to me, one night round a campfire with mice scampering in the darkness beyond. And I wonder how far along he is, now, on that grim path.

On darker days, I sometimes feel I am walking right there with him.

And a shiver runs through, right through, my soul.

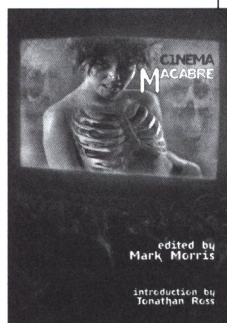


So they're telling me I need to talk about what I talked about in all these pages which had my bestest cover ever with green crayon and blue crayon because they're the only ones Glora Feeb hasn't eaten yet and bits of bark and moss and a dragonfly water beetle which is what they are before they crawl out and unwrap their wings, but it's only the shell because the dragonflies climb out through a hole in the beetle's back and then they dry up, which is what I'm going to do when I dry up too, climb out through the hole, I mean. And that's what was on the cover using LePage's glue, the white stuff that tastes like toothpaste without the mint or chili pepper if it's my sister's toothpaste when she's not looking because she's too busy staring at her new phone all the time, probably because it doesn't work, it's got no cord! But that cover's gone I don't know where maybe

to the Smithsonian and I'd tied strings through the holes to keep all those pages in order, especially since I forgot to number them, only it's not real string it's five lb test monofilament fishing line that says 8 lb on the box but it's old and Grandma Matchie says fishing line that's old doesn't weigh as much as when it's new, not that I can tell the difference can you? Besides it's not like pages weigh a lot or fight back much. Anyway the pages I'm supposed to talk about got numbers now because grown-ups are obsessed with putting things in order but I'm not good at taking orders which is where all the trouble started so I'll stop now. the end.

Horror movies are big business. Ever since the first flickering images started appearing on that magical silver screen, people have enjoyed being scared. What is it that compels us to seek out the kinds of experiences we wouldn't dream of wishing for in real life? Is it the visceral thrill, the physical kick to our system that we crave? Or are the reasons more deep-rooted? Are horror movies like waking dreams, sluicing out the clutter of our unconscious minds, purging our anxieties and fears by confronting us with them in a safe environment?

In *Cinema Macabre* the editor, Mark Morris, asked fifty genre practitioners to elect their favourite horror movie and to wax lyrical about it. The choices are eclectic, enlightening, occasionally startling. Come with us as we delve into some of the most fertile, imaginative minds working in the genre today, as we examine what frightens those who in turn frighten us.



*Juliet E. McKenna is approaching the end of The Aldabreshin Compass series, as Eastern Tide (2005) brings that particular story full circle. But, she adds, "It's becoming apparent that no one is returning to the point where they started. If it's to be more than an inadequate literature of trite consolation, fantasy fiction must explore the impact of the events it portrays, especially on individuals and their relationships. Such changes are central to 'A Spark in the Darkness'. Livak's friend Halice had been crippled in an accident in The Thief's Gamble. The tensions this created between them erupted in The Swordsman's Oath. This story offers a chance to see what happened between those first two tales of Einarinn, and to explain the enduring hatred that these two women and their allies Sorgrad and Sorgren feel for the iniquitous Arle Cordainer."*

---

# A Spark In The Darkness

## Juliet E. McKenna

According to my friend Halice, summer solstice is the favourite festival out in the fields and farms. All through For-Summer everyone's longing to drop their hay rakes and spend a handful of days idling and drinking before the back-breaking labour of harvest. She should know; she was born in one of those hamlets so far off the high road, it was reputedly founded by some peddler who got lost trying to sell ribbons to the peasants for their frolics around the ricks and stooks.

Any peddler with any sense heads for a town with stout walls, welcoming inns and open-handed merchants for the winter solstice festivities. I was born and bred in Vanam, proudest of the cities grown rich on the trade between forest and plains, mountains and sea, so winter solstice has always been my preferred festival. As we rode

into Kadrass, the port's gates and buildings were decked with evergreen boughs and garlands of ivy. I saw lively anticipation on faces all around. The children were the most excited: bright eyed and rosy cheeked as they hugged their hopes to themselves. Let slip what they longed to find crowned with mistletoe before the hearth on Solstice morning and they risked finding that Trimon, god of travel and music, had brought only a bare yew wand from the depths of the forest, so their parents could switch them for their greed.

Even with the hum of expectation thrilling through Kadrass, I couldn't recall a solstice when I'd felt less festive. Not even the year when I'd realised it was pointless hoping for anything special, because my gift would be whatever the mistress chose to discard and graciously allowed my house-keeper mother to claim. I stole a

sideways look at Halice as we jolted across uneven cobbles in the carrier's cart. She looked more grim faced than those elders who would be quenching all the lights in the house to mark the passing of the year. Once the happy children were safely abed, the adults would be remembering those who had died, and those who had never been born, before kindling new flame on the hearth.

'This is as far as you go for a silver mark.' The carter pulled his shaggy coated gelding up short and looked back over his shoulder.

'You can take us a bit further, can't you?' I wheedled, smiling at the coarse faced man in his shabby sacking hood as if we'd been friends all our lives.

'This is good enough, Livak.' Halice reached down among the sacks of dried beans and tight-sealed barrels of salt beef for her crutch. She slid awkwardly along the narrow bench seats on either side of the wain and dropped to the road before I could help. Trying not to let my exasperation show, I grabbed our modest baggage and jumped down, ready to offer her a hand. Balancing on her sound foot, she warned me off with a glare as she settled her crutch in her armpit and tested it on the slippery cobbles. The carter clicked his tongue at his horse without a backward glance and the wagon rumbled away.

'Where do we go now?' I couldn't recall the last time we'd stopped in Kadras for longer than it took to get a change of horses and a scanty meal from one of the eating houses pressed

up against the outer face of the town wall.

'Somewhere with a fire where I can get a bottle of white brandy,' Halice scowled. Pain was carving deeper lines in her face with every passing day. I was achingly stiff after spending most of a day perched on that wagon, bracing myself against every frozen rut in the road, so Saedrin only knew how much worse she felt.

The carter had dropped us where the main road escaped the cluster of houses around the Northgate and sprawled wider for a stretch. I glanced around so Halice wouldn't see the concern in my eyes, on her account and on account of other worries I would rather not acknowledge. I tried to keep my voice neutral. 'Where do you suppose Sorgrad and Sorgren have got to?'

There hadn't been room in the wagon for our travelling companions, even if we'd been willing to pay a second silver mark, and I'd lost sight of them in the press of people, pack animals and vehicles waiting their turn at the gate.

'Probably arguing the toss over paying the gateward—' Halice broke off and nodded. 'There they are.'

Sorgrad was wearing a caped hood neatly tailored in russet wool against the raw wind coming up off the sea. Gren goes bareheaded in all but a blizzard and his blonde hair was bright as pale flame as the noon brightness faded to grey overcast above. He waved cheerily as the two of them drew closer,

his cornflower blue eyes alight with mischief. 'Had a comfortable ride in your elegant carriage, my ladies?'

Halice ignored him, turning to Sorgrad. 'Do you know a decent inn anywhere close?'

'I can find one.' Sorgrad pushed back his hood to reveal hair as blonde as his brother's. 'But we generally stay down towards the docks when we're passing through.'

'On our way to Col.' A scowl clouded Gren's sunny smile.

Halice kept her sombre gaze on Sorgrad. 'I don't want to go anywhere where we might be known.'

There was a moment of awkward silence between us amid all the bustle of the townsfolk.

'Mind your backs!' A shout went up as a small flock of sheep came down the road, brindled dogs keeping them in a tight huddle. The aged, barren ewes watched their captors with jaundiced eyes, as if they knew they had only been fed their turnip tops through the autumn so they could play the part of fresh mutton in the winter festivities.

'This way.' Sorgrad headed for a side road twisting between two wooden framed houses whose stepped upper stories nearly met over the cobbles. I tried to keep an unobtrusive eye out for any filth or loose stones that might hinder Halice.

'You want to find your skirts when you unpack your bag,' Gren observed with amusement. 'I don't think these good folk are used to seeing such a shapely arse as yours in buff breeches.'

'They'll be too busy wondering what autumn storm blew such an undersized runt down from the mountains,' I retorted with a grin.

Mind you, with Kadras being a trading port in its own right and more importantly, the main stopping place for folk on their way to the seductions of the mighty city of Col, there were other people around with the shorter, stockier stature of the hill folk. Sorgrad and Gren weren't particularly noticeable, even if the locals mostly lacked the true golden hair of the Mountain race. There were heads as coppery as mine here and there; we weren't so far from the Great Forest where my father had been born, before he took to wandering, before he left my mother with me as token of their ill-starred liaison.

While I was the only woman I could see in breeches, boots and a thick winter jerkin, I didn't think that was what was drawing curious covert glances our way. Halice might be wearing plain indigo skirts and the heavy black cloak of a respectable matron but she was still taller than four out of every five men we passed and as broad across the shoulders as most. Added to that, there was the mystery of her twisted leg, her foot barely touching the ground and plainly unable to support her weight as she leaned heavily on her crutch. I could see the question in the faces we passed: just what injury or deformity was concealed beneath her sturdy flannel petticoats?

'Over there?' I looked to see Sorgrad pointing at a sign announcing the inn

in question was called The Speckled Duck.

‘It’ll do,’ Halice said curtly.

Sorgrad pushed open a nail studded oaken door that had seen better days. The timbers of the walls hadn’t seen a fresh coat of pitch this winter or for several past and the plaster coating the wattle between them was dingy with mossy stains. Still, I’m used to trusting Sorgrad over far more important things than where to find a bug-free bed and unwatered wine. Gren held the door for Halice, winning a narrow glare for his pains. I followed her inside.

The inn proved more prepossessing inside than out. The walls had been fairly recently limewashed and the lamps in their niches glowed with neatly trimmed wicks beneath polished glass cowls. The boot-scarred floorboards were clean swept and a fresh yew bough rested on the chimney piece. Brass fire irons gleamed and the hearth was well tended. I always like to see such signs of a well-ordered house, even if I had run as far and as fast from a housemaid’s life as I could.

The men around the tap room glanced up, incurious, and returned to low-voiced conversations and half-drunk tankards of stout winter ale. Like the inn, they could have done with some refurbishing. Long sleeved jerkins were worn shiny at the elbows or boasted patches from some garment sacrificed to keep a few others wearable that bit longer. A couple boasted leather gaiters, dark with age, against the winter cold and damp. Most had

simply wrapped their lower legs with sacking secured with knotted twine. There were no wanton girls displaying gooseflesh and dyed chicken feathers: working men came to The Speckled Duck to drink and that was all.

Gren looked at a trio playing a desultory hand or two of runes by the fire. ‘I don’t see us getting into any very lucrative game here.’

‘Then we won’t be fouling our own nest,’ I countered. Besides, I wasn’t in the business of fleecing poor but honest folk. Plundering the rich and greedy makes far better sense for so many reasons.

Gren’s thoughts had taken the same turn. ‘The fattest game in Kadras won’t hold a candle to what we could find in Col.’ He slid a sideways glance at Halice.

‘We’ll talk about that in the morning. I need to sit down and I need a drink.’ The unguarded pain in her harsh words rang loud in the hush of the tap room.

‘You can sit here, mistress.’ A man in the nondescript garb of an artisan sank the last of his ale. ‘Get a bit of fire.’ He nodded at his mate who obligingly finished his drink and stood up.

‘Thank you,’ said Halice through gritted teeth. She manoeuvred herself awkwardly around the battered black table and sat down heavily on the high backed settle.

‘Can I get you a cushion, mistress?’ A serving lass in sensible brown skirts and a high necked blouse beneath her respectable green bodice had appeared



unnoticed. She smiled at Halice with warm pity.

‘Thank you,’ Halice said curtly. The girl was lucky. If she’d been a man, that incautious compassion would have won her a response as cutting as the sword Halice had been wont to earn her livelihood with. ‘And a bottle of white brandy.’

‘For the gentlemen?’ The girl’s smile faltered somewhat as Gren’s cheery smirk made it plain he was no gentleman. ‘And what will you ladies take? A nice tisane?’ She included me in this generous offer, even though the men were looking askance at my breeches.

‘The brandy’s for me.’ There was an edge in Halice’s words.

‘Nothing for me, thank you,’ I said hastily. ‘I’m going out.’

‘Me too.’ Sorgrad surprised me. ‘Gren, you stay here and keep Halice company. And arrange us some rooms.’

Sorgren opened his mouth to protest and I shot him a warning look. ‘You can go out looking for mischief later. Just be careful. You can’t go to Col if you’re in the Watch’s lock-up here.’

‘Sit down, Gren,’ Halice roused herself momentarily to command him with all the authority of the captain of mercenaries she’d once been. ‘You can at least play a few hands of runes with me.’

‘It’ll cost you a share in that white brandy.’ Gren sat down amiably enough, pulling a bag of rune bones from his pocket.

‘Come on.’ Sorgrad nodded towards the door and I followed him. ‘Where are we going?’ he asked as we paused on the splintered step at the threshold.

‘I want to find an apothecary.’ I curbed an impulse to look back and check on Gren. ‘He won’t go off and do anything foolish, will he?’

Sorgrad shook his head. ‘He won’t leave Halice on her own and if I’m not there, he can’t leave her with me. What do you want with an apothecary?’ He led the way down the winding lane away from the high road.

‘There’s a decent piece of trade with the Archipelago that bypasses Col for Kadras, for the sake of offloading this much further up the gulf.’ I glanced at the shabbily modest houses on either side. ‘There must be some apothecary with Aldabreshin poppy syrup in his stores. That would do more for Halice’s aches and pains than all this brandy she’s drinking.’

‘It might do something to sweeten her mood.’ Sorgrad looked upwards at the leaden sky. A spatter of rain struck cold across our faces and he pulled his hood forward. ‘Let’s find ourselves something warming before we go looking. I know a place down this way.’

We hurried along the lane until we turned a corner into a wider street where a considerably larger tavern offered open doors to all comers despite the worsening weather. The inn sign was a massive wooden carp, expertly carved and gilded and the tap room was full of merchants and traders anticipating the opening day of festival

three days hence. Sorgrad slid past a vociferous group and secured a table that someone had left incautiously vacant.

'Lamb's wool, master? Mistress?' A sharp-eyed serving girl with a sprig of mistletoe tucked behind one ear and a trayful of empty tankards stopped beside us. The lace-trimmed neck of her fine lawn blouse traced a fine line between saucy and sluttish.

'Thank you.' Sorgrad favoured her with a winning smile. With his vivid blue eyes and the clean lines of his strong boned face, he could be very winning indeed when he put his mind to it.

I was watching the would-be revellers. They were well-enough oiled to be careless in a game of chance but I wouldn't wager much on my chances of getting such frivolity started. The travellers would all be keeping their purse strings knotted tight until they got to Col.

Sorgrad followed my gaze. 'You and Halice might still get seats on the roof of a coach to Col.'

'She couldn't manage it, not with that leg.' I let Sorgrad see my weariness. He was the only one I would let see it.

'She can't walk it,' Sorgrad pointed out. 'So are you going to hire a gig and postillions?'

I had no answer to that, so just sighed.

The girl reappeared with two tankards and set them down in front of us.

'Thank you.' Sorgrad rewarded her

with another smile and a silver mark besides.

'Don't be too free with our coin,' I warned him in an undertone. Taking up my tankard, I sipped at warmed ale sweetened with honey. Ginger and nutmeg added a taste of the sun that shines year round on the barbarous islands of the Aldabreshin Archipelago far to the south.

'Gren doesn't see why we should stint ourselves.' Sorgrad took a mouthful of the baked apple pulp stirred into the beer and now floating on the top. It didn't look that much like lamb's wool to me but then I've no interest in sheep beyond whether they're roast or stewed. 'You've got plenty of coin and he says we can soon fill our purses in Col.'

'I had plenty of coin,' I corrected him. 'I've got a cursed sight less after paying for a decent bed for Halice every night and for enough white brandy to get her to sleep.' Something in Sorgrad's unrelenting sapphire gaze challenged me. 'What?'

'I just wanted to hear you say it.' His voice was soft. 'Now tell me why you're nowhere near as keen as Gren on travelling to Col for the festival. I can understand Halice doesn't want to see pity in people's eyes but come on, Livak, we don't keep secrets from each other.'

'It's what we do when we get there that's bothering me.' I prodded at the bobbing apple pulp topping my ale. 'Fishing the festival for fools is all very well as long as we can run fast enough

to keep one step ahead of the Watch and two steps ahead of anyone whose purse we've just emptied. I don't fancy our chances with Halice slowing us down. And the most lucrative games in Col will be where I don't want to go without her sword to back me up. No offence, 'Grad, but someone has to be in a fight with you and Gren to realise they're going to come off second best. They just look at Halice and think better of it.' I drank deep. 'Or they used to.'

'I don't deny it.' Sorgrad wiped a trace of foam from his mouth. 'And there are plenty of questions about what we do after the festival, even if we work a profit there.'

'What do you mean?' I looked at him, concerned.

'What do we usually do after solstice?' he challenged me. 'We see what scents might be worth following and plan some joint enterprise, or we go our separate ways after agreeing where to meet at equinox in a city big enough to offer some fun. What are we going to do this spring? Halice can't be waiting in some thicket with a pair of fast horses while you trail a lure for some easily distracted lordling.'

'She was talking about playing recruiting sergeant for one of the mercenary bands over in Lescar,' I offered reluctantly. 'She knows that game well enough and there are always pickings in the camps for me. Mercenaries gamble away anything that's not blood and bone.'

Sorgrad wasn't about to let me get

away with that. 'And they turn uglier than rabid dogs when the run of the runes goes against them. Do you want to try facing them down without Halice fighting fit?'

I tried a last hopeful throw of the bones. 'You and Gren could back me up.'

'Take Gren into a mercenary camp and you'll spend so much time getting him out of fights you won't have a chance to take your runes out of your pocket,' Sorgrad said tartly. 'Besides, we've a few plans of our own it might be time to pursue,' he continued rather mysteriously.

'Just the two of you.' The warm ale sat heavy in my stomach.

'It would hardly be the first time,' he reminded me. 'And you took off on your own all last summer.'

'Not through choice,' I retorted. 'I told you: it was agree to work for those wizards or be handed over for flogging or hanging as the local justice saw fit.'

'Gren's getting restive,' Sorgrad said after a silence callously filled by the jollification all around us. 'He sees as well as you or me that Halice can't play her part in any of the old schemes.'

'And he doesn't want to be shackled to a cripple?' The bitterness in my own voice shocked me. I bit my lip.

'He wants some way of coming up with enough coin to keep her out of some poorhouse,' Sorgrad chided. 'Without her arguing that we're beggaring ourselves on her account.'

'Him and me both,' I admitted ruefully.

'We're more likely to manage that on our own,' he said bluntly. 'Him and me.'

'Yes, you are,' I admitted, defeated.

'So we need a good reason for you and Halice to stay snug somewhere while we do it,' Sorgrad continued more robustly.

I nodded. 'Before she cites every mercenary band's articles of association that she can think of which say those as can't fight must be cut loose.'

'If she wants me to cut her loose, she'll have to fight me for it.' Sorgrad drained his ale. 'Twisted leg and all.'

'We owe her better than that.' I pushed away my drink unfinished. 'I wish I'd cut myself loose from those wizards. I might have been able to do something, if I'd been there when she was laid up with that leg.'

'No.' Sorgrad laid his broad, hard skinned hand over mine. 'A bad break of her thigh bone like that with deep, dirty wounds besides? She was lucky to keep the leg at all. And at least you came back from whatever trouble those wizards dragged you into with a full purse. Halice would be a cursed sight worse off without that.'

'So what do we do?' I sighed again, more heavily this time.

'We go to Col,' Sorgrad said firmly. 'We look for a few safe games to earn our keep, so you needn't dip any deeper into your wizard's gold. We keep our ears open for some likely prospect for me and Gren, as well as thinking up something to keep you and Halice busy through the spring that doesn't rely on

her looking ugly with a sword to keep you safe.'

'And we pay up when someone offers us a map to the lost treasures of the Plains People while we're at it?' My heart wasn't really in the jest. I couldn't think of any scheme me and Halice could work between us, not with her crippled.

'It wouldn't hurt.' Sorgrad grinned, a glint in his eye. 'A stash of Eldritch gold would solve our problems for a while.'

I laughed despite myself. 'Only if you can find a way to spend it before it turns back into sunshine.'

'We could sell the map on at a profit.' Sorgrad finished his ale. 'I'll show you where to find an apothecary and we'll see if some poppy syrup brightens Halice's day.'

The winter day was appreciably gloomier when we went outside. I shivered in a cold breeze tainted with the muddy reek of the salt flats down in the estuary. 'Where are you going?'

'Off to the south market, to bribe or bully someone into giving Halice their seat on a coach to Col.' Sorgrad's determination boded ill for some hapless traveller.

A few more turns took us to a better kempt street where apothecaries announced their trade with outsized replicas of their tools above their shop fronts.

I paused beside a door crowned with a lath and plaster mortar and pestle. 'Where shall I meet you?'

'Back at the Golden Carp for

another jug of lamb's wool?' Sorgrad suggested.

I gave an exaggerated shudder. 'Only if you buy me a decent flagon of wine to wash away the taste.'

'Fair enough.' Sorgrad went on his way without further ceremony and I pushed open the apothecary's door. As it turned out, he didn't have any poppy syrup but a neighbour down the street with a forbidding lancet engraved in the glass of his window obliged me with a small phial that should bring Halice some much needed respite. My spirits rose, and not just because I'd expected to pay twice as much as I actually did. With the small green bottle secure inside my shirt along with my purse, I retraced my steps.

A few of the windows glowed golden with candle light and honest working men were returning to warm hearths and welcoming families. A tall man with dark curly hair passed without sparing me a glance. I felt a pang that had nothing to do with Halice or Sorgrad or Gren.

Not so long ago, I'd watched another tall man with curly black hair walk away in another port city, half a season's travel on the far side of the powerful Tormalin Empire. We'd saved each other's lives, pulling free of the lethal tangle of wizard's concerns that had snared us both. He'd been returning to hearth and home and to his duty to his liege lord, and he'd invited me to come with him. I felt so drawn to him that I'd even considered it. I couldn't recall when I'd last been

tempted to abandon the life I led for any man.

I quickened my pace and reminded myself how Halice and I indulged in such idle fancies from time to time. To while away an uneventful evening, we would imagine ourselves as settled matrons dressed from elegant wardrobes. We would debate the merits of marrying a merchant as opposed to a master craftsman or possible even a landed noble. We'd long ago concluded we would require astonishingly luxurious mansions to house all the servants we would need to keep us in idleness, and to keep any brats out of sight and hearing.

As the level in the wine flagon sank, we would point out the disadvantages of such a lifestyle. We'd consider the likelihood of our hypothetical husband losing all his money to, well, someone like us or Sorgrad in a game of runes. Or in some fabulous speculation, like those our friend Charoleia excelled in laying before men whose wealth was only equalled by their gullibility. We would conclude that any husband would lose interest even in Halice's splendid physique or the alluring charms of my auburn hair and green eyes, once a few years of child-bearing had taken their toll. After all, what other reason would such a man have to marry beyond getting an heir to secure his fortune?

I turned up my collar against the cold and damp of the dusky alley. Ryshad had no fortune to bestow on any hypothetical child. He had made

it plain he didn't care a jot for my background or breeding. Just the memory of our snatched nights together warmed me. It was everything else he offered that tipped the scales against me accepting his embraces on a more permanent basis. His place was serving a mighty Tormalin noble, and his home was with a large and loving family. My mother came from a large and supposedly loving family. I'd run away from that straitened, judgmental existence as much as from a life cleaning up other people's messes. My grandmother had never tired of telling me no decent man would be prepared to wed a minstrel's bastard.

Life on the road had proved much more fun, once I'd honed my skills at tavern gambling, when I'd learned how best to distract an opponent with wide-eyed innocence or a casually unlaced shirt. Once I'd allied myself with Halice, my horizons as well as my winnings had expanded. The thrill had been as intoxicating as the rewards, as I'd followed Sorgrad and Gren into places I'd never have dared go on my own, to play far chancier games than a simple hand of runes with farmers or White Raven with some merchant who fancied himself a strategist.

A treacherous thought hovered around my head. If those days were truly gone, if Halice could be settled in some life where her crippled leg could be accommodated, perhaps I could go and see what opportunities there were for me in the shadier byways of Toremal, where I might

just happen to encounter Ryshad again.

I took the last turn that would take me back to the high road and a shadow crossed the mouth of the alley before me. Steps behind me hurried to round the corner I had just taken. I used my knife hand to undo the buttons of my other cuff and felt for the dagger I keep sheathed on my forearm. It seemed Kadras was big enough to have footpads. Footpads who hunted in packs. A couple were behind me, judging by the footfalls overlapping each other.

Two more appeared in the entrance to the alley, burly men who looked past me with an unconvincingly casual air. One wore a dirty red jerkin cut short in an old fashioned style that must have left him with a cold arse in this weather. The other wore a winter tunic that might once have been blue. Both wore small swords, which was common enough in these parts. I wished I had one as they sauntered towards me, still not looking me in the eye. Foolish of them, given everyone wishes complete strangers a fair festival at this time of year. I palmed my knife and acknowledged the two of them with a nod and cheery smile when they were a couple of strides away.

That disconcerted Dirty-blue just long enough for him to be a breath behind Chilly-arse in drawing his sword. Which meant it was Chilly-arse who got my knife deep in his forearm as I stepped inside the arc of his blade, rather than recoiling in the terror he'd

expected. He collapsed to his knees with a raw yell of pain and surprise, clutching his wounded forearm and whimpering as blood dripped from his nerveless fingers. I kned him hard in the side of the head, sending him sprawling across the hard-packed earth.

In the instant Dirty-blue just stood there gaping, proving that he was no professional mercenary, I ducked down to scoop up Chilly-arse's fallen sword and pressed my back to the reassuring solidity of the wall. Dirty-blue recollected why he was there and with two long strides, attacked. Taller and heavier than me, he opted for a hacking downward stroke. I stepped out of danger round to his blind side, forcing his blade away with a twist that Halice had shown me. The steel-edged toe of my boot in the side of his knee sent him staggering forward with an oath but he had the wit to turn to face me, waving his sword wildly.

A shout sounded back down the alley as the two who'd been trailing me sprang into action after a moment of frozen astonishment. They drew their own swords and came running, yelling abuse.

The run of the runes was still in my favour. Dirty-blue didn't see Chilly-arse lurch to his feet after ripping my dagger free from his forearm. That wasn't his wisest move, judging by the rapid increase in the blood flowing down his hand. He yelped as Dirty-blue stumbled against him and was roundly cursed for his pains. I took the

opportunity to draw another dagger from a discreet sheath in my boot-top and glanced back down the alley to see what was delaying the would-be reinforcements.

One was flat on his face and motionless, with an ugly wound to the back of his head that was visible even in this gloom. Sorgrad's sword blow had ripped away his hat and half of his scalp. The mountain man was forcing the other footpad back against the alley wall with a flurry of vicious strokes. Every time the man parried, he was forced to give ground.

Dirty-blue was coming for me again, face was twisted with aggressive determination, so I left Sorgrad to his amusements. Dirty-blue tried for a low slash at my legs. I parried with the salvaged sword and thrust at his face with my dagger. I had no hope of reaching him but instinct pulled him back regardless. As he recoiled, I brought the sword back and ripped through his jerkin to leave a stinging red score across a belly as pale as fish scales in the gloom. He cried out in pain and surprise.

'Leave it,' rasped Chilly-arse, clutching his wounded arm, blood now coating both his hands. 'He can have his money back!'

'Who can?' I raised my voice in hopes that Sorgrad might hear above the clash of steel echoing down the alley. 'Who paid you to jump me?'

'Curse him, and curse you.' Dirty-blue was backing away, his sword held warily up. Chilly-arse drew close to his



KENDALL 05



shoulder, face vicious. They retreated a few more paces, quickening as I took a slow step forwards, balanced, my weapons at the ready. With abrupt unspoken agreement, they turned and ran. I didn't give chase. My blood was up but I'm not that stupid.

'Wait—' Their abandoned ally's plaintive appeal was stifled as his momentary distraction gave Sorgrad the chance to lunge forward and seize his upper arm in an iron grip. As he forced the man's sword arm back against the wall, Sorgrad reversed his grip on his own sword, almost too fast to see. He smashed the hilt into the side of his attacker's head and the man went down like one of those sheep we'd seen earlier meeting a butcher's pole-axe.

Keeping a wary eye out towards the high road, I hurried back down the alley, sucking a sore graze across my knuckles. That would teach me to get into a sword fight without gloves on. 'You didn't hit him too hard?' Mountain Men grow up hauling sacks of ore from their mines or bundles of furs trapped in the forested heights and that builds muscles out of all proportion to their lesser height.

'What do you take me for?' Sorgrad spared the man at his feet a glance before satisfying himself no one else was lurking in some shadow to give us another festival surprise. 'I wouldn't much work as a mercenary in Lescar if I couldn't keep a man alive to be ransomed, now would I?'

'No,' I conceded, abashed. 'Sorry.'

Sorgrad squatted down to riffle our captive's pockets. 'He's the one who's going to be sorry. Go and get his mate's belt.'

The other man had died without making a noise. Rolling him over, I averted my eyes from the gaping ruin of the back of his head and from his slack face. I unbuckled his sword belt and tossed it over to Sorgrad. I noted muck from the road on his back and sleeve and a raw bruise darkening on his jaw that was the clear imprint of a boot. 'These two jumped you?'

'On the way back from the market. As soon as I played dead, they didn't bother looking any closer.' Sorgrad applied the skills he'd learned fighting other people's wars to securing the man's wrists and ankles. 'Seems they wanted their share of the fun with you. They reckoned they drew the short straw, being sent after me.'

'They weren't wrong.' I searched the dead man's jerkin and won a worn linen purse as our captive stirred. He opened bleary eyes to see Sorgrad grinning evilly at him.

'My friend, you have a choice,' the Mountain Man began conversationally. 'You can tell us who hired you, and everything he said, never mind if you think it's important or not, or—' Sorgrad rolled the man over with a hefty shove so he could see his dead companion. 'Or I'll cut your throat and you can stand with your friend before Saedrin and see if your explanations convince him to open the door to the Otherworld to you.'

‘The bastards left me.’ Disbelieving, the man screwed up his eyes, in pain both physical and mental. A massive bruise was swelling just in front of his ear where Sorgrad’s blow had landed.

‘The bastards left you to me,’ Sorgrad corrected with casual menace.

‘No such thing as honour among thieves, my friend.’ I spared a moment from keeping watch in both directions to thread the dead man’s scabbard onto my own belt. At least our attackers had picked a nice quiet alley.

‘Your pal over there got unlucky,’ Sorgrad continued. ‘We let those other two go with our mark on them and you can do the same if you tell us who really deserves the kicking for this.’

The man shook his head, eyes closed, which won him Sorgrad’s boot just below his ribs. He doubled up, gasping a thready whimper of distress.

Sorgrad rolled him over and planted his foot firmly on his chest until he recovered his breath. ‘If you’re thinking you’d rather be at the Watch’s mercy than mine, think again. I can kick your splintered ribs clean through your lungs before anyone hears you cry for help.’

Tears trickled down the sides of the man’s face and disappeared into his uncombed hair. ‘I don’t know his name,’ he protested hoarsely.

‘What did he look like?’ I interrupted the swing of Sorgrad’s boot. ‘Was he Lescari? Caladhrian?’

‘What did he want with us?’ Sorgrad prodded the man with a metal-shod toe.

‘He wanted—’ The man coughed. ‘He wanted you given a beating that would keep your minds off anything else for a couple of days.’ He slid a furtive glance in my direction. It wasn’t a beating they’d had planned for me: I could see that in his eyes.

I repaid him a vicious kick into the meat of his thigh. ‘You don’t know who he is and he convinces you to deal out a beating to two perfect strangers?’

‘You know I’ll be paying you back bruise for bruise and adding something for luck,’ promised Sorgrad. ‘If you want it to end there, tell us everything.’

‘We only met him a couple of days ago,’ our prisoner protested. ‘A stevedore we know down at the docks introduced us. He said there was someone on their way to Col with a fatter purse than all the rest put together.’ He stumbled over his words in his haste to save himself more pain. ‘He said he’d watch the gate and give us the nod. Once we snared the pigeon, we’d all share the gold. He paid us a token, as proof of good faith.’

‘He pointed me out as the pigeon?’ I was racking my brains for whoever could be behind this. No one knew about the wizard’s gold beyond the four of us. And Ryshad.

‘No.’ The man shook his head vehemently. ‘He said there was a change of plan. He said we’d no chance of taking the gold if you saw he was in town. He took us to the Speckled Duck.’ He shot Sorgrad a look of loathing. ‘When you two went out, he told us to follow. He said we had to catch you one at a time.’

Sorgrad looked at me, one brow raised and I read his thoughts in his eyes. So it wasn't the wizard's gold these scum were after.

I answered him with a significant look and saw he understood me. This mystery man must have had dealings with us in the past, if he knew any two of us could send twice our number of footpads running away with their tails between their legs. And he reckoned we would recognise him. Who could it be?

'Four against one, you'd have still been outmatched,' Sorgrad assured our prisoner.

'What was this man's name?' I interrupted with another kick for good measure. 'You must have called him something.'

Our captive shook his head frantically. 'He said his name didn't matter; he was just passing through.'

Sorgrad looked at me. 'If he sent these buffoons after us, do you suppose he's still keeping watch on Gren and Halice?'

'It's a good bet,' I nodded. 'I don't see those other two being too keen to tell him what happened and hand back his coin.'

'Let's find a way through the back alleys to the Speckled Duck,' Sorgrad said ominously.

I sheathed my sword as we walked away from the high road into the shadows. The dead man's scabbard wasn't a perfect fit for the salvaged blade but it would do.

'What about me?' our captive pro-

tested weakly behind us, struggling in his bonds.

We kept on walking. 'Who do you suppose it is?' Sorgrad mused.

'I can't think.' I was genuinely baffled. We always made a point of keeping on good terms with most of those making a living along the byways of law and custom like ourselves. Or made sure they had no notion of our right names or where we might be found again. Or we let Gren convince them it was in their best interests to avoid us in future.

'Whoever it is, he's going to regret it,' Sorgrad promised grimly. He paused where a still narrower alley crossed the one we were following. We followed the path until it veered away from the direction of the Speckled Duck. A discreet shortcut through a flagstoned back yard and over a brick-coped wall took us to a foetid lane running on the right bearing.

We slowed in mutual, unspoken agreement. Sorgrad's sword was in his hand. I drew mine. 'Where would be a good place to keep watch?' I wondered softly.

'We came and went through the front door,' Sorgrad observed. 'I'd say he'd be somewhere across the street.'

'Somewhere where he wouldn't stand out,' I hazarded.

'There are a couple of inns over yonder,' agreed Sorgrad.

'But most of the people hanging around for half a day in hopes of a coach will be down around the south market,' I frowned. 'Do you suppose

that friendly serving maid might be persuaded to go and look for some gossip from the wenches on the other side of the road? He'd recognise any of us, by the sound of it.'

'Let's see how well she's been getting on with Gren.' Sorgrad shot me a grin.

'Indeed,' I approved. It's a rare girl who can withstand Gren's blandishments.

Sorgrad pulled up short and frowned. 'Do you smell that?'

I sniffed. 'Smoke?' Harsh among the soft scent of wood fires in kitchen hearths, this had the acrid tang of a chimney blaze. I searched above the chimney stacks rising above the steep slate gables but couldn't see any sparks flying upwards.

As we stood silent for a moment, we heard commotion swelling somewhere ahead. Cries of belated alarm were raised, pierced by hysterical cries. I looked up at the stars just visible in the twilight sky to check my bearings. Sorgrad was orienting himself by the paths we'd followed. We looked at each other.

'If that's not the Speckled Dove, it's somewhere close.' It wasn't just the taste of smoke drying my mouth.

'He got tired of waiting.' Sorgrad was already running. 'He must be trying to burn them out.'

We didn't waste breath on any more talk. We ran. I burned with frustration as twists and turns in the maze of alleys took us five paces away from our goal for every ten we advanced towards it.

After what felt like half a season we saw the backyard of the inn ahead of us. A matronly cook and a covey of maids were milling around like headless chickens, getting comprehensively in the way of a gang of men from the tap room who were trying to fill buckets at the hopelessly inadequate well.

The blaze plainly had a good grip in the kitchen. The windows were black with smoke and the doorway was wreathed in flames. My blood ran cold as I saw how fast the fire was devouring the old, dry wood and taking hold in the hazel withies beneath the plaster of the walls. It wasn't a chimney fire; that much was plain. Could it have been an accident in the kitchen?

'What happened?' I grabbed the arm of a man who was shouting to no one in particular to bring more buckets. 'Did everyone get out?'

He shook me off without even acknowledging me. 'Fetch cook pots, empty barrels, anything that you can find,' he roared at the panicking girls.

I gave up on him and headed for Sorgrad who was coaxing something out of a trembling maid in what passed for a calm corner beyond the well. As I approached he thrust her abruptly into the arms of another girl and left the two of them in shocked tears.

'Get round to the front,' he ordered tersely, sheathing his sword. 'See if you can see them.'

We pushed our way through the alley. I'd put my sword away but was sorely tempted to use a dagger to clear the way with a few pinpricks. The

uproar out in the high road was ten times as bad as the confusion in the back. Some men were trying to save their favourite drinking den with a chain of buckets bringing water from the fountain that fed a horse trough on the far side of the road. Others had seen that the fire had already secured a hold too high for the hastily flung water to quench and were bringing long lengths of wood to be ready when the fire began devouring the roof, to try pushing the crumbling walls in on themselves. That might or might not stifle the fire but at least it improved the chances of the buildings either side escaping unscathed. Anyone inside who hadn't escaped by then would be dead already.

'What did she say, that girl?' I shouted, my head close to Sorgrad's ear.

'Someone threw oil and lighted rag in through the back door and in through the windows at the front,' he yelled back.

'And no one could stop it getting out of hand?' I raged as I scanned the crowd gawping at the spectacle for the two faces I sought.

'Not when that someone threw a full bottle on the hearth that went up like a lightning strike,' Sorgrad bellowed back, searching like me for Halice and Gren.

'Who do we know who sets fires?' I wondered aloud. There are various concoctions that can clear a room like that but we never used them or allied ourselves with people who did. Sorgrad

in particular has a loathing of such indiscriminate tactics.

'Oh miss, oh miss!' It was the serving girl in the brown skirts and green bodice. Her face was paler than her linen blouse. 'Your friend, miss, she was upstairs and I can't find her anywhere!'

'Halice?' I looked up at the blank, uninformative windows of the upper storey.

'What about my brother?' Sorgrad grabbed the girl's shoulder so hard she winced.

'He went after the man who set the fire.' The lass was shaking at the memory of the unexpected assault. 'He said he wanted to look at the rooms before taking one. Then he came down and he threw something on the fire and then there were oil-flasks through the windows—'

I looked at Sorgrad. 'Gren must have recognised him.'

His reply was lost in a sudden shattering of glass and a horrified outcry all around. I stood, stock still, as I saw a face at an upper window. It was Halice, smashing the leaded panes with her crutch. Smoke smudged the pale plaster around the frame.

'We need ladders!' A shout went up behind me.

'She's lame!' The serving girl turned to rebuke whoever it was. 'She can't climb with a bad leg.'

'Get some blankets to catch her!'

'Don't be a fool! Where's a cart with a good soft load in it? Straw or the like?'

Halice disappeared from the win-

dow. Sorgrad and I left the babbling townfolk to their argument, shoving our way towards the burning building.

‘You can’t go in there, lass!’ Horrified, a burly carter seized my shoulders.

I twisted and dug my elbow hard under his breastbone an instant before swinging my fist up and back over my shoulder to land square on his nose. Shocked, he released me and everyone else at hand was too surprised to do anything. I was a bare pace behind Sorgrad as he reached the doorway, ignoring the oaths of the men on the bucket chain.

The water they were flinging was disappearing in a hiss of impotent steam almost before it landed on the walls. The taproom within was a cavern of heat and brilliant flame. With the heartwood of the old dry timbers well alight, there’d be no saving the building. That wasn’t my concern: Halice was.

‘Stay close behind me.’ Sorgrad ripped off his hood and tore it apart, finishing what the footpads had started. He thrust the cloth into a handy bucket and soaked it with water before tossing me one half. ‘Keep this over your face.’ If he said anything else, it was lost as he clapped the dripping wool over his nose and mouth.

I followed him through the flaming doorway. There was more fire than smoke inside and it was the wet cloth over my face that felt as if it was smothering me. I didn’t let it fall though; I didn’t want to breathe the searing heat

that I could feel on my forehead and the back of my hands. At the far end of the room, the fireplace was an inferno, the hearth lost in a white-gold blaze. In between, stools and tables were either burning or awaiting their fate, knocked over to lie helpless as the tavern’s customers had fled this wholly unexpected assault. Following the trails of oil splattered across the floor, flames licked at floorboards, biting deep where shards of the broken flasks glinted like vicious teeth.

We shied away towards the stairway leading up to the bedchambers above. The flames hadn’t reached this end of the room yet but the heat felt no less intense. As we climbed the stairs, the smoke thickened, stinging my eyes and clawing at my throat through the damp wool I still clasped to my face. I wanted to shout to Sorgrad but I dared not lift the cloth aside even for a moment. Besides, I doubt he would have heard me. The timbers of the walls and floors were splitting and cracking as if some demented axeman was laying about him and the fire was growling like some maddened beast. I could feel it behind us, hot breath on our heels, ready to leap forward and devour us.

But not yet. We ran up the stairs. I struggled for breath and blinked tears away as I tried to see through the grey haze filling the corridor. I heard a noise; not a voice but the deliberate sound of snapping wood. Halice tried to shout out but a fit of coughing racked her. I followed Sorgrad to find her doubled up on the other side of a

hole in the inn's partition wall. Straightening up, she waved us away and began hammering at the lath and plaster with her crutch again, sending splinters and ragged lumps of daub clotted with horsehair flying across the passageway. Sorgrad had a dagger in his hand in an instant and began helping her enlarge the hole she'd made.

I wondered why she wasn't leaving by the bedroom's door. Then I found the latch string had been pulled through to the outside and knotted tight around a nail hammered into the doorframe. It was the work of a moment to cut that and as the cord fell away, I realised Halice had already done the same from inside. But I still couldn't open the door. Something was holding it fast at the bottom. But the door opened inwards and if Halice had wedged it from within, she'd have been able to undo her own work. I dropped to my knees, trying to keep the cloth in front of my face. The smoke was getting thicker and sweating in my winter clothes, I felt like a pudding being boiled in a cloth.

As I groped along the bottom edge of the door, I felt something hard at the opposite side to the hinges. I blinked and peered through the smoke. Some curious strip of metal had been slipped under the door and the end left in the corridor had been hammered hard into the floorboards. I tried to lever it up with a dagger and established it had backwards pointing barbs biting deep into the wood. Assuming it was angled to plant similar hooks in the inside face

of the door, Halice was effectively locked in. And the harder she pulled on the door, the tighter the device's grip would become. Then my dagger blade snapped and I cursed under my breath as I reached for a second blade. This snapped too but not before I'd managed to loosen the foul device a good deal more.

Sorgrad and Halice were making a thorough job of demolishing the inn's interior wall but the hole still wasn't big enough for her to climb through, not encumbered with her lame leg. I reached up and grabbed the hem of Sorgrad's jerkin. Taken unawares, he staggered and looked down at me. I dragged him to his knees so he could see me gouging at the floorboards with the broken stub of my dagger blade. I risked lifting the woollen cloth for a moment. 'Try shoving the door,' I shouted.

He leaped to his feet and grabbed the thrusting end of Halice's crutch to get her attention, shouting through the hole in the wall. 'Get ready to pull on the door!'

I concentrated on splintering the wood around the metal device some more. Sorgrad seized my shoulder and pulled me up. I looked at him and with a nod of agreement, we threw ourselves against the door. It gave, just a little, as the vicious barbs of the metal strip pulled loose from the floor before digging in again. That was enough for Halice to get one broad hand around the edge. As she pulled on it, using all her weight and whatever strength she

had in her good leg, Sorgrad flung himself bodily at the narrow opening. The planks groaned and flexed and the metal strip lost its grip. As Halice and Sorgrad ripped the door open between them, I bent to retrieve the angled twist of metal.

‘Get me up!’ Halice’s shout was muffled by a strip of linen she had tied around her face. I could see her brow twisted with pain. She had fallen hard as the door gave way. Sorgrad went to pull her to her sound foot and I retrieved her crutch.

The air was clearer in the room thanks to Halice smashing the window. I looked towards the window where I could just hear some commotion rising above the roar of the fire within the building.

‘Out the way we came.’ Sorgrad clapped me on the shoulder. ‘Fast as we can. It’ll be all right.’

It was trust him or trust whoever might have found some blanket to try and catch us if we threw ourselves out of the window.

‘I’ll risk burns before I risk breaking my other leg.’ Wedging her crutch under her arm, Halice set off down the corridor. Sorgrad and I followed.

The smoke was denser than ever and the heat coming up from below was like the blast from a furnace door. The noise of greedy crackling drowned out any sound from outside. As we looked down the stairs, we saw the doorway opening onto leaping flames. The door itself was alight.

‘It only burns us if it catches us.’ Sor-

grad ducked under Halice’s arm, catching her around the waist. I did the same on her other side. The stairs were just barely wide enough for the three of us abreast and Halice’s weight bore down heavily on me as she struggled to find a footing. Sorgrad pressed on, grabbing her crutch in his free hand to shove aside the burning door.

The heat was a physical burden crushing my chest. I looked for some escape. The boards beneath our feet were smouldering and charred holes threatened treacherous pitfalls. Above our heads a coil of flame was lapping across the ceiling. The fire had devoured the outer door, frame and all, leaving only a ragged, perilous hole curtained by sparks falling from above. We hurried towards it. There was no other choice.

The fresher air outside hit hard. I gasped and coughed, as my chest ached as if I’d been struck down with phthisis. Someone with more sense than most swathed me in a blanket, beating me with ungentle hands. I smelt scorching and realised I had been all but alight myself. The skin on my hands and face felt as if I’d been walking all day in a high summer sun without hat or shade. Voices all around exclaimed in wonder at our good fortune in coming back out alive. I wasn’t going to argue with them. I reckoned I’d used up half a season’s luck and then some.

‘Where’s Gren?’ Halice snatched back her crutch as someone snuffed Sorgrad with the same treatment.

I coughed again and took a water-



skin gratefully. 'Went after the man who set the fire.' I swilled out my mouth, spitting out foulness.

'Which way?' Sorgrad waved away any more help with a ferocious glare.

'Did the lass in the green bodice see?' I wondered.

'There she is.' With her superior height, Halice picked the girl out of the crowd and headed towards her. With her cloak lost in the burning tavern, the breadth of her shoulders was quite apparent under her shirt. Add to that the grim determination in her coarse-boned face and people scurried out of her way. Besides, it was doubtless more fun watching the inn burn, now we were evidently alive.

The girl saw us coming and hastened to meet us. 'Oh mistress, oh mistress, I was so worried—' Tears choked her.

'We're safe now. That's all that matters.' Halice spoke with the gentle calmness I'd seen her use on women misused by mercenaries under her command. I could see the same ominous purpose in her eyes as well. Whoever was responsible for this was going to pay dearly. 'Did you see where our friend went, his brother?'

'Down towards the Rope Walk.' The lass scrubbed at her tearstained cheeks with trembling hands. 'But mistress, all your things—'

'Clothes, trifles. They can be replaced.' Halice shrugged. 'What about you, lass? Did you live there? Is there someone you can stay with? Good.' At the girl's nod, she dismissed

her and turned to the road leading away to the docks. 'That'll take us to the Rope Walk? Come on, let's find Gren before he steals all the fun. Livak, let me have that sword.'

As I meekly handed over my salvaged blade, I caught Sorgrad's eye and saw discreet amusement in his expressionless face. This was the first time in a season and a half that we'd seen Halice showing her old mettle.

'Sorgrad, I want to know anything you overheard while you were hanging around the town gate. Who was coming into the town and who was heading out? Did you see any faces you even thought you recognised?' Halice was swinging along on her crutch faster than I'd seen her move on it before. Her haste betrayed her. The foot of the crutch slipped and she took her weight on her twisted leg for an instant. She swore a soldier's oath and pain knotted her heavy brows.

'I've poppy syrup if you want something to ease that,' I said casually. That was safe inside my jerkin, along with the wizard gold and the few other things I valued. This wasn't the first time we'd left our baggage behind without a backward glance, though it was the first time it had gone up in flames.

'Not for the present.' All the same Halice spared me a grateful nod before repeating her question. 'Sorgrad, did you see anyone you recognised at the gate?'

'Not at the gate but we had an interesting encounter in a dark alleyway.'

As he told Halice the tale of the four would-be footpads, I kept my eyes open for Sorgren.

'I wonder who the pigeon might be?' Halice mused as Sorgrad concluded. 'Do you suppose knowing that would give us a sniff of whoever's behind this?'

'Sorgrad, have a look at that coin.' I reached inside my own jerkin for the purse I'd won off the fallen ruffian. 'Is it good?' Pulling out a gold crown, I studied the picture of Saedrin and his keys to the other world as best I could in the dusky light.

'If this is forged, there's a master craftsman at work.' Sorgrad commented. 'Where were your crowns struck?'

'This one?' I flipped the coin. It took me a moment to identify the florid seal of 'Trebin.'

'That's unusual, hereabouts,' Halice commented. Caladhrians keep their coin to themselves as a rule.

'What about the rest?' Sorgrad was sorting though a handful of coin.

I did the same. 'All of them are from Trebin.'

'So are these.' Sorgrad looked at me, puzzled. 'When did you last have less than five cities' coins in your purse?'

'Not since I left Vanam,' I said, equally mystified, as I stowed the money safely away.

'There he is!' Halice pointed with the salvaged sword.

'Who?' I saw she meant Gren, who was walking slowly back up the road towards us, the arc of the har-

bour's waters shadowy silver behind him.

Sorgrad whistled through his fingers and I waved. Gren picked up his pace and soon reached us.

'Who was it?' Halice demanded without preamble.

'Arle Cordainer,' Gren replied with equal bluntness.

'What?' I exclaimed a bare instant before Sorgrad's foul curse made his feelings plain.

We all stood in silence for a moment.

I was the first to speak. 'He must have seen us coming in through the north gate.'

'He'd have known he was a dead man two breaths after we spotted him,' said Gren with grim intensity.

'He'd have known he had no chance of duping this pigeon of his.' I rested my hand on the bulge of the purse inside my jerkin. 'What'll you wager this particular pigeon comes from Trebin?'

'You think he's up to his old tricks again?' Sorgrad looked at me. 'You reckon the Watch would have had someone tell them where to find those four curs, with their purses full of Trebin coin, while Cordainer took himself off with ten times that amount?'

'We believed him when he proposed the same sort of scheme,' I reminded him. 'When we still believed there was honour among thieves.'

'And we were nearly hanged for it,' Gren growled. 'I'll see him dead for that one day.'

‘Why not today?’ demanded Halice. ‘Where did he go?’

‘Off on a ship.’ Gren spat with disgust. ‘I nearly had him—’

‘What was the ship?’ Sorgrad interrupted. ‘Where was it headed?’

‘I haven’t had a chance to find out,’ answered Gren defensively.

‘Down the gulf to Col? Across to Peorle?’ I ticked off the possibilities on my fingers. ‘Down and across to Kevil?’

‘Or right down the coast and round the cape to Relshaz?’ Halice shook her head. ‘There’s no guarantee he’ll stay aboard anyway. He could jump ship at any landfall along any of those routes.’

‘So what do we do?’ demanded Gren, looking like a hound who’d just seen a rabbit disappear down a burrow.

‘We go to Col,’ Halice said authoritatively. ‘We look up everyone we’ve ever shared a bottle of wine or split some winnings with. We ask if anyone’s had so much of a sniff of Cordainer in the past year; where he was and what he was doing.’

‘And what names he was going by,’ I added.

Halice nodded. ‘You can spend some of that wizard gold on sending a letter to Relshaz by the fastest ship in the harbour. Charoleia might have some news, and she’ll certainly want to know about his latest murderous trick.’

‘I think she’d have told us if she’d had news of him,’ remarked Sorgrad. ‘She wants him to pay for using her name to convince us of his good faith.’

‘There might be a letter from her waiting for us in Col,’ I interjected.

‘We’ll need to find somewhere for me to stay after the festival.’ Halice looked at the three of us, daring us to challenge her. ‘Where letters can find me reliably. If I’ve got to be sitting on my arse, I might as well spend the time plotting Cordainer’s ruin. You lot can go off and find whatever gold his downfall costs us.’

‘That’s a sound plan,’ Gren approved.

Halice snapped her fingers. ‘Livak, what did he use to trap me in that room?’

I found to my surprise I still clutched the strip of metal, bent at a right angle, with its barbs at either end on opposite faces. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘Why did you pick it up?’ Sorgrad asked curiously.

‘I don’t know.’ I shrugged. ‘I thought it might come in useful some day.’

‘While we’re in Col, you ask anyone you know in the housebreaking trades if they’ve ever seen something like that,’ Halice ordered. ‘Sorgrad, you can talk to the swordsmiths and armourers, see if they know anyone who might have made it.’

‘And what about me, captain?’ Gren saluted smartly, his grin widening.

‘You can find any mercenaries wintering in Col and let them know word of Cordainer’s whereabouts is as good as gold in their hands,’ she told him unhesitatingly. ‘Tell them I sent you. Livak, you can keep this toothpick.’ She handed me back the salvaged blade and

considered the foot of her crutch. ‘An armourer could put a metal sheath on this, maybe even a spike.’ She paused and looked at Sorgrad who was smiling as broadly as his brother. ‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ he chuckled.

‘So what are you waiting for?’ A slow spark of amusement kindled in Halice’s eye. ‘For me to tell you to “hop to it”?’

‘Are you pulling my leg?’ queried Gren, mock-innocent.

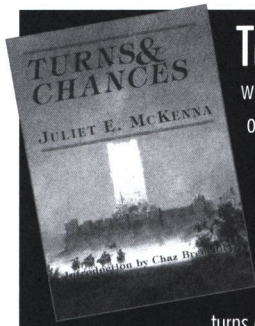
‘That’s a really lame joke,’ countered Sorgrad.

Halice laughed for the first time

since I’d come back from my travels and found her laid low. ‘Let’s go and convince some coachman on his way to Col that it’s in his best interests to take us as passengers.’

‘Already done,’ Sorgrad said smugly.

We retraced our path, skirting the crowd still wide-eyed at the burning ruin of the Speckled Dove. My spirits rose with every step. Who’d have thought an old enemy trying to kill us could have turned out to be such a boon. As the goodwives say, there’s fire in the coldest flint. ☒



The country of Lescar was carved out of the collapsing Tormalin Empire by ambitious men who felt entitled to seize power. Now six rival dukedoms are ruled by their descendants, each of whom feels entitled to the crown of high king.

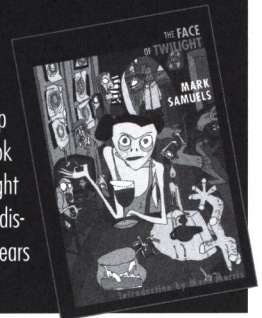
Dukes pursue their ambitions through strategic alliances and strength of arms while their duchesses plot marriages and discreet pacts. As long as the battles stay inside Lescari borders, neighbouring powers are content to buy up whatever the dukedoms can produce and sell their rulers whatever they can afford by way of luxuries or necessities.

All the while the ordinary people struggle to raise their crops and families amid the turns and chances of uncaring uncertainty. Some have had enough.

Common cause unites a duke’s beautiful mistress, a stable lad, a goodwife, a priest and teacher, the bereft mother of an infant son and guild masters weary of seeing apprentices drafted into brutish militias, often never to return. Conflicting loyalties set a duke’s dutiful bastard son on a deadly collision course with a journeyman blacksmith with most unexpected skills.

Who is the sinister little man with the scarred head? Why is there no end to the twilight? What does the bizarre graffiti appearing everywhere symbolise?

Ivan Gilman is the penurious author of several obscure novels. When he rents a cheap flat overlooking Archway Road in north London, he is determined to finish the new book that he believes will finally establish his literary reputation. Instead, he finds himself caught up in a bizarre conspiracy to replace the living with the cryptic dead. Gradually, Gilman discovers evidence of this conspiracy operating at all levels of society and, by then, it appears much too late to escape the consequences of his prying . . .



*Matthew Hughes began life in a council house in Liverpool but has spent almost all of his fifty-six years in Canada, where he wrote more than a thousand speeches for politicians and corporate executives. The hero of this story, if "hero" is the appropriate description, appears as a reformed crook of a far future Old Earth in Hughes's third Archonate novel, Black Brillion (Tor, 2004), but the following tale obviously dates from before Luff Imbry's reformation.*

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# The Farouche Assemblage

## Matthew Hughes

**H**aving made an immense fortune amid the commercial frenzy that characterized life in the Canton of Zeel, the magnate Paddachau Chin retired to his secluded family estate in the County of Ambrou, where his singular collection of artworks became the chief jewel of his reputation. The incomparability of the Chin Collection was universally agreed, though there could be no certainty as to how many of Chin's wide circle of acquaintances had been permitted the exquisite pleasure of viewing it. Those who whispered that they had been afforded the uncommon privilege would say no more; they had sworn to keep silent.

Luff Imbry's encounters with art centred mainly on its traffic, especially when that trade was diverted through the more ombrous avenues of the ancient city of Olkney. Under Imbry's hand, works passed quietly from their previous owners to their next, inconvenient questions were left unvoiced and the new possessor was as unlikely to advertise his acquisition as Chin's

visitors were to burble about whatever glories they might have seen.

Chin's miserly sequestration of so many exquisite pieces offended Imbry's sense of how things ought to be in a well ordered universe, namely that valuable goods existed to be appreciated by those who could afford to pay Luff Imbry to provide them. His was a rich and comprehensive philosophy, with many corollaries and axioms involving the iniquity of locks and the virtue inherent in weaving ways around watchmen and other obstructions.

He resolved to teach Chin a moral lesson by transferring as many as possible of his possessions to grateful hands. The lesson would be all the more pointed for those hands being connected to some of the magnate's circle who had long and vainly sought an invitation to view them.

Imbry conducted research, conceived an approach and made preparations. He learned that Chin had spoken of a frustrated desire to acquire a new work by Hassol Humbergruff, who worked in multicolored wire figurines.

These he assembled in various configurations hung from strings and thin rods so that as they were moved by currents in the air they enacted a shifting series of tableaux. The figures might at first glance suggest a ribald joke that as soon as it was understood became an ironic commentary on itself, before transforming into a tragic statement that then plunged all the way into bathos.

New creations by Humbergruff had of late become increasingly difficult to acquire. The artist alternated between short bouts of feverish creativity and long spells of somnolence. The latter were caused by his addiction to blue borrache, a powerful lethetropic drug, the former by his need to acquire the money to buy the dream-swept oblivion he craved. Unfortunately, the addiction was progressive, the drug tending to burn its way through one neural structure after another until there was scarcely enough left to maintain the most elementary functions. Or, as Imbry put it to Humbergruff as he sought to arouse him from a six-day stupor, "It won't be long before you're unable to tell any part of you from any other. The likelihood of unhappy accidents will then approach a certainty."

The artist's reply was somewhere between a word and a moan. He rolled over on the stained pallet that occupied a corner of his studio, pulled bony knees up toward a thin chest and smacked gummy lips. Imbry sighed and, seizing a hank of the man's greasy hair, pulled him to a semi-sitting posi-

tion propped against one wall. He squeezed Humbergruff's cheeks in a way that forced open the slack mouth, dodged the puff of foul breath that emerged, and poured another measure of restorative into the cavity.

The artist choked and spluttered but Imbry pinched the man's lips closed and held them until he saw the protuberance in the scrawny throat bob up and down. "There," he said, "now come up out of it. I need you."

Still within the borders of his dream, Humbergruff muttered something unintelligible. Imbry methodically slapped one cheek then the other with carefully measured blows until the artist's eyes opened. Seeing that each eye was looking in a different direction from the other, Imbry continued to rock the man's head from side to side until both red veined orbs were focused on him.

"Are you here?" he asked.

Humbergruff blinked and peered. "Who are you?"

Imbry told him a convenient name. The artist did not even struggle to place it. He allowed his eyes to close and his head to loll.

Imbry delivered another slap. Humbergruff raised an ineffectual hand. "What do you want?" he said.

"Later. First we must make you bearable in a closed room."

Luff Imbry was a figure of pronounced corpulence, so thickly upholstered in layers of fat that some people thought that if he ever fell down he was at risk of rocking himself to sleep try-

ing to get back up. But beneath the sleek exterior was a well concealed musculature and a practiced mobility. Imbry now applied both to raise the artist's spare frame to a standing position before propelling him to the studio's sanitary suite. He secured Humbergruff in its grip then activated the controls for the full cycle. A short time later, the artist emerged shaking and pale, but thoroughly scrubbed, emptied, groomed and polished.

While that process had been in train, Imbry had instructed Humbergruff's integrator to prepare some innocuous food and a pot of strong punge. "Sit and eat," he said, making sure that the man did as he was told. "I have a proposition to make."

He watched the artist lethargically spoon up a sweetened gruel. As the last wisps of blue borrache effervesced from Humbergruff's system, his attention retained a tendency to wander inward. Imbry questioned him, partly to compel a continued awareness of where and when they were, partly to satisfy a curiosity about the drug's attraction. "What draws you to spend your life, indeed to shorten it, in this sorry manner?"

"Dreams," said the ruins of Humbergruff. "I dream of worlds and wonders."

"Starships depart hourly. They can take you to worlds and wonders all up and down The Spray."

The artist's drawn face took on a reflective aspect. "True, but they are not mine."

"You had fame and accolades," Imbry said, "and could have them again."

Humbergruff sighed. "We inhabit an impossibly ancient world. What can be done that has not already been done to perfection? What is there to say when all has already been said? And not just said, but heard and understood? We are naught but a recurring dream. What is the point of all this making and shaping?"

"The world's regard?" said Imbry. "Which translates into fine dinners and a comfortable place to lay one's head, often beside an engaging companion."

"I have done all of that, and now I am done with it," said Humbergruff. "It pales." He touched his brow. "In here, I have found more. I have found everything."

Imbry was no stranger to narcissistic impulse; indeed, he preferred the world to revolve about his own needs. But here he saw the purest form of vanity, a shutting out of all experience but that of the self, rattling down the shutters and sealing the doors of perception, to sit in a darkening solipsism until the essential inner spark dwindled and went out. He shuddered then pushed the image aside and came to business.

"Humbergruff," he said, "I will acquaint you with your situation. It is not a happy one." He explained that the artist had entered a downward spiral, producing haphazardly in order to purchase temporary oblivion, but each visit to limbo lasted longer than the

one before, while his productive periods grew correspondingly shorter. At the same time, his tolerance for blue borrache increased, requiring him to make a greater effort to earn its cost, but the drug steadily robbed him of that ability. "Eventually you will have neither the drug nor the capacity to acquire it."

The artist blinked. "I have never been good at grasping the obvious," he said. He turned and regarded a credenza set against the far wall where his few remaining vials and paraphernalia lay scattered. "You have opened a sad vista."

"I will now reveal a more comforting one," Imbry said. "I have purchased a large supply of blue borrache, enough to keep you dreaming until you have passed over into the ineffable."

Hassol Humbergruff's head snapped toward the fat man. His gaze had lost all trace of dreaminess. "Where is it?" he said.

"Close by," Imbry said.

The artist was rising from his seat. "And yet we sit here bandying irrelevancies? Let us go get it," he said.

Imbry reached across the table. The shoulder beneath his plump hand was perilously thin and he easily pressed the man back into his chair. "First let us come to terms."

"You will find me very agreeable," Humbergruff declared.

Imbry quickly outlined his proposal: Humbergruff would produce several works. When Imbry was satisfied with their quality, he would hand over the

supply of blue borrache. The artist could then slip into a languorous dream from which he would never emerge.

Despite the fat man's having pointed Humbergruff along the path to sure extinction, the artist displayed a fervent interest in the arrangement. "First, though," he said, "I should sample the merchandise, to be sure that it will meet the test."

"It is the finest product of the Green Circle syndicate," Imbry assured him. "You will not be disappointed."

"Still," Humbergruff said, his pale tongue emerging to lick his lips, "only the taste will tell."

Imbry showed him an unhappy face and mused aloud, "Perhaps there is some other artist with whom I could do business."

And so the bargain was struck. In short order, Imbry removed Humbergruff and his working materials to a secluded location, a remote and rural cottage where there was plenty of light and a complete absence of blue borrache. The artist suffered pangs and fearsome bouts of nightsweats, ameliorated by liberal doses of Imbry's restorative, and several times tried to call off their agreement. But Luff Imbry displayed an adamant resolve, expressed in stern words backed up by occasional shoves and buffets, until five assemblages of wire figures adorned the air above the workbench. Two of them were minor pieces, produced in the first several days of their association, but the latter period had brought



three first-class constructions, as good as if not better than anything Humbergruff had produced in his prime.

"These are excellent," Imbry said, watching the hanging shapes dip and rotate to create evolving stories of mythic intensity shot through with subtle subtexts.

"You have driven me cruelly," Humbergruff said. In the last two days he had ceased to eat, spending every hour bent over the bench, plying his crimps and twizzlers to shape the delicate metal fibers into precise alignments. Though his legs trembled as constantly as the leaves of a wystal tree, his fingers were crisp and sure in their judgments.

"Your suffering has raised you to new heights," Imbry said. "You have surpassed yourself."

"It has all been done before, as well or better."

"Not to my knowledge."

Humbergruff made a face that did not speak highly of Imbry's understanding. Imbry dismissed the criticism with a twist of his plump lips and said, "Your views are your own. I am satisfied with the work."

"Then pay me."

Imbry saw that Humbergruff's time away from the spell of blue borrache had not diminished the craving. He made a gesture of acquiescence and summoned the aircar that had brought them to the cottage. It had removed itself to an inaccessible ledge on a cliff face some distance away until Imbry, and only Imbry, should call for it. Now

it eased down in the front yard and opened its luggage compartment. From behind a false bulkhead Imbry withdrew a package and handed it to the artist, who tore it open then sighed when he saw the vials and equipment within.

"This place is leased for quite some time," Imbry said. "Or I could take you back to your studio."

"Here will be fine," Humbergruff said. He went inside and sat on one of the beds, lining up the containers of blue borrache on a shelf set into the headboard. It took him only moments to deploy the apparatus that would continuously administer the drug while he sank deeper into the dreamscape. Then he poured the substance into the hopper and lay back. Within moments his eyelids were fluttering and Luff Imbry and all the world became no more than the flimsiest of distant shadows.

The fat man carefully packed up the five pieces and stowed them in the aircar. He locked the door of the cottage and left the key in a safe place. Moments later he was high above the rural landscape, instructing the flyer to set a course for the County of Ambrou.

**W**hat is your purpose in seeking to enter the County of Ambrou?" said the customs inspector. Imbry knew that the man must have asked the question a myriad of times, yet the fellow's elevated nose and suspicious eye suggested that he had yet to receive a truly satisfactory answer.

“I mean to attend Toppling Fair,” Imbry said.

“To buy?” said the border man, his manner easing fractionally. Fees and levies collected by the County from the annual fair’s revenues probably accounted for a sizeable portion of the officer’s salary.

Imbry signed in the negative. “To sell.”

The custom inspector’s brows drew together, like furry predators coordinating an attack. “To sell? And just what do you propose to sell?”

Imbry waved toward the open hatch of the aircar. “My works,” he said.

The inspector came out of his booth and examined the contents of the luggage compartment. He lifted one of Hassol Humbergruff’s delicate creations until its various parts dangled from his thumb and forefinger, blew on them gently until they dipped and rotated into different alignments. His gaze softened as he followed their movements and read the changing stories, then hardened as he turned back to Luff Imbry. “Entry denied,” he said.

“On what grounds?”

“It is forbidden to import works of art into the County for subsequent sale.”

“It is not,” said Imbry. “Artists have brought their wares to Toppling Fair since time out of mind.”

“And departed to spend the proceeds elsewhere,” the customs man said. “Which is why the new Board of Fuglemen has changed the regulations. Now only those works produced

within the County may be sold at the fair, though you may import materials.”

“That is a recent change.”

“Fairly recent,” the man agreed.

“You might have let the world know.”

“The regulations were proclaimed. You must not have been paying attention.”

“Indeed,” said Imbry. “I was in seclusion, preparing these.” He gestured toward Humbergruff’s works and assumed an air of innocent speculation. “I don’t suppose if one of them were to remain here, under your guardianship, the others might go to the fair.”

The inspector’s face became as a dark cloud, and Imbry realized that the man was a captive of narrow views that denied him a creative imagination. “Never mind,” he said and packed the goods away. He quickly reversed the aircar and departed in the direction from which he had come.

He returned to the cottage, but as soon as he unlocked the door he knew that there was no hope of reviving the artist and taking him to Ambrou to make new assemblages. Imbry went back to the aircar and sat in the gathering gloom of dusk, as the tired orange sun sank wearily behind the forested Polpol Hills, and thought about the unhappy twist that Ambrou’s fuglemen had given to his plans.

**T**oppling Fair was one of Old Earth’s preeminent venues for the buying

and selling of art. It drew connoisseurs from all of the still inhabited parts of the planet as well as persons from the Ten Thousand Worlds for whom this timeworn ball of dust was not irredeemably out of fashion. It was also a social necessity for Ambrou's most prominent citizens. Paddachau Chin had never been known to miss it.

The collector personally toured the fair at least once during the several days of its run, lingering at some booths, merely glancing into others. He had been known to buy on the spot, sometimes elevating a new artist from anonymity to instant fame. Even when he did not purchase, he would often invite those whose works he favoured to a private masque whose other guests were the cream of Ambrou.

The masque, on the final night of the fair, was held in the antique formal garden at The Groves. The garden was within the walls of the estate and overlooked by the west wing. In that part of the house sat the treasure rooms that housed the most fabulous pieces in Chin's collection, according to the few who said they had entered its well guarded precincts, though they honoured Paddachau Chin's request not to divulge what they had seen.

Luff Imbry intended to make himself one of those few, though he would do so without an invitation. He was sure he could overcome or undercut whatever defences lay between him and his goal. He would, however, remain as close-mouthed as any about what he expected to find within the west wing,

although his reasons for silence would be his own.

But in order to put his plans into operation, he must first gain entrance to the well-guarded formal garden. The easiest way to do that was to be invited to the masque. And to be invited to the masque, he must exhibit at the fair the works of Hassol Humbergruff and pass them off as his own.

But now that carefully planned sequence of events had been roughly truncated by the Board of Fuglemen. He stepped out of the aircar and reentered the cottage. Humbergruff breathed slowly and heavily on the bed. Imbry went to the workbench where the artist's tools and materials lay scattered. The fat man took up one of the shaping boards, a flat surface thickly covered in tiny holes. Into these pock marks Humbergruff would place pins in selected configurations then loop and bend his wires around them, rough-shaping his figures before lifting them free to refine them with crimps, pulls and twisters.

Imbry took a few pins from a flat dish and placed them in some of the board's holes. He looped a piece of green wire from one point to another then to a third and considered the result. During the time he had spent with the artist in the cottage he had often hovered over the man's shoulder, urging him to the work. An observant overseer, Imbry had absorbed the basic techniques of the assembler's art. Now he wondered if he had learned enough to forge a convincing Humbergruff.

On the last day of the Fair Imbry installed himself in a booth in the second tier near the bottom of Deobald Rise. He was far enough away from the fire dancers and the bottle-bell ringers to be undistracted by whiffs of smoke and discordant arpeggios, but he was still unaccustomed to being watched as he worked; though forgery and counterfeiting were two of his greatest strengths, he was unused to practicing them under the public's gaze.

"But it is this very openness," said the official who had showed him to his booth and stamped his hand, "that is now the most attractive aspect of Toppling Fair. The new Fuglemen have swept out the old fustiness and imbued all with a sense of imminence. Virtuosity appears, not as if from behind the curtain of mystery, but moment by moment, before the eye of the beholder. The viewers are greatly entertained."

"Yet I, the author of that entertainment, am not paid for any of it," said Imbry, "but only for the products of my labours, and then only if someone deigns to buy what I make."

"You also breathe and digest your dinner while I stand here and observe you," said the officer, a crabbed and angular man whose skin hung loose wherever gravity could tug at it. "Should I pay you for those activities?"

"If they entertain you."

"They do not."

"But that is beside the point," said Imbry. "The Fair charges admission to the attendees, many of them mere

look-ins who do not buy so much as a smoked button, and you retain one hundred per cent of that fee. But we artisans and crafters, who create the spectacle that draws the crowds, receive nothing."

"Are you saying you will not work unless you are paid?" said the Fair man. "I can assure you that your booth can be let to another artist. There is a queue of them outside the gate."

"No, I am saying that I would prefer to work in solitude. It has ever been my way."

The officer drew himself up and regarded Imbry from the very pinnacle of his nose. "Then go home. But if you wish to exhibit at Toppling Fair, you must do so in public view."

A small collection of fairgoers who had been watching the altercation now burst into a smattering of applause, which quickly died as Luff Imbry glowered at them from beneath lowered brows. But then the fat man took a deep breath and when he let it go he allowed it to carry away his fruitless opposition. He raised both hands in a manner that signalled his surrender, adding a fillip to the gesture that said that the matter was fundamentally beneath his concern, then paid no further attention as the official sauntered off.

Now Imbry lifted the rough draft of a wire figure from its armature of pins and regarded it critically. He was copying from memory one of Humbergruff's most successful assemblages, and the form he held between a fleshy

thumb and forefinger was that of Farouche. This was the eternally yearning lover, always presented carrying his bardolade, though with its strings broken by long and tearful years of unavailing strumming as he pursued his unrequited courtship of unfeeling Ardys.

Humbergruff's Farouche had been rendered in two contrasting materials: a heavy-gauge wire of dark purple that showed a sheen of verdigris when the light of the old orange sun struck it obliquely, and a lighter filament of tarnished gold. The bardolade had been a mere sketch in purest silver.

Imbry remembered how the artist had gone at his Farouche with crimps and twizzlers and believed he could emulate the technique. But after he had bent the figure's arm (the one that would hold the bardolade, not the one raised to heaven in a last plea for aid), he held it up to see it in the round. Immediately he knew that he had extended the limb's position farther than Humbergruff had. He returned the figure to the workbench and reached for the number four kinker.

But then he stopped and held up the figure again. The greater length of the arm's line would allow for a more fully realized bardolade, Imbry saw, especially if the broken instrument was rendered uncompromisingly in flat black instead of silver, and that would draw the viewer's eye toward the futility of the lover's quest rather than to the upraised hand of hope.

That was not how Hassol Humber-

gruff had seen it. And yet, as Imbry regarded the bits of wire dangling by their thread from his pinch, he felt that that was how Farouche ought to be seen.

He allowed his gaze to change focus and saw the faces of several fairgoers peering at him from the entrance to his booth. On an impulse he said to them, "The bardolade: in black or silver?"

"Silver," said one of them, a well-fleshed matron with an arrangement of facial wrinkles and creases that suggested she had pronounced more disapproving judgements than blessings. Most of the others signed agreement with the woman's dictum, but a man with a lean and corded neck and a more thoughtful aspect said, "Silver is traditional, but black would make a statement."

Imbry set down the Farouche and reached for the black wire. He rapidly fashioned a miniature bardolade, then at the last moment added a filigree of the thinnest silver to represent its forlorn broken strings. He crimped the instrument to the figure's hand and held up the ensemble to the light and the gaze of his audience.

A gasp of insight came from the matron and a knowing nod from the man who had spoken for black. Imbry fastened the figure's thread to a horizontal rod hung from the ceiling as he had seen Humbergruff do in the cottage. He began to bring together the materials for the second major figure in the piece: Goladry, the green and untried youth, innocent as an egg.

Already, Imbry had an idea for how he could express the young exemplar's naivete. The crowd murmured as he set pins in the board and chose a strong platinum wire to be the boy's torso.

There would be nothing new under the old orange sun. It could not be argued otherwise: no fresh, undiscovered stories waited to be told on a world as ancient as Old Earth. Every tale that could be recounted had been, in every possible permutation, a thousand times a thousand times. Heroes of every quality, villains of all shades and persuasions, had strutted and fretted along the mazed paths that led to story's borders, had bounced off and sashayed back again. Every possible beginning, every possible end, and all the myriad middles had been spun and cast and reeled in time after time.

Everyone knew every tale. There could be no grand surprises. And yet there was always the possibility of an unthought-of juxtaposition, or if it was not truly unthought-of then perhaps the thought had last occurred so many millennia ago that now it had been forgotten and could be revived, like a shade from the underworld, to be briefly enjoyed before it was allowed to fade anew.

The effect of all these aeons of telling and being told was to create not boredom, but a vast and complex language of symbol and allusion. Farouche and Goladry were universally recognized archetypes; each drew

after it a comet's tail, broad and long, of meaning and association. To present one such figure in the context of the other, and then to add a third—like Marenya, the young maiden poised on the cusp of full adulthood—was to make a subtle and involved statement on the vagaries and cohesions of life.

Imbry fashioned his Marenya in green and red, iridescent and matte. He strung her from the same rod from which Farouche dangled, but on a longer thread so that she would rise and fall between levels of the assemblage. He had turned her head so that sometimes she would be glancing idly away, innocently spurning an unnoticed infatuation, but as her figure rotated she would come to be wistfully gazing over her shoulder.

The arrangement brought a ripple of comment from the crowd that now watched him work. Imbry was conscious of the reaction as background to his own perceptions, but now his thoughts took him in an unexpected direction. In his piece, Hassol Humbegruff had arranged Farouche, Goladry and Marenya thus and so, adding in minor figures—the faithful attendant, the old man who harboured a lifelong guilt, each offering a mutable commentary on the main themes—but letting the central trio dominate the assemblage.

*What if I mixed Grond into the trio?* he thought. He turned to the shaping board and began placing pins even as

his mind was considering types and colours of wire. He found a spool of lead, the wire thick, dull and lifeless, perfect for the old libertine's coarse body. Then he chose a length of brilliant diamontine from which to fashion the roué's signature hat and full length cane. He formed and crimped, joining the accoutrements to the main figure, angling the cane so that from the right perspective it became an obscene expression of the rake's true nature.

He fastened a thread to Grond's wattled neck and tied it to one end of a long rod, putting a globular counterweight at the other end. He positioned the rod in the rest of the assemblage so that Grond would perpetually circle Farouche, Goladry and Marenya, alternately rising above their plane before dipping beneath their view in an endless cycle.

"Ah," said the man with the corded neck, while the woman with the seamed face took on an introspective expression as she relived some experience that the assemblage had conjured from memory into the foreground of her mind.

Imbry quickly made two minor figures: Haft, the true friend; and Shigharee, the reflective older sibling. These he hung at heights that would allow them to intersect the main action of the piece where necessary for narrative purposes. He adjusted relative distances among all the figures until, suddenly, the disparate parts coalesced into a comprehensive whole. Here was a tale of longing, of a road not taken,

yet as the figures slowly spun in the ruddy light of the tired sun, it became a cynical commentary on the follies of youth and the calculating guile of age. But scarcely had those sour notes sounded than the arrangement shifted again into a quiet statement of hope amid dignified endurance.

*I have a talent for this*, Imbry thought. *I have not copied Humbergruff. I have stood upon his shoulders and leapt higher still.* He watched the figures rotate and spin, dip and rise.

"Brilliant," said a deep voice, one that was comfortable in making such pronouncements and expected no contradictions. "I wish I had been here to see the process from the beginning."

Imbry looked away from his creation and found himself under the gaze of a man of mature years, attired in a day-gown of embroidered silk with slashed sleeves and the "covert ruffle" motif that was the fashion of the moment. Equally fashionable were the man's split-toe slippers and his complexly folded hat of red patent leather.

"I am Paddachau Chin," said the paragon. "What price the assemblage?"

Imbry looked thoughtful, then quoted a number that would have been fitting for a Humbergruff masterpiece. One thing he knew about the wealthy—and he knew many things about them—was that when they were buying for themselves, the more expensive the object the more they desired it. A high price gratified their desire to spend as much on themselves as they felt their own intrinsic worth deserved.

Paddachau Chin put a finger to his lower lip, looked upwards as if consulting some relevant information written across the sky, and said, "Done. Would you bring it to my estate tonight? The Groves. We're having a masque, if you're free."

"I will make myself free."

"Your work reminds me of that of Hassol Humbergruff. What is your name?"

"Hassol Humbergruff," Imbry said.

Chin peered at him. "You look different from how I remember you."

"It's not something I care to talk about," Imbry said, adding a gesture that indicated the subject was indelicate.

"No matter," said Chin. "It is the work that counts. The who is always less important than the what, certainly less than the why." He made his farewells, employing a mode that signified that Imbry's status had risen, at least temporarily, to the same plane as the magnate's. Imbry responded in kind.

The crowd had watched their interaction with almost as much interest as when they had followed Imbry's assembling of the wire figures. The man with the noticeable neck offered congratulations. "It is no small thing to be invited to Chin's masque," he said.

"No small thing indeed," said Imbry.

**T**he Groves was a well-founded estate, although its agricultural surround appeared neglected. The manse had suffered an accretion of styles and

enthusiasms of former generations of Chins, but that was not unusual in rural houses. Either by fortunate accident or the efforts of some able architectural syncretizer, the present state of the old building showed an unexpected balance among all the spires, domes, colonnades and air-suspended roofs. Paddachau Chin had apparently added nothing to the mix since inheriting the place. Imbry assumed the magnate preferred to spend his fortune on the art works he sequestered in the west wing.

This was a long, high-ceilinged extension from the main body of the house, clad externally in brushed virentium that had tarnished nicely over the centuries. In the lights strung about the trees and topiary of the garden, the walls gave off the ghostly glow for which the pale metal had once been prized by builders. The tall narrow windows were shuttered in a material that allowed those within to see all without, but denied anyone outside so much as a glimmer of the treasures said to reside in the wing's galleries.

Luff Imbry would have made no attempt to see through the windows even had they allowed an easy perspective. He intended to submit Paddachau Chin's collection to far more than the attentions of his eyes; his program included seizing, stowing and stealing away in his aircar, which hovered somewhere nearby, equipped with devices that rendered it all but invisible to prying energies. Always an inventive thief, Imbry also concealed about his person an apparatus of his own design



that he was eager to apply to the virentium walls.

He sauntered among the revellers at Chin's masque, nodding affably and offering the kind of florid gestures that were appropriate to the evening's mood and the elevated rank of the attendees. The garden boasted several marquees and portable stages, the former dispensing food and drink and the latter a variety of entertainments that ranged from the subtle to the gross. Imbry stopped at a bar and accepted a selection of small sausages and chopped vegetables wrapped in stiff paper as well as a flagon of a robust tawny ale made on the estate.

He wandered about, chewing and sipping. He could do both without difficulty because he had chosen for a mask a version of the wei-wei bird, with crimson-feathered brow and blunt ocher beak that protruded over his nose, leaving the lower half of his face uncovered. Above the brow the mask became a cowl of grey cloth that encased his head and flowed behind him in a voluminous cape. He had not hired the costume, but had employed yet another of his useful skills to fashion the garment himself, adding a number of pockets and pouches that could transport small but valuable items without drawing attention.

He stopped near one of the stages to watch a performance by several young men and women, all of them healthy and limber and clad in not much more than body paint. Their antics combined gymnastic strength and flexibil-

ity with artistic representations similar to those of the assembler's art, except that their tableaux were punctuated by sudden tongues of vertical fire from the back of the stage or explosions of scintillating confetti from the front. While the audience gasped and oohed at these eruptions, the players quickly rearranged themselves for the beginning of the next sequence.

Imbry appreciated the artistry of distraction as a technique. Indeed, many of his career successes had relied on his being able to draw someone's eyes to look *here*, and definitely not *there* at a crucial moment. He swallowed the last of his smoked sausage and downed the lees of his ale and waited for the next arrangement of bodies, letting his gaze drift about the crowded garden.

Some distance off, in a doorway sheltered by a decorated arch, he spied Paddachau Chin. The magnate was not masked, but was splendidly attired as a marshall of Hemistor's Grand Militia. He was deep in conversation with a man whose only concession to the conventions of the masque was a domino across his eyes and the bridge of his nose, the rest of him being attired in nondescript clothing. Yet something about the fellow tickled an association somewhere in the depths of Imbry's mind. He resolved to let it slowly bubble its way to the surface where he would examine it later.

A bulky object wrapped in paper passed from Chin to the man, then a smaller item went the other way. Neither examined what he had received

but each tucked his acquisition away and they parted without ceremony. The anonymous man faded into the crowd while Chin stepped openly into the light of an overhead lantern and was immediately noticed and celebrated by a swirl of his guests. After a few moments he extricated himself with smiles and playful gestures then stood looking purposefully about him.

Imbry slid the bird mask upward until it sat above his forehead, leaving his face visible. Moments later his gaze met that of Paddachau Chin. The magnate raise a finger and both eyebrows then began to make his way through the throng, sliding past jolly greetings and attempted embraces until he pitched up beside the fat man.

They exchanged salutes and made the appropriate observations as to the success of the festivities, Imbry's being warm and fulsome, Chin's self deprecating. The formalities over, the magnate said, "Have you brought the piece?"

"It is here," Imbry said, indicating an inner fold of his cape. "Shall I bring it out?"

"Please."

The assemblage was neatly packaged in fine cloth. Imbry carefully drew it from an inner pocket of his cape, slipped off the covering and allowed the rods and figures to dangle free. The different colours and textures of the wires caught the various hues and intensities of light from around them.

"Very fine," said Chin, his eyes

glinting, "It will be a high point of my collection."

"I am honoured," Imbry answered then took the opportunity. "I would be delighted to see the works among which my little collation of wires will be set."

A curious expression took possession of Chin's face but was quickly dismissed. He spoke briskly, "Not possible, I'm afraid. I am reordering elements of the collection. Everything is jumbled."

Imbry arranged his face in an expression that conveyed a mellow fatalism. "Some other time, perhaps."

"Indeed," said Chin. "But I almost forgot your fee." He drew from within his bemedalled tunic a compact purse and passed it to Imbry, who pocketed it without further examination.

"If you don't mind, I will go and hang this immediately in the treasure room," the magnate said, holding the glittering work before him. Imbry signalled acquiescence and watched the man go, the crowd parting before him with more oohs and sudden intakes of breath as people caught sight of the assemblage.

The fat man accepted the disappointment. It would have been useful to have toured the collection in advance, but he had a good eye for quality and would be able to choose well when the moment came. In the meantime, he noticed a stand offering seedcakes and a colourful punch. The sausages and ale now but a memory, he made his way through the crowd.

The masque went on all night, the public revelry giving way in time to more private celebrations in the shadows beneath the decorative trees and behind convenient shrubs. Here and there about the gardens clumps of guests wandered, parts of their costumes askew or altogether missing. They hung on each other's shoulders, swaying and singing elegiac ballads or humming quiet songs of melancholic affection that spoke to the Ambrou character.

Imbry waited in a dark corner of the west wing's facade until a nearby choir had passed by. He drew from an inner pocket of his cape a small device of his own manufacture and activated it, then watched as it consulted his immediate surroundings and identified the means by which Paddachau Chin guarded his premises. As he had expected, the wards and got-yous defending the west wing were several and powerful. But Imbry had prepared for them. He now instructed the device to gull and lull the house's defences.

Within moments, the telltales all showed that he could proceed to the next stage of his plan. He tucked away the inquisitive instrument and brought out another: a short, thin cylinder of metal something like a stylus. He put the point of the object against the wall of virentium, at a height just above his head, and depressed a stud on its base. A shivery sound emanated from the tip, along with a glow of deep purple luminescence.

Virentium was an artificial material,

a combination of metals and other substances that ordinarily could not cohere. Imbry had researched the compound and found that its components were induced to bind to each other by a treatment that combined a particular sequence of high energies. The resulting composite would resist the most incisive cutting tools. However, Imbry had discovered that one of the forces that bound the aggregate together could be convinced to reverse its polarity if an energy of the right intensity and frequency were applied to it.

Imbry's instrument now applied that energy at precisely that intensity. He tuned the instrument's control until it reached the indicated frequency. At that point, the purple glow at the stylus's tip deepened until it fell below the range of human vision. A small hole abruptly appeared in the virentium. Imbry drew his hand downward and the hole lengthened into a crevice taller than he was. He smoothly continued along the base of the wall, turned upward then across. He put his fingertips to the top of the oblong shape he had created and tugged. An Imbry-sized slab of virentium leaned out of the wall. He caught it and carefully lowered it to the ground then stepped into the opening.

He found himself standing in the outer wall of a long gallery that ran the length of the wing, its inner wall interrupted by doors at intervals of several paces. The passage was dimly lit by tiny lumens set in the moulding just above the carpeted floor and by widely

spaced hemispheres of pale glass in the ceiling.

Imbry remained in the opening while he exchanged his cutting stylus for the inquisitive device he had used earlier. It identified three defensive systems in the gallery, infiltrated their decision-making processes, and diverted them into harmless directions. The fat man stepped into the gallery and approached the nearest door.

It was locked, but not for long. He eased the portal open and saw an unlit room. His inquisitor detected no surveillance. Imbry threw back his mask and cowl and brought from another pocket a harness studded with lenses, emitters and receptors that he fitted over his skull. He touched a control at one temple and the apparatus flooded the chamber with several wavelengths of energy, recaptured their echoes and translated them all into a coherent picture. The image appeared in the air before Imbry's eyes as if he were looking through a hand-sized window into a brightly lit room.

Which turned out to be effectively empty. Imbry turned his head from side to side, scanning the space. Along the walls he saw shelved cabinets with their doors hanging open. Here and there about the floor were truncated columns whose flat tops would have been perfect for displaying objects of beauty and wonder. But the shelves were bare, the plinths supporting nothing but dust-flecked air.

Imbry withdrew and closed the door. He went to the next portal and

repeated the procedure that gave him entry and view. Here the walls were lined with shelves that should have held rare books or a collection of small items, perhaps reliquary boxes or the intricately decorated bottles in which the aristocracy of Old Earth kept their baby teeth. But here, too, the shelves were vacant.

He drew back from the doorway. Then a thought touched him. Might this be an illusion rendered by protective systems even more sophisticated than the devices he had built to overcome them? He stepped into the room and advanced to one of the shelves, reached out and touched. But his plump fingers met only emptiness and a fine powder of dust.

Imbry returned to the gallery and pondered. Might the magnate have moved his treasures to another location? But no other part of the manse boasted such security systems. And Imbry trusted his intelligence sources too much to believe that the Chin Collection could have been relocated beyond the walls of The Groves without his having heard of it.

Some would have found in the disappearance of the trove a piquant mystery. Luff Imbry found a source of sharp irritation. He had invested much time and many resources in this operation, and now it seemed he might as profitably have strode down Ekhevry Row, Olkney's main commercial thoroughfare, throwing armloads of currency to the thrusting crowds.

His black mood deepened as he tried

the next chamber and the one after that, finding them as bereft of plunderables as the first two. Grimly, he made his way down the concourse, seeing one empty room after another, until he came to the final door. Here he stopped, for his inquisitor told him that within the chamber was life, light and movement.

Imbry removed his surveillance headgear and carefully tried the door's control. It responded to his touch but he eased open the portal no more than a crack. A warm glow of golden luminescence shone through the narrow opening and Imbry put his eye to it. He saw another chamber like the others, full of empty cabinets and display stands, but in the centre of this one stood Paddachau Chin beneath a cone of light that shone from a lumen in the ceiling. Also captured by the warm illumination was a gibbet of base metal, of the kind commonly used to display assemblages, and from that dark frame hung the collage of rods, threads and wires that Imbry had made and sold to the man who now stood enraptured before it.

Finding nothing to steal, a common malefactor might have slunk away, cursing his disappointment, perhaps to kick some blameless shrub on his way through the garden. But Imbry was a proud man. He knew his abilities to be superlative, for all that some might raise certain ethical quibbles. It was a crime that his efforts should have been so egregiously wasted. He required at least the satisfaction of an explanation.

He flung wide the door and stepped into the chamber. "What is the meaning of this?" he said.

Paddachau Chin had just blown a puff of air at the assemblage, causing it to reorient its components into a new gestalt. His lips remained pursed even as his eyes widened and blinked in surprise, putting Imbry in mind of a comical fish. The fat man was, both by necessity and by lifelong study, an expert judge of character. He gauged that this situation required him to continue on the offensive. "What have you done with one of the greatest collections of the age?"

Chin stepped back, his eyes flicking about the room like an errant schoolboy caught in mischief. When he spoke, the words tumbled over each other, "I had no choice! I had severe reverses, financial commitments came due, and there was the upkeep on the estate and the house in town."

Imbry formed his features into the sternest censure. "You sold it all off? Everything? How could you?" he said, advancing on Chin like a small, rotund army. "You've callously dismantled and dispersed a collection the like of which will never be seen again!"

A part of Imbry was genuinely incensed that such wanton destruction had been visited upon the treasures of The Grove, even as another part of him was aware that it had been his intention to commit exactly the same acts. But Imbry had a supple mind, capable of assessing moral situations and discovering clear distinctions

between right and wrong that would entirely elude anyone who did not have the good fortune to be Luff Imbry.

Still, the moment's pause it took the thief to dispose of his brief episode of internal disharmony was enough time for Paddachau Chin to come across the obvious question: "What are you doing in my house?" he said, and went on to an equally salient query: "And how did you get in?"

"This is not the time for trivia and superfluous tangents," Imbry said. "The important issue is that you are a fraud. The Chin Collection is a byword for unparalleled taste. People have dined out for years on a hint that they have glimpsed the merest corner of it."

"You're not Hassol Humbergruff," Chin said, his eyes narrowing and the corners of his mouth turning down. Then all three formed circles as a connection was made at some obscure level of his intellectual apparatus. "I know you! You are Luff Imbry! You were pointed out to me once as someone who might be able to sell a piece or two, if my current agents became unavailable."

*If my current fence should be taken up by the Bureau of Scrutiny,* was how Imbry translated the remark. And now he knew where he had seen the man in the garden from whom Chin had acquired the purse that had been paid over to Imbry. "I might have been interested," he said, though inwardly he felt a faint unhappiness at the thought of being associated with the wanton dissolution of a magnificent

collection. *It's one thing to nobble a few bits and pieces and pop them off to the buyers,* he thought. *It's quite a different matter to undo the work of generations.* "But now I do not know what to say."

"You must say nothing!" Chin said.

Imbry saw a desperate flash in the man's eyes that made him quietly reach into a pocket of his cape. He slipped his hand around a powerful shocker and only when he had thumbed its control to stand-by did he reply. "You would be ruined," he said.

The fire went out of Chin. His shoulders declined. "My friends would find me a figure of pity and amusement," he said. "Who would come to my masques?"

Imbry felt a mild twinge of sympathy. But he put it aside and concentrated on what was truly important in this situation: that it lead to a recoupment of his expenses and a reasonable profit. He released his hold on the shocker so that he could put both his hands in front of him for a vigorous rubbing of palms. "The past is fled. The future lies shapeless before us. The question is: what shape shall we give it?"

"Do not look to me as a fount of income. My resources are limited," Chin said. "I invested too heavily in the Fassblind Bubble. By tonight I had settled my obligations, but that left only one truly worthwhile work in the collection—the Waldolid Tapestry."

Imbry knew of the hanging; who did not? It had been woven over umpteen generations from the hair of a family

whose gene plasm had been the venue for a unique mutation. A clan of master weavers had used the incomparable material—it shimmered, changed colours in responses to heat and light, glowed in the dark—to create a masterpiece of masterpieces.

“But it would buy more than five estates like this one,” Imbry said.

“True,” said Chin, “if I could have sold it openly.”

“Ah,” said Imbry, because now he saw it. The collection had been precious to Paddachau Chin, but more precious was his reputation as its owner. By selling off the works surreptitiously, he had retained their reflected glory. But he had received only a fraction of their monetary worth. Even Imbry could appreciate the ironic pain of the magnate’s situation, and he allowed his face to display it.

“No, no,” said Chin, “it has not been so bad. I have long suffered from a creeping case of lapsed ardour, the result of having lived so long in the Canton of Zeel.”

Imbry signalled that he understood. The cultural ethos of Zeel demanded constant novelty. Goods retained their allure only as long as they satisfied the unslakeable thirst for freshness; once that faded, the most exquisite work of art was of no more interest to a Zeelot than the box in which it had arrived.

A hapless expression took ownership of Chin’s face. “So now I acquire, one by one, the pieces that catch my eye. I enjoy each until it inevitably palls, then

quietly sell it on to acquire funds with which to buy the next.”

Imbry saw that, like Humbergruff, Chin was trapped within a narrowing, descending spiral. “You pay more for what you buy than you receive when you sell it.”

“Yes,” said Chin, “the progression worries me. In the end my reputation may suffer.”

A spark glowed in the back of Luff Imbry’s mind. He allowed it to burgeon until it took on a warm effulgence then became a burst of brilliance. “I have an idea,” he said.

The discreet plaque beside the inconspicuous door on Ekhevry Way read, *Vervacity—Works of Creativity for the Discerning*. In smaller type below was, *Exclusive agents for the Chin Collection*.

Through the door came two distinct types of persons. The first were artists who wished to sell their works to Paddachau Chin. These were often surprised at the small prices they were offered; some left throwing harsh words over their shoulders, but most were intrigued enough to stay to learn the rest of the terms. Almost all who heard the proposition agreed to it. They departed Vervacity bearing a purse that contained a sum somewhere between a pittance and a trifle, and a short document that entitled them henceforth to decorate their premises and letterhead with the phrase: *By Appointment to Paddachau Chin*. Their

popularity, and therefore their incomes, inevitably climbed. As did Chin's reputation as a patron.

The second category of patrons at the exclusive agency slipped quietly through the door after regular hours, having made arrangements to be received without names or identities being needlessly bandied about. These persons came bearing more substantial sums of money and purchased works that had somehow lost their way and strayed from the Chin Collection into the shadier channels of commercial intercourse. Each departed bearing an object of beauty to be enjoyed in strictest privacy, lest anyone pose the kind of inconvenient questions that might draw the attention of the Bureau of Scrutiny.

A third class of person entered the premises, though always by an unmarked door in the rear. These were close confederates of Luff Imbry who toiled in a basement workroom to copy each new purchase, usually producing several quite good forgeries that were then sold to the second class of upstairs visitors. The originals themselves were passed on to The Groves, where Pad-dachau Chin briefly enjoyed them before sending them back to Vervacity, whose proprietor, Luff Imbry, carefully stored them away, along with the five original Hassol Humbergruffs that were the beginnings of the Imbry Collection.

This arrangement endured for some time, and all the participants were well

satisfied. Eventually Chin developed new enthusiasms, involving memorabilia associated with sporting contests, by which time Luff Imbry had also broadened the scope of his appetites and abilities, so that the shop on Ekhevry Way was a mere bagatelle. The two partners wrapped up Vervacity and parted on good terms.

"But you know," said Chin, as they marked the dissolution of their partnership with a dinner at one of the clubs where Imbry always found good food and often encountered persons who would be shaped into participants in his various enterprises, "you could have gone another way."

Imbry paused with a glass of ruby Phalum halfway to his lips. "How so?"

"The piece you made when you were masquerading as Hassol Humbergruff—the Farouche, Goladry, Marenya—was as good as anything he ever produced. Indeed, it had a unique quality that could only have come from you."

Imbry sipped the wine. "I fail to grasp your point."

"Instead of forging other people's efforts, you could have been creating true works of lasting renown, under your own name," Chin said. "You might have made a legitimate fortune."

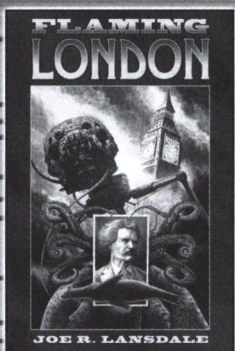
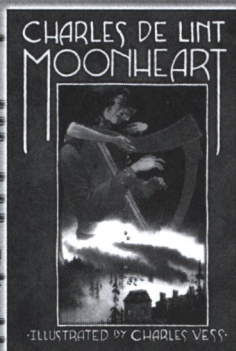
To Luff Imbry, the concept was completely novel. He turned it over in his complicated mind, then said, "No."

"But why not?"

Imbry offered a tiny shrug. "I have my reputation to consider." ☒



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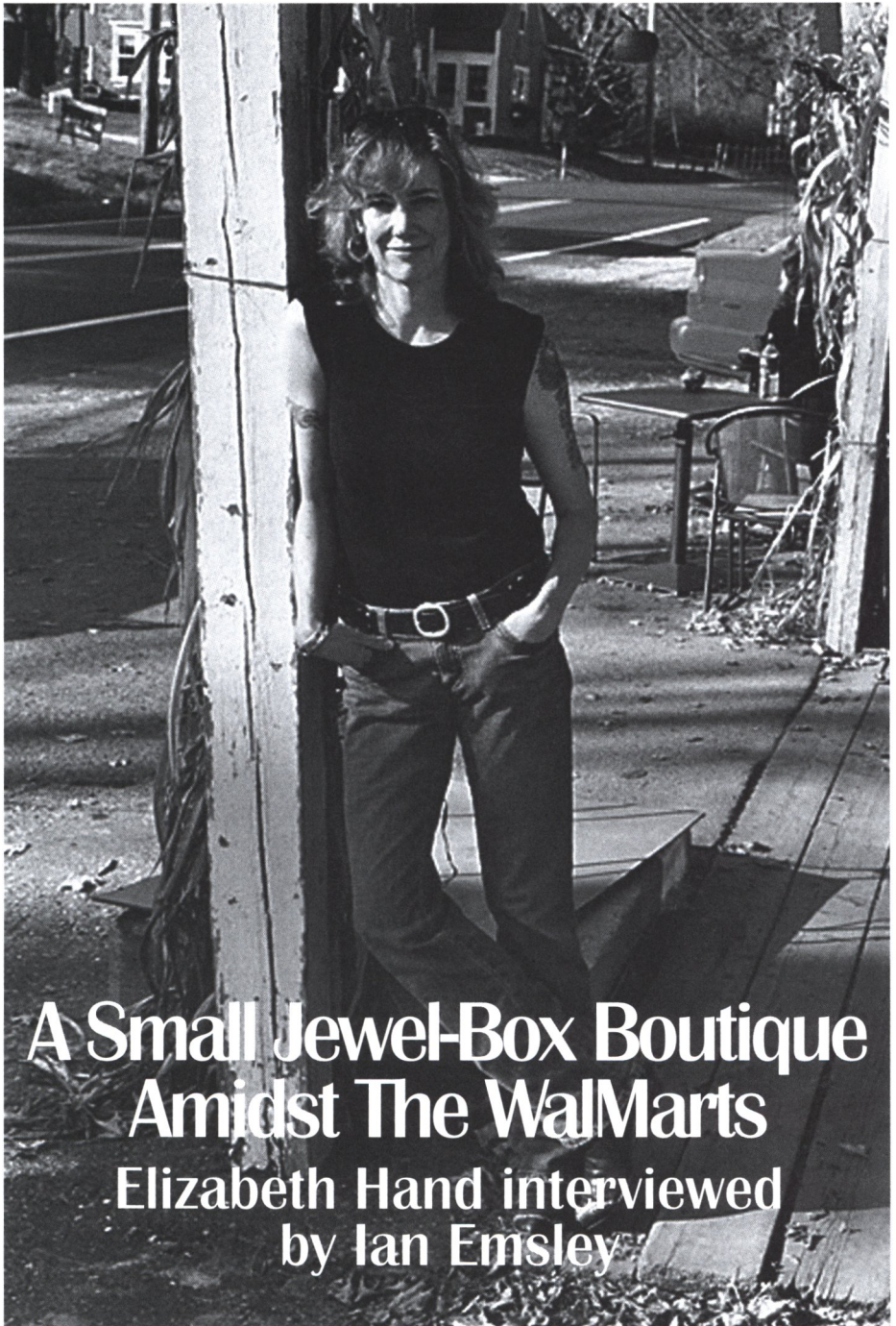
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**S**UBTERRANEAN  
PRESS



# **A Small Jewel-Box Boutique Amidst The WalMarts**

**Elizabeth Hand interviewed  
by Ian Emsley**

Elizabeth Hand is currently working on a very dark mainstream novel titled *Generation Loss*—“the first thing I’ve ever written with no fantastical element,” she tells us. Liz has also recently completed a sequence of four thematically linked stories, all dealing in some way with art and loss in the post-9/11 world. Copies of the trade hardcover edition of *Bibliomancy*, her World Fantasy Award-winning collection of novellas, are still available from PS Publishing.

Iain Emsley is a books review editor for Interzone as well as being a reviewer and critic. He is currently working on a history of fantasy in children’s writing and owns his own bookshop.

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Elizabeth Hand grew up in Yonkers and later in Pound Ridge, New York. In 1975 she moved to Washington, D.C., to study playwriting and cultural anthropology at Catholic University. From 1979 to 1986 she worked at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air & Space Museum. Her first story was published in 1988 and first novel, *Winterlong*, in 1990. The latter began an SF sequence, never-completed, that included *Aestival Tide* (1992) and *Icarus Descending* (1993). Contemporary fantasy *Waking the Moon* (1994), which won the James Tiptree Jr. Award and Mythopoeic Society Award, was followed by science fantasy *Glimmering* in 1997, and contemporary fantasy *Black Light* in 1999. Her story collection *Last Summer at Mars Hill* (1998) includes the Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winning title novella. *Bibliomancy: Four Novellas* (2003), which won a World Fantasy Award for best collection, contains the International Horror Guild award-winning “Cleopatra Brimstone” (2001). Hand has also written numerous movie and TV novelizations. She is a regular book reviewer for *F&SF*, *Washington Post Book World*, and the *Village Voice Literary Supplement*, among others. With her long-time friend Paul Witcover, she created DC Comics’ post-punk, post-feminist cult series *Anima*. Her one-act play, “The Have-Nots,” was produced in 1997, and was a finalist at the Battersea Arts Center as part of London’s Fringe Theatre Festival. Her seventh novel, *Mortal Love* (2004), is published by William Morrow.

“As a kid, I loved ghost stories and fairy tales and mythology, and also animal stories—Thornton W. Burgess, Ernest Thompson Seton, Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, Gerald Durrell. I wanted to be a writer and a zoologist or paleontologist—I was very good at science, the quintessential nerdy kid with glasses. Then, when I was eight, a babysitter gave me *The Hobbit*. That really was the book that changed the course of my life, because I immediately devoured it and then *The Lord of the Rings*, and every Ballantine Adult fantasy title Lin Carter published. I loved science fiction movies—all those great B movies of the 1950s and 1960s—and *Star Trek* and *The Prisoner* and *The Avengers*. But I never really read much science fiction; certainly not novels. That came much later, when I was in my late teens and early twenties. Our library did have Judith Merrill’s *Year’s Best* collections, and I read all

of those. I read Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* when I was about ten, in a paperback copy that had the cover missing, so for years I never knew who the author was. What I really loved, and love, was classic ghost stories—Algernon Blackwood, M.R. James, Arthur Machen and I loved A. Merritt, Clark Ashton Smith. From the beginning, my taste very definitely had a trope towards the pulps. But I was, am, just a voracious reader, and fortunately a pretty fast one. I read the Eddas, *Beowulf* in an old edition that had the original text and Modern English on facing pages, so I could read the original tale; Greek mythology, the Ramayana, the works. I was a bit of a snob: I read children's books, but I sort of disdained them until I was an older child, twelve or so, when I discovered Edward Eager and E. Nesbit. I loved Dickens, and comic books—Batman, Superman, Spiderman. Oddly, I read C.S. Lewis when I was about seven—not the Narnia books, but *The Great Divorce*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and then *Perelandra*. I had a slightly eccentric childhood reading pattern. By the time I was a young teenager I was enraptured with the Beats and Lawrence Durrell and the Lost Generation; Christopher Isherwood was a big influence, and Durrell of course. But by then I had decided to become a playwright, so my immersion was in pretty much all of the English language theatre, from the Mystery Plays on through the theatre of the Absurd, then very much in vogue; but especially Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward. Believe it or not, Coward was my role model.

“I decided to be a writer when I was four or five, before I could even read or write. I started writing ghost stories as soon as I could hold a pencil. I taught myself to type (very badly) when I was seven or eight, so that my stories would look like real books—i.e., not scrawled in my childish script. My first book was a thrilling nature adventure called *Saiab, the Red Kangaroo*, set in the Australian outback (it ended badly for the title character). My father had his secretary type it up for me—fifty pages, single spaced. My parents were very proud.

“After I read Tolkien, I began writing very strange, dark fantasies set in a place called Ealweard—essentially, the books my character Valentine writes in *Mortal Love*, only without the erotic content. All the characters in my books were melancholy heroes in poisoned landscapes, in thrall to peculiar obsessions which drove them mad, or else they died particularly unhappy deaths; sometimes all of these at once. I was a twelve-year-old writing M. John Harrison novels.

“As a teenager I began to write plays, which were produced by a local community theatre company, the Hamlet Players, started and run by a fabulous woman named Linda Klein. A great experience for me. Pound Ridge was a theatre town—a lot of Broadway people lived there, and some of their kids were in the Hamlet Players—so there was always a wonderful Let's Put on a Show! vibe to the whole enterprise. They were funny plays, one-acts, all fantasies or fractured fairy tales, with a cast of kids and teenagers. ‘Tales of the Bedragoned Buffoon,’ ‘The Silly Sit-

uation at the Ravastan School', which featured a proto-Hogwarts school for young jesters and magicians, and a memorable villain named The Wart of Peckindorf; 'The Misadventures of MaryAnna Maudlynne and the Dreadful Things Which Befell Her,' which I think brought back the Wart of Peckindorf. I like villains. An adaptation of Lewis Carroll's Alice books. I loved it, loved working with kids. I always think that if I weren't writing, I'd try to do that sort of thing again. By this time (high school) I was also writing my first real stories, set in Kamensic Village, which was based on my hometown and the neighboring village of Katonah.

"My work is almost strictly autobiographical on one level or another. I don't really have a good imagination: I can't make things up. But I do have an eidetic memory—I can recall things from my very early childhood in startling detail—and a keen sense-memory, and a pretty good knack for observing and absorbing people I know. So my books are filled with friends and acquaintances, though of course the fictional characters are radically different from their real-life counterparts. Again, it's somewhat akin to acting: I observe someone's behaviour, the details of their voice and actions, and filter that through myself and onto the page. My villains are generally not drawn from people I know; this is more a labor of love, of re-creating and refining the real world into something that is necessarily more idealized, more intense, than the world I live in.

"And the settings are real—my grandparents' house in Yonkers in *Glimmering* (there's a picture of it on my website); Catholic University in D.C, which was the model for the University of the Archangels and St. John the Divine; Kamensic; Mars Hill, based on Temple Heights, a spiritualist community just up the road from me here in Maine; the Lonely House, which is my lakefront cottage (though I'm not on an island); the North London settings of *Mortal Love* and 'Cleopatra Brimstone' are places I've lived as well. My current work-in-progress is set in a fictional version of where I live on the Maine coast. I could never make these places up. I lack the imagination.

"The same thing goes for my own voice in my fiction. I can point to most of my protagonists and say, 'This is me, at some point in my life. Me, me, me, me . . . .' It's like that great scene in *Being John Malkovich*, when you're inside Malkovich's head, and every guest at the party is himself. I'm Wendy in *Winterlong*; Julie Dean in 'On the Town Route'; Jack Finnegan in *Glimmering*; Lit in *Black Light*; Daniel in *Mortal Love*; Tony and Brendan in 'Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol' (my personality neatly split in two); most obviously Sweeney Cassidy in *Waking the Moon*—just about everything and everyone in that book was based on actual experience. As was *Black Light*, now that I think of it. And *Mortal Love*, and my two most recent short stories. Janie in 'Cleopatra Brimstone', Ivy and her panic attacks in 'The Least Trumps'. The shorter list would be to name those stories or novels that *don't* have me in them.

“This isn’t an ego thing—most of my protagonists are fuck-ups, or damaged in some deep way. They’re immensely flawed, as I am; but I find there’s something beautiful in the way they fuck up, and the way they attempt to mend themselves, and the world. There’s a beautiful line from a Patti Smith song (and I may have the line wrong, which would be typical, but I still love it)—‘The way that I fail is the way I seem to sail.’ Like Samuel Beckett’s dictum: ‘Fail better.’

“In this sense, I do believe my characters are looking for completion, or healing. I don’t know enough about the karmic wheel to know where their place is on it—probably all stuck in Maya, or whatever the illusion is. Someone once observed that my fiction is about healing. I think that’s true. My mother always said I should become a nurse, that I was a healer. I’ve worked as a health aide, living with terminally ill people; I’ve lived with and cared for dying relatives, and one of my best friends. I don’t think I’m particularly drawn to people in pain, but I certainly sense it acutely, and my impulse is always to make it better. Which I can seldom do in life, so I struggle to do it in my work, through my characters; give them the sort of closure that may be impossible in real life.

“And often this closure is what happens *after* the book is shut—someone who’d read ‘Chip Crockett’ was talking about how bleak it was. I said, ‘But that story has a happy ending!’ And of course, the happy ending is in my head: Brendan and his wife reconcile, they have a healthy baby girl, their autistic son Peter continues to show improvement, Tony Maroni and his girlfriend get married and everyone lives happily ever after. I think that most of the characters in my books—the ones who don’t die horrible deaths through supernatural means—go on to live happy, productive lives off the page. We should all be so lucky.”

“I do feel a stronger affinity for fantasy. My work isn’t plot-driven, and most SF is still fairly strong on narrative. And whatever my particular gifts are, they seem to lie more in the realm of supernatural fiction than in science fiction. I do sometimes think of returning to the world of some of my earlier work, *Winterlong* in particular, or even *Glimmering*. There are things you can do—that I can do, anyway—with science fiction that I find I can’t do with fantasy. World-building in particular—my fantasy tends to be set well within the parameters of our world, or a recognizable variant thereof, whereas my science fiction (science fantasy, really) gives me free rein to create something a little more over-the-top.”

Although she writes every day, Hand does find that it takes a while to get into the swing of a new novel. “I nearly always have side projects—novelizations, media tie-ins, the kind of things that pay the bills, as well as book reviews and essays. My serious work tends to have a long gestation—I usually start a novella, pick it up and put it down and pick it up again, over the course of a year or two. In the last year I did write two short stories, each of which was done in a sort of white heat over a

few days. My early story ‘The Have-Nots’ was written one Saturday while my infant daughter was napping and ‘The Least Trumps’, which began as a 500-word out-take from *Mortal Love*, was written in two weeks. But usually it takes forever. As I said, my work is not plot-driven. My friend Paul Witcover once observed that my fiction is about the correspondences between characters and themes and mythic resonances, and the reader’s gradual discovery of where those correspondences lie and what they lead to; a sort of palimpsest. My writing process is like that as well—it’s an archaeological process; maybe because my academic background was in anthropology. I discover my story as I tell it. It’s like that wonderful line from Theodore Roethke—‘I learn by going where I have to go.’ I usually have a very general outline, but I tend to leave that behind fairly early in the process. The characters come first, and the landscape. The underlying mythic structure is the one part that tends to be firmly in place from conception to completion, and which tends not to change during the course of writing a novel. With *Waking the Moon* I knew the story would follow the traditional birth/rebirth structure of the Goddess myth. With *Mortal Love*, I knew it would adhere to certain elements of the Tristan mythos and its variants. *Black Light* would follow certain elements of the Dionysian/maenad tale, and so on. The novel I’m working on now is drawn from the myth of Eros and Psyche, and whatever else happens, I don’t think that will change. I read a lot of poetry—Auden, Roethke, Rimbaud, Cavafy, Anne Carson, Ted Hughes, the classical Greek poets—and that informs the work as well. *Glimmering* was very much impacted by Auden; my work-in-progress by, god help me, the Greeks and the Beats.

“In some ways, I probably work more like an actor than a writer. I went to university intending to become an actor, and spent three years in a very intensive theatre program before burning out and dropping out. I find that I need to tap into a character to channel him or her successfully, and that can take time. Not time to get into the mood to write, or to wait for inspiration to strike, but time to really understand how this character works; how s/he reacts to the world. More than anything, I think I strive to achieve an emotional honesty or coherence, rather than a narrative one, or even a stylistic one: I want to capture as closely as possible the actual experience of heartbreak, or orgasm, or hallucination, or grief, or ecstasy. This is a difficult, maybe an impossible thing to do in writing, though not of course with acting. Since a lot of my work is done in the first person, this can take a certain emotional toll—writing *Winterlong* was like playing Lady Macbeth, and *Glimmering* was like the Oresteia: a load of laughs.”

*Mortal Love*, however, was wonderful, although it did take almost five years. “A few months before I finished it, I remember thinking how much I loved writing that book—I’d never had that much pleasure with characters and setting, the whole nine yards. I really didn’t want to leave them. I’d never had that experience before.

It was great. I've also found that my public readings from this book are much more like actual performances, which has been quite a trip. Very satisfying and again, something I've never experienced before."

Hand views *Waking the Moon* as her most popular book. "I don't think it's the best written of my books, but I think the whole bildungsroman aspect has made it appealing—college students still read it, which is cool, and it remains in print after ten years. The neo-pagan stuff remains popular, I guess, and the conspiracy element of the Benandanti. I have friends whose kids are just now getting old enough to start college, and I give it to them as a going-away present—good reading for Freshman Orientation Week!

"I've always thought that *Glimmering* was underrated, because it's so dark; but I can certainly see why it's not a beloved book. I think *Mortal Love* is going to remain a favourite. It has a huge amount of emotional resonance for me, and several of the characters are very close to my heart. The same thing goes for 'Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol', which I adore—I just love everything about that story, especially Tony Maroni. That was definitely an instance where a character came and stayed and I was sorry to see him go. That story is also so resonant of my childhood and my family. I'm incredibly attached to it. I'd love to use those characters again, but it's hard to know where or how. A lot of what I do functions as a kind of homage to people I've loved, or people who've touched me through their work. 'Chip Crockett' is an homage to Sandy Becker; 'The Least Trumps' to John Crowley; 'Pavane for a Prince of the Air' a memento mori for my dear friend Ben Smith. In a lovely example of life imitating art, through the internet I was able to get in touch with the widow of the real-life Chip Crockett, and I've had a delightful correspondence with her for several years now. She told me her husband would have loved the story. That was one of the high points of my writing career."

John Crowley and M. John Harrison are the two writers whom she thinks most influence her work. "I think my work shares a similar concern with the mutable nature of history and reality, and a similar emphasis upon character, though stylistically I think they're both light years ahead of me. Paul Park, Lucius Shepard, Richard Grant, Jeffrey Ford, Andy Duncan, Peter Straub, Kelly Link—though Kelly is *sui generis*, I can't think of anyone who writes like her; she's a genuine groundbreaker—we're living in a real Golden Age for fantasists. Some years ago, John Clute jokingly invoked The New England School of Ethical Romance in a review in the *Washington Post*, naming Crowley and several of the other writers I mentioned above as members. The New England School of Ethical Romance—it's an amusingly Crowleyesque term, but Crowley is almost certainly the living author who's had the most impact on me as a writer."

Apart from the current US administration and environmental change, Hand is concerned with the decline in literacy. "I feel like we're living in the middle of a par-



adigm shift, from a culture that made use of the written word to one that is almost strictly semiotic; an intriguing change, sure, but one that I wish I personally didn't have to live through. I've had a pretty pessimistic world-view since childhood, and nothing that's happened in the last few years has altered that. I've been living with the threat of an apocalypse in my head for decades now. 9/11 was horrific, but it didn't surprise me a bit. It was exactly the sort of thing I'd been expecting. It was exactly the sort of thing I was writing about in *Glimmering*—a terrorist act upon a New York City landmark by a group of religious fanatics. Of course, when that book was published in the go-go 90s, no one wanted to even imagine such a thing was possible—the very notion seemed absurd. I've since had a bunch of people tell me how uncanny they thought *Glimmering* was in anticipating a lot of the terrible things that have happened since it was first published. But one doesn't particularly relish seeing one's worst nightmares come true.

“What makes me hopeful? Realistically, I'd have to say not much. I live a pretty scaled-back, low-impact life in rural Maine, but in the last decade my immediate world has changed, and not for the better—there have been a lot of incursions by developers and American junk culture in the form of WalMart, SUVs, malls and the like, all of which I despise. I suppose what gives me hope is that it's still possible, sometimes, to fight back and win. Three years ago the power company here in Maine wanted to clear-cut the trees in our little town to make way for new power lines. Within a few hours I found myself part of an ad-hoc committee of five who fought the power company and eventually prevented them from destroying our trees—for the moment. Our neighboring town is now fighting a similar battle, and they may not win. A central lesson one gleans from fantasy literature—that the Dark Lord can be fought and ultimately defeated—I'm not certain if that applies to real life. Alas.

“I think that reading plays a role in shaping one's world-view, which is one reason I'm dismayed to see us losing a written culture. Reading takes an effort, just as writing does. Acquiring knowledge takes effort. But it takes very little effort to absorb visual cues—we do it unconsciously all the time. Children who grow up deriving their knowledge of the world solely through oral or visual media like television or the internet or music or videos lack the skills to distinguish between real information and propaganda; they have a sophisticated symbolic language and culture, but they're not good at articulating ideas or beliefs. They're not that good at articulating anything. I see this with my own kids; I see this when I teach writing workshops for children and young people. The English language consists of a vast number of words; a few years ago the number commonly known and used by the average American teenager had dropped to around 200. Now, with Instant Messaging, it's probably dropped to around ten. It's like losing all the colors in your paint box except for black and white. Eventually, I think, computer and AI culture

and technology will evolve to fill that gap, and our paint boxes will hold colors we can't imagine right now. But we're not there yet. In the meantime, we're losing something precious."

Hand's work often grounds the Fantastic with the real, working towards a thinning of the barriers between the worlds. "In my own fantasies, I want to show the effort involved in achieving a balance; not between fantasy and reality, but between two radically different forces—the Benandanti and the Malandanti in *Waking the Moon* and *Black Light*; our own world and Faerie in *Mortal Love*. It's a struggle sometimes, but I do try to present them all in a sympathetic light—i.e., not show the Benandanti as Simply Good or the Malandanti as Purely Evil (or vice versa), but more like rival political parties whose individual members may be decent (or indecent) human (or inhuman) beings, capable of surprising acts of charity (or wickedness). So Balthazar Warnick, a character of whom I am very fond, works for the Benandanti, an organization that in my universe operates not unlike the Republican Party. Balthazar has his doubts about his job, and someday he may get his own novel, but for now he functions as a decent, increasingly conscience-stricken moderate, quietly doing the best he can under what must be very challenging circumstances.

"In *Mortal Love*, the balance between our world and that of Faerie has been thrown off for centuries, at a terrible cost to some people (and some fairies). But there is a benefit to this imbalance, and that lies in artistic creation—those humans damaged or haunted by their fleeting encounters with this other world are driven to create, as a means of exorcising or maintaining a connection to their experience. It's a not-very-subtle metaphor for the creative process, and also a fictional representation of what it's like for me, as a writer who lives with a sometimes debilitating mood disorder, to experience the ecstasies and despairs concomitant with these very intense mental states. 'The edge is what I have,' Theodore Roethke wrote in 'In a Dark Time'. That edge is a precarious place, and I think it's where most of my characters live.

"In more strictly generic terms, I love playing with the notion of immanence: that something on the other side of our world is about to break through, or has broken through and is now trying to get back. The novels that haunted me as a child dealt with that. Dark books, most of them: Alan Garner's *Elidor* and *The Owl Service*; C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*, which for all its flaws had a powerful sense of another world lying in wait just beneath the surface of this one. Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-In-The-Mist*, in which Faerie doesn't break through so much as seep through. All British writers; I was an Anglophile from an early age. *Elidor* in particular absolutely stunned me, because there was no doubt that it was a children's book—it was packaged and marketed as such, the protagonists were children—but the sense of dread and decay was so palpable, the sense of danger so real and terrify-

ing; the cost, if the children failed in their quest, was untenable. There were no brief, peaceful interludes in Lothlorien or at the Beavers' house: I had the feeling, reading that book, that this is what it would *really* be like if one had an encounter with magic, with what the grownup Me would call the numinous: it would be terrifying. It would unmind you. And while there was a happy ending, sort of, it wasn't the kind of happy ending I had ever encountered before.

"That was a powerful, radical book for me to encounter when I was, what? twelve or thirteen? I knew I wanted to write, and I knew immediately that *this* was what I wanted to write. *Elidor* made me see that fantasy, as a literature, was capable of things I had never imagined; that our reality, drab and workaday as it was, could be the setting for cataclysmic battles that only a few might be aware of; that all these terrifying, beautiful, otherworldly beings could co-exist with council housing and sibling rivalries and Ouija boards. It was an incredible revelation. Of course it's a very effective thing when done well in a novel. One wants to think—I want to think—that the possibility is always there: that another reality might break through at any moment, if only one is in the right place or says the right words or meets the right person or puts on the right ring. To me that's the most intoxicating notion: that it's all *right there*, if only we could put our hands on it."

Writers such as Lucius Shepard and Alice Hoffman have mined and re-imagined Magical Realism for a new audience and again, Hand views this as a Golden Age for fantasists. "The great loss to the American literary establishment is that so few of its members would know to put Lucius Shepard and Alice Hoffman in the same sentence. But yes, I think there is a very wide stream—a river, really—with people as diverse as Shepard and Hoffman and George Saunders and Paul Di Filippo and Paul Witcover and Karen Joy Fowler and Jonathan Carroll and Donald Harington and Peter Straub and Jeff VanderMeer—well, the list just goes on and on and on. All of these, and the writers I mentioned earlier, and so many others. I could probably sit down and compile a list of forty or fifty truly excellent fabulist writers, and that's an extraordinary thing to think about. Like I said, this is a new Golden Age, a lot of it fueled by the emergence of so many fine small presses and the internet. And the same phenomenon seems to be happening in England as well. This may be a great efflorescence because we're at the end of something—not *fin de siècle*, but *fin de monde*—but it's great all the same, if you're a reader."

Hand's male-female relationships can be violent. "I think there's an undercurrent of violence in many relationships, but certainly not all of them. I've been in violent relationships, and I was abducted and raped by a stranger when I was twenty-one. Sadly, I know a number of other women who've had similar experiences. So is my use of this dynamic an instance of 'write what you know'? I don't think so. I think that our ability to function productively in an inherently dangerous, unstable world is very much a product of our ability to tune out a lot of that

sense of imminent danger. I don't believe that there's an implicit threat of violence, sexual or otherwise, in every waking moment of one's life; but as a writer, I'm alert to the possibilities of violence erupting when we least expect it. And of course one can't overlook the fact that this is all grist for the mill for a writer, especially for a writer of supernatural fiction. Sexual relationships are highly charged; in dark fantasy, the negative charge is usually directed at one of the partners in a couple or a romantic triangle. Usually, but not always. One of the best and most frightening novels I've ever read is Richard Adams's *The Girl in the Swing*, in which the female protagonist is an avatar of a goddess or maenad. She takes a human, male consort, with whom she has an intensely sexual and blissfully happy relationship: her violence is not directed at him, but towards her own young child. It's a brilliant, terrifying novel, but it doesn't seem to have spawned a lot of imitators insofar as the family dynamic goes.

"I should add that I don't necessarily see the relationship between the lepidopterist and Janie in 'Cleopatra Brimstone' as being a destructive one. I think she wanted to be caught: and I don't think he kills her. In SM circles, their relationship could be seen as being fairly traditional. Later they switch roles, of course."

*Mortal Love* features the Pre-Raphaelites, whose relationships turn out to be quite complicated with the gender politics of Victorian society, and its views on the place of women. "The Pre-Raphaelites have fallen out of favor these days, but I continue to find them wildly entertaining. My first contact with them was when I was fourteen and my aunt, who had been living in London for several years, visited and gave me a full-size print from the Tate of Millais' 'Ophelia', along with Beardley's 'How Sir Tristram Drank of the Love Drink'. I was particularly obsessed with 'Ophelia'. I'd read and re-read *Hamlet*, of course, but I was still puzzled by that painting: was she dead? was she floating before she died? She looked so *alive* to me—who *was* she, really? Later I was one of those 1970s college girls who have all the Pre-Raphaelite posters on the wall—'The Lady of Shallot,' that Burne-Jones siren with the drowned sailor. And when I was nineteen, one of my boyfriends had a tattoo on his upper arm—this back when *nobody* had tattoos—a small gold ring with the letters PRB inside it. I asked him what they meant, and he said, 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.' He carried around a biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti—*he* was obsessed with Rossetti, whom of course I'd never heard of. He'd point to that Rossetti early self-portrait, when the painter was about twenty and very beautiful, and say, 'Doesn't he look like me?'

"Indeed he did. He gave me PRB biographies—I was called Lizzie, I had dyed red hair. So it all imprinted on me at a tender age. I've been reading about them ever since then—nearly thirty years now. And over all that time I absorbed a great deal of their history, some of it now discounted. But they never stopped fascinating me; I've read dozens of biographies and studies and monographs, whatever I

could get my hands on. Their relationships with women were especially intriguing—Jan Daly has written an excellent book called *Pre-Raphaelites in Love*, which distills most of their relationships into a very heady mix. Rossetti gets all the press, but Burne-Jones was the one who really ended up intriguing me (along with Swinburne), especially his relationship with his model Maria Zambuco, an extraordinarily beautiful young woman who was also an artist. I very much wanted to make her the centerpiece of a novel, but I couldn't find enough biographical material, and didn't want to take liberties with her life—she seemed in many ways a sad person, though she continued to paint and sculpt after her relationship with the married Burne-Jones ended.

“I think these women were extremely strong in so many ways—not just Lizzie Siddal and Maria Zambuco and Janie Morris, who were the famous models whom we associate most clearly with the PRB; but Georgie Burne-Jones, and Effie Millais, who divorced John Ruskin to marry John Millais at a time when divorce was absolutely unheard of—Queen Victoria refused to have her at court, despite Millais's later standing as a painter, which was heartbreaking for poor Effie. These women were remarkable people; they were all risk-takers, to varying degrees, and in many ways they expanded the roles that women played—not necessarily as artists (though Zambuco and Siddal were artists) but as women who played a very active part in their marriages or partnerships. The more I read about them, the more I found that they defied the view we've developed of them, as being nothing but pretty, simpering Victorian window-dressing. That may have been what made it onto the canvas; but the reality must have been very different. That was the real genesis for Larkin Meade in *Mortal Love*. I wanted her to embody the communal spirit of all of these women: powerful and creative, but hobbled by being trapped in the wrong world.

“I don't think this is applicable today. Again, I think it's useful as a metaphor: we still have unhealthy unhappy relationships, but while someone like Maria Zambuco may still try to kill herself because of her involvement with a married man, it seems less likely that her artistic abilities would be thwarted simply because of her gender. Nowadays she'd just get on Prozac. Then she'd never want to paint at all.

“Someone who read *Mortal Love* in manuscript commented that he was surprised that I would choose this particular subject—the Eternal Feminine; surprised, I guess, that as a feminist I didn't focus on the Eternal Masculine or an ideal that didn't seem so antiquated. (In fact my next book deals with a female artist and her male muse.) My feeling is, there's such a rich body of material in that feminine archetype, a whole mythic substructure that I've explored and still seem not to have exhausted. Certainly the more I read about the ancient Greeks and their mythic representations of women, the more fascinating they become. So I may never stop drawing from that well.”

The notes to the book mention research on outsider art, especially Richard Dadd. “I’ll here use the term ‘outsider art’ for brevity’s sake: people who make a study of this sort of thing have an entire spectrum of terms they employ, from folk art to visionary art to self-taught art to the art of the insane, and more. I’ve been fascinated by outsider artists for decades since I was about twelve or so—I read about the English painter Louis Wain, and saw some of his work. He haunted me. As I grew older I became aware of other, more visionary artists—Blake, Albert Pinkham Ryder—people who didn’t quite fit into what was then the established artistic canon. One of the first things I visited when I moved to D.C. to attend college was The Throne of the Assembly of the Third Millennium, an outsider art assembly at the National Gallery of Art. An early story, ‘Snow on Sugar Mountain’, was inspired in part by a piece of outsider art, a notebook that I discovered while working at the Smithsonian Institution, where I had a friend and co-worker who was also a visionary artist. My story ‘The Erl-King’ dealt with a lot of the same themes that crop up in *Mortal Love*—the frightening, visionary paintings, the unstable creator, in this case a singer-songwriter. My Mars Hill is pretty much a community of outsider artists. And several years ago I wrote an essay about Henry Darger, another fascinating, pitiable artist who created ecstatic and disturbing work. I’m certainly not an outsider artist myself—too many bills to pay, too many parental responsibilities, and I lack the driving obsessiveness that I think characterizes outsider artists.”

Elizabeth Hand sees herself as a small boutique amidst the WalMarts but it remains that her writing obsesses and intrigues her readers.



### 2004 World Fantasy Award-winner for Best Collection



From Elizabeth Hand, one of America's leading literary fantasists, comes a collection of extraordinary novellas of damnation and dark revelation, epiphany and redemption. Written in the author's characteristic poetic prose, and rich with the detail of lives traumatic yet luminously transformed, these stories form a remarkable tapestry interweaving the supernatural and the mundane.

"I emerged from *Bibliomancy* with my mind full of colors. You do not find this sort of cohesion, this linguistic inevitability, except in the very best writing."

—Lucius Shepard (from his Introduction)

*Rhys Hughes says, "This story owes its existence to the old fashioned condition of a struggling writer waiting for a muse to appear. The muse in question appeared in the internet café at Swansea University during the 2002 World Cup when Brazil were playing Turkey. We have been good friends ever since. Recently she graduated in psychology from the University of Curitiba and may now have more free time for ocean swimming."*

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# The Mermaid Of Curitiba

## Rhys Hughes

**T**he joys of Brazil pressed on The Traveller as he wandered into the historic quarter of the city. It was almost carnival time and people were preparing themselves for the experience. They were rehearsing by dancing and drinking and dressing in costumes. As he entered the Largo da Ordem, he was amazed by the variety of disguises which the revellers had adopted. Here was colour and imagination in excess. Yet it all blended rather than clashed and carried him along on a single wave of shared indulgence.

He felt pale and feeble in comparison with these alluring people. He wanted to simply stand and watch, but it was impossible to remain aloof. Wherever he went he found himself in the middle of a dance. Groups of pretend gypsies whirled around him, the girls swaying their hips in so seductive a fashion he was suffused with a sensation that was both agreeable and hopeless. He felt an intense yearning, a desire that was painful, because there was too much beauty and he was no longer young.

At last he reached a tranquil corner in the shadow of the Nossa Senhora do Rosário. This church was only a reconstruction of the original, which had decayed to a ruin, but it still held the breath of the past in the bones of its stones. He uttered a sigh of disappointment which also worked as one of relief, for he wished to lose himself in the festivities but he was tired and could not forget the misery of his former life. Everything here refuted his belief in the world as a tasteless joke. It was almost beyond his endurance.

He relaxed slowly. There was a stall selling drinks and he ordered a *caipirinha*, rum mixed with lime, sugar and crushed ice. It cooled and warmed him at the same time. His individuality began to melt. Far from home in this tropical land he believed that acceptance waited for him. Rarely had he beheld such lack of suspicion, such openness of heart. The revellers were often frantic and even the lilting melodies of the guitars were driven by a powerful beat, but everyone was wel-

come to be equally wild. There were no barriers.

Beyond the songs he heard a gentle splash. He assumed there was a fountain in the square and he went to search for it. He crossed the Largo da Ordem, heading in the direction of the Praça Tiradentes, weaving between dancers adorned with feathers who swooped on him and each other like carnivorous parrots, veering away at the last moment and giggling. When he was safely through, his own face carrying a smile he had not placed there himself, his heart light against his will, he found the source of the water.

It was not a fountain. It was a glass tank full to the brim. A girl swam in it, making ornate patterns which threw up a fine spray. He relished the moisture on his cheeks and lips as he approached her. Then she stopped and grasped one side of the tank with her fingers and waited for him to step even closer. In the light of lanterns which hung from brackets on nearby buildings, her skin sparkled, each droplet a costume jewel. Her eyes laughed at him or with him, he could not say which. It did not matter.

He bowed. "*Boa tarde, sereia bonita.*"

She replied in his own language, her tone warm and yet haunting, like so many songs of the south, sensual and humorous. "Yes, I am a mermaid."

"Very convincing," he replied quietly.

She flicked her tail. "I try my best. But what are you?"

"I have come as a traveller."

She winked, her long lashes dark gold and moist. "Ah, I thought you had dressed up as a lonely man!"

He accepted the jest with a little shrug. Then he thrust his hands into his pockets, unaccountably nervous in front of her, his weary feet shuffling as he wondered what to say. He realised he was the only person near the tank. A space had opened around them, a rare opportunity to stretch and breathe clean air instead of the scent of sweat of drunken dancers, not that the flavour of those exuberant secretions was unpleasant. But he was happy to be alone with her, to stand in her presence and exchange inquisitive glances.

"What is your name?" he asked at last.

She offered him a hand. "Caroline."

He held it timidly and then on impulse kissed it. She laughed again and he felt an incredible energy surge inside him. This was a perfect moment, one of those precious instants when it is both desirable and possible to exist only in the present without former or future cares betraying or troubling the senses. He inhaled her perfume. It was smooth but fiery, like honey and pepper, and he imagined submerged volcanoes erupting in shallow, sugary seas. Then he shook his head and returned to reality and spoke again.

"I have a new name for you."

"Oh yes?" she answered.

"*A menina com cabelos ondulados.*"

She clapped her hands. "That is cute. I am the girl with wavy hair. And why is that, do you suppose? Is it



because I live in the waves? There are many different kinds of wave. And what must I call you, little traveller?"

He leaned forward and whispered his name. He thought he tasted the spray of the ocean as he pressed his lips to her ear. She listened with a frown and seemed to disagree with what he told her.

"No," she said, "you are not what you claim to be."

"Then who am I? Who?"

She lifted a finger to her lips and turned her head partly away. A line of dancers was approaching, snaking closer, each man and woman apparently joined at the pelvis, so that they resembled a giant millipede with thorns in its feet, for no heel touched the ground without instantly springing up again. And the dancers were followed by drummers, striking a bewildering selection of percussive instruments, giant *surdo* and *tantan* drums, and the smaller *pandeiro* and *timbal*, held high or strapped to their waists, some playing with hands, others with sticks. The Traveller stepped back and they undulated between him and the mermaid.

A few of the drummers were locked in a trance, eyes open but not seeing, willing slaves to the music, which was so powerful it vibrated every part of their bodies, but not their faces, which remained masks. But there was nothing to conceal. They had no inner feelings or identities left. It was all projected outward in the rhythms, the movements and spells. These were not

masks of intrigue but faces empty of language, for meanings had burst out through the arms and into the drums, whose skins bounced and boomed them further out again into the dusky heat of the city.

Caught up in the action and result of the sound, puppets of what they created, they must have perceived only two elements in the cosmos, the drum and its actual beating. Every surface was a membrane for this act of worship. As they passed the tank of water, they played the glass side closest to them, using it as a musical surface. The Traveller lost sight of the mermaid but he guessed the reverberations were becoming visible in the liquid, eddies and overlapping waves giving transient shape to each pulse, the separate rhythms crashing and mixing until a minor storm had been created in the depths of this misplaced aquarium.

The Traveller wanted to push his way through, but he was stunned or shamed into immobility by the music. There was sexual heat in the aggressive tempos and when the final drummer had finished beating his own rhythm on the tank before returning to his proper instrument, and the space was clear again, the mermaid was gasping and smiling and blushing behind a web of cracks. The glass had been fatally weakened. Breaking out of his own trance, The Traveller rushed forward and shouted a warning.

With a dramatic crash, one side of the tank shattered into thousands of tiny stars and a wall of agitated water

hung suspended for an instant, holding the echoes of the music tight, before collapsing over him. He started to lift his arms to protect his face. They were level with his chest when the mermaid, swept along by the mighty current, collided with him. She settled into his arms with remarkable precision. But he was knocked back by the surge and unwillingly sat down hard on the ground.

He remained in his puddle, clutching the girl, until he was sure neither of them was hurt. He stood with difficulty, splinters of glass clinging to his trousers and sparkling like sequins. For a minute he was irresolute, shivering as he regarded the ruins of the tank. Then she whispered to him and he nodded and set off to find a bar. She was comfortable in his grasp and he pressed the strong muscles of her lithe body with a primitive delight. Holding her like this, he somehow felt lighter or stronger.

In the Praça Garibaldi and the streets which jutted from it, they found many establishments serving beer and *cachaça* rum. There was music here too but it was milder than the raw rhythmic mesh outside. The Traveller lowered the mermaid onto a high stool and positioned himself on another close to her. Then he ordered a pair of drinks. His hand trembled as he raised the glass to his lips. He could hardly bring himself to look directly at her, afraid she might be bored or annoyed, but with each furtive glance he saw that her smile, more curious now, was still in place.

“This is my first proper carnival,” he said.

She touched his arm. “Curitiba is not really noted for its festivities. It is too ordered and successful for true abandonment. The best places in the south for wild displays are Florianópolis and Laguna. But this is only one of the *bailes carnavalescos*, a rehearsal for the main occasion. The carnival is still to come. You are easy to please or difficult to please, I am unsure which.”

“Will you stay for the duration?”

“In Curitiba? No, my celebrations are elsewhere.”

He finished his drink and ordered another. A desperate urge to know her future plans overwhelmed him but he drowned this oppressive need at the bottom of his glass. He could not declare his love for her without sounding like a fool or monster. It was unreasonable. He must be simply enchanted by his environment. That was the only sensible answer. He resolved to enjoy her company without asking anything more from it. There was already enough physical desire in the atmosphere, more pressure than any bar should be expected to contain. He did not wish to burst the city with his lust.

He said swiftly, “I want to move on.”

She nodded and he picked her up again, carrying her back out under a shower of meteors. There was a commotion in a high window. Someone had set off fireworks in a room. The crackle of artificial stars matched the sparks in his head. He emitted a short laugh. They entered another bar, more

crowded than the previous one, and he bought more drinks. This time there was only one free stool and she sat on his knee. He held her close and lightly caressed her. His emotions had settled but the balance was delicate.

Even trying to examine his feelings might upset this stability and return him to turmoil, so he disregarded his heart and concentrated on his mind. He was stupidly drunk but not offensively so. That was acceptable. He continued to spend money. Did he hope to heighten his dumb joy or distance himself from it? He was unsure and the question made him thirsty. He vaguely noticed that his companion was consuming far less than he, while preserving the illusion of matching him glass for glass. She did not need intoxication to feel special.

Soon they moved on again. And so began a complete tour of the bars of the Praça Garibaldi and its narrow tributaries, each flowing with a different coloured current from a variety of spilled beverages, lime and passion fruit and guaraná, and the wines of the Italian farmers from Rio Grande do Sul, and potent *batidas*, glittering particles of crushed ice floating along like lost floes, prey to the heat of dancing feet and lantern drippings. Not once did The Traveller stumble under his tender burden. He carried her carefully, as a bewildered sea relocates a bottle and its message, each new bar a gentle beach.

At last he realised he had been talking for the best part of an hour and that

she was no longer there. His knee was cold and even his own stool was unoccupied. This seemed very funny, but his head hurt when he laughed. He was lying on the floor and the low ceiling seemed far away. He had fallen without noticing. He staggered slowly to his feet. The bar was empty. The first light of dawn was exploring puddles of wine in the streets, turning them from oil to gold or blood or the juice of blushes. Then the sun came up and these shallow pools burst with sparkles, causing him to shield his gaze.

He lurched through the streets to his hotel. Only a few revellers were still out. There was no need to rehearse too hard. He had overdone it. He found his room and bed without difficulty, for although he was very drunk his senses had been energised to their limit and this compensation gave him a judgment that was approximately normal. He slept but his dreams were exhausting. He imagined that the night was endless, but he could not select a response to this fact. Elation and frustration both seemed suitable, yet he feared that choosing one would forever cancel out the other in his soul. He did nothing, avoiding the responsibility, and woke at midday. His headache had vanished.

He went down for a late breakfast. The owner of the hotel was dancing gracefully to unseen music. Dulcilene Urbainski was too shy to be truly Brazilian, or so she claimed. She was a professional photographer who had bought a hotel because the characters



who inhabited it were always as illuminating as the pictures she took. It was a way of watching her own work come alive. This traveller was only mildly intriguing, but she was patient and tolerant. His defects did not spoil his potential in her eyes. Like all negatives, they could be developed. He sat at the table and she brought him coffee and a plate of *salgados*. After his coffee, a glass of squeezed *cupuacu* freshened his tongue. He dabbed his lips with a napkin and remarked:

"I met a girl last night. I fell in love. Can you believe that? What sort of man falls in love at first sight these days?"

Dulcilene raised an eyebrow. "Did she have wavy hair?"

He nodded forcefully. "Yes."

"And the biggest smile in the world?"

He stood and blinked rapidly. "Do you know her?"

"Of course. Her name is Caroline Moreira. We are friends. But she is leaving Curitiba today. In fact her train went this morning. You have missed her, I am afraid. Where is she headed? For a carnival elsewhere. That is all I can be sure about. The exact location remains a secret."

The Traveller said thoughtfully, "There is only one train line out of this city and it passes through the Serra do Mar and down to the Bay of Paranaguá. That must be where she is going."

Dulcilene shrugged. "You may borrow my car if you like."

He accepted her offer with a kiss on both cheeks and hurried out. She followed and handed him the keys to the ignition. Then she waved him off and watched as he began the pursuit of his destiny of choice. Yet as he roared away, her sympathies were muted. This was unfair on him, but there had been so much vibrant colour in the recent past, with much more promised, that a pastel influence somewhere was essential to cool the engine of fevered nights, and that was her task. Or else the joys of Brazil would burn themselves out. Half a continent owed her the favour of soothing its brow. That is how she felt.

The Traveller drove fast but with alert senses as he sought an escape from the city. He passed the Federal University, turned right at the Rua Tibagi and joined the highway which leads to the Jardim Botânico and far beyond it, down the slopes, to the ocean. The drop to the sea was considerable. This was best displayed in the change of vegetation during the journey. In the heights of Curitiba the smell of pine trees was cool and musky in his nostrils, but the rapid descent produced a remarkable transformation. At the base of the Serra do Mar, subtropical jungle awaited him. And beyond even that, with doomed luck, the consummation of his subtropical desires.

The railway line to Paranaguá is one of the most exciting in Brazil. It clings to the sides of cliffs, crosses vast ravines on slender bridges, grips narrow mountain ridges and passes through

innumerable tunnels, all the while giving spectacular views of the last vestiges of the Atlantic forest to the deep east. The road to the same place is less fussy. The Traveller guessed he could overtake the train and reach the coast first. Then it would just be a matter of waiting for his beloved and her look of surprise to arrive and disembark into his arms, or into his tears, depending on her reaction. As he drove, he whistled one of the previous night's melodies, a tune he did not actually remember hearing.

He ran out of fuel just outside the town of Morretes. He sat without moving, stuck in disbelief, until a stranger wandered over and leaned into the open window. The Traveller gazed up mournfully. "I am in love," he said, and when the stranger frowned, he added, "*Apaixonado*." This produced an unexpected result. The stranger gestured at a horse grazing quietly in a field next to the road. Was it feasible to gallop into romance in this modern age? Yes, for he was a traveller and travellers must travel to maintain that distinction and it is unavoidable, when they do, that they will try new things, including methods of getting about. He had already learned to ride a horse. He accepted the offer, but with a kiss only on one cheek, for the stranger had a beard and was a man. Then he mounted and jerked the reins and the sound of hooves was old and satisfying.

The south is a land of horses and riders, less so around Curitiba than in Rio Grande do Sul, but true all the

same, and there are many narrow paths where no wheeled vehicles may go. The Traveller picked one of these winding tracks and realised it was better this way, to meet his beloved again with his hair combed by the wind and the creak of leather still in his thigh-bones and his feet blistered by stirrups. More traditional. Then he thought he glimpsed the train itself, high on the far side of the gigantic valley, before it was obscured by thickly clustered trees. But this sighting must have been a mistake, for it seemed that an array of mirrors was moving along the line instead of carriages, each one flashing in the afternoon sun and holding reflections which had nothing in common with the landscape they faced. A mirage.

The horse decided to stop before it reached the outskirts of Paranaguá. No amount of encouragement would make it move. It cared nothing for The Traveller's sentiments. He dismounted and wept, holding his face in his hands and peeping between his fingers for the next helpful stranger. There really was one and he had a bicycle. This time The Traveller kept quiet, but he made the shape of a woman in the air with his hands and when this failed he pretended to flick wavy hair back over his shoulders. The bicycle was handed over. Now the creak of leather was less dramatic, but the breeze and blisters were the same. At last he entered the port and reached the train station, which is located three blocks from the waterfront. Here he paused and caught his breath.

A group of musicians strumming guitars on the corner finished their song and called to him. He made a gesture of ignorance, so they shouted in his own language.

"There are no trains due today, Senhor."

"Yes there are," he replied. "One left Curitiba many hours ago."

"That is a special train. On the other line."

He blinked. There was a second line parallel to the one which terminated at the station. It continued to the sea. He heard a distant whistle. Abandoning the bicycle, he ran across the tracks. He could not work out where this special train would stop. There were no platforms for passengers to wait on. So he took the only option left and stood in the middle of the tracks with his hands raised high. The whistle was repeated, louder now. There were flashes in the trees and through gaps in the buildings. The rails rattled.

The musicians played a lament for him, certain he intended to kill himself, but he cried to them above the melody and they heard the words, "*menina . . . cabelos ondulados*," and they understood and approved and changed their song to a serenade. Now the train rumbled into view around a corner and The Traveller closed his eyes, shutting out that velocity which turned his longing into dread, and his lips also shut tightly and every cell in his body seemed to shrink in anticipation of the collision. But he heard the squeal of brakes and the anger of locked metal

wheels and felt a hot blast of air on his face, and then when all was finally silent, he risked a look.

The front of the train had come to a halt directly in front of him. His eyes roamed up the buffers and grille and single blank headlight of the cab to the window. The driver made a rude sign at him, but there was something odd about his uniform. He was encased in a diving suit, his expression unclear behind a tiny porthole in a thick steel helmet. Stiff rubber pipes connected this helmet to oxygen cylinders and behind him dozens of other cylinders were arranged in neat rows. The Traveller stepped casually to the side and began walking the length of the train. The metal cab with its huge rust spots was one thing, the carriages were quite another. He gasped in astonishment.

Glass tanks, at least a dozen of them. Full of water too. And mermaids. Now he knew the flash across the valley had not been a mirage. The sun was dipping behind the mountains in the west and the long shadows of the serrated peaks crept toward the train like barbed harpoons. He could not detain them for long. The sudden braking had set the water in motion, so that it sloshed from one end of each tank to the other, and the girls surfed these miniature rollers with cries of delight. He continued to walk and at last saw her. She swam to the top of her tank and peered over and he was reminded of a time not long ago in hours but ancient in feelings.

"Hello again," he said simply.

“You should not have followed me,” she replied.

“I did not realise you were a real mermaid. I thought it was a costume. Are you returning to the sea?”

“Yes, with my friends. It will soon be time for our own carnival. We gather in uncharted depths in the middle of the ocean and there we dress up as ordinary people. The clothes of your everyday lives are exotic for us. We will pretend to be doctors, bakers, electricians, waitresses, architects, teachers, students. There are many options.”

“Will you disguise yourselves as travellers?”

“If we do, we shall not copy your style. It is inaccurate.”

He turned pale. “I am a traveller. I have travelled. It makes sense. If I am not a traveller, what am I? You almost told me last night. Tell me now!”

She seemed unable to reply in English. The answer was too elaborate, too strange. Rather than say nothing, she finally responded in her own tongue:

*“Uma personagem sem nome. Fazes parte de uma história mas não percebes. Viajaste até lado nenhum porque esta história é o único lugar onde existes. Nunca teremos futuro porque a história não terá sequelas, mas por outro lado estaremos sempre juntos no presente, presos a estas palavras, e o nosso romance será eterno, ou pelo menos enquanto houverem leitores.”*

He could not understand what she said, but he took a profound comfort from her tone, which was sad but strong, and he knew he had been offered a gift beyond hope, which is a

feeling only concerned with the future. She had given him the past, not just as a memory but somehow as a set of recurring experiences. How to set them in motion again was the one mystery left. He suspected the mechanism was not his to control. But this was already more than that granted to most lovers. He sighed and brushed the spray from his face.

“How will we say goodbye?” he asked.

She smiled gently. “Remember I told you there was more than one kind of wave? Well, here is another . . .”

She raised her hand, fondly but finally, and at this signal the train started moving again, gathering speed, bearing its unique cargo down the rails to the point where they entered the sea, the engine and carriages plunging into the surf and disappearing under the broad expanse of blue. She was heading out beyond the Ilha da Cotinga and Ilha do Mel and across the almost limitless seabed, with sunken galleons and treasure chests on both sides, perhaps to the base of a submerged mountain range and up again along narrow ridges and over bridges of coral and through tunnels into phosphorescent caverns until finally she reached a green shimmering festival where everything people regard as ordinary is outlandish and curious.

He said to himself, “I will return next year with a diving suit of my own and catch that train before it departs!”

And he crossed the tracks again and nodded at the musicians, who played a



song for him which was neither sad nor happy, and he lifted the bicycle and mounted it. He would have to return this to its owner. And after the bicycle, the horse. And after the horse, the car. He planned to thank Dulcilene by taking her out for a meal. There was a nice restaurant on the corner of Praça Garibaldi called the *Estrela da Terra*. He would ask her to translate the mer-

maid's words for him. But he was already forgetting them and he knew that by the time he reached Curitiba they would have all completely drifted away.

The original reads "innumerable," but there is more than enough cause to conclude that when spoken by The Traveller that vague quantity stands for "fourteen". ☞

**W**hat is Luck? If it exists at all, where does it come from, and how does it operate? Is it a supernatural force? A genetic gift? Or a quantum phenomenon, a knack for adjusting probability in just the right way? In *Streaking*, Brian Stableford, one of Britain's most honoured SF and fantasy authors, tackles these questions with all his customary flair, invention, intense logic, and dark wit.

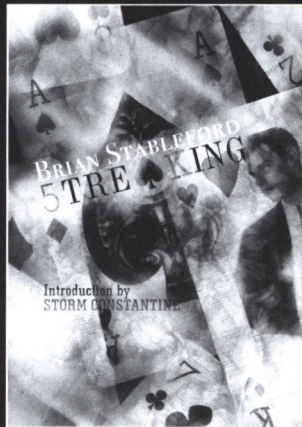
Canny Kilcannon, heir to the earldom of Crededale in Yorkshire, is an extremely lucky man, the scion of a long dynasty of extremely lucky men. Unlike his dour and cautious ancestors, he believes in taking material advantage of his hereditary good fortune: as a playboy gambler, he cruises the casinos of the world, winning steadily yet cleverly and calculatedly, so as not to draw undue attention. But a particular defiance of the odds in Monte Carlo is noticed, both by a criminal gang and by Lissa Lo, a beautiful woman who may somehow share Canny's luck. As he returns to Crededale, to the bedside of

his dying father, Canny is increasingly aware that powerful forces are closing in on him.

But Canny is a resourceful man, and astute at judging the odds in any situation; as he becomes Lord Crededale, he plays the game of life with the same tactical brilliance he showed in Monte Carlo. Faced with challenges both domestic and

acutely menacing—the dilemma of how to continue and strengthen his family line, the need to fight off foreign mafiosi and alluring romantic blandishments all at once—he is well equipped, but events may be moving beyond even his capacity to control. The ways of Chance are approaching an apocalyptic crossroads, and life as Canny knows it could be coming to an end . . .

In *Streaking*, Brian Stableford has written a characteristically brilliant intellectual thriller, full of rich incident and compelling argument—his finest work since his seminal vampire novel, *The Empire of Fear*.



*Although busy with his head down on The Age of Storytellers, a study of the British popular fiction magazines from 1880-1950 to be published by the British Library, Mike Ashley nevertheless took time out (at our editor's insistence) to write this fascinating insight into one of the world's greatest illusionists. As soon as he clears the decks, Mike will be working on the third and final volume of Gateways to Forever, his History of the Science Fiction Magazine, to be published by Liverpool University Press. "Breaking off to do the article has actually been quite helpful," Mike tells us. "After all, both of the books I'm working on are linked to the article in that they too explore fictioneers and their inspirations." Maybe he's just trying not to make us feel guilty . . .*

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# The Houdini Chain

Mike Ashley

**H**ere's an easy but intriguing question. Easy, because I have already given you the answer, and intriguing because it opens up a chain of enquiry that begs the question of what collective impact this man might have had on mystery and weird fiction.

So, what one person links the creators of Carnacki the Ghost-Finder, Sherlock Holmes, Fu Manchu, Craig Kennedy, The Shadow and Cthulhu, and also starred in five science fiction films?

Who indeed but none other than Ehrich Weiss . . . known to the world and posterity as Harry Houdini.

Houdini has long fascinated me. Not just because he was such a marvellous illusionist and escapologist, but because of these literary connections. There is little else to connect these otherwise disparate writers—whom you will already have identified as William Hope Hodgson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Sax Rohmer, Arthur B. Reeve, Walter B. Gibson and H. P. Lovecraft—and yet there must surely have been something about Houdini that allowed these connections to arise. Exploring the connections may answer some questions.

The connection with Hodgson is a purely physical one, and takes us back to the early days of Houdini's career and before Hodgson had become an established writer. It happened in October 1904 at the Palace Theatre in Blackburn, Lancashire. Hodgson was 23, Houdini was 30. Houdini was on a tour of British theatres and had offered an award of £25 to anyone who could secure him with chains and irons from which he could not escape. Hodgson, who ran the local school of Physical Culture, knew about

muscle and breathing control. He took up the challenge, which allowed the public to bring their own locks and chains. Hodgson, every bit the self-publicist as Houdini, had notified the local newspaper that promoted the confrontation, resulting in a sell-out performance.

According to the later newspaper report Houdini initially objected to Hodgson's irons as not being regulation locks. Nevertheless he agreed to continue, amidst much cheering. Hodgson bound Houdini so severely that Houdini's blood circulation was at risk. A curtained cage was then lowered around Houdini. This was certainly no easy escape. After half-an-hour Houdini asked if his hands could be freed enough to allow the circulation to be restored, but Hodgson refused. There were protestations from the audience who believed Hodgson was acting unfairly, but Hodgson maintained that Houdini could admit defeat and pay up the reward, which Hodgson had said would be paid to the local infirmary. But Houdini was not going to give in—£25 (around \$100 at 1904 exchange rates) is equal to about £2,000 (some \$3,700) today. After another fifteen minutes Houdini announced that his hands were free and that he was going to take a rest, but it was still another three-quarters of an hour before Houdini freed himself from the last shackle. The theatre was in pandemonium, and Hodgson had to be escorted out by the police for his own safety.

Although the audience may have felt that Hodgson had been unfair, and it seems that Houdini was in severe pain—a doctor reporting that the restricted blood circulation could become life threatening—the fact that Houdini did escape after so much tension and anguish resulted in a major boost for his career. In fact he built upon it in later performances.

As for Hodgson. Curiously the report of this incident in Ruth Brandon's *The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini* (1993), which gets virtually every fact about Hodgson wrong, including his name (calling him Ralph), says that afterwards "He faded away." How wrong could she be. Hodgson was just at the start of his career as a writer. He had already sold a few articles to magazines on fitness exercises and only six months before the Houdini episode his first story, "The Goddess of Death", had appeared in *The Royal Magazine*. Although not brilliant there are some elements in the plot—which is about the High Priest of a Thugee cult who hides away beneath the pedestal of a statue and comes out at night to wreak revenge—which make you think of another of Houdini's famous stage acts, the Metamorphosis—the trick where Houdini is secured in a sack, a screen held up by his partner and then, within seconds, Houdini is holding the screen and

the assistant is in the sack. Had Hodgson seen Houdini perform on an earlier tour or is that just coincidence?

What seems to have happened is that after this incident, Houdini's career moved on to greater heights. As for Hodgson, his gymnasium closed down—perhaps because the locals shunned him more after the Houdini episode—and this pushed him into a writing career and literary immortality.

We must move on fourteen years to 1919. By now Houdini was a superstar with a huge circle of friends. Two other superstars would join that group over the next year or so—Sax Rohmer and Arthur Conan Doyle. What's fascinating about their connections is how much they revolve around what one wants to believe.

Houdini had apparently written to Rohmer in 1914 saying how much he had enjoyed his book *The Romance of Sorcery*, which covered the subject of past magicians. Rohmer, whose roots were in the theatre, was apparently a member of the Magic Circle and partook in some minor stage magic himself. The two had hoped to meet but the opportunity did not present itself until 1919 on Rohmer's first visit to New York. Rohmer and Houdini hit it off from the start and became firm friends, so much so that they occasionally helped each other out. According to Rohmer, he suggested some ideas to Houdini for his illusions, whilst Houdini helped Rohmer out of a problem or two with his writing.

The question therefore arises as to whether Houdini was ever a “collaborator” with Rohmer on any of his stories. It's a matter that Rohmer complicated unnecessarily. In various reminiscences, starting with “Pipe Dreams” in 1938, Rohmer recalled how he set out to write a genuinely mystifying whodunit. This was *Fire-Tongue* (1921). Rohmer drafted the first few chapters and showed them to his agent, who urged him to continue as *Collier's Weekly* were keen to have a mystery serial. However when Rohmer tried to continue, he realised that a clue he should have laid in an earlier chapter was missing. He needed to revise but had worked himself into a corner and was stuck. He thus tore up the story and started a new one, which became *Bat Wing* (1921). This went well and was soon completed. Rohmer cabled his agent, then in New York, only to learn that he had taken a copy of *Fire-Tongue* with him and that *Collier's* were delighted with the opening chapters and had already scheduled the first instalment for the issue of 25 December 1920. Could Rohmer send the rest as quickly as possible?

Rohmer sailed for New York trying to complete the novel on the trip over. But all failed. Once in New York he was set up in a hotel with every convenience to hand, but still the inspiration flagged. Enter Houdini.

Apparently Houdini believed that Rohmer would get nowhere cooped up. He needed to get out, enjoy himself, have a proper break, and maybe the creative juices would flow. According to Rohmer, Houdini almost dragged him from the hotel room allowing him time only to put on a tweed suit over his pyjamas. One version of this story is that Rohmer went to a Thanksgiving party but that could not be if *Collier's* had already started serialisation, and especially if the key third chapter had already appeared, because that chapter (published in the issue for 8 January 1921) was the one missing the vital clue. Rohmer tells us that Houdini had been reading the serial in the magazine and immediately spotted the problem. He told Rohmer how he could save it in a later chapter, and all ended happily.

It all sounds a bit too unlikely and indeed several Rohmer devotees have noted that nothing happens later in the book that hinges upon anything in chapter three and that the crucial clues appear in the two earlier chapters. So why should Rohmer invent such a story? Well, it makes for interesting reading, and it was a way of remembering Houdini whom Rohmer regarded as a good friend. There is no reason to doubt that Houdini supported Rohmer through what may have been a difficult time, and may have suggested any manner of plot devices to use in the story, none of which may have made such an exciting anecdote as the one Rohmer chose to tell.

The novel tells of the investigation by Paul Harley into the death of Sir Charles Abingdon whose final words were "Fire Tongue". The trail leads Harley into the mysteries of an Indian cult and there are some elements in the way Fire-Tongue's identity is masked and a web of illusion created around him that might well owe something to discussions with Houdini, but perhaps Rohmer did not want to imply that Houdini had too great a hand in plotting the story. Better that he had this sudden mystical insight into the one missing clue, thus demonstrating Houdini's powers of observation.

Mysticism and illusion aside, Rohmer and Houdini were comrades in fighting against bogus spiritualists and it was this that led to a strained relationship with Conan Doyle.

Doyle had seen Houdini in Portsmouth during his tour of Britain in 1920 and the two met backstage afterwards. Doyle believed that Houdini had spiritualistic powers and that his escapes were aided by Houdini's ability to dematerialise. Houdini never claimed this and did his best to convince Doyle otherwise, but the more he argued the more Doyle believed. Doyle was at his most gullible at this time. He had just been taken in by the photographs of the Cottingley Fairies, a hoax perpetrated by two young cousins in Yorkshire. Doyle spoke out in support of the photographs, even after it was shown how they could have been faked.

Houdini discussed spiritualism with Doyle, keen to learn of any unshakeable evidence, but found none. Indeed while in Britain Houdini took part in an investigation into the medium “Eva C.” and became convinced of her sleight-of-hand manipulation. Houdini could not understand why or how Doyle could be so easily duped.

Nevertheless the two remained friends and when Doyle undertook a lecture tour in America in the summer of 1922, he visited Houdini who joined him when he took a short break in Atlantic City. It was then that the friendship fractured. Doyle’s wife, Jean, fancied herself as a medium with a talent for automatic writing. She believed that she might have a message for Houdini. They started a séance and soon Lady Doyle began to write. It was a message apparently from Houdini’s mother, to whom he had been devoted. She had died in 1913. It was the kind of message you might expect a separated mother to write to her son, saying how much she loved him and how happy she was in her present existence. The Doyles firmly believed they had achieved something wonderful for Houdini, but Houdini was saddened by the whole affair. Firstly he could not understand why the message came through in English, as his mother had never mastered the language. And secondly he was puzzled why there had been no reference to her birthday, which was on the very day of the séance. In fact the message contained no detailed personal facts at all.

Soon after, the Doyles returned to Britain. Houdini kept quiet about the séance for a few months and then published a strong anti-spiritualist article in the *New York Sun*, which referred to the séance. Doyle was upset but prepared to let Houdini make up his own mind. However the friendship cooled even more when, two years later, Houdini published a book *A Magician Among the Spirits*, which derided the whole spiritualist movement. Nevertheless Doyle continued to admire Houdini, convinced that he had genuine spiritualist abilities which he had chosen not to recognise. He was much saddened by Houdini’s death, writing soon after that “Houdini is far and away the most curious and intriguing character whom I have ever encountered.” (*The Strand*, August 1927.) Doyle also reasserted his belief that “I was right in thinking that there was a psychic element which was essential to every one of his feats.” This was based on the fact that Houdini had once told Doyle that whenever he performed a daring feat he always waited for an inner voice to tell him when the time was right.

It was clear that Doyle was not to be dissuaded from his entrenched views on spiritualism, and he believed to his dying day that Houdini had psychic abilities. Houdini, on the other hand, went out of his way to explode the myth of spiritualism. If ever there was a case of opposites attracting, it was

Doyle and Houdini.

At the same time that Houdini was consorting with Rohmer and Doyle he had become a film star. It was inevitable that Houdini would be drawn to the movie medium as a way of recording his feats and reaching a wider audience even though film removed the element of risk and allowed for possible cinematographic fakery. It did not matter that Houdini claimed all his stunts were unedited on film, the doubt would still remain.

So rather than just make films depicting his act, Houdini also made heroic adventure films. The first was *The Master Mystery*, released as a 15-part serial early in 1919. Houdini plays detective Quentin Locke who is investigating an organisation, based in an impregnable castle, that seeks to suppress scientific advance and hide all new inventions in the castle vaults. The plot was no more than an excuse for various attempts by Houdini to get into this castle and thwart the villains. He is usually captured and the end of each episode has him in some predicament from which he must escape. *The Master Mystery* is also of interest as apparently having the first movie depiction of a robot—called here The Automaton. Bunkum though it was, and Houdini was no actor, the film was a financial success and set Houdini on a mini-film career.

Although Houdini insisted on helping plot and write the films, the real work on the screenplay was by Arthur B. Reeve. Reeve was already well known as the creator of Craig Kennedy, the scientific detective, billed as “the American Sherlock Holmes”. Kennedy was really more like Freeman’s Dr Thorndyke in that he solved most of his crimes by scientific analysis and detection, though he also used degrees of psychoanalysis. Kennedy’s investigations appeared in a long series of stories and books starting with *The Silent Bullet* (1912) and soon transferred to film with *The Exploits of Elaine* (1914). This film brought together the writing talents of Reeve and Charles W. Goddard who had scripted the massive hit serial *The Perils of Pauline* earlier that year. *The Exploits of Elaine* became another vehicle for film star Pearl White to be subjected to all manner of villainy by the notorious “Clutching Hand”, to be rescued by Kennedy. It was through Goddard and Reeve that the cliff-hanger serial became so popular and Houdini’s work fitted into that same category. Reeve adapted *The Master Mystery* as a book, published in 1919, and also scripted *The Grim Game* (1919) and *Terror Island* (1920) for Houdini. *Terror Island* is borderline science fiction in that Houdini has developed an advanced submarine which he uses to rescue a girl’s father from a tropical island.

Reeve did not script Houdini’s later films of which the most interesting was *The Man from Beyond* (1922). Here Houdini plays a man who had been

frozen in the Arctic ice a hundred years before and is thawed out and revived. He has to cope with the new world about him. He sets off to find the reincarnation of the girl he loved and, finding her, must rescue her from an evil villain. There is a famous scene where Houdini saves the girl just before she plummets over Niagara Falls. This film, a full-length feature, was the first produced by Houdini's own film company, which he established when he failed to receive royalties from his earlier movies.

Houdini provided the story-lines for his films though he left the writing to others. This was typical of Houdini who had a brilliant fund of ideas but had no writing skills. Virtually everything attributed to him was ghost written. Even *A Magician Among the Spirits* was written primarily by Oscar Teale and based upon Houdini's notebooks, though Houdini cast an editorial eye over it.

Another of his ghostwriters was Walter B. Gibson. An author and amateur magician Gibson had been publishing books on magic, mostly card tricks, since 1921 but his career was boosted with his fourth book, *Popular Card Tricks* (1926) which was planned to appear under Houdini's name as the first of a series. However, after Houdini's death on Hallowe'en 1926, his estate agreed that the book should carry Gibson's name. Gibson continued to work with Houdini's family. The following year he compiled a small booklet, *Houdini's Book of Magic and Party Pastimes*, but later wrote two detailed studies, *Houdini's Escapes* (1930) and *Houdini's Magic* (1932). The first is the only complete record of Houdini's methods.

Thereafter Gibson ghosted for other magicians, notably Howard Thurston and Harry Blackstone, but he became best known in the pulp-fiction world for the 283 novels he wrote featuring the mysterious character of The Shadow, beginning with "The Living Shadow" (*The Shadow*, April/June 1931). All but one appeared under the alias Maxwell Grant. The Shadow, whose true identity is hidden behind a series of alternate egos, and operates through various agents, employs many illusions and tricks to aid his fight against crime. He is a master of escape and uses the same breathing techniques employed by Houdini. Whilst it would be stretching the truth to say that The Shadow was based on Houdini, it would be fair to say that some of Houdini's skills and abilities were built into The Shadow over the years. One such novel that would have delighted Houdini was "The House That Vanished" (*The Shadow*, 15 October 1935) in which a house, that was a den of criminals and the scene of much evil, disappears. Another, "The Death Tower" (January 1932) reads just like one of Houdini's adventure films, with trapdoors, secret passages, death-defying escapes, secret codes—all the paraphernalia of pure pulp. Gibson wrote another series



featuring the magician-detective Norgil. There were twenty-three stories in the magazine *Crime Busters* (later re-titled *Mystery Magazine*) from November 1937 to November 1940. Norgil is a travelling magician who uses his talents to fight crime. Here we are closer to Houdini territory and at least one of the stories, "The Glass Box" (June 1938), which involves Norgil being entombed in a glass casket and dropped into the waters of a harbour, bears much similarity to one of Houdini's tricks.

Houdini's best known ghost writer was H. P. Lovecraft. Since *Weird Tales* had such a long and influential lifetime, it's easy to forget that it almost folded after its first year. Its publisher, Jacob Henneberger, tried various methods to promote the magazine, one of which was to enlist Houdini as a contributor with a column "Ask Houdini". Houdini was happy to lend his name and ideas but once again sought ghostwriters to complete the work. In the end three items under Houdini's by-line appeared in *Weird Tales*, in addition to "Ask Houdini", namely "The Spirit Fakers of Hermannstadt" (March to April 1924), "The Hoax of the Spirit Lover" (April 1924) and "Imprisoned with the Pharaohs" (May/July 1924). The last was by Lovecraft. The author or authors of the others have not been identified. It has been suggested that Gibson may have been involved but he told me in 1982 that any contacts he had with *Weird Tales* were "brief and unproductive". They may have been the work of Clifford M. Eddy who worked as Houdini's booking agent at that time. He had sold several stories to *Weird Tales*, some revised by Lovecraft.

However "Imprisoned with the Pharaohs" was all Lovecraft. It was developed from an outline given by Houdini to Henneberger in February 1924, and reads like a plot for Houdini's next film, which never eventuated. Houdini tells how he and his wife visited Egypt and, at the behest of some locals, visited one of the pyramids where they witnessed an altercation between two Arabs. Too late, Houdini discovers it was a ruse to get him there, for he is captured, bound and lowered down a shaft into the pyramid where he witnesses unspeakable horrors of which he cannot talk. Eventually he makes good his escape. It was left to Lovecraft to embellish the horrors. Lovecraft was more than happy to write the story, though his research soon revealed that the whole story was invented and had no basis in truth at all. He used that as his reason for developing the story along his own lines.

One of the better known stories about Lovecraft is how he managed to leave the final typed draft of "Imprisoned with the Pharaohs" (then called "Under the Pyramids") behind at the bus station as he and Sonia set off on their honeymoon. Thankfully he still had the original handwritten draft and the two spent their wedding night recreating the final version. Thank-

fully it was all to a purpose. Although Lovecraft did not hold the story in high regard, word came back that Houdini was delighted with it. In fact Houdini wrote directly to Lovecraft to thank him and asked Lovecraft to contact him. The two met in New York in October 1924. Lovecraft later told Frank Belknap Long about the meeting, and Long recorded it in *Dreamer on the Nightside* (1975). Lovecraft remarked that Houdini was “a strange little man” who “talks incessantly” and was “the sort of person who would get on my nerves if I had to meet him often.” But he also acknowledged that Houdini had “a magnificent stage presence” and made the odd observation that when Houdini sat next to him in the auditorium for a chat Lovecraft “had the strange illusion that Houdini was not there at all. Only his voice seemed to come from some region immeasurably remote.”

It is possible that Houdini put in a word for Lovecraft with Jacob Henneberger for Henneberger offered Lovecraft the editorship of *Weird Tales* at around that time. Lovecraft declined as he had a dread of living in Chicago. Houdini also wrote a letter of introduction for Lovecraft with Brett Page, the head of a newspaper syndicate, in case there was an editorial position. Alas, there was no vacancy but Page suggested he approach a book publisher. Nothing came of that, but Houdini continued to put work Lovecraft’s way. Plans were well in hand in October 1926 for Lovecraft and Eddy to ghost write a volume *The Cancer of Superstition*, which was to be an attack on astrology and other superstitious beliefs. Lovecraft prepared an outline and Eddy began work on the first few chapters, but with Houdini’s death a few weeks later, it all fell through.

So, what do we make of all this? Aside, that is, from the singular fact that Houdini was almost certainly the only person to have shaken hands with William Hope Hodgson, Sax Rohmer, Arthur Conan Doyle and H. P. Lovecraft—let alone Arthur B. Reeve and Walter Gibson. What emerges from this is a strong-willed, determined but approachable and helpful individual who was attracted to those who either shared his vision (certainly Rohmer and Lovecraft) or opposed it but with sufficient belief (Doyle) as to trigger Houdini’s enquiring mind. Reeve and Gibson likewise shared the idea of science being able to help in a fight against injustice, which was part of Houdini’s own crusade against fakery. Hodgson may seem the odd one out but again here were two strong-willed personalities both with a similar goal—to outdo each other—the living embodiment of the immovable against the invincible.

There is no doubt that Houdini was generous and we can argue that he helped the careers of Gibson and Lovecraft and to a degree Rohmer, in getting out of a mess. You could also argue that Houdini caused Hodgson to

change his career, and there may be a case to say that Hodgson helped boost Houdini's.

Behind all of this is a powerful individual belief—a strong self-belief in all cases except Lovecraft, and maybe Houdini helped Lovecraft there. Lovecraft entered upon one of his most creative writing periods at the time that he knew Houdini.

Houdini's career merges the mystery and fascination of both science and magic. The same may be said for all of these writers who created larger-than-life characters capable of adapting science and illusion to their own ends. One could even argue that all of these characters had, like Houdini, cast off the shackles of the everyday world and set themselves free, beyond our normal lives. Even Lovecraft's Great Old Ones are able to free themselves from aeons-old shackles as humans interfere.

We can therefore identify the common link between Houdini and all these writers and their major characters in one word. Escape!



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### Coming Soon In **Post**scripts

Coming up later this year are new stories from Tony Ballantyne, Scott Carter, Ian Creasy, Jack Dann, John Grant, Brian Hopkins, Rhys Hughes, K.W. Jeter, Jay Lake, Tony Richards, Michael Swanwick, Vaughan Stanger, Lavie Tidhar, Stephen Volk, T.M. Wright, and Zoran Živković. All these plus an interview with Howard Waldrop and an editorial from Lucius Shepard. Have you subscribed yet?

*“The Hotel Room” is the third of four self-contained parts forming the mosaic-novel Four Stories till the End, being serialised in Postscripts 4–7. Zoran tells us, “Although I am not supposed to have favourites among my writings, this is an exception. I am particularly attached to this story because it was very well received by the audience at a couple of sessions of the Brisbane Writers Festival 2004, where sections of it were read out.”*

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# The Hotel Room

## Zoran Živković

**T**here was a knock on my hotel room door.

I picked up the video player remote control from the coffee table in front of me and pressed the “stop” button. The television screen turned a dark blue and the sound went off.

“Come in,” I said, looking towards the door.

A woman appeared wearing a dark-red uniform, carrying a basket full of apricots. She was as tiny as a munchkin. The oversized cylindrical cap she wore descended to her ears, covering more than half her forehead.

“Please excuse me for bothering you. I am your maid. I just wanted to leave this.”

She raised the basket a bit, smiling.

“Thank you.”

She went over to the left side of the room, where a long cabinet extended almost the whole length of the lateral wall. She placed the basket next to the one I’d found when

I entered the room. It contained peaches.

Returning to the door, the maid stopped.

“Should you need anything, just ring once right here.” She indicated a white button on the wall underneath the light switch. “I am at your service.”

I returned her smile and repeated, “Thank you.”

The maid bowed and her cap slid forward, dropping down to her eyes. She pushed it back with a look of discomfort. Holding it with both hands, she bowed again. Then she quickly left the room.

I pressed the “play” button on the remote control. The movie returned to the screen, but it was not destined to stay there very long. After a few fleeting scenes, there came another knock.

I frowned. I don’t like to be interrupted in the middle of a movie. Perhaps I should have put a Do Not Disturb sign on the door. I looked

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*Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copples-Tošić*

around but didn't see any sign to hook on the outside doorknob. I sighed, then stopped the player once again.

"Enter," I said with an edge of reproof.

A woman entered, also wearing a hotel uniform. She was in her early fifties and had a fair amount of excess weight that emphasized her matronly curves. She was wearing a conical cap that seemed one size too small, so it only covered the crown of her head. She stood at the door, her hands folded.

"Please excuse me for bothering you," she said in a voice that was somewhat deeper than one would expect given her appearance. "I am the hotel mine guide. I just wanted to see whether you might need our services."

"Hotel mine?"

"Yes. It's absolutely natural, you can be sure of that. We don't stoop to fakery like our competition. Nothing is artificial here."

"I didn't know the hotel had a mine."

"Why of course, what are you thinking of? This is a five-star hotel, after all. It was actually the mine that helped us receive such a high rating. And we could have had at least one star more if the mine produced silver or gold instead of just zinc. But what's to be done? We are satisfied with what we have. The vein is very rich."

"Where is the mine?"

She pointed down with her index finger. "Right below us, just as pre-

scribed by the regulations. Would you like to visit it?"

I shook my head. "No, thank you."

"It isn't at all tiring. An elevator takes you all the way down the deepest shaft. It moves so fast you're down there in no time."

I shook my head again.

"Is it perhaps the safety factor that worries you? If that's what's wrong, rest assured. Not a single visitor has yet had an unpleasant experience in the mine. In addition, should anything happen, even something terrible, as a hotel guest you are insured."

"It's not about that. What would I do in a mine?"

"Isn't it obvious?" replied the guide with a question. "You would mine zinc."

"Why would I mine zinc?"

She smiled. "You might not know this, but the price of zinc is steadily rising on the world market. And hotel guests are allowed to take all the ore they dig. It hasn't always been like that, there used to be limits, but they were lifted not long ago. Naturally, you aren't expected literally to dig. That would not be in line with a hotel of this category. You can use state of the art mining equipment, and there are experts to show you how it works. If you are hardworking, your efforts will certainly be repaid. Zinc has made some of our guests quite wealthy."

"I don't intend to become wealthy."

She eyed me reprovingly. "Quite so. But that makes no difference. The

mine offers other features besides extracting zinc.”

“What features?”

“That depends on the guest’s affinities. If you have an adventurous spirit, you can investigate the undeveloped parts of the mine. There are plenty of abandoned corridors that are guaranteed to be unsafe, without lighting or ventilation. Some of them have poisonous gases, others are flooded with ground water, some are on the verge of collapse, and one is linked to stories about the ghosts of dead miners. I must warn you, however, that your basic insurance is not sufficient for this. You would have to pay a supplemental premium.”

“Why would anyone expose themselves to dangers in such places, and pay for it to boot?”

“You would be surprised at how many people stay in the hotel just for the sake of having exciting experiences in the wilds of the mine. Some spend their whole stay with us down there. We’ve even lost all trace of several, but the hotel bears no responsibility. Guests go there at their own risk.”

“I don’t want to go there.”

“Quite so. Perhaps you would like to visit our mine’s summer resort. There you would be completely safe, surrounded by absolute comfort.”

“Summer resort?”

“Yes. Our hotel is particularly proud of this amenity. In this respect we are far ahead of the competition. Guests can spend summer vacations the whole year round. There is nothing to indi-

cate that you’re deep underground. You have the impression of being on a seashore with the sun high in a blue sky, translucent turquoise water, fine sand and palms swaying in the breeze. We have water skiing of course, and surfing was recently introduced. Guests leave there as tanned as if they’d been in the tropics. If you want to get the rest you truly deserve, then our summer resort is the right choice for you.”

“I’m not here to rest.”

“Quite so. Would you be interested in trying some form of creative activity? The hotel mine has not overlooked guests with such inclinations. The mine has a special department for those who want to devote themselves to art.”

“How is it possible to devote oneself to art in a mine?”

“Oh, it’s quite possible, yes indeed. You can’t imagine how many works of art have been created here. It would be excellent publicity for the hotel, but unfortunately we must be discreet. For some reason those who’ve created something here don’t want word to get out that they found inspiration for their work underground.”

“What sort of artistic inspiration is there underground?”

“I’m not an artist so I’m unable to give you an answer, but something clearly exists. If that weren’t true, would there be waiting lists for our artists’ cave?”

“Artists’ cave?”

“Yes. It was discovered by accident. Located at the very bottom of the

mine, it is spacious, full of stalactites and stalagmites, and an underground river runs through it. A narrow, twisting opening leads to the cave, so the only way to get in and out is to crawl. But this disadvantage has not deterred artists of all kinds—musicians, writers, sculptors, painters—who can barely wait to seclude themselves inside. Not a single one has yet returned from the cave without an original work of art.”

“Really?”

“It seems impossible, but believe me it works, even if you’re a beginner or have no talent. I highly recommend you give it a try. The first time is free, so you have nothing to lose. There might be a way to cut you in at the front of the line, but I can’t promise anything. The word has spread about the artists’ cave. It’s in great demand.”

“Thank you, but I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“Quite so. If you change your mind, however, be sure to let me know. We are at your service.”

“I won’t change my mind. This will suit me just fine.”

It seemed as if there was nothing left to say, but she continued to stand by the door.

“I shouldn’t tell you this,” she said at last, hanging back. “The management is very strict with regard to hotel secrets. But you won’t give me away, I hope.”

“I won’t.”

“Although you feel that you are just fine, I don’t advise you to stay in this room.”

“Why?”

“Because it brings bad luck.”

“You don’t say. How’s that?”

“Four suicides were committed here.”

“Four?”

“Yes. And they weren’t ordinary, unimaginative hotel suicides of the kind that no one blinks an eye at anymore. These four were quite exceptional, each in its own way. The first one in particular made quite an impression on me. Would you like me to tell you about it?”

My eyes dropped to the remote control in my hand.

“I won’t take up much of your time,” the mine guide hastened to add. “You’ll see, the story is truly remarkable.”

I sighed. “All right. But please be brief.”

“Of course. The suicide was a young man who had registered under a false name. His real identity was never discovered, nor were the motives behind his suicide. He left no farewell letter. He had brought a CD player and very powerful amplifier to the hotel with him, enough to wire an entire auditorium for sound. We, of course, are equipped with the latest sound equipment, so this aroused a bit of suspicion, but who could have suspected what this equipment would be used for? The young man was found lying in the bathroom, in an empty bathtub. He was wearing headphones hooked up to the amplifier, which was laid across his chest along with the CD player. Blood poured out of all the openings in his

head: nose, mouth, eyes, ears. The unbearably loud sound was what killed him. It was so strong that those who first entered the bathroom had to put their hands over their ears, even though the music was only coming out of the headphones. The police making the onsite investigation did not report what the poor young man was listening to, so we never found out what piece of music led to his death.”

She stopped talking and stared at me fixedly. “A very strange suicide, wouldn’t you say?”

“Very,” I agreed.

“If you want, I’ll make arrangements for reception to give you another room.”

“No, thank you. I’ll stay in this one.”

“Quite so. If I can be of any assistance, please ring twice.”

She indicated the same white button as the maid. Then she bowed, turned around and left the room.

I glanced at the door to the bathroom, and then raised the remote control towards the player. I didn’t have time to start the film, however, because another knock was heard at the door. Before I had a chance to respond, the pint-sized maid entered the room. The new basket she carried was full of strawberries.

“Pay no attention to me,” she said with a smile and a bow, holding onto her cap. She went up to the cabinet, put the basket next to the other two, and hastened back to the door. She bowed once again and quickly left the room.

I looked at the three baskets for a moment, and then pressed the “play” button. The film ran even less time than before. The knock that came was thunderous, as though someone was banging their fists on the door. I stopped the movie with an angry motion.

“Come in!” I said sharply.

The woman who entered corresponded perfectly to the style of the knocking. She was wearing a hotel uniform and a four-sided pyramid-shaped cap that was firmly pulled onto her head, but a worker’s outfit such as those worn in a heavy industrial plant would have suited her much better. She was in her forties, of medium height, with a broad neck, large muscular arms, almost no waist and legs that resembled sturdy pillars. When she spoke, however, her thin, squeaky voice clashed utterly with her appearance.

“I’m sorry to disturb you. I’m the hotel packing plant guide. If you will allow me, I’d like to briefly acquaint you with what we offer.”

I stared at her. “Packing plant?”

“Yes. It covers the whole second floor. It is an entire complex that focuses on raising animals, something that makes us especially proud. Here you can rest assured that we know the pedigree of literally every bite you eat, not like in lower class hotels, and even some of our own rank, where you have to hold your breath whenever you put something in your mouth. Have you tried our food yet?”

“No, I haven’t.”



“You’ll appreciate its exceptional quality the moment you taste it. Our guests even have the privilege of personally choosing the animal they will eat. Of course, sometimes during a short stay they can’t eat a whole animal, particularly if it’s big. A large steer, for example. But whatever is left of the chosen animal that the guest is not able to eat in the hotel can be purchased at a large discount when he leaves. Some people check into our hotel solely for the chance to purchase top-quality meat at a giveaway price. You shouldn’t pass it up either.”

“I don’t need meat.”

“Very well. Would you perhaps be interested in watching an animal being butchered?”

I shook my head. “How could that possibly interest me?”

“You would be no exception by any means. If you only knew what an increase there’s been in the number of overnights in our hotel since we’ve made it possible to watch the butchering either in person or on a closed circuit television. We were amazed to find out how many people are curious to know how it’s done and how much they are ready to pay to satisfy their curiosity. Have you ever seen an animal butchered?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Of course, we don’t do it in a primitive way, the process has been rendered utterly humane, but it’s still a shocking experience. If you think that the butchering attracts only sadistic types and psychopaths then you are

highly mistaken. The most frequent spectators are family people, there are even more women than men. If we were to allow children to attend, they’d certainly be the most numerous. Although the law is not strictly against it, allowing children would nonetheless give us a bad reputation. You no doubt wonder why ordinary people flock to see animals butchered.”

“I do.”

“Contrary to all expectations, watching a butchering has been shown to have a beneficial effect on neuroses, psychoses and phobias, and who in today’s world full of stress and tension does not suffer from those? Ordinary people actually the most, isn’t that so? It also provides relief from depression, apathy and low spirits, insomnia and a poor appetite. In such cases you might seek the help of a psychotherapist, to be sure, but why waste your money when it’s considerably less expensive here? In addition, we give a three-month guarantee. Do you have any of the ailments I mentioned, perhaps?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Very well. This, however, is not where it ends. We were quite surprised when it turned out that watching an animal being butchered has a beneficial effect on purely physical ailments. Water on the knee, for example, disappears like magic after two or three sessions. Hemorrhoids quickly shrink and athlete’s foot clears up in a flash. Serious cases of crossed eyes and stuttering require a few more treatments. The most difficult is restoring tooth

growth, but if the patient is persistent enough there is no lack of success. Are you troubled by any of these maladies?"

"No."

"Please don't be reticent. Everything you tell me will remain strictly between us, just like talking to a doctor. Hotel ethics strictly forbid me from revealing what you tell me to anyone, even the police."

"I have nothing to tell you."

"Very well. Then perhaps you'd like to visit our packing plant spa."

"Packing plant spa?"

"Yes. The great demand for our medical services has led us to expand our activities. The thermal spring under the hotel was also a contributing factor. Although enclosed, the spa is by no means inferior to those that are outside. Quite the contrary. Can you count on perfectly nice weather every day in an open-air spa? Or immaculately clean air that isn't polluted by traffic? Or the complete absence of mosquitoes all summer long?"

I shook my head. "I can't."

"And wait until you see our parks. They are without equal! An ideal place for long, invigorating walks through the lush growth. The tree-lined paths are a particular favorite. Even though the trees are deciduous, their leaves stay green all year round, even the hundred-year-old oak that is under state protection. There is also a lake inhabited by swans. The most popular gathering spot for visitors, however, is the geyser that shoots up all of forty-six

meters. Have you ever been near a geyser?"

"No, I haven't."

"Here's a chance to make up for the loss. The main purpose of the spa, of course, is the treatment we offer. We are simply besieged by people suffering from arthritis. Daubing on the spa's mud has a truly healing effect and patients leave us rejuvenated. Infertile women are also quite numerous. Bathing in the spring several times is enough for them to become pregnant. And of late we have been experiencing a genuine invasion of people with a short left leg. The word has spread that our spa works wonders. Allegedly, whoever drinks one hundred twenty-seven and a half liters of mineral water will have their short leg grow to its full length. We immediately issued a disclaimer so we wouldn't be accused of exaggerating the whole thing, but nothing worked. The onslaught of the lame has not subsided, although there is no proof that any of them left here with both legs the same length. But those who believe in miracles don't need proof. You don't have a short left leg, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"You're not bothered by arthritis?"

"No, and I'm not infertile."

"To be sure. Would you like to visit our spa anyway? It's a pleasant experience even if you are perfectly healthy."

"No, I wouldn't, thank you."

"Very well. This is not all the hotel packing plant offers, however. Perhaps

you'd be interested in the artists' swimming pool?"

"Artists' swimming pool?"

"Yes. It's an Olympic-sized swimming pool filled with the blood of the butchered animals. The blood is constantly refreshed so it's always clean. The pool is frequented exclusively by artists who carry on erudite discussions about different aspects of creativity while they're in it. This was not the original intention of the pool, but ever since it was accidentally discovered that swimming in blood has a stimulating and inspirational effect on reflections about art, an exclusive club has been founded that has taken a permanent lease on the pool. Entrance is restricted to members only, but I might be able to pull some strings and get you in just once, to try it out. You might like it."

"I won't. Blood disgusts me."

"I understand. One really needs to have a stomach for artistic extravagances. If you are the sensitive type, though, maybe you should change rooms."

"Why?"

"What I have to say is highly confidential. The hotel management has covered it up, but guests come first as far as I'm concerned. I believe that no one has the right to hide the truth from them. Four suicides took place in this room."

"Oh, that."

She looked at me darkly. "You've heard about them?"

"A bit."

"Do you know about the suicide with books?"

"No."

"It's a truly bizarre case. I'd like to tell it to you."

"I don't have a lot of time," I said, raising the remote control.

"I'll make it very short. Just a few sentences. May I?"

I sighed and nodded my head.

"An elderly lady came to the hotel with no fewer than nineteen large suitcases. The bellboys were bewildered at their weight. When the woman was served tea and cookies somewhat later, she was found taking books out of the suitcases. That wasn't too unusual—our guests sometimes bring in much stranger things—but the girl from room service noticed that the books were all identical, as though copies of the same book. Unfortunately, she couldn't make out the title of the work. I'm afraid that will remain a secret forever—along with the woman's identity, by the way—because all the copies were burned. They were used for the poor woman's funeral pyre. Her completely carbonized body was found in the bathroom, and subsequent investigations established what happened after she was left alone. For hours she had patiently torn the pages of each book into tiny pieces and filled the bathtub with them. After she'd destroyed the last copy and the bathtub was overflowing, the woman first disabled the fire alarm on the ceiling with adhesive tape, then sprinkled the bits of paper with gasoline from a bottle she'd

brought with her, and finally she sank into the bathtub. When she was on the bottom, all she had to do was strike a match and everything around her burst into flame. An autopsy established that she died of suffocation and not from the flames, but that is little consolation. It was a terrible way to leave this world, wasn't it?"

"Terrible," I agreed.

"If you think that you won't be able to use the bathroom after this, feel free to ask for another room. You won't have to give any reason."

"It's not necessary. I'll keep this one."

"Very well. Should you nevertheless find an opportunity to visit the hotel packing plant, we would be honored. All you have to do is give three rings here and I'll come at once."

She pointed her thumb at the wall behind her.

"Thank you, but I don't think I'll have time."

The packing plant guide's face suddenly dropped in dejection, but she said nothing more. She bowed and left the room.

Yet another knock prevented me from watching the cassette. This time the maid did not wait for me to invite her to enter. She opened the door just enough to squeeze through, then quickly closed it behind her. This time the basket was filled with plums. Her smile and bow were not accompanied by any words. She hastened to the cabinet, added the new basket to the others, and then went back to the door.

Before she stole away, she briefly lifted her left index finger to her lips, giving me a sign to keep mum. I nodded my head.

I enjoyed the sight of the colorful fruit for a moment, and then returned to the film. When a knock was heard in the very first scene, I was annoyed but not surprised. I actually would have been more astonished if there had been no knock. I angrily pressed the "stop" button.

"Enter!" I said, almost shouting.

The woman who marched in couldn't have been more than thirty. She was tall and slender. The hotel uniform seemed a little tight on her, while the cube-shaped cap matched the sharp features of her face. She was holding a short stick under her arm. She stood at attention in front of the door and bowed briefly.

"Allow me to introduce myself," she said brusquely, as though reporting. "I am the hotel weapons factory guide."

I looked at her in silence for a few moments. "Do you have one of those too?"

"Of course we do! It's impossible to imagine a hotel of this category without such a factory. Furthermore, ours is located in a prominent place. It covers the entire top floor and roof, not like our competition where everything is quite low-key. In addition, many different types of weapons are produced here, not just light arms as in most other hotels. We can make almost anything the guests want."

"You arm the guests?"

“They arm themselves with tailor-made weapons. Our only role is to provide the needed parts and offer technical assistance. Sometimes it isn’t easy to satisfy the guests’ desires. They can be very demanding. But we never shrink from a challenge. We are proud of some of the weapons that were created in our factory. You might not be aware, but the first sniper slingshot appeared here. The stealth crossbow too, and so did the electronically guided javelin, the neutron trident, the atomic sword and the laser catapult. But we are proudest of the plasma mace. It has entered all the military encyclopedias. If you need a weapon, regardless of how complex or unusual, you are in the right place. Indulge your fantasies.”

“I don’t need any weapons.”

“Of course. Have you ever thought of becoming a commando? We have an excellent training camp as part of the weapons factory. Not many can match the quality of our equipment and experts. We achieve considerably better results than in other hotels, even those with more stars.”

I smiled. “It would be hard to make a commando out of me.”

“You’re mistaken. We are able to turn a guest in the worst physical and mental shape into a top-notch commando in only twenty-three days. Naturally there are no shortcuts, you have to expect blood, sweat and tears, but in spite of the tremendous exertion no one has yet complained. On the contrary, many return on a regular basis to

refresh their skills and keep in shape. And the diploma we offer when you finish commando training opens many doors, even to special units. Quite a few guests started brilliant military careers right here. Would this interest you at all?”

“No, it wouldn’t.”

“Of course. Perhaps you would like to take one of our higher education courses? The one for hit men is quite popular.”

“Hit men?”

“Yes. It does last forty-seven days and the fee is quite high, but the investment certainly pays off. There is always work for a properly trained hit man and his services are richly rewarded. For a modest commission we are happy to help you find customers. In addition, we will provide you with all the necessary weapons and tools. That’s included in the price.”

“No, thank you.”

“Of course. Perhaps you would like to earn the diploma of a certified terrorist?”

There was no need for me to repeat her words in question form. The expression on my face spoke volumes.

She nodded her head. “This is the latest addition to our program. Unfortunately, we are not able to advertise it publicly, even though it would result in great demand. The course instructors are renowned terrorists who are on the wanted lists of all international police. In sixty-three days they will transfer all their hard-won knowledge to you, making you entirely qualified to carry

out terrorist acts of the greatest proportions. The cost of this course is necessarily very high, but the income of a hit man is usually small compared to the fees you would receive from terrorist organizations with our diploma. One act would be enough to set you up for life.”

“No, thank you,” I repeated.

“Of course. If none of this interests you, then you might like to visit our weapons factory ski center. It’s located on the roof of the hotel, on a mountain that is not very high, indeed, but is celebrated for its gentle slopes and wonderful conifer forests. We have three first-class ski slopes, for downhill, slalom and cross-country skiing, and they’re open at night too. There are two high-speed ski lifts and we recently opened an Olympic ski jump. You can also try the snowmobiles or simply enjoy long walks in the fresh mountain air. The correct low temperature and snow cover are provided all year round.”

“I don’t like spending time in the mountains.”

“Of course. In that case we have one more thing to offer you: the artists’ firing range.”

“Firing range?”

“That’s right. It is frequented by artists, most often writers who, for a variety of reasons, have become afflicted with writer’s block. Nothing removes writer’s block as successfully as shooting at live targets.”

“What live targets?”

“People.”

“Writers shoot at people?”

“Yes, but with air guns.”

“But air guns can be lethal too.”

“They can, that’s true. That’s why the targets’ heads are protected. The writers can only shoot at bare torsos.”

“But hitting a bare torso must surely be very painful.”

“Yes, it is. The targets, however, do not gripe about it. They stoically bear the pain for the sake of their fat fee. Everyone is happy with this arrangement. The targets get away with some bruises and swellings. It only rarely happens that an air gun pellet breaks a rib. And after only a few direct hits into flesh the writers resume writing as though they’d never had any block. It’s even happened that they get down to work right there in the shooting gallery, overcome by a sudden wave of inspiration. If you try it yourself you’ll see how beneficial this therapy can be.”

“I don’t suffer from writer’s block.”

The weapons factory guide looked at me briefly in silence.

“I wouldn’t like to give you the impression that our department is extremely brutal and savage. There are worse places in this hotel. We don’t have to go any farther than your room.”

“My room?”

“Yes. You certainly aren’t aware that it was the scene of no fewer than four suicides.”

“I am aware.”

“You are?” She looked at me in amazement.

“Yes.”

She seemed about to ask me something but changed her mind.

“Of course. One of them was particularly unpleasant, even for me, in spite of the fact that as a soldier I am hardened to various forms of death and dying. I must tell it to you.”

“If you really must . . .” I said, nodding my head towards the remote control in my hand.

“In a nutshell. The girl, whose real name was never discovered, brought into the hotel a marble bust, a cement drill, a hook and some rope. She used the drill to make a hole in the bathroom ceiling, above the bathtub. She fixed the heavy-duty hook into it and then attached one end of the rope around the bust and threw the other end over the hook. She lay down in the tub and began to pull on the rope, lifting the bust straight above her head. When it reached the hook, the girl let go of the rope. The bust plummeted like a guillotine and smashed her head. Eyewitnesses say the sight was gruesome. The bathtub was spotted with blood and brains. The police did not report which piece of sculpture was involved or whether it was damaged.”

She paused to see what kind of impression this had made on me.

“Gruesome,” I said.

“Gruesome, yes. After that no one can expect you to bathe in the same bathtub. You are perfectly within your rights to ask for another room.”

“I think I’ll stay here.”

There was another pause.

“Of course. In any case, should you

decide that our services might be needed, just ring four times on this buzzer.”

She took the stick from under her arm and touched the button over her shoulder.

I nodded my head.

She bowed curtly once again, and then marched out of the room.

I put my thumb on the “play” button on the remote control, but didn’t push it. I raised my eyes to the door expectantly.

But there was no knock. The maid just entered without even turning towards me and headed straight for the cabinet. A fifth basket full of apples joined the others there. The pint-sized woman returned to the door but did not go out. She stopped in front of it.

“I would like to tell you something in confidence.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’m not just a maid in the hotel.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s actually just a front. My main job is as the hotel cemetery guide.”

“Does the hotel have its own cemetery?”

“Any hotel that cares a fig about itself has one. Even the lowest categories are not without a few graves.”

“I had no idea.”

“Of course not. We keep this a secret because it’s against the law. You won’t find a word about it in our official brochure. The hotel would lose its license instantly if word got out that it has a cemetery. We have to take every

precaution so no one finds us out. Only hand-picked guests are given this honor—those who pass the fruit test.”

“Fruit?”

“That’s right.” She gestured to the left, towards the five baskets on the long cabinet. “Guests have different reactions to the fruit I bring them. The first kind pounce on it right away, without even washing it before they eat it. The second kind change the order of the baskets. The third kind mix the fruit in them and the fourth kind ask me to take out some or all of the baskets. The fifth kind place them around the room. Some immediately empty the baskets into the garbage can, toilet bowl or even throw them out the window. Believe me, there are highly different reactions to the fruit. We evaluate whether or not we can confide in a guest based on their reaction. It is a highly reliable test and has not failed us once. I am happy to be able to tell you that you passed the test.”

“Seriously?”

“With flying colors. Would I have mentioned the hotel cemetery to you otherwise? Even so, if you decide to visit it we’ll have to follow a special procedure. We would take you there in a wheelchair, blindfolded and with plugs in your ears, so you don’t find out where in the hotel the cemetery is located. This is for your protection as well as ours. The less you know, the better. No one will be able to get you to reveal something you don’t know, regardless of the force that is used.”

“But why would I want to visit the hotel cemetery?”

“There are lots of valid reasons. First of all, it’s not an ordinary cemetery, it’s quite special.”

“How so?”

“As in all better hotels, our cemetery has a theme. While you might find the graves of prominent scientists, politicians, military leaders, athletes or entertainers in other places, our specialty is artists. We are very proud of our collection of graves of famous musicians, writers, sculptors and painters. Some of them date back not only centuries but even thousands of years.”

“But how did you get their graves?”

The former maid did not reply at once. She looked at me inquisitively and then sighed.

“We handle it in various ways. Mostly we get them on the black market.”

“Is there a black market for that too?”

“Sure there is. And it is quite extensive. There’s no grave that can’t be bought if you’re willing to pay enough.”

“But how can you hide the disappearance of a grave? That would be hard even for the ordinary deceased let alone famous people.”

“The whole grave isn’t stolen, only the coffin. Outwardly everything stays just as it was. Those who visit the grave don’t suspect that there is nothing under the gravestone.”

“But that isn’t . . . right.”



“It isn’t, I agree, but when you’re pressed by the competition, you’re not very picky when it comes to means. In any case, if we’d been concerned about moral rectitude, someone with fewer scruples would have taken over in a flash. Unlike many other hotels that make do with false graves of the great, everything here is guaranteed authentic. When buying corpses we go to great pains not to be deceived. A DNA analysis is mandatory.”

“Even so . . .”

“Recently we started acquiring graves in a very legal way.”

“How?”

“We draw up contracts with artists while they’re still alive. Not a single one will refuse to bequeath you their earthly remains if you offer the right price. It’s a real pleasure doing business with them. They are practical people who don’t beat around the bush and hesitate. This way, with a bit of patience, we’ll enhance our collection considerably. But it is already exceptional right now. I recommend you visit it without fail. As you know, this opportunity is not open to everyone.”

“I’d rather not.”

“As a visitor you have the right to take something small from one of the graves—a handful of earth, a sprig of flowers, a piece of the tombstone. If you don’t want to keep it for yourself you’ll have no trouble selling it to a collector. With our certificate of origin, it will be well worth the trouble.”

“No, thank you.”

“As you wish. What would you say

to the possibility of personally burying an artist?”

“Me bury someone? I’m not a gravedigger.”

“It makes no difference. Our professional gravediggers will instruct you in how to do the job. You’ll see, even though it is physically demanding, it gives great satisfaction.”

“Burying someone gives satisfaction?”

“That’s what everyone who’s tried it claims. Some come back for that reason alone, even though the supplementary fee for this enjoyment is rather stiff. They say it’s an experience beyond compare, and is all the more exceptional the greater the artist you bury. If you are interested, I might be able to get you one of the greats, even with a bit of a discount.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Perhaps you would like to be buried yourself? Temporarily, of course.”

“Temporarily?”

“Yes. You decide how long you want to stay in the grave. Guests can stay underground as long as they like. Some ask us to take them out after just a few minutes, but the average is around two and a half hours. The record is held by a guest who stayed in the grave forty-three hours and six minutes.”

“How could someone stay in a grave that long?”

“It’s not hard at all. The burial places are very comfortable: they have air conditioning, relaxing music and even a little refrigerator. There is absolutely

no light, but the absence of light makes the temporary grave an ideal place for introspective seclusion. All those who come out of them say they truly feel resurrected. Unfortunately, this service is the most expensive we offer, but if you feel you need to come face to face with yourself and make a reckoning of your life, don't complain about the money. A grave is the best place to do it."

"I don't think I need that."

"As you wish. Perhaps you would enjoy a bit of recreation in the cemetery's sports center?"

"The cemetery has a sports center?"

"Yes, quite modern. We have courts and fields for almost every sport, even some exotic ones. For example, you can do underwater archery, swim in quicksand, play antigravity table tennis or mentally lift weights in a hyperbaric chamber."

"Mentally?"

"That's right. Just with the power of thought. The record is seven hundred sixty-four kilograms and believe it or not, it's held by a woman about my height. Physical proportions make absolutely no difference and neither does experience. Beginners are known to achieve exceptional results. Would you like to give it a try? You might have a real knack for it without even being aware."

"I wouldn't, thank you."

"If you prefer classical disciplines, our coaches are exclusively Olympic medal winners. And our training fields are state of the art. Our marathon track

is a real thorn in the side of our competition. We are also famous for our training ground for group parachute jumping. And wait until you see our main stadium with sixty-seven thousand two hundred fifty seats, completely covered and with AstroTurf! Everyone openly envies us that. You will certainly make no mistake if you decide to use one of our sports amenities."

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a jock."

"As you wish. All I have left to offer you is a visit to the artists' crypt."

I didn't say anything. I just kept my eyes on her.

"It's an original, very old crypt. Artists visit it like they're on a pilgrimage. Apparently the crypt contains works that for one reason or another were never finished: uncompleted novels, half-painted pictures, sculptures just appearing out of the stone, fragmentary compositions. Unfortunately, none of it can be taken out or copied in any way. Even so, it seems to do the artists a lot of good to see what the creators failed to accomplish, so there is quite a line to enter the crypt. Do you perhaps have some unfinished work of art?"

"No, I don't."

"It's unfortunate that none of what we offer attracts you. However, you would find even the hotel cemetery a more pleasant place than staying in this room."

"Do you mean because of the bathroom?" I nodded towards the bathroom door.

“Yes,” she said after a moment’s hesitation. “Quite an unpleasant thing. Particularly the last suicide.”

“I assume that you want to tell me about it?”

“Unless you have something against it.”

“I hope you won’t be long-winded.” I lowered my eyes to the remote control.

“I won’t. Just the main points. An elderly gentleman who did not register under his real name came to the hotel with a small suitcase. Later it turned out that he had a small canvas, several tubes of paint and a bottle of paint thinner inside the suitcase. He was found dead in the bathtub. At first glance the cause of his death could not be ascertained; an autopsy revealed that he’d poisoned himself. The investigation that was carried out established the sequence of events. He’d filled the bathtub with hot water, poured paint thinner into it, undressed and entered the tub. Although the paint thinner must have irritated his skin, it wasn’t unbearable. What was not harmful to him, however, was harmful to the painting. When he plunged the canvas into the water, the layers of paint on it started to dissolve. Some ten minutes were enough to remove the paint completely. After he’d destroyed the painting, he took a glass, squeezed some paint from each tube into it, and then added a bit of thinner. He waited briefly for the paint to dissolve, then drank the lethal mixture. The police did not report whether they’d discov-

ered the identity of the painting. The unofficial word was that a celebrated and very expensive work was destroyed, and that the colors the poor man used to poison himself matched those on the painting.”

“A very unusual death.”

“Very. Nothing obliges you to stay here now that you know what happened. Changing rooms is quite an easy matter. I can do it for you.”

“No, thank you. It doesn’t bother me.”

“As you wish,” she said, hesitating once again. “In spite of everything, if you think that I might be of help, just press the button. Do you remember how many times?”

“Once.”

“That’s right. Well, then, goodbye. I won’t take up any more of your time.”

“Goodbye.”

The hotel cemetery guide bowed, again forgetting to hold onto her conical cap. She quickly raised it from her eyes and left the room.

I turned the remote control over and over in my hand, but didn’t use it. I got up, went to the player and took out the cassette. I put it back in the box on top of the television set, and then put the box in my jacket pocket. I turned towards the cabinet and stared at the baskets of fruit. I stayed there like that, stock-still, for several minutes. Then I went to the bathroom door and knocked on it.

Four people came out. They headed one after the other towards the opposite side of the room. As they passed,

each one gave me a silent, fleeting smile. I joined them, at the end of the line. We each took a basket from the cabinet. The young man took the peaches, the elderly lady took the apricots, the girl took the strawberries, the elderly man took the plums, and I took the apples.

The procession then turned in the opposite direction, back towards the bathroom. Before I, as the last one, joined them, I looked briefly around the room. Nothing was left to keep me there anymore. I slowly closed the door behind me.



For years, Zoran Živković has awed, entertained, and tantalized the world of fantastic literature with his ingenious and moving fabrications, tales of ordinary, often isolated people facing and being transfigured by the strange, the improbable. Logic and illogic meet head-on in Živković's stories, and the outcome is always deeply memorable. Now, for the first time, *Impossible Stories* assembles between a single set of covers five of the author's distinguished story-cycles, as well as the stand-alone "The Telephone": twenty-nine stories in all.

In *Impossible Stories* you will find:

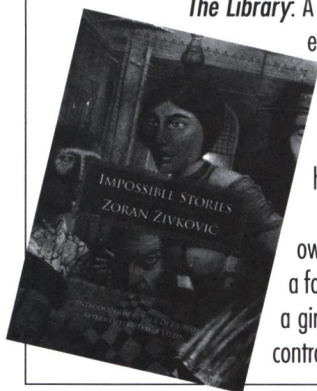
**Time Gifts:** A mysterious visitor comes to see three desperate human beings across the ages: an astronomer, a paleolinguist, and an old watch-maker; he has a unique but ambiguous time-gift for each one of them. His true identity is known only to an insane artist locked up in her asylum studio. But who would believe an artist in this world, even if she were not insane?

**Impossible Encounters:** Six strangely related stories about encounters that could or should never have happened. Including conversations with God and the Devil, with an alien and one's older self; and the answer to the enigma: where do off-duty story characters go?

**Seven Touches of Music:** Seven stories about moments of divine revelation through music, which leave no mark beyond the ephemeral instant of their perception. Among the remarkable epiphanies witnessed are an old widower glimpsing an alternate existence, a librarian dreaming the death of all knowledge, and an artist's rendering of inscrutable alien messages.

**The Library:** A cycle of six thematically linked stories, droll renditions of the nightmares ensuing upon misplaced, or (of course) excessive, bibliophilia. A writer encounters a website where all his possible future books are on display; a lonely man faces an infinite flow of hardback books through his mailbox; a connoisseur of hardcovers strives to expel a lone paperback from his collection . . .

**Steps Through the Mist:** Five women of various ages face, each in her own way, what seems to be the deterministic trap of Fate. A schoolteacher, a fortune-teller, a young woman on a skiing holiday, an inflexible old spinster, a girl who can collapse reality into any shape: when another dreams you, or controls you, or invests you with godlike power, can there be any escape, ever?



*Stephen Baxter tells us, "I grew up on the line between Manchester and Liverpool, two great engines of the Industrial Revolution, and three generations of transport links—road, rail and motorway—pass within a few hundred yards, all running east to west, and more links will no doubt be laid down long after I'm gone. This story is about geographical determinism and human destiny."*

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# The Long Road

## Stephen Baxter

**H**ara took days to walk the long road, from the hunters' camps in the hills to the sandstone huts of the fisher folk by the marshy shore. But the road ran straight, its surface hard, the walking good. This directness pleased Hara, as she walked alone through the autumnal sunlight. She was fifteen years old.

Her father scolded her for these excursions. But Hara would be able to trade cattle leather for bream and mussels, and enough cockle shells for an anklet or two.

Besides, her father's misgivings were to do with the road itself. People muttered darkly that it must have been built by vanished giants. But Hara had a practical turn of mind. A straight line was simply the most obvious way from hills to coast. And generations of patient walkers like herself had surely flattened the ground with their feet, without the help of giants: Britain was already an old country.

The wind rustled dying leaves. She could smell the ice that still lay not far to the north. She hoped to reach the

coast before nightfall, and, perhaps, to find a certain boy of the fisher-folk clan. Smiling, warm deep inside, she hurried on, her feet padding softly on the road's grassy surface.

**U**nder the unusually hot sun of this northern summer's day, Marcus Plautius, stripped to the waist, worked with his men on the road.

Marcus didn't have to do this. A centurion from north Italy, he had won his seniority the hard way. But road-making pleased him: the surveying with plumb lines and beacons, the grades of stone and gravel laid in sequence, the design that ensured good foundations, a decent walking surface, and reliable drainage. Maybe it was because of all the destruction he had seen that he found building so satisfying.

But a soldier understood that the roads were the Emperors' supreme instrument of control. Just here they happened to be following the course of an old rutted track, but Roman roads ran straight whatever was in their way,

their cold geometry freezing barbarian minds. And where roads ran, towns and prosperity flourished, and citizens paid their taxes—and Marcus's salary.

So Marcus worked with a will, immersed in songs from Spain and Persia and Africa, and the road stretched true from horizon to horizon.

**S**eth sat in the musty dark of his toll gate lodge, chewing on tobacco. He had had an argument with his son.

Like his father, Seth was a turnpike gatekeeper. This was a profitable road, the obvious route to carry your cotton goods straight from city to port. And thanks to the tolls those who used the turnpike paid for its upkeep, so the old road was restored to its best condition since the Romans.

But now the railway had come, its culverts and embankments following the road's own direct route. The turnpike traffic had reduced to a trickle, and the tolls dried up with it. Today Seth's son Thomas had vowed that he would never become gatekeeper but would go work on the railway.

Seth heard a clattering of hooves. Another traveller, another penny. Sighing, he pulled himself up from his chair.

**T**he road itself was aware.

It still followed the ancient, logical route between inland city and port. But now every centimetre was saturated

with chips and actuators, and nanomachines repaired every crack, while the road monitored and controlled the traffic that thundered along it.

And sometimes the road, integrated into a global transportation network, could become very smart indeed.

Transport drove the economy, but things were out of balance. For a century it had been cheaper to travel than to build. So children commuted to huge regional schools, their parents to work in faraway cities. But if you factored in the cost of waste and excess heat, transport really wasn't so cheap after all—and the days of 'cheap' travel must soon end anyhow. And then what?

Sometimes the road understood that nothing like it was ever likely to be built again. But then it would sink back into the joy of purpose fulfilled, as storms of traffic broke over its long back.

**L**ida, fifteen years old, took days to walk the long road, from the hunters' camps in the hills to the huts of the fisher folk by the shore, where she would trade rabbit skin for bream and mussels.

The road ran so straight and firm that people muttered darkly about its origins. But Lida was practical. This was simply the most obvious way from hills to coast, and generations of patient walkers like herself had surely flattened the ground. No need to imagine vanished giants.

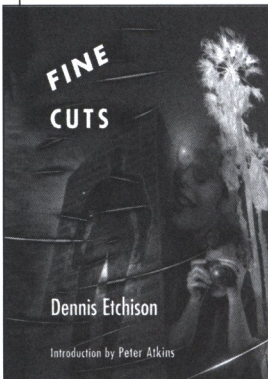
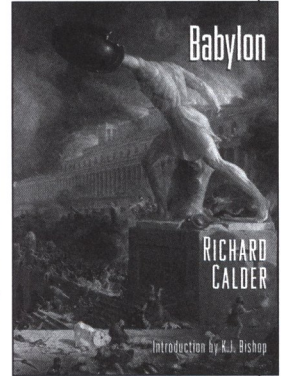
The wind rustled dying leaves. She could smell the ice to the north; every day it edged closer. She hurried on.

The road sensed the soft pad of her footsteps, and dreamed of vanished traffic. ☒

**W**hitechapel, London. 1888. Madeleine Fell is dreaming of Babylon. Not the Victorian Babylon of London, but a second, Mesopotamian Babylon that exists in a parallel dimension, a world populated and ruled by Ishtar's sacred prostitutes that has of late gained ascendancy over our own.

In Whitechapel, Jack the Ripper is murdering Babylonian whores. And off-world, on Babylon itself, the men of the Black Order plot revolution—by instituting a ruthless program of gendecide. Unbeknown to her disapproving parents, Madeleine enters the Babylonian novitiate, her heart set upon travelling to the exotic, parallel world of her dreams, fearful, yet at the same time strangely excited, by the intimation that her demon lover awaits.

When Madeleine's parents discover what she has done, she escapes to Babylon with the help of her irrepressible friend and fellow novice, Cliticia. As the two adventuresses journey through a landscape of magnificently bizarre ruins towards the consummation of their amour fou and a concomitant disillusionment, they begin to understand that Babylon the Great, like London, is as much a city of the mind as a set of co-ordinates on a transdimensional map, and that they owe the Black Order, and even Jack the Ripper himself, a debt of complicity.



**W**elcome to the most dangerous intersection in Hollywood—the razor's edge between fantasy and reality. The house lights dim, the curtains open and the veil of illusion is finally lifted as both dreams and nightmares come true. Here truth is under contract to ambition, morality is left on the cutting-room floor and life and death are the ingredients of a storyline from which no one escapes.

Fine Cuts is a new collection of tales about Hollywood by a three-time winner of both the British Fantasy and World Fantasy Awards, in a volume destined to become a classic of modern horror.

"Dennis Etchison is absolutely one of horror's most exciting, most radical and innovative talents."

—Peter Straub

*According to the author, this is his first attempt at a science fiction story for several years. "I've written general fiction and fantasy tales," Garry explains, "but it gets harder and harder to find themes and plots for sf stories which are not echoes of those I've written before. New ideas are difficult enough to find, and one needs a story to carry that idea and there too one has to avoid repeating oneself with tales of jealousy, hate, fear, suspicion and love. Happily there are talented new young writers coming along all the time, with fresh new ways of using these ancient emotions. Good job too, though hopefully the creative juices in this old boy will keep flowing for a few more years yet."*

*Garry's collection Moby Jack and Other Tall Tales is due out soon from PS Publishing.*

## 12 Men Born Of Woman

### Garry Kilworth

They were milling around the coffee urns, rather than sitting where pens, white paper, glasses and jugs of water had been immaculately placed so that there was exactly two feet between each juror. Twelve leather-padded, leather-backed chairs had been arranged at a round table, as if we were King Arthur and his knights, but people seemed to prefer to stand, talking to each other in the vicinity of the stainless steel hives containing that brown nectar which men like me preferred to honey. And we were *all* men. I have written *people* but there were no women. It was an all-male jury.

'Guilty as hell,' said the chubby man in the large check suit. I wanted to tell him that if he wanted to look slimmer, he should try a narrow stripe pattern. Or even plain. 'Can't be anything else.' He took a long sip of his coffee and obviously burnt his tongue, because he

made a face and stuck the tip of that organ through his teeth.

The chap he was speaking to was not much leaner but he was a more sensible dresser, in a blue sweater and jeans.

'I don't know,' he replied in a cultured voice, the kind of accent which one heard at county fairs. 'I thought that's what we were here to discuss. I mean, what about this cloning thing? Do you think there's anything in it?'

He was talking about the case for the defence. Let me tell you the story first and then you'll soon be up to speed, even if you're a little lost at present.

You must remember the case? Four men went out on a yacht to do some sea fishing. It was a very expensive boat, owned by a millionaire's son, who was not actually on board at the time of the incident. He had loaned it to a politician friend of his, who had in turn invited three companions to join him. One was an important civil ser-



vant, the second a well-known Mafia head, and the third the gangster's bodyguard who it seemed he never went anywhere without. What they were all doing on the yacht can only be surmised, but since the story broke the civil servant has resigned and the politician is leaving the country after the trial is over. They all said they were simply keen fishermen. Ha, say I and many others.

The mobster's name was Freddie Lazarus. I say *was*. He's now dead. He originated in some South American country, no one is quite sure where. But it's his bodyguard who's on trial, for murder he's accused of committing on board the yacht. No, no, he didn't kill his boss, some Eastern European rivals did that, awhile after this particular murder. The man the bodyguard murdered is still a mystery, a complete unknown, having no identification on him whatsoever at the time, and whose prints, dental records and DNA are unregistered anywhere. Various media agencies, publishing his picture, have not received any satisfactory replies. No one seems to know who he is or where he's come from. It was as if he'd crawled out of the sea.

How did he get on board, this victim of Mickey Kyle, the hoodlum who hacked him to death?

The prosecutors tried to assert that the man must have been on board when the yacht set out. Yet two independent 'valets' from a boat cleaning firm, who were on the yacht right up

until it left the harbour, maintained there was no one else on board. *All* four passengers and crew—evidence was forthcoming from Lazarus before he was gunned down in a night club—staunchly maintained that they also searched the boat thoroughly before setting out, fearing eavesdroppers and spies. This could be a bunch of lies of course, but their stories were consistent.

So, if not there at the outset, he must have got on board sometime during the trip out to sea. Helicopter? A fast vessel of some kind? Submarine? No evidence has come to light to support any idea that he was transported to the boat by another craft.

Did he swim there and climb on board while they were distracted by their 'meeting'?

No answers have been forthcoming, not to anyone's satisfaction. I and the other jurors in this room have so far been kept apart. The trial has thus far been conducted in conference mode on a closed TV network, to protect the judge and jury, and prosecuting counsel, from harassment. There have been threats against our lives, which I'm sure would have been carried out, had our names not been kept secret. We don't know each other. Until we were locked in this room, just an hour ago, we'd never met. Kyle has 'goodfella' friends, naturally, who'll stop at very little to influence the outcome.

So far as I know we're anonymous. I hope it stays that way.

An obviously very nervous little man in Cuban heeled boots came and stood by me.

‘What about this theory, eh? You understand it?’

‘I don’t think anyone understands it,’ I replied.

‘No, what I mean is, I haven’t the foggiest about it. How does it help the defence? Y’know, what’s in it for Kyle? After all, he’s admitted he took a chopper from the galley and split the guy’s skull with it. Hacked off his arms and legs—and,’ he gulped for breath, ‘his head, and chucked the lot with the torso overboard, hoping for the sharks to do the biz. There’s not much defence against that sort of confession, is there? I mean, he did it, he said he did it. How’s this theory goin’ to change that?’

*I remember the sky was a cobalt blue (Kyle was no ignoramus, he was an educated thug: he had majored in art) which made me think a storm was coming. We’d already been out there four hours and the sea began to grow dark along the edge of the horizon. A fresh wind sprang up. It really did look like dirty weather was on the way. Then I saw him, sneaking around the stern of the boat. An intruder. An intruder who’d managed to board us without been heard or seen. How sinister was that? It appeared to me, though I was mistaken, he had a weapon in his hand. I was in the galley at the time. Cooking. I like to cook. I specialise in oriental dishes. Anyway, I grabbed the nearest piece of cutlery—it just happened to be a chopper—and went out to confront the guy. He raised his hand, the*

*one with the weapon—which turned out to be a small fish, bait we were using—and I struck him down. It was self defence. I thought he was going to stab me. A stranger’s hand going up, a flash of silver? In my profession if you don’t act quickly, decisively, you end up dead. I split his skull.*

There were five jurors huddled together in one corner of the room and a lively debate was going on between them. I wanted to hear what they had to say. They looked a little brighter than this little twerp. It would have restored a little of my faith in justice to hear an intelligent conversation going on, about the real issues behind this murder. If murder it was. The short man had raised one of the key points. Was it indeed murder?

‘What they’re saying,’ I told him, my eyes still on the group of five, ‘is that if he was a clone, he wasn’t in the strict sense a human being. Our laws are there to protect *people* . . .’

‘Life, surely? To protect life? Kyle took a life.’

I was being patient as hell. ‘A cockroach has life.’

‘Ah, I see what you mean.’ There was a pause. ‘But he was a *man*, not an animal.’

‘You have to look at the definition of what constitutes a *man*. If he was a clone, he was not born of woman. Does a true man have to be born of woman? you have to ask yourself. If the answer’s yes, then you can’t call a clone a man.’ I hesitated, knowing I was getting into deeper water. ‘Especially the kind of clone the defence are putting forward.’

‘Oh yeah, what did they call it? S.R.C.?’

‘R.S.C.—Random Spontaneous Cloning.’

‘Several people go into a confined space and more come out—in this case four men in and five men out.’

I nodded. ‘Exactly. The fifth man has been accidentally cloned from the four birthright men. No one’s sure of the science yet, but they talk of electro-genetic fields producing a rapid cell creation. They say it’s happened at several large gatherings: night clubs, parties, even in elevators and offices. In all cases they have been single-sex gatherings: all men or all women. The clone looks like none of the makers because he or she is an amalgam of all of them. Yet the clone has knowledge of their memories, skills and habits: a vessel for their collected attributes and faults.’

The little man licked his lips. ‘That would make him very clever. It’s not clever to get murdered. You have to be very stupid to do that.’

‘If he’s a new creature it’ll take time for him to learn that there’s danger all around him. When men first arrived in New Zealand the birds came right up to them and looked them in the eyes. See if they do it today, now they’ve learned what predators we are. The next clone that comes along will be more cautious, will have more of a sense of self-preservation.’

‘How come? How?’

‘Who knows? But creatures learn from the history of their kind. It’s passed on somehow. One of the mys-

teries of life. Well,’ I started to walk away, ‘we need to talk to others.’

His eyes darted round the room and back again.

‘Hey, hey—don’t go yet—answer me this—how does something like this happen? I mean, it sounds like hocus-pocus—creating a man out of thin air. I can’t think they’re serious. It’s just another get-out clause for the criminal elements in our society, isn’t it?’

‘It could be. Or it’s a new phenomenon created some say by overstimulation of the body tissues—constant use of new artificial drugs and medication—combined with a change in atmospherics. Even a slight alteration in the layers that protect our planet from the sun’s rays affects us a great deal. Static electricity increases in quantity and power. Other waves and rays increase or decrease in value. Anything that upsets the balance interferes with the natural laws of physics as we know them and will have consequences we won’t have experienced before now.’

‘Wow, you talk like a scientist. Are you a scientist?’ He stuck his hand forward to be shaken. ‘My name’s Archie by the way.’

‘We’re not supposed to give names,’ I reminded him, ignoring the hand. ‘Look, I’m no scientist. I just read magazines. I haven’t really any idea what all that stuff really means—like you, I can only guess. Maybe you’re right. Maybe it is a get-out clause. Kyle is using it, isn’t he? It’s the basis of his defence. He’s saying he killed the guy, but it wasn’t

murder because his victim wasn't a real man, he was some accident of nature, a freak of physics.' I took a long draught of coffee. It smelled better than it tasted. 'That's why we're here, isn't it? To decide whether to accept that as the truth, or whether we think it's just a load of crap.'

'I thought he was advocating self-defence.'

'Listen, buddy,' I said, growing tired of him, 'if you're up on a murder charge you don't just have one line of defence, you have several—it helps to confuse the jury.' I didn't add that it had certainly confused this little squirt, which wasn't difficult since he had brains the consistency of mushy peas. 'Go and ask some of the others. You'll get a better overall picture.'

I turned away from him and put my coffee down so that I could take off my jacket which was uncomfortable. Once I was in my shirt-sleeves I rolled them up: the sleeves were a little too long. 'Archie' had gone and was chatting to three men who had the look of startled deer. One of them managed to extricate himself straight away and he came over to me, flicking his thumb back at those who were left and rolling his eyes.

'I know,' I said. 'It took me a lot longer to get away than you.'

The man, a bulky guy who had a truck driver's nose, spoke to me in unnerving Liverpudlian accents.

'What's your decision? We've all seen the evidence now. What do you think?'

'Me? I think Kyle is lying. I think the whole four of them are liars. I think the fifth man was killed because he knew too much.'

He nodded slowly. 'That's a good reason for killing a man, if you've got something desperate to hide.'

'How did number five gain his knowledge, though—that's what I'm trying to figure out. Was he indeed randomly spontaneously produced and arrived with intrinsic knowledge intact—or was he simply a spy who'd hidden himself on board and had heard all?'

'I agree with you, and I go with the second one. I think he hid in one of the nooks and crannies of the boat before it left harbour. He heard what he wanted to hear and was then discovered by the four conspirators. They hacked him to death and chucked the bits to the fishes, hoping no more would come of it. The head being washed up on the beach was their undoing, along with the bloodstains on the yacht. Case closed.'

'You could be right.'

'I know I'm damn well right. R.S.C.? Bollocks. Utter bollocks. Pseudo-science, my friend, from crapland.'

'Well, there've been a number of other reported cases, some say from reliable sources.'

'Crap. Rumours. Myth. Apocryphal tales. Tabloid press sensational junk. Daily Shite news. Of course the rags love stories like that. It's bread, butter and meat on the table to them. Take it from me, they ain't real, my friend. They're a load of bollocks.'

‘So you said.’

The noise level in the room had increased as conversations began to get heated in various corners. Men had removed their suit jackets, like me, and had claimed one of the twelve chairs by hanging it on the back. Smoking was not allowed and several jurors, obvious smokers, were getting agitated and irritable without their cigarettes. One man was gloomily staring out of the window, lost in domestic thoughts by the look of him, no doubt wondering when he was going to get out of this zoo cage.

Suddenly a tall guy in horn-rimmed glasses and wearing a black blazer with grey flannels clapped his hands for attention.

‘Gentlemen. I think we’re all gentlemen here, aren’t we? Can we please sit down now. We’ve had time to chat. Let’s get down to the serious business of reaching a decision . . .’

‘Who made you chief?’ cried a beligerent voice from the back of the room. ‘I don’t remember signing anything.’

One or two people laughed.

‘The judge,’ growled the man in the blazer, ‘that’s who. I’m the Jury Foreman.’

‘Well, I wish they’d tell me,’ grumbled the other man. ‘Everything’s a bloody mystery. No names, no pack drill. I’m fuckin’ fed up with playing secret fuckin’ games.’

‘Could we keep the language down?’ muttered the foreman, pulling back his chair. ‘You might regret it when they show this to your family on the box.

This is all being recorded you know. They can hear everything we say outside.’

I hadn’t remembered that. It was true. We could be seen and heard on a closed network. We were being watched and judged too. There was little privacy in this world. If you wanted privacy you hired a yacht.

‘Just going to take a leak,’ I said, heading towards the toilets at the end of the room. ‘Won’t be a couple of minutes.’

There was someone in the toilets. A pale young man in a dark suit. He didn’t look well and was splashing water on his face. Looking at me in the mirror in front of him, he said, ‘Late night. Had too much.’

I nodded in an understanding way and went to the end of the room where suits, shirts and other clothes were hanging from coathangers on hooks. We had been told to bring spare clothes, in case we were up here all night. The judge had told us the decision must be unanimous and therefore we were stuck in the hotel room until we came to an agreement. I rifled through some pockets and eventually found a black spectacles’ case. ‘Forget my head next,’ I said, showing it to the young man. Then I went the end washbasin, nearest the door. I washed my hands, wet my hair and smoothed it down a little, then moved for the doorway.

‘What’s going on out there?’ asked the young man.

‘Oh—yes, sorry. We’re gathering at

the table. But no rush. You've got a few minutes yet.'

'Thanks.' He leaned over his washbasin and I wondered if he was going to be sick.

I joined the others.

We all took our seats, or rather the seats that were available. I sat next to the nervy little man who called himself Archie and picked up pens and paper. What we were supposed to do with the writing materials I had no idea. A secret ballot? Surely we had to have the courage of our convictions. We had to say openly what we thought. Guilty or not guilty. Simple as that. No fussing around with bits of paper.

'Now,' said the foreman, knitting his hands together in front of him, 'we're all seated. We should all have reached a decision. Is there anyone who wants to discuss it further?'

Seven hands went up.

'Oh Christ,' muttered the man who'd been looking out of the window. 'Here we go. Take-out meals, bloody in-house showers. I want to get home to my family . . .'

The foreman ignored him, but asked, 'All right if I take the decisions of those who have no further doubts? The five who're left?'

There didn't seem to be any objections to this, so he started with a man three down to my right.

'Guilty as hell. Murder.'

'We don't need any superlatives,' replied the foreman, pointing at the next man. 'You?'

'Guilty of manslaughter.'

'Oh, come on!' muttered a guy over the other side of the table. 'What? Are you blind and deaf?'

'You?' asked the foreman, ignoring the interruptions and pointing to me. 'Your decision?'

I hesitated for a moment, then said, 'Guilty.'

'Of?'

Again I hesitated, then said in a firm tone, 'Murder.'

At that very moment the young man came out of the toilet at the far end of the room. I turned and whispered in Archie's ear. Archie gave a startled gasp and gripped my arm with claw-like fingers.

The young man approached with my black glasses' case in his hand. He had seen that I'd left it behind on the washbasin and was no doubt bringing it to me.

There was an electrified silence as we observed his progress over the hotel's thick carpet towards us. His tie had been loosened and hung down below an unbuttoned collar, but he was still wearing his jacket. He seemed pre-occupied, looking down at his feet. We all gave one last quick stare around the table, checking that all twelve seats were occupied, before some of us shifted uneasily. Everyone knew there were only supposed to be 12 men in the room. There were now 13. The door had been locked behind us and there were no other entrances or exits. People were asking themselves, was this one of Kyle's killers, come to threaten us? Or worse?



'Who the hell are you?' cried the foreman, leaping to his feet. 'How did you get in? Through the toilet window?'

Archie now found his voice and pointed, shouting, 'He's got a gun!'

The next thing that happened was the door burst open and two armed police came in. They aimed their weapons.

'Stay where you are!' yelled one of the cops. 'Don't move. Keep your hands out in front of you. Drop that!'

'This?' replied the intruder, wildly, holding forth the black glasses' case. 'It's just . . .'

'Don't move. I warn you. Drop it! Drop it!'

Some of us now fell to the floor, lying flat. Others confused the situation by starting for the doorway. There was rapid movement everywhere. The policeman looked uncertain. I could see the gun in his hand shaking a little. He too looked quite young. His target wisely remained still, but others were darting behind him, dashing for the toilet to be out of the firing line. There was hysteria in the air, which was very unsettling. Finally the jury foreman cried out in a shrill accusing voice, 'He hasn't dropped it. He's still got it!'

'Heck, I only went to the bog . . . I'm one of the jurors . . . I think I've got . . .'

His right hand went towards one of his pockets. That rapid movement was fatal. The policeman fired twice in quick succession, striking his victim

high in the chest. The wounded man staggered backwards, blood bubbling from his sternum. He coughed once, twice, three times, then fell to his knees. Finally he pitched forward on his face and lay there, jerking spasmodically. Within a few minutes he was completely unmoving. His left hand still clutched the case. The cop, white-faced and looking ill, moved forward to remove the glasses' case from the dead man's hand. He stared at it, bemused for a few moments, then opened it and found a pair of sunglasses inside. Then, with panic in his eyes, he felt for his victim's pulse. Clearly, from his expression, there was nothing.

He yelled back hoarsely through the open doorway. 'For Christ's sake call a bloody ambulance.'

'Already done,' murmured the other cop, placing a sympathetic hand on his partner's shoulder. 'On its way.'

'You thought it was a weapon, didn't you, Dave?' said the shooter. 'It looked like one.'

His friend shrugged, averting his eyes. 'I dunno. Maybe. I'm not sure.'

'You bastard,' said the shooter. 'You bastard, Dave.'

Dave looked very uncomfortable and refused to look his partner in the eye.

'No, Mike, I'm just not sure.'

More police arrived, one or two of them quite senior in rank. We were questioned exhaustively. Statements were taken from everyone in the room, and from those who had been viewing proceedings on the monitor screens.



Many were still convinced the dead man was indeed an assassin sent by Kyle, though that hardly made sense at all, since even if he wiped out all twelve of us there would be another trial and another jury appointed. Common sense wafts away in the heat of the moment though. It's only when there's time for calm reflection that rational thinking returns and proper assessments are made.

Once the doctor had declared the policeman's victim officially dead there were photographs taken of the corpse. Then the body was taken away. The black glasses' case was put in a plastic bag and went with the dead man. The policeman who'd fired his weapon had been quickly whisked away, shaking his head and protesting that any cop in his position would have done the same, forgetting that his partner had refrained from firing.

When the police had taken statements from us, we were allowed to go home. I was followed down the stairs

by the little man, Archie, who was still badly shaken.

'I'm *never* going on another jury,' he said. 'I swear if they try to make me I'll just—well, they can do what they like to me. It looked like a gun, didn't it? You thought it was a gun, didn't you? We nearly died in there. He might have had a machine pistol of some kind. He could have mowed the lot of us down. I'm never going near a courtroom again. They can do what they like to me . . .'

I let him rattle on. He was harmless enough. We both hit the street at the same time and he said, 'Share a cab?'

'No, no thanks. I'll get my own.'

He shrugged. 'Suit yourself. Here's one. You take it.'

I got in and closed the door behind me.

'Where to, sir?' asked the driver.

I leaned forward, opening my mouth, then suddenly realised that none of the twelve addresses in my head was of any use to me. ☒

**C**oming soon from Garry Kilworth and PS, *Moby Jack and Other Tall Tales*, a collection of stories that span some 20 years, covering a variety of themes and are more different, in style as well as content, than they are similar. As the author himself says, "Some writers follow a path of sameness in order to satisfy their readers' desire for familiarity. To me that's like going to same country for your holiday every year. It's not me. I like going somewhere different every time." Check [pspublishing.co.uk](http://pspublishing.co.uk) for details.

*Conrad Williams's new story is a valentine to the football life he had as a child. "It's also a grim acknowledgement of my own fading skills," he adds. "At 36 I now know I'll never play for Liverpool and that any future glories will be confined to sweaty buffings on astro turf pitches with other ageing dads. I hope that the excitement I felt as a teenage left winger comes across. And if any of you should happen to pass through Warrington, nip up Hillock Lane to see the pitches described in the story and take in some gritty atmosphere . . ."*

*Conrad is the author of the novels Head Injuries and London Revenant, the novellas Nearly People and Game, and a collection of short stories, Use Once, Then Destroy. A new novel, The Unblemished, will be published by Earthling in October 2006.*

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# The Veteran

## Conrad Williams

Deal didn't need to ask for directions to the football pitches. He had not played there for twenty-five years, but he knew the way. Nothing had changed. The pylon standing sentinel at the entrance as you drove into the car park. The cinder training areas. The field stretching away into the darkness. Goal posts. Floods in the mist bled acid-white sodium into the blue-black night. He might never have been away.

The changing room was like any other he had known with its muddied benches, the plastic crates filled with weathered drinks bottles. A smell of sweat and soil, leather and stale smoke. There were two other men already there. One of them was sitting in his shorts, a paunch hanging over the waistband. He lighted a cigarette. Deal recognised him, which produced only a moment of flat joy as he realised it meant nothing. He must have played

against him over the years, at school level, or for a Sunday league side: Under 13s, Under 15s, something like that.

The players pulled on dirt-encrusted boots: Adidas Predators in the main. No shinpads. Waterproof tops. Some of them carried bootbags. He felt woefully inadequate in his fleece and tracksuit bottoms. It was mismatched stuff. Running gear, climbing gear even, maybe. Not football kit. His new boots were cheap, unsullied, smelling of synthetic materials, not kangaroo leather, grass and mud. His blue and yellow Fila sports bag was designed for swimmers, or athletes, or tennis players; not footballers. With the thumb of his left hand he rotated the band of white gold on his ring finger, as he did whenever he was nervous. He looked like the tourist he suspected he was.

More players arrived. Pretty soon it

became apparent that he and the other man, whose name was Roy, were the oldest there. Deal remembered Roy as he did himself, whenever he recalled his own footballing past. A young, energetic, enthusiastic player. Difficult to beat. A bit of flair. Speed. A player that made a difference, rather than one who made up the numbers. Roy was no longer built for speed—who was, in their mid-30s?—and Deal watched him now as he pulled on a heavy blue knee support. Deal felt a part of him inexplicably die. Maybe it was in the way that Roy accepted—amicably it seemed—that he was crocked, that he was not coming back from this. Presumably he had been playing a number of seasons coming to terms with that knowledge. Deal was finding that out via the regret of never having played regularly. He had yet to turn out for a proper team for longer than one season. The distractions of youth had been too great. Now all the girls, beer and TV were still there, the football was not. This was his last chance. In London he had played on Sunday evenings, but huffing around on Astro-turf pitches for an hour with fifteen other unfit office workers wasn't the same as getting out on the grass on a freezing morning with people who played the game because it meant something, because there was nothing else to do and would play even if there were.

Walking up to the pitches, the sound of football studs clacking on con-

crete—one of the truly magical sounds in life, his favourite—he found Roy keeping pace alongside him.

'I thought you'd turned up with Phil,' he said.

'No,' Deal said. 'I saw the ad in the midweek *Guardian*. Needing players. I haven't played in a while. I just want to get fit.'

'Fair enough.'

'I know you,' Deal said. 'I can't think where from, but we must have crossed swords over the years.'

'Yeah,' Roy said. 'I know your face too.' He looked around at the pitches. Although he was carrying extra weight, he still looked comfortable with his own physicality, as most footballers did. 'I've only ever played here,' he said.

They accepted him, despite the awkwardness of getting used to a new bunch of people. Nobody was used to his name yet. 'Connie,' he said, to the first of them to ask, as the coloured bibs were being handed out.

Cunnie?'

'No, Connie.'

'Kenny?'

'*Connie*.'

'Fuck me, I wish I'd never asked.'

The footballers' jargon. The banter. 'Get it under, mate,' as a ball came to him, fast on the wing.

'Square.'

'Time, mate. Time.'

'Touch.'

'And again.'

'Have a dig.'

He was doing all right, considering he hadn't played for a year and was wearing unfamiliar boots. There were a few passes that went astray and towards the end he was labouring to fulfil his defensive duties, but nobody berated him. He found his positional sense had improved intuitively. Knowing his job, maintaining the team's shape and backing up when he was needed was more important than harrying after the ball, wherever it might be on the pitch. He was intercepting passes made by the reds that he would otherwise have never reached. He was anticipating the play. He had to. He was an ageing footballer. Maybe this was his future in the game. A holding midfielder. He was no longer the mercurial wingman, taking on full backs and whipping crosses into the penalty area. Although essentially he didn't feel any different to the way he had when he was in his teens, he appreciated that he couldn't cover the same acreage any more. He couldn't play box to box. Maybe it was even time to return to left back, the position he had started in at school, aged ten.

And then it was over. They marched back, the steam rising off them like ghosts failing to keep their shape. Occasional figures in far off kitchen windows, backlit by orange light, watched them leave. Already, Deal was missing it. Despite his burning lungs and the liquid lead filling his legs, he wanted the game to go on. Behind them, the floodlights were killed, one after the other. Darkness fell in wedges,

overtaking them as they reached the car park. They moved through it and Deal was aware only of the gleam of sweat, the breath that fired from every mouth, along with the swear words, and talk of that night's pints.

Deal showered quickly and made to leave before the others. He didn't think it right to accompany them to the bar. He didn't want to be standing on the fringes, meekly clutching his pint, unable to contribute to discussions with which he shared no history. He needed to get to know them first. The season was a long one. There was plenty of time. He had plenty of time.

'You playing, Saturday?' the manager asked, and Deal started, his hand on the door handle. He was about to say that he would if he was needed, but by then it was obvious the manager was talking to somebody else.

'I can't.' This was Twinny, the right back. The other Twinny played in goal. 'I need to spend some time with my girlfriend.'

'You need to spend some time fucking playing matches,' Roy snapped.

Twinny shut up and stared resolutely at the floor.

'Thanks for the game,' Deal said, feeling obliged to fill his pause.

'No problem, mucker,' the manager said. 'See you next week.'

'Yeah, thanks for coming,' said Roy, pointedly, his eyes never leaving Twinny's.

Deal trudged to his car. Behind him, the players filtered into the bar. He eased himself behind the wheel,

already feeling the first shortening of muscle in his thighs and back. Getting out of bed would be difficult in the morning if he didn't stretch and have a hot bath before he turned in. But he was suddenly so tired that he wanted his pillow above anything.

Except for food. He stopped at the chip shop on Manchester Road and bought a fish supper. A new fitness regime, he reasoned, meant that he would be able to eat pretty much what he wanted; the exercise would burn it all off. He had pocketed his change and was returning to his car, which was illegally parked on the dual carriageway, when he heard a shout behind him.

A young man came sprinting across the road and hurled himself on to the diamond-link fence that belonged to the secondhand car dealer. He was over the top and vanishing into the dark before Deal had the chance to ask if he needed help. More shouts followed. The traffic had melted away. It was just Deal and something coming. He got into his car and sank into his seat, kept his eyes on the rearview mirror. Three men in black sports gear moved across the road and over the fence with the speed and grace of natural athletes. He knew in that moment that they would catch the first man easily. Dread shifted in him, a delicious unfolding, like a hungry spider knowing that something has just been trapped in its web. He knew he had to act. But instead, he turned on the ignition and drove home, because at the moment his hand fell on the door latch, a fourth figure stepped

out of the lights across the street and watched Deal until he departed.

He woke early, but not from choice. His legs were being painted with dull fire each time he moved. At least it was light outside. Deal rose ponderously, and made a mug of tea which he carried into his back yard. He sat among the rusting tools and bleached plastic toys, wondered what his two boys were doing now. How old would they be? Five and seven? He could be on a pitch with them now, teaching them how to volley the ball, how to trap it with one foot and pass with the other. How to beat an opponent with a drop of the shoulder. Did they ever think of him? Probably not. He had been gone a year, no, eighteen months. Christ, eighteen months already. Children forgot quickly. They adapted. The aches in his legs were joined by another, much deeper, that no amount of wintergreen would be able to budge.

He called in sick at the train depot and spent half an hour soaking in a hot bath, a flannel covering his eyes. His mind emptying, he suddenly saw himself as if from the doorway, the fabric of the wet cloth peaking and sinking on the troughs and ridges of his face. The soapy water filming the exposed parts of his body just above the water, where it gently beat against him, moving with the motion of his heart. He saw the condensation beading on the misfitting tiles around him, and the plastic shower curtain with its hem of mould.

Mist on the mirror, which was flecked with pimples of shaving foam and toothpaste, minuscule obliques of plaque that had been catapulted from between his teeth by dental floss, and the grime powered off him during a thousand showers.

He looked down at himself and then looked away, his arc of vision shifting so swiftly it was like being on a wildly fast fairground ride. Colours bled into each other, light drenched his retina. His bedroom. He was looking at the angle his bed made against the back wall, the headboard with the old, old scars of love it had driven into the magnolia. The cheap Ikea office lamp and the small hill of paperbacks and newspapers gathering dust beneath it. The shoeboxes of letters and photographs beneath that needed sorting. A life lived that he needed to let go of.

The figure in black, watching him from beneath the streetlamp as he drove away.

He sat up in the bath and the flannel fell away from his face. He half expected to see himself standing in the doorway but there was only the shadow of traffic playing in a rectangle of light against the wall.

He dressed quickly and drove to Manchester Road. His aches were still there, still acute, but manageable now, pleasurable even. He stretched and cursed softly once he'd parked the car by the Dog and Partridge. He strolled to the secondhand car showroom and wandered down the side of the building, where rows of tired Nissans and

Fords and Renaults were freshly parked.

'Help you?' asked an earnest young man, rubbing his hands together and squinting into the early morning sunshine.

'Just looking,' Deal said.

'If you want to buy,' the salesman said, 'then Andy's your man. Remember that.'

'Yeah,' Deal said. The salesman was a kid. He was no footballer, Deal could tell that straight off. He probably played badminton or squash in his lunch hour. Too skinny. Too mannered for football. He wouldn't last five minutes on a pitch in midwinter, the sleet arrowing down and his marker up his arse, snapping at his heels every time the ball came near. Deal moved further along the line of cars, only peripherally aware of their colour and shape. He felt uncomfortable about his reliance on the game sometimes, how he used it to measure a man's worth, or lack of it. But there was precious little else in his life to use as a barometer. He didn't care one jot for the Premiership, or its pampered, superannuated cast list of wankers. Real football showed its guts on the uneven winter fields populated by hard men from pubs and clubs and shattered lives. There were midfielders in some of those teams who would make Roy Keane scream for his mother.

The back of the yard. Chainlink fence. One part of it slashed open and yawning. They caught him and then did this and took him through. Beyond

the fence, an unshaved slope of pale-green beard slid down to a pulped mass of flytipped shit. He picked his way down the slope, stepping over the strange, shattered technology of things rarely seen: TV innards, rent computer keyboards, split car batteries bleeding grey foam. A dead rabbit lay incongruously next to all of this, part of its face sheared away to reveal a grinning wedge of white, yet it looked more alive than anything he had seen that morning. Everybody's teeth were gritted like that, beneath the jowls and pouts. Everyone went around in an ecstasy of bruxism. Beneath every smile was a rictus.

Deal paused at the bottom of a ditch and rubbed his face. He didn't want to look at his hands in case his pallor had come away in them. He tried to understand why he was here. Disappointment lay at the end of the trail regardless of what he did or didn't find. It was a slice of violence, the kind of night-time riot you could find in any corner of any town if you went looking for it. Just leave it. Just back down. Return to the car showroom and test drive someone else's cast-off. Then go home and catch up on your sleep, read a book, write a letter to the boys.

Any colour, when seen in the street-lamps, becomes so many variations of grey. Tucked under a green explosion of ground-elder, bastard cabbage and yarrow, a brilliant length of red and blue check. New fabric, dumped recently. Age had not yet settled in this and slowly sucked out its colour. He

approached until it was clear that the fabric was filled. Yet what filled it was empty, and looking at him.

The names from those old teams come to him now, like poetry. Penlake, Fearnhead, Silver Birch, Rainhill, Monks. He had played for Penlake when he was still at school. Their ground was at Cherry Tree Farm, out St Helens way. He had played in the foulest weather and scored a goal in the quagmire of the penalty box, turning on a sixpence to shoot past the static keeper. It was as if everyone in the world had frozen in the instant he made his decision to move. Everything was grey: the sky, the pitch, the shirts of his own team and those of the opposition. The ball had been a gorgeous bright orange. He swore to his father that evening that it had scored a path through the air that had remained for seconds after.

He had never seen any of the players from his team again after that season. At the end of May, they held a gathering in a small club off the East Lancs Road. The team coach handed him a trophy of a footballer dribbling with a ball. The plaque read: *Many thanks, 1982/83*. He still had that trophy somewhere. Over the years it had become detached from the base many times and he had glued it so clumsily that a collar of gum had built up around the footballer's shin. It was the only trophy he had ever earned. He often wondered if any of his team-

mates had gone on playing football, had made it into the professional leagues, even. Maybe he would come across them if he continued training. Roy couldn't be the only player he had intercepted in his youth who was still plying their trade in the Sunday leagues across the north-west.

Deal raised the glass to his lips and saw that his drink needed refreshing. It was always best to replenish a glass that had not been drained. It gave you the illusion that you weren't drinking too much. Technically, you were only having one before bed. This one had lasted three hours, but still . . .

Roy Freeman. He remembered a game against Roy's team—Rope & Anchor—from that one season. Rope were the outfit to beat. They won the league with the kind of machine-like regularity that Liverpool were achieving in Division One. Penlake were often their runners-up. In this game, which Penlake lost 2-1, Roy had scored a goal that made Deal's jaw drop. The ball had come to him quick and thigh-high on the edge of Penlake's penalty area. Roy's back was to goal. He had somehow trapped, yet allowed the ball to slide off his leg at the same time as pivoting on his standing foot, then volleying into the net. It had been such a momentous display of balance and skill that Deal had found himself clapping even as the other team were trotting back to take up their positions for the kick-off.

He made tea, remembering how Roy had moved on the cinder pitch the

previous night. He had been slow, but not cumbersome. His feet still had that quicksilver ability, even if the rest of him did not. He could score a goal like that again. Such feats were not dependent on speed and agility, but quickness of thought, of anticipation. That old Liverpool great Kenny Dalglish was never going to win any medals at sprinting, but his footballing mind was second to none. He could imagine a game that was happening beyond the prosaic hoofing that occurred in front of him. He was a chess player, really. Roy had a bit of that in him.

As he always did on a Saturday, Deal traipsed down to the newsagent's and bought a red top and a broadsheet. He studied the previews of the weekend's games over a large mug of strong coffee and found himself wondering what Euan and Alex might be up to, if they had started playing football for anyone, and if so, what their positions might be. He wondered if Carol ever went to watch them play.

The police had responded quickly to his anonymous call, made from a phone box on Manchester Road.

Thinking of football helped to keep his mind away from the broken body he had discovered. He had panicked at first, believing the man to still be alive, but the movements he made could only have been the slow, reflex adjustments of death. From the wall of the pub he watched the huge police presence assemble. Almost at the same time, an ambulance came tearing along Manchester Road, its lights flashing. While



he watched, a young officer walked over to him and asked him if he had seen anything.

'No,' said Deal.

'You didn't call in about this?'

'No.' And then: 'About what?'

The constable eyed him, but simply nodded his head and returned to the cordon. Deal left then, when he saw the PC in conversation with a number of men in plainclothes who all turned to look his way at the same time.

*The physicality of the figure watching him drive away. His posture. His leaden grace. An athlete who had thickened and tired with fatigue, with years of injury.*

That night Deal felt restless and caged. A little before nine o'clock he donned his grimy football gear and went out running. There was a light drizzle building thin nests around the streetlamps. The head- and tail-lights of cars were controlled explosions trapped in time. He jogged south along Orford Lane. The Martin Dawes stadium rose up above the flat slab of Tesco's like an iceberg. Turning right he moved along Longford Street, the wind in his face cutting out all sound save that of the rasp of his cagoule. He pushed himself hard into the weather, crossing the Winwick Road and taking the hill over the railway. Pain unpicked the seams of his body and he pressed a hand against his side to keep it together. He took another right at Clout's newsagent into Longshaw Street and ran past tired terraced houses with net curtains all shivering with synchronised patterns of televi-

sion light. Further along, the housing stuttered, replaced by large paved spaces, a pub, a church, a small petrol station, a working men's club and then a large recreation ground. The darkness was just about being pegged back here by weak floodlights. A game of football was being played on the pitch furthest from the road. The echoes of volleys detonated flatly into the dead spaces on all sides. A sporadic call for assistance, or an admonishment, sounded too shrill for a game that was meant to be enjoyed.

Deal padded across the dark field to the edge of the zone created by the floodlights. Now he could see why the voices sounded so high and panicky: schoolkids being given a late training session. Someone called out: 'Euan, Euan, watch the short corner.' Deal felt his bowels turn to water. There were other kids on the planet called Euan. Probably millions. Still, he felt compelled to check. He was about to step into the ring of light when he noticed another figure on the opposite side of the pitch do the same thing, like a mirror image that has somehow anticipated its leader. It was Roy. Deal was almost startled into a greeting, but something held him back. Maybe it was a reluctance to foster any familiarity, having only chatted to him once, and then momentarily. What else could it be? Yet he couldn't broach that borderline. He flashed a glance at the boys legging up and down the lumpy, scarred pitch but none of the stricken faces meant anything to him. Eighteen

months. It shamed him that he could not remember what his boy looked like.

'Euan!' he called suddenly, despite himself.

A boy on the far wing turned his head. Brown hair in need of a trim. An open expression. Too distant to be sure. Roy began walking around the perimeter of the pitch towards him. Why shouldn't he? A stranger loitering in the shadows around a bunch of kids. Why shouldn't he? Deal felt like screaming, *he's my son*, but because he wasn't certain, and because he didn't want to ruin any potential standing with Roy, he retreated, falling back into the rhythm of his running, turning once, at the entrance to the recreation ground, to find that the lights had been switched off.

**A**naemic sunlight met the insipid colour of the roofs beyond his window and they almost cancelled each other out. Into this oblivion, Deal coughed and sneezed himself awake. He sat on the edge of his bed and felt his breath lift and sink like wet fire in his chest. He stared at the wedding ring on his finger, rotated it with the ball of his thumb, thought about removing it, selling it, moving on. Was there any hope of a reconciliation? Was eighteen months long enough to sue for peace, try again? Was eighteen months dead in the water? He couldn't imagine Carol, even with the children, waiting for the wounds to heal. Thinking of her with another man, laughing, hold-

ing hands, kissing, making love, as they had done, reamed him of all warmth, all feelings of humanity. He remembered finding a packet of photographs in a box of things she had saved from a time before him. Looking at them made him feel cheap but he couldn't help himself. There were pictures of her and a previous lover in a hot and dusty country, India maybe. There were pictures of her topless on a beach, her breasts firmer than he had known. There were pictures of her lover, naked in a bathroom or kneeling on a bed, a blanket covering his groin. There was a picture of her lying back on a bed, the picture-taker's knees on either side of her. Her hands were flung back over her head. She was looking at the photographer, she was looking at him. Her look said: *come on, stop messing with that camera, come and undress me, fuck me now.*

Cold rushed in, filling him completely, apart from that seam of unpleasant heat behind his sternum. He coughed hard and spat thick green phlegm into the empty mug by his bed. Great. He must have picked up something while training the other night. Getting older. Getting difficult to just shake things off. The ache in his limbs was like a taunt.

People before. People after. It was the same for everyone. It was the same for him. But it didn't make things any easier to swallow.

He dressed and snatched up his keys, pushed the old car hard along the route he had run the previous night. Had the

football not distracted him then, he might have kept going until he hit Harrison Square, the estate in Dallam where he had lived with his family. Or he might not. The pain was like the liquid in a spirit measure on an uneven surface. It would not settle.

He drove there now. When he saw the gaping hole in the street where the residential block used to be, shock made him step on the accelerator instead of the brake, flipping the car up on to the pavement and giving the engine block a good crack; his head too, which bounced against the ceiling of the car. A man in a blue blazer and a tweed flat cap shook his head as he passed him on his bicycle. Faces came to windows. Deal got out of the car. His head was bleeding a little, but the car was all right.

The residue of demolition lay around him. Local kids had stolen much of the paraphernalia of the wreckers: traffic cones, hazard signs, warning lights. Shattered brickwork and cement lay on the paving stones in front of an acreage of black that shocked Deal to his core. He stared at a shivering tree behind the dead air that had once contained the residential block. It was hard to reconcile that hovering space with the happiness that had followed the birth of his two boys. He remembered them all eating breakfast on the day after Carol had come home with Alex, their second son. He had been clamped to her breast while he shook corn flakes into bowls for the rest of them. The radio was on. Euan

was wearing his Thomas the Tank Engine pyjamas. He and Carol were in tatty towelling robes. Watery wintry sunlight staggered through the kitchen window and painted the far wall with a colour that Dulux would never have advertised but was more beautiful than any Deal had ever seen.

In one of the windows he recognised a face from the past. He waved. The window opened.

‘Con,’ the woman said, flatly.

‘Hi Lesley. How’s the family?’

‘Keeping out of prison for now,’ she said. ‘That was quite a landing.’

‘I had a jolt, seeing this place.’ It was strange being able to see through to what lay behind the block: a great wall of nettle and toadflax; beyond that, Bewsey woods and a partial sight of a weathered, lifesize resin dinosaur in the trees at Gulliver’s World theme park. ‘I don’t suppose you know where Carol and the boys —’

Lesley’s lips disappeared into a flat line. She shook her head. But he knew she knew and wasn’t telling. Lesley had been Carol’s closest friend here at Harrison Square. They met for coffee and cigarettes in the little greasy spoon by the post office when the boys were at school.

‘Do you at least have her number?’

Another shake of the head. But something in his voice must have melted her, at least a little bit. ‘They’re safe, Con. That’s as much as I can give you.’

‘Why won’t she . . . I only want to see my boys.’

'I can't help you. I'll tell her you were here . . . if I see her, I'll tell her.'

'But —'

She pushed back from the sill. 'There's the door. I have to go.'

**H**ours later, his cold had settled, deepened, and was steadily replacing the spaces behind his face with pain and sludge. A lump had risen where he had banged his head, but any discomfort had been subsumed by this greater, more general malaise. He washed dishes and listened to the football on the radio. Grandstanding show ponies with £500 haircuts. Diving, cheating, arguing with the referee. Tactical bookings. Handballs into empty nets. He had to turn the commentary off when it became too much like a stench for the ears. There seemed to be so many stoppages during a game now. Referees pressured into checking on decisions with their touchline assistants, managers sent to the stands, skirmishes in the centre circle, injured players being ordered off the field of play before being allowed back on. Nothing like the real game being played out in the badlands. Reputations counted for nothing in those theatres of dreams. It was all about the three points. The difference between fifth and sixth place at the end of the season amounted to six figure sums. Teams celebrated when they finished fourth because they qualified for the following year's Champions' League. You didn't have to be a champion to

spoon some of that gravy down you. Losing was winning. Except out here. In this town, on these unlevel playing fields, in all weathers, losing was losing. You didn't get Securicor to pick up your wages. You didn't drive home in a warm car that cost more than three terraced houses. No phone calls to the agent to agree to that million pound sponsorship deal for a brand of sunglasses. There were no such balms. You lost, you were shit. You tried to wash the taste of it away in the pub. You thought of the next game while you toiled for a pittance at the factory. You washed your own blood out of your own kit, and were prepared to spill it again for the privilege of wearing it.

You didn't kiss your club's badge and then pocket a huge signing-on fee for the next club that offered you a contract. You knew the value of working in a team.

The phone rang.

'Connie. It's Roy.'

'Roy?' His head shifted like half-set glue. The name was like a word he'd never heard before. And then the face swam out of his confusion and he understood. 'From football?'

'Yeah, Roy from football. We're fitting in a training session tonight. A run. You up for it?'

Deal gritted his teeth. He felt like something folded from cheap paper.

'Connie?'

'Yeah. I'm up for it.'

'Top. We're setting off from The Blackie Arms at eight o'clock. With

you, that's five of us. Hard core. See you in a bit.'

Two runs in two nights. When was the last time he'd managed that? Half a lifetime ago, maybe more. He ate a banana and half a bar of fruit and nut, washed it down with a pint of tap water. Then he put on the previous night's sweats and pulled a woollen beanie down over his ears. At the door he paused and looked down at his wedding ring. He'd had a sudden, strong impetus to remove it, put it somewhere safe, but the moment passed. The sound of the door closing felt very strongly like an underlining, a separation of his life into what had gone before and what was about to happen.

The night smelled fresh, untainted. The symptoms of his cold, disguised in this bitter, sniffing darkness, might almost have been in abeyance. He got into his car and ghosts crept up the glass around him until he could not see outside. Heat was coming off him powerfully. Not well. Not well at all.

'Shit,' he said, miserably, and swiped at the glass with the back of his hand.

**T**he Blackburne Arms was on Orford Green, a mile from his house. He had not been there for many years. It used to be a place to take girls, rather than have a drink with your mates. When he arrived, four figures were standing under the security light in the car park, stamping, stretching, smoking. He parked and got out, nodded at the others, then began to warm-up. A

fine drizzle hung in the air, clinging on to the exhaled smoke. Deal couldn't get a proper grip on the others' expressions. The wateriness of his eyes didn't help.

'Top man, Connie,' Roy said.

'Yeah,' said Cosgrove, the right midfielder. He wore his hair long, and had tied it off in a ponytail. The other two footballers, Fives and Smithers, remained silent.

'Where are we going?' Deal asked.

'Usual route is along Capesthorpe Road, Blackbrook Avenue, south along Lambs Lane to the Manny Road, then Marsh House Lane, right at the barracks up O'Leary Street, Hallfields Road and back here for a pint.'

'That's some ride,' Deal said.

'It's a fair distance, but it's doable.'

'Okay,' Deal said.

Cosgrove took the lead, Smithers and Fives the tail. Roy ran alongside Deal, taking the roadside half of the pavement. Very quickly Deal felt that he was being boxed in.

The drizzle thickened, became proper rain. Despite the incipient menace coming off the men, their physicality, the darkness engraved in their features, Deal was pleasantly surprised to find the run much easier than the one he had undertaken a day earlier. He guessed it was to do with running in a pack. The other footballers grunted brief encouragements to each other, especially after the first couple of miles, when calves tightened and lungs began to burn. It was easier to push yourself when there were others to

cajole you along. You didn't want to lose face by stopping.

They were on Lambs Lane, approaching the busy main road at its foot, when Roy nudged Deal on the shoulder.

'Change of route,' he said. 'Follow us.'

Deal did so, although alarms were jangling all over his body. There had been no debate about altering their original plan. He felt the first kick of real fear and wondered if he had the legs to outrun them if he took off. Probably not. The preceding thirty minutes or so had been designed to take any sting out of his pace.

They crossed Manchester Road and filed through the entrance to the cemetery, Deal noting with dread that the winter closing time on the laminated notice on the gate had lapsed an hour previously.

'What's going on?' he asked. Adrenaline pumped him up, made him forget about his cold. He felt angry that he had allowed them to dupe him like this. He wouldn't let them do what they did to their victim at the reservoir without a fight.

'We had to talk to you, chief,' Roy said.

'You only had to ask.'

'It's not the kind of thing you can discuss over a pie and a pint, eh boys?'

Fives, Cosgrove and Smithers muttered their assent.

'What the fuck is going on?' Deal asked. The question wrote a cheque that his voice could not cash.

They were deep into the cemetery now, countless headstones sinking away into the dark like the rows of teeth in a Great White's mouth. The traffic sounded fuzzy and dreamlike. Red lights from Chevie's, the bar opposite the cemetery's entrance, hung in the wet air and bled, like a fish fouled on a hook.

There was a shed in the far corner, spilling a pale rectangle of light on to the oldest parts of the graveyard. They shepherded Deal towards it. When he resisted, Roy put a hand on his arm and shook his head. A callow youth, a student perhaps, closed his book and shrugged on a Parka, left the shed without speaking. The padlock for the front gate was on a table, mottled with rust.

The five men stood in the shed, their breath turning to steam, which joined the vapour from their exertions. A heavy animal smell, all fear, muscle and testosterone, was as invasive as a sixth figure. The shed creaked. Rain whispered against the mildewed glass panes in the window.

'I want you to understand, Connie, that we're grateful to you for not . . . going public on anything you might have seen recently. I want you to know that we'll repay that loyalty. The fact you came out tonight, with your head full of snot, means something to us. Some people know about teamwork. How important it is. There're players staying in with their birds tonight. They'd rather have a curry, a fuck on the sofa and watch something on ITV



than get muddied up with us cunts. So you'll be . . . selected next week, if you can prove your fitness.'

Deal said, carefully, 'What *did* happen the other night?'

'We were dropping a player to the bench.'

Fives snorted laughter.

'You left him to die.'

'Oh no we didn't.'

Deal licked his lips. He felt his grip on the situation loosening. He didn't understand. He felt the way he had on the day he came home to find Carol and the boys gone. One of Alex's toys, a simple wooden jigsaw puzzle, was half completed on his bedroom floor. He had stood and stared at Alex's picture of Daddy on the wall until it grew dark, his mind unable to unfold beyond that mad scrawl of black crayon slashed through with red, for a mouth. It had been like looking into a mirror.

'What do you mean?' Deal said.

Roy said, 'We'll show you.' He sent his elbow into Fives' nose. The deep, crunching noise filled the shed. Deal thought he felt it vibrate in his chest. Fives staggered back, his hands on his face, trying to simultaneously stem the flow of blood and wipe it clear of his eyes so that he could see what was coming. He knew what was coming. He was saying something, trying to say something. Deal managed to wonder, through the rushing of emotions, how the word *no* was always ignored in the middle of violent acts. His own mouth was trying it on for size, but it wasn't impinging on Roy's intent.

'Roy,' he said, but his mouth had turned to dust.

Roy grabbed Fives' hair and hauled him through the door on to the path, grunting as his injured knee was forced to move in ways it oughtn't. Fives was now trying to say please, but the blood running down the back of his throat was spoiling the word.

'Hold him down,' Roy said. Cosgrove took one arm, Smithers the other. Each man knelt on a leg. Fives resembled a crucifixion without the wood. His chest heaved as he tried to struggle upright. Deal thought, *Cosgrove has lovely hair. I ought to grow mine out like that.* His legs were jittering so much he thought he would fall over.

Roy kicked Fives until the fight had gone from him. Then he disappeared into the shed and returned with a large roll of masking tape. He started winding it around Fives' shattered nose and mouth. Tiny red bubbles leaked from its edges; gaps that Roy assiduously plugged.

'Hold him, boys. He'll buck like fucking fury.'

He took out a stopwatch and did not look away from its dial for six minutes.

When they peeled off the tape and began trying to revive him—Roy going so far as to stamp on Fives' chest—Deal had to look away. His eyes fastened on a headstone picked out in tired yellow light from the shed. *Raymond Ives, 1939-1943, drowned aged 4 years.*

'Euan,' he whispered. 'Alex.'

Spluttering sounds. Vomiting. The ragged breath of someone whose brain



is powering that but precious little else.

Roy's breath at his ear, hot and filled with Wrigley's Extra. 'Death's too good for some cunts.'

Somebody was playing a song he recognised; old Radiohead, *I Can't*, it was called. It lanced him to think of his favourite band as rock stalwarts, already six albums into their career. He had happened across Steve Wright on Radio 2 a few days previously and was appalled to hear him refer to a Cure song from the 1980s as a Golden Oldie. But then, he supposed that back then, if he'd heard a song thus described from a similarly retarded span he'd have agreed with the DJ. Another love, Nirvana, were ten years finished. At least they were still influential. You got older, you felt the same as you did when you were in your teens; everything else that still looked or sounded new to you was ancient. Time was not a uniform concept. It did not behave fairly.

He bought a drink, unable to meet the barman's eyes, and took it over to the window. The gates to the cemetery were shut and padlocked now. He thought of his feet on the pavement tonight, as much to prevent him from thinking about what lay beating on the path inside.

Once, he had been a good runner. Fast. Back in the days when you used to run for no other reason than it felt good. He ran the 100 metres in a shade under 13.5 seconds when he was

twelve. He was nudging 11 seconds when he finished school. Some time in the twenty years between then and now, his ability had peaked and dropped off. A graph of his achievements would resemble a camel's hump. Running flat out, with the feeling that you could go a bit faster if you really wanted to try for it, was as exhilarating a feeling as any. Sprinting in the dark always felt as if you were beating your personal best. Sometimes it felt as if he had been doing nothing else.

He couldn't finish his drink. It tasted metallic. He left it on a table and went back out into the rain. There was a telephone box a couple of hundred yards to his left, by the junction with King Edward Street. He was moving towards it before he had fully thought out his intentions. He didn't make it half way before he noticed the dark shapes in cars parked along the Manchester Road, or in a window over the newsagent's, or loitering at the edge of a cul-de-sac's shadows. A man stepped out of the shop, crossed the road and stood in front of the door to the phone box. He felt like George Segal in *The Quiller Memorandum*.

*I've got a phone at home, you know, he wanted to yell. I've got a mobile by the bed.* But he knew it wasn't about access to telephones. It was a reminder. A warning. They were very gently bending him towards complicity.

He walked back to the Blackburne Arms and sat in the driver's seat for a long time before starting the engine. The rain had thickened and was

swarming across the windscreen. He wondered if Fives would drown.

The next training session was not for another two days, but the fields, though empty, seemed to hold the essence of the exertions that were regularly shown here. The rain had stopped. Smoke from damp Autumn fires on the allotments moved cinematically across the pitches and the cinder five-a-side area. There was the deep, organic smell of dead or dying leaves, and the occasional, illegal tang of burning plastic. Deal could just make out figures far off in the gloom, stalking through the rows of cabbage and cauliflower. He wondered what home life must be like for them, if they preferred to spend late hours out here. Would he have done the same, when things had grown so bad?

Though he was tired, and afraid, and unable to return home, Deal felt the call of this place in his calves and thighs. He got out of the car and breathed deep of the cold, acrid night. The fields were soft underfoot, but not sludgy: the grass kept its shape. The cindered section winked. He was suddenly struck with a strong sense of recognition for it, or something it contained, but he couldn't move beyond that surprise to identify what it might be. It was like sensing some shape in dense foliage, or almost grasping the secret image in a stereogram. It was like seeing a face from your youth and being unable to put a name to it.

He shrugged away this vague frustration and scanned the rest of the recreation ground. From this spot to the goalposts, just palely visible, was a hundred metres, give or take. He was suddenly back on the school field of his youth, the 400 metre circuit branded in the grass. They never had anything like blocks or spikes, but they had the explosive trigger of youth, extensor muscles that twitched readily, like the legs of grasshoppers.

Deal took off, trying to locate that dormant impulse. He pumped his legs hard, punched the air, as he had been coached. He tried to relax into the sprint, keep his head level, but all he could think about was Fives' mouth with its wet, red lipstick collapsing in on itself as he tried to remember how to breathe. He came to a standstill, a third of this personal time trial left to run, an invisible stopwatch running down.

He turned and the cinder pitch reached out into the dark, softly gleaming, the sense of something there to be determined now gone.

**C***arol? Is that you?*

He wakened into a hot, airless room. Sweat was sandwiched between his skin and the fleece that he had been wearing for so many hours. His hand still held the receiver from his dreams. He delved for the number he must have rung but it would not come to him. She never said hello when she picked up. It was always: *Carol speaking*. He won-

dered what he might have said to her in his dream, if he hadn't been interrupted by consciousness.

He got up and made his way to the thermostat, turned the heat down. It had been freezing when he let himself in. It was not yet light, but something unstable in the night's colour told him that dawn was not far away. He took a blistering shower, turned on the radio and made himself coffee.

He went out and bought newspapers. He read of a 20-year-old footballer for a top six Premiership side who, in the same sentence, pledged himself to his club but couldn't rule out a change of scene should the right offer come in. They were plucked from normality at such a young age, they never knew what it was like to fail, in a normal sense. Failure for them was not earning their weekly bonus. The extent of their cossetting was such that they didn't have to want for anything. They had an entourage to see to their every need. He imagined the kind of mental meltdown that would occur if one were to be left on a street corner without a map or a wallet. When did too much money become enough? Why did a multimillionaire need to agree to put his face to engine oil ads in the Far East for a seven figure sum?

Perhaps his psyche had fastened on to the intensifying focus of his need and was urging him to find closure, one way or another. From under his bed he dug out two shoeboxes containing letters and notes and photographs that he had stored away eighteen months pre-

viously. He believed he might never look at them again. But something had stopped him from throwing them away. Now, concretising his heart, he lifted the lids and went back in time to a point where he had met and fallen in love with Carol Matthews. He found letters he had both written to and received from her (of course, why would she want to keep his?). Initially their correspondence had been light, full of jokes and self-deprecation, offers of petty help, invitations to parties or films or drinks. A couple of months later, the letters increasing, their content became less inhibited. She wrote about what she liked him to do to her, about what she wanted them to do together in the near future. *I want to pour honey over your cock and balls and suck it off, I want you to fingerfuck me while I watch in a mirror. I want you to go down on me in the front row of the cinema. I want to film you ejaculating and then play it back over and over in slow motion while I bring myself off. How does that sound?*

He held the letters gently in his hands. Her florid, cursive script contained the innocent energy of a child. He liked the way she punctuated her sentences with little smiley faces, or laughing asides (tee-hee!). When she ran out of space, she continued up the sides of the page. Her marginalia was dotted with sketches of flowers or cats or, arrestingly, depictions of her own cunt with his name tattooed on the labia. *I love you* appeared for the first time. Her words, not his. She had

introduced that particular game and now she'd taken her ball home with her. Those words bounced back at him from the walls of the empty house. His erection would not subside.

One letter existed from the dawn of her first pregnancy, shortly before he moved in with her and they no longer needed to write to each other.

She wrote: *Darling Honeybum (I luv your bum, so soft and squidgey)—So hey, we're going to have a little Connie or Carol to love and take care of. Whoopee, but a bit scarey at the same time. Yes? What about marrying me and making me an honest woman? Not a shotgun wedding, though people would think it (baha!). Carol Deal. Quite a jolly name, I reckon. I love you so much it makes my heart (my hearts!!!) miss a beat. I can't wait till we are a famly and can spend more time together laughing and chating and changing nappies (aaaargh!!). I am happier than I have ever been in my life, and glad, so very glad, to be with you and ready to spend the rest of my days with you and the little one. What will it be? A boy or a girl? I've already made a list of names. I really like Eve for a girl, or Euan for a boy. What do you think? I won't be mad if you hate them, or prefer something else. I love you, teddy bear. I love you. I love you. All my love, Cxxx*

Where does all the love go? How does it change from all of that effusiveness to the sour, niggardly infolding that sent him away? It was like the feeling of indestructibility you felt as you trotted out on to the brilliant green pitch before a game, and the way it was steadily eroded as the goals flew in past

your goalkeeper, and the playing surface cut up, became an unplayable morass. You were liable to injure yourself on it if you carried on, but you always did. You always gave 110 per cent.

He was at work by eleven, despite feeling worse than on the day he played hooky. He evaded his work colleagues, not wanting to be engaged in talk of the weekend's results.

He worked diligently, missing lunch, only stopping at six for a cup of tea. His hands were bruised and his arms were heavily corded from the effort he had put into the repairs on the southbound track just north of Bank Quay station. He squinted along the parallel tracks to the point where perspective brought them together. The hot, sweet tea hurt the raw strip of his chest, but it was a good feeling. His mother had always given him tea when he had been upset, or sick, as a child. Drinking it infused him with warmth and hope. He felt crazily sure that if he walked these tracks to that ultimate point he would find them actually touching. He absorbed some strange comfort from the thought.

After a shower, and a late tea at the caff on Bridge Street, he decided against returning home and sat riffling through the pages of an address book stuffed in his glove compartment. Carol had said they should keep a copy of friends' and relatives' numbers to hand in case they ever needed to contact them while out in the car. Deal had thought it a dumb idea, but never got rid the book when they split up.

Now he trawled the scalloped edges of the index, all of them bent and grimy, except for the tab XYZ. One of them was grimier than most: F. He flipped to it, determined to track down his wife and work something out, even if it meant a divorce. At least that way he would be able to move forward. He would be able to see his boys.

The names were lined up neatly, some of them forgotten already to Deal. It encouraged him. Someone in this book would be of use to him, even if it took all night to make the calls.

Dave and Hannah Fleming. Ian Flint (plumber). Foy's (hair). Ray and Jean Farmer. Stewart Fentiman. Alice Fowler. Alice Fowler's mum. Roy.

It wasn't so much those three letters as the lack of a surname that jammed him back in his seat. In that moment he knew that Carol had been having an affair with him. It was almost funny that he found this more shocking than the possibility that she knew what Roy was doing in the evenings.

Disgusted, yet weirdly exhilarated, Deal flung the book into the back of the car. His hunt was over without a call needing to be made. She was with Roy. He felt perversely proud about this, at the same time as feeling his heart battered by cruel fists. This man was seeing his boys every day. He was playing with them, hugging them, putting them to sleep. He was their point of focus for what it meant to be a man. He was who they turned to when they were afraid.

He sat in the car, playing with the

keys (the key ring contained a stainless steel ingot bearing the brand name Viagra, Carol's little joke for his 30th birthday) not knowing what to do. He turned on the radio and listened for local news bulletins. When Graeme Fives' name was mentioned, he gave a start, although he had been waiting for just that. He was in a stable condition. Police wanted to talk to a man who had been seen in the area that night. They went on to describe Deal's running gear in alarming detail.

He switched off the radio and felt sweat oil the creases all over his body. He checked the street was empty and slid from his car. He took off his beanie and tossed it into a skip piled high with masonry from a renovation taking place in one of the terraced houses further along from him. Inside, he stripped and cut his training gear into small pieces. Then he dressed in jeans and a sweater, thought about shaving, about changing the look of his hair and decided against it. That would only bring attention from his neighbours, who had rarely seen him in any state other than tousled and stubbled. He left the house, cringing as the door slammed, realising how late it was, and set off at pace. Where to dump it? Some of it could go in dustbins both public and private, some of it in the canal, some of it scattered in fields. It was all saturated with his DNA, but it was the best he could do, beyond burning it, which he didn't want to do because again it would attract attention. And then he thought of the fires

burning in the allotments by the football pitches.

He left the car where it was and walked. It took a couple of hours, there and back. The allotments had been deserted, and rightly so at this Devil's hour, when people were sleeping, or dying. He used a garden fork leaning against a stack of rubber tyres, tucked the clothing into the smouldering heap of yesterday's conflagration. As he was leaving he saw one of the floods above the cinder training area blaze into life. A figure moved into the spot it created. It stood there for an age before beginning to run, up and down the cindered training zone, a hefty figure with a determined lean, favouring his left leg as he put in the miles.

When Deal got home, his clothes were full of the organic stink of burning vegetation and his mind couldn't shake off the bullish figure as it trained. He fell into bed and pulled the covers around his neck. Before sleep took him, he thought the snug feeling there was the arms of his boys pulling him tight, and he shouted out.

**T**raining. Seven-thirty. Traffic lights, Manchester Road. Heavy rain. His foot dipping the accelerator and relaxing. The engine complained. Why was he going? He was going because it was more dangerous to stay at home. He was going because this way he was closer to his wife and children. They were accessible, almost accessible, close enough for him to feel they might

still fill a hole in his life if he could only work out how to proceed. A police car to his right, visible through the dream shapes of rain on the glass. A police strobe ahead, a van shooting the lights. Heavy presence on these bleak streets. Somehow he knew it would not matter if there were a hundred policemen on patrol, a thousand. Roy was a ghost. He was above the law. Dip and relax. Dip and relax.

He parked his car in shadow, up against the wall of the sports club. Orange light fell from its windows, along with the ventilated fug of cigarette smoke, flat beer and cheap perfume. Laughter was muffled, as if in attempted concealment. He imagined badly rouged lips flattening against poor teeth. False nails rattling against thin tabletops ringed with Venn diagrams proscribing years of suffering and anxiety. Vodka and pineapple. Rum and black. Lager top, mate, and one for yourself. You had to enter the club to get to the changing room. He had done it before but now the thought of it seemed intolerable.

He waited until he was sure there were no other footballers approaching because he didn't want to walk with anybody. He didn't want to interact. He just wanted to play the game, to run the circuits and go home. Was it really only a week since he had arrived for the first time?

He carried his bag along the path to the club entrance. To his left, men were smoking on the crown green square, laying down jacks and chasing them

with ebony wooden bowls. He heard someone call out: 'Short as a carrot, Jack!'

Too right. Too fucking right.

He changed quickly, quietly, into gear he had found mouldering at the back of his wardrobe. There was nobody in the changing room from the night of Fives' relegation to the bench.

*Stable condition.* Death is a stable condition. I fancy some of that. Short as a carrot.

Black laughter shot from him, along with about half a pound of snot. Nobody noticed. He wiped his arms across his face and hurried outside.

They were waiting for him. The floods were on, brighter than he remembered them. The air above the cinder training area fizzed. He had to squint to make everyone out. Someone, Roy, was juggling a bright orange ball. It beat against the leather of his boots, staying clear of the floor, it seemed, by dint of sheer magic. Roy wasn't even watching it, his eyes were on Deal.

'Five a side,' Roy said. 'Me, Connie, Smithers, Cosgrove, Tann. Us lot against the rest of you dumb twats.'

Bibs were handed out. The sound of the harsh fabric as it scraped past Deal's ears made him flinch. He didn't want to be here. The strength was gone from his legs. He was tired beyond the meaning of the word.

The orange ball moved as if it were responding to beacons positioned on everybody's feet but his own. He chased it, and the opposition with

dogged determination, but it was fifteen minutes before he got a touch, and then it was a bad one: he gave the ball away.

'Connie!' Roy said. 'Get stuck in, you fucking fanny.'

He received the ball wide on the left and tried to take it past Marshy, but the ball was stolen easily off his toes. He attempted a volley and hit only fresh air. He went to head the ball and it mashed into his face. Blood filled his mouth. He thought they were attacking him, but the noise was laughter. He staggered off the cinder pitch and sat down on the touchline. He thought maybe his nose was broken; it was too painful to breathe through, but breathing through his mouth, the wet, sucking sounds he made, only reminded him of the other night.

'Are you coming back on, or fucking what?' Roy asked him.

Deal made to rise but dizziness planted him back down. More laughter. Through the haze of his watering eyes, and the unstable lighting, he watched the figures criss-cross before him. The orange ball developed a smeared tail, like a comet. Pain throbbed in his sinuses. Nobody was calling for the ball any more. They moved like magnets repelling each other, threading passes without looking up for support. It was beautiful. He realised, a moment before the lights were killed, that everybody was watching him while they played. He felt cold ripple up through him, displacing the pain.

'Time's up,' someone called, need-

lessly. The talk turned instantly to pints and women. Nine backs to him, treading towards the showers, steam rising off them like a threat. Roy came to him, hunkered down.

'You had a bad night tonight,' he said.

'No shit.'

'Something bothering you?'

Deal started laughing. He couldn't stop, even if he could have seen Roy's face, and any displeasure that rode it. Blood and saliva pooled in the folds of his bib like strange soup. And then tears joined it. Suddenly he was screaming: 'What do you want with me? What are you going to do with me?'

Roy's voice was maddeningly tranquil. 'You and me, let's have a run.'

'Fuck that,' Deal said, his fingers toying furiously with his wedding ring. 'I'm sick of this. Tell me what—'

'I'll tell you while we run. Come on.'

He began jogging on the spot until Deal had drawn himself to his feet. Then the two of them headed out along the twinkling cinder carpet. The only sound was their breathing, and the dusty crumbs as they were pulverised beneath their feet.

'I come here when I can't sleep,' Roy said. 'I always come here, rather than plodding the streets. Less dangerous.'

Deal felt like laughing again, but he was too tired. All at once, he just wanted Roy to get it over with. He decided he must force his hand. 'You're fucking my wife,' he said.

Roy seemed not to have heard him. 'I train all the time. I don't look like I do, but I'm fitter than a butcher's dog. I run all the time. Always running, that's me. Maybe more because if I don't the pain will catch up and I'll never be able to move again.'

'I want to see my boys,' Deal said.

'I thought you might run with us, if you know what I mean. There was something in you that I recognised. Something apart from everyone else. A knowledge. An experience. But at the same time, a loneliness. Someone who didn't fit in well, whose edges kept knocking against what was conventional.'

'Young boys should not be kept away from their father. You should understand that, even if Carol doesn't.'

The smell of the fires clinging to the wet air caused him to sneeze a gruel of blood and phlegm into the cinders.

'In the end,' Roy said softly, looking at him out of the corner of the eye, 'we return to the soil that produced us.'

Their feet crunching, pulverising the shards.

Deal said, as if through a dream: '*My boys.*'

Roy said: 'They are not your boys.'

Deal reckoned he might be able to escape if he vaulted the makeshift fencing around the allotments, but he stumbled and fell hard even as he was summoning the energy to put space between them. His mouth filled with dust. All he could taste was blood. A picture came to him of a delivery room bathed in sunshine. Euan's head



appearing, streaked with meconium. Deal's arms around Carol's neck, loving her, helping her, trying to help her in the amazing thing she was doing. Whispering his love, his encouragement, as Roy's son was born. On his knees, his face in the ashes, he saw how the crushed cinders looked like so many particles of bone. The smell of the fires carried a heavy, greased edge.

'She was mine first,' Roy said. 'A long time ago. She used to come here to watch me play when I was in my teens. You might have seen her too, you played here occasionally twenty years ago, like you said. We never married, but we've always been together. We've had time apart, lean periods, she married you. But we always . . . stayed in touch. And we've had two boys. Fine boys . . .'

'No,' Deal said, but the word was stifled at birth. He wanted to ask him where she was now, and Roy spared his breath.

'She left me,' he said. 'But I brought her home, where she belongs. She won't leave me again. And to press the point home, I've been catching up with every cunt who ever dipped his nib in her inkwell since then. A fair few, I can tell you. Fivesy was the latest. She can read all about them, if I hold the newspaper steady over her face.'

'You're mad,' Deal said.

'No. Not mad. I don't get mad. I get even.'

Figures growing, approaching out of the smog that enveloped the allotments.

Deal said, 'I don't want to end up like Fives.' He was afraid that Roy had not heard. But then, as the figures came closer, and crowded out the last of the light, Roy leaned in to him.

'Don't worry,' he said, and his smell was her smell, tumbling over him as it had at the start, when she smiled up at him and said yes. Roy said: 'Don't worry. You deserve better than that.'



**S**ome nights you can hear screams rising up from The Eyes, the abattoir on New Cut Lane. Those screams belong to the animals queuing up to be slaughtered there. Well, most of them do . . .

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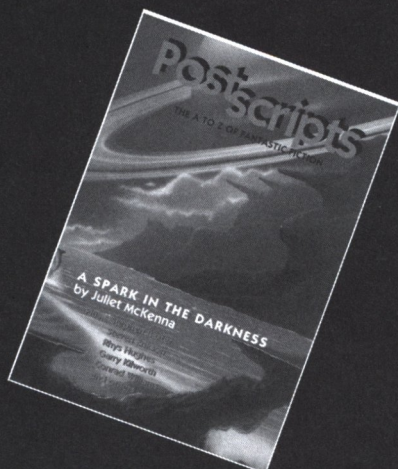
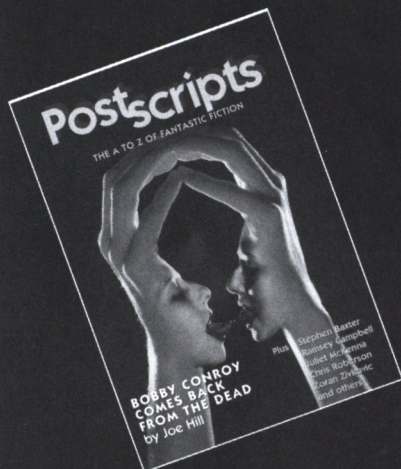
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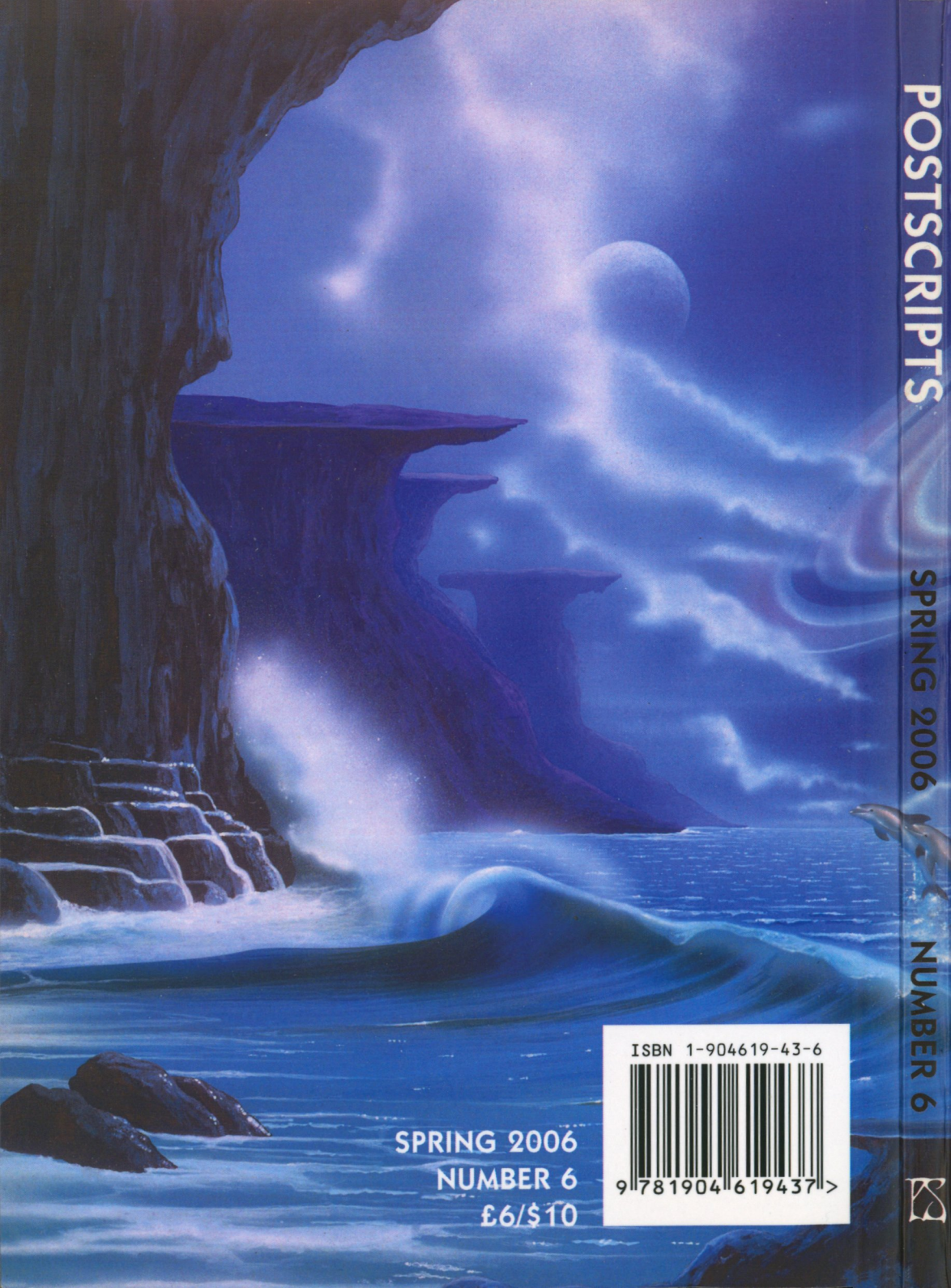




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