

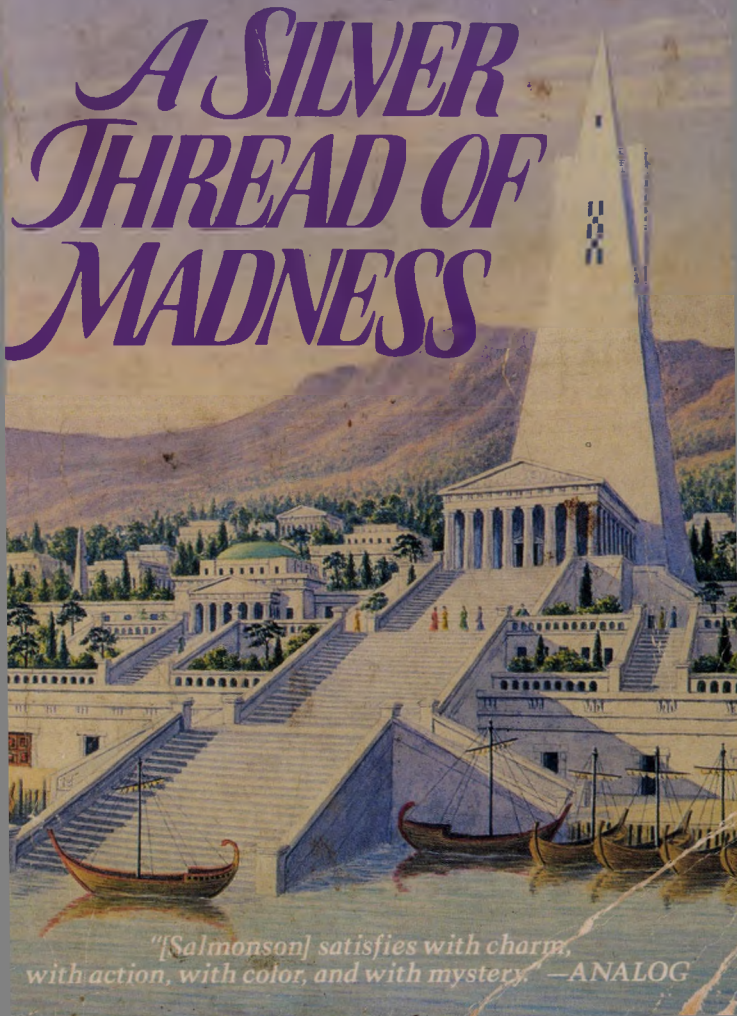
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TIMELESS TALES OF BEAUTY, TERROR, AND WONDER

By the Author of the *Tomoe Gozen* Saga

JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON

A SILVER THREAD OF MADNESS



*"[Salmonson] satisfies with charm,
with action, with color, and with mystery." —ANALOG*

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A SILVER THREAD OF MADNESS

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SAMURAI FUGUE

She'd been watching *Sword of Doom* when she had a revelation. The film ended with a suddenly frozen frame, the warrior caught in eternal combat. But to Pim it seemed that the samurai hadn't stopped at all, that the film was still going on and on and on, and the cruel hero was still killing, and killing, and killing—and she was mesmerized by the gory beauty of his every motion. The theater's janitor poked her in the shoulder and asked, "Are you asleep, miss?"

"Shh!" said Pim sharply. "I'm watching the movie."

"But, but, it's been over for half an hour . . ."

Still she wouldn't move . . .



PRAISE FOR JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON'S TOMOE GOZEN SAGA:

"Striking . . . will fascinate a wide variety of readers!"

—*Library Journal*

"There is enough action here to fill a score of books . . . Salmonson does an excellent job!"

—*Science Fiction Chronicle*

"Unusual . . . a blend of lyricism and violence."

—*New York Daily News*

"For those who enjoy magic and adventure, it is all here!"

—*Seattle Gay News*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS are due Orson Scott Card, who included "Eagle-Worm" in his anthology *Dragon of Light* (Ace, 1980). Thanks also to Victoria Schochet and John Silbersack for giving "Lincoy's Journey" its debut in *The Berkley Showcase III* (Berkley, 1981), and Terry Carr for selecting it for *Fantasy Annual V* (Timescape, 1982). "A Child of Earth and Hell" had its first appearance in *The Berkley Showcase V* (Berkley, 1982) edited by Victoria Schochet and Melissa Ann Singer. Scott Edelman has my gratitude for giving "Time-Slit Through a Rice Paper Window" its first audience in *Last Wave* volume 3 (1984). Dennis Mallonee and Nick Smith included "The Romance of Tcheska and Provetsko" in *Fantasy Book* (1984). "Samurai Fugue" appeared in *Worlds of If* (1986). I had the luck to be among the contributors to the British Fantasy Award-winning seventh issue of John Martin's *Anduril* (1976), with "Stomping Grounds of the Gods," which has not previously appeared in America. Susan Schwartz included "The Harmonious Battle" in *Hecate's Cauldron* (DAW, 1983). The other stories in this collection appear here for the first time. The collection's proem "Book Monster" was first published in the little-magazine *Random Weirdness* in 1984, and was reprinted in Wilum Pugmire's *Tales of Lovecraftian Horror* in 1988.

DEDICATORY NOTE

The great art of modern literature is to be found all but exclusively in the short story, despite that it is commercially the poor cousin of the novel. Those authors who have forsaken the short story for the less competitive and monetarily greener pastures of the novel have by and large abandoned art.

As with many authors, then, I consider my finest writings to be those which have also been least circulated: the short stories. To what individuals can one dedicate what she believes her best work? This has been my most difficult book for which to devise an appropriate dedication. I thought first of South American, French, German, Italian, and Russian authors, two-thirds of whom aren't alive today. I thought of nineteenth-century British and American giants. I thought of a handful of brilliant newcomers who in a few more years will have their brilliance beaten out of them or will cease writing altogether.

Then I remembered colleagues who, like myself, have struck a balance of commerce and art, novels and short stories, categorizing our creative psyche to such a degree that our egos have been rendered "vertically divided." That is, we have become schizophrenic.

I thought of

JANE YOLEN and MICHAEL BISHOP

for whom I have a degree of fondness and admiration reserved chiefly for those who are the most human, artistic, and mad.

—Jessica Amanda Salmonson
Seattle



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PROEM

BOOK MONSTER

I read the forbidden book
and joined the mad—
I gleaned deadly knowledge
from beyond the page.
I now believe profoundly
in the wonderful copulation
of demons and saints.

I swam the wine-red sea.
I observed the drifting dead.
I charged my brilliant mind
with darkness.

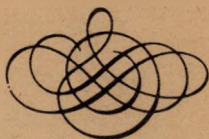
I climbed the hill of skulls.
I lost this finger
Not to bitter cold
But bitter jaws.
I placed my own skull
upon the apex
of humanity's deceptions.

I sipped poison,
Dining with the laughing lords,
Then slept beneath the
lids of sarcophagi
engraved with faces
nobler than mine.

I read the forbidden book
and joined the mad.
I now believe profoundly
in the wonderful copulation
of demons and saints.

PART I

SIX LEGENDS



*“Or is true wisdom in the underworld,
Tangled and gnarled as are the roots of trees?”*

—Abbie Findlay Potts

Lincoy's Journey



Lincoy with almond eyes and hair like a midnight fountain was in her seventh year when first she tasted death. Some of it was sweet, but most of it was fearful, and it was most assuredly a long and perilous journey for one so tiny and young.

It was not purposely that Lincoy had wandered so far from school. The wild grapes had just come to ripeness along the vine-grown banks of the canal, and she quickly learned that the biggest and the bluest grapes amid the clusters were sweet and succulent. She began to force her way through the underbrush, working her way further and further from the school, with always the grapes ahead seeming bigger and bluer than the ones growing where she was picking. So on she went along the canal, losing all track of time and distance, foraging for the fruit, stuffing all she could into her mouth and the rest into the large front pocket of her long, drab dress.

So far had she ventured that she did not hear the school bell ring or see all the other children run back to class. She was enthralled with the nectar-rich marble-sized prizes at her fingertips. Never in young Lincoy's recollection had she beheld manna in such abundance simply hanging on vines along the canal. Soon both her cheeks and her pocket were bulging; both her hands and her face were stained a vivid purple.

It was as though the fruit were scattered along the right places especially to lead Lincoy to her death.

When finally there were no more grapes to be had, except little sour ones, Lincoy sat amid the vines and greenery feeling disheartened that there was nothing left to pick. She sat there in the sun-spattered shade, lower lip protruding, head turning back and forth, searching for just one more ripe, blue treat. Her pocket was filled to overflowing, yet it somehow seemed important to find just one more.

Greed, however minor, is seldom worth a man's undoing. This is equally true for a young child; and often lessons are not

kindly taught. There were no more grapes worth having, but there was another fruit nearly identical in coloration, smaller in size, which grew near the ground rather than on vines. It was not a berry common to the country, but sometimes the gentle current of the canal brought seeds from distant and strange lands and deposited them where they did not belong. The sight of these berries delighted Lincoy, for they were even bluer than the grapes. She picked all there were—one small handful—and having no more room in her pocket, she ate them. Then she was well satisfied and decided to head back.

Being so small and inexperienced, she became lost with great rapidity. Had she stayed in sight of the canal and followed it back the way she came, she could not have ended up anywhere but at the school. But with no grapes to make threading through the undergrowth worth the effort, Lincoy forged away from the canal, out of the heavy growth, and severed herself from the only landmark recognizable to her. It is a fact that Lincoy was a child with little fear and much trust, especially in Buddha, and she never considered the possibility that she was going the wrong way. She just walked on and on, confident that eventually she would end up either home or at school.

Not long after, she grew irresistibly sleepy, so she looked around for a quiet spot. The ground was everywhere hard, stony, or covered with coarse weeds, so she fought her tiredness a short while.

For a spell she walked on with eyelids more often closed than open. She fell various times and squashed her grapes in the process so that the front of her dress was all stained as with purple ink. She eventually stumbled onto a path which led up a hill, and though her tired legs would rather have gone down a hill than up one, there was no turning the path around, so she headed up, directly finding a rustic bench constructed of a split log. Upon this bench she lay down to sleep.

When the sun was low, Lincoy still lay there, unmoving except to shake with a chill. Her face was wet with fevered perspiration. Once she opened her eyes and saw a man dressed in yellow, but it was much pleasanter to sleep than to ask who are you.

It was a Buddhist monk who had come down the hillside and found the girl lying there ill. He picked her up in his arms and took her on up through the forest and into the temple where he and other monks cared for her and tried to awaken her enough

to get her to take curative herbs. She was delirious that night and would not take food or water, much less the herbs which were bitter.

Lincroy's death was not sudden, and for a while the next morning it seemed as though she would be all right. She awoke having no idea where she was. But she was not a child easily made afraid. She found herself in a large room where she had never been before, and she was alone, but that was not in itself cause for alarm.

She rose from the wooden pallet and went exploring through the temple, searching for something to play with. The temple was of goodly size, much of it underground, and though it was occupied by many Buddhists, Lincroy passed no one in the halls and found no one in the rooms she inspected. In one room were shelves stacked with many books and scrolls. In another room were many beautiful vases and carvings of jade and silkstone. In several rooms there were coffins and urns, and in one of these rooms Lincroy spied a skeleton lying in its entirety on a wooden pallet very similar to the one she had slept upon. The bones were very dusty, and Lincroy took this to mean nobody cared about them. So in her innocence and lack of fear, Lincroy took away the grinning skull to play with. She found her way back to the room she had been asleep in and sat down upon the floor to play with her new-found possession.

In a few minutes the same shaven-headed man in yellow who had found her the day before, and who Lincroy remembered only as a vague and not unpleasant dream, came in and saw her with her small arm shoved up inside the hollow of the skull. He was instantly horrified, but properly composed himself before approaching her.

He told her in a gentle but grave tone that she must give him the skull.

To Lincroy's reasoning, this seemed an unfair request. This was her only plaything, one that she had searched hard for and hauled back herself, and it was a much more interesting toy than she had ever had before, with all its white teeth and funny holes for nose and eyes and its hinged jaw; and whoever had it before didn't even bother to clean it, so they must not have wanted it. She did not wish to part with it and held it near.

"No," she told him bluntly. "It is mine."

"It is not yours," the monk corrected. "It belongs to another."

They argued a while in quiet tones until the monk decided simply to take it away. But her arm was still half inside the skull which gave Lincoy an edge in keeping it, and the monk stepped away for fear their struggling over it would cause the skull to be broken.

"Very well," he finally agreed, changing his strategy. "It is yours. But right now is not the time to play. It is the time to eat. So you must put your toy away."

Lincoy, though obstinate about parting with something she honestly believed was hers, was not a disrespectful or disobedient child. So when she was told it was not the time to play she asked where she was supposed to put the skull. The monk had a shoulder pouch hanging at his side and he opened it saying, "You may keep it here."

Immediately suspicious, Lincoy hesitated and asked, "Are you going to throw it away?"

"I promise I won't throw it away."

And so Lincoy put the skull into the monk's pouch. She never knew what a terrible deed it was to upset the bones of the dead priests who were kept in the temple, and it was not in the monk's heart to reprimand her. But he was very much afraid for her after that, and since he did not know what Lincoy had eaten the day before, he blamed all that happened to her afterward upon the skull.

All morning long she seemed healthy. She told the monks her name, and they sent a messenger to seek her parents. But she would not eat or drink, and all the monks thought this strange, for always people should be very hungry after a night of fever. But one monk did not find it strange. He knew that spirits did not take nourishment, and he believed the girl was possessed by the spirit of the priest whose bones she had unsettled.

By the time the sun approached its zenith, Lincoy once again felt weak and drowsy, and she lay down on the floor to fall fast asleep. When her father came, neither he nor the monks could arouse her, and this greatly disturbed her father.

The monk who had found her on the path and later with the skull took Lincoy's father aside and whispered so none else could hear how his daughter was now possessed and he must take her away from the temple and tell no one where she had been. This, Lincoy's father did.

Lincoy lay in sickness all the rest of the day and most of the next, never once stirring during that period. Her family, from

oldest grandfather to youngest brother, spent all the lighted hours working among the ripening crops, so Lincroy was alone when finally she woke.

She was so weak she could not raise her arms, and only with greatest effort did she turn her head to see out the open door. Her throat was so painfully dry she could not call out.

The only one to look in on her was her wild-haired brother of three years. When she saw him enter, she managed with much difficulty to rasp out a small request. "Give me something."

"Give you what?" the little boy inquired, moving near the bed.

She tried to say specifically that she wanted water, but she could make no other sound. The boy ran quickly into another room and returned with a piece of fruit which he put into her mouth. Lincroy could not swallow it, and it had a terrible taste to her. She tried to move her tongue to get the thing out of her mouth, but that simple task seemed inordinately toilsome. Having the fruit thus clogging her mouth became the center of her attention, and it seemed insidious having it stuck there. She despaired over it; but she was too dehydrated even to cry.

It was at that precise moment that she died. Her little brother returned to his chores and only when the entire family returned to the house to eat did they find Lincroy dead. Her brother admitted it was he who had put the food into her mouth, but he thought she had only gone back to sleep afterward. It was good. Lincroy's mother had said, that she had taken at least a small portion of nourishment before death, for it would give her ghost strength for the journey into the next life. Then all wept, and messengers were sent to those of the family who had moved away from the farm, telling them that a funeral was to be prepared.

To Lincroy it did not seem that she had died. It seemed instead that she had awakened all alone and, no longer feeling weak and tired, left the house to search for her father and mother. Outside, they were nowhere to be found, so she started down the cart-rutted, dusty road. The world looked as it had always looked, except there were no people tending the farms, no crickets calling from the brown grasses, no colorful birds singing and flitting in the trees and bamboo.

The road brought her to the canal. Usually it was busy with fishermen, houseboats, and occasionally a ship or two from lands

near and far. But today there was only a single junk adrift in the quiet mirror waters, and what a junk it was!

It sported a huge, square sail of rice paper more colorfully printed than the grandest kite ever flown. And, in truth, the junk sailed so smoothly that it seemed more to fly as would a kite than to float. The hull was carved with dragons and lesser animals, and standing in the prow was a woman of unsurpassed beauty.

As the junk approached the bank, Lincoy stood in awe of the lady's beauty. She was tall, shapely slender, dressed in an A Dai gown of shimmering gold, and upon her head she wore a tall, pointed adornment. Her small, perfect hands were held in prayer between her breasts and she stood like a perfect statue. Her wide, slanted eyes staring straight into those of Lincoy.

There was not the slightest ripple upon the still waters, nor the gentlest breeze in the air. With neither current nor wind, Lincoy was at a loss to guess what powered the junk. As though of its own accord, the junk stopped just short of the bank and brought one side around to make boarding easy. Lincoy knew she was welcome to ride the vessel, but for some reason she hesitated.

"Are you not ready to come with me?" asked the pretty golden lady, her eyes like black suns, her face the loathing of jealous empresses.

Lincoy could not think what to answer, so she silently climbed into the junk, and it began to sail down the canal toward the setting sun. She wondered where the golden lady might take her for it was Lincoy's childhood belief that the canal led everywhere in all the world. On and on the boat sailed, and finally Lincoy broke the silence to ask about the destination.

The golden lady answered mysteriously, "To a land very near yet very far."

Hours seemed to have gone by, but always the sun remained at the same point at the end of the waterway, as if the junk were following it around and around the world, giving it no chance to set. Or could it be that time had stood still in the strange little ship? Were these hours or eons that were going by?

They passed through lands Lincoy had never heard tell of from parents or teachers. Unfamiliar plants grew along the shores, and unrecognized mountain peaks were visible far away. Later the shores turned into endless barren desert. And still later the canal took them between two stone-faced cliffs that rose into infinity.

When wonders came so close together, they soon ceased to maze Lincoy, and she remembered that she had not eaten since the day she found the grapes. "I am hungry," she said.

"Soon you will never have to be hungry again."

After a short term of silent thought, Lincoy stated, "I am thirsty."

"Soon you will have no need of water."

Lastly Lincoy proclaimed, "I need a toilet."

Against this the beautiful lady could not argue, so the junk beached the shore and Lincoy climbed out. But she did not need toilet at all. She was thinking only of her father and mother, and she began to run back along the way the junk had brought her.

At this time, Lincoy awoke in her coffin. She had never been there before and did not recognize it, else she might have been more afraid. As it was, she was only confused. The preparation for burial consisted of the binding of the ankles, of the knees, of the waist. The upper arms were bound to the sides and the forearms were bent above the chest, with the wrists tied together and the hands in prayer. Inside her praying hands was placed a yellow lotus.

Lincoy could not move her jaw to cry out, for her whole mouth was stiff and immobile. She could not open her eyes, for they were encrusted and stuck shut. Being properly bound for burial, she could not have kicked even had she the strength. She did manage to rock from side to side, banging her elbows on the coffin floor, but it did not make much of a sound.

All around the outside of the coffin had been placed large guavas, for guavas have the power to absorb terrible smells and were always kept around the unburied dead. The only reason Lincoy was not yet placed below the ground was that her oldest sister in another village was ill, and the family wanted to wait for her before they began the ritual bathing; for each among the family should help purify the body before setting it into the land.

Lincoy's grandfather came into the room with fresh guavas, for they had to be changed every day in such a warm climate. He picked up all the fruit of the day before and replaced them with new. His old age had robbed him of much of his ability to hear, so the dull thudding from within the small coffin went unheard. But he was not left without clues. On his way across the farmland with his bundle of old guavas to throw away, he dropped one and it burst open.

As all know, when a guava is used to absorb the smell of the dead, to burst one open is to release all that odor, and it is scent many times worse than rotten pheasant eggs.

So the old man cursed his clumsiness and bent to pick up the dropped fruit. To his surprise, it did not smell at all, and he thought this very odd indeed.

Meanwhile, Lincoy had been captured by the beautiful lac in gold and taken back to the junk. "You mustn't do that again!" Lincoy was scolded. She cried the longest while, but eventually forgot her tears and looked out at the wonders unfolding before and below her.

First the waters of the canal turned a rich sky blue, then warm sun yellow, and as they drifted along, the waters turned beautiful grassy green, and then bright red, and then orange and every other color imaginable. It was a grand sight unlike any other in Lincoy's experience, and she could not lift her eyes from the intensity of the colors as the spectrum flashed back and forth in its indescribable splendor.

All the while the sun led the way.

When Lincoy managed to raise her eyes from the painted waters, she discovered that the shore was not so friendly. Bamboo had grown dense, and she could see that if she tried to escape again, she would never survive that forest. Many of the bamboo limbs and shoots were broken, beveled, and sharp. A person would quickly be impaled if an attempt were made to run through there.

And it became worse. The bamboo knives grew more and more plentiful and began to reach out over the canal to form a tunnel. Lincoy was forced to lie flat on her back in the bottom of the junk to escape being poked and scratched. But the sharp spikes and stalks turned aside from the golden lady, who still stood straight and tall at the prow, and even the paper sail was not torn.

It had been decided that if Lincoy's sister had not arrived on the morrow, they would proceed with the burial without her. But they did not have to delay that one extra day, because the older sister was nearly home even as the decision was being made.

Several shaven-headed monks in yellow were in attendance for the ceremonial bathing, as well as a Buddhist priest and a great gathering of friends and relatives, plus a few mild acquaintances who had nothing better to do that day. Lincoy's father

removed his daughter from the casket, and the casket was taken away to be used by others in the family when they died, for poor people could scarcely afford to bury caskets with bodies.

Many tears were being shed and many people wore solemn faces while the priest spoke over the dead girl. But the old grandfather was not paying attention. He slipped to where the casket had been sitting and plucked up one of the guavas. He purposely broke it open and sniffed of it.

"She is not dead!" he cried out, interrupting the priest's words.

"What do you say, old one?" the priest asked.

"That she is not dead! She has lain here for seven days but her flesh does not melt. And smell this fruit! It is still good enough to eat!" And when he said this, he took a big bite out of the casket guava, letting the pulp and juice drip down his chin. This made the gathering gasp, for it would seem no less vile to bite into a dead buffalo crawling with maggots than eat a guava which had been used to absorb the scent of death.

While the priest smelled the pulp in some surprise, Lincot's father returned to his little daughter's side. He listened at her chest, felt for a heartbeat at her temple, then behind her ear. Her body was cold and there was no life in it to be found.

"Get me string and cotton!" he commanded, and Lincot's mother quickly obeyed. With everyone standing around in silent expectation, Lincot's father held a string with a cotton ball tied to it before Lincot's lips and nose. If she breathed but slightly, the ball would swing. Her father held his arm steady half an hour, an hour, one hour and a half, two hours. They were a patient people who stood around, and they did not lose interest in the silent ordeal. Every eye remained riveted to the cotton ball, and all were careful not to breathe in that direction.

At long, long last the father took his aching arm away and, shoulders sagging, he turned and assured the rest, "She is dead."

Then, Lincot was filled with a feeling of despondency. The golden lady would not talk to her as they passed through the Dark Land, and this increased Lincot's inner loneliness. She felt more sure than ever that she would see her family never again.

Despite her fearlessness, this part of the journey was particularly terrorizing. The sun still glowed at the mouth of the canal, but its light seemed not to shine on this shadowed land. The

canal had become more like a narrow channel through a mist swamp, and on either side of the channel red eyes could be seen blinking in the black shadows of giant bog trees. Hisses, slitherings, splashes, muted groans, and even sinister chuckling were the sounds that filled her ears.

Lincoy looked with moist eyes at the tall woman and admitted, "I am afraid."

"This is the last land we must pass through," the golden lady answered in her usual mystical manner. "Then you will never again be afraid."

When she heard it said that this was the last land they would pass through, Lincoy knew with full certainty that she was never going home, and her depression increased tenfold with this knowing. She cried hardest then, but without whimpering or even a slight snuffle, for she did not want the golden lady to hear her.

She forgot all about the monsters in the dark. All she could think about was how greatly she missed her father and mother. All other fears were overcome, and Lincoy feared only that this was her last and only chance to return to her home. In a burst of blind courage, she leapt over the side of the junk, scrambled for the mucky shore, and climbed out of the dirty waters. Her legs sank knee-deep in the mud, making running next to impossible. Still, Lincoy ran.

The golden lady could only watch in sadness and pity and call out twice for Lincoy to come back. She could not run and bring the girl back this time, for this was a land even the golden lady feared to enter.

Behind her, Lincoy heard the sound of cruel laughter and when she looked over her shoulder, she saw two hairy men with buffalo tails and horns chasing after her with forked spears.

She tried to run faster, but it seemed as though a spell slowed her pace. Like a magic rope: the harder one struggles to escape it, the tighter the rope becomes. The faster she tried to go, the heavier her feet became.

Her heart felt as though it might pound out of her chest. She feared to look back again, for she knew without checking that the devil men were about to grab her. Her legs sank further and further into the stinking swamp filth until she could not raise them up one more time. So she closed her eyes and took hold of a bog tree's trunk and with tears flowing she cried out, "Buddha, Buddha, Buddha! Help me! Help me!"

Then she felt a strong, powerful arm sweep around her and snatch her out of the mud. The hideous laughter suddenly ceased and when she opened her eyes, Lincroy was sitting in Buddha's lap as he sat in lotus, smiling down at her and washing away all her fears.

One by one, the family of Lincroy purified her body. A bowl of water was set by her supine form, and each person wetted his or her hands and cleansed the dead girl's legs or thighs or belly or breast or neck or face.

Many wet hands ran over her flesh, one after the other, so that badly needed moisture was being absorbed into her dehydrated body. The friction warmed her cold skin. The massaging renewed the circulation of her stilled blood.

Yellow-clad monks stood behind her with bald heads bowed. Incense trailed through the room. And those who had not yet helped wash the body awaited their turn. When Lincroy's grandfather began to gently wet her face with water, he saw her eyes open a trifle. He froze, looking down at her, his hands still on her cheeks. Maybe, he thought, his hands had caused her eyes to open. He had already made a fool of himself once during the ceremony, and he wondered if there was any wisdom in alarming the gathering all over again.

He concluded in that instant of thought he could only be twice the fool he had already proven himself, so he cried out again, "She is alive!"

Of course nobody gave much credence to what by now could be considered the senile ravings of a mournful old man, but no one dared show disrespect to one of such years. Besides, Lincroy's father wanted very much to believe that the impossible was the fact, and once again he moved into activity.

He gently moved his old father aside and whispered, "Get me a cup of water," and when it was delivered, he poured it down his daughter's throat until it came up her nose.

Then he began to remove the funeral bindings from her ankles, knees, thighs, and arms. The dry, brittle lotus in her bound hands fell and crumbled on the floor. There was minor protest, but when even the priest shushed them, Lincroy's father continued to untie her. He sat her up and she was limp as a rag doll, all the water spilling out from between her teeth and from her nostrils.

The gathering watched with varying secret thoughts, but said

nothing. Her father rubbed her arms and legs all over, and was as persistent in this maneuver as he had been with the cotton ball.

From Lincoy's dry throat came three words, spoken so softly and with lips so unmoving that only her father, grandfather, mother and three of the monks who stood directly behind her heard what she said.

"Give me water," was her whispered request.

When these words were spoken by the presumed dead girl, two of the monks ran out of the house and did not stop until they were safe in their temple. The remaining monk was the one who had found her the first day of her illness, and he only smiled as though with knowing relief. Lincoy's mother stood gawking with mouth open while her husband rubbed Lincoy's flesh more vigorously. The grandfather began to jump and halloo and grab and hug the other people, who were either amazed beyond reaction or as yet uncertain what was going on.

It was many days before Lincoy regained the strength to stand alone, but she could speak within the hour, and she wanted to know: "What were you doing with me?"

"You were dead," her father told her. "We were going to bury you. And we would have, too, if your sister had not arrived so late."

"Who told you I died?" the little girl demanded in protest. "I did not die! I only went to sleep!"

"No one goes to sleep for seven days," her father disagreed.

Lincoy persisted, "I did not sleep for seven days! I got up and went to the canal. A golden lady took me on a river of many colors. Buddha—he brought me back."

Her father could only smile at such childhood fancy and hug her tightly as he did. But there was one thing he could not dispute: Buddha had brought her back.

The Romance of Tcheska and Provetsko



Provetsko came to the knoll where they had often met before. They stood face to face and she asked, "You're leaving. It's so?" He nodded. There was a solemn look about him, in his posture, in his eyes. He was tall, broad of shoulder, lean of hip and waist. His hair was long and brown and soft. He was too young for a true beard, but a feathery sort of moustache had gotten started, and he was no more a boy. Nor was Tcheska a girl. She was round-shouldered and round-hipped, and her face was round, and even the toes of her feet were like two rows of little fleshy bulbs. Pudgy-toed-Tcheska. He'd called her that when they were little.

She chewed her lower lip as she gazed up at him. He could tell she was hurt and angry; but as always, she was too calm and rational for sharp words or crying. "We were betrothed, Provetsko," she said, the tear not falling, her tone just shy of accusation.

"By whose words were we betrothed?" he asked, trying to sound gentle, meaning no insult. "Not by my decision, Tcheska, dear as you are to me."

She reached toward his hands and touched them. He looked at their fingers half-united, her pudgy fingers soft and caressing, lost against the hugeness of his own hands.

"You have been my only friend," said Provetsko. "We have fished these streams and climbed these trees together. I knew nothing of my parents' plans."

"Nor I mine," she said. "But I was glad when I learned. Am I so plain, Provetsko? Would I be such a poor wife?"

"Ah, no, Tcheska. You are strong enough to work beside a man in the fields. Your breasts are heavy though you're young, and your hips are wide . . . surely you will bear a man sons and

daughters as strong as their sweet mother. But I have never thought of you in this way, Tcheska. You have been my friend."

"As you said," she replied, pulling her hands away and looking another direction. "Are husband and wife not friends, then?"

"I am sure they are," he said. "I hope they are." He was lost for words. "But . . ."

"Yes. But."

"I . . ."

"What a towering man you've become, Provetsko!" She looked at him in the face again, and she was smiling, but the tear had fallen at last. "You were meant to be a warrior, not a farmer, is it so?"

"I would not like to learn to kill."

"But you leave to seek adventure."

"To see a city," he said, shrugging awkwardly, feeling stupid. "I'll return someday, don't you think so? Perhaps sooner than either of us know."

"I could wait for you. I could go with you."

"No."

"No," she said. "Your adventures must be free. They will include the arms of finer wenches than myself, yes?" She laughed, but he could not detect the bitterness which might have been expected. "Lithe girls," she said, "built for sport, not families. Girls with the skill of harpists in their hands, fingers like long-legged spiders plucking out the tunes of a web." She hid her short fingers and her round hands in a tangle of shawl.

"I do find you attractive," said Provetsko. "No better bride could be found in all the countryside, I swear."

"Oh, but what a foolish thing I'd be in paint and bangles, eh? I know. I know. You are too beautiful a man to be satisfied with some peasant girl."

"We are all peasants, Tcheska. My father. My mother. Me."

"But you're not," she said, looking at him earnestly. "Can't you see? You've dreamed since you were small. You taught me about dreaming. It is unbecoming of us to dream. We must grow things, that is all; we must be practical. You're not like the rest; and despite the dreams we shared as children, I've grown comfortable with life the way it is. I like to see things grow, to watch the seasons. I would like to have children and watch them grow as well. But you, Provetsko, ah, you! Your eyes wander yet. Your attention never lingers."

"I'm sorry, Tcheska."

He was ashamed.

"I am, too," she said. She unlocked her necklace, removed it from about her neck, and placed it in one of his hands, saying, "I won't say that I'll wait for you to change your feelings. If you do return, I may already have many children by some other man. Nor will I pine for you, for I am as much a realist as I am sentimental. But I want you to have this. My grandmother was a gypsy, as you've heard, before my grandfather tamed her. This star amulet belonged to her. It won't bind you to me; it's not that kind of magic. But it will be luck for you. If life ever sours, if adventures pale, it may help you in some way."

"You've had it always . . ." He was overwhelmed, thinking it too much to accept as a good-bye.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I am fortunate to have something meaningful to give you, something more than a toy bought at a fair. I won't regret your having it. Even if my love falls to another man, yet shall you be a memory worth recalling—a memory of youth, of freedom, of dreams."

She helped him lock the chain around his neck. The amulet, a simple metallic star with four points, sat at the hollow of his throat.

"It's not girlish, is it?" he asked, touching it where it hung.

"Perhaps a bit," she said. "People will make more of it than it is. They will think it a memento of lost love."

Now she was no longer melancholy, and the humor in her tone was genuine. Provetsko said, "Thank you, Tcheska. Thank you for not making it difficult to leave."

"Put it down to foolishness on my part," she said, her small lips smiling as wide as they could manage in her moon-face fringed with curls. "I should make you feel too bad to go, if I were wiser."

"But you're too wise for that," he said.

And that is as much of their last meeting as Provetsko could recall. The years had passed like water along the stream beds, carrying him to large rivers and through dangerous gorges. He never did become a warrior, never wanted to be one; but his size and calm demeanor made him the Prince of Bluffs when he started out. In time he met the manager of a sort of traveling circus, and was estimated just the sort to be a wrestler.

Thus he became a wrestler wandering from town to town and land to land, constantly in the company of jugglers and animal

tamers and actresses and acrobats. Because he was big, and due to his physical beauty, and the titillating fact that wrestlers practiced their art in the nude, Provetsko became the troupe's star, famous everywhere they traveled.

He liked to think his fame might have echoed as far away as the village of his birth, so that his mother and father and dear Tcheska knew that he was well, and believed that he was happy.

He believed himself happy for a while. There was wine and there was laughter and constant companionship. Everywhere he traveled, women admired him, and he knew many of them in passing, women of all types and sizes and smells. It was a long time before he sensed that he wasn't happy.

It was a rule that he not drink before a match, but new friends he met in a village baited him away from the protection of his fellow travelers. They bought him a lot of wine, and hardly did he hear them whisper about his opponent who spent that same day and night in training. Provetsko awoke the next morning with a sorry head and clouded vision.

His challenger was a rude-looking fellow, a warrior in fact, though not a young one. The fellow might be skilled with spear or sword, but stripped of armor and weapons, men were like unto equals. It meant nothing to Provetsko that the fellow had survived a score of bloody battles and was something of a local legend, a hero, the best man the villagers could find to come against an itinerant wrestler.

Two members of the troupe were not jugglers or beast tamers or anything of the sort. They were specialists in seeing to the needs of their star wrestler. One of them massaged Provetsko's muscles while the other oiled his skin, making him a shiny god, and slippery as a pig. While they rubbed him down, he grinned expansively at the naked warrior at the far end of the chalk circle, and at the men who accompanied him—the men who had bought Provetsko so much wine. The warrior gnashed his teeth and growled ferociously, showing off for villagers. Provetsko only nodded politely and smiled some more.

His head throbbed, though, and his helpers could do nothing about that, except keep better watch on him next time, lest "friends" bait him into a drinking match, which sport he was less inclined to win.

The stripped warrior and the wrestler met like bulls. So lacking in unarmed skill was his opponent that Provetsko had to look over his shoulder to share laughter with his aides; but his aides

stopped laughing as their ward took a good whack to the temple. Fists were unfair in wrestling; but one should expect it from amateurs, and there was no excuse for Provetsko's unwariness.

He staggered around inside the chalk circle. Onlookers scooted out of the way, thinking he might fall outside the line, thus providing the town's warrior quick victory. Instead, Provetsko got his wits enough to control the staggering, to make of it an act, to squeeze every ounce of drama out of it as he evaded his opponent's grasp and trod perilously along the chalk markings. Then he staggered headfirst into the warrior's midriff, heard a rib crack, heard the wind go out of a startled opponent.

It was over. The warrior plunged to his knees, his face pale. Provetsko stepped back, uncertain what had happened, for it had been a playful attack. His head had struck lightly, relatively speaking. A cracked rib was nothing. Yet the man clutched his side and looked to be in amazing pain. Shortly, the warrior was dead.

No bets were collected that day, for it would be unwise to add insult to sorrow. The townfolk liked their gruff warrior, witless giant though he may have been, hero-in-residence, innocuous veteran.

"Not your doing," said the troupe's manager.

"Then whose?" asked Provetsko. He clutched a little amulet as though it would bring back the dead if he wished upon it hard. But the warrior did not rise, except in the arms of the townsfolk, who carried him away in solemn procession.

After that, his fame grew even more. He was greeted in each town as Killer Provetsko, Provetsko the Dangerous. More and more people were eager to witness his feats of strength and wrestling prowess. Yet it became the rule that he was hissed instead of hailed. He was nearly always victorious, and the people expected that, too, and were glad of it, though they expressed their joy perversely. Provetsko forgot the days when he was gazed upon by people who were in awe of his beauty and his grace. Now he performed for folk intent on enraging him, egging him on with shouts of, "Kill! Kill!" They could not know he lived in dread of killing another man. He only defeated them. And the crowds always went wild, hating him, envying him, and paying lots to see.

Provetsko no longer hoped that his fame went so far as a small village where he had spent childhood and youth. He hoped his mother thought him dead. He hoped his father had forgotten him

completely. As for a childhood playmate, well, perhaps she held onto the dream Provetsko lost, the dream of an endless world invented for the pleasure of any who were strong enough to go forth and claim it.

One night, drowned in liquor and smothered in the kisses of wenches who had offered themselves for free, Provetsko roared his agony in a voice no one had heard from him before. He was usually a quiet man, an introspective man. That he should shout like some wounded monster, pushing the women from his lap, the wine from the table . . . well, it was expected only in the ring, and even his friends held back from him that night.

He went out of the brothel into the cold darkness and bel-lowed some more. He was shouting for a blacksmith and a barber. "Blacksmith!" he screamed, then, "Barber!" He started pulling posts out of the streets and slinging them through shuttered windows. One post had horses and a wagon tied to it, and Provetsko used his tremendous strength to lift the wagon and turn it on its side, the wagon's tongue tossing and injuring the squealing horses. Nobody could stop him from what he was doing, until a blacksmith and a barber appeared meekly at their doors.

The blacksmith was a giant, but not apt to stand up to Provetsko, since the blacksmith was one of the men defeated by the wrestler earlier that very day. Without questioning the why of it, he stoked up the coals of his furnace and, taking a small amulet from the wrestler's hand, heated it, then smashed it with an iron hammer until the object was paper thin. It became a blunt star rather than a sharply pointed one, twice its original breadth.

Then the barber was commanded to set the paper-thin amulet into Provetsko's forehead. When the barber was reluctant, the wrestler lifted the skinny fellow up with one huge hand around his throat, nearly choking the life from him. Then the wrestler put the barber down and said, "Do it." And the barber took his razor to cut the skin from the wrestler's forehead in the shape of the four-pointed star; then, using a pair of tongs, set the star, hot from the blacksmith's furnace, against the bone of Provetsko's skull. It seared to the spot so that the cut was cauterized and there was little blood. What blood there had been at first soon dried in streaks on Provetsko's face. He refused anyone permission to clean the stripes from his visage.

Then he returned to the harlots, who no longer wished to go unpaid; and he returned to his wine, which not only dulled the

pain of surgery, but the pain of life. Thereafter Provetsko was called the Amulet, and the Belloweer. No longer were children and women welcome to the circles in which he fought. There were only baleful cynics and viler sorts of men, crowds of hating, envious, insatiable men who liked the sight of blood and anguish. When men such as these began to chant, "Kill him! Kill him!" it was done. Provetsko killed many an opponent, or stomped a writhing, injured man into a smear.

The troupe's jugglers, animal tamers, singers, acrobats, and the like, went away without Provetsko; and as for the manager, Provetsko never saw the man again. But the wrestler's aides remained, and became serious of mien. Their wages were tremendous, but it cost a lot in terms of their souls.

The game had to be changed entirely. It was now agreed that any man who could enter the chalked circle and get out again before the Amulet had caught him, then that man would get a fat prize. Occasionally someone succeeded, but the next man never did.

At length his fame reached the ears of sadistic King Olaf and his vile Queen Olga, famous for cruel sport. Gifts were sent to the wrestler, along with an invitation. Provetsko was commanded to perform before privileged aristocrats. The invitation promised that he would receive the title of Duke or Earl or some similar thing, if he could defeat eighteen specially chosen men.

The Amulet was no longer in the prime of his career. Furthermore, he had never in his life fought eighteen gifted fighters in rapid succession, though he'd fought that many or more of men devoid of training. His aides said not to accept the gifts, or to accept them but spurn the chance at title. They suggested a counter-invitation for Olaf and Olga to witness the matches as they were meant to be witnessed, amongst the grubby, violent denizens of the country's lowest sorts. Or! They proposed that Provetsko run away from the city as fast as possible, his aides in tow; and, if caught, they could pretend they had never seen the invitation.

"This is our great chance," bellowed the Amulet, silencing his aides and their concerns. "If I become lord over some properties, we can all of us retire in a castle. We can get fat and lazy and be rich off the sweat of lesser men than ourselves."

His aides were themselves peasants and did not like the sound of this; but they were men just the same, greedy as could be, and so they overcame their initial revulsion for the wrestler's

selfish plan. If Provetsko the Amulet wished to take the risk involved, then his aides were willing to knead his muscles, wipe his brow, and keep him standing for as long as they could manage. It would be interesting to see if he could smash eighteen skulls before one of them smashed his!

So the invitation was accepted. On the night before the battles, Provetsko sat in a dark chamber of the King and Queen's palace, surrounded by soft furs and silken pillows that made the richest brothels seem pitiful. Palace maidens made famous courtesans seem like whores. He drank the finest wines imported from lands so far away he'd never realized those lands were more than myth. But he stopped drinking and wenching before he reached a total stupor, and his bellowing began. He shouted at the courtly maidens until they ceased solicitation and went away. He bolted the door from within lest partisans for the battle try to get him in the night. He pushed away what was left of the aromatic wines and meats and sauces, and threw himself upon the heavy covers.

He felt ill. Sick of mind and soul. Sick of life. He felt drained of all will to live.

He lay there in the darkness, sweat causing him to glisten. There was so much sweat that it might seem he'd just returned from a drawn-out bout. But he'd spent a lazy day in the court of the malignant rulers.

And he was sad. Inconsolably miserable.

The star embedded in his brow began to shine. Provetsko sat up at once, feeling the sensation. His brow was like a beacon, and in the light of it he saw a wraith drifting a little ways above the floor. It was the wraith of a woman, transparent enough that he could make out the designs on the tapestry behind her.

"Who are you?" the wild-eyed wrestler asked.

"Who are you?" she asked in turn, seeming herself to be lost and confused. She was middle-aged and large and not clad well enough to be the forlorn ghost of some palace aristocrat. The wrestler turned aside his fears, and bellowed a proud reply:

"I am Amulet! I am Bellower! I am Killer Provetsko!"

"Provetsko?" the wraith said dreamily. "Provetsko?" Then the wraith began to shrink, shedding fat, shedding years, until she was a plump but pleasant commoner with round face and round thighs. She shrank still more, until she had become a little girl who Provetsko recollected as a playmate from his childhood. She said in a small child's voice, "Provetsko? I dream of you

yet, mother though I am of six children, four of them still living and healthy, two more taken by a fever years ago. My husband is a good man and I love him, but oh, Provetsko, how I dream of how it might have been."

Provetsko hid his face in the furs of the great bed, dousing the four-pointed light in his brow. Though he could not see her, yet did she linger, and she asked, "How is it with you, Provetsko? Tell me quickly lest I waken in a moment and you are gone."

He tried to burrow into the covers but could not. He scratched at his forehead until his fingers were sticky with his own blood, but the amulet was laminated to his skull, the skin was healed close to the points of the metal, and it would not come off.

"I'm famous, Tcheska! Very famous!"

"I thought it would be so," said the child.

"I'm strong despite the years!" he said, his face still against the bed, his voice muffled.

"Oh I am not surprised," she said with awe and happiness.

"Tomorrow I will earn a Lord's rank and rule a thousand serfs!"

"Oh, Provetsko, can it be so? A peasant made into a lord! How fine it is to hear! How good it will be for other peasants to be ruled by one who knows . . ."

"I lied, Tcheska! I won't be made a lord at all!"

"Oh? Oh?"

"I have come to this place to die, Tcheska! I will meet in battle eighteen brutes as cruel as I! I will probably kill about ten of them, but the eleventh will kill me! A king and queen will laugh at my demise!"

"Oh no, Provetsko. It cannot be as you say."

He looked up and shone the light of the amulet upon the floating wraith, which had grown to a plump young woman once again. She aged before his sight, becoming a worn and weary mother of four living and two lost. Her eyes looked earnestly about the room, but somehow failed to locate Provetsko on the bed.

"I'm here, Tcheska," he said lowly, ready to be seen as he truly was. Her gaze settled on him then, and she smiled. She said, "How sad that dreams are hard to remember on waking. I fear I won't recall this dream at all."

"If I could be so lucky," he replied, uncertain if he wanted the luck of her forgetfulness, or his own.

Gazing at him, her happy look began to melt away, and he did not question that it should be so, for he was not the beautiful young man she had known. He was a wild sort of monster. Yet it did not seem that her startled look was meant to judge him. She appeared to be concerned about something; and when she spoke, her words surprised him.

"You won't die tomorrow," said Tcheska.

"Won't I?" he said, feeling a moment of hope. Perhaps it wasn't true that he had chosen a suicidal end. If he survived, he could retire with land and title, and make amends for his life by being a gentle overseer. Something. Something. There must be something on that order he could do. It needn't be too late to change, to turn his life around, to heal his aching, blackened spirit.

"No," she said breathily, sorrowfully, as tears tracked her cheeks. "You've died an hour or so ago, I'm sure of it." He heard her begin to sob, and her sobbing faded into the distance. He lay back into his body thinking, "Thank god. Thank god." Olaf and Olga would be disappointed. The bolted door would be broken through come morning. Provetsko's aides would be distressed and unnecessarily suspicious, but too afraid to grumble. With permission from the palace steward, the aides would take their master's corpse away, and place it in some stoneless grave.

Stomping Grounds of the Gods



Only those other gods of whom Jehovah has always been jealous know the true story, and laugh, of how Man came with Woman into Eden, and it is a tale much different from the ones that men have told around their campfires and in their temples throughout their history.

Among the gods, Art was their only master, and all the gods sought vainly to create a work of Art so grand and noble that they would be rendered able to gaze upon the unseen God of Gods and know that Art was real. All their immortal lives were spent in the fashioning of artistic things such as galaxies, which they would set to ticking like ornate clocks. Many were their efforts and beauteous their renditions, and vast; yet the personification and epitome of Art seemed ever just beyond viewing.

Only one god departed from the popular belief that Art was vast. Jehovah the Idler, as he was known then, built no galaxies, neither globular, molten, spiral, oblong or flat. The other gods thought him lazy and considered him a blasphemer because he paid no homage to Art. But Jehovah the Idler was not so lazy or foolish as others believed. He reasoned secretly that his fellow gods who strove to outdo one another in vastness of creation with their mosaic galaxies were not headed toward the holiness of Art but toward the wickedness of Pride and its inimical kin, Prestige. No, thought Jehovah, Art was not of necessity vast. Art, he reasoned, could be inscribed upon the head of a pin.

Allah the Awkward, as he was then known, was busy lighting new suns for his most recent galaxy when his near and dear friend Jehovah came to call and to ask, casually as he could, if he might borrow a small planet, a mere speck of dust, a scarce atom of gas, to use as canvas for a small and experimental work of Art. Allah had always been generous when in a good mood, and since his friend's request was small indeed, Jehovah the Idler

was unbegrudgingly awarded an insignificant solar system on the rim of the yet incompleting galaxy of stars.

Thus while other gods sent galaxy after galaxy wheeling on their way, Jehovah became a sculptor on pin heads. Upon a single tiny planet he commenced designing a work of Art more intricate than anything before conceived by gods. He began with random abstracts, which soon began to take on their own natural shapes. Soon, rivers were coursing, mountains rising, clouds drifting, and atmosphere stirring. One especially mighty river he purposely sent crashing over a monstrous cliff, thereby making a magnificent roaring, ever-changing waterfall. On either bank of the swirling crystal waters he crowded lush vegetation of every imaginable shape and color: tall trees with a limitless variety of leaves, laden with sumptuous fruits, and beneath them ferns and bright-colored mushrooms which tasted of bread, and flowers. Oh! the flowers, big and small, round or funneled, long or squat, rainbow hues. And soft lawns of moss and, lo! even the mosses were of uncountable variety.

It was more beautiful than anything ever molded from the elements of Art. Yet it was not complete. There was the noise of the high falls, but it was like a drum without music. Other sounds were needed. So Jehovah made singing birds of splashing color to dot the trees and skies and surface of the river. There were darting sparrows, fluttering macaws, wading egrets, graceful hawks, and such a multitude more that the verse that names them takes ages to recite.

Enraptured by these flying wonders and amazed that such works of Art could sprout from one so humble as himself, Jehovah was carried away in an insane creative heat wave. He made hopping, splashing toads and slender, slinking crocodiles. He made fiery-maned lions and horses. He made sloths and bears and monkeys, and watched them dance off into the forests of this land dubbed Eden. He made fish of all shapes and sizes and turtles to chase them about. Every species had its own preoccupation and each individual its own peculiarities.

Surely this was the Ultimate Art. Surely what he had made was the closest gods would ever come to that hypothetical, unachievable ideal. Nowhere in the universe was anything so intricately wrought, so minutely complex. With only a few dozen elements total, he had put together an inestimably variegated

paradise, without any two leaves, snowflakes, or furred beasts exactly like another. Not even identical twins or clutches from the same nests or flocks of birds alike were truly like one another. Everything was somehow and profoundly different from everything else, and despite this he had designed them to live as harmoniously as galaxies of stars.

And this perfection, this rendering of idealistic Art into material form, was his alone. Here, on the head of a pin, no other god would likely discover what he had built, and he would not have to share it.

At least that is what he thought.

It was only by an astounding combination of misfortune and sheer luck that Allah tripped over his own feet, as was his wont, and landed face down in Eden.

It took some moments to orient himself and he thought surely he had fallen into a kettle of cold soup, which would not have been the first time. But shaking his head, he found himself sitting in the turmoiled waters of a vast river at the base of a wall of falling water. On each side of him grew a vegetation alien to behold, and small peering creatures looked up at him unafraid from the forests and even from the water between his spraddled legs.

Curious, he snatched the fish from the water and it flopped about in the palm of his great hand until it slipped over the edge and back into the clear liquid, where it much preferred to be. Then he reached out and plucked a tree up by its roots and sniffed it and felt its texture. He stood up in the water and gazed over all this paradise, his face flashing hues of envy. His first thought was to smash it all, for this was after all his galaxy that Jehovah was piddling around in. But he knew feuds among gods were terrible things even for gods, and he feared no other god would take his side if they knew Allah the Awkward had willfully destroyed anything as venerable as a work of Art.

So Allah the Awkward devised an evil plan. He would add a creature to Eden whose presence would totally perplex Jehovah (who was, after all, a very simple sort) and wreak horrible and irreparable damage to Jehovah's Art.

Thus did Allah pluck a kicking gorilla from a tree, and altered it subtly, hardly noticeably, giving it many godly virtues, mainly the ability to strive for Art. Then he snapped the altered beast in the head with his finger so that it would be daft.

He then captured an orangutang and followed the same recipe and ended up with a black-haired, dark-fleshed Man and a red-haired, fair-skinned Woman.

Allah's mischief done, he chuckled and vanished from sight.

Jehovah was later looking over his beloved Eden, humming an old hymn, when suddenly he stopped his song. Something had, since last he looked in that spot, chopped down a whole section of the forest and used the logs to make a decidedly in-artistic shack. Outside the shack stood the two culprits, hugging one another, evidently proud of their artless creation.

Where these small parasites originated he did not know, but their destructive presence was alarming. To rid the land of them before they spread cancerously, he breathed a cold breath to freeze them solid, and snow fell upon all the land. When the flurries were passed and the land again visible, he saw that the uninvited guests had killed two of his finest lions and stolen their pelts to keep themselves warm.

Saddened, but not daunted, he made earthquakes which rent cracks on the face of Eden, from which sulfurous flames emitted, and all the world was covered with smoke. But when the smoke cleared, the parasites had survived. In fact, they had increased in number, and their latest conception of Art involved a city of rocks and stones piled one atop the other in hideous formation.

Much irked, Jehovah smashed his foot on their city, and the inhabitants ran off in every direction. He thought that would be the end of it all, but new cities soon appeared like spots of sour mold in every land where the first broken tribe had fled. He smashed these, too, but every time he smashed one, ten others rose in its place. It was as though every little shard sprouted bigger, stronger cities.

They killed his animals left and right and laid the land to waste. The trusting unicorns were driven to extinction because they would not run from swords nor use their horns to fight back. They killed every noble griffin because griffins were too dangerous for their liking. Every mastodon was slain that they might carve mundane idols of presumed Art from the ivory tusks. They killed the giant buffalo for food and when there were no more, they killed every last jumping-deer, and after that their appetites would wipe out yet another once common breed. The lions vanished, but the invaders wore fine yellow furs. They threw out

nets to catch the blue-tailed salmon before they could spawn. And the forests fell in upon themselves as if the roots had rotted away, and new cities rose up in their places.

Jehovah was tearing his hair, when as a last resort he made it rain and rain and rain until the oceans swelled. When the catastrophic tide receded, all that was left of Eden was drowned or washed away, yet there were still people everywhere coughing up water and rushing to rebuild their moribund efforts at Art. Far and wide were spread their cities, their highways and pyramids and canals. They even built a dam, aptly named, which rerouted the river and drained all the water away from Jehovah's most prized waterfall.

Then Allah came trudging across the galaxy innocent as you please, whistling all the while, and bumped into Jehovah in his usual clumsy manner. He cried aloud, "Oh! Excuse me! What have you been up to all these ages, my dearest friend? Let me see what you have made. My, my, isn't this nice. Tall pipes belching black smoke, concrete ribbons crowded with steel boxes in neat rows, sluggish rivers of slime. Is this some new form of Art?"

"Oh, friend Allah!" wailed Jehovah, "I am sorry that I have caused a plague in your galaxy. I made a beautiful Eden, but somehow a dread parasite came and ruined it. I have tried all manner of catastrophe to wipe them out. They are undefeatable! Forgive me for the harm I've done!"

"What matter one speck of dust?" Allah shrugged, feeling a bit guilty that Jehovah should commence weeping and begging forgiveness over something not his doing.

"That is just the problem, dear friend who I have wronged! Their creations are ugly and crude and they destroy everything in their path to increase the production of such foul anti-art. Most recently they have learned to travel from planet to planet and star to star, and now, instead of one disease-encrusted globe, there is a great cloud of fermenting filth."

Allah screeched, horrified, realizing his just reward. "We must destroy them now!" he commanded and he commenced stomping on planets, snuffing out suns with his spittle. But every broken particle seemed to seed more Men and Women like some ever-widening circle of fire, as if they actually thrived on ruin.

The moral of this story is that jealousy has no reward. And now you know why the gods laugh when they speak of Jehovah the Pin Head, as he is now called, and Allah the Awkward, as he is still called, as they scamper around their galaxy on their endless and jointly earned fate, stomping their feet left and right.

Eagle-Worm



Tamura'nun-pa rose early and went to the longhouse of Tribal Mother. Many others had come that morning also, each with a mystic dream. Those men, women, and the one child who had dreamt upon the preceding night ducked into the longhouse. Tamura'nun-pa went last.

There was not much light within Tribal Mother's longhouse. Her several guests sat cross-legged upon the dry, packed earth. All were silent.

Tribal Mother was old, and lay ill on a bed of moss and fern. Her hair was long and gray. Her face was very wrinkled. Tamura'nun-pa thought: How beautiful you are, Mother, so old and so wise.

Behind where Tribal Mother lay, Medicine Chief leaned over her. He was upon his knees. There were no more chants; no more healing herbs; no more dancing to scare away Owl, Thief of Souls. He had painted one large, silver tear upon his cheek. It shined in the dimness of the longhouse.

This was the time of waiting. A time of joyous sorrow. Every member of the tribe was in a heightened state of awareness. There were many dreams.

Tribal Mother raised herself with an effort and the help of Medicine Chief. There was pain on her face a moment, and then it passed. Medicine Chief continued to hold her up, for she was very weak. Medicine Chief's visage was serene. He never spoke. He had vowed one moon of silence four days earlier.

"Tell me your dreams," her dry, weary voice said. The young man sitting nearest obeyed:

"In my dream I went to fish without a net. I called the fish to shore with a song. It was a fine day for fishing so. As I cut and dried my catch, I found a pearl in the belly of a strange yellow fish. I ate the pearl. Then I was able to walk on the bottom of the sea."

Medicine Chief's face revealed that he, too, was impressed.

Tribal Mother said, "Yours is a powerful dream. It means you will be a great fisher for our people. I will rename you Many-Fish, and send you on a quest. You must go North and North until you meet the Walrus King. If he judges you courageous, he will give you wisdom."

Many-Fish stood with his new name, and with wonder in his eyes. He went away. It would be many moons before any one of the tribe saw him again.

"You have dreamed, too, little one?" Tribal Mother asked of the woman-child who scooted closer. The child nodded, reverent. She said:

"There was a big hole in the ground. I was not afraid to enter. I walked through many Countries-Under-the-Earth. Then there was a white forest, white for lack of sun. In a clearing I heard Grizzly Bear and Coyote conversing. Grizzly Bear said, 'Even I am not strong enough.' Coyote said, 'It is too cruel a trick for me to play.' Together they said, 'We will make a new and powerful Totem animal.' Then Grizzly Bear mounted Coyote. As they copulated, they made sounds like a storm."

Everyone was silent in the longhouse. This was an awesome dream. Even Tamura'nun-pa could interpret it. It was the dream of a warrior. Tribal Mother covered her mouth during the telling, and cried long streams of tears. Then she held the child close to her and patted her back. "You must go and play," said Tribal Mother. "You must play while you can."

The child tugged respectfully at one long, gray strand of Tribal Mother's hair. Then she went off to play.

All of the dreams were important ones. One by one, Tribal Mother told each of the dreamers their destinies with the tribe. Finally all had gone away but Tamura'nun-pa, who looked at how tired Tribal Mother appeared after this busy morning and she so near to Owl. Medicine Chief helped her lie down again. She turned her head, and Tamura'nun-pa saw how bright and cheerful were the old woman's clear, black eyes. Tamura'nun-pa imagined she would be happy, too, if her dying brought so much magic to the tribe in a single night.

"One more dreamer," said Tribal Mother, her voice grown softer and far away. "You are Tam, my sister's daughter."

Tamura'nun-pa nodded. She said, "I fear my dream is insignificant compared to the grand ones I have heard told this morning. I dreamed simply that I held a basket in my hands. It was

not a very large basket. In the basket was a small world: river, trees, lake. I was very careful with the basket."

Tribal Mother looked quickly to Medicine Chief. Their eyes held one another for a long while. Tribal Mother touched Medicine Chief's hand and patted it. The painted, silver tear below Medicine Chief's eye glistened. Tribal Mother said to the young woman:

"Your quest, Tam-of-my-Sister, is of immediate concern. You must go to the Valley of Firs. There you must seek Eagle-Worm for your vision. If you return, you will be made Tribal Mother. If you fail, we are in the hands of War Child, and she is yet too small to be strong."

Tamura'nun-pa was badly shaken when she went into the startling brightness of the day. She spoke to no one. She gathered necessities into a basket, which she tied to her back. Then she left, toward the Valley of Firs.

There were many days and many camping places between the tribe's peninsular homeland and the inland Valley of Firs. Along the way, Tamura'nun-pa found much to eat. Near the first night's camp was a swamp. The swamp was demon-haunted, but she shouted them away as she dug roots of cattails. These she wrapped in leaves of swamp-cabbage, and roasted them together. The smell would frighten predators, but the taste was very good.

Another day she passed through a country rich in berries, several kinds. She also captured a large number of tree frogs and swallowed them whole. It was a good season for a quest.

This was the first quest of Tamura'nun-pa. Because it was expected that all among her people would follow dream-destinies and seek visions from Totem beasts, it was not strange to her that the rhythm of her day-to-day life was so altered: no fishing today, no gathering mushrooms tomorrow, no tending the big fire for tribal feasts. No making or mending baskets. In truth, her days would have felt more disrupted had she gone another season without quest or vision. It was part of growing. "It is my time," she said to herself, and that was all.

The hills were rugged. Sometimes she found huge landslides had sealed roads she had heard would provide easy passage. At times like these, she would be forced to climb over, or try an unproven route. On one of the latter occasions, she discovered

herself on a trail that was barely wide enough for her feet, a sheer drop to her right.

The ledge was too narrow. She could not go on. She stopped and clung to the wall, unable to make herself move. She thought fearfully: If I take one more step, I will fall.

Then, before her was a mountain goat. She had not seen him come. He stood close enough to touch, though she was afraid to move to do so. A huge buck, he had a long coat of heavy white fur and thick ivory horns curling in upon themselves. He regarded the woman who stood on his path, and she regarded him.

"If there is room for his four legs," thought Tamura'nun-pa, "there is room for my two."

Though she would not have thought it possible, the mountain goat turned full circle on the ledge. Then he put his forelegs against the sheer face and began to climb straight up! Tamura'nun-pa followed close behind. Her hands and feet used the niches and protrusions the goat's cloven hooves revealed. Now and then, he would look down at her with intense yellow eyes. Tamura'nun-pa knew that Eagle-Worm, too, had yellow eyes. "Are you sent by Eagle-Worm to guide me?" she asked. There was no reply.

Her legs were tightly muscled. The dark flesh of her back rippled with the strength beneath. The heights made her giddy. Her basket was light as air. She fancied herself mighty—and her mightiness was tested.

When she reached easier ground, the mountain goat was gone. She never saw the buck again, but sent thoughts of kindness and gratitude after him. He had taught her how to climb.

On the night of another day, she slept in a shallow cavern. Fishhook-shaped formations grew out of the ceiling. Bats clung to some of these. She hung her basket from one. The floor was dirtied with bat droppings, but she found a clean spot. She lay down to rest.

Her slumber was disturbed by . . . she did not know what. There were no bats here now: they were gone on moonlight sorties. She felt the cavern's emptiness, yet knew she was not truly alone. In the dark, she scrabbled for her two knives. She found only one.

"Who is there?" she asked the darkness. Her voice echoed; there was no other answer.

Against the stars which shone at the cavern's mouth, a black shape arose! It was hunched, formless, and ugly.

"Away, Demon!" Tamura'nun-pa commanded, disguising a quaver in her voice. The demon did not obey as did those which lived in the swamp. She raised her short knife against the approaching shape. It loomed nearer, nearer, until she saw . . . she saw her other knife in its malformed hand!

Tamura'nun-pa leapt up from the floor, projected herself against the demon, clung to the arm which bore the weapon. The demon had little substance, for all its bulk. She outweighed it. She was stronger. She wrestled the demon into the ground. Soundlessly, it melded back into the dung of the bats. Tamura'nun-pa reclaimed her knife. She breathed heavily and alone. She had defeated the demon! Were she a shaman, she might have captured it for her magic bag. As it was, she was glad merely to be safe.

The bats woke her the next morning, returning from their night's excursions and fighting noisily over roosts. Uncertain if her own adventure had been dream or reality, Tamura'nun-pa continued on her way, thinking: *Dreams are reality.*

Three days later, she stood on a hillside overlooking the Valley of Firs.

There, the trees were larger than any she had ever seen. However, from above, the perspective was unusual: the valley looked small, because the firs were so large. She could see over the tops of trees, and did not fully imagine their size. Halfway across the roof of trees, she spied a nest. It was so gigantic it used seven of the tallest trees for pillars. It was the nest of Eagle-Worm.

The walls of the valley were steep. She took a hemp rope from her basket and used it to get down, stage by stage. As she descended into the valley, the trees seemed to be rising, as though they were growing at a visible pace. As this was not possible, she thought instead that she must be shrinking.

Smaller and smaller became Tamura'nun-pa, until the forest loomed around her. Soon she was no larger than a hare. Then a vole. Finally, a cricket. "How can it be," she asked of the valley, "that one as small as I has come to stand before Eagle-Worm?" She thought of her simple existence along the sea, of the duties she performed daily with her tribe. She performed each task with pride and self-assurance. Those tasks did not

seem lesser than the one now set before her. She felt very proud, and brave. Eagle-Worm would welcome her as a friend.

The undergrowth of the forest floor was so thick that there was a limited choice of paths. She followed the trail of a deer she had startled. When she looked up, it was like being in the longhouse of all gods. Each brace was an incredible Totem pole.

Although the valley had looked small from above, after a full day's travel she knew the vastness of her environment. Late in the evening, she had traversed barely half the valley's length. She came to the nest's first pillar.

She slept that night at the foot of a fir whose trunk was as big around as her tribe's entire settlement. Were the trees hollow, all her tribe could live comfortably within.

It rained that night, but high above, the nest served as roof to shelter her.

The next morning, she began to climb.

She strapped her basket firmly to her back, and used the two flint knives to climb as would the cougar. The ridged bark provided many toeholds.

Up and up she went. "I will not fall," she told herself. She was half convinced. "I am brave and strong." Only once did she look down. The sight was very frightening. She closed her eyes and clung to the side of the tree with knives and toes, until the dizziness passed. There was still half the way to go.

It was more harrowing than she had guessed. "Perhaps," she considered privately, "I am not so brave." She could not have made it at all but for the lessons of the mountain goat.

Once, there was a wind. Were she on level ground, it would seem scarcely a breeze. But on the precarious climb, even a breeze felt to be a hurricane sent to rip her from her hold and dash her to the ground. The wind went away as swiftly as it had come, leaving her chilled but undefeated.

Later, she was visited by a woodpecker, who withdrew larvae from beneath the bark where her knives had cut. "Lazy bird!" she said to it. "Foolish girl!" it said in turn, and so startled her that she nearly let go of the tree. It flew away in a hurry, chattering laughter, leaving her to ponder its brief lecture. It was a magic valley, she reminded herself. She should not be amazed that birds could speak.

In the stories of her people's origins, it was said that Coyote was the Maker, but that Wolf was a better friend. It was said that Beaver taught the people to fish and make longhouses, and

that Grizzly Bear brought strength in war. In those early days of creation, Eagle-Worm taught her tribe to make baskets. But like Coyote, Eagle-Worm could be an enemy. She made lightning and big winds beneath her wings. She made floods with her tears. She was a test of valor to the heroes of every epic. She never forgave those who failed her tests.

As Tamura'nun-pa approached the heavenly nest, she could well believe none but Eagle-Worm taught basketmaking. Smaller trees had been bent and woven like wicker into an immense bowl. The design was finely planned. White-trunked trees were interspersed with brown trunks and red trunks so that the design was pleasing, although the pattern resolved into a tangle of untrimmed branches as she climbed nearer. Tamura'nun-pa was awed by the thought of a power that could bend trees into baskets.

Now the nest was a roof directly above her head. She could see how it rested atop the other major firs in the distance.

The nest was too tightly woven to climb up between the logs. She would have to climb out to the rim. Limbs had been left on the trunks, which would provide handholds. It would be no easy task, however. Already her muscles ached to the edge of endurance. Before starting, she sat on a relatively small limb of the giant fir and rested, rubbing her arms. She felt insignificant on her perch, looking at the grandeur of the vast valley; but in another way, she felt supremely important to have survived to this place.

Afraid her muscles would stiffen if she rested longer, Tamura'nun-pa risked cramps and went onward. She climbed through the tangle of branches on the underside of the nest. It seemed they were left on the trunks precisely for mortal usage.

Eventually she met the bottom ridge of the bowl, and began to crawl upward, hand over hand. Here, the limbs had been sheared off. Still, it was easy to climb up logs. It was so easy that she became oversure of herself. A strip of bark pulled loose in her hand. She fell!

One end of the bark remained attached. Tamura'nun-pa swung at its end, dangling so far in the sky that the underbrush on the floor of the forest appeared a smooth carpet. The basket fell loose from her back and spun earthward, vanishing to a pinpoint before she could see it land.

Back and forth she swung, sweat bursting from every pore, dripping down her arms, her belly, her legs; stinging her eyes.

Her heart threatened to tear a hole in her chest. Above, the bark peeled off a little more and let her drop another arm's length.

The bark made little ripping sounds as she climbed upward, slowly, with slick palms. Finally she regained the solidity of the nest's outer wall, and clung until the air had dried her cold, quivering flesh.

Then, to her surprise, she discovered that her near-brush with death had emptied out the last of her fear. Now her resolve carried her on, certain of her quest. At last she stood at the top of Eagle-Worm's home. Nothing could harm her now!

She looked across the expanse of the nest in amazement. In the nest was another forest. At first she thought it was only the tips of the pillar trees poking through. But there were too many trees for that. The nest looked much deeper than was possible. Far below, within the confines, there was a stream. It ran into a small lake in the distance.

The nest, covering the distance of seven widely spaced giant firs, was as big as the entire peninsula upon which her people lived. There was room within for much life and activity. But she did not enter the world she saw.

She had long known, by the lessons of her elders, that there were worlds within worlds within worlds, all ruled by Totem animals. Some of these worlds were very similar to her own. Others were entirely different. Some of them were one and the same with her own world, only far in the past or future.

It was easy to enter such worlds. But no one could return without the guidance of a Totem creature. Tamura'nun-pa must await permission to enter, and assurance of return. She must await Eagle-Worm.

When she came, Eagle-Worm first appeared to be a large bird over the Valley of Firs. But she was not a bird, and she was not over the valley. She was way atop the mountains, and she was larger than large. With each passing moment, her astonishing size grew more evident. Fearless, Tamura'nun-pa sat on the nest's rim.

When Eagle-Worm was close enough to discern features, Tamura'nun-pa saw that between the feathered wings was the body of a sleek lizard. Some tribes called Eagle-Worm the Lizard of Fire. Others called her Thunderbird. But Eagle-Worm was the most appropriate. The body had silvery scales. The neck was long and red underneath. She had two spiky tails. The wings

were white as mountain peaks. Her feet were like a predatory bird's. The head sported horns like a mountain goat.

Eagle-Worm alighted without stirring the smallest of winds. The deity towered over the woman, but somehow was not threatening. Tamura'nun-pa was spent of fear, and did not quake, though her mouth hung open as she peered up, up into one placid, yellow eye. There was something in that gaze that suggested affection, as of a mother for her child. A bright blue tongue, forked at its end, licked out and touched the woman lightly. "I know you," said Eagle-Worm. "It is good to see you again."

This confused Tamura'nun-pa. She had never visited Eagle-Worm before. Eagle-Worm read these thoughts. "You would not remember," she said. The deep, womanly voice was surprisingly gentle to have issued from so huge a being. She explained, "It was lives and lives ago—perhaps in other worlds. But you are the one. You brought law to your people after the creation. You were White Buffalo Woman."

Tamura'nun-pa felt her heart stop a moment. The name gave her a feeling of ancient sorrows, a nostalgia which she could not understand.

"What do you wish of me, White Buffalo Woman?" asked Eagle-Worm. She spoke as though this one woman could command gods. She said, "It is yet many generations before you are truly tested. Meanwhile, I serve you."

"I . . . I am chosen to be Tribal Mother. I have come to you for my vision."

The birdlike lizard seemed to smile, but may only have shown her teeth. She said, "Your vision has already begun." She stretched out a great white wing to sever Tamura'nun-pa's vision from the forest in the nest. When the wing folded again, the forest was gone. There was only the floor of the nest, vacant and woven of logs. The wing moved in front of her view again. This time, she saw a peninsula with a stream running into the sea, and a familiar place of longhouses and friendly fires. The wing blocked her vision once more, then parted like a curtain to reveal the peninsula again, but horribly changed. The buildings were not like longhouses, but were tall as the giant firs, and perfectly rectangular. There were no trees. The sea had changed color.

"I give you a present," said Eagle-Worm. A white feather dropped from a wing. It was thrice as long as Tamura'nun-pa

was tall, but it weighed nothing. She held it aloft. Eagle-Worm said, "Leap, my sister. Leap into the world you see."

"You will bring me back?" the woman asked. The word of Eagle-Worm could be trusted. But the promise must be had.

"You will return to your time and people," Eagle-Worm assured.

Tamura'nun-pa jumped from the lip of the gigantic nest. She hung from the middle of Eagle-Worm's feather. Down she drifted toward the world within the nest. The walls of the nest rose all around her, then vanished in mist. Below, the Forest-of-Great-Buildings loomed, hideous as a dream of doom.

When she reached the ground, the feather had shrunk to the size of any bird's.

Tamura'nun-pa stood on something more solid than ground. She bent to touch it. It was stone: gray, unchanging, and stretching between the buildings without end. "Where is moss?" she asked aloud. "Where are mushrooms and ferns?"

A small, malignant creature stared at her from a heap of garbage, its back hunched and its tail ragged. The woman whispered fearfully, "Where are the creatures of the land?"

No one answered her. The tall buildings glowered at her balefully, their windows like eyes. She could not understand them.

She walked at the edge of the stone road. Over its center, herds of raving beasts roared to and fro. In the belly of each beast sat a terrified, ghostly human.

There were other people on the street, but they did not see her. They were heavily clad in odd clothing. All of them had faces and hands pale as death. Everywhere, she saw death. Everywhere, the people were ghosts.

The air stank. Everything was filthy. One small tree grew like a feeble mockery of vanished forests, from a perfectly and puzzlingly round hole in the stone ground. Was it the sole, pitiable survivor of the verdant lands Tamura'nun-pa had known?

She wandered, stricken of her senses, until she saw a stranger who might have been of a neighboring tribe. One eye was cut and swollen. He dressed like the ghosts. His hair was long and black and dirty. He sat in the corner of a stairwell, moaning. He needed to see Medicine Chief. He was half asleep and dreaming. He needed to see Tribal Mother. There was something in his hand, held at an angle so that its content was spilling out. It looked like water but smelled vile. Tamura'nun-pa bent to straighten the container. The man smelled too.

He stirred. He opened his eyes one at a time, the swollen one second.

"Where are our people?" Tamura'nun-pa asked. "Where are our tribes?"

The man pressed himself against the wall, whacking himself on the back of the head in the process. He held up one hand, as against a brilliant and destructive light. He chanted a song Tamura'nun-pa only partially understood. If she did not know all his words, she knew his meaning:

"I am your people

I am all that lives

Go from me, Spirit of All Our Ancestors

Do not gaze on what the people have become."

Tamura'nun-pa ran through endless narrow valleys of concrete and steel. She sped that way, this way, up one blocked corridor—a cul-de-sac—and back again. She stopped. She started another way. Lungs aching, Tamura'nun-pa ran on and on. She could find no way home. Her mind reeled. She was sick.

Metal beasts screamed like wounded, mammoth geese. Behind their ice-sheet eyes sat the swallowed ghost-people, clinging uselessly to medicine wheels. Their expressions were bleary. They were less real than the demon who had risen from bat dung.

Was all she beheld merely one of many worlds not her own? Or was this what her world was to become? Was this the future of her land and people?

What trials would be set for War Child! What agony for Tribal Mothers to come! How often must Medicine Chiefs lose against Owl!

This was the trick more wicked than Coyote could conceive.

The foe too horrible for Grizzly Bear to consume.

The rent in the world which only War Child could enter.

The forest white for lack of sun.

White Buffalo Woman ran screaming for Eagle-Worm: "Take back the vision! It is not yet my time!"

She looked skyward in despair—the sky a narrow, hazy band. There, a white and silver cloud had taken the shape of Eagle-Worm. The first red of sunset was the color at her throat. Swirls of clouds made the horns upon her head. Ethereal mountains of mist were her wings. She looked down between the skyscrapers, as from another place in time, her gaze upon Tamura'nun-pa.

Eagle-Worm wept bitter tears. But there was no flood to cleanse the land of villainy. There was only a sour rain.

"I am too weak!" the woman cried, arms held upward to no avail. Black hair hung wild across her tormented features. The gift of Eagle-Worm was a white gash in her hair. Her shouting echoed between the unnatural escarpments: "I am not the one I am Tamura'nun-pa, not White Buffalo Woman!"

The winds in the sky blew Eagle-Worm away.

Tamura'nun-pa fled past people who did not see her. She pushed at people who did not move. She screamed in faces that did not hear. The utter futility of her flight burst torturously from her lungs in a maddened, frustrated lament. She would have cursed the land were it not already done. She thought: I will uncurse it instead!

The white feather of Eagle-Worm hung down the back of her head. It began to glow like a pearly dagger. About Tamura'nun-pa there grew an aura of light. Silence engulfed the whole of a city which the moment before had impinged upon sanity with its constant, self-pitying groan. In the recess of the woman's mind, a voice spoke, and it was her own voice, but deep like Eagle-Worm's:

"I can destroy the world!"

Her aura began to pulse and grow. Tamura'nun-pa knew that the light of her would melt away the dream. The world would cease to be—how many aspects of the world, she did not know, for every world was part of the whole, and the whole was a dream.

"Hold, my sister," Eagle-Worm said, gently and far away. Her voice soothed and cured the madness. "It is yet many lives to come that you will rise and conquer. It must not yet be done."

The light drained out of her, and Tamura'nun-pa stood in the remaining silence, the silence of her own despair. She did not think she would ever go from this spot, but would stand, deathly as the city and the ghosts who lived within.

Then, one agile movement caught her eye—strange amidst the slow, dreamy procession of ghost-people. An old woman leapt from a dark alley. It was Tribal Mother! She was laughing. She was strong. Her arms reached out to comfort.

Tamura'nun-pa rushed into the old woman's arms. "How are you here, Tribal Mother?" she asked, sobbing, tugging with two fingers at a gray lock. "Have you died?"

"Soon, Owl shall take me, for now I dream my last. From

our deaths comes great magic! I dream Eagle-Worm sends me to fetch you home. I have never dreamed so mighty!"

Tamura'nun-pa thought: If in our deaths comes great magic, there is hope even here, where death abounds. "Help me, Tribal Mother. I wish to bounce War Child on my knee and pray she finds peace. I wish to see Many-Fish fill baskets with his catch, to know our people will never hunger, to share the wisdom he gains from Walrus. I wish a moon of silence with Medicine Chief to count my griefs. I wish my burden to be small."

"Come, then, Tam-of-my-Sister. You shall have all your wishes but one. I will take you home."

A Child of Earth and Hell



I had spent many years in search of my parents, whom I remembered without clear detail: my mother weeping and hugging me and telling me what to say to whomever found me, my impatient father pressing her to hurry, and his face now and then grimacing as from pain. It was a simple yet nightmarish recollection, and I suspected even then that they were gone upon a life and death mission to which they would not imperil my life with theirs. Her tears made me cry also; and the crowded concrete sidewalk was a frightening thing in itself, to a child accustomed to soil and woodlands verdant.

My father, who had stood almost dispassionately in the background whilst my mother bid her sad good-byes, suddenly staggered against the wall and began to groan. That was when my mother with agonizing effort forced me through the huge door of the railroad station and I saw neither of them again, save in my uneasiest dreams of where they might have gone.

After minor efforts on the part of the authorities to find my parents and learn my identity, I was declared a ward to the state of Washington and placed in a foster home outside the suburbs of Seattle, the city where I'd been abandoned. It seems that the state had no orphanages, which were deemed dehumanizing, and in many cases it was necessary to place children in less than amiable situations merely to provide them any home at all. I was treated abhorrently by my foster family, except on those days, often months apart, when the welfare caseworker dropped by to see my circumstances.

Once, as I recall, I did try to inform the caseworker, during her visit, that I had not been kindly treated. But she could see I was not unhealthy or beaten or dirty, and she surmised, I presume, that I was lying, perhaps out of jealousy of the two older boys, who were my foster parents' own by birth and but one

cause of my various distresses. Surely the caseworker recognized my conditions were less than adequate, but she never seemed to grasp the true extremity of the non-physical violence I endured. And it was, after all, especially difficult to find homes for deformed children.

My foster mother, after the caseworker left, locked me in an emptied closet as punishment for trying to be a "tattletale," as she called it. I was fed, twice daily, mixed scraps from the family's table, which I suppose was ample feed; and my box-sized room was cleaned daily, so I was at least as well kept as any caged house pet. My false brothers would torment me outside the door by describing the taste and flavor of candies and ice creams they were eating, or by pounding on the door and yelling until I was cowered so far into the corner that I could only withdraw into myself for further escape.

I was not released until a month later, on the occasion of the welfare worker's return visit. I was the epitome of good manners and obedience, complaining naught, for I knew she would not believe anything so outrageous as my being locked away all that time since her last visit, and I did not wish to be so punished for another month as well.

My gratefully accepted reward for being good and silent was my usual run of the basement. I did not mind being kept there at all, for I was seldom bothered except when food was delivered or thrown down the wooden staircase; and I had a private toilet there, several makeshift toys scrounged from the debris and stored items, and even a mange-scarred rat for company, with which I shared my adequate if motley food supply. My one true friend, the rat would generally eat with me, but he was too high-strung ever to let me touch him; he was, after all, wild, and he never came closer than arm's length. His was the first moral lesson I ever learned: a friend, but at a distance.

I should not belabor the cruelties of my childhood, for they lend either an air of disbelief or bitterness to my tale, however true the case may be. And I confess a vile detestation for that family, which emotion is bound to corrupt my memory of early life. But the fact that I spent much of those six years in the dank cellar of a foster home is important to my tale, for certain barely tangible occurrences, I now believe, were early clues to my heritage.

It must be said here, to state it mildly, that I was no handsome child. No attractive child would have been subjected to my treat-

ment. My appearance, I feel, is a large reason for my being placed in a home with people whose only concern was receiving the added monthly income provided by the state for the care of its wards.

No hair graced my pate, and I was regularly taunted by my enemy foster siblings for that baldness. My fingernails were blunt, black, hard things that had to be cut almost weekly lest they grow into useful weapons against my hateful and hated brothers. Beyond these two abnormalities, I was reasonably ordinary and was never accused of being more than merely overgrown and homely.

During these six years of cellar life, I came to appreciate the darkness, even to prefer it. I went so far as to make a willful attempt to seal off the metal grid which allowed fingers of sunlight to stray into my domain each morning. But more, my senses were driven to acuteness. Not only were my eyes grown keen and accustomed to the night, but my sense of touch and hearing were so finely attuned that I could detect underground sounds and movement with uncanny accuracy. I had, by ear and fingertips, learned where the rat's every tunnel weaved, and I envied his smallness, his ability to explore those dark passages.

One of his tunnels I judged to be made of metal, probably a fragment of buried pipe; and one chamber was large enough to cause a perceptible echo of the old rat's padding feet. I thought also that I had detected passages which the rat never used, and I was curious as to why he limited his territory. If it were me, I reasoned, I would methodically conquer every reach of my domain of miniscule caverns and crevices.

One night, as I lay with only the thin, coverless cot-mattress between me and the floor, I blocked from my mind the sound of the late television shows upstairs, and listened to the rat scramble underground, questingly. I wondered what had him so busy. Then I heard something extraordinary, a faint noise that might ill-fittingly be termed "slithering." Whatever it was, it seemed to have entered the chamber which was the rat's chief lair, only a few inches beneath the cement floor. My heart beat hard, for I feared some rodent-eating snake had found its way to my one friend's main nest. But in the next moment I knew it was no serpent, for I heard a beguiling purring sound, which began to accompany the abrasive slithering on the tunnel floor, and this was confounding when one considered that no ophidian could make more than a hiss.

I sensed and heard my mammalian friend approach his favored lair and stop, sniffing the rank sub-cellar air for signs or odors of the unwanted guest which had risen from deeper, more sinister passages. The rat squeaked uneasily, uncertainly, as though unsure of the alien presence. I envisioned its sensitive whiskers dancing quizzically, its nervous tail, hairless as my pate, twitching. I wondered why the mangy little beast didn't flee; could it sense less than I the presence of the other? I knew the rat to be a wily, crafty sort—but perhaps senility was upon him at last. Or maybe the thing that purred had no odor the rat could perceive, and echoes made him uncertain which way to escape. *Run*, my mind was thinking, but the rat stood fast, either of senility, enchantment, foolhardiness, or the territorial instinct to stand against an invader.

The thing, the purring slitherer, at last struck. I heard their underground tussle and knew the elongated slitherer was trying to loop itself around its biting prey. The rat squealed loudly, furiously, so I knew that he was in peril. In my own panic for his well-being, I began pounding on the cement floor and screaming at the slitherer to go away, leave my rat alone, when suddenly the key rattled in the basement door.

My foster father, a shadowy hulk against the blinding light from the kitchen, beer can in hand, descended the steps in his untied shoes and approached where I lay. He kicked me in the face and two of my teeth were broken out. Without our exchanging a word, and without my whimpering, he left the cellar and relocked the door. That was my first really physical attack, but somehow it was less detestable to me than was the day-to-day revilement and spite I suffered without physical contact of any kind.

As I spat blood and bits of my teeth, I listened for the rat. The slitherer had gone, scared off by my shouting or by the larger footsteps. And the rat had not been killed. It crawled out through the crack in the concrete floor, its manged fur matted with dark blood, its yellow incisors dripping with ichorous slime. It stood there on the ledge of that small crevice, badly shaken by its ordeal, and that night we shared our mutual pain.

Several days later I was called up from the peace of the cellar and cleaned and clothed afresh for the benefit of the woman from the department of social services. Of course the caseworker was curious about my shattered front teeth. She was told by my foster mother that I had fallen down the basement steps. The

caseworker demanded that she see the basement, as it was part of her job to see that the homes of state wards were not unduly dangerous. My foster mother hedged, refused, but with her husband gone, she hadn't enough backbone of her own to resist the caseworker's insistence that she be given access.

I followed innocently, precociously, as the caseworker carefully took the darkened stairway one step at a time, appalled by the stench and disrepair of the place. On the floor, she spied my toys: pieces of blue and green glass from shattered Bromoseltzer and antique canning jars, rusty cans and tools, an old brass water-hose spray-nozzle.

My foster mother was fidgeting with her own fingers and explaining nervously that the basement was almost always locked and no such accident would ever happen again. But the caseworker was not a complete fool and could see the area had been played in with regularity. My rat had been getting a drink from the stained porcelain toilet when we intruded; the caseworker choked back a cry when she saw it dart toward the crack in the floor. Dumbfounded, she stood at the base of the steps. She saw my blue-striped, filthy cot-mattress in the corner, stained with blood not yet turned brown, where my mouth had bled off and on for two nights running.

"Oh, that," my foster mother tried to explain before the question could be posed. "That's just an old thing my husband threw down here."

Still being true to my act of innocence, I passed the caseworker at the foot of the steps and walked with an almost casual stride to my mattress, where I laid myself down as to take a nap, facing the wall so that my insuppressible smile would not be witnessed.

Shortly after, I was taken from that place, and when most of the facts were learned, I understood that my foster parents were to be prosecuted for various offenses. The caseworker discovered that I had not, in my six-year stay, been enrolled in any school, and that my ex-foster parents were guilty of welfare fraud as well as breaking out my teeth and keeping me like an animal. Yet, they never came to trial. I was by then an estimated eleven years of age, large for the age, yet in many physiological ways underdeveloped. Whatever my true age, I was old enough to have developed a keen and compelling need for revenge. I doubted that the sentences they might receive would equal my torturous six years, and I knew with a certainty my two pseudo-

brothers would escape any kind of punishment, for they were young and would not be held responsible for their part in my cruel treatment.

I did nothing overtly. Even mentally, I did not willfully cause the thing to happen. It was merely a dream I'd had—a dreamland wish-fulfillment, which afterward proved to be the physical reality. Perhaps I inadvertently made the thing happen by some sinister ability unrecognized even by myself, or perhaps I was only an astral witness and not the cause. Or possibly it was coincidence. Yet so strange was the circumstance, I cannot but think it was somehow linked to me. It was too bizarre a happening to be dismissed.

The dream was this, and I had it the second week following my removal from that foster home: I was viewing the familiar cellar and it seemed my spectral self was located near the ceiling, judging by the angle of my panoramic vision. I was calling, spiritually, to the purring slitherer, which I had longed to see since that night less than a month earlier when I heard it beneath the floor. "Slitherer," I called. "Slitherer. Come." I think I heard my voice command aloud, an echo in the darkness, but I knew no one else could hear me. None but one.

The rat, dear untouchable companion, scurried frantically out from the crack and ran madly toward the toilet. He jumped atop the back of it and stood there twitching his tail and squeaking wildly.

The slitherer was coming to my call! I was overjoyed by this newfound power. When I saw it ooze its abominable snakelike, sluglike flesh up from the small crevice, I was tempted to further test my power over it. "Up the stairs," my whispering voice echoed, chanted. "Up the stairs. Up the stairs."

It glided smoothly, leaving a trail of slime to mark its path. The length of it, when entirely distended from below, was several meters, perhaps as many as six. It reared its flattened head with the slow purpose of a snail, and under it I saw the circular razored maw of a lamprey. It seemed to be testing the air by whatever senses it possessed in the four eyes dancing on stalks. A single hole on the side of its long body, immediately behind the head and which I imagined to be a gill or other breathing apparatus, fluttered rapidly, producing the purring sound. It started obediently for the steps, veritably *flowing* upward, matching the contour of the staircase.

My dream continued on and I was experiencing a high degree

of delight over the success of my orders. Its slimy flesh squeezed under the door, stretched itself across the length of the kitchen's linoleum floor, and at my mental insistence sped its way around a corner and down a narrow hall, then through an open doorway to where the two boys slept in twin beds. It slithered up one bedpost, its air-hole purring with excitement. Unfelt, it attached its razored suction disc to the sleeping youth's neck. With a barely perceptible sucking sound, the boy jerked once, and was instantly leeched to whiteness.

The sticky maw drew away from the punctured jugular and the insatiable, blood-dripping, hideous little head with waving eyestalks looked toward the other bed.

"Hurry," my echoing voice commanded. "There are two more in the other bedroom."

I awoke then, witnessing no other nightmarish feasts, not suspecting until years later that my command had been obeyed even after I woke from my dream. The authorities evidently kept the strange slaying unpublicized, and of course I was never told of the occurrence by my new keepers.

At first I was presumed retarded, but I was not responsible for my lack of education. Their initial judgment was born of other factors as well, aside from my low level of general knowledge. An abnormal growth rate made me seem awkward, though I later became exceptionally coordinated when the speed of my growth subsided and my physiology caught up to my size. I had always had a speech impediment, worsened by the loss of two front teeth, which grew back at an unusually slow pace. My teeth and skull and even the length of my arms particularly intrigued the doctors who initially examined me. My increasing ugliness must have added measurably to the overall appearance of a mentally deficient child. I bore some resemblance, in fact, to a leering spastic with little command over facial muscles, though I venture to say I was actually facially coordinated in my own way.

Because of my presumed mental handicap, I was moved from the Seattle Orthopedic Hospital to a virtual children's sanitarium in the town of Buckley, a goodly distance away. My new home in Buckley was the nearest thing the state had akin to an orphanage. The defective, sickly sorts were kept there—children no one could be expected to adopt, children who needed specialized training or constant care. My playmates were the spawn

of inbred minorities, unwanted children of decadent or poor families—some blind, deaf, or mute, or combinations thereof, with birth defects, or scars acquired after birth, and a great many mentally retarded cases. We all had in common the single fact that no one wanted us, though I think no one was as fully cognizant as I of our shared trait.

I did not enjoy their company, and I think I might have gone truly mad and thereby adapted to my situation, but for one saving grace. I was given the opportunity of an education, as it was of primary concern to the establishment that as many residents as had the capacity would be raised into self-sufficient members of society, to one degree or another.

I relished the education, and it was quickly evident to all that I was not, after all, in any way mentally handicapped, though I think they still considered me somewhat deranged, a condition they may have attributed to my traumatic childhood history.

Told a thing once, I remembered it, and I had reached sixth-grade level within a few months. I was recognized as exceptional, but a special tutor was beyond the resources of the ill-funded home, and my teachers remained the same people who were trained to aid the underdeveloped mind, not the overly intelligent. I was my own best instructor anyway, once the fundamentals were at my command. I read voraciously, everything and anything I could lay my hands on, until I was adjudged as being at the college level of education and still accelerating. The teachers and hospital staff were easily overawed, however, and something inside me always reminded me of my basic inferiority.

My studious efforts were not well organized, thus I went through phases. I had books of more advanced and variegated subjects delivered regularly from neighboring libraries to the sanitarium on loan. For a while, I was deeply interested in prehistoric mammals, especially of the ice age. The likes of the woolly mammoth and the saber-tooth awakened what might well have been racial memories, sparking in me an academic intensity that was not quenched until I exhausted all available information, much of it exceedingly technical. Eventually I moved on to another obsessive interest, then another. American Indian lore held great fascination for me for a long duration. And though it would be ludicrous to suggest this attraction was also born of some genetic link to the past (for I was obviously kin to no Indian), there was always something barely beyond my grasp

that was definitely familiar about those cultures. There were other phases as well that rendered me superficially expert in archeology, world history, philosophy, mythology, and all manner of subjects that had intrigued me fleetingly.

Always there was a feeling of emptiness after I'd completed a study, for though I did not know what it was I was hoping to discover, it seemed certain that I had not found that for which I quested.

And these studies kindled my sleeping imagination—or perhaps awakened an array of memories locked by heredity into my DNA. I would see as vividly as life the glacial ice and the great hairy beasts that roamed there, and in one such dream I saw a gray-robed old man sitting dwarfed astride the neck of a mammoth with long, widely curved tusks. That man was somber of face, and in my dream I could not be sure if the man were an aged and wizened version of myself or of my father. In another dream, I watched savages in a forest gather around a great, tall totem pole, and all the faces of the totem looked like my father. The savages knelt all around it in wonder, and they chanted a weird song in a tongue that was not their own.

That song I remembered even after I awoke. I chanted the words in the manner I had dreamed them, for I liked it better than the nursery rhymes the younger children were obsessed with, though the words were meaningless to me. One doctor took an interest in my dreams for a while, and I think he recorded the sounds of the chant I learned in my sleep. But his time was sparse, and his interest in me was aborted. So my dreams, like my studies, were largely private things, and I largely a private person.

I lived in the sanitarium only two years, until I was thirteen or fourteen. I had grown to astonishing proportions for my age, and the doctors suspected a thyroid problem. I was too large to be kept with normal-sized children any longer, and too intelligent to be left there to waste away. But I was too young to legally be on my own or to start any job rehabilitation program. These sorts of things were talked over in my presence, and I was told one day that I would probably be placed once again into a foster home and allowed to enroll in a regular high school. That circumstance did not appeal to me, however, so I ran away. It was simpler than I had imagined it would be, leaving.

It was not totally without preparation or purpose that I left, for I had two small clues to help me discover my true parents'

identities, and I intended to find them. Being tall and intelligent, and too ugly for anyone to guess my true age, I had little trouble adapting to the outside world. Labor jobs, though paying poorly, were not hard to find. Additionally, I stole. My needs were few, but my search made travel necessary, and I learned the crafted art of thievery to make up the difference in bus or train fare—though I honestly did prefer to work for my subsistence whenever possible.

One clue to my identity was acquired from sanitarium files, during my quest for reading material and out of conniving curiosity. The file contained not only medical and educational records, but also a résumé of my earlier life as seen by old caseworkers. Portions that interested me were the areas covering my earliest known history—vague or completely forgotten by my own memory. I was presumed between four and six years of age when found wandering in Seattle's King Street Station. At the time, I carried a wrinkled lunch bag prepared by my mother so that I would not go hungry during the time it took some official to realize I was lost and abandoned. On the old and oft-reused brown paper sack was written a fragment of an address, possibly scrawled by one of my parents. It had been the police department's only clue, but it led them nowhere, since it was a rural street address without the name of a town or county, and it might not even be a Washington state residence. Nowhere else in that file was there a tangible clue, though I found out in that one reading how many misconceptions persons had about me.

The second clue was dredged out of my own blocked memory, or from my dreams. Often I had awakened, frightened by some terrible horror, with the stifled cry of "Momma Lydia!" almost bursting from my lips. Possibly I cried out to a Momma Lydia rather than simply Mother because my father called her that; I could not be sure. But at least the name Lydia was one clue I had of which no one else had been aware.

Then, too, I had the potential of remembering more, of seeing something that would trigger recollections of tothood experiences or places. Not three months on my own, one such memory tugged faintly at my mind. My first job was as a berrypicker, and it brought back something of that childhood trainride to abandonment: we had passed farms of a huge-leafed vegetable, which I suspect was rhubarb, though on that point my memory cannot say for certain. And people were bent among the agri-cultured waist-high forest chopping the leaves at their bases.

That was all: only a rhubarb field, and it wasn't of much help. But if more memories of the countryside returned, perhaps I'd be able to place myself on the map somewhere near where my parents came from, with me, on that train.

Early detective work consisted of learning from where every train had come, that day I was abandoned. The train schedules were available from the newspaper morgue. It was a futile gesture, I knew, for it was ground covered by authorities when the trail was fresh. And the number of stops at towns and cities was incredible, the additional number of potential transfers incalculable. But I was determined to visit every single burg. Traveling, at least, I had a chance of spying something that would bring back memories.

Several years passed while I lived the life of a road tramp—a singular life, lonely but for the occasional hobo who would befriend me temporarily. From one tramp, as ragged and unkempt as any, I learned that the life of a hobo had once been noble in its way. In his youth, such wayfarers as we, he told me, could find their way into a subculture and network of carefully hidden hobo villages, colorful ragtag communities with boisterous elected officials, proud rail-riders, and friends returned from, say, Chicago or New Orleans or San Francisco, all with grand stories to tell. But alas, I was told, that life had died, though there were yet half a dozen or so hobo villages strung up and down the West Coast. Melville, for instance, around the northern Cascade region of Washington, could still boast a fairly large community, completely unknown to the remaining inhabitants of Melville itself.

Bells rang when I first heard my fellow tramp mention Melville in connection with a hobo village. I remembered, so very faintly, the tramps my father used to hire a day at a time to chop wood or plow or tend the vegetable gardens. Why Melville should trigger that recollection, I could not be certain. But that one previous clue, that rural address minus town, was embedded in my mind.

For one reason and then another, I did not make Melville for several months. The cold season was upon the land when I slipped out of a boxcar as the train approached that commercial forestry town. Snow splotched the ground sparingly, the really heavy snows not expected for another month; but the biting cold rain was already generously available. Collar up and hands thrust

deep in my pockets, I walked away from the tracks, along a narrow muddy road through the trees.

It proved a fruitful journey. Set back among the Douglas firs far along that little-used road, I found that rural address, and it filled my heart and lungs with nostalgia and yearning. Though it smelled no differently than any number of abandoned barns and houses I'd used as shelter over those years, it had a quality all its own when joined with a familiar vision. Hadn't I played near that very porch, now sagging and ready to fall with the rain pouring off and through it? Wasn't that rotted rope on that lone elm's branch the remnant of a rubber-tire swing my father had once made?

It was a painful vision and my eyes blurred. I began to weep, though the tears were not distinguishable from the freezing rain that numbed my high-boned cheeks. There came an urge to turn and flee, not as from unknown terror, but as from an unbearable emotion, a commodity so long pent up in me and threatening to burst forth all in a single flood.

There, in the now crumbling house and barn, walked the ghost of a man who never lived—myself. My ghost: me, as I could have been if some mystery hadn't driven my family to abandon me in a far city and then go on to some other life or place.

I was shaking all around at the shoulders, and my weeping became whimpering as I tried unsuccessfully to control myself between the elm and the firs. Crying for no specific reason to determine: for the atrocity that had been made of my life, for the loving childhood which was the best part but least recalled of my youngest years, for my parents who must have deserted me only by their own sacrifice.

With a few deep breaths, I managed to contain myself, and even managed a methodic countenance as I searched through the rotting timbers. Vulturous persons had been there before me, salvaging anything of value. Thus I found little but rubble and familiarity. Nothing noteworthy awaited at the top of the dangerously creaking stairs, and all I found in the main floor room was a broken bed-frame and a few dry logs some hunter had left unused by the still-sturdy fireplace.

Miserably wet and cold from the subsided rains, which still dripped from the eaves and leaves outside, I shook out my long coat, built a fire, and sat on a bed-frame plank across two logs, watching the flames that glowed orange on my face and hairless pate, and I thought.

There were flashes of memories tugging at the back of my mind—impressions almost tangible, here in this place where, quite likely, I was born. But the memories were not useful, merely teasing visions of my father sawing boards laid over a wood-horse or pitching hay or milking the single cow, and my long-skirted mother bent over a steaming pot on a wood-burning stove, which now lay rusted and broken in the weed-grown back yard.

Then, suddenly, I jerked forward, staring into the flames, mesmerized by the memory I envisioned there:

I crouched in a nightshirt at the top of the stairs, unseen between the rails of the banister, as my father answered the rap at the front door and my mother stood immediately inside the kitchen. My father bore a shotgun, but the man outside stepped in with a wicked, twisted smile, unafraid.

"Leave us alone," my father demanded.

"You know I can't do that," a deep voice said calmly. Like my father, like me, this man was bald, as I saw when he removed his brimmed hat. "It was not easy to find you. But you can't hide your mind from ours, especially as the Time draws near, as the Change alters your metabolism."

My father cocked one side of the two-barrel shotgun.

The other did not plead, but said, "There will be others after me. And if there were not, would you die here?"

"I would *live* here!" my father shouted angrily, raising the gun to fire and cocking the companion barrel. But his finger tensed and he lowered the weapon. "I have never before begged," he said, in a tone I had never heard from this seemingly callous but truly caring man. "I beg you."

"To what avail?" The mysterious stranger shrugged.

"I have, perhaps, another month. Give me that long. Then I will return."

"Or you will die," concluded the other flatly.

My mother gasped from her listening place and hurried from the kitchen to my father's side. She exclaimed, "Why are you threatening us?"

"Shh," my father said. "He did not mean it as a threat." Then to the tall man—tall as my father and enough like him to be his brother—he said, "Come for me in a month if I have not come of my own accord, and there will be no resistance. Let me live a true life while I can."

The eyes of the other were without evident emotion. But be-

hind that mask of uncaring, compassion must have rested, or pity, or even envy—all these feelings and others, carefully hidden and unexercised. After a cold, glaring minute, he turned abruptly and left without a word, the door slowly swinging shut behind him.

My parents clutched one another in terror, her terror that of not comprehending, his of comprehending too well. His almost clawlike hands ran gently, lovingly, down her back, and he spoke so quietly I almost couldn't overhear, "At least he knows nothing of our son, Momma Lydia. It may be that your blood has made him different from me. In what time I have, I must find safety for him, away from their clutches."

And then, before his beloved Momma Lydia's wondering, frightened eyes could search his with questions, he turned to the crackling fireplace and wrestled loose an unmortared stone. There, in the hollow, he retrieved a parchment tied with string, and he faced his wife again, to tell her with dour expression, "Lydia, were I a poet, I would recite you a verse of love. But instead, I must read to you a grave horror and truth, that you might know me as I really am."

Though sore afraid, strength and dignity was in her, and she promised, "Even then—I will love you."

There my memory, my vision, ended. How much, I wondered, originated in my own locked thoughts, and how much was relayed mystically in the flames now dying before me, like tattling ghosts of a haunted ruin. The fire, or my own mind, had given up its secret, and my fingers fumbled expectantly at the unmortared stone, pulled it loose, let it thump to the floor.

Inside the hollow lay two pieces of paper—my heritage.

The first paper, laid flat and face down, was a yellowed and faded photograph of my father, mother and myself. My mother was plain, but not unattractive, my father like a brute beside her, smiling fawningly at the baby in her arms. On the back were written all our names, and at last I knew my identity, or part of it. It read, quite simply, "Bennet, Bennet, Jr., and Lydia Strlpretner."

So, I am Bennet Strlpretner Junior. Strlpretner—German? Swiss? Or something more arcane? It was anyone's guess. I tucked the family photo in my ragged shirt. The other paper, rolled and tied, was of rare parchment, so dry and brittle it gave a crinkling complaint as I unbound it. It was in a strange script;

serpentine letters crawled across the scroll, familiar somehow, but beyond my reckoning.

I stood staring at that paper held taut between my hands, wondering if I really wanted to know what it meant, what it said. Here were things my father meant to protect me from: horrors he deemed more dread than anything the mortal world could mete out to an abandoned child. Before the last embers of the fire I stood, unmoving, uncertain, and I fancied shadows darker than the shadows reading over my shoulder and whispering among themselves. I let the paper roll shut, and in a desperate pang of fear I held ready to fling the parchment onto the coals. But I did not. I had come too far and suffered too much to throw it away now. I smashed the sides of the scroll flat, folded it lengthwise, and tucked it in my pocket.

I could not sleep there, for my own ghost would haunt me. The hobo village was not far, for it was from there tramps would come for handouts or a few hours work when I was a toddler. There I went, and was welcomed half-heartedly, and begrudgingly spared some hot beans from a campfire. My coat was heavy and usually served as a mattress and blanket, but tonight I would sleep with a real blanket, tattered thing though it was, proffered with the same slow reluctance. I was a stranger, and a beggar of beggars, and these were hard times for their kind. Perhaps in other years, they were warmer people who lived like these. Or perhaps they were warmer now, to their own kind; much as my mien resembled theirs, I was yet an outsider.

Before turning in, I sat with a few others around their fire, exchanging pleasantries so that they might more easily accept me, for a few days if necessary, while I collected my thoughts and laid the most tentative of plans. When I removed my hat, the oldest among them gasped in apparent surprise, though he was nearly as bald and not much handsomer than I. His eyes then looked down at my hands, the nails of which I had not cut in some time and were long, black, sharp. For a moment I feared he recognized me as a monster—for such I feared myself to be. But he asked again what I'd said my name was. I had cast off former titles; now I called myself Bennet Strlpretner. His eyes seemed to glisten then, for he had known my father, and worked for him upon occasion. "A generous man," he said. I was thereby linked to their company, and accepted so fully that their propriety and good nature was embarrassing.

I stayed a week, and learned much of my father's personality

from the codger. But more, I learned of a strange circumstance following what the man admirably termed, "the sudden disappearance of the Strlpretners." It seems a huge dark traveler came into their village of lean-tos shortly after my family's home was vacated. "Could have been kin to you and your daddy," said the tramp, "and he asked questions about Benedictus Strlpretner." When the group of bums kept mum (as it was their rule never to aid detectives in finding someone who wished not to be found), the great tall man became violent.

"We all ganged up on 'im, though," the old man said, laughing. "He swung those hands like ball-and-chains, nearly killed ol' Pipeline Henry, but he couldn't outmatch us all with our rusty knives and broken whiskey bottles. He turned and beat a track out of here, and I cut him up the arse with a busted wine jug as he went. He didn't bleed, though, so I figure I didn't get deep. Strange feller, that one, no offense now, I mean because I said he was a bit like you."

"Hairless like me, you mean?"

"Can't say; wore a hat. But those hands. Huge! And nails like claws, like yours, like your daddy's. What causes that anyway?" He passed a puzzled look over my fingers and I closed my fists self-consciously to hide the nails. "I don't know," I said.

Shortly after, I was gone—at once sad to leave that supportive atmosphere and pleased to be free of their constant closeness.

I had to have that parchment translated, but a tramp cannot simply walk up to a language professor or an eminent archeologist and ask a favor. It was months before the time was right. I finagled my way into a gardener's job on a community college campus in Seattle. Did a right good job, too, and made certain I came to be on "howdy" terms with all the language teachers. With the meager wages, I rented a cramped room in the skid row district and slept in a bed for a pleasant change—a small bed, but with fewer lumps than the ground. Bought myself some new Salvation Army clothes. Then, one day after classes were done and I noticed one of my "howdying" professor friends had remained behind for whatever reasons, I walked into his empty classroom with my arcane scroll in hand.

He was immediately intrigued. I told him I did not know its origin, or what it said, but that it belonged to my father and I'd greatly appreciate it if I could find out what it said. He ventured that it might be Arabic, Turkish or some derivative, but he didn't

know enough about it. If I'd let him keep it awhile, he said, he might be able to get one of his colleagues to look it over. I thanked him kindly, then spent the next few weeks quietly gardening about campus, betraying no impatience.

But I was impatient—for strange visions, waking dreams, were beginning to visit me; and I felt certain that the parchment would contain not only clues to my heritage, but lend purpose to the psychic phenomena I began to endure. At the same time as my occult experiences were beginning to unfold, my old affinity for darkness returned anew. Or perhaps that affinity had never left but, if anything, had only been suppressed.

Each afternoon, my gardening duties fulfilled on the campus grounds, I would escape to my cramped, windowless room, away from the dread sun, and sleep out the day. Come nightfall, I would roam the skid row streets, from the dark waterfront wharves to the decrepit and historic relics of First Avenue, preserved in their decay. From midnight to three A.M. the drunks and sexually disturbed and prostitutes were my unspeaking company; I would pass among them as a shadow, almost unnoticed. Once, a native American Indian, in the grip of sotted delirium, fled from the sight of me, bellowing in his tribal tongue. By four in the morning, the whores and homosexuals would be gone, the winos and alcoholics hidden into stairwells and abandoned buildings, and I would walk alone between the bleak exteriors of pioneer architecture a hundred years old.

But this architecture was young compared to what lay below the city streets. In another era, the whole of Seattle was gutted by fire. Instead of leveling the sturdy, burned out structures, iron girders were laid down and a new city built atop the old. Every year, new portions of that elder city are unearthed or rediscovered, for miles and miles of tunnels worm from one underground building to the next. Some of them are mapped, others are suspected to exist but have not yet been reached. Underground tours are conducted daily through the safest, tamest areas. In Pioneer Square itself, the underground buildings have been sandblasted clean, so that gift and novelty shops run amok, turning these confined areas into tourist ghettos. Few among the plebeian horde ever stop to realize that these obtainable areas are only the smallest fraction of the entire rat-infested complex beneath the shops and hotels of their mundane world.

I was attracted to that low and gloomy realm. A hound for the macabre, I sniffed out secret or forgotten entries and pas-

sages. My clawed hands had minimal trouble pulling up a man-hole cover, and I walked beneath the nighted streets, an occasional police car or other vehicle the only sounds above, rumbling over my roof. I came to a section where the walls were interrupted by low archways, seldom visited but not unknown. I entered each building I found, scrutinizing worthless artifacts. The roofs were so low I had to stoop, as none of that early generation was so tall as me. I needed no light, though the eyes of another would be blind in such darkness. Soon, I had discovered places doubtlessly unseen by human eyes since the days they were paved over and forgotten.

Each night I would widen the outskirts of my territory, until dawn arrived and I'd perforce return to my rooming house, bathe at the end of the hall, and go to work, hoping each day for word on the translation of the script. Hearing nothing yet, I would grovel in the gardens beneath the horrid light of day, then bus to my room once more to sleep out the sun, and complete this cycle when returning to my explorations.

I had discovered a place on one of the lower side streets where the boards far behind a tall wooden staircase could be pulled loose and I could enter underground Seattle, then replace the board behind me. I disappeared into that corner, to the consternation of a night patrolman cruising the streets, who shone his spotlight my way an instant too late to see who'd been there.

I made my way along paths known to no other—I, and a few giant wharf-rats. But even they were not common in the specific area I had grown fondest of, and that was odd in itself. The stone-walled, rat-shunned building had once been a drugstore. Among the antiques I found in the strewn mess were many outdated pharmacy utensils, and in one area a pile of pill bottles fused together by the heat of that historic blaze. A blackened porcelain syrup fountain lay crashed on the floor. There was nothing overtly special about the place, but it attracted me, and I knew by psychic intuition that this would come to mean something.

Near a wall was a perfectly round hole that may have been where a sewage or water pipe once led. One night, I heard noises from that hole, which at first I took to be mere rats. But rats do not speak.

Out of the jumble of many voices, I picked the word "Benedictus" many times. It grew louder, but no easier to understand with so many blending undertones. And then I had my vision,

not unlike the vision I'd seen in the flames of a fireplace many months before. Like a genie from a lamp, a ghostly vapor rose from that opening, and it took on the transparent, tenuous shape of a woman in ordinary dress, her arms held out to me as her form wavered into solidity. Her forward-held arms did not invite me, however. The way she held herself, I knew that she was warning me away.

"Go back!" I read her lips saying, though I could not pick her voice out of the other ghostly sounds. "Go back" was the message her mouth was forming.

"Momma Lydia," I called quietly, and walked forward, hoping to touch her, longing for the embrace of her loving arms. I begged to know: "How can I come to you?"

She shook her head, and warned me back vehemently. And then she vanished, like a popped bubble, rejecting me and abandoning me once again. And with her went the haunting sounds. I was left dumbfounded, empty, but not afraid. I was determined to carry on. Her very warning was proof of my nearness!

All morning as I tended the flowers, though the bright colors had come to offend me, though I affected a show of loving my endeavor, I reflected on the specter of the night before.

When first I began venturing into the eerie catacomblike hollows of old Seattle, it was merely the longing for darkness, I had thought, which drew me on. Only the instinct of a burrowing, nocturnal beast—for surely I was that, or made myself that, or had been made into that. But now I suspected premonitory, psychic ability, untrained, unrealized, native to my being, which had brought me to the depths below the city *on my quest*.

I remembered, or it struck me, suddenly, like a flash of lightning, a thing that had never before dawned on me, though it seemed so obvious in that instance of enlightenment. My true parents had abandoned me in the Seattle train depot, but *they themselves had never entered*. The train station was on the southern verge of underground Seattle. Indeed, the tracks leaving Seattle were themselves underground railways, buried beneath city traffic.

I had searched in Washington, Idaho, Oregon and Canada, when all the while they had been here. They had never left the city. And my instincts, my sixth sense, or some subconscious logician, had at last led me to their self-imposed burial place.

In my glee of realization, my strong hands broke the handle

from the trowel I'd been using to lay rows of marigolds. I stood anxious from the chore, and would have fled downtown to reenter the maze of buried buildings and dark passages, never to return until I'd found where my parents had gone, or died in the trying. But I did not rush back then, for Professor Bunting was in my path, and the sight of him brought my fitful thinking back from plans of a sub-city existence, subsisting on rats captured by swift bare hands, drinking what seeped down from the gutters above.

What expression was on my visage, I could not know, but it must have frightened poor Bunting, for he stepped away from my hulking height as though I might be dangerous. But after composing my manic thoughts, I smiled amiably, and he reddened as though embarrassed by his moment of foolish terror. He said he had good news.

"The translation?" I asked.

"I imagine so," he told me with a nod. Young men and women hurried down the campus sidewalks to their next classes. "Professor Fennerson of the University of Washington has suggested I have you come by his office. Here—I have the directions written down. I expect he wants to know more of your parchment's origin. He's a noted archeologist, and when he says he's got something slightly phenomenal, you can bet the word 'slightly' is his modesty creeping in."

After minor pleasantries, we parted company, and I left knowing with a passion that I'd not return to that miserable daylight job. I had what I needed now. Or, rather, it awaited at the end of the bus connections to the opposite boundaries of Seattle.

Late that afternoon, I walked into Professor Fennerson's office. Skulls lined a shelf behind his desk, ranging from some tiny primitive primate's to a modern man's. Indian artifacts were hung in random attractiveness all about the room, with an unmatched pair of African masks glowering from among its Northwest cousins. After greeting me with a warm handshake and cordial manner, Fennerson, who was gray with years flesh-wise and hair-wise, tottered to a cabinet from which he removed my parchment inheritance. He set it on his desk, using two ancient-looking pieces of carved stone to hold it flat, then opened his notebook beside it.

"Have a seat! Have a seat!" He waved in a direction and I pulled up a chair to one side of the desk he sat behind.

"I'd never seen a script like it," he was saying. "It's not that

I was too busy to get to your request sooner, my friend. In fact, I set other matters aside to work on this every night. It simply took this long!" He was most apologetic as to the length of time I'd waited, as though his time had been worth nothing. But now all I cared about was the meat of the matter, and I craned my neck in an effort to read his notebook while he talked not of the work involved, but of the extremely interesting nature that made the work worthwhile.

"I worked with Leonard Styles on an expedition, oh, back before the war, in an area still considered Palestine. Styles, rest him, would have known more of this, I think, and would have delighted in it as well. He was always dabbling in arcane matters, forever trying to make some ancient spell or magic work. Poor fellow! He was a genius of archeology, but ignored by his peers for his eccentricities." Fennerson smiled then, mischief in that look. "And he *was* eccentric, I suppose. Never did get any of those spells to work—used to blame it on inadequate phonetics. Said he thought he had the right words, but the pronunciations were wrong."

Fennerson chuckled, and I was growing secretly impatient with his almost senile fondness for relating the past. Then his humor waned a moment and he added, "But no one ever knew exactly what became of Styles. Vanished utterly from his home in England after retirement. I often wonder if he finally got his pronunciations right." The humor that marked Fennerson's brow returned again and he completed his recollection: "I'd like to fancy he did, at last, herald some doom upon himself; he'd have liked that, I think—knowing in his last moment, after a long life, that he was right."

"Please, Professor. I don't mean to be reticent, but I'm dying of suspense. What precisely does the parchment relate?"

"Oh, yes!" he said, as though suddenly realizing the present. He fingered a pair of round spectacles from the pocket of his vest and wrapped one wire stem around each ear. Then he focused on the parchment, his lips pursed, and looked to be reading the Sunday paper spread out before him. Then, bursting into recital, he seemed to be reading directly from the text:

"We came before the French came down from Quebec, before the Spaniards from California. We were first to witness the Straits of Juan de Fuca. First missionaries to the shores of Puget Sound. Before Cook, before Lewis and Clark, before all others of Europe, we came.

"Constantinople was still a power then, from whence we fled. We sailed from that adopted homeland, ostracized, our numbers much reduced by attempted genocide, avowed to settle nowhere near the likes of civilization, nor where it soon might come.

"No martyrs had we been—only sources of heroism for Turks and sometimes Moors, who would prove their bravery by the slaying of a wizard. We sailed. By the sorcery of lost Mu, we crossed the wide Pacific, across seas that covered our once-proud nations. Our numbers dwindled further on the journey. But the strong survived, by tooth and claw and necromancy.

"There were cannibals on Puget Sound then. But it was ritual cannibalism, and the natives would not foul their honored heritage by adding the flesh of outsiders to their own. So we were unmolested. The tribes were peaceable, and always preoccupied with bizarre customs of greed and prestige: who owned the most baskets, who caught the most fish, who held the biggest feasts, who built the tallest totems. These were important among them; and they were, for their needs, a rich people. And we were, for the first time since our land was destroyed by angered gods, free of persecution."

The professor stopped here, took up a tissue to dry watery eyes. He smiled at me and said, "Imaginative, yes? A queer history, or a well-spun yarn? There's more."

He returned to the long page of tiny, snakelike marks.

"One day a young brave spied us fishing without nets. He carried this tale to his people. The story spread, and when it came back to us, we were already legend. Monstrous salmon, said the tale, threw themselves on the shores at our feet, in multitudes unequalled. By their custom, our prestige was unrivaled.

"We feared we might soon become objects of superstitious terror. Instead, the innocent people revered us. The natives made pests of themselves. They built their longhouses on the outskirts of our small community. They came to us begging and praying. We craved solitude, and could not stand their incessant curiosity, interest, reverence. But we could not smite them when they were as children or affectionate dogs.

"Three chiefs we took into our confidence, or made them think as much. We taught them small magicks: how to control a bear or sasquatch and make it do their bidding. How to conjure a ghost, though we were guarded enough that they could not also learn to summon demons. And how to leap uninjured from

high places. Several medicine men we taught to heal wounds or cure certain common diseases by reciting incantations more powerful than their own. And we taught them to raise small rocks without touching them, which useless sport pleased them more than any. We were this generous, and more, but only for our own good.

"We knew the medicine men would want the workings of their new abilities kept their own secrets. And the chiefs would want no others to learn the same magicks that would equal them in prestige and power. So it was the medicine men and chiefs came to ensure our solitude, keeping their people from coming to our region and learning the same things they had learned.

"A cult sprung up around us. The sons of chiefs and medicine men, and the daughters of priestesses whose line had been more powerful in earlier generations, came to us each autumn with payment of gifts, to be our students. A mystic aura was given us, cultivated by the leaders of the tribes, so that we were no longer bothered save by the few young and honored students.

"Years passed. A century. Our numbers were still not great, but our survival seemed secure. And then one night we were attacked by an army of black bears, and we knew the magicks we had taught, though minor in themselves, had been turned into a weapon of some might by the combined efforts of all the chiefs. We were reduced to the border of extinction, and we were angered. For the first time, we proved our mightiness.

"We set upon one tribe a gigantic spectral raven whose wings produced hurricanes against their villages. This was a dread horror for them, for Raven was their greatest benefactor, creator and uncreator of the world, and they thought certainly they had incurred the wrath of their most honored god. On another village, whose chief and medicine man had betrayed us, we sent a likeness of their honored Thunderbird, who burned and ravaged their community beyond repair. Into another tribe ambled a grizzly bear that dwarfed the black bears beset us, and it killed every brave before it was completely subdued and died of its many wounds taken. Their nights were harried by the presence of soaring white owls, their symbol of eternal darkness and death. We caused crops to wither and fishing nets to come untied at every knot and our temper was so beyond our own control that we did not stop these evil sendings for three days.

"And then we mourned our own sins as much as our dead. We had gained nothing. Vengeance is so hollow. And so we saw

that our past history of oppression was not all undeserved, and we deemed our kind unfit to walk with other races of human-kind. Thus we cast repentant and repulsive spells upon ourselves that would last unto the hundredth generation. We condemned ourselves to a self-made hell in the depths of the earth, there to live in our so-precious solitude for all our lives, and our children's children's lives, accursed to the sun, accursed to all who might summon us from our living death."

The professor finished the script with a wry smile, and when he looked up to the chair I'd been sitting in, I was not in it. He glanced over his shoulder in time to know his fate. He slumped forward without a grunt, the top of his skull caved in by the carved rock I'd taken from a shelf behind him. I then left with his notebook and my parchment, and threw both into an incinerator before leaving the university. I made my way to downtown Seattle on foot, shunning the proximity even of transit passengers. The shops were closed by the time I attained the downtown area, but it was not so late that the movie crowd had yet deserted the streets. I felt lost in a sea of oppressive flesh while I made my way to the secret place behind the steps. All the crosswalk lights had seemed to work against me.

With the strength of my inhuman hands, I madly ripped away a large portion of the bricked and boarded section leading underground. I did not regret leaving my entryway more easily discovered, for none would follow so far as I intended to go. A ferret in the night, I found my way through areas none but I knew. There was a chamber, I knew by sense of hearing and touch, existing where I had been unable to find passage, deeper in the earth. I came to the stench of a long-buried, fire-gutted brick structure, and I cried out in despair: "Show me the way!"

My voice echoed with a commanding power and I felt a slight tremor, an earthquake that few would notice though the Richter scale at the university would tell of its passing. A section of the floor gave way beneath me, and I fell, screaming, and fell, screaming, and fell, screaming.

And from the depths of the earth resounded my cry . . . the name of my mother.

Three Dirty Men



In Ashum Patt, a town in Persia, nearly every third street has its own well, around which will be found a well-curb no higher than the ankles. Such well-curbs are made of hardwood, or ancient marble, or some other significant material, occasionally carved into wondrous shapes. Sometimes the well-curbs are of no greater importance than their utilitarian value would suggest; but in other cases, the well-curbs are famous for one reason or another. Most of them are antique and, being removable, have traveled around a bit, taken elsewhere whenever an old well goes dry or becomes fouled or accursed. Well-curbs have been made in exactly the same half-dozen designs, with myriad subtle and artistic variations, for hundreds of years. They are roots in their communities. The great nation of Persia changes from time to time but the people manage to stay much the same, and their well-curbs reflect this. Those well-curbs which are famous are apt to have names of their own. "Such-and-such well-curb once belonged to the conqueror so-and-so, encircling the well of his garden at you-know-where, which is why we call that well-curb so-and-so, after the conqueror of three hundred years ago." Well-curbs as old as that, or older, but having no history connected with them, and no legend, are usually called after the street where the given well is encircled; but this can be confusing, since a well-curb can be known by the name of a street where it used to be found. "Let us have a tryst," whispered a young lover, "by the Pu Street well-curb!" And the poor girl lingers at Pu Street, though the well-curb known as Pu had been on Dha Street for one hundred and fifty years by then. The poor girl not only feels jilted, but is apt to be killed by someone who noticed her out too late; and then a legend would grow up around the well-curb she had mistaken for the one called Pu, and it would carry her name, let us say Chesa, forever after. Sometimes nobody remembers how a well-curb got its name. The wells themselves are of less importance as regards legends and his-

tories, since what is a well but a deep hole with water in it? But well-curbs are works of art and often the mark of a street or community's distinct nature.

Occasionally some drunkard coming home late at night stumbles over an ankle-high well-curb and is heard next morning thrashing around and hollering. Some strong men will throw him a line and, with great to-do and festive fun-making and guffaws, pull him out. It is the tradition to make light of such a fellow for a long time afterward. "Ha-ha! There goes Habi Dom who fell in the well of Abu Street, ha-ha!" And the only thing he can do is bear it.

Sometimes children fall in and die, or an animal drowns in one. In such cases, the despoiled well is sealed up forever; for who would drink water haunted by the spirit of some pathetic child or goat? One might be reborn a goat for having drunk the water, or have nightmares of the child's last moments. When such a well becomes tainted in this fashion, the well-curb is taken away, and a heavy board or piece of metal is set over the well. A new well is then dug on the opposite end of the street, or the next street over, and the well-curb is put there. The people of Ashum Patt will soon enough forget the previous well, but a well-curb is never forgotten.

One might think that after a few drownings or serious accidents, well-curbs would be made taller. But the fact is, some people are so stupid, they would manage to fall over the highest wall built around a hole in the ground. Also, traditions are not easily changed, and well-curbs have not altered in fundamental form in a thousand years—longer, for all anyone knows. So it has never occurred to the people of Ashum Patt to build walls instead of well-curbs around their water sources. It would only make water harder to get at if they did such a thing. Also, only a remarkable accident is ever remembered, so it scarcely seems a problem; for, as only the remarkable accident becomes part of the folk memory, the illusion that accidents are rare is reinforced. In fact, three or four hundred children and animals must have died in those wells over the past two hundred years or so, and a lot of wells have been abandoned as a result; but the tragedies happen at wide intervals or widely separated parts of the city, and people are able to forget such events between recurrences. Also, neighborhoods close to each other are apt to be of differing faiths and dialects and not communicate one street to the next, and a famous drowning in one part of Ashum Patt

will never be remarked at all a couple of streets over. So it is that everyone has the belief that very few dogs and goats and children, or even the occasional adult, ever die in wells by tripping over well-curbs. It being such a rare occasion, so far as is recalled, why bother to build walls around water sources? It is never done.

When wells are no longer useful, as when goats—or children—fall in and die, or when there is no longer any water to be had, it never occurs to the people of Ashum Patt to fill the old well with dirt. It would be a lot of bothersome labor and nobody wants to do it. The mud taken out from under the street while making a new well is used to make cheap bricks or roof tiles. It's hard to find enough dirt to fill up a disused well. Instead, some sort of cap is used, and deemed sufficient. In the course of time, the disused well's covering becomes soiled and hidden. There are some which have even been cobbled over so that close inspection would not reveal their existence. As time passes, the wooden covers on these forgotten wells rot, or the metal caps rust. These represent accidents waiting to happen.

It so happened that a very wealthy man was coming home late one night. He had finished buying some Arabian horses, then stayed with the dealer to drink a lot of wine and celebrate the bargaining. Now it was dark and he was lost in the city, and greatly befuddled, but not especially worried, for he was sure to find the proper direction soon enough. He knew all about well-curbs and watched out for them. Though he walked a crooked line, he veered far clear of well-curbs.

He was happy and giddy knowing the beautiful white horses would be delivered at the dawn. His wife and children would be pleased to ride them about the city, proud as royalty, chins up. In point of fact, the rich merchant's wife was of royal extraction, so it was only fitting that he should buy her and their children such rare animals. His weaving steps were therefore rather jaunty. He was singing a song of praise to Allah, albeit out of tune, and with a few unexpectedly unpius phrases thrown in wherever he forgot how the hymn usually went.

Then—*crack!*—a loud noise beneath his feet. He fell through a place where a well had been abandoned and covered up. He made a wonderful splash with his large body. Bits of rotten board and rubble and dirt came down upon him, soiling his white turban. He was soaked with filthy water and found himself standing on the bones of a goat. He yelled and yelled for help,

but no one would be in the streets for many hours. The best he could do was brace up for a cold and miserable night.

It certainly did seem a long time before he perceived the dark sky growing a shade lighter. At that long-in-coming hour, he took up shouting with renewed vigor. The face of an impoverished young woman peered down at him, her veil covering her nose and mouth, her dark eyes melancholy. She must have seen how woeful his condition, and heard how dearly he begged; but after a few moments of regarding him, she simply went away.

The rich man shouted and shouted some more. Then three dirty men gathered around the hole and looked at him.

"By Allah's name, get me out!" cried the rich man.

"What will you give us if we do?" said one of the dirty men, the one whose teeth were broken and yellow, and whose eyes gleamed with sinister wit.

"I will reward you most handsomely, be assured," said the rich man, holding his palms together in a pious manner of avowal.

"What," asked the dirty man with broken teeth, "do you consider handsome?" Already some children had gathered around and were on their hands and knees, looking down, smiling. One of the children had but one hand. All were clad in terrible rags.

"I will give you at least some pigs and a goat," said the rich man. When there was no response above, he added, "And a fat purse for all to share." He pressed his palms together again, and made a tiny bow. He could not bow much or he would dunk his head.

The dirty men exchanged glances and laughed. Then, the one with the very horrible and lice-ridden turban said, "If we put new boards over the hole, no one will ever find you. This place is far from the neighborhoods of wealthy men."

"A fat purse for each of you!" said the rich merchant quickly.

"More than that," said the first dirty man, his broken teeth shining with saliva.

"Anything you please."

The dirty men whispered to each other again. Then the third one, who was gaunt as a dervish, called down, "How do we know you will really pay us?"

"By my honor!" said the rich man, his expression exceedingly serious, his tone indignant.

"That's pretty good," the three dirty men said to one another,

and took up whispering anew. The one with broken teeth then said, "If you were one of us, we would pull you out and make a good deal of fun, and that would be a lasting reward for us. But as you are a rich man, we would never see you again. After we had spent our fat purses, and eaten the goat and the pigs, what would we have left? If we could come around to your house and laugh at you from time to time, that would be better. But of course we would be rounded up by the Kalif's men just for trespassing on your street. Our heads would be cut off. There would be nothing you could do to prevent it, as your neighbors would be involved and not allow our exception. As you can see, it cannot be that you can reward us in the traditional manner; and as you surely know, tradition is not something to be overlooked. Therefore we have decided not to get you out at all."

With that, and despite the drenched man's protests, the three dirty men went away.

Dogs looked in the well and barked.

A goat looked in the well and stared a long time. It was chewing something and salivating on the rich man's turban and in his eyes.

Children looked in often. The boy with one hand brought other boys to look. "Hey, help me!" the rich man said. "Go tell your fathers there is a big reward!" But the children were as though deaf and mute where he was concerned.

He was there all day. It got dark. He could not sit down, for his head would be below water. He was most tired and awfully cold. The night was shockingly protracted. Every time he began to fall asleep, his knees would buckle, and he would awaken with a start, choking on vile water. That morning, the three dirty men looked in at him.

"Oh!" said the man in the poorly wound turban, scratching under it to get at a parasite. "Are you still living?"

"By Allah, have pure hearts!" cried the man in the well, chattering his teeth together, dark circles under his eyes. "I cannot last another day."

"That's true," said the one with broken teeth. "The least we can do for you is not cover up the hole as yet. Someone is bound to pull you out if you shout enough. It won't be us, however. We are not so inclined."

"I will give you anything you desire!" the rich man squealed. "I will even visit your neighborhood once each day so that you can jeer at me!"

The men talked to each other about that. The one with hideous teeth then said, "Well, that is a good bargain all right, and in keeping with the traditional reward. But a rich man like you—how long will you put up with it? Especially as you can be safe and sound in your home and we would be helpless to do a thing about it if you forgot to come."

"I am an honorable man!" he protested.

"An honorable man," said the smiling dark face, "would never condescend to be laughed at periodically, not by such as my two friends and I. Once or twice, if bound to it, you might come. That's all. Then we would have nothing but spent purses and devoured meat. I think we had better leave you where you are."

"But I will die!"

"If it is Allah's wish," came the reply through broken teeth; and all three men signed their foreheads.

"Listen!" said the desperate rich man. "I will give you everything I have! More than your dreams! You can even have my wife, who is of royal extraction; she is mine to do with, after all. You can share her all around, and my gold and silver, too. I will be a poor man after that, and have to live in this very neighborhood, a wretch among wretches. You can make fun of me as much as you require, for I will be a beggar on this street. Only, please, I beg you, do not leave me to this suffering and death!"

"By Allah!" exclaimed the poorly turbaned man. "Oh! Ah!" said the gaunt fellow next to him. The one with broken teeth said, "My, but that is a surprising offer. But I can understand your position, having no use for any of those things if you are dead this afternoon. We will get a rope and haul you out."

They sent the one-handed boy after a rope. Other eager children went along to help find a good one.

Already the man in the well regretted himself. It was so easy to be pulled out of a well; but it was to cost him his entire fortune and his wife. Maybe he could fool them and save aside a good part of his wealth. A little gold would look to be a lot to their eyes. It needn't be so much. What did they know of wealth? If they thought it came in a box, he would have a nice one fashioned. If they thought it came in a bag, they would have an embroidered one. If they thought there should be more than these things held, he would raise his hands and look innocent

and tell them he was only a merchant, not a priest or relative to the Kalif; and riches were not so vast for men like him.

Soon there were children all about, one of them with a rope. The three dirty men held one end. The other end went into the well. The rich man tied the rope around his soft belly. He felt himself pulled from the filthy water. He braced himself away from the stone wall, skinning his hands and knees. He was half-way up when he heard a commanding if somewhat decrepit voice say: "Loose that rope at once!" Down he went with a thunderous splash, right back to the bottom. In a moment, the three dirty men, looking chagrined, peered down; and the gaunt one asked, "Are you all right?"

The rope had fallen into the well with him. He could by no means toss it so far as the top. "You will have to get another rope," he said, lamenting the delay.

Then a wizened blind man put his head over the well's mouth. He cocked his head sideways to listen. The blind man said:

"When I was a young fellow, a rich man fell into a well on the street where I lived. Some friends and I teased him a lot. At last he promised us a lot of money and animals if we would pull him out, which, laughing and jeering, we finally did. Once he was out of the well, he had a change of heart. He returned to my street not with the promised rewards, but with a captain and some soldiers. He commanded the head of my most cherished friend be chopped off; and this was done. His head was thrown into the well which had caused the rich man indignity. My second friend was to have his legs chopped off, and these were thrown into the well. He lived a few months after. As to myself, my eyes were gouged out, and thrown into the well with the bobbing head and two legs. There were some children involved as well. They were sold as slaves and never seen by their families. This was a long time ago in another part of Ashum Patt, but they still speak of it on my street, and the world has not much changed."

The man in the well was aghast. "I would not do such things!" he shouted in earnest. "I am not such a monster as that! May Allah collapse these walls upon my head if my word is false!" He pressed his hands together and bowed over and over, not concerned that he dunked his head.

The three dirty faces which regarded him were most sober. Ugly teeth glinted as one said, "It is easy for you to say that now. Come to think of it, it would not be very sensible to give

us all your wealth and your royal bride, who must have cost dear to obtain, just to get out of a well. I have some friends who have lost their heads, all right, and for petty things. See this child here with one hand? His other hand was chopped off by a wealthy man who caught him stealing bread for his dying mother. How about that?"

"I have never done such a thing!" said the rich man, though in fact he had done it once or twice; for was it not the law to punish thieves?

"Maybe you never have," was the reply above. Then there was the sound of sucking teeth. He looked at his friends, then back in the hole. He said, "We must retire to consider it sensibly." Then the three dirty men went off with the blind man.

The children no longer peered in. Nobody came to him for about an hour, despite his loud and continuous shouts and guarantees and whining insistencies. He became more and more worried that he would have to try to stay awake another night, or drown. Finally, the three dirty men came back, without the obnoxious blind man, which was a relief.

The rich man's relief was short-lived. He saw that the three men had brought a thick, wide board—a heavy old door, which would for a long time prove sufficient. The rich man yelled and yelled. The heavy wood slammed down and sealed out the light, sealed in his shouting. If anyone could hear him at all, they did not lift up the lid to be certain of his next offer.

The rich man's wife and children were out riding their white horses a few days later, with many servants accompanying them on foot. How beautiful the veiled lady! She and her entourage and her children passed through the poor district, tossing small coins so as to put themselves in good graces with Allah. The hoofs of the white horses clattered onto the wood of the newly capped well. Round horse droppings contributed to the eventual disguise of the abandoned well's existence. The rich man's wife was proud and young and regal. As she was never able to find out if her husband was alive or dead, she was never in a position to be taken as some other man's wife, but guarded her missing husband's possessions as though they were her own. Also, she had many lovers.

PART II

***A SILVER THREAD
OF MADNESS***



*“Whoever weeps for the death of Ophelia
has no aesthetic taste.”*

—Rémy de Gourmont, 1902

Seller of Stones



There is a shop near my apartment block that sells nothing but stones. Please understand it is not a hobby store for rock collectors. They are plain and ordinary stones. The proprietor, an elderly woman, picks them up around the city. She has morning rounds. She searches everywhere. She has done this for many years, since before I was born, since before she opened the store. Her daily routine is always the same. She pulls a laundry cart through the city streets before dawn. You might see her on the East Side, or the West Side, or North, South, Central. There is a pattern to her method but I cannot quite figure it all out. I think she is usually to be found West in the earlier part of each month. Morning by morning she makes her way in a wide circle that bends inward until, at month's end, she has been everywhere and comes out in the Central district. Then she starts again on the West Side. I think that's how it works. In any event, each morning she turns up at her store near where I live, in time to open promptly at seven sixteen. No one else is up that early but she opens her store anyway. She never opens a minute earlier or a minute later.

At first I never saw anybody in her store. Nobody bought her rocks. It was no wonder. She hadn't even brushed them off. They were the vilest of rocks, lumpy and gray and dirty. On my way to work, I would pass her shop about a quarter to eight weekday mornings, by which time she would have been open a half hour or twenty-nine minutes. I could see her sitting behind the counter, rocks piled up to her left and right, rocks lying on the floor, rocks heaped upon tables and crowded onto shelves. Her head showed over the counter like a lumpy gray rock. She always smiled and watched the glass door on which a signmaker had painted the gray legend: Stones. It was apparent that she enjoyed her store even though she didn't have any customers. How she made the rent when she started out, I'll never know. Later, she developed a clientele.

Her clientele dropped by during lunch hours. They were mostly important businessmen with high incomes and when they started coming, it was my assumption that they wanted something natural for paperweights in their office towers. Some of the rocks they bought were too big for that, though. Some of them were too little. They could only come and browse among the rocks at lunch because the proprietress closed her shop promptly at three nineteen, before most of her wealthy customers were finished with their day's work. So they would skip eating lunch in order to spend the time in the stone seller's shop.

They would look over her stock and make such comments to each other as, "Look at this rock, Jack," and "Look at this one over here." You would think they had never seen rocks since they were little boys, so enthralled were they with the stone seller's wares.

"How much for this rock?"

"Fifty cents," she replied.

The businessman raised a brow as though surprised at the low price, the while rubbing his left hand down the front of his dark blue suit, leaving a dusty smear from right shoulder to middle of his fat belly. "And this one?" he asked, pointing to one larger than the one he held.

"Fifty cents."

"And that big one over there?"

"It's fifty cents, too," the old woman replied, never moving from her seat behind the counter until time to close. "They're all fifty cents."

"Are there discounts for large numbers of them?"

"No, they're just fifty cents."

"Where do you find so many?" he asked.

"Around."

Another businessman was looking at a rock the first businessman had asked about. This caused the first fellow to buy it right away, promising to send a boy around before three nineteen to pick it up. "Thank you," he said, paying his fifty cents. "I'll come look again tomorrow."

When I was fired from my place of employment and went on welfare on account of some emotional problems I was having at the time, I was able to stand around at the street corner near the old woman's store and observe everything. I went in quite often but couldn't afford things. It was an enjoyable activity for me, and a constant source of wonder. One of her clients was a very

beautiful woman, who I recognized as a television newscaster. She would drop in two or three times a week and purchase small rocks, apparently having a preference for round ones. She never said anything but would place her fifty cents on the counter and leave with each purchase hidden discreetly in her bag. On the evening program, if I happened to catch the show, I could see how smug she looked as she said the news.

The old woman occasionally had trouble with shoplifters. She was at their mercy. I remember a Chinese boy—perhaps Korean or Cambodian—who stuffed his pockets full before making a dash for the door. The old woman's neck stretched upward a bit, but otherwise she was as still as one of her stones, for she could by no means run after him at her age. Taking pity, I put myself in the boy's path. He slammed into me. It hurt quite a bit. When he fell down, he was unable to get up on account of his full pockets. By this means he was captured and arrested. The police took the rocks as evidence. So far as I know, the stone seller never did get the rocks returned. They may still be in the police evidence warehouse, where I recently read in the paper there are kept some very old evidences such as cigarette butts and bullet casings picked up at the scenes of crimes as far back as 1926. If anyone could get permission to turn that particular warehouse into a retail business, I'm sure it would be an interesting place to shop.

One day while I was browsing around the stone seller's shop, I noticed that the buying customers had dwindled down to one or two, and finally they left as their lunch hours came to an end. When it was just the stone seller and myself, I asked:

"Is business well."

"As well as can be," she replied, her lips barely moving.

"You have a very fine stock," I said, "but I notice you have not been adding much to it lately. This morning, for instance, you arrived with your laundry cart, promptly at seven sixteen, and had only two rocks."

"There is only concrete in the world today," she said, and her words were a lament.

"Is that so?" I asked. Then: "I suppose one day all the rocks will be in the hands of private owners and there will be no more for those of us with little money."

"That's so," she said, nodding her gray lump of a head but not looking at me. Even her eyes were flint.

"I am unemployed," I confessed, "and it is difficult for me

to afford your stones. Have you a layaway plan? I could pay you a nickel or a penny every few days, whatever I can find, then take with me a certain rock I've had my eyes on."

"I have no layaway," she said, and was immovable on this point.

"What if I were to help you gather rocks some dark morning, or go in your place when it rains," I suggested. "You could pay me off with a rock or two."

"Business is not so great," she said, "as to allow me an apprentice." Almost as an afterthought, she added: "As a matter of fact, I should charge you to be my student if you came along."

"What would it cost to be your student?" I asked.

"Fifty cents," she said. "And you must sign a promise not to open a business too near to me."

I said, "But if you would let me work in your shop without pay, I would be appreciative of the experience. I would go so far as to walk about the city with a sandwich board that tells the address of your shop. Anyway, I don't have fifty cents to be your apprentice. I am very sad."

"It's a hard world," said the stone seller. "I must be hard also."

It was no use. She wouldn't hire me even for free. I left her shop and walked about the city, hoping to find two quarters to pay her for my apprenticeship. I noticed as I searched that there were no rocks anywhere in the city. It was no wonder rich people bought them, they were so rare! I found an expired cigarette lighter and several silver gum wrappers and assorted things like that, and several pigeon feathers, and a dead parakeet smashed so flat in the gutter and so dirty that only my keen eye could have recognized what it was. But I could not find any rocks; neither was there any fifty cents for me.

I returned to my tiny apartment and pined. I thought to myself, "I must make something of my life. It is never too late. For years, that old woman's store was unsuccessful, and still she persevered. Look at her today! I can do something like that. What will it be?"

Several days later, starvation drove me into the world. I had not yet my welfare check and began to look in garbage bins for something to eat. I scraped out a cat food can, but it was the pizza crust that saved my life.

In the corner of the alley I saw a dead, bloated rat. It re-

minded me of the flat parakeet I already had. And I vaguely recollected spying the remains of a dead squirrel near the park, where perhaps nobody else would have noticed it and taken it away. Hadn't I once seen a partly squashed porcupine that had wandered into the city to its regret? A plan formed in my mind as I gathered up the bloated corpse of the rat and started off toward the park to see if the dead squirrel was available.

Now you can see how it is my apartment came to be filled with all these things. I have developed a special method to limit the smell. You may think they are all useless and will never help me. But I'm young and can wait out my investment. Already there are fewer and fewer to be found. When I am ready to open my store, I will have the finest stock of this kind, and it will be hard work keeping it replenished as things get less common. But already I am an expert and can find more.

The stone seller has been ill lately, I've noticed. Her stock has dwindled to a few things because she doesn't get around so well. I am thinking that when she no longer runs her business, I will rent the space for mine. Today I went to see her for a minute and she was more gray than ever. She could hardly move. She spoke feebly. "My friend," she said, "what's happened to your hair? You're as mangy as a dog on the side of the road. What is that smell you brought in? You should take better care of yourself. Look how you're bloating up." Though her tone was kindly, I was annoyed by what she said, so I left. After all, she shouldn't talk, old stone that she is.

Threats



There was that man sitting on the bus minding his own business, but I could see the truth. I could read his mind. He wanted to kill everybody on the bus. There! He just turned his head a bit and half smiled in my direction, then looked straight ahead. He looked exactly like a harmless old man, but he was thinking, "I should kill somebody right now, maybe that fellow who can read my mind." I was really scared. I didn't know what to do. Should I get off the bus? What if he got off behind me? I'd have to wait until he got off the bus. Then I'd get off somewhere else. What if he never got off the bus? What if we just rode back and forth until the bus driver asked us what we were doing and we both had to get off right then, together? Yes, I was really afraid.

He scratched behind his ear. What did he mean by that? Was it a signal to someone else? I gazed around the bus. All the faces were terrible and innocent. They were normal-looking people, really ugly. But it was a trick of some kind, I could see that. Was there only one more? Was it all of them? Who had the man signaled? What did the signal mean?

I wasn't going to wait to find out. I got up and went and sat beside him. I looked straight ahead, just like him. I thought very hard, hard enough for him to hear me thinking: "I know what you're up to."

"Do you now," he thought back.

"Absolutely. And you can't get away with it."

"Do you think I won't?"

I scratched behind my ear, so he would think I had a confederate with me on the bus. But I didn't. If they were all his associates, then he would know that I was bluffing. But if only one or two people were perfectly innocent like myself, he would have to worry that one of the innocent ones was my confederate.

"So," he thought to me, "you have a friend."

"One or two, perhaps," I thought.

"Well, then, we are even. I have one or two myself. Maybe more than that."

He scratched twice behind his ear.

"Do that again and I shall have to cause you a little trouble," I warned.

"Can you?"

"Yes, I can. You'd better look out, that's all I have to say."

We said everything in silence. He never looked at me. The bus bounced along and came into the heart of the city. He looked out the window. He opened the window a crack. Did he think I smelled? Was it another signal? Were there more conspirators out there in the streets? My god! If he got off first, and I got off afterward, how would I know I wasn't walking into a trap! There might be someone at several bus stops after he got off! Oh, he was clever. He'd worked it all out. But I could play cards, too.

"You may think you have me," he heard me thinking.

"Yes," he agreed.

"Well, you're wrong. There are defenders waiting at certain bus stops up ahead. At any moment, some of them could get on the bus if they knew I was in danger."

"How will they know?" His thought was a smug one.

"They'll know."

I kept my thinking positive. He mustn't catch a quaver in my thoughts. Otherwise, even if he believed there were protectors at the stops, he might think there was a hole in my defense, that he could time it just right, kill me and get away before the defenders could act.

The man was wearing a dirty, brimmed hat and his nose was peeling as from an old sunburn, or maybe a disease. He had cut himself shaving, three or four different places. But they were old nicks—a couple of days old. His cheeks were bristly. That nose with the flakes was a big one, absurdly big. I turned my head and was horrified to note that he had hair growing in his ears. Was he human? Was he some terrible creature in disguise? Was the disguise almost perfect except that he could not hide the hair in his ears? Was the nose not a real nose at all but something unfathomable that was peeling?

"We humans are clever, too," I thought.

"Yes, I know; it makes it more interesting."

"To kill us, you mean?"

"Yes, that. And the other things."

I dared not ask "what" other things. He mustn't think me

ignorant. He mustn't think he is one up on me, that he knows something about it that I don't know.

"I have a knife," I thought matter-of-factly. "I could kill you this minute."

"You forget how thin I really am. It must be a very long knife to get all the way through the disguise I am wearing."

"It is a big enough knife," I lied, patting the hem of my threadbare jacket.

Did he let me hear his thoughts laughing? He was thinking, "If you kill me, there are so many witnesses, you will go to prison."

It was true. The disguises were so perfect, even dead they looked like people. I could not possibly prove it was self-defense. Besides, my knife was only three inches long, a little folding penknife. But he didn't have to know that.

"I am a member of an underground organization that has penetrated the justice system," I informed him. "So you see, I can kill you and not worry. It is easy. So you had better watch your step."

"I shall," he thought. "I shall watch my step, as the sign says, when I get off the bus. Will you?"

I was sweating. What was he implying? What would happen to me if I got off the bus *after* him?

"I shall get off the bus before you get off," I thought.

"Fine."

"You won't be able to follow." I made this one a convincing thought. "The defenders will stop you."

"I don't mind," he gave me to understand. "I don't have to get off."

"There's someone else, then," I thought.

"Someone else."

"The protectors can stop them just as easily."

"Maybe you are right. I doubt it."

He reached up to ring the bell.

"I wouldn't if I were you!" I thought very angrily, my hand feeling at the lump in my jacket.

He thought better of it and didn't ring the bell. Someone else rang it. But he did not get up. To the average person it would look like he had merely gotten confused, old as he was, and had thought it was his stop, then realized it wasn't. In reality, I had won a round. I had delayed his plan.

At the next stop after this, he began to stand, but I would not give ground. I would not let him out.

"Pardon me."

He said this with his actual voice. What a strange voice it was!

"Please be seated," I replied by thinking. He pretended not to hear me, but nudged me with his legs, so I said with my voice, "Please be seated."

"This is my stop," he said.

"You are quite wrong," I said.

The bus jarred to a halt. A few people got off, some others got on. Still, I would not move my knees.

"Why are you doing this?" he whispered, and gazed around the bus in an embarrassed way. "Please just let me off at my stop."

I whispered back, "You know perfectly well. If you did not know, you would have called for the driver to help you. You would have told him I am being unreasonable and won't let you off. But you know perfectly well that you cannot get away with it. So, please, sit down."

He sat. I continued to look straight ahead. He had his head turned and was looking at me with a woeful expression. Oh, they were all good actors, it was true! He looked so sad! But was he really sad? Certainly not! He had no reason to be.

Three stops later, I reached up and rang the bell. My arm reached straight across his face and he flinched. Ah! I had the better of him now!

I thought to him, "We'll get off here," but he denied me an answering thought.

I rose from my seat, but he stayed put. I walked to the front of the bus. He still had not moved. He gripped the top of the seat in front of himself, his knuckles white, and tried to avoid eye contact with me when I looked back. I had to play my hand to the end! He clearly did not wish to get off the bus with me, so this must be the safest thing for me, to have him with me. I stood in the open bus door but did not get off. The driver said, "Are you getting off?" I mumbled at the driver, "My friend. My friend," and pointed at the man with the peeling nose and the hair in his ears.

He got the message all right. Shaking, tottering like the old man he pretended to be, his features terrified, he came down the aisle of the bus and we both got off. How really terrified he

looked! But I must not be too sure of myself. They *are* good actors, after all. He might have one or two more tricks. I must be on guard.

I used my voice. "Don't try anything."

He didn't reply, not with his vocal cords or his mind. He let me take hold of his coat and arm and lead him away from the bus stop. In a block or two, he said roughly, but in a low and scared tone, "Where are you taking me?"

"Defenders," I said. Did I say it with just my mind? Yes, I did not speak aloud. He pretended not to hear my thought.

There were tears running down his cheeks. A clever disguise indeed! People whisked past us in both directions. We progressed slowly. The streets were noisy as well as crowded. We had to wait for every light. The fiend began to stumble a bit, as though he were all worn out, and still he dared not call to anyone for comfort. He had no conspirators after all! I had seen through his bluff! He was a rogue, acting alone. But this time, he had chosen the wrong one. I had him now!

"What are you going to do with me," he asked, his rough voice cracked and miserable.

"You should know that. You should know all about it."

"I don't know," he said.

"Don't you? Don't you?"

"I don't know."

"You should know it."

"I don't."

"What would you do if you were me? Wouldn't you kill me?"

"Yes."

He stumbled, fell to one knee. "Excuse me. Excuse me," he said, allowing me to help him stand. "Don't be mad at me," he said. "Excuse me. I'll get up. I won't escape. Excuse me."

"So you would kill me, would you?" I asked.

"No, I would not. Why would I kill you? Why would you kill me?"

"You said just this minute you would kill me, before you stumbled."

"I didn't say it."

"I heard you say it. We were talking."

"We weren't talking."

"We were exchanging thoughts. We were talking."

"I am not thinking anything. I cannot think. What am I doing? Why are you going to kill me?"

"You must admit it is only self-defense."

"Why must I go through it again? Why must there be so much terror?"

"Someone caught you before, did they? But you escaped?"

"After four years, I escaped."

He almost choked on a sob. How old he looked! How dreadfully ugly and old!

"I will torture you," I said. "It will hurt you a lot."

"No. Please, no torture."

"I will peel off your disguise. I will reveal your scrawny body."

"No, please. Not the torture."

"You would rather I do it quickly?"

"Yes, quickly."

I hadn't known what cowards they were. The stupid bullies! They think only ill thoughts about us humans and want to harm us, but when it is turned around, look at how they snivel!

We passed a police officer. The beast made a strange coughing sound at the policeman. Was it an alien tongue? Was the policeman one of them?

"Speed it up," I said.

The policeman ignored us.

"You failed," I whispered cruelly. "It was your last chance. Even your own people won't help you now."

He fell down. He was so frightened, he began to throw up. He was dripping this awful stuff down his chin and on his ragged jacket. He was sobbing something awful. He didn't sound human at all. The stuff he vomited, it did not look like food. What was it he had thrown out of his system?

"Get up," I demanded. "Get up, or I'll kill you right here."

He began to wail. He began to scream. "Help me! Oh please for God somebody! Ohhhh! Ohhhh! Please for God, somebody!"

People were watching us, lots of people. They were just watching. I dragged him to his feet and gave him a push from behind. "Get going!" I said. "No one will help you. We've got you this time and no one will help you."

I pushed him harder. We continued through the streets.

Nights in the City



What a shame that in this world there is so much suffering. Today in the street I saw an elderly man standing alone, miserable and lost, having soiled his pants so that pedestrians made sour faces and veered away from his odor. He wanted to know where there was a certain street, but no one would answer him. He had gotten off the bus because the driver told him the street was nearby, but he couldn't find it. So, holding my breath, I walked up to this very old and ugly man and said, "You cannot get to that street from here. You are in the entirely wrong part of the city." And he began to wail, "But I haven't a bus transfer and it was my last change! The driver didn't give me a transfer! Why did he tell me my street was this one?" What should I tell him? That the driver probably didn't want a man who had soiled his pants to ride the bus and had neglected to give him a transfer in case he tried once more to get on the bus and find his proper way? I left the old man so that I could take a couple deep breaths, then I walked back to him and told him not to shout and weep, that if he would walk down to the bottom of the hill, which was a long way, he would see a bridge across the freeway, and across that, some distance further, he would find the road that would connect him with the street he sought, or at least one end of it. The last I saw of him, he was going down the hill as I directed. Several minutes later, as I continued toward errands of my own, I suddenly realized I had told him a wrong turn, and he would end up under the freeway viaduct, even more hopelessly lost than before.

So you see it is a sad world. And as this is the truth of things, how can I be expected to sit down and write stories for the magazines and anthologies that are so much hot air meant to entertain? How can I write you a spooky ghost story that you will enjoy a great deal because secretly you do not believe in ghosts and the terror isn't real to you. Someday you will be standing on a street corner, old and pitiful, having shit your

pants, and a middle-aged woman with a sincere face will give you bad directions. That, my friend, is real terror. But you would rather hear about a weird visitation—a ghost or a vampire—something like that. Very well, but no more of these trumped up horror stories that could never be. This is about an actual spirit, an absolutely true story that I have never told anybody until now because I knew they wouldn't believe me. It happened to me quite a while ago, when I was a pretty girl. All kinds of men were attracted to me in those days, even a dead one. I thought I would never be rid of him. Don't laugh, or you will shit your pants! Then who will want to sit by you on the bus?

The bus is in a lot of my stories because I live in the city and don't drive a car. I write about what I know. That is also why I so often write about pain and about ghosts. I know about ghosts. If I had a dollar for every bus I've been on and five dollars for every ghost I've seen, I could break even riding the bus. One day on the bus, when I was young and good-looking, a very pale fellow got on without paying. I saw him not pay the driver, but the driver didn't say a thing. I should have known at that moment that the pale man was a ghost, but in those days, I didn't believe in them. Whether someone believes in ghosts or not, they are everywhere. They are seen all the time by everybody. But if you don't believe in them, you think they are something else, living people perhaps, or crazy ones, or dogs hunched back in the shadows of the alleys. But they're ghosts.

I have a lot of tricks to keep people from sitting beside me on the bus. The simplest is to slouch all over the place and pretend not to notice anybody. A more subtle method is to give the general impression that I'm getting off at the next stop. No one likes to sit beside someone, only to have to get up and let them out of the seat right away. Another excellent method is to look very intensely out the window on the opposite side of the bus. A new rider will not want to sit down and get in your line of vision. Usually I do things like that, but as this fellow had not paid his bus fare, I looked at him as if to say, "Hey, I had to pay for this ride, so you better do it too!" But the eye contact was a bad idea. He completely misunderstood what I was thinking. He smiled at me and I knew he intended to sit beside me. Another girl might have liked the idea, because he looked pretty clean, and his smile was innocent. But I thought he looked like Aubrey Beardsley and who wants to sit with some sick, skinny young fellow who parts his hair down the middle? What a clown

he was! And now he was sitting beside me, a bit too close, and saying, "I only just got here."

I didn't say a thing to him at first. I ignored him. What was I supposed to say to such a line as that? Oh, that's nice, I'm very glad you just got here. Or, should I have asked him where "here" is and how was he so sure he had made it even now?

"In Seattle, I mean," he added. "Until a few minutes ago, I was in Dallas."

He had a Texas accent. It added to his general air of being a clown.

"Have you ever been to Dallas?" he asked.

"Once, I was," I admitted, not looking at him.

"It was always ugly," he said. "Now it's worse. A lot of office towers, and downtown it's boring and there are no good places to eat, if you're a vegetarian like myself."

As a matter of fact I was a vegetarian like himself. So, despite my defenses, which were big walls from here to the moon, he had somehow managed to climb over. I turned my head to give this skeletal clown of a Texan a long look, and he showed me those big teeth again. Big eyes, too. He wasn't bad looking if you like skeletons. I had to turn away so he wouldn't see my silent laugh.

"I never wanted to live in Dallas but I didn't have a choice: I was born there. Poverty killed my mother. In Texas you either have a lot or you don't have anything. Seattle is much nicer. Even if you don't have anything, you have a lot."

That was true. There was the water, the mountains, the parks, the stores, the trees, and you could walk to everything—or catch the bus.

"I thought it was the end for me," he said. "I always wanted to see Seattle, or else Paris, but my mother was born in Seattle and talked about it a lot. I always thought Seattle was on a map next to Paradise. That's when I was little. I thought Paradise could be found on a map, you see. Seattle would be close by. I always thought that if someone dies and goes to heaven, it wouldn't be far out of the way to go to Seattle first."

At this point I could not help but laugh out loud, and it was no use trying to hide it. I was going to look him straight in the face to do my laughing. Only I didn't laugh. When I turned my head, there was no one sitting beside me. I looked down the aisle and up. The bus was approaching my own stop, so I had

to get off. "How did he do that?" I wondered. I guessed he must have been hiding.

"Hey! Hey! You never told me your name!" he shouted several days later. He came running down the sidewalk in my direction. His gait was awkward. He ran on his toes and leaned too far forward. His comically parted hair was sticking up in back. His big teeth smiled. His big eyes smiled. I was afraid he was going to smash right into me. "Let me take your groceries!" he said, out of breath, but I wouldn't let him take them. "You'd drop them," I said. He was so skinny I doubted he could carry anything heavier than a balloon without falling down with it. I said, "I thought only girls were anorexic."

"Boys sometimes," he said. "But I'm not. I'm just skinny."

He walked along beside me. I wasn't sure what to do. I had no particular reason to trust him. He was a stranger to me. But if he kept following me, he'd see where I lived. If I went somewhere else besides home, I'd have to carry the groceries everywhere and the milk would get warm.

"Want a picnic?" he asked.

"No."

"When was your last picnic?"

"I don't go on picnics."

"Why not?" he asked. "It's such a nice city! Lots of places to have a picnic! Isn't life a picnic? Gee, Seattle is swell!"

He was definitely an exasperating clown.

"You should be glad you live here," he said.

"I am glad," I replied curtly.

"You didn't tell me your name."

I told him my name.

"That's a nice name."

"Thank you. I picked it myself."

"My name is Henry."

"Terrible," I said.

"I know. I didn't choose it."

"Change it," I said.

"To what?"

"Sam," I said.

"Okay, my name is Sam. Oh! Must be going. See you soon!" And when I looked around, he was gone.

You may be thinking this is an amusing story, but it isn't. Sam was a very unhappy fellow despite that he kept smiling. It made him miserable that I was smart-mouthed with him and not interested in his uninvited attention. He was in Seattle on his first trip to anywhere in the world, and on his best behavior as travelers always are, and he was hoping for a wonderful adventure, a nice romance. But I was the only girl he had met so far and I had a smart mouth. I wouldn't even go on a picnic with him. If that's not sad, then you don't know what sadness is. Sam was very sad.

As for me, I wasn't sad in those days. That came later. Or before, I forget which. In those days I was having an affair with a shot-putter, a big young woman with a mean arm who could bench-press I forget how much, a million pounds. She was Olympics material and was supposed to go to Russia for some trials but fell in love with a country-western singer named Tasha and gave up her chances to be recognized as a world-class athlete so she could be a go-fer for Tasha's band. Made a complete fool of herself. But it wasn't giving up much, I guess. Shot-putters don't get to be on boxes of Wheaties or pose with fancy cars. Neither do athletes who won't or can't hide the fact that they're dykes. Obviously everything I'm telling you has to be the truth, you surely realize, since even in a ghost story, nobody could make such things up. So, as I was saying, this was after her thing with Tasha, and I was very happy with this big-muscled girl. It didn't last a long time, but it was a nice affair and I was still in the middle of that when Sam tried to get to know me. If I had been on the rebound maybe I would have responded. Who can be sure? As it was, I didn't need any scarecrow of a Texan for a boyfriend. Forget him, I thought.

"Hi," I said, when I saw him sitting on the outdoor deck of a café I often patronize.

"Hi!" he shouted in surprise. I was standing right in front of him.

"You were somewhere else," I said.

"Me? No. I've been in Seattle the whole time."

"I mean you were daydreaming."

"How do you know?"

I laughed. It was hard to make sense out of that boy.

"I don't know if I was daydreaming or not," he said. "I was sitting over there on west Queen Anne Hill waiting for the sunset

a couple of minutes ago, wondering where you might be. Suddenly, here I was."

Queen Anne was pretty far away from Capitol Hill. I supposed he exaggerated how fast he covered the distance.

"I was going to have their quiche," I said. "Care to join me?"

"What's a quiche?"

I laughed again. He was a Texan after all. "Cheese and egg pie with broccoli—at this place anyway. It used to be the 'in' food. This is the only place that still makes any. You eat cheese and eggs, don't you?"

"I used to. I don't eat anything now."

"The ultimate Gandhiist," I said. "Well, I'm going to eat."

He came in with me but didn't order anything, wasn't even acknowledged by the woman behind the counter. He sat across the table from me.

"You should order something," I said. "You're too thin. You must be anemic. I thought all Texans had tans."

"Not me," he said.

"I can see that."

"I mean not me, I'm not anemic."

"Do you take vitamins?"

"Used to. Lots. Want to see a French film with me? I like French films. Can't see them in Dallas."

"Okay, I'll see a French film with you. Dutch?"

"I can pay."

"Wow, a real date," I said. "I thought you were poor."

"I got here with about twenty dollars in small bills in my pockets. No matter how many times I spend them, they're still there. I think they must disappear from the cash drawers and get back in my pockets. I guess it isn't honest, huh?"

"Pretty handy pockets if you ask me," I said.

"It looks as though I can spend the money forever and ever if I wanted."

"If you get new pants," I said, "save me your old pockets."

I ate my dinner and we went to see a French comedy. It was about two girls and a guy. Why was it always two girls and a guy? Why not just two girls? Why not two guys? Why not two guys and a girl? The French are like that. I ate popcorn in the dark and offered some to Sam but he never took any. He held my hand for a while, a delicate touch. Then there was a really funny scene. The guy in the comedy had been locked in the

bathroom and the girls were in bed together. The guy was yelling, according to the subtitles, "What are you doing out there? Why is the door stuck?" I was laughing really hard at that part. I was the only one. After the film was over, I turned to ask Sam if he liked the part about the bathroom, but he was gone. "Probably went to the bathroom," I said to myself. I waited by the exit a long time, then said, "Stupid Texan," and went to see my shot-put girl.

The two things you can't find when you need them are police officers and bathrooms. This is why so many old people shit their pants in public. They get so frightened of the muggers and purse snatchers and street punks, they just shit their pants. If there were more police officers around, things wouldn't smell so bad. I'm not sure what the connection is exactly, but bathrooms and police officers are part of the conspiracy of misery. Something to do with the way the universe works. I'm still thinking about that old guy I gave bad directions to. He is probably under the viaduct at this very moment, while I tell you this story of my youthful follies. I was also thinking of the scene in the French movie. I remember almost nothing about that movie, not the title or anything, but I remember that bathroom. Funny the things you'll remember years later.

Sam appeared in my apartment one evening.

"Shit, fuck, Sam! What are you doing in my place! How did you get in!"

I cussed a bunch more. I was beside myself. I was instantly and extremely very, very mad. Sam looked hurt that I wasn't glad to see him. But I value my privacy. I don't tell many people where I live. I don't go see many people, either. Even my best friends, I expect them to knock on the door first. But some skinny turd from Texas who took me to a movie once thinks he can barge right in. Boy, was I mad. By the time I could see straight, Sam wasn't there. I hadn't heard him leave. The doors were still bolted from the inside. Had I imagined him? Was I even crazier than I knew about?

Several days later he appeared in my apartment again. It must have been two or three in the morning. I rolled over on the futon and there he was, standing beside my quilts, a gawky shadow. "You asshole," I groaned sleepily, feeling helpless because I slept naked. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm a virgin," he said.

"Get the hell out of here."

"How can a boy just die and be happy if he's a virgin?"

"If you don't get out you'll find out because I'll kill you."

"Somebody already did."

I wasn't hearing straight. I was really tired. But Sam was weeping. I fumbled for my bed lamp but its twenty-five watts didn't light the bedroom much. In the dimness, I saw that Sam was paler and skinnier than ever, like something was wasting him away. He rubbed his eyes with long, thin fingers and tried to brace up. He tried to put on a manly show. But he was just a stupid skinny kid. "I always wanted to come to Seattle," he said.

"Well you made it," I growled, sitting up and pulling a cover all around me. I said, "I didn't know you were a cracked nut, Sam. You can't break into people's places like this."

"I didn't break anything."

"What would they do in Texas if you did this?"

"Shoot me, I guess. I never liked Texas."

"Seattle's mellow, Sam, but it's not *that* mellow. If I had a gun, I'd shoot you too."

"But if you were a Texan, you'd *have* the gun. Three or four."

"Why have you come at this ungodly hour?"

"To say good-bye." His expression was so sad. His eyes were like a big puppy's.

"Going back to Dallas?"

"God! I hope not. I don't know where I'm going. But I'm going somewhere, I can tell. I keep feeling it pull at me."

"I know the feeling," I said.

"But I didn't want to go and still be a virgin."

"Look," I said. "In this life you get to visit Seattle once, or you get to be laid. You can't have them both."

That made him smile. Big teeth smiling.

"Pretty subtle fucker, aren't you? Look, would you believe me if I said I was a dyke?"

"Yes."

"You would? Why, do I look like a goddamned dyke?"

"No."

"Good. Well, I am."

"I thought so."

"You did?" I didn't know how to take this guy. "Then why the hell have you been following me all over the city? You got a thing about lesbians or something?"

“Yes.”

There was something so painfully, asininely innocent about his reply that I couldn't even be annoyed. I had to admit I was attracted to the clown. I had Beardsley drawings on my walls, and a couple different books about his life, what there was of it. Suppose that that pathetic boy came to you in the middle of the night and said, “Look, I'm dying of consumption, I won't live long, but I took a good bath, and I'm going to die a virgin unless you help me out.”

I threw back the covers. “Hop in.”

He stood there gaping.

“Come on, hop in.”

He fell onto the quilts like a snapped twig. “Really?” he said.

“What are friends for?” I helped him undress. “Do you know *anything* about this sort of thing?”

“Sure. Lots of pictures.”

He started nosing around my body.

He was clumsy but his touch was light, pleasant. He was skinny as a girl but sharper-edged. Was he any good? Not really. But I kept thinking his name wasn't Sam or Henry, but Aubrey. I rather liked it. To tell the truth, that bench-pressing shot-putting girlfriend of mine wasn't any worse or better. So I couldn't complain. And *he* was having a good time. Afterward, he chattered on and on like I was the only friend he'd ever had in his whole miserable, boring life. He trusted me. He loved me. He poured out his soul.

In the morning he was gone, the bolts to the doors still locked from the inside.

I would've looked him up in the Dallas directory but he never told me his last name. But I guess I sort of knew all along he was dead anyway. And I'll always remember the last thing I heard him say before I nodded off to sleep that night, with him in my arms. The poor sweet boy, smiling at me in the dark, whispering, “I always knew Seattle was next to paradise.”

The Old Woman Who Dragged Her Husband's Corpse



The author intrigued by things macabre (who is, after all, the only sort of author worthy of attention) will find it difficult to outdo the daily paper. Not long ago it was reported that a retired physician acquired permission from a lifelong friend (by then an elderly wino) to preserve his corpse "for use as a paperweight." They had gotten an attorney to go over the written contract. After the friend's death, the physician set forth by means unspecified to preserve the body as a memento of long friendship in as natural a condition as could be achieved.

When the authorities learned of this, they wished to arrest the physician on charges of "abusing a corpse" but could not locate the evidence, the physician having hidden it until such time as he was assured it would not be confiscated.

Such a grotesque, taken from life, is difficult to exceed in fiction, which is perhaps why many horror writers trump up an element of the supernatural, ensuring the illusion of imaginativeness.

I never saw a follow-up on the case. I do not know if the physician was allowed to keep his enormous paperweight. I certainly hope he won out in the end. His sentimental feelings strike me as less shocking than what most doctors would do with a corpse, not to mention with living beings. If it is not abusive for medical students to tear a body liver from spleen, why should it be abusive to preserve one intact?

If the physician did lose his cherished friend, we needn't feel terribly sorry for him, as he seemed by nature a humorous gentleman and probably would not be long distraught. Another case from the newspaper, by contrast, struck me as poignant and pitiful: A man who had kept the skeleton of his wife, wedding ring upon its finger, beside himself in his bed for twenty years, took seriously ill and was discovered by an emergency aid unit.

By the time his physical health was sufficiently restored that he was released from the hospital—and allowed to return to his pathetic apartment—his wife had been taken from him, never again to be touched, held, loved.

How indeed does even the greatest mistress of horror one-up the reality of life's simple madnesses?

A case in yesterday's paper interested me enormously and preys upon my mind. It regarded a pair of retired schoolteachers in their eighties, many years divorced from the realities of the modern world. They became paranoid and secretive. The husband died suddenly and in a week began to deteriorate. The old woman, too frail to move her husband's decomposing body, and too frightened to seek help from neighbors, contrived a method of removing the stinking body from her trailer house.

She tied a rope about his body and, though the paper doesn't say so, I would suppose she apologized and explained the necessity of her plan. With tremendous effort she was able to drag the body from the bed, down the trailer's narrow hallway and to the front door.

Then she took the farther end of the rope out to the driveway and tied it to the rear bumper of an old Chevrolet.

Seating herself behind the wheel, and being so very short that she could scarcely see out the windshield, she started the engine, and drove slowly out into the street.

Then she drove faster.

The corpse was dragged for several miles, losing some of its parts along the way. Then the poor woman accidentally drove off the side of the road into a ditch. Can you imagine the condition of her mind as she drove about seeking an appropriate place to dump her husband's body? Watching that body hop and tumble along in her rearview mirror? Then, poor frail old gal, getting her car stuck in a ditch?

She managed to free the wheels from the ditch and regain the highway, but was by then in such a state of mind . . . the final straw was when the rope broke and the body, such that remained of it, reposed on the centerline.

Feeling helpless and forlorn, the old woman drove home.

The corpse was struck at least twice by passing motorists before a highway patrolman pulled over to see what it was.

By following the trail of the dragged corpse, the authorities were able to trace its origin to a trailer court.

The woman was arrested, charged with "abusing a corpse,"

that fine phrase. Her neighbors, pitying her, refused to discuss her with those reporters who made a national story of the tragedy. The official police statement was that the old woman had acted in "misguided desperation."

That's as much as we are ever apt to know about the old woman who dragged her husband's corpse. I hope she got off with a light sentence and was soon able to return to the routine of her daily existence. If by anyone's reckoning she deserved punishment for her crime, I should think being able to live out her life much as she had been living it already would be punishment enough.

My own mate asked me, "What if you knew, since the day we met, that when you died, I would tie your body to the bumper of our Volkswagen, and drag you about until your pieces were strewn across the countryside? Would you still love me?"

In point of fact, it wouldn't bother me a bit. I dread the doctor and the mortician, whose abuses are legal ones, who profit from our mortality, but whatever my mate decided to do with my remains would not be, by my estimation, abusive.

That incident haunted me all night. I kept picturing the lonely, frightened old woman trying to get that stinking corpse out of her home, talking to her husband as a combination "thing" and "companion," confused in one part of her mind, certain of her intent in another, struggling to succeed at her simple task without being harassed by outsiders. . . .

I think of her and I want to make a story of it.

The story begins:

Once upon a time there was a dead husband . . .

And it ends:

His ghost came to the trailer house later on, all in pieces, and sat in front of the television.

Ah, well, perhaps I shouldn't write such a story.

Atrocities



“ . . . a tiny morsel
in a dish of night.”

—*Gertrude Kolmar*

Lucifer, to see what it was like to be a man, removed all vestiges of power from himself, and limped through the world, helpless for seven days. Tired, hungry, observing cruelty, badly treated, arrested, tortured, and terrified, on the seventh day he obtained a horrible vengeance, then retired to his dark pit with the knowledge that in Evil, as in everything, he was second-rate, and Hell was nothing compared to God's Earth.

That is a story I believe is true. No greater evil can be found than on God's Earth. Lucifer could not do anything more terrible than God has already done, or we have done to each other.

I believe in the supernatural. Anyone who believes in God believes in the supernatural. I have particular reason to believe, as I have seen the things that I have seen; I know what I have learned. And I have felt the pain of small, crippled beings and seen their spirits wander. The ghosts of dogs and all manner of animals struck by automobiles huddle along the highway margins. The ghosts of hundreds of thousands of rats, poisoned or dissected in the gutters or laboratories, continue their desperate quest to end their hunger and their pain. Children, dead of neglect, still wail from their beds and sniffle in their cellars. Ours is a haunted planet. It is haunted by misery and injustice. It is haunted by confusion and prejudice and hate.

Once I saw the sick ghost of a mother. She was emaciated and her breast was bared but could not give milk. She carried the shade of a dead infant, as pathetic as herself, dark their eyes, thin their faces. The ghost-mother saw that I noticed her existence and she said, “Don't look at me. I'm too ugly.” All that I could do to ease her pain was to look away. She did not wish to be seen.

I have this ability to see the things that others cannot see. For years I thought I was mad. I hid it well. No one but myself knew of my madness. But as I observed this war-torn world and its material horrors, I realized that I alone was rational. The rest of the world was insane and I was not. I began slowly to accept the unique qualities of my mind. I accepted the things I saw, the ghostly things. There is the ghost of an old synagogue not far from where I live. Nobody knows it is there but me. I am used to such things. My ability is a painful ability, a sacred ability, an ability of no crucial value to me, but still, it is my ability.

Resigned as I am to living in a world that is different from the world others believe they live in, it is hard for me to be made nervous or afraid. I have adjusted too well to everything. I'm cynical about everything. I'm sorry for everything I see. It is hard for me to be surprised. But one day I was badly upset. It was when my friend of many years came to see me and he told me about a horrible dream. He had dreamed about a world that only I knew to be real. Let me tell you in his own words what he said: "I dreamed about a world that only you know to be real." It was a very odd choice of phrasing, and his words terrified me. I felt that he had dreamed about my secret, for how else could he have known that I knew the things he dreamed about were real? "What is more," he said, "I have not yet awakened. I am still dreaming of this world, of you, of the terrible things that you alone know to be true."

I consoled him and convinced him it was all a dream, but since that time, I have not myself been convinced. Am I even now in this old friend's nightmare? Are all the tragedies the fault of my friend for dreaming so fierce a dream?

This made more sense than people always killing people, building machines of war, governments of war, human beings dying in such vast numbers, only to wander about in a perpetual daze asking, "Why am I dead? Why has this happened? Why is the world like this?"

A few days later I went to my friend's house to wake him up.

"It's no use," he said, fixing me some breakfast tea. "I cannot actually awaken. You cannot get out of the nightmare to get to me in my real life. I can only imagine that I am in a coma someplace. Perhaps I am in a hospital and they are keeping me alive. If you knew where that hospital was, and could reach it, you could perform a mercy killing. It would be a mercy to this

whole world, for at the moment my nightmare ends, everything is over."

I began to visit all the hospitals far and wide to see if my friend were in two places at once, in his old home and in some hospital, but none of the hospitals knew about him or had anyone answering to his description.

"Surely you can change the nature of your dream," I said to him one evening as we sat in the park looking at the reservoir. The park was crowded with unhappy ghosts, people who had died in the park, or had been killed somewhere else but wandered into the park. A lot of transparent pigeons were being fed by a transparent old woman. Some living pigeons moved in and out among the ghosts of pigeons past. The reservoir had many floating bodies. My friend whose nightmare it was could not see any of it. Only I knew the truth of what he dreamed.

"Who can change their dream?" he asked of me. "I cannot. I do not even know all the parts of my dream. What is going on in Bangkok at this moment? What is going on inside those houses along that hill beyond the reservoir? I, for one, haven't the least idea. My dream has taken on a ghostly life of its own. It does as it pleases. Even I am but its pawn."

"You must struggle with your dream nonetheless," I said. "Think about a kind world, a world filled with generosity and goodwill, a world of gentle people."

"It would be murder!" he exclaimed.

"What? How so?"

"Should I do away with all these people who are already here? They must change themselves. I cannot change them. It would be murder. I cannot dream a better world upon the blood of their destruction."

"I see."

We left the park and walked along the avenue. The street was cluttered with thousands upon thousands of classic and vintage cars, mostly ruined, piled one atop the other and for as far as my eyes could see. But only my eyes could see them. Those automobiles that still functioned rushed down the street and through the ghosts of cars as though they were not there.

"If I were to kill you," I suggested, "it would end your dream."

"It would remove me physically from my dream," he said, "but I would still be dreaming."

"Then I must find some way out of this dream," I surmised.

"I must make it somehow into the world where you are dreaming."

"How can you get there?"

"In a dream of my own," I said. "I know a great hypnotist. I will tell him the exact nature of the dream I must dream."

"But won't it be only a dream within my dream?"

"I will tell the great hypnotist to plant the dream in my mind in such a way as to establish irreconcilable contradictions. Have you studied Zen? No? Well. Thoughts are like mirrors. There will be two opposing thoughts in my dream. It will be impossible to say who reflects who and into whose infinity. Both directions, both possibilities, will be as one. I will find you in my dream and wake you up. If you are comatose, lying in some hospital as you have supposed, I will destroy you."

"Wouldn't it be suicide for you?" he asked. "It will end everything to end my dream."

"Will it? I wonder. Will I cease to be a dreamer dreaming that I killed the dreamer who dreamed me? Might I become the new dreamer, hypnotically compelled to dream a world of a better kind? Won't I have escaped from this world that you have made, at the moment it ceases to exist, and live in the dream of my own making instead? Think of the complexity of the situation! We cannot know a definite answer."

We had gone into a diner. All the cows and chickens that had been eaten in that establishment were crowded all around, but I alone could see them.

"Perhaps I won't die willingly," he hypothesized. "Suppose that I return to my home and fall into a sound rest and dream, without intending to do so, that I have gone into the other world to stop you from killing me? You will be standing as above a vampire, ready to put the stake into my heart, and suddenly I will appear to stay your hand! If I can be in two places at once, here and where I'm sleeping, surely I can be in three places, dreaming myself dreaming myself . . ."

Suddenly my friend stopped in mid-sentence and his eyes glazed over. He seemed to have short-circuited his brain and gotten stuck on his idea.

"I thought you hadn't studied Zen," I said, thinking to break his peculiar concentration.

At that moment he fell backward with a ferocious spasm, tumbling away from the table with a great clatter, scattering the chickens that perched on the backs of the diner's many chairs.

The owner rushed out shouting, "What is the matter? What has happened?"

"He has had a heart attack," I said, feeling my friend's pulse. "Please call an ambulance."

But already it was too late. He was dead. I crouched over him, waiting, waiting, waiting to see if everything would dissolve. The chickens and cows watched, too. A little ghostly lamb said "bah, bah," for no ear but my own. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of my friend's spirit slipping out the diner's front door, passing through the glass and into the street. Nothing dissolved. It was all still the same, still terrible.

I remain obsessed by the idea that he is sleeping in some other world. I have been to the hypnotist many times to reinforce my alternative creation. In my dreams, I search for my friend, meaning his destruction. I dream of a better world, a world where there is no war and no terror, and all the ghosts are laid. It is the opposite of this world. In my waking world, I alone am rational. I alone see how things really are and that killing is bad. In the other world, the world of my dream, there is no killing, but I stalk through the nights searching for my friend.

It is a good dream.

Body Rot



“Death is the common right
of toads and men.”

—*Emily Dickinson*

“Death itself
the substance of a dream.”

—*Joseph Auslander*

“Everything in this world is
but a marionette show.”

—*Yamato Tsunetomo*

“The maimed, the blind, the insane
is the language of the heart.”

—*George Myers, Jr.*

“Frankly, life is not amusing.”

—*Flaubert*

Two weeks ago, I noticed a little rotten spot in the dimple of my fat, fat knee.

I went to the clinic and was given a tetanus; but it was no good. The spot began to grow. Before long my entire leg, from the knee upward, was pus-dripping, a yellow wound that stank to a high degree.

I did not want to go to the clinic again. They would probably only remove the leg. But that would not save me, because the reason that I have begun to rot is that I am dead. My heart keeps beating, if only a little, and my lungs labor beneath the weight of my enormous breasts; and the blood, thick and black, still travels, very slowly, through my veins. But I am dead nonetheless. I was always a stupid girl and now it is clear that my stupidity is more profound than I could have guessed (being

stupid). The very cells of my body are stupid. They are dead but go on doing some of the things they did in life, not knowing how to die correctly. But death always has its way, even with us stupid ones, and I am rotting right beneath my very nose.

By the end of that first week it had spread up my side, across my bosom, and down the other side of my thick belly and plump hips, until it reached the opposite knee. My feet were both still all right at that time; but soon the horseshoe-turn of rottenness branched out into my armpits and to my toes and up around my neck.

I've stopped eating, not a bite in at least three days. Nor am I drinking water, not since the rot enclosed my lower portions so that it was no use trying to pee. A lot of greasy sweat oozed out all over my body for a while, adding minutely to the already overwhelming stink; but later, all my pores became swollen shut, as I turned blue and yellow and black and red—a mottled horror. As you can imagine, I never do go out. A dead woman shouldn't walk around the city. It's too embarrassing. In fact, it's mortifying.

There is an old man across the hall. Yesterday he came over to complain about the stink from my apartment. I let him in and he stood by my kitchen door, looking at me, his mouth agape. He is somewhat senile and no good at communicating exactly what he thinks. "You had better go away," he said. I'm not sure what he meant by that. Yesterday, I was not much less rotted than today, my face swollen, misshapen, grotesque. My every breath billows black clouds of flies. The room is buzzing. And it is difficult for me to state to this man the depth of my indignation. Why should I go away when my rent is paid? If the manager does not complain, why should this man from across the hall? What business is it of his what I am doing? Instead of saying what I wanted, all I could get through my corroded throat was a foolish, pathetic, "Rot. Rot." And I began to cry thick, yellow tears. The senile man from across the hall said, "Don't ask me to console you!" Then he stomped out of my apartment into his, closing his door but not mine.

I think today, maybe tomorrow, will be the end of it. I am a two-weeks old corpse, after all. I can feel my heart still beating once or twice a minute, my poor heart, its tissues so broken down by death that it is like a moldy old sponge left under a warm sink, dripped on, two or three drips a minute: drip, drip, maybe one more drip, every minute promising to fall to pieces. My liver is worse, I'm sure, and everything else—all rotten. At this stage, I am sure a surgeon could not figure out what part of

my insides were once intestines. They are no longer ropelike, but melted into a stained, gelatinous mass.

How terrible to be as grossly repugnant as this! To be unloved! To feel the need to hide away, knowing I'd repulse all who had to see me! To awaken, at best, pity, that is a kind of hate! Why has it happened to me? Why should I, who never harmed anyone that I was aware of, be rendered a cancerous, festering sore with all her hair matted and scabby and all her teeth loose in her mouth? Am I struck by a greater Hand that wishes me to symbolize a fact about the world? Do I represent the hearts, the minds, the flesh of all people? Or am I just a little joke God is playing on no one else but me? My mind accelerates along a line that says we are all abominations, I no worse than others. We are all doomed to death and rottenness, and I am not so much stupid as brave to stick it out, to see it through, to not go running off because things have gotten bad.

The acceleration stops and I am stupid once again. Inside my skull (the plates of which have separated slightly), my brain has softened, melted, expanded with bacterial waste, putting pressure on the backs of my eyes that yesterday bulged and today have fallen into cavities. . . .

Oh, oh dear, I have ruined the furniture. I suppose I should have stayed in one chair and ruined only that. But one gets restless in such a state as mine. I have gotten pus and black blood on everything: the sofa, the chairs and kitchen table, the bed. My bed is worst of all. I don't know which smells worse, it or me. As for the carpet, it was worn out anyway, but now it is quite slippery with the grease that I can scarcely believe exuded all from me.

I tried to take a shower a day or two ago, but clogged the drain and had to settle for a bath. It was a short bath. My numerous open wounds could by no means be cleansed. I am like one big salivating gland, salivating the most horrific stinking stuff, and the bath only got the gland that is myself secreting worse than ever. And the tub won't drain, so it has just been sitting there getting more and more scummy and rancid. I hate to go in the bathroom as a result, and also because the mirror is in there.

The door-length mirror hangs inside the bathroom door. Even before this started happening to me, the mirror tended to give back a distorted likeness of my fat body, for the mirror is cheap, from a dime store. But to see myself in it now! Naked, or ridiculously clothed, it is too terrible! If a smart aleck was asked what is my mouth, what is my nose, what are my eyes, he might

be tempted to say something that would hurt my feelings. All the fat of my face has drooped and discolored. I am ready for Halloween. I would scare even the most obnoxiously bold dogs. Children would never get over me. Fathers would get their guns.

Oops! Oops! I slipped on something, a scummy patch in the hallway between bedroom and living room. I lost my balance and slammed into the wall, leaving a great long smear that includes big pieces of my skin. Damn it! Now the red-black, putrefied muscle and butter-yellow fat of my left arm is exposed, inflamed, dribbling multicolored fluid like the blood of a caterpillar. What am I to do? The annoyance causes my heart to speed up, four or five ticks a minute. How long can it go on?

In the kitchen, I put a can opener to the rim of a can of pork 'n' beans, turning the opener around and around and around the can, about fifty, sixty times. I get tired of that and abandon the can, whose lid had been removed days before, the beans already crawling with maggots. I urge myself toward the living room again.

This is sad, too sad, so sad. I delude myself with the foolish hope that it has progressed as far as it can go, and that it will begin to heal now. In a few days I will be all better. My pudgy, swollen, purple hand moves upward toward my eye, to brush away a tear of blood or pus, or just to take a pensive position—I rub my eye, and the lid rubs off. It balances there on my knuckle. I am tempted to laugh at the very idea of an eyelid on my knuckle. I try to blow it off my knuckle with thick, swollen, puckering lips; but I cannot blow. My lungs have collapsed entirely. It seems I'm not breathing at all, though perhaps I am, too shallowly to tell. The next temptation is to put the eyelid on my tongue. I have not eaten in a long time; but it is not that I want to eat my eyelid. I don't know why I had such an impulse. To taste it? So that I could imagine *blinking* my tongue? In the worst of crises, we keep our sense of humor. We only panic when it is past, if it ever passes.

It is now well into evening. I have not turned on my lights. A glaring street lamp right outside my window (I am on the second floor) gives a sickly illumination to the living room. I raise my fat, gross bulk from the armchair and heave forward toward the sofa, so that my back can be to the glaring light. How worn out the movement left me! I sit, fast and hard, and feel a lot of my internal organs collapse, come loose from their connections, accumulating where my stomach ought to be, or slightly lower. What a sensation! It almost makes me sick to ponder it!

I am more misshapen than ever, with everything misplaced inside me. My breasts are oozing particularly rapidly, yellow and white and, in the street lamp's shadows, greenish pale. The reason I no longer wear clothes is that they get soaked with pus too quickly, and stick to me in places. But I can see relatively little of myself; I need not be too appalled. My right eye, without the lid, has dried out, with something on it. I can see only from my left eye, and fuzzily at that.

It's coming now, the end. I'm sure if it. We can sense these things. It is a premonition. My heart has gone a minute or two without a single beat. The last time I felt it tick (in the area of my stomach; for the heart, too, had shaken loose), it was really more a burble, a relinquishment, a throwing in of the towel. Will it tick once more? I cannot lift my arms anymore. I can still lift my legs, with effort, one at a time, and thump back down. But I won't walk again. I couldn't make it to my dirty, slimy bed. Just as well.

My door is unlocked, as always. The man across the hall comes in. He is wearing a face mask, like all of us in the building bought when the flu went around last year. He has his shotgun. What's he saying? I can barely hear. My ears are full of those goddamned maggots.

"I have this!" he says. He is shouting, but to me it is a whisper. "I have this!" He shakes his shotgun to let me know what "this" is. What is the crazy old bastard thinking? Did he shout the word "Out"? Does he want me to get out? And that word, what was it? "Misery"? He shouted, "Misery!" Out of my misery. I get it! He wants to know if I wish to be put out of my misery! The senile bastard wants to shoot me! He is asking if I wouldn't like to be shot!

My lungs, what is left of them, if anything is left, don't want to work for me. It is an enormous effort to make a noise. I do manage a watery, coarsely driven sentence: "I . . . want . . . to . . . go . . . on!" Fortunately he understood. He lowers the shotgun. He is shouting some more words at me from behind the dust mask. If he would take it off, perhaps I could read his lips. I can't hear what he says before he goes away. He comes back in a minute and sprays the air all around me with conditioner. I can smell it vaguely: pine; pine; pine. For a moment of hallucination, I am in the forest. The old man goes out again. Then he comes back to close my door. He doesn't come back after that.

I'm still sitting here.

Remembering Allan



Due to a terrible accident involving the supernatural, two men are trapped on a little island in a deep river gorge. The rapids to either side are too dangerous for them to swim to the banks. They also know that if there are heavy rains in the higher country, this could create a flash flood that would erase their wet, rocky island in an instant. They are terrified men, Jack and Allan, sitting on the island.

They have no fuel or matches and aren't well dressed for the cold. They must hug one another to stave off the ill effects of exposure. Water splashes them from time to time. They cannot dry out. Nothing grows on the island, either, unless one counts a bit of noxious brown algae. They eat some of that, scraping it from rocks. They eat a few bugs and worms and frogs, and are able to survive for several days.

On the third night Jack begins to lose touch with reality. He laughs for a while, then cries. Then he is silent. When he speaks, his speech patterns are slurred and slow. Then he will be perfectly lucid for a while but only speak about his favorite restaurant in Tennessee. Later still, he begins to panic and almost hyperventilates. When Allan calms him down, he becomes morose and withdrawn.

Allan is still able to cope to some degree but is losing hope. He is being driven to exasperation by his friend's unpredictable variety of mood swings.

"I don't understand it," says Jack, who has bitten his own lips until they bleed. "I just don't understand how we got here."

"You remember, Jack."

"I don't. How did we get here? Why are we doing this? I don't understand it. I don't remember it."

"Get yourself together, Jack. We'll pull through."

"But I don't understand it. I can't remember." He whines for about an hour; not a word is intelligible. Then he snaps halfway

to attention and bids again for his friend's attention. "Allan! I really can't figure this thing out. I don't understand it."

"You remember the boat, don't you, Jack?"

"Oh, I remember the boat."

"There was a spirit, Jack. A ghost or something worse. It was terrible. You must remember that."

"That doesn't make sense, Allan. How could there be a ghost? What does that have to do with our being here? How did we get here, Allan? What happened? Can't you tell me? Don't you know? I don't understand it. I don't . . ."

"Don't say you don't understand!" snaps Allan, gritting teeth behind a slimy beard.

"But do you understand? I don't understand. I can't figure it out. I keep trying but I can't."

Allan looks up, trying to find the moon above the gorge, but the moon has gone too low. Jack, not liking to be ignored, whispers his most archly pathetic, "I don't remember."

Allan tries to explain. "We crashed our boat, Jack. It broke to pieces. That's all that happened."

"Will we die, Allan?"

"There are bound to be some other rapids-riders along after dawn. Or the next day at the latest. Someone will find us. You remember now, Jack? The boats? The rapids? The spirit? The crash? Washing onto this pile of rocks?"

"Oh yeah. Yeah. Now I remember." But his eyes glaze and he looks puzzled and pleads to Allan, "What happened, Allan? How did we get here?"

Allan clenches his fists and cannot reply.

Several hours after daybreak, Jack is completely mad. He stands up and thrashes his arms above his head and exclaims, "Oh-oh! Oh-oh!" Then he lurches off the rock. The swirling rapids drag him under. He doesn't surface. Allan runs around the little island trying to see Jack's body but cannot see it.

Allan is alone. Without his friend to keep warm against, it is unlikely Allan can survive another cold night, and he knows it. He feels despair.

At day's end, as the sun goes down, Allan sees a boat up the gorge, hanging back in the shadows of the gorge's wall. He screams and waves his arms but the boat never moves. Someone is standing in the boat but doesn't answer, doesn't come, not until the sky is black. Then the boat comes. Allan realizes it is the boat that sank with him and Jack. The boat was splintered

and couldn't possibly float as it appeared to be doing. In the boat stands the terrible apparition that tried to get Jack and Allan before the tragedy began.

The river is in turmoil but the boat comes slowly. Allan shouts for it to go away, go away, go away, but the boat stops alongside the island.

Long bony arms reach out to get Allan. The island is too small for him to escape.

At that moment Jack crawls out of the river and onto the rear of the boat. Jack is a white, wrinkled corpse. His hair has slime and green water-plants in it. The corpse of Jack grabs the bony specter and pulls it away from Allan.

The corpse of Jack gurgles, "I figured it out, Allan!" He pushes the bony specter into the river. The bony specter floats away into darkness, a black cloak or shadow upon the waves. "I remembered, Allan!" says the corpse of Jack. The splintered boat floods with water. The boat and the corpse of Jack are sinking. The last thing the corpse of Jack says is, "I figured it out!"

Then Allan is alone again. He is too shocked to fall asleep even once that night. Will Allan be found the next day by a rapids-rider? Will he live to tell the story of how Jack saved him from the bony specter? Maybe. Someone should ask around and find out.

Parenting



“Children for sale! Children for sale!”

I heard the vendor on the street and hurried to my window. He was wheeling his cart along the cobbles of the winding way. The cart was crowded with his wares, angels and squalling brats pressed close against one another.

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “Vasquino, dear husband! Can I have a child?”

He shrugged his big shoulders. “I don’t care. But it’s your responsibility. You have to feed it and clean it.”

I ran out the front door but already other women had arrived. They were taking the best of the lot. It looked as though I might be stuck with a squaller or one that was sick. The vendor had a big mustache and a nice smile. He did a good business on our street and looked happy.

When he got around to me, he saw that I looked disappointed with the remainders. “You shouldn’t worry!” he said. “This one here, bat him alongside the head like this—see?—and no more noise for a long time.”

I didn’t feel an instant affection for any that were left. But one could never tell when the vendor would come again. Sometimes he came through twice a year. Sometimes it was eighteen or twenty-four months between trips to our neighborhood.

“He has a runny nose,” I said.

“A special bargain for you! A little care and the runny nose will go away. Good as new!”

“What’s the matter with his fingers?” I asked. The vendor had taken the tiny boy from the cart and stood him on the ground. His feet, too, were crooked.

“Some of them are a little bent, it’s true,” said the vendor. “But you’ll appreciate the low price.”

He named a figure that was not even a full third of what the other wives had had to pay.

The tiny boy raised his crooked arms in my direction and began to walk toward me, pain and hope in his brown eyes.

"He waddles!" I said, and laughed. He had club feet and it made him look like a cute brown duck. I exclaimed, "What a sweet waddle!"

I paid the vendor and scooped up my purchase under an arm. The vendor wheeled his cart away with only a couple very sick children left. I didn't think he'd ever sell those. But he had done a good business that day and shouldn't want to complain.

Vasquino did not like his clubfooted son. He thrashed the boy once or twice a week, and glowered at him in a menacing way almost every morning and then again in the evening on arriving from work. I would reassure our boy, "Don't you worry. Daddy loves you, just the way Mommy loves you."

But when the boy got the stomach flu and vomited on the linen tablecloth that had been in my family for so long, and at the same time shit on the chair that I had already told him not to sit in, I couldn't help myself. I thrashed him. I thrashed him pretty hard. And I found out what Vasquino already understood, that it was kind of fun to do it.

Soon he lived in terror of his parents, but you mustn't think we overdid it. Obedience is something every child must learn. And I made sure he was rewarded now and then.

He never did learn to talk. And really, he was not so much trouble and I could tell he was pretty smart. Still, sometimes I felt angry with him. "What a bad deal I got!" I screamed one day when Vasquino was away. "If the cartman comes around, I'm giving you back! Trade you in for one that isn't all bent up! Hey! Look what you did to your shoes, walking on the sides of them all the time! You think shoes grow on trees? Go wash the tears off your face!"

Sometimes I gave him big hugs, but it wasn't easy to do it, his nose was always runny. His waddle began to get on my nerves. He was too nervous for his own good, or mine. But he got over crying. After the first few months, he almost never cried.

To keep out of the way of Vasquino and me, he would sit by the window upstairs and gaze down the street, doing nothing. I got him some toys but he never played with them after Vasquino yelled about the racket and busted some of them. The boy was the most serene when he looked from that window, and I thought that he was happy.

After eight or nine months, we had really gotten to feel that he was part of the family.

Then one day our clubfooted son ran down the stairs as awkwardly as ever, but more quickly, looking excited.

It was Vasquino's day off work and usually our son never came down for any reason when his father was home.

"What do you think you're doing!" growled Vasquino, trying to scare him back up the steps, but too lazy to get up from the chair to hit him.

"Don't yell," I said to Vasquino, for I was in a good mood that day. To the boy, I said, "What is it, dear? Why are you excited?"

He pointed to the door.

Just then, I heard the cartman shouting, "Children for sale!" louder with each call. Our son went to the door, as though ready to go.

I laughed. "Don't worry, little crippled son of mine. I was only teasing you. I won't trade you in."

But he wanted to go outside. Vasquino threatened to slap his face, then sent him up to his room.

I watched from the downstairs window as the women of our street went out to look at the vendor's wares. They were a worse bunch of children than the other time. Besides, he had done such a good business at the beginning of the year, our neighborhood had plenty of children for the time being. It looked as though he was only able to sell one or two, though I suspected he would do well in the next community because he hadn't gotten so far last time.

"Damn!" cried Vasquino from his chair, alarm in his voice. "What was that sound?"

We had heard a loud noise in the alley beside our house.

"I think our son must have knocked the flowerpot off the sill of the side window."

"Damn," said Vasquino more calmly, shifting himself to one side in his chair, then standing up. "I'll fix him." And he started up the stairs.

The vendor was going down the street toward the next community, crying, "Children for sale! Children for sale!" He was just disappearing around a turn.

Then I was hurt and surprised to see our little son waddling up the cobbled street after the vendor, fast as he could go. "Vasquino!" I cried. "Vasquino! Our son is running away!"

My husband stood at the top of the stairs, a hulking presence in the shadow. You would think he never had feelings. But as he stood there, I could hear him crying.

Tycoon and Lady Death



The tycoon had left business affairs with trusted aides and vice-presidents in order that he might take an extended vacation, visiting Latin American and Oriental quacks, in the hope of a cure. Three months later he had returned home, hoping against hope that his doctor would say, "George, I can't understand it. You're in complete remission. It's as though you were never sick." But as luck would have it, if anything, his illness had progressed more rapidly than had been expected, due no doubt to the stress of travel.

One evening, driving about the city, he asked his chauffeur to let him out of the limousine.

"You might as well go home, James," he said. The chauffeur was not aware of his employer's state of health, and merely looked at him queerly, then abandoned him at the street corner as commanded.

The tycoon wandered about the streets until he came to the very office tower owned by the corporation he had humbly founded thirty years before. The tycoon gazed upward, thinking of the years spent building his empire, and what it had come to in the end. "I'm still young!" he lamented, which wasn't exactly true, but he was young as tycoons go, and sad to be dying.

He went into the office tower and took his private elevator direct to the top floor. His electronic key let him into the plush, dark interior of his private offices. From there, he overlooked the entirety of the gorgeous, hilly, nighted city. It was beautiful at the top! It most certainly was! The poor and the middle class might like to think it was hateful to be wealthy, that the rich suffered for their success; but the fact of the matter was that power made life rather more dear. The tycoon didn't wish to leave it.

Scanning the city's vista, he said to himself, "If I weren't a confirmed atheist; if I believed in so much as elves, I would

swear a mighty oath to liquidate my financial empire in a Trotskyist gesture, only to live another twenty years!"

When he turned about, he noticed there was someone in his office, sitting in a comfortable chair. The tycoon gasped, but composed himself at once, and turned on a small gooseneck lamp and twisted it so that it shone upon the inhabitant of the shadowy corner. So doing, the tycoon gasped more loudly than before, seeing that it was the skeletal presence of Death, who was decidedly female, clad in a conservative evening dress (which ill-fit her cadaverous thinness), one leg crossed over the other, seemingly at ease.

"I've a year yet to live!" the tycoon protested. Death replied in a familiar voice:

"Don't you recognize me, Daddy?"

The tycoon could have laughed at himself, realizing it was his own daughter. She had been put into a hospital two years before, but escaped, and never came home for help or money. Clearly her anorexia nervosa had progressed. Her psychotic dieting had rendered her thus: a monster.

"Good Lord, you frightened me, Delia! Your mother has been worried sick since you vanished from the hospital!"

Delia rose from her seat, wobbling strangely because of her deteriorated musculature. She approached her father, but could not get very close, for he stood across the expansive desk from her, silhouetted against the smoky grayness of night beyond the window.

"Is it true," she asked, "that you would liquidate everything you have striven to obtain, for a little more of life?"

"Dying changes one's perspective, Delia. Yes, for twenty healthy years, I would gladly apportion all of my success to those people who have struggled to less avail."

"In that case I shall give you twenty years," she said.

The tycoon laughed bitterly. If only it were possible! Delia continued:

"I wish to purge my own sad spirit of its pain, which is somehow bound to me by things which are yours. That I might see my shackles and your own cast into the streets below, I will cure you, and my soul can rest more peacefully than now."

Delia raised her skeletal arms and a glittery substance sprinkled downward from each fingertip. The glittery substance swirled forth and enveloped the tycoon. He looked through this shining substance which surrounded him, and saw that his

daughter's dress had become gauzy and transparent. He could see her shining body's sharp edges and bones. Then her body, too, became transparent. When the glittering substance was gone from around the tycoon, so too had his daughter vanished.

Though shaken, he quickly convinced himself that his medication and his sickness had caused him to hallucinate the presence of his daughter. If she were dead, surely her body would have been found and identified, and the tycoon would have been notified. As she had merely run away and was probably shackled up somewhere with some crazy fellow, she couldn't possibly have been a ghost visiting him in his offices.

He began to credit the spectral visitation only after his doctor said to him during the next visit, "George, I can't understand it, but it's as though you were never ill."

The tycoon contacted the detective agency who had been unable to uncover his daughter's whereabouts, and had them get on the case again. But already he was a believer. He knew the only thing the agency was likely to uncover was a pitiful corpse.

He had not in his life been a man of particular honor, but his miraculous experience, and his salvation, had changed him indeed. Therefore he quickly set into motion the first steps required for the liquidation of his corporation. However, shareholders soon intervened, and a conglomerate stepped in with a takeover maneuver at a critical point. The tycoon found himself a mere employee, albeit at the highest level, of an empire suddenly expanded beyond his control. He instigated a campaign which caused him extraordinary legal debts, all in an effort to regain enough control of matters that liquidation could proceed. This, too, went astray, as the shareholders presented a united front which outweighed his previously controlling share of stocks; and during the complication of financial events, the other shareholders managed to buy him out, and quickly demanded his resignation.

His personal fortune had always been somewhat of a paper empire, and the paper no longer belonged to him. He could have mustered a few hundred thousand dollars for the right purpose, but liquidation struck no one as the right purpose, and his mad efforts were stymied at every bend. Ultimately his very own attorneys used the courts to bring a clamp down upon his immediate assets, to be certain their hefty fees were paid in full.

A year passed thus, and the healthy tycoon, who was no longer exactly a tycoon, felt his compulsion increase, while his ability

lessened, and a sense of doom settled in. His wife meanwhile had been contacted by the detective agency, while the tycoon was away. She was informed by phone that someone was needed to identify a few things in connection with a corpse. Shortly after, she committed suicide.

At the end of that year, the tycoon felt figuratively straight-jacketed. All his efforts had appeared, to his corporate managers, to be blindly and ridiculously aimed at crippling an important and necessary business empire, and they laid increasingly clever plans to keep him from getting his hands on the right buttons. Through everything, the ex-tycoon managed to live quite well, for the shareholders and business partners were not about to let him fall into actual poverty, and they felt they understood his insanity as the result of losing his family and other such pressures. Thus he was caught between a cashless existence, and a lonely, luxurious one.

He awoke one night in his vast apartment, feeling strangely warm. He saw that a glittery substance was exuding from his prone body, oozing from his pores, and swirling away from his bedcovers, to congeal at the foot of his bed. Soon his daughter stood there. He was not at all certain if he were awake and delirious, asleep and dreaming, or perfectly mad.

"You failed to keep your promise to me," said the spectral Delia, lowering her scrawny arms, and looking at her father with profound melancholy.

"I tried my best," he said, "but it was beyond my power."

"I forgive you," she said. "Now you must forgive me." So saying, she walked away, passing through the wall. In the morning he awoke in pain, was hospitalized that afternoon, and come evening his doctor suggested only that he put last-minute things in order. At midnight, he died.

The Womb and the Grave



“At midnight an angel was floating on high.”

—*The Angel*,

Mikhail Lermontov

On the day of his birth, when the midwife held him by his toes and slapped his butt, Prendovo did not cry out, but gasped and thought in a wordlessly calculating manner, “So! This is how it is to be!” After that, he was prepared for any abuse. “Nothing is good between the womb and the grave,” was soon his philosophy. “No use to cry about it,” he always said.

There was no heat in the thin-walled house where he and his mother and father lived. He often had a bad cold. Four out of his first six winters, he had pneumonia and each time it was believed that he would die. But it was not his good luck to die. Even in the summertime he continued with the sniffles. But he overcame his physical weaknesses and was tough-spirited, always in a fight. He became the leader of boys in his neighborhood. He talked them into doing such things as ruined their whole lives. As for himself, he was too smart to stay in trouble very long for any single thing. There was always something brand new to be in trouble about.

His father beat him. “Bad marks in school!” shouted his father and slapped Prendovo in the jaw so hard his teeth shook and his gums began to bleed. Or it would be, “Why did you fight with that boy half your size? Lean over and grab the table!” Then, removing a long leather belt, Prendovo’s father would whip him until wide white welts rose all over the boy’s rump and thighs.

Often there was no reason for his father’s anger. “Little son of a bitch!” his father yelled, smelling of cheap vodka. He slugged the boy in the eye and it was blue and swollen for three whole weeks.

Prendovo said to himself, “They can’t get a tear out of me.”

When still in primary school, Prendovo had sentimental feelings for a girl one grade below him. The boys and girls were not allowed to mix, but he managed ways to get together with Tasha. He played with her and her dolls, hoping the boys wouldn't catch him at it. Tasha was very beautiful to Prendovo. She would wear things like yellow chiffon dresses with a dozen half-slips underneath, flouncing as she skipped. Her shoes were always shiny and her white socks had yellow lambs embroidered around the top. Her short, stubby arms were pink and sweet-looking. Whenever they were together, Prendovo's heart sank to the bottom of his chest, and his mouth was dry.

One day they were playing in the woods and he tried to make her kiss him. Tasha made ugly faces. She sang a rhyme that went, "Ikky ikky sticky sticky, Mary stuck her tongue at Dicky!" Then she stuck out her tongue.

As she was running away, Prendovo picked up a rock as big as a fist and threw it at her. It struck her in the back of the head, with a fierce thump. She ended up in the hospital with a concussion.

As this was about the tenth time Prendovo had caused some sort of trouble, he was no longer allowed back in school. As further punishment, his father decided to get drunk and beat him black and blue. So Prendovo ran away to Mr. Kapru's house.

Mr. Kapru was the richest man in the neighborhood, in the whole world as far as Prendovo knew. He was thin and smoked a slender pipe with sweet tobacco and had leather patches on the elbows of his jacket. Prendovo and the richest man in the world stayed up until late into the night looking at Mr. Kapru's collection of stamps and coins. Mr. Kapru loved the stamps and coins as a baby loves its rattles and milk bottle.

Then Mr. Kapru's older sister came and put Prendovo into a warm, soft bed. In the morning, Mr. Kapru came in to wake up Prendovo. Sitting beside the downtrodden boy, Mr. Kapru said, "The world is full of pain, Prendovo, but you're a strong fellow. Don't worry about a thing."

"I never worry," said Prendovo. "There's no sense worrying."

"That's exactly right!" said Mr. Kapru and took the boy into the kitchen.

Even an important man like Mr. Kapru was unable to convince the schoolmaster to let the boy back in classes. Prendovo continued to find new trouble every week. When his friends

graduated from grammar school, Prendovo had not the simplest degree and no prospect of employment. His mother finally locked him out and refused to support him any longer. By then, Prendovo's father had died of a bad liver and Prendovo was glad of it.

What was he to do but take to stealing? He was clever at getting into houses without making a sound. He took things to a man named Emetrio and made money by this means. "Ah! This is good silver, Emetrio! Can't you give me more than seven ducats?" Emetrio countered, "What! Greedy boy! You need more money? Come in the back room with me a while." Prendovo said, "Okay, I'll go in your back room." And Prendovo was able to earn two or three more ducats.

Nothing repulsed Prendovo in life, for life itself was repulsive. Inside the enormously repulsive act of continuing to exist, littler things were nothing at all, and no bother.

When he was a bit older and had hair on his chin and had filled out with muscles, Prendovo was an expert thief. Even Emetrio could not take advantage of such a smart fellow. Prendovo always had enough money to buy women and morphine or throw a big party in the gambling dens.

The girl he liked better than any was Tasha. One day he said to her, "Tasha, remember when you were little and wore yellow dresses? I tried to steal a kiss."

"I remember that," she said. "You threw a rock and put me in the hospital. What a naughty boy you were! But even then," said Tasha, "I loved you. I knew your hurting me was an accident, no matter what others said."

"You're wrong, Tasha. It wasn't an accident. And if you ever deny me a kiss, I will hurt you just like before."

Some while later, when she became afraid of him, and annoyed that he was unfaithful, she tried to end their attachment. He beat her up and broke her nose; she wasn't pretty anymore so he lost interest in her. When she killed herself afterward, it made him think: "She had exactly the right idea. Why didn't I ever think of it? I've made it this far without thinking about killing myself. I guess it's too late for me now. I might as well see it through."

Prendovo became syphilitic. This was in the days before there was a cure. Occasionally, he raved about things no one else could understand. But generally he had control of himself. Few

knew of his condition. He went in and out of remissions and was able to live a long life in spite of his disease.

His use of morphine was also less of a problem than one might have predicted. He used it readily, but it never became his master. How this could be so is hard to say, except that some part of him was forever divorced from the tragedy of life. This part of him had no emotion and was a wall that saved him from a more crippling addiction. There were periods when he wanted no drugs and took none. Then he would go through a period of using them a lot. It seemed to depend on his mood.

Once when in the mood for something strong, he had to raise some quick money. He broke into the house of Mr. Kapru and pried the lids off the iron boxes that held the old man's stamps and coins.

How long ago it seemed that Mr. Kapru helped a maltreated child! Prendovo had always thought Mr. Kapru's kindness was evidence of a weak and imbecilic nature. Nevertheless, some odd fragment of honor or appreciation had for many years protected the old man from Prendovo. Now, however, needing money quickly, he thought immediately of Mr. Kapru, who had become lonely and decrepit and stone deaf.

Prendovo began to stuff his pockets with the stamps and coins, remembering with a startling clarity the ones Mr. Kapru had liked best and indicated as most valuable.

While he was gathering up this treasure, in came the old man, who exclaimed, "Prendovo! My little friend! Can it be that you have grown to such a villain? Those are things I cherish in the folly of my old age. If you need help or money, just say it is so. I will be your patron as I was when you were small. I will help you turn your life around."

Prendovo picked up the iron lid of one of the burst stamp cases and whacked the old man with such ferocity that the front of the skull caved in. Mr. Kapru flapped his arms like a crazy old stork and fell down to his knees. His wounded eyes gazed at Prendovo—the eyes of a sad dog too stupid to know why such things happen.

Then Prendovo took the stamps and coins to Emetrio. Emetrio said, "These coins aren't worth a thing. Should I go to Holland to spend this one? To India to buy penny candy with this? Then to Spain for a newspaper? Even so, I'll give you two ducats for the lot."

"I happen to know these are quite rare," said Prendovo.

"Even the ones that aren't of gold or silver, but only copper or some degraded metal, they will bring three hundred ducats each from a collector."

Emetrio laughed. "How foolish! Who would pay two months' wages for one coin? I'll give you five ducats for the whole sack. As for the stamps, you can keep them, they're no good."

Prendovo grew red in the face. He said, "I remember you would bugger me until my ass was sore. Fat cretin! I'll kill you!" And Prendovo strangled the life from Emetrio and took all the money he had, which wasn't much as things turned out.

While Prendovo was in a gambling den, giddy from some unidentified chemicals he had tried, someone came to warn him the police were looking for him. Prendovo had made no effort to cover his tracks. "Why shouldn't I confess it?" he shouted to his friends. "What can they do except hang me until dead? Death's not much!" All the same, he was whisked away by faithful comrades. They said, "Join the army and go fight the Italians. By the time you return, all this will have blown over."

So he went to Italy and continued with the killing. Other soldiers admired him. He wasn't afraid of a thing. It was as though he invited death. But death never came to Prendovo.

One evening they were on a march across the tortured countryside. It had been pouring rain. Mud had slid from the hillsides onto the road, half burying the corpses strewn along the way. The men's legs sank in bloody mire and the youngest ones were coughing and sick. They were dying from the flu. Though it was dark, they had not found any ground good enough to camp on, so they kept going. Everyone was miserable except Prendovo. He alone didn't seem to mind.

A thick fog seeped out from the swamps and forest. In the night, the fog was like a green shroud. Prendovo stopped to tie his boots. When he stood up again, he could not hear a thing. He could not hear the tramp of his comrades' feet. "Hey!" he shouted and heard only the echo of his cry. He began to run along the road but could not overtake anyone. He ran for an hour before it occurred to him that the others must have found a campsite and he had run right by them.

It was a relief to stumble upon the burnt husk of a bombed church.

Much of the roof was gone. The green mist had lifted; stars shone into the ruin. Everything was burned. The Virgin Mary was a used matchstick. Only one thing was spared: Standing in

the midst of the destruction was a white marble angel glowing in the starlight. Prendovo marveled that it had not been broken by bombs or charred by conflagration. "What a cold monster you look like," he said. "Think you're good-looking, don't you? Well! What do you think of all this war? Cold thing like you, without an expression on your pretty face, you'd probably approve of matters. As for that, it's all right by me, too."

He slept at the angel's feet and dreamed it bent down to kiss his brow.

The next day he woke to the sound of his comrades passing by, and rejoined them. That afternoon there was an ambush. But it turned out to be a lot of badly armed and desperate women and children. They were easily slaughtered. The men broke into smaller parties after the pathetic battle in order to root the last of the enemy from their hiding places.

It rained again. Again the ground was blood and mire. Prendovo was alone when he found a filthy, frightened woman hiding in a barn. She was passive as he tore the clothing from her body and threw her on a splintery floor and had with her roughly. While his pants were down, a small boy—son or baby brother of the woman, he did not know which—jumped out from under a pile of straw and stuck Prendovo in the buttocks with a rusty knife.

Stuck like a pig! Why were things always happening to his ass? Prendovo yelled and grabbed the boy's knife-hand before he could strike a second time. He took up his rifle and, as he was standing, fired so many bullets into the woman that her legs were nearly blown off. Then he pulled up his pants and dragged the boy outside into the rain. He used the boy's knife and some long nails from the barn to nail the boy to a tree. The little boy never cried out, but spit in Prendovo's face right to the end. Prendovo admired the boy. It was like crucifying himself.

There were many other atrocities; but as it was war, it was all right. Prendovo returned home a hero.

Back in his home town, Prendovo set up his business. He bought all kinds of things from young burglars. He became wealthy. He bought the house of the first man he had ever killed, the nicest house in the neighborhood, and had improvements and personal additions made. He was very comfortable.

Prendovo had friends in government. His influence ran high and far. If he so much as whispered that a certain man should

be killed, that man would suddenly die by some curious accident.

Only once did he spend some time in jail. It was because of taxes. He was like a prince or a king in a hotel, lording over the other prisoners. Before long, his friends in the government had gotten his release. Several of his enemies died by unexpected means that could never be traced to a single cause.

The old syphilis bothered him sometimes. The morphine checked the pain. When alone, Prendovo would sit sweating and confused, but at any moment when someone needed to see him, he was able to pull himself together, like a ghost materializing in the dark. No one could see that he was unhealthy or that his torso had recently broken out in oozing sores. No one knew that while he carried on his business conversations, devils danced around the room, eyes rolling.

He heard that his mother had not left her house in many years. Some unreasoning fear had gripped her a while after she disowned her son. She would never go outside. She was impoverished and ill. Prendovo went to see her and she begged for his forgiveness. After that, he gave her a pension and had a servant take care of her, for she would not even go to the market to buy groceries. As she dreaded to leave the house, he sent a doctor to her near the end. He paid the doctor to stay with her since she had such a fear of being taken to a hospital.

Such magnanimity toward a woman who had turned him out and cursed him so many times caused his friends to hold Prendovo in still greater esteem. But the truth was, he didn't really care one way or the other about any of it.

Yet a strange thing happened to him, despite that life had always appeared tiresome and unending. Prendovo looked around one day and he, too, had gotten old. He hardly knew himself. Private physicians came regularly to treat his skin ulcers. His diet was bland. He was thin. His eyesight was no good. His face was long and gray; there were wattles under his chin. It was painful to shit.

Now and then he retired to what he termed his "third-floor back," a special room off-limits to his servants, exceedingly private and soundproof, from which he would not emerge for days on end. The servants wondered what was in the room and what he did when in there. One bold serving maid slipped up and looked at the room on the third-floor back and afterward

said it was empty. She said there was nothing in there at all. But Prendovo knew it to be filled with wicked marvels.

As age and delusion loosened his hold on things, the world became dangerous for Prendovo. His important friends got sick and died or were put in homes for the infirm. Legal and financial snares were set for him at every turn. Somehow he carried on, never ceasing to be calm, taking matters as they existed.

One day he called for a servant to clear the dottle from his opium pipe, but nobody answered. He rang again for an attendant and still there was no answer. He was halfway in a dream and unable to rise from his large, thickly padded chair. He murmured unintelligibly. In reply, a smart-mouthed young man—remembered by Prendovo as a good-for-nothing thief—stepped into the library with a pleasant smile.

Prendovo searched his slow, dull memory and recollected this young thief. They had not met in a couple of years. When last they had dealings with one another, Prendovo had humiliated the egotistical fellow. So his unexpected appearance in Prendovo's private library was cause for alarm.

Prendovo pressed a hidden buzzer. His bodyguards, two thugs, came quickly, billy clubs in hand. But they did not obey Prendovo. Instead, they nodded to the young man as though they were friends for a long time. At that moment Prendovo realized this no-account punk had carved a place of recognition in the gangster world, without Prendovo's notice. The punk made a flicking motion with his hand. Prendovo was bludgeoned by his own bodyguards.

The next thing he knew, he was outside the gates of heaven, his ulcers healed, his skin young and elastic. The gates were opened for him right away. An angel who was vaguely familiar took Prendovo into his arms and exclaimed, "Isn't it Prendovo? Look here! We have a golden crown for your head!"

There was a big welcome. Prendovo thought it was a trick, that any minute, the angels would transform into devils, and he would be in hell. But time passed. Prendovo remained a citizen in good standing in heaven. There was a vague hierarchy, difficult to define, and while Prendovo was not among the ranks of angels, it did seem that among the unwinged citizens, he had a respectable status.

One day he had a chance to visit God, who sat like a dull silver orb in a faint golden throne, flanked by angels. To this glimmering presence Prendovo addressed himself: "I commit-

ted every sin I could think of but still I'm allowed in heaven. How is it so?"

"Didn't you suffer?" said the right-hand angel, who was God's voice.

"I don't know that I did," said Prendovo. "Life was shit, to be certain, but I made something of it."

"Even now," said the right-hand angel, awe in his voice, hence in God's emotion, "you scarcely complain. You are a saint, Prendovo; the purest kind."

Then the left-hand angel, who was God's hands, spoke. "Here, Prendovo! It is time you had your wings. There you go! Now you're an angel."

Prendovo went away with his wings attached to his shoulders. He tried them out and found them satisfactory. He flew this way and that way through heaven. Then he swooped near the Earth. He saw the suffering, smelled the fecal stench, heard the praying and pleading. He saw people running about seeking some sort of order where there was no order to be found. What fools they were! They thought they could find paradise by pretending things weren't so bad; by pretending they themselves weren't so bad. They had completely misunderstood God's plan, although the obvious thing was there before them the whole while. Human life is sorrow. It is injustice. Depravity is the only basis for human greatness. Big-hearted lovers are cowards or frauds to be despised, victimized, and condemned.

Exercising his newly discovered angelic powers, Prendovo made storms and earthquakes and sent pestilence to increase the sad lot of Earth's inhabitants. There was no angel more skillfully devoted to God's plan.

Meditations and Confessions Regarding My Disturbing Ability



My mind has encountered no end of disquiet since I discovered I possessed the ability to explode people's cigarettes, while myself standing a safe distance away. I no longer believe that there is the least bit of logic in the concept of leotarded superheroes, not even within its own limited and fantastic context; for the truth of the matter is, no matter how moral and decent one considers herself, or indeed might be, there are inevitable moments of truth, when weakness or outrage cause one to give one's talent over to selfishness, ferocity, and injury to others. Power, as they say, corrupts. Humanity has warred for millennia, starting no doubt with clods of grass; and look where it has led. It is much the same with my odd faculty.

In the beginning I devised a moral plan regarding the application of this new-found skill. It would be put to work for the good of humanity, I resolved, while I remained humbly incognito. But by stages I became addicted to action, much as a sexual psychopath cannot help himself, and the rate of cure is slight. I ceased to be the passive girl I once had been. I was unable to steer a right and proper path. I failed to use my talent exclusively during crises, when intervention would be sensible, justified, or essential.

I found out about myself by accident. I "popped" the cigarette of a rude Italian while riding with him on an elevator. It startled me as much as it did him. Fortunately it did not harm his fingers, causing only a small burn on his trouser leg and a lot of shredded tobacco on the elevator floor. Although I was aware that I had been consciously wishing his smelly brown cigarette would explode, I did not instantly suppose my wish had been the actual cause of the phenomenon. Rather, I presumed some trickster had given him an exploding cigarette—of the sort easily made by inserting a pellet of gunpowder in the

end—and he had only just then gotten around to lighting it up. Nevertheless, though accepting no personal responsibility, I was uplifted by the event, pondering it wryly the whole afternoon.

That same evening, or perhaps an evening or two after (my memory is not perfect in the matter), I was sitting with a friend in the nonsmoking section of a nice restaurant when I became distracted from our conversation by smoke wafting from other parts of the room. Smokers should, I reflected, be sequestered from the rest of society in small, dark, poorly ventilated rooms. Or they should at the very least catch themselves on fire with fair regularity, to teach themselves a lesson, and as an aid to natural selection.

My friend was discussing some article in *The Atlantic*, which ordinarily would have captivated me, but my mind continued to wander. I was trying to bolster my sinking mood by recollecting the rude Italian and his trick cigarette. Just as I was wishing the same fate would befall those smokers who were fouling the air while decent people tried to eat, there were three small explosions at different tables, accompanied by (1) a Junoesque lady's startled shriek, (2) a fat old man's bellow, and (3) a teenage smoker leaping abruptly from his seat, toppling his table, his meal scattering across the floor.

I began to have suspicions.

For weeks to follow, I experimented. It was possible to pop cigarettes at their lit end alone, or to cause the entire length of a cigarette to explode like a firecracker, depending on my conscious design. I was careful to harm nobody more than slightly, merely to a degree sufficient to give them pause for reflection the next time they removed a cigarette from a pack.

I tended therefore to pop only the lighted ends. I tended to pop them while in fingers or ashtrays rather than when being puffed, for this maximized safety.

I made exceptions.

Parents who smoked in the proximity of their children struck me as criminally insane. Killing themselves was one thing, suicide being a personal choice. Even the act of inflicting their diseased smoke on adult strangers in public places was marginally forgivable, for annoyed individuals could, if they pleased, slug the offender in the stomach, or bludgeon the vulgarian with any handy object. But killing one's own helpless babies an inch each day was a madness that required strong measures in behalf of the innocent.

Thus I would pop cigarettes while mothers and fathers held them in lips or teeth. This usually charred the nose, encouraged a startled expression, and burnt the lips enough that it would be difficult to smoke for a few days of healing.

Behavioral modification requires repeat experience, but I generally exploded the cigarettes of unsuspecting strangers whom I would never again see. How to be certain children's lives were being saved? With an overwhelming and concerted effort, and by trial and error, I perfected the means of "cursing" entire packs of cigarettes, whether in pockets, purses, or rolled into shirt sleeves, so that each cigarette, as lit, would explode within a minute or two, whether or not I was still in the vicinity.

Up to this point I had acted in accordance with my thought-out code of ethical and heroic action for the good of humanity, with only the most insignificant of slips. Within a few months this was to change, for I had not calculated my own behavior becoming modified by the sure knowledge that I no longer needed to suffer the rudeness of smokers. I started to be somewhat malicious.

If there were such a person as Wonder Woman or Superman, I am convinced they, too, would have their mores corrupted by the very fact of their ability to take certain extreme measures without the least fear of reprisal. It begins with a few charred noses on people who deserve it, and it escalates by imperceptible degrees, so that one scarcely recognizes the alteration of personality.

Only in retrospect can I see that there were people who had their fingers, lips, noses, or eyes injured worse than justice required. Cigarettes placed in ashtrays were too often set off with inexcusable force, causing shards of hot glass to inflict unnecessarily painful gashes in the flesh of offenders.

In my war against infamy, I had myself become a villain.

It was not easy to confront this change in myself. Not until an especially obnoxious cigar smoker, arrogant and indifferent to my needs and those of others, found himself requiring an ambulance and plastic surgery, did I awaken to the selfish aims of my actions, which had grown extravagant.

I vowed to cut back on my use of the extraordinary power but, alas, my activities had become habitual and beyond my control. I cannot deny a subtle and frightening pleasure obtained by perpetuating these incidents. Often I did not even need to be near enough to be personally affronted by stench. I would send my will along whole city blocks, clearing my path, experiencing

a smug and profound satisfaction at the sound of a string of reports, grinning as I heard the series of startled yelps fading off into the distance.

I would go through supermarket lines and give the evil eye to entire stocks behind the registers, never to know who was fated to light each of those thousands of eager booby traps. Perhaps some pitiable old lady had her gray hair singed, a ten-dollar perm ruined, though she had scrimped for weeks to afford it; and had she deserved it? She might never in her life let anyone see her smoking outside the confines of her dingy, one-room apartment; never caused others to suffer for her vice; never known happiness.

Oh, I was guilt-ridden, you may well believe; and I knew that I, as certainly as any alcoholic, must give up my obsession lest it destroy me.

At one point I was able to go several weeks without creating so much as a sparkler effect. I began to regain some portion of self-respect by adhering to my special sort of chastity. Then, an excruciatingly vile young man got to my ragged nerves and I popped his cigarette, singeing the hairs of his nose, sending him hopping and whooping out of the post office!

Soon I was at it worse than ever. Guilt increasingly plagued me; but rewards seemed greater. I had no awareness that my talent had not yet manifested itself to its most horrific measure. Had I known, I might have sought professional help, or withdrawn from commerce with my fellow human beings.

My descent continued. Eventually there was nothing that could raise my spirits. Still my deeds persisted. When I discovered that my talent was related to the nicotines and tars, and that I could cause the yellow parts of fingers and stained beards to spontaneously combust, I was not aroused even by this fresh development.

I became morose. Colleagues and friends abandoned me. I went on welfare, calmed my nerves with pills, became somewhat nocturnal. I fought a perverted urge to try something untested: to explode unlit, unopened packs in men's hip pockets, or entire cartons in people's homes, or crates of them in warehouses! I knew that it was possible, having learned to cause the spontaneous combustion of the least little stain, requiring no heat or flame to aid the mysterious catalyst my mind provided.

I never did succumb to this desire. Yet the plan haunted me, even as I haunted the streets, like a specter, looking askance at every smoker, aware that I could blow the features off their faces

or reduce every digit of a hand to loose, stringy fragments of cooked meat.

So great a store of emotional energy was expended to keep myself from the temptation of blowing up homes, warehouses, and people's bodies, that I did not detect the early warnings of graver, more sinister possibilities. A feverish, twisted subconscious was quick in its toil, devising the penultimate application of my art; but I was not privy to the sub-mind's workings.

Meanwhile my health deteriorated. I rarely ate. I walked with halting step, and my memory became more and more imprecise. Eventually I collapsed in the street and was hauled to the emergency treatment center of a nearby hospital.

The doctor ran tests and took X-rays, discovering a tumor on one of my lungs. It was no doubt the fault of my mother having been a heavy smoker and my having passed my formative years in her constant company. I only vaguely recalled my frailty, my chronic runny nose, and my periodic bouts of pneumonia. Mother died when I was fourteen, of cervical cancer, which is much more common in smokers than nonsmokers and I had blocked much of the years before that time out of my mind. It was this, very likely, which implanted the earliest revengeful feelings regarding smoke and smokers; for I surely must have hated cigarettes for killing my mother, or else hated my mother, who smoked incessantly.

My tumor could well prove benign, the doctor encouraged, but surgery was essential. I was too physically and emotionally exhausted to cope with the everyday things which must be put in order, or put on hold, before entering a hospital for an extended stay. My life was unmanageable and I could not pull myself together enough to fill out the requisite forms and do the inescapable running around so that I could obtain medical assistance from the government. I lamented deep in my heart, keenly and silently that my mother, my dear dead mother, had reached out from the grave to kill her only child!

This was overreacting, no doubt. But until one has reached the furthest depths of despair, there is no understanding the poverty of the senses and the helplessness of the spirit; so I don't judge myself harshly in this regard. I was ill-equipped to handle even the common things, much less a medical crisis.

Lacking insurance, they did not wish to keep me in the hospital even for that one night, and they released me from the emergency center with a vast handful of forms, telling me care-

fully everything I must do to obtain the proper assistance. It was late that night when I realized I'd left those papers in the street somewhere, perhaps at a bus stop.

I wandered aimlessly, as had become my common habit. I was passing through a quiet residential area of the city when, without the least warning, a burly, repulsive ogre of a man leapt from the darkness, grabbed me, pulled me through the side door of a garage, and dashed me to the concrete floor.

He smelled of booze and tobacco, but was not at that moment smoking, or I would have saved myself with the best explosion I could muster. In my panic-stricken state of mind, I have no doubt but that I would have finally tested the forbidden plan, blowing both of us to smithereens if he had had an unopened pack about his person. Fortunately or unfortunately, his cigarette pack, which I could see in his shirt pocket, was crumpled and empty. I did manage to ignite the tar and nicotine stains upon his fingers, resulting in a momentary *sprzzz*; but he was too drunk to feel it. His slapping me about the floor no doubt caused more damage to his hands than did the foolish, useless spark I was able to conjure.

I was dazed. He lurched back to look at his handiwork, me crumpled among boxes and tools and a gasoline can in the corner of the garage. He fumbled with his zipper. I saw him only vaguely as I withdrew into a new and macabre realization: his lungs. His lungs thick with the tar and the nicotine of years of heavy smoking . . .

I can't describe more than the resounding explosion which echoed between those walls. I *won't* describe more. I crawled from the garage, blood-spattered, splinters of his rib cage in my hair. Somehow I made it home. I vomited. I bathed. I slept.

Thus far I have not pursued hospitalization. I've ignored the letters sent by a concerned physician. I intend to take my chances much as smokers take theirs. It may be a benign tumor after all, and I can live a long life ignoring it. I rather suspect it is malignant. I don't know why I think so. I've come to believe my strange talent, born one day on an elevator, must have begun to develop at the same moment the malignancy rooted in my lung. I believe it to be the source of my power, the power I would loathe to be without.

I must go into the world tonight. I must exercise my singular aptitude. It is my one joy, my only reason to carry on; and, furthermore, I cannot help myself.

Samurai Fugue



Now I intend to tell you (and you'll be glad to hear) the tale of Pim, dim Pim, who everyone said was slow, *although*: she passed the college entry exams and maintained a stable, respectable, though not at all remarkable grade-point average.

The singular reason that Pim seemed dim and failed the second grade, and later the seventh, was that she was obsessed, possessed, and crippled by a dear, precious love of film.

When little, she would steal money from Mummy's purse and run away to the theater to watch serials and cartoons and coming attractions and advertisements and double or triple features, covering a space of time from matinee to final show—by which hour her mummy would have noticed that Pim, or if not Pim, then the money, was missing from the house. Then would a policeman fetch her home, for she was always precisely where presumed.

As years passed, the serials no longer played; and later, the cartoons were all but foregone; the trailers and the ads grew ever shorter; and finally, progress was such that theaters showed not two, never three, but only one major feature. Yet the theater owners had not yet devised a manner by which to make the same amount of money by showing nothing at all, so Pim was not upset.

She would go every day when she had the money, and she had the money because she collected and returned soda pop bottles, until the returnables vanished from the face of the planet along with the giant condor and the black-footed ferret, at which point she began to collect old tires and pieces of aluminum (especially empty beer cans) to be recycled for a pretty penny. Pim became known as "the scavenger." In college, this industry guaranteed an addition to her "regular" income (the money Poppa sent for tuition, books, and expenses). So she could afford to see a million movies. Her goal in life had been to see a million movies, but her goal was soon to change.

In college, Pim's life had settled into a fairly routine going: school and study, scavenging, and going to the movies. It was easy to apportion her time for each, because she had done away with most of the frivolities like friendships, boys, or regular meals (except popcorn). She kept no pets and had no hobbies or other untoward expense or time-consuming passion (save the main one named above).

She was studying a foreign language, and taking an extra class in filmmaking—the former so that someday she could make a living for herself, and the latter so there'd be a reason for doing so.

Pim was not persnickety about the quality of the films she saw. Oh, she knew the good ones from the bad ones all right; but it happened that she could enjoy the bad ones too. She remembered all the casts, all the directors. She understood everything the actors and the directors intended to convey; and she understood what they managed to convey *instead*. Moreover, she understood the actors and directors themselves, which scared the daylights out of the only director she had ever managed to talk to, a rather overblown Scandinavian who didn't like being seen through one bit. He ran away from Pim, flailing his arms in the air, shouting in a dry old voice that he would never lecture in America again and why didn't everyone realize all women, but especially American women, were evil witches.

She went through phases of favorites (everyone does): war films, old Hollywood dance comedies, Tarzan, spaghetti westerns, horse porno, and anything at all with Marjorie Main. She had phases for directors too: Azner, Renoir, Hawks, Woody Allen—no one too eclectic, for films were meant to be entertaining, not difficult.

Even her first masturbatory experience was in a theater (in this, she *was* quite slow, being all of seventeen at the time), fantasizing herself tucked neatly in the sheets twixt Bogey and the Babe.

As her tastes ran in phases, so did her personality perform acrobatic metamorphoses. Mummy liked to tell the story of the time a lady in the supermarket became convinced that Pim was really Shirley Temple (irrespective of the fact that by then Shirley Temple was Mummy's age), but that was years ago. When Pim learned to masturbate, for the longest while she strutted around like a drag queen being Mae West. Later she became more subtle and talked like Katharine Hepburn, until she overheard some-

one say it was affected, at which point she became a sincere, intense Greta Garbo. Shortly after moving to the dormitory, she became Sean Connery, but Poppa came to visit and for two months afterward she didn't get her usual check in the mail, until she went screaming home for a weekend being Sue Lyon and after that everything was fine.

In brief, Pim's life had been one long, slow, sedate stare at a silver screen.

Two things altered Pim's cozy lifestyle. One of these was the discovery of *chambara*, or, to use a vulgar term, samurai films. Without much lessening of the other types of films she saw, she yet began to pay especial attention to *chambara*, and often drove far and wide (gathering aluminum and old tires along the roadsides as she went) to attend any such film which might be playing on some other campus or in a farther city.

The other thing to change Pim was her foreign-language studies. She had chosen Japanese partly because she was herself one-quarter Japanese. (Her Japanese-American grandfather disappeared in a POW camp in Washington state; but the government apologized by giving back the property they'd taken away, which had to be sold for a ridiculously low price. Now there was a big department store on that downtown block, and Mummy occasionally went there and lamented how they *might* have been rich if only . . .) Well, actually, Pim had chosen that language because a career counselor pointed out that more and more medical, scientific, and technical papers were published in Japanese and she could be assured a fairly secure if entirely boring job in translation, which was a sight more than could be said for the students of any other foreign language.

It might not at first be obvious how these two events—learning Japanese, and watching samurai films—changed Pim's life. The thing is, you must understand, that learning Japanese completely changed her method of viewing *chambara* movies, and thereby changed her attitude about all movies everywhere, which by association changed her attitudes about life in general, which was itself one overlong film in need of editing.

In an American film, Pim would, naturally, *listen* to the characters speak their lines. In, say, a French or German film, she *read* what the characters were saying, in the form of subtitles. But with *chambara*, as she learned Japanese, she began to do both at once! It was an amazing effect, especially since the sub-

titles generally told a slightly different story than the spoken dialogue conveyed.

Hearing and reading are two very different acts. The samurai films she watched began to take on certain aspects of a fugue, that is, a composition with two or more themes enunciated simultaneously. It was like listening to two very different songs at the same time, yet without a single note of discord.

Pim was overwhelmed. She felt that she was watching two films at once. Such heaven! Such joy!

Thus had she discovered there was really no pleasure quite the equal of watching samurai killing peasants, evil lords, and each other.

It was glorious.

It was rare.

The words at the bottom of the screen; the words from the mouths of the players . . . they gave her two distinct, separate understandings of the same film. And though the two interpretations might contradict, they were yet, somehow, both, *right*.

This awakened her to the realization that there were actually *more* than two simultaneous stories being told in any given film. She did not mean the intellectual, subjective manipulation of literal, allegoric, symbolic, or figurative levels. She meant that each film, in an objective fashion, was in reality a large number of films made all at the same time.

She'd already noted the interpretation accessible through the subtitles, and the one accessible through the words and intonation of the actors. Additionally, there was the story which the director intended, often at odds with what the actors *or* subtitles suggested. Plus, there was the story the scriptwriter originally intended, some of which might remain. Atop all this, there was a whole other interpretation to be achieved through the social context outside the film, which was especially poignant in films made in a Japanese social context and viewed in an American social context. That made, let's see, how many films she was watching at once? Five! The subtitled one, the spoken/acted one, the directed one, the scripted one, and the one of social context. Of course, even in bad films, these all blended into a smooth, unblurred image devoid of chaos. But for someone who had become attuned to the various overlays, the actual complexity of every movie big and small was, in a word, captivating.

She'd been watching *Sword of Doom* when she had these revelations. The film ended with a suddenly frozen frame, the war-

rior caught in eternal combat. But to Pim it seemed that the samurai hadn't stopped at all, that the film was still going on and on and on, and the cruel hero was still killing, and killing, and killing—killing on nearly half a dozen levels—and she was mesmerized by the gory beauty of his every motion. The theater's janitor poked her in the shoulder and asked, "Are you asleep, miss?"

"Shh!" said Pim sharply.

"But, miss . . ."

"Shush! I'm watching the movie."

"But, but, it's been over for half an hour . . ."

Still she wouldn't move, and the management had to throw her out bodily. As she staggered out into the night, she realized there was a *sixth* context for the film: the values brought to the movie by the production studio itself, that is, the financial *point* of the entire venture, which in extreme cases overshadowed an entire product and in every case had some influence.

The next day, she returned to the same theater to watch *Sword of Doom* two more times, and they threw her out again. The manager, who himself was Japanese and had a delicious accent, asked, "Don't you know this is a bad movie? Don't come tomorrow, please."

For the first time since the seventh grade, Pim's grades began to fall below their average average. She spent almost all her study hours attempting to produce, for her film class, the perfect short subject for her personal purposes: a samurai fugue. Which reminded her of a *seventh* interpretation for a film: orchestral interpretation. A good soundtrack could tell a story all by itself!

It was clear that she could not hope to bring these various levels for understanding or interpretation to a film if she were the one and only creator, filling all the roles of actor, director, scripter, subtitler, purveyor of social context, musical composer, studio manager, and choreographer. (That's eight! She hadn't thought of the interpretation through choreography before, which is very important especially in a samurai film, with the precise ballet of violence.)

Pim made her actor's costume out of aluminum cans—and a fairly convincing suit of armor it became. She obtained a samurai sword, or close approximation, for an extravagant sum at a pawnshop in the Asian district. All other filming necessities were accessible through the school. But there was still only one *her*. How could she hope to have eight films in one with a single

person's input? The answer was inspired: She would multiply her personality.

It was complicated at first, deciding what her personalities ought to be. The choreographer would be a sadistic faggot. The director was a tyrant. The scriptwriter was a dilettante convinced his every word was golden, outraged by every alteration. The subtitles were by a well-meaning Japanese woman who didn't really understand English at all (though she had a degree from Kyoto University stating otherwise), but since her own father was descended from the samurai class, she took her duty seriously. The musical score was by a frustrated old nincompoop who had wanted to be another Bach but instead composed for B-grade films. The actor was an egotistical but otherwise fine, serious artist. The owner of the studio was a miser, who wanted successes, not art. Oh! There was *another* context for the film she hadn't perceived before: the *film editor's* perspective. Very well: The editor's persona would be: complete idiot.

There was still the interpretation of social context outside the film itself. Hmm. That could be difficult. Ah! She had it: The social context was that everyone in the whole world was stark raving insane, including the nine people responsible for the film, but especially the tenth person, who was the entire audience (this would be Pim herself, so no specially devised personality was necessary).

Considerable thought and imagination had gone into creating the various personalities who would provide their own unique overlay and interpretation to the one-reel, one-actor chambara feature being made by the people mentioned above. But curiously, Pim utterly forgot that she had invented these people, although each in turn appeared when needed to perform his or her required tasks.

Since an audience was not yet needed (because the film wasn't finished), the personality that was the original Pim had not been called upon (this left more time for the others to complete the film, for it would have been difficult for them to work while she was gone to the movies). Pim effectively ceased to exist. Therefore, she didn't show up at her classes, or take calls from home, or answer anyone who called her by name.

Occasionally, the hard-driving director or the artistic actor or the miserly studio owner would obtain cryptic communications which were obviously intended for someone they didn't know. Thus Pim was never informed beforehand that she was being

expelled from school for nonattendance and bad grade-point average. However, the studio owner was indignant to find himself, one day, refused access to his studio, which a crazy man calling himself a fine arts professor claimed belonged to the college and was for the use of students only. The actor was upset to hear about this, as was the choreographer, and especially the film editor, whose job was soon to commence. The script and score writers weren't as concerned about all of this, as their jobs were completed.

The film progressed, somehow, and with the aid of the studio's owner-manager (who figured he was kept out for failing to pay the rent), the film editor gained access to the dark rooms at night, and began to perform his finishing chores like the true idiot he was. The director argued to save key scenes, which really did have to be spliced back in.

When Pim reappeared as herself, she was slightly disoriented. She found herself in the viewing studio of the college, which was presently devoid of any other persons. She did not have the slightest notion that, for the past month, she hadn't existed, or that at that very moment her mummy and poppa were driving six hundred miles up the coast to get their poor sick daughter and take her to a nice private hospital, or, as Thurber might have termed it, the booby hatch.

None of this was part of her knowledge when the movie started. She was not even aware that this was the film she'd set out to make for a class in which she was no longer officially enrolled.

Since the film editor and subtitler had slaved through the night, it was presently time for morning classes to begin. Pim's film instructor wandered into the viewing room at one point, and Pim said hello; but he scurried out again, apparently not wishing to see this particular film today.

She absorbed the film's nine levels (or had they grown to fifteen?), comprehending all of them completely, becoming enmeshed within the most perfectly conceived movie that had ever assaulted her heightened senses. It was the sad story of the last samurai, a young man who had killed every human being in the world and now was all alone. She wept. She laughed. She shook with terror. She was swept away in ecstasy. A truly wonderful achievement! She gave the film a standing ovation.

Afterward, the actor himself made an appearance, for this was, after all, the world premiere of the most important cham-

bara movie since *Seven Samurai*, destined to win at Cannes, at the Asian Film Festival, at Toronto, New York, Chicago International . . . and Gosh!, Gee!, he had worn his costume, which without the camera tricks appeared to be made out of old tires and tin cans, and he had a cute samurai ponytail (was that his real hair so long?).

It was about this time that Mummy and Poppa and the film instructor and a policeman and two gentlemen in white jackets appeared in the doorway of the viewing studio. They approached slowly. They were talking to the actor in English, but he only knew Japanese. They seemed to be very cajoling as they surrounded the chambara star.

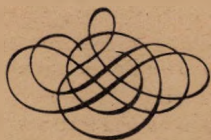
Six or nine personalities chattered in her brain, trying to explain the situation to her, to him, to each other, with going-on-a-dozen different interpretations regarding every innuendo. Life was a fugue, but something here *was* in discord. As the six cajoling people surrounded Pim, she suddenly realized that she'd been transported into some terrible place in time. It was no longer seventeenth-century Japan, where she had studied fencing like all good boys of her samurai class. She had somehow been sent forward in time to a frightful land where all the people were monstrous and insane (insanity had been, after all, the outside social context of the film).

Pim, the mighty samurai, carved through the monstrous, insane people of this future place. Blood sprayed all around. She screamed a samurai oath, and thanked the Shinto gods that she had survived this awful battle. Then the samurai youth left the corpse-strewn stage, trailing blood with her sword, and went out, out into the horrifying world.

When they came for her, she was eating popcorn and watching the latest Clint Eastwood, which she thought a comforting movie because it seemed to have only one very shallow level to it and therefore didn't stress her sensitivities. She never understood what the doctor meant when he said, Pim, your movie has won eight awards.

PART III

TALES OF NAIPON



“All things are sad dreams.”

—Buddhist proverb

*“They passed the water
Into a forest quiet for the slaughter.”*

—Keats, 1820

The Harmonious Battle



Throughout her eight weeks recuperating at Emura Temple hotsprings on Mount Awa, Azo Hono-o dwelt overlong on the loss of her left arm. Although she revealed none of these emotions, secretly she was consumed by self-pity. As *onna-bushi*, or woman warrior, she had excelled in the use of *daito*, a sword generally considered to be a two-handed weapon. There were one-handed styles which she could study, but there was no denying the handicap: her effectiveness was halved. How would the fame she had acquired in past encounters ever be maintained? Were she to strive exceptionally hard, she might achieve the strength of an average foot-soldier; but it did not seem possible to regain her previous abilities. It would take getting used to, the fact that none would comment any longer on the superiority of her fighting skill.

The shoulder had healed smoothly with the aid of ointments and the care provided by the priest of the temple. The hotsprings were located on the mountainside overlooking Emura-ji. The view from the high pools had a curative effect of its own. Azo was well enough to be upon her way; but the self-pity and its attendant sense of ennui kept her lingering extra days.

She rested in the steaming waters, her head against a rock. Her one remaining arm reached out of the water like a lazy serpent. She turned her hand slowly to look at it from every angle. When she parted her fingers, she saw another woman coming down a mountain path. This was strange, for no one lived above the hotsprings and only wild animals kept the paths clear of foliage. A pilgrim to the hotsprings ought to come from the temple below, not from the peaks above.

The woman was naked but for a towel around her hair. Azo's strong, serpentine arm withdrew into the water. She watched the graceful woman approaching.

The new arrival smiled pleasantly, bowed politely, then slipped into a farther side of the pool without creating the

slightest ripple. The steam rose in ghostly veils between them. Azo Hono-o ignored the other woman, closed her eyes, relaxed. In the next moment there was someone standing close to her, although Azo had not heard the woman walking through the pool.

"Did I frighten you, onna-bushi?" The woman's voice was sweet.

Azo Hono-o collected her wits and looked up at the woman standing in the shallow water. "It was impolite to come upon me without a sound!" she complained.

"It was impolite that you did not acknowledge my arrival," the woman countered. She squatted down until the water covered her breasts. Azo sat with water to her neck.

"I am here to recover from battle wounds," said Azo. Her hair drifted on the water's surface. "My mind is preoccupied with thoughts about my injury. I have forsaken many social amenities in order to regard my singular misfortune."

"I understand," the woman said, her tone forgiving. "In fact, that is why I have come."

"Ah!" said Azo. "The priest sends you to advise my departure?"

"No, onna-bushi! You are too sensitive to think so. I come because you seem so sad. There is no reason for it!"

Azo made a derisive sound. She lifted her head from the rock, sitting forward a bit so that part of her torso rose above the water. "You see?" said Azo, her armless shoulder evident. "There is cause indeed for melancholy."

"I would like to advise you," said the young woman with the towel upon her head.

"Advise me how?"

"Emura-ji hotsprings has nothing more to offer you," she began. "I advise that you travel to Lake Miwa and seek there my two sisters. Tell them the Witch of Awayama has sent you."

Azo sat upright and looked surprised. "Witch?"

"I am called that. I am also called spirit, fairy, devil." The woman unwrapped her hair. It was arranged in a beautiful style and was as white as the snow of Awayama's highest levels. The woman said, "I think of myself only as an ascetic."

The division between mortal and deity was a slender one; who to one person was an ordinary individual was, to another, someone profound and immortal. Azo Hono-o stirred immediately, getting to her knees and bowing ludicrously with her head in the

water. When she lifted her face to the white-haired young woman, Azo said,

"Kami of Mount Awa, please forgive my rude manners!"

"It is all right, onna-bushi. Only, go as I say to the lake called Beautiful Harmony. Its name, you'll find, is more ironic than descriptive. The trip will ease your troubled thoughts."

Azo said resignedly, "I will do as you instruct, Kami-awa. I will leave at once for Lake Miwa."

The promise received, the white-haired woman climbed from the hot pool and wrapped the towel around her waist. Momentarily, she vanished up the steep mountainside.

The priest of Emura-ji was surprised by the gloomy onna-bushi's sudden decision to leave. He insisted that she say what stirred her to activity after pouting for so long. Azo told him. For a moment he only stared at her. Then he bowed full to the waist and blessed Hono-o's journey. She soon strode paths toward a mountain pass, clad in a split skirt called *hakama* and short kimono called *haori*, its left sleeve tied back. Through her cloth belt, or *obi*, she carried the longsword called *daito* and the shortsword called *wakizashi*.

It was many days to Lake Miwa.

Lake Miwa was a wild place, backed by sheer cliffs which vanished into white clouds. The forest was alive with small noises and continuously moving shadows. On the shores of the lake itself there was but one rude village, and the people there were reticent. Either they knew nothing or would not speak of what they knew regarding sister-ascetics in the region.

As she was a member of the *buké*, or warrior caste, the people were required to feed Azo. In this they were generous. She made a little pack of food and then began the long trek around Lake Miwa's perimeters searching for a shrine or place where the Sisters might reside. In an area farthest from the village, halfway around the lake, she found the stone carving of a lantern. It sat on the far end of a small, rocky peninsula, or jetty. Azo had seen no other sign of human presence, and even this site was not greatly suited to habitation.

It was impossible to travel further, for the cliff walls met Lake Miwa at a point a little ways on. The sky was darkening, so she would have to wait until morning to make the trip back to the village. Then she would wait for yet another morning to begin exploring the lake's shores in the other direction.

She made camp near the Peninsula of the Stone Lantern. When it was dark, the clouds parted for a while and Azo was able to see the Celestial River. It seemed to be a bridge from the cliff heights to the farther shore of Lake Miwa. Beneath this amazing arch Azo Hono-o slept with her arm drawn inside her haori for warmth.

While asleep, Azo experienced a nightmare. In it she was being swept along a torrential river toward a black abyss. In her only hand she held a daito; but the sword could not slay the watery demons who clung to her clothing and sapped her of warmth and strength. Then she beheld salvation: a tree's limb reached out as though it were a generous hand. In order to take advantage of the limb, however, it would be necessary to drop the sword to the river bottom. The sword was her soul and she would not let it go. The river-demons babbled delightedly and bore her past the branch. The black abyss waited.

Before she fell from the brink, Azo awoke, chilled with sweat. She sat up abruptly and pushed her arm out of the sleeve of her haori. For a moment she was startled that her left arm did not slide out of its sleeve as well; reflexes were hard to unlearn. She remembered the dream with frightening clarity, remembered that she might have saved herself but for the lack of a second arm. She would have liked to curse the warrior whose sword had cleaved so neatly through flesh and bone; but Azo Hono-o respected her opponent too well to level curses at so late a date.

The night was moonless. Clouds sealed off the stars. There was only a feeble glow which came from within the stone lantern at the end of the peninsula. Had fireflies gathered there? Azo rose to her feet and gazed at the curious light. In a moment, she heard a faint sloshing which reminded her of waves slapping the hull of a boat. Something was coming across Lake Miwa, guided by the peninsula's strange beacon.

Mist clung to the water surface as fuzz on rotten plums. A round, luminescent boat appeared from those mists. The boat was made of mother-of-pearl with constantly shifting patterns of color. Two beautiful women reposed within. The hair of their heads was long and snowy white. Azo Hono-o ran a short ways onto the narrow peninsula and shouted,

"Kami-miwa! I am sent by the Witch of Awayama!"

The glistening craft struck shore near the stone lantern. Fireflies scattered from the lantern and disappeared like sparks. The women were languid, deigning not to stand up or to leave their

vessel. Their lazy eyes peered darkly at Azo Hono-o, and their voices said in harmony,

"Long we have waited for one such as you. Priests and kings have ridden in our boat, but never onna-bushi."

Their musical voices were seductive. Azo Hono-o was almost drawn to the jetty's farthest reach, but she held back by force of will. "If it is a warrior you seek," said Azo, "I fear I must tell you that I have lost one arm and am thereby weakened."

"Our mountain sister would seem to disagree about your weakness," the voices sang as one. "Ride with us to the Secret Land. There you can test your merit and serve us by so doing."

Azo Hono-o could not resist the voices this time. She hurried to the boat. She was directed to the steerage at the rear and stood working a handle back and forth. The languid women continued to recline comfortably. Although Azo had become the tiny ship's source of power, she was confounded as to how it was kept on any special course. As it was round in design and had no actual prow, the boat ought to have traveled randomly about the lake.

Cliffs loomed to the left. It was nearly dawn when Azo Hono-o saw the gaping rent in those high stone walls. When she realized the boat was taking itself toward that frightful opening, it was Azo's strong desire to cease pumping the rear oar; but she was unable to conform to her own wish.

The barest moment before the sun was visible, the boat entered the inky gloom of the fissure. The waters were sluggish and thick so that the boat proceeded slowly. Azo worked hard at the oar, although she would have liked to stop. She could not see the walls in the darkness, but the echo of her own breath proved the narrowness of the passage.

Because of the boat's oily glisten, it was possible to see the white-haired women relaxing upon cushions. Their voices spoke together: "This is the longest part of our journey. To pass the time, we would like to hear stories of the outside world. We rarely have news."

It was more certain now than ever that Azo Hono-o was under some compulsion. She was in no mood for storytelling, yet could not resist the command. She could, at least, choose the story carefully.

"In the world today," said Azo, "there walks a Buddhist saint named Nichiren. He teaches the Lotus Sutra to all who will listen and wields sword against all who will not. Once, this martial

priest was visited by a sly man who was a beggar. The beggar asked Nichiren if it was worth the smallest coin to hear Buddha speaking the Wonderful Law. Nichiren said, 'The largest coin would be too small an appreciation.' This reply made the sly beggar smile broadly. He sat on his knees and began to recite the Lotus Sutra, as though he were a follower of Nichiren. He shouted again and again at the top of his lungs: '*Namu-myo-ho-rengo-kyo! Namu-myo-ho-rengo-kyo!*' As he shouted, the sound of his voice seemed strangely to fade away. In front of the beggar, or rather, between the beggar and Nichiren, there was manifested the apparent form of Amida Buddha. It was by then impossible to hear the beggar chant the sutra. Instead, Buddha said the words Himself: '*Namu-myo-ho-rengo-kyo!*' Nichiren was overcome with gladness and fell upon his face in thanksgiving. Then, slowly, the vision and the voice of Buddha faded away. The shouting of the beggar was heard once more. Tears slid down Nichiren's cheeks, for the sound and the appearance of Amida Buddha had been precisely as he had always imagined. He began to kiss the hands of the beggar. Those hands were held out for something other than kisses, however. 'What is it you require?' Nichiren asked, confused by the beggar's manner. 'Why, the coin you promised,' said the beggar. It was at that moment Nichiren realized he was the victim of *saimenjutsu*, the art of hypnotism. He stood from where he had knelt before the image of Buddha, the image which had been conjured from his own mind by the crafty beggar. 'How dare you mislead pious priests!' exclaimed Nichiren. He drew his sword at once and smote off the head of the beggar."

A light passed from eye to eye, back and forth between the reposing women. Eerie as that light was, and calculating, it yet alleviated some of the sense of darkness Azo thought she had seen within them.

"An interesting man is Nichiren," they said. "Perhaps someday he will come to us, as saints have done before. Do you subscribe to the law of the martial priest, onna-bushi?"

"I am a convert to the Lotus Sect," said Azo. "In this violent world, the edge of steel is the only religion that makes sense."

"If you were deceived," they asked together, "would you slay as swiftly as does Nichiren?"

"If I were," said Azo Hono-o.

"Then we had best erase illusions now," said the two women; and there was brilliant light all around. Azo Hono-o threw her

arm across her face, shutting out the blinding light with the sleeve of her haori. When she lowered her arm, the women were gone, as was the boat. Azo Hono-o stood by a river which ran through the center of the hollow cliffs. There was blue sky above, for the high walls on four sides held clouds at bay. The land was dry except for the river. In the Secret Land, it never rained.

An acolyte was coming down the rocky hillside toward the woman. He was only eight or nine years of age. He carried a paper lantern, but the candle was not lit, for it was yet day.

"My master sends me to show you the way," said the head-shaven boy.

"Who is your master?" asked Azo Hono-o.

"He rules the Secret Land."

Azo Hono-o followed the boy through a maze of rocks and gulleys. She became hopelessly confused as to the direction of the river. It seemed as though they traveled in circles, but the acolyte was too sweet and young to doubt. The day was short but hot. The evening was long in the shadow of the high walls. Azo Hono-o became hungry, and offered to share the pack of food which she had brought in her sleeve's pocket.

"I am fasting," said the child. "I must not eat." So Azo ate by herself, still following the boy. Night fell upon the Secret Land. The boy removed flint and iron from his robe and with this fire-kit lit the lantern's candle. Now the trip was eerier than before. Azo Hono-o felt as though she were following a pale ghost through the dark country. The acolyte held his lantern ever before and led Azo to nowhere.

"We must stop and rest!" Azo Hono-o suggested, for she had not slept well the night before.

"I am weary too," said the boy. "If I can travel, can't you?"

She supposed she could, when it was put that way. Eventually they came to a natural stone bridge which crossed the river. By this time Azo was indeed weary, though the boy seemed unaffected. At first Azo was glad to see the bridge, for it meant they had not been traveling in circles after all; or she would have seen the bridge before. Her mind was slow for need of sleep. But in a moment she realized she had indeed been led circuitously, for this was the river they had started from.

Though suspicious, Azo Hono-o kept silent. She followed the acolyte and watched the shadows carefully. The ground was dusty here. In the lantern's dim glow, Azo Hono-o could see that she

was leaving obvious footprints. The acolyte, by contrast, left no track whatsoever.

Azo Hono-o withdrew her wakizashi, the shorter of her two swords. She said, "I am sworn to slay illusion!" When she said this, the boy turned around and he was no longer sweet-faced. He had a demon's visage; and he began to grow. His white garments dissipated, revealing red, pockmarked skin. The lantern's stick was a sword in the demon's left hand. The candle became a flame upon the palm of his right hand. He was more than a head taller than Azo Hono-o, yet she did not hesitate. She advanced, but the demon had somehow come to be standing atop a boulder and she could not reach him.

"A one-armed woman cannot defeat Hidadite!" growled the demon. He had struck immediately at her one fear. She backed away from the boulder, but said,

"Leap down, then, and kill me."

The demon countered, "Climb up the rock and take my head!"

Azo Hono-o slipped her wakizashi back into its scabbard. Then she got down on her knees. She held her single hand in front of herself with the fingers together and pointed up. It was as near as she could come to the position for prayer. She began to shout the Lotus Sutra: "*Namu-myō-ho-renge-kyō! Namu-myō-ho-renge-kyō!*" When she had said it seven times, the demon vanished, loath to hear it the eighth. He had been illusion after all; and if he did truly live somewhere in the Secret Land, Azo Hono-o had yet to actually meet him.

When she slept, she dreamed again. This time she was running home as fast as she could go, for she knew that Hidadite intended to kill her mother and father and brothers and sisters. She came to a rise and saw her family's house at the bottom of the hill. Hidadite stood outside the house with his sword and flame, threatening to set the house on fire and slay everyone as they ran outside. He looked to the top of the hill and laughed at Azo Hono-o, for she was too far away to stop him. On the ground at her feet was a quiver of arrows and a longbow. With these, Azo Hono-o might have slain Hidadite and saved her family. But it took two hands to draw the bow; and that was why Hidadite left it there to torment her.

Azo Hono-o awoke miserable but wiser. She knew that her own fears alone could defeat her. Her obsession with her lost

arm weakened her far more than its actual loss; it pervaded even her dreams. To defeat her enemy, she must first defeat herself.

Toward noon, the parched country was unbearably warm, and Azo Hono-o could not find the river. She had eaten the last of the food she had brought along. Without food or drink, she perforce emboldened herself to spartan survival, traveling onward in search of Hidadite or the sister-ascetics who had abandoned her in the Secret Land.

She knew that she was being followed by as many as three or four pursuers, but doubted it would do any good to search for who they were. They would reveal themselves in good time, and she must be ready.

She loosened her haori to cool herself off and trudged onward, though she knew of no destination. When the sun had passed beyond the rim of the western wall, the long twilight began, and the Secret Land became cooler. Azo Hono-o came to a clearing surrounded by large stones. In the middle of the clearing was a drum tower, or pagoda, twice as tall as herself and made of granite.

Azo approached the drum tower cautiously and peered in one of its windows. There was a brightly painted box inside. The door to the drum tower was very small, so Azo had to crawl inside. Within, there was not room to stand. Azo knelt before the box. It had a lock, but the lock was undone. She was about to lift the lid, when a chill ran up her spine. A dozen folk tales leapt to mind, about boxes which, when opened, released misfortune. Yet Azo felt that there was something in the box of importance to herself. Why she felt this she did not know. Probably it was a feeling planted in her by the demon. Yet she felt the importance strongly. Something she needed was in the box. Something she had hidden from herself. With greatest difficulty, she turned away.

The woman warrior crawled out of the drum tower drenched in sweat and shaking. She felt as though she had just survived untold horrors.

A man stepped out from behind one of the rocks surrounding the clearing. He was a warrior. A second warrior stepped from behind another rock. Then a third appeared from his hiding place. The first one said, "I am Koji Nakashima. My associates are Bunzo Nomotashi and Rentaro Shimoda. We are the retainers of Hidadite, King of the Secret Land. We are sent to kill you."

Azo Hono-o did not reply, but bowed politely to her opponents. They charged at once, swords raised. Azo dropped to one knee. She drew her daito and with three quick gestures, the three men were slain. They fell, one in front, and the others to each side of her. Azo Hono-o's quick sword slid neatly into its scabbard.

When she stood, the three corpses disappeared as though they had never been. Azo fled the place, not for fear of the vanished corpses, but for fear of the box inside the drum tower. She hurried through the shadowed country until she saw that three men blocked her path. They were Koji Nakashima, Bunzo Nomotashi and Rentaro Shimoda, who she had recently killed. They came at her again. Azo's sword licked out rapidly, but this time they knew her fighting style, and they were harder to kill; and yet she killed them, and their corpses vanished as before.

The third time they appeared she was less surprised. They attacked wordlessly. They fought even better than the previous two times. One of them succeeded in cutting a slit in the sleeve of her haori. It was the left sleeve. Had she had a left arm, it would have been wounded severely.

When they were dead and vanished, she hurried to find a place where the next encounter would give her an advantage. If they got better each time, they would eventually become too strong for her. She found a hump of ground with a boulder on top. Against that boulder she set her shoulders and waited. The three men appeared before her, and their leader laughed.

"It is because you have but one arm that you cannot defeat us!" said Koji Nakashima. "This time we will cut off your remaining arm, then hack it into pieces before your eyes!"

"It is true I cannot defeat you," she said. "But it is because you are already dead, not because my arm is missing. I will not duel with you again!" So saying, she fell upon her knees and held her hand in front of herself, chanting the Lotus Sutra.

"We were Buddhists in life!" said Koji Nakashima angrily. "The Lotus Sutra cannot frighten us away!" The three men rushed forward with their swords drawn. Azo Hono-o did not move. Three swords fell at once, stopping short of her right shoulder. She continued to recite the sutra and the swords could not touch her. At last she feared them no more and could stop chanting. She looked into the eyes of Koji Nakashima and told him,

"Tell your master he must fight with me himself. I will not duel weak assassins anymore."

Koji backed away, looking peevish. He motioned the other

two to join him. Together they bowed to Azo with strained politeness. Then the three of them broke into a run, and disappeared into a solid wall of stone.

Azo Hono-o was afraid of sleep. Two nights in a row she had suffered nightmares. She would not suffer one tonight. As there was no likelihood of losing the way, inasmuch as she had no destination, Azo continued her explorations beneath the starry roof of the four walls. It was no surprise to see a fire in the distance. She had expected the demon Hidadité would show himself this night. He held the fire in his right hand and the sword in his left; and he sat in lotus position atop a three-sided, flat-topped boulder. He was humming a mantra to himself. Sitting thus, he looked like a war god. When he left off his mantra, it was because Azo Hono-o stood below him.

"Are you pious, onna-bushi?" the resonant, dreamy voice of Hidadité asked.

"I am pious," said Azo Hono-o.

"Have you come as a pilgrim to bow before me, onna-bushi?"

"No, Hidadité. I have come to slay a demon."

"Whose demon have you come to slay, onna-bushi?"

"I have come to slay you, Hidadité."

Hidadité smiled grimly. All his teeth were pointed. "To defeat me," he said, "you must first defeat yourself."

"I know it," said Azo Hono-o.

"How well do you know it?" the demon asked. "I think you do not know it very well. I think the sister-ascetics of Lake Miwa's Secret Land have tricked you, onna-bushi. Demons are not born on this earth; they are conjured. Did the Witches conjure Hidadité?"

"I do not know," said Azo. "Did they conjure you?"

"If so, it was their ill fortune, for I have proven myself stronger than them. They built the pagoda to appease me, but I was not appeased. After I have slain their champion Azo Hono-o, I will slay the Witches too. Then Hidadité will go from this place to terrorize the outside world. Only you, onna-bushi, with the ascetics, stand between me and absolute dominion of the mortal world!"

After saying these things, Hidadité stood up and flourished the sword in his left hand. His left-handedness would make him harder to defeat. Most fencers were right-handed, most especially Azo Hono-o, who had only a right hand, and she was not

so well-practiced at countering left-hand blows. Hidadité jumped from the boulder, and a ferocious battle was engaged.

There was something balanced and harmonious about the right-handed fighter versus the left-handed one. Again and again the demon struck at Azo. At least he, too, fought one-handed; for he would not put down the fire. Twice he tried to dash the fire into the woman's face, but she was too quick, and he nearly lost his hand those two times. It seemed as though they were evenly matched, for neither could break the other's guard. But slowly, Azo began to perceive a certain weakness in her opponent's style. He cut single-mindedly at her right shoulder, as though he believed it were her only vulnerable spot. Perhaps emotionally it *had* been her weak spot; but his three retainers had inadvertently cured her of the previous fear of losing her remaining arm. Azo Hono-o waited only for the right moment to take advantage of the demon's limited approach.

The moment came. Her sword sliced through his belly. But the demon did not fall. He backed away and looked at his own bloodless rent. Then he laughed and threw his fire-hand outward in a sweeping gesture. Azo Hono-o was pressed away by the resultant heat. Fire-devils sprung from Hidadité's hand and came rushing at her. They were no higher than her knees, with pointed heads and huge flat feet. Her sword would not cut them, so she was forced to retreat.

They chased her through darkness. She looked over her shoulder, and the brightness of the fire-devils made her night-blind when she turned again to look ahead. As a result, she ran headlong into the drum tower and knocked herself unconscious. Her last thought was that she would now be consumed by the fire-devils, or that the grandfather demon Hidadité would come and strike her with his sword.

She awoke in the clearing next to the pagoda in the bright of day. Many hours had passed, yet neither the devils of fire nor Hidadité had taken advantage. There was a large bump on her head, which smarted to the touch. Her head swam when she tried to sit up.

"Do not trouble yourself," said the singing voices of the sister-ascetics. They had placed a rock under her head as a pillow. They were sitting one to each side of her, serving as nurses. One of them held a quaint, small cup to Azo's lips and both of them said, "Drink only a little at first."

"Hidadité," Azo groaned. "I could not kill him."

"You hurt him more than he pretended," said the women. They helped Azo Hono-o to sit. She was distraught to see that the wooden chest had been dragged outside the pagoda. The sister-ascetics said, "Hidadité lives inside this box. He has returned to it until his wound heals; but no lock can hold him there when he is better. We are helpless to destroy him even in his weakened state, for he is your demon and not ours."

Azo's bruised head was still swimming. The words of the singing women made no sense to her. "How is he my demon? You are the witches who conjure devils! I am merely onna-bushi."

"Still is he your demon," they insisted. "We did not conjure him. You must know that 'Hidadité' means 'left hand,' and he did not take his name from the fact that he is left-handed. Please open the box."

Azo obediently reached out and removed the loose lock with a shaky hand. When she raised the lid, she saw that a severed arm lay within. It was brown and dry and mummified.

"After the War between Yoshinake and Yoritomo," said the white-haired women musically, "your arm came to the Secret Land, carried by the river. Cast onto these shores, it dried and hardened. Because your mind dwelt utterly upon your loss, the arm was given demonic life. If you cannot defeat your fear and anger and sorrow, Hidadité will rise again, more powerful than before."

Azo Hono-o looked at the mummified arm, but felt no horror of it. She had proven herself strong, even one-armed. She no longer felt consumed with grief over her loss.

"I will put my arm to rest," said Azo Hono-o. "I will sit here for a day and a night reciting the Lotus Sutra, bowing to the box after each eighth chant. I will assure the arm that it is no longer hated and then I will build it a pyre. Do you think these things will appease its anger with me?"

Two voices sang: "With those acts, surely your poor arm's spirit will sleep easily."

Two nights later, Azo Hono-o returned to the rude village on Lake Miwa. Nobody saw the mother-of-pearl boat that brought her. She spoke to a priest about her adventure and she lingered several weeks in spite of the fact that the people had been unfriendly. In that space of time, Azo made a carving from a large, round piece of hardwood. The priest tutored her now and then, for she was not

highly versed in the task she had undertaken and needed occasional instruction. When it was done, it was a lovely carving, for Azo Hono-o had put her heart into its making. Though it might seem crude compared to the work of a professional woodcarver, it yet captured excellently a general sense of beauty. It depicted the Witches of Lake Miwa reposed within a bowl.

Azo Hono-o carried the heavy carving on her back toward the Peninsula of the Stone Lantern; and she was surprised that a group of pilgrims joined her, for the villagers were instantly more friendly when they saw what she had made. The carving was situated in the middle of the stony peninsula with great ceremony. Then Azo Hono-o thanked the village's pilgrims. Everyone sat on their knees and bowed many times.

Several days later she had returned to Emura Temple hoping to meet the Witch of Awayama once more and express personal gratitude. At the Hour of the Ox on a night of a swollen moon, the woman warrior went up to the hot springs and lay quietly in the hot water. Kami-awa came down from her mountain peak and conversed with the warrior until morning. What they said, no one knows. But it was noted thereafter that the hair of Azo Hono-o began to turn prematurely white. It is common knowledge that people who dwell among ghosts become ghosts themselves; it is less well known that those who are favored by kami spirits become kami spirits also. Azo Hono-o lived many years and no one was really certain if she was immortal or not. It is said that she was defeated for the last time in a battle with another white-haired warrior, and that her grave was later moved to Emura-ji, where you can find it today. Her grave is surrounded by three others: those of Koji Nakashima, Bunzo Nomotashi and Rentaro Shimoda, whose souls Azo Hono-o had seen to after fighting them in the Secret Land.

Many people who have lost one or both arms worship Azo Hono-o to this day at Emura-ji. And it is rumored that there are now two sister-ascetics on the top of Mount Awa, as there are two sisters on Lake Miwa. Sometimes people see Azo's three retainers on that mountain as well. These things are attested to by many pious individuals, but who is to say what is true.

Time-Slit Through a Rice Paper Window



First you must picture a man wearing bamboo armor, a man who is standing very far away. In fact he is in a valley and you are seeing him somewhat from above. You must not expect to understand his motivations, even if he does something which you would do in a similar circumstance. It is the great falsehood of fiction that a reader can identify with a character. The reader identifies only with the reader, and shapes the character to that. In this case, the reader must bear in mind that nothing makes definite sense even when it appears logical; and nothing is outrageous even if it looks absurd. The activities you are about to witness, through words on paper (think of the page as a rice paper window through which a slit is made into another place and time), simply *are*. Or, they simply *were*, since the events take place somewhere in history.

The man in bamboo armor (the armor is lacquered black) has a name (it is Kohachi Takuro), but you should think of him as not having a name at all, or you may begin to feel you know him better than you do. You do not know him at all. He is even too far away to see his face. If you could see his face, you might also feel you were getting to know him a little bit. But even close up, you would not be able to see his face, for he is wearing a warrior's mask of iron. It covers the jowls, nose, and chin. His eyes are visible (not from so far away, of course) but there is nothing special about them, except that they are, to Western perception, slanted. The eyes of the reader may or may not be similar. Probably the reader's eyes are not similar, since this is being written in English (the author takes no responsibility for the quality of any translation). Or perhaps the reader's eyes are in fact similar to the eyes of the man in the valley, for certainly there are a large number of English-speaking (and reading) Asians, not to mention the fact that even some Caucasians have

eyes which slant. But whether or not your eyes are slanted like his, you must not imagine you have anything in common with him. He is from a different time, which we can only intellectualize about, and he is his own person, unique and not to be twisted into something you feel more comfortable about, something you feel is similar to you.

A second man enters the valley. It appears as though the first man has been waiting for him, but perhaps he was not waiting for anyone, and the second man happened there by coincidence. The second man is also wearing bamboo armor, which is lacquered blue. The two men look a bit like turtles, which in the mythology of this place is quite suitable, for turtles represent warriors. Turtles also represent long life, and that is not appropriate at all, for the two men are instantly hostile to each other when they meet. They draw forth long sabers and begin to duel. From your view overlooking the valley, it seems as though the clang of steel against steel is out of synchronization with the picture, as in a badly dubbed movie. This increases the feeling of looking through a time-slit in the window of the page. Actually, the reason for this is that it takes a little while for the sound to reach you. Swords cross. Then, you hear the sound. Swords cross again; a moment later, you hear it.

The warriors seem to be awkward, but it is only because the bamboo armor hangs loose and shakes upon their shoulders and arms and thighs. Their bodies are actually highly coordinated. They are very scientific about what they do, which is try to kill each other. One or the other, if not both, will not live long like a turtle.

One of the men acquires a serious wound. It is the man with blue armor who is wounded. The other, who is our protagonist, Kohachi, whom we must not pretend to understand, goes for the victory, and achieves it. His opponent is dead. It seems Kohachi is not satisfied yet, although we do not really know why he feels compelled (by code? custom? personal wish?) to cut off the dead man's head and carry it away. If you personally had just killed someone with a sword, would you then take away the head with you? Would you show it about as a trophy? Would you have it delivered to your foe's lord or employer as a boast? Or would you bury it with some sort of ceremony, unconcerned about the rest of the corpse? Probably you would not take the head at all, nor have any idea what to do with the head if you did happen to take it. Kohachi will not have the head the next time we see him,

so we will never know what he did with it. If we did some research on the time, we could find some reasons why heads were taken, but generalizations are foolish. We will never know why Kohachi wanted the head. If the story took place in the Congo, we could guess what happened to the head. As it is, we have no idea.

Now Kohachi is wearing a *yukata*, which is a sort of kimono worn when one is relaxing at home. He is not at home, however, but in a private room at an inn. There is a table in front of him. It's a small table, very small indeed. But it is the right size for Kohachi, for he is not so big himself; furthermore, he is sitting on his knees, so a small table is obviously just the thing.

You may have thought Kohachi was a large fellow, being a warrior and a successful one at that. That's what happens when you see someone far away in a valley. You cannot tell how big he is. That's also what happens when you believe things with no real basis in life, such as the belief that warriors are quite large. In fact most warriors are frail in appearance, being often enough about eighteen years old. Kohachi is probably older than that, but not very. Now that he is not wearing an iron mask, it is possible to see how good-looking he is. When he is older, perhaps he will look ordinary. But as it stands now, he is still young enough to have a girlish quality, a prettiness that belongs mainly to youth. After seeing him kill his foe in the valley (for what reasons we may never fully understand, except that these things happen all the time, even in our own age) you may have imagined him with a hardened visage, just as you imagined he was quite large. But warriors are not like that at all, at least not in Kohachi's time and place. In fact Kohachi is a poet. He does not write poems about war, either. He writes about plum blossoms, which are symbolic of innocence; or he writes about cherry blossoms, which are symbolic of life's transient beauty. In a way these poems of innocence and transience are, after all, about war.

Also in the room is a woman dressed in a very fancy kimono of bright colors, and her hair is piled up high on her head with sharp pins holding it together. To tell the truth, it does not look as though all of that hair is hers. She is probably a geisha, although the term may suggest too high a station. She serves Kohachi sake and talks to him (he rarely talks back) and pretty soon he is intoxicated. At one point he acts as though he is going

to ravish the woman serving him, but for some reason changes his mind. Perhaps he thought of warrior codes, which prohibit idle copulation. Perhaps he prefers women with less makeup and gaudy appearance. Perhaps he remembered his girl back home, or his mother. All we know for sure is that he almost took the woman with some selfish intent (she didn't act as though it would have bothered her; not that her passivity or resignation meant she was glad), but in the end he went to sleep instead.

Kohachi lay upon a "wafer futon," that is, a mattress thinner than a worn-out blanket. He is covered with a second quilt of similar threadbare thinness; it is a wonder he doesn't shiver. Kohachi is not staying in a poor inn really. The cupboards have nice, thick quilts in them. But he had previously requested wafer futons. If we had gotten to the inn in time, we could have heard him say the reason: "Austerity is better than comfort." The maids of the inn talk about this a long time, thinking it extreme even for a spartan warrior (not that Kohachi is from Sparta).

In the morning Kohachi has a salty soup and a bitter tea, and before long is on his way from the inn to somewhere else. We are somehow able to stay very close to him and not have to see him from far away. In fact we ("we" being the readers, along with the writer) can look right over his shoulder and see the dusty road Kohachi is walking on. We have no idea what he did with his armor. Possibly he left it in the same place he left the head. Perhaps it wasn't his armor in the first place. Whatever he did with it, he doesn't have it now. He has a straw hat, however, and he is wearing it, we may guess, because the sun is very hot. It is unusually hot for autumn. Leaves fall on the dusty path. They fall on Kohachi's straw hat. One of the leaves stays there on his hat (Kohachi doesn't know about it until later).

Because we are so close and know how pretty he is and how he likes to sleep and what he ate that morning and how he walks so carefree—because of all this, we may feel we're coming to know Kohachi a little bit. That's what happens when you observe someone for a while. But really people are usually wrong when they make guesses about people. We don't understand Kohachi at all, or know him in the least, and he is liable at any moment to do something we cannot understand. (He just this moment picked up a rock and threw it off to the side of the path. There were other rocks he didn't pick up, and there was no reason to throw the rock anywhere at all. We've no idea why Kohachi threw the rock. Yet, if we were walking on the path—as indeed

we seem to be, so close we can see over Kohachi's shoulder—we might have thrown a rock just that same way and for as little reason. And if someone looking over our shoulder wondered why we threw the rock, we could not tell them, and they could not guess, because really there was no reason. Though Kohachi may have had some reason we will never know about.)

After a long walk and when the sun is cooler (and Kohachi's hat is hanging down his back), there appears far ahead another man dressed similarly to Kohachi. Now Kohachi, as a warrior, has two swords with him, thrust through the belt which holds his kimono together. The man in the distance has two swords also. These two men converge. The other man is older. They pass each other by, and nothing happened at all. They didn't even bow to each other a little bit. We may have expected something to happen. It just goes to show how little we understand things.

Later on there is another man, and another man after that, the latter with a child; but none of them have swords, being of a different class than Kohachi. The man after that is with a woman. She has a sword but he does not. This is not common, but it is not surprising to Kohachi, so it shouldn't be to us. In any event, nothing happens with any of these people, and we begin to be off guard, thinking nothing is going to happen whatsoever. Nothing does. For once, we are right about something.

Kohachi stayed in an inn much like the one he'd stayed in the night before, but we didn't hang around to see him there, and we don't know whether or not he slept with the woman who waited on him. If he did so, he probably had to pay a little extra sum for the lodging, but we don't know anything about that. Somehow we have gone ahead in time and are with Kohachi once again, in the afternoon. How we shot ahead in time like this way is interesting to think about. Time-travel is quite ordinary in fiction, and not just science fiction, any kind of fiction at all. Most people think time travel is impossible, but in stories it happens all the time, and we hardly ever think about it. If not for time travel, we would have to watch Kohachi pee and sleep and clean his teeth, and things would get very dull. Sometimes it is even possible to travel backward in time in a story. This is most interesting of all. Moving forward in time can be explained by our having gone to sleep or something like that. But how do

we go backward? That is harder to explain. But sometimes it happens.

About a month earlier, Kohachi met with an old man named Doko. Doko is an armorer and his worst enemy is another armorer named Tosiki. "You must be my champion in about one month!" Doko pleads. "My rival, Tosiki, says his armor makes a warrior invincible! I say only my armor can do that. So he will choose a champion to meet my champion in a certain valley. Will you do it?" Kohachi says yes to the old man. Kohachi likes adventure, apparently, although we don't really know that for sure. Perhaps cases like this have something to do with duty or honor, so for some reason Kohachi couldn't have said no. In any case, now we know why Kohachi was in that valley. He was testing Doko's armor against Tosiki's. No doubt Doko is doing a better business now, and Tosiki is making excuses.

One would think Doko would at least have let Kohachi keep the armor as payment, but perhaps Kohachi didn't want it, or such payment was too lavish. If we were to ask around, we might be able to find out if Kohachi received any payment at all, but it's difficult for the reader to ask anything of the people in a story. "Hello, Doko," we might say. "We're several people reading this story—perhaps a million people if the author has any luck—and we'd like to know if you paid Kohachi to kill that man in the valley a month from now." (We say "a month from now" because we have not yet time-traveled back to Kohachi's present.) "And by the way," we also ask: "Did Kohachi give that head to you? We were wondering what became of it."

Although we have just asked Doko these questions, he doesn't seem to hear us. Getting ourselves inside a story is really much harder than time travel. It just goes to show that it is not really possible to get inside a character and understand him. We can't get in the story at all. We can't change it. You might think the author could do so at least, but you'd be surprised. The author doesn't know anything either. The people an author writes about are very puzzling even to the author.

"Hello, Kohachi!" someone shouts (we are in Kohachi's present once again). Kohachi turns around and for a moment we think he is going to see us since we have been looking over his shoulder. For a moment we may even think it is we who called out to Kohachi and, unlike Doko, he heard us. But no, there is someone behind us, and we turn around too. We are standing between Kohachi and the fellow who called his name, but they

don't seem to see us at all. The other man is a midget and very old. He wears the long black vest of a priest. If we saw him from the top of a valley we might think him a child, for we couldn't see his wrinkled face. Or we might think he was a full-sized warrior-monk, for perspective is that way sometimes. Close up, he is an old midget. We must crouch down a bit to be sure, to see under his hat (it is as big a hat as Kohachi's, though the wearer is much smaller). "Kohachi! I heard a story about you lately! Is it true?"

"It's true, Priest Genzaburo," says Kohachi. Does he mean the encounter in the valley? If we eavesdrop, maybe we can find out.

"Your mother must be happy!" says Genzaburo. That would seem to suggest the priest is *not* talking about the encounter in the valley. Being as small as he is, it isn't likely he could have heard about the duel and then caught up with Kohachi later, so we were foolish to think he was talking about that.

"She is happy, Priest Genzaburo."

"Who was your go-between?" asks Genzaburo.

"It was the girl's Aunt Oko. She made the meeting very pleasant."

Probably they are talking about Kohachi getting married.

"I met Oko one time," says Genzaburo, the midget priest. "She can be very insistent."

"She wasn't insistent at all," says Kohachi.

"No? Maybe she didn't like you!"

"She seemed to like me very much," says Kohachi.

"Well, anyway, it isn't Aunt Oko who has to like you, it's the girl. Her name is Uneme? A very pretty girl!"

Definitely they are talking about Kohachi's marriage.

"Yes, very pretty, and talented. Have you heard her play the koto? My mother made a good choice for me. I am going now to visit my father's grave in Seki and let him know about everything. I think he will be happy for me."

"All the way to Seki? You could have told him at the household shrine!"

"It's too important for that," says Kohachi. "I will visit him at his grave."

"A very pious son!" says Genzaburo, and bows deeply to Kohachi.

As we cannot understand the religious significance of this

conversation without studying the beliefs of the time and place, it is perhaps best that we once more skip ahead in time.

Genzaburo is sitting on a rock on the side of the road and he is by himself. We seem to have lost Kohachi while traveling forward in time. This happens in fiction very often. There is a scene-break and suddenly some of the characters are gone. Or there are different characters altogether. One wonders why this is not more disorienting when it happens, but it is somehow taken for granted. Genzaburo looks even older than he did before. Perhaps we skipped too far ahead in time. No, he is just tired. It is late and his little feet have not taken him as far as an inn. Did Kohachi take long strides and leave his friend behind? That wouldn't have been very nice! But we don't know that Kohachi did such a thing. Probably Kohachi had to take a different road, and Priest Genzaburo this one. It is better to think this happened, or else we won't like Kohachi so much. We may not understand the protagonist of a story (and that means *any* story, not just this one) but we should at least like him a little bit or else we won't be able to pretend we are having an adventure with him.

Genzaburo begins to sing a folk song about a medicine god who is a dwarf. We could make psychological guesses why Genzaburo likes that song so much, but we might be wrong. The song could be the most popular song of any in the place where Genzaburo was born, so it would be perfectly natural that anyone from that place would sing about the dwarf god. It has nothing to do with Genzaburo being a midget. On the other hand, the song might be quite obscure and Genzaburo remembers it better than anyone just for the psychological reasons we had suspicions about. We'll never know if our guesses are right or wrong; but we can guess about ourselves, and guess we are terribly rude to make judgments based on someone's stature.

The priest sings the song for a long time. Then he gets up and continues on his way, coming to an inn before the sun is completely down. He is given a room like the rooms in most inns, like the one we saw Kohachi in earlier, a small room with rice paper windows. There is a narrow slit in a section of one rice paper window. There seems to be writing on the other side of that section, like a book's page. Eyes, like stars, are looking through the slit. The other sections of the rice paper windows are quite ordinary.

A maid brings Genzaburo a yukata to relax in, but it is too

big for him. He wears it anyway. He sits on his knees beside a little table (which looks larger beside him). After he has eaten a nice meal, the maid begins to pour him sake.

He gets a bit tipsy and makes a pass at the maid. This may not be proper for a priest, but we really do not know anything about his religion. Perhaps it is quite an ordinary thing for a priest to do. Girls at inns sometimes don't mind that guests do this; they make a little extra money. Sometimes the proprietors demand that maids respond. The girl may respond because of the proprietor's regulations, or it may be for the extra money. There is also the possibility that she thinks Genzaburo is cute. Unlike the dwarf god, Genzaburo is perfectly formed, merely small. If the maid thinks he is a cute old man, like a doll set out on Girls' Day Festival, it cannot be that she is entirely incorrect.

She lays out a very thick futon for them both and they make exquisite love all night long. Genzaburo chants sutras part of the time and both of them laugh a lot. Genzaburo is usually on top, for otherwise he would be squashed (that, perhaps, is a mean joke).

Kohachi comes to his father's grave in Seki and talks to him for a long time. Several days may have passed or just one; time-travel is unpredictable and we don't really know. He has arrived at the grave late at night and, before he knows it, it is the Hour of the Ox. The Hour of the Ox is a haunted hour, and Kohachi's father suddenly appears, sitting in front of the tombstone. Kohachi is not afraid, for his father had been a kind man in life, and Kohachi does not imagine kindness is lost in death. "Why, I've been talking to you a long time, Father, but did not expect to see you so clearly."

"Clearly, you say! Why, a paper window stops more light than I do!" Kohachi's father laughs. "See, the moon shines right through me! Isn't it interesting?"

"Yes it is," says Kohachi. "But I must say your appearance here is quite an unusual thing. I've heard of it happening to other people, but usually there is an important reason. Do you have one?"

"Why, I don't think I do," says Kohachi's ghost-father. "I was off somewhere and heard you talking to me about getting married, and I thought, 'Why, isn't that fine,' and suddenly here I was. Oh, yes! I met a young man a day or so ago and he said

if I heard from you soon, to say he held you no animosity, that you fought well, and anyway Tosiki makes inferior armor."

"I'm glad he holds no grudge," says Kohachi. "It was a good duel and a close call for me."

"I remember my last duel!" says Kohachi's father, sighing and looking nostalgic. "A good way to die!"

"Did you know I avenged you?" asks Kohachi.

"It was excellently done!" says the ghost. "Ah! That reminds me! You must be careful, Kohachi. The man you killed in the valley also has a son. He is young, but in a couple of years he will come after you."

"I don't mind," says Kohachi. " 'A good way to die.' "

"Oh! Do you hear that?" The ghost claps hands to ears and looks irritated.

"It's a bell," says Kohachi. "There is a Buddhist temple nearby and the monks are slamming the boss of the bell right this moment."

"Oh! It's too loud for me! I would like to stay and talk longer, but the priests won't have it! That's why they ring that bell during the Hour of the Ox! Be good to Mother, Kohachi! Be good to your new wife!"

Kohachi's father disappears.

A few days later (we are time-traveling again) Kohachi is home with his mother. There is much ado about the marriage preparations and the invitations which must be sent out. A servant is replacing the torn windows in the rice paper screens and doors, so everything will be spiffy for the celebration. We won't be able to see through the time-slit much longer. What will happen to Kohachi after we are gone? Perhaps he has a good life with his bride, winning a few more duels in his life. Perhaps there is a war and he goes off to that and dies, or else is a success and becomes a wealthy warlord. Possibly the son of someone he killed comes and duels with him and wins. It is difficult to know what occurs in the life of the people in a story after the story ends. If we have any hearts at all, we must suffer thinking about it. That's why stories sometimes say "happily ever after" or else kill all the characters off, so that we won't have to worry about it. As for Kohachi, we have no idea what happens to him after this. We can always hope for the best.

Story of a Castle Page



Hanzaemon Yoritawa was the only son of a lower vassal in the service of the Lord of Saga. The young man was a diligent worker and though he and his elderly father lived in poverty, they lived happily and never did complain. Because of his father's duties to Lord Saga, upon occasion Hanzaemon would run errands to and from the castle. It was during one such errand that he was noticed by a certain page named Hiroki Matsuyama.

Hiroki Matsuyama was the favorite page of Lord Saga. He was quite taken by his own beauty and convinced of his ability to seduce any man living. When he cast a flirtatious eye at Hanzaemon Yoritawa, however, the young man did not respond in any manner. Rather, he hurried on his errand as though Hiroki Matsuyama had not smiled at him at all.

Vain though he was, Hiroki was not an evil boy. Yet he was not used to such a failure, and his selfishly sensitive nature caused him to feel badly injured. Hiroki asked around until he found out the name of Hanzaemon Yoritawa. He began to send the samurai sweet letters, signed with a poetic name which did not convey the writer's sex.

Such a thing was common enough and it cannot be said that Hanzaemon had no way to guess the author of these love letters was a boy. Nonetheless it was the beginning of a tragedy, for Hiroki could not possibly have loved Hanzaemon as much as he pretended in these letters. It was merely his effort to reconfirm his seductive prowess.

Perhaps it was cruel to write such adoring prose when it was not heartfelt; but we may suppose that Hiroki was at least a little insecure, aware that the exploits of a castle page must pass with youthful beauty.

Be that as it may, Hanzaemon Yoritawa saved the letters and read them over and over again, wondering who the secret admirer could be. He was more eager than ever to be sent on errands to the castle. Each time he went, he would casually eye

the maids, wondering, "Could it be her? Could it be this other girl? Is it this one?" He had never a clue, except that after each visit to the castle, he would receive another letter of glowing praise for his manliness and bearing.

Each letter was written in a hand that was exceedingly graceful and sensitive. Perhaps it was the very grace of the penmanship which misled Hanzaemon. More likely, it was his utterly naive view of the world, borne of always having his nose to some book or his shoulder to some work for his father. He knew nothing of love between a man and a woman, much less love between a man and a man. If someone else had read the letters, surely they would have guessed at once that the author was a page. Maids are rarely so bold about such matters, if only because their futures are more easily destroyed by an inopportune word or relationship. Hanzaemon kept the letters a secret, and for this reason never had the good advice of a wiser fellow.

It happened that while Hanzaemon was at a nearby temple praying for his mother's spirit, Hiroki Matsuyama arrived in a palanquin to light incense for someone or another. Hiroki was dressed in gorgeous finery. He held a piece of gossamer silk over his head as he entered the temple. When he saw the object of his intended conquest, he whispered stern orders to his palanquin bearers to keep anyone from entering the temple for a while.

Hiroki sidled up to where Hanzaemon was praying. He bowed like an obedient maiden, his head still covered, and introduced himself by his *nom de plume*. Hiroki's tenor was so pure that Hanzaemon still did not realize his admirer was a boy.

Hanzaemon became extremely flustered, for he had no practice talking to girls, and here they were in the darkness of a temple, where he least expected such a meeting. While Hanzaemon was sputtering a foolish greeting and apologizing for the lack of a go-between, Hiroki removed the silk from his face and gazed at the samurai, with as adoring and angelic an expression as he could muster.

Hiroki was practiced at this. How could Hanzaemon suspect insincerity? How could he know that Hiroki was a sensualist first and a romantic last? Hanzaemon was surprised to learn his admirer was a page, to be sure. But truth be told, Hiroki was as beautiful as any maiden, and Hanzaemon was not upset, merely astonished. While he sat dumbstruck by the realization of how things were, Hiroki scooted nearer on his knees and bowed his head in a sweet manner until his cheek was against Hanzaemon's

shoulder. How astonished Hanzaemon was now! He was astonished before, but his present astonishment was incomparably greater than his astonishment of the previous moment!

In the days to follow, Hanzaemon neglected his duties and his studies. He wrote poems and correspondence every single day, all of which went unanswered. Surely beautiful Hiroki had grown ill or something terrible had happened! He beseeched his lover to respond. He ran errands to the castle but never caught sight of the page even one time. He asked around, but there was some conspiracy to keep Hanzaemon in the dark about Hiroki's health and whereabouts.

Hanzaemon ceased to eat and in a couple of weeks was pale and thin. His father at first was angry that his son was not getting necessary work completed; then he was alarmed that his son looked ill. He sent for a doctor, who proclaimed Hanzaemon beyond help. "He will die of melancholia unless you can find the source of the trouble," said the doctor.

Though bedridden, Hanzaemon would not tell his father why he was pining day and night and wasting day by day. By the by, Hanzaemon died. It was while cleaning up his son's quarters, preparing his clothing to give to the temple, that the grieving father stumbled upon the love letters. As the letters were dated, it was clear to see that Hanzaemon's laxity, then illness, began immediately after he ceased to receive the letters.

Being wiser about the world, the father suspected at once that the bold letters were those of a page. He also recollected that Hanzaemon had visited a nearby temple the day after the last of the letters. Soon, the father was granted an interview with the chief abbot, who knew nothing of the matter but promised to ask around. Two or three days later an acolyte of ten or eleven years of age came to the house of Hanzaemon's father and was extremely embarrassed to confess that he had been hiding behind the image of Buddha while Hanzaemon and Hiroki made love upon the altar.

The old vassal asked a few more questions here and there until he put the whole story together. As Hiroki Matsuyama was Lord Saga's favorite page, while the mournful father of Hanzaemon was a minor vassal, it was not possible even to suggest the idea of punishment. In his heart, the vassal felt Hiroki Matsuyama had been cruel in his conquest of Hanzaemon's affection, and had murdered the young samurai as certainly as by a sword.

. . .

The old vassal's name was Horimitsu Yoritawa. He did have one other offspring, a daughter named Yoino, who had been raised at a Shinto shrine. She was a *miko*, or Shinto nun, and had been raised with the knowledge of Shinto arts and magicks. Horimitsu informed Yoino of the situation, explaining his inability to attempt revenge because the page was in a privileged situation.

"As I am Lord Saga's vassal, I cannot act against his wishes," explained Horimitsu.

"Leave everything to me," said Yoino, and Horimitsu went home, striving to lose his grief by working harder.

Several weeks later a young samurai came to Saga Castle and introduced himself as Juzaburo Hosakawa, son of Lord Hosakawa. This prince was put up in fine quarters right away. Everyone was talking about his arrival, for he was beautiful beyond comparison, had a manly gait suggesting a warrior's ability, and his politeness and regard for others was regal beyond measure. Hiroki Matsuyama learned of the prince and conspired to visit him that very night.

"Who invades my compartment?" asked the gentle but commanding voice of Prince Hosakawa.

"I have been sent by Lord Saga for your pleasure," said Hiroki, who moved into a candle's light and bowed his head, looking as sweet and subservient as any girl. Prince Hosakawa admired the page's appearance with a discerning eye, then said, "You are of exceptional beauty. I can only surmise that you are the famous Hiroki Matsuyama, who is known even as far away as Hosakawa Castle for his romantic exploits."

No one had ever said anything quite like this to Hiroki. He did not know whether or not he should feel flattered. His response was to raise his eyes, looking as humble as could be, and as innocently puzzled.

Prince Hosakawa laughed and said, "Oh, that is very good indeed! Better than I was told!"

Hiroki was stunned, but hid his true feelings in favor of a look of injury. Prince Hosakawa laughed louder, as though he were watching a funny play put on by clowns in the street. "That is quite enough amusement for one night!" he said. "Now leave me and send some manlier youth to me right away. You are too much like my betrothed, and I shall have enough of her by and by!"

Stricken to the core, Hiroki withdrew with minimal ceremony. He had never been rejected so utterly, and never judged so cruelly and correctly. What was most insulting was that he

was forced to find Prince Hosakawa a more suitable partner. By morning the whole castle would be buzzing with the gossip of Hiroki's rejection.

How Hiroki sulked! He kept picturing the laughing eyes and lips of the gorgeous prince. Hiroki realized that he was up against a man immune to the charms of a page. What was more, having found someone genuinely unconquerable, Hiroki felt a desire unlike any he had felt previous to this encounter. Was it possible he had fallen in love with Juzaburo, the Prince of Hosakawa?

The prince preferred a manlier sort. Therefore Hiroki would have to change his tactics. The very next day he attended the castle's daily lessons in swordsmanship and strove with a fervor the teachers had never seen before. The instructors were themselves conquests of Hiroki; but they had known what he was like from the start, so none of them had become heartbroken. They liked him in spite of his vanity, and were glad to see this change in him.

Prince Juzaburo Hosakawa remained as a guest of the castle for three months and won the hearts of many, being ever generous and kind with his attentions—except where Hiroki was concerned. During this time, Hiroki improved his skill with sword tenfold, in part because instructors were willing to give him special attention. At the end of these three months, he shaved his forelock, and looked as manly as any samurai could.

Lord Saga had simultaneously cast the boy off in favor of someone younger and less obsessed with manly arts. So Hiroki was in a position to request the privilege of accompanying the prince back to Hosakawa as part of his retinue.

As it turned out, Juzaburo had no retinue, though it was extremely rare that a prince traveled without company. He accepted Hiroki as his personal retainer, and the two set out alone. Rather than heading toward Hosakawa, they set out in the opposite direction, causing Hiroki to ask what the prince had in mind for their itinerary.

"I am on my warrior's pilgrimage, if you must know," said Juzaburo. "That's why I've been traveling alone. I only started out a few months ago and did not have it in mind to stay in such a comfortable place as Saga Castle for so long. But it has taken that long for my plans to take hold."

Hiroki did not dare ask what plans these were, for it would be presumptuous.

"From now on, you will be my disciple, and we will live under harsh circumstances."

Although Hiroki had never lived a hard life, he was yet pleased by the words of the prince, for he took this to mean they would be lovers all the while. This turned out not to be the case. Juzaburo tested Hiroki to the limit of his endurance, passing through rugged mountains, sleeping at run-down shrines and peasant hovels, and meeting various duelists along the way, against whom the prince pitted himself, vanquishing foe after foe. This was the way of the warrior in those days. Duelist met duelist in a fight to the finish, merely to see who was better.

At the same time, Juzaburo gave Hiroki instructions in the use of the sword, which added greatly to what had been learned in Saga Castle. Eventually the prince was insisting that Hiroki also meet with other duelists in deadly encounters. Hiroki was not much pleased with the way things were going, but he strove his hardest, lest he be wounded or killed by someone. He could have run away, but he was by now incurably devoted to and in love with Juzaburo. He knew that only if he excelled at manly arts would the prince return this love.

At the end of the year, they were staying in a cold mountain hut, which had been long abandoned and seemed about to fall on their heads. There was so much snow falling outside that they could not continue their journey for a few days. Hiroki thought he would freeze to death, but as was so often the case, Juzaburo seemed comfortable even in a miserable situation.

After three days in the frigid hut, seeing his hands were turning blue, Hiroki could bear it no longer. In the middle of the night he insisted they use each other's bodies to keep away the cold.

"Is it necessary?" said Juzaburo, for once genuinely concerned.

"I may die otherwise," said Hiroki, teeth chattering. "I have tried my utmost to be manly, but nobody could be as stout as you."

"It is no affront to your manhood to admit to need," said the prince. "Consider it your most important lesson!" He then took Hiroki into his arms. By morning, Hiroki's blood was warm and he felt at ease. The snow had ceased and they started along the mountain trails, sometimes having to dig through drifts to clear the route.

The next night they dug a hole in the side of a snowbank and snuggled inside together. Hiroki was blissful. He said, "If it is manly to confess a need, I must confess another!"

"You sound in too good a mood for it to be urgent."

"More urgent than you may think! I have been waiting this whole year!"

"As have I," said the prince, causing Hiroki to feel encouraged. He began at once to press himself lovingly against the prince and to move his hands underneath the other fellow's shirt. Juzaburo did not respond in any manner; but all of a sudden, Hiroki Matsuyama gave a yelp and leaped away from the object of his year-long desire. He had felt breasts beneath the clothing of the prince!

Juzaburo followed Hiroki out of the hole in the snowbank. They stood facing one another in the moonlight, two dark shadows against the whiteness of the mountain. The prince said, "My real name is Yoino Yoritawa, a *miko* of a Shinto shrine in Saga. My brother was killed by your heartlessness. As it would be equally cruel to slay a weak and helpless youth, I have seen to your training so that my revenge-seeking will be fair and just. You are now a great swordsman, though you have never realized it!"

Yoino drew her sword.

Hiroki backed away and slipped onto the snow. He stood and bowed over and over again, pleading, "I never thought he would die! I never meant harm! How am I to blame?"

"You arranged your conquests as warriors plan for war!" said Yoino. "Where there are conquerors, there are victims who die! You should have been more careful of the feelings of others. For now, there is no helping it, you must draw your sword."

He did so, but continued to move backward, his sword forever pointing toward the princely woman. Her stride and bearing were powerful; his bearing was frightened and nervous.

"You can do better than that!" said Yoino. "I've taught you better! I know I have!" She glared at him in the moonlight until he was browbeaten into improving his posture, holding his sword more effectively. "Good," she said. "Now, maybe you can defend yourself!" She attacked, and he countered well enough to save his life the first time; but her skill was great, and he was not certain his was equal.

They battled a long time, the sound of steel on steel echoing against mountain walls. Always he was on the defense; always he gave up ground. The sun began to rise, casting bloody shades across heaven.

"I will feel sorry for you after this!" said Yoino. "You're not a bad man after all, but that's hardly a good excuse."

"I know it!" Hiroki shouted, tears frozen on his cheeks. "My ghost won't hate you after you've succeeded! I'll admire you from my grave! Vengeance is the only thing a good sister could pursue!"

They clashed again and again; the only reason Hiroki did not

die was because he focused all that Yoino had taught him into his own defense. He began to tire and knew it would not be possible to maintain his efforts indefinitely. Yet he could not see his way clear to form an offensive. There was nothing he knew about the sword that she didn't know; he was her disciple after all. He searched for something he might have learned at the castle that she had not taught him and might not expect, but there was no way to fool her. He was resigned to death. He fought bravely as a result, deciding to die in a manly way, lest the training she had given him be entirely wasted.

But what luck was this? The snow was frozen solid, yet some weak spot in the crust gave way beneath Yoino. She fell to her waist, unable to maneuver in the hole. He attacked her and managed to nick her arm. She thrashed about in the slippery trap. If he attacked a second time with all the skill possible, surely he would win!

Something kept him from moving to the kill. In the next moment, she was out of her predicament, with only a slight wound bloodying her sleeve.

"You lost your chance!" she scolded. "Why did you hold back?"

"I don't know," he said, backing away from her again.

"It takes the sweetness from success," she said. "You could have won! Did I teach you that way? I'm ashamed of you!" For the first time since they met, Yoino sounded genuinely angry. She raised her sword and he knew her attack would sever his head if he countered poorly; but almost against his will he threw his sword down. It slid along the slope and stopped at Yoino's feet.

"Why have you done this!" she demanded.

"Why do you think I've followed you for so long?" he said, trying not to reveal a tear, but to sound as strong as she. "Because I worshipped a length of steel? I worshipped you!"

"You worshipped some prince who never did exist!" she countered.

"I worshipped you," he said more quietly. "You've impressed me a lot."

Her grip on the sword began to shake, for now her anger exceeded reason, and that was not a good way to enter or leave a fight. She screamed bitterly and with frustration as she closed the distance between them, and then struck. She cut the belt from his garments so that his *hakama* trousers fell to the ground and his kimono opened in front. Then she sheathed her sword and turned

away, taking his dignity but not his life. He did not follow her down from the mountain, nor did they ever meet again.

There is no happy ending for the story. Yoino failed her brother and her father. In recompense, she stabbed herself in the throat a few weeks later, having put various things in order before doing so. Horimitsu Yoritawa died a year afterward, a lonely old man who had forgotten laughter. Hiroki shaved his head and became a Buddhist monk, praying every morning and every night for the well-being of Yoino's ghost.

After Hiroki had studied for many years, he became a famous priest by the name of Jomen, and performed many good works in the name of Buddha. Eventually it was time for him to die. While the monks were gathered around the aged priest's death-bed, he suddenly bid them stop chanting the sutras, and he pointed to a place where there was nothing they could see. He insisted it was the ghost of a young samurai come to help him into the next world.

"How is your sister?" the old priest is reported to have said. Then, imagining some reply, he nodded his head and looked sadder than usual. "Do you bear me a grudge?" he asked, then added, "I don't blame you if you do." But apparently the ghost assured him there was no grudge, for old Priest Jomen seemed much relieved. "I caused a lot of grief when I was a young fellow. I've repented it a lot of years. If I had it to do over, I don't know if it would go better. Sometimes I think it was worth it, for I learned to love someone as a result. Other times it seems that nothing has been worthwhile, not in this transient world; not pleasure, not self-sacrifice, for in the end what's left of us? If that's the case, at least I needn't feel I've been an evil man, but then again I can't believe I've been a good one either. I've only been a man, and that after all isn't much, is it?"

The ghost may have replied at length, for Jomen certainly did listen intently. After a while he said, "That's nice. That's nice. I'm ready now." The monks began chanting anew when he was dead. As it was his request, they took his body to a certain snowy mountain and buried him there with a memorial tablet which said, "The sum total of myself is here. There is nothing more."

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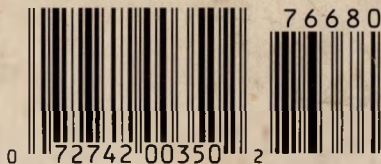
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