



Suggested Oddities

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Dedication

The stories in this collection were suggested by members of Mobileread.com. Without their prompting and participating these fifteen odd little tales would never have been written. I thank all of them and Mobileread.com for fostering this kind of interaction.

The names of the guilty are listed below and beside the stories they inspired.

Magic in the Wind - Dreams

LLounge Llamas in Love - Vivaldirules

Afterglow - Ralph Sir Edward

The Insane Blue - Geoff C

The Moonlit Skye - LazyScot

Gamelan and High Tea - Montnsmags

Spider Dreams - Netseeker

Wisconsin Heat - pshyrnk

The Pouf - SteveJordan
Strange Weather - Zelda Pinwheel
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If Not, Then What? - Basschick
Am I a figment of my imagination - or
Yours? (Figments) - columbus
Suddenly September - MoeTheCat

Magic in the Wind

That morning he ignored the ringing cell phone and instead watched the dawn light through the window.

A golden puddle of light touched and warmed the bottom of the bed where, under covers, Pete Francis's feet were hidden.

He fixed on the light, watching, waiting for what happened next.

In the dream and out he had seen that light. So distinct, such a tandem feeling that it could not be ignored, and he would not ignore it, not now, not with the cell phone ringing for the eleventh time in a row.

The dream.

The same dream every night. The same events, the same feelings, the same warm sun filtering in through the morning window to warm the same patchwork of cloth at the bottom of the bed. No coincidence, this, but

something more. Something he could no longer ignore.

The phone rang again and then clicked, then voicemail coming from the speaker.

“I don’t know what kind of trick you’re playing, Pete, but you got me worried. If you’re ill, then phone me, if you’re not then you better have one hell of an excuse waiting when I catch up with you. I didn’t arrange all this just for you to flake out on me.”

Toby’s voice was, as ever, running at fever pitch. Not surprising for a man who survived on coffee and deadlines. A man who liked the pressure almost as much as any other normal man might like a day off from the grind.

Today was not a day for grind.

It was a day to answer questions, to ignore the phone, and find out just who the man in the dream was, and what he meant.

The words came to him now, a tickle in the back of his brain.

It's in the wind, Peter. In the wind. You'll find magic in the wind.

What magic was in the wind? What did that man mean by those words? And why were they repeated so often?

There was only one way to find out.

Mirroring the events of the dream, Pete picked himself up out of the bed, dressed, drank some juice then left the house behind.

The Californian sunshine met him as he stepped outside. The kind of sunshine that only belonged in a dream. Absent of smog, the scent of freshly cut grass in the air as though summer might last forever, the beige and rusted city of Los Angeles could no longer be seen

Pete blinked twice.

Am I still dreaming? How would I know what is the dream and what is reality?

In the dream he had walked to his car, opened the door and like countless mornings before, started the engine.

But not this morning, no.

In the garage, collected along with a weight-lifting set he'd never lifted, a rowing machine he'd never rowed was a bicycle he'd never ridden.

He climbed aboard and without thinking about the garage door, pushed out into the morning sun.

Here's where me and the dream part ways, he thought. In the dream I drive to them hills and find that man, but here in the real world I'll take this bike and pedal my way to answers.

He reached the bottom of the driveway before the remembered dream intersected with his new reality.

A child, who belonged to a later point in the dream, blocked the way out onto the road.

"Wanna buy a rabbit, mister?" The boy held a box, and in that box were six rabbits, black except one, which was snow-white with pink as raw flesh eyes.

This was all wrong. The child with the rabbits was supposed to appear at the foot of the hills where Pete looked up toward the mysterious figure shadowed by the sun. Then he followed the rabbit like some grownup Alice down the rabbit hole, but up the side of a mountain. But here the kid was, and there was no denying him.

“How much are they?” Pete asked, his voice a perfect mimicry of the voice he’d had in the dream.

“Ten bucks each.”

“Why you selling them?” Pete asked, already knowing the answer that would come.

The kid looked at the rabbits, then at his feet, everywhere except Pete.

“We run out of money and mom wants...mom thought if we had rabbits we could...”

The answer had been awful in the dream, and now out of the dream Pete couldn’t bring himself to prompt the child to complete the

sentence. Nobody wanted to hear that some had hit such hard times they were breeding rabbits for food.

“I tell you what,” Pete said. “I’ll give you fifty bucks for the white one.”

“Fifty bucks, are you kidding?”

Pete reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. There was exactly fifty inside as there had been in the dream. And fifty was all he needed to buy his ticket to the mysterious stranger and the answers.

“Fifty, take it or leave it,” Pete said, holding out the money.

The kid took it and took off before anybody could change their mind.

Pete clutched the rabbit at his chest, wondering about why his reality was so different and still so much like the dream.

The voice had been so convincing, the dream so real, that he was sure he was meant to find the man one day while awake. Sure that there would be an answer so revelatory that it

was worth the looking. But now he wasn't so sure.

Had he ruined his chances the moment he stepped away from the regular pattern of the dream? Destroyed any chance of finding answers upon testing the reality? What if he was in another dream, subtly different from the other, but still a dream nonetheless?

The thought brought on a chill that had never been in the dream before.

This was crazy. What was he doing out here with mountains of work waiting for him and a life that he couldn't turn his back on? All because of some strange dream? Searching for answers to words he didn't understand, now what kind of nonsense was that for a grown man to be doing?

A buzz in his pocket brought Pete away from his confused thoughts.

Phone?

He'd never brought the phone with him from the house when he'd dreamed all this.

One hand clutching the rabbit, he fished the phone out of his pocket with the other.

The Caller ID said: WORK, which translated to Toby.

Pete stared at it while it buzzed and fidgeted in his hand.

Could he answer? Would answering prove all this to be another dream, or the reality he needed to answer his questions? And what if he did answer; wouldn't it just be Toby on the other end chewing him out about missing work that day?

Maybe he needed chewing out, at least once, something to bring him back to a reality that was feeling more and more like a dream.

He connected the call and put it to his ear.

“Goddamnit, Pete, where are you?”

Pete looked out on the neighbourhood and it was like seeing it for the first time.

Littering the lawns, where once children's bicycles and toys had coloured the neighbourhood with their primary patterns, were rows

upon rows of white foreclosure signs. It looked like a graveyard out there and each house a silent tomb.

Had he been asleep for a year, more, to miss all this? Had he been dreaming for so long that he'd missed the making of this modern cemetery? What had happened to the world in his absence?

"You there, Pete? Can you hear me?"

"I hear you," Pete said, his eyes still on the changed neighbourhood.

"Well?"

"What day is it, what year is it, Toby?"

"Are you yanking my chain?"

His voice was as silent as any whispered prayer in a graveyard. "No," he said.

"Are you okay, Pete? They didn't come and take the house early, did they? You made the payments, right, you were on time?"

He turned like a statue upon a turntable exhibit to see a new tombstone planted on his lawn.

He opened his mouth to speak, but it was filled with silence and doubt.

“Oh, Christ, Pete. They did, didn’t they? Don’t tell me they foreclosed.”

He couldn’t say anything, for the dream was now a nightmare and that nightmare was a reality. But how had he missed all this? How could he have slept through someone taking his house?

“What about Rachel, the kids? Oh Christ, Pete, it hasn’t happened again has it?”

“Rachel, the kids?” he asked, the names familiar but faraway on his tongue as though he were talking about dead relatives.

“It’s happened, hasn’t it? Now you just wait there and don’t do anything stupid. I’ll be right over.”

“Stupid?”

“You’re not anywhere near the medicine cabinet are you? Listen, it’s not so bad, believe me, buddy, don’t take any pills. You hear me, don’t take any pills.”

He wasn't listening.

The phone slipped from his hand and crashed against the ground.

The crashing startled the rabbit and it jumped out of his grasp.

But Pete didn't move.

His eyes were on the neighbourhood, his mind fixed upon the words from a dream.

There's magic in the wind, Pete. Magic in the wind.

He couldn't understand what had happened to the world or him, but he understood what those words meant.

An answer.

One he knew he had to find.

A half hour spent searching the empty streets of the graveyard neighbourhood and Pete still hadn't found the rabbit.

How hard could it be to find a stark white bundle of fur in amongst the rusted graveyard

streets? Once or twice he caught one of those tombstone notifications of the end of it all and thought he'd seen the rabbit, but like everything else it was nothing more than a trick of sunlight and wanting.

How much longer could he search? Was there a time limit on all this dream or not dream world he'd emerged into? Did dreams countdown to some unknown time when waking was the only option left?

He wouldn't get any more time for searching or pondering the questions in his mind. A black SUV came to a screeching halt by the sidewalk near to him and the door flew open.

"Thank Christ! You're still here."

Toby was still in his office-gear, buttoned down shirt, striped tie and suit, but that's where the neatness ended. Above all the straight-laced attire was a face and a man who looked like they'd just finished a marathon.

"What's wrong?" Pete said.

Toby took a struggling breath.

“Are you kidding me?” he said.

“No.”

“Well let’s start by you being here, Pete, how about that? You weren’t at the apartment I got for you. Jesus, but I thought I was going mad when I saw you there on the street. I didn’t think you’d actually still be here after all this time.”

“Should I be someplace else?”

Toby grabbed him by the elbow and led him back toward the house. “For the next half an hour or so, no. Not until we have this thing sorted out. Come on.”

Toby led him away from the street and back into the empty house, shaking his head all the way.

Inside the true emptiness came to light. No pictures on the walls, no TV in the corner, the missing furniture had left behind ghostly imprints in the dust of the wooden floors. The only decorations were empty takeout boxes,

stacked in ridiculous Pisa leaning towers wherever there was space.

“How long have you been living here, Pete? I mean, you shouldn’t be here at all, but Christ, all this! The bank said you had to get out right, you do remember that? That’s why I got you and Rachel the apartment, don’t tell me you forgot about that?”

No, he didn’t remember, and looking now upon the interior of the house it was like looking at a picture of somebody else’s life, somebody else’s decline. Hearing the words, it was like being told a story where he knew none of the characters or the setting.

“And where are Rachel and the kids, Pete? They weren’t at the apartment when I checked. Not a sign of—“ Toby cut his talking in favour of the opened letter on the table. He picked it up and wrinkled his brows as he read. “Aww, Pete, why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“What is it?”

Toby stepped forward, his eyes narrowing, searching for something that shouldn't have been there in Pete's eyes.

"Did you take anything? Swear to me that you didn't take anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like pills. You damn near killed yourself the last time, Pete. Are you telling me you don't remember?"

He didn't. All he could think about was the dream and the words and a white rabbit somewhere out there on the streets that would lead him to the owner of those words.

Toby grabbed him by the shoulders and looked him dead in the eyes.

"Pete, you were out of it for six months after the last time. You were supposed to come back today. Do you remember any of that?"

Pete wagged his head no.

"And this letter, you haven't read this letter?" Toby said holding it up in front of his face.

“No, what does it say?”

Toby sighed and closed his eyes.

“She left you, Pete, she took the kids. Took them...” Toby glanced at the letter. “Jesus, this letter is from four months back. Are you telling me you’ve been haunting this empty house for four months all by yourself? You’ve been on your own and you didn’t call me?”

He wasn’t telling him anything.

He was sure only that he’d woken this morning to the dawn light and he’d needed to find answers.

Now he wasn’t so sure.

“You need help, friend,” Toby said, taking a cell phone from his pocket, “and fast. We thought we’d lost you the last time, scared us all, but it won’t happen again if I have anything to say about it.”

“What happened the last time?”

Toby flipped the phone open but left his finger hovering over the buttons.

“Do you really want to rehash what’s past?”

“I can’t remember any of it, Toby, not one bit.”

Toby sighed. “Money, that’s what happened, or the lack of it. You’ve seen what it’s like out there, all over now. Everybody’s got hard times, nobody’s safe from that, not even you. You lost it, friend, couldn’t take it anymore when the money dried up, you...” Toby swallowed.

“I what?”

“There’s no way to candy-coat this, you tried to take your own life. You broke apart. Took us a month just to get you talking again. I thought you’d come through on the other side, but—” Toby tapped a number onto the keypad.

“Who are you calling?”

“A doctor, someone who can help you.”

“Same one who helped me before?”

Toby’s finger stopped on the last number.

“What are you saying?”

But Pete wasn't talking, he was walking. Back toward the front door and the world outside. Whatever had happened, whoever he might have been before the dream and the voice, he wasn't that person now. There was only one way to break a dream and that was to find the answers.

"Pete, what are you doing? Come back here. You're sick. You're—"

Strange that he didn't feel so sick, he felt almost happy, as though he were waiting for a present to be unwrapped, knowing what was inside was good.

And as he stepped out onto the street, he saw the rabbit. A white glint of fur on the hillside above the empty tombs of the houses. It was climbing.

And so was he, shortly.

A wife.

Children.

A time before the dream where the world wasn't so confusing, where every day started and ended the same. A man existed in those memories, a nine-to-five man happy with work and home. A man who did not complain and could not guess the end was just around the corner.

That end began with news reports caught in passing. The banks were in trouble and their fate was that of everyone. Houses emptied, whole communities made into new ghost towns with nobody left to haunt them.

He'd had no idea then that he would become a ghost in his own neighbourhood. No idea that he'd lose his job and that nine-to-five would become a measure of time that meant nothing to him.

No idea.

But now he did. Now he remembered the lost days after they'd fired him. The lost life that followed soon after. The pills, the hospital, wrapped in silence unable to speak for fear that there was nothing left to say.

Days, weeks, months and then...

Pete climbed higher, higher still, the white rabbit no longer leading him down some Alice hole, but now a talisman of revelation, a burning light that he had to reach to discover his past.

He was partly there in his mind, already touching upon but not fully realising what had happened.

Los Angeles, Texas, wherever there was enough sunshine to keep the homeless warm through the day and unfrozen at night, had become a home for the ghosts.

There wasn't much hope for a ghost.

Inches away from the rabbit, Pete stopped.

A single dandelion grew from the ground before him. A bright yellow object on the rusted Californian hills.

Pete smiled.

He glanced at the rabbit.

It hopped away from him, disappearing on the far side of the hill, but now it didn't matter.

Pete plucked the Dandelion from the earth and held it before his eyes.

"Hey, Pete, what are you doing up there? You'll hurt yourself," Toby called from the bottom of the hill.

Pete found his voice and it was the voice of a man in a dream, a man he'd been looking for in the lost months. A man he'd finally found.

"There's magic in the wind," he said.

"What was that?" Toby said, cupping a hand to his ear.

"Magic in the wind," he said, his voice a giggle, and with a breath he sent the petals of the flower drifting into the air.

They drifted away across the sky, a bright contradiction to the now seen and still rusted city of Los Angeles.

In Pete's eyes they spelled a word as though dragged along behind a message writing plane.

Hope.

Llounge Llamas in Love

They came from the snow, an avalanche of men clad in gold and sequins, their legend tattoo stitched in rhinestones across their shoulders.

Llounge Llamas.

Five crooners without the croon, lost in the snows after their bus – that gold and sequin studded Winnebago – lost a tyre and its way somewhere on the back roads.

Five men.

One goal.

Her name was Vera.

Just as the Beatles had their fifth member, so the Llounge Llamas had their missing Beatle. That which would make them whole, but that which had no idea she was missed.

They tumbled into a roadside dive by the name of Misty's Saloon and as a group shook off the snow.

Rudy, the lead singer and now the leader of the pack was the first to the bar.

"Five double bourbon's, hold the ice and water and, Miss, there's one more thing."

Vera, for it was Vera behind the bar, nodded.

"What would that be?"

Rudy slid back on his chair, clicked his fingers and the four other Llama's joined him in a perfect, swinging line behind.

"Won't you please, please, please fall in love with me," Rudy sang.

And then Bobby, Tommy, Charlie and Sammy brought up the rear.

"With me," each sang in turn.

Vera smiled and to the Llounge Llama's it was the smile of a goddess with many arms, but only one pair to wrap around one man.

"What is this? Did Bob put you all up to this?" Vera said.

Rudy slid forward, and with another click of his fingers and a wink of his eye, he said; "No Bob, but we're here for you, Vera. Each man a song in his heart, and each song with the same title – Vera."

"Stop it, you're making me blush," Vera said.

Each Llama felt that blush warm their heart and each in turn remembered a song that he wanted to sing, but there would be no more songs. Not yet.

"Here's the proposition, oh lady fair," Rudy said, "we, each of us, the Llounge Llama's have fallen in love with you. We ask you on this cold Alaska night to take one of us, to become a Llama too."

"You've fallen in love with me?" Vera said.

"Yes," the Llounge Llama's said in turn.

"How can that be, you don't even know me?"

Rudy pointed to the ceiling and a memory six months old.

"One night above the Four Seasons in the hot Las Vegas night, we each, and quite separately saw our North Star, that beautiful bright light that was you, Vera. Each of us saw you in our dreams. And it was those dreams that brought us here to propose marriage, love and as much fun as we can cram into one life."

"You're crazy," Vera said.

"In love," the Llounge Llama's sang in a pitch perfect harmony.

Vera giggled.

"This is madness."

"All love is madness," Rudy sang.

"And all madness is love," the Llounge Llama's joined in.

"You're serious, the lot of you?"

"Take a hand, any one of our hands and we'll take you away from the cold and to the warm. You'll be loved, Vera, by one and by all."

Vera took a step backward. She eyed each Llama in turn and each Llama in turn blushed with pride under her stare.

"This is serious? It's not a joke?" Vera said.

"Serious as the songs of Dean and Frank, serious as all the love that has come before and will come again."

Vera leaned forward.

"And let's say I believe you, let's say I don't think this is some kind of prank and I've been wishing my whole life for just a bit of romance that isn't a cheap dinner and a cheaper time afterward."

"Say it," the Llounge Llama's crooned.

"Let's say all of those things, how am I supposed to choose just one of you?"

The Llama's lost their voices and instead found a lot of shrugs and worried glances.

"You didn't think about that, did you?" Vera said.

"We thought...we thought *you'd* know," Rudy said.

Vera shrugged. "Now how am I supposed to pick one of you, when all of you look so...attractive?"

It was Tommy who found the answer.

He slid forward, clicked his fingers for attention and when Rudy turned he leaned into the man's ear and spoke his idea in a low, but still perfect key.

Rudy swivelled around on his chair.

"Vera, our bright North Star, you'll shall soon have your answer."

"I will?" Vera said.

Rudy jumped from the stool.

"Boys, it's time for a good old-fashioned singing competition. Each man chooses a song, each man sings that song, and Vera here will choose her man by that song alone. What say you?"

They said yes.

"And what say you, Vera? Will you pick a song and a man and then leave with all of us

to fill that hole which is missing, to be one of us, a Llama?"

Vera had her doubts, but she didn't like the cold too much, and there was never any romance or heat in these parts. Maybe it was time for an adventure and a little romance?

"What the hell," she said, "sing your songs and I'll pick me a man. I'll be a Llama, why not."

Bobby came first with his rendition of "Something's Gotta Give," then Tommy with "One for My Baby", Charlie followed with a roaring performance of "That's Amore" and then Sammy sang a sweet version of "That Old Black Magic."

Each was good, and each would have shaken a martini instead of stir.

Finally, Rudy took to the impromptu stage at the front of Misty's Saloon.

He cleared his throat, grinned that Sinatra grin of his and began.

They all knew the competition was over before he'd reached the chorus. Rudy had pulled a Sinatra classic from his mouth – Stranger's in the Night. And more besides.

He left the stage behind, sang his way to the bar and there lifted Vera into a dance.

The song continued, Rudy's eyes fixed to Vera's.

"Love was just a glance away, a warm embracing dance away," he sang. When he reached "Lovers at first sight," the rest of the Llama's were crying tears both happy and sad.

And when he finished there were cheers from Llama's and locals alike.

Rudy took a bow.

Vera took a seat.

The Llama's lined up before her to be judged.

"I liked them all," she said.

Rudy was the first to speak, but it wasn't a Sinatra voice any longer. It was bruised by lost pride and shock.

"You liked them all? How can that be? Isn't there one you preferred over the others?"

Vera shook her head.

"They were all wonderful, I can't choose."

"But—" Rudy said.

It was up to Tommy again to find a solution. He crooned the answer into Rudy's ear.

"How about we turn the tables, Vera? How about you sing a song and we choose?"

"Me?" Vera said.

"Yes, you. We wouldn't have come here if we didn't know you'd have a fantastic voice, right boys?"

The Llama's agreed.

"How do you know I've got a—"

Rudy held his hand in the air and cut her words in half.

"You think just anybody would have come to us in our dreams? No, Vera, you're the one. Our North star, now give us a song and, if you permit, let us choose."

"But if you all want me then—"

Rudy held his hand out, palm down.

"We make a promise, boys. Whichever one of us likes her song the most they get to chose. And we all know what our favourite songs are, so there'll be no cheating."

Agreed the Llama's said as they made a mountain of pledging hands atop each other.

Rudy pointed a finger at Vera.

"Sing, baby, sing," he said.

Vera sang.

They weren't so much an avalanche any longer as a wet fine snow that soaked you even through three layers of clothing.

Five men still searching, but now doubtful of finding love.

"Could you believe that?" Rudy said. "I mean, her voice was good enough, but she chose that song, out of all the songs in the world and she chose that song."

None of the Llama's could believe it, it was beyond belief that they'd seen her face in the desert hot skies above Las Vegas, that they'd braved the snow and the dying bus to get here, and it had all been for nothing.

"I mean, for Christ's sake, who picks the Macarena as their favourite song? Who, I ask you, who?"

None of the Llounge Llama's that was for sure.

Afterglow

In the Kingdom of the Blind...

In the Kingdom of the Blind...

The thought rolled in Sebastian Newman's head like a sneaker in a tumble dryer clattering against the steel drum.

There was no Kingdom for the blind, or the nearly blind. Only a prison cell that became smaller with each and every day. What was left now but the unseen sunsets, the lost dawns, the fading light of a day that, soon enough, he would no longer be able to recognise.

Not much, that was what was left.

He'd had his second opinions given and many more besides. There was nothing that could be done, barring prayer and intervention from a God he'd abandoned too many years earlier to ask favours from now.

Acceptance, was that all there was left?

Everyone had a cross to carry, his mother had said. You went through this life and at some point you had to put a weight on your shoulders. Some carried more than others. Some got off lightly.

Well damned those crosses, and damn the God who wouldn't listen, he wasn't about to give up so easy. If there was still a chink of light left in this world, he was going to see it. If there was still a chance, then he would take it.

Even if it was crazy.

"Come in, Mr. Newman, take a seat."

Felt crazy as he stepped into the office, following the smiling man to the desk and there the offered seat.

What he could see of Archibald P. Lundstrom was impressive in girth. The man was a flesh coloured balloon dressed in a suit with a shocking red wig glued to the top. There were no pointy hats, black cats or cauldrons for that matter.

“Now, Mr. Newman, what brings you to a wizard on this fine New York morning? More to the point, what makes you believe a wizard is a thing that might exist in these unsentimental and rational times?”

Fear, he wanted to say. Desperation came a close second, and third, he was willing to risk even such a crazy notion as a New York wizard with his own Brooklyn offices.

“Can you help me or not?” Sebastian said.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Whether or not you believe in magic, for starters.”

God’s and magic, he would take anything at this late stage.

“Show me results and I’ll believe anything you tell me,” Sebastian said.

Archibald P. Lundstrom let out a laugh that sounded like a balloon losing air. He rocked forward in his seat, the weight crushing and creaking the wood below him.

“That’s not how magic works, I’m afraid. Results come after belief, it’s a nature thing, Mr. Newman. Balance, you see. Yin and Yang. Desire and Fulfilment.”

Sebastian’s hands curled into tight angry fists. Had he made a mistake thinking this man could help him? Had he gone that one step beyond the rational and let his fear take away all reason?

“Listen, I’m going blind, do you understand what I’m telling you? I’m going blind and I will do anything to stop that from happening. I’ll pay anything.”

“There’s a flat fee, did you not read the card?”

Nothing but the number and the address, he had to admit. Straining for too long with that overlarge magnifying glass gave him headaches.

“How much?”

Archibald P. Lundstrom leaned back in his chair, which gave another frightful squeal.

“A million dollars,” he said, without any hint of sarcasm.

“Are you yanking my chain here?”

“That does include parts and labour, plus any magical aftercare that’s needed.”

Disbelief shook Sebastian’s head in a slow, ticking rhythm. This was a last chance, but what kind of last chance could it be with a million dollar price tag? If he’d had a million dollars he would have flown to Europe and some miracle worker over there for a transplant.

There was the house though.

“I don’t have a million dollars, and I’m not likely to come up with that anytime soon. I can get maybe two-fifty if I sell my house, another fifty on top from stocks and savings.”

“A million it is, no bartering. Of course...”

The unfinished question hung in the air like helium balloon with a Birthday message that you couldn’t quite read scrawled on one side.

“Of course what?” Sebastian said.

Arnold P. Lundstrom, wizard and balloon-shaped man, pulled himself out of his chair and walked over to the window. There he bent back a blind and looked out onto the Brooklyn day.

“Magic works, Mr. Newman, by taking from one energy and giving to another. If I give you your sight back, then something of equal value must be taken away.”

“What do you mean?” Sebastian said.

Arnold P. Lundstrom turned from the window.

“Say, for instance, there was a dying old man who lived out on Fire Island. Now, let’s say this dying old man, well, he’s not got much time left in this world. You could count the days on one hand. Measure it in hours, rather than days, if truth be told.”

You didn’t have to have 20/20 vision to see where the wizard was going, Sebastian thought.

“Wait a minute, what are you saying?”

“Nothing yet, just an illustration of how this would work. Now, do you want me to continue, or is our interview over with?”

Sebastian bit at his lip. He stared at the hazy diminishing light of the world that would soon be gone for good.

“Go on,” he said.

“Well, let’s say a particular client, just like you and in need of a cure, well, let’s say that particular client went out to the island and the old man. With me so far?”

“Go on.”

The house looked down upon a winter-grey beach where the winter tides crashed against the colourless sands. To Sebastian’s eyes it was as if a weekend artist had left his latest landscape out in the rain and the paint had run. The whole world had taken on that look in recent days, and would only get worse if he didn’t act.

And that's what drove him now, one thought as he climbed the steps toward the house; soon I'll see again. Soon I'll have as many sunsets and sunrises as the days left in my life. Soon...

If it worked? If Lundstrom wasn't as full of hot air as the balloon he looked like.

All so crazy, the whole shebang. In his pocket he had a gold watch and in the house in some lonely old bed there was a lonely old man. Lundstrom had told him it would be easy. Place the watch over the heart, place your hand over the watch and...

This *was* crazy. Talk about Hail Mary's, this was a one-second-left on the game clock, full-field, fourth down throw, and he knew it. Why couldn't he just do like everybody else and take himself out to Lourdes and take a bath in Holy Water? There were plenty of quacks out there offering salvation and reprieves. A thousand faith-healers, snake-charmers, voodoo chicken-blood Priestesses, and each one of them willing to take cash.

But no, you had to go and find yourself a wizard to hang your hopes onto, he thought.

A wizard.

The sound of the word was like a slap in the face. He'd gone nuts, that was it, completely insane to trust some fat Brooklyn con-man and his promises. And the fee? A million dollars! Okay, so he wouldn't be footing that bill, the dying old man would, after he'd...

Sebastian looked over his shoulder to the blurred road that would take him back to the ferry and away from this madness. Back to a world that would soon be in perpetual night. Forever night.

How could he go back to that world if there was even the slightest chance of regaining his sight?

Hail Mary? It was the only prayer he knew, and the only one he could trust in now.

He wiped the rain from his eyes and walked to the front of the house. There he narrowed

his eyes to bring the blurred world into something resembling focus.

Now how would he do this? There wasn't enough left of the world to pick an intricate lock, and he was no lock pick. And what courage would he need to smash a window? More courage than he could muster?

Didn't matter.

In that narrow band of light he'd trapped within his failing eyes there was a dark shape, an oblong.

An open door.

A cold wash of fear, colder than the spray from the water, or the rain that blanketed the world, came over him.

Why was the door open? What kind of crazy old man left his house unguarded like this?

A dying man, he supposed. A man with only one fear left and that fear was coming whatever he did.

Sebastian sucked in a salty breath and stepped forward, into the cold dark.

It was a house, he knew, but only the misty version of a house that his eyes would allow him to see. What light that came from the grey world outside didn't help much. He might as well have been stood at the bottom of a well for all he could make out of his surroundings.

Easy, Lundstrom had told him. Well nothing was easy in the Kingdom of the Nearly Blind, everything was a groping, touching, grasping fumble to find your way.

He stepped forward.

The floorboards beneath him creaked out an ancient and lonely song. A song of the island without the fiery residents of summer. The scariest song Sebastian had ever heard.

He shivered.

Christ, who the hell was this old man who was lying up there upon a million dollar fortune? Why would he choose to spend his last hours in this silent, ocean-sprayed and empty house? Why would anybody be out here in winter?

Not so empty.

“You came then?”

The voice drifted from above, seemed almost matching the crash of the tides just beyond the house.

Sebastian made himself as still as wood and hoped that any creak he made would be confused for shifting timbers.

No such luck.

“I see you, but I fear you don’t see me worth a damn, boy. I’m up here, straight ahead, there’s a set of stairs if you’re wondering. Just you take a straight line, one foot after the other, you can’t miss ‘em.”

Sebastian tried to find the owner of the voice in the shifting dark, but there was nothing. Not the faintest ghost of light to signal where the voice was coming from, only the voice and its calm instructions.

But how could he move now? What if it was the old man? What if it was...

“Don’t dawdle, boy. I know why you’re here, and who sent you. It was that fat excuse for a wizard, Lundstrom, wasn’t it?”

No doubts now in Sebastian’s mind, the owner of the voice had to belong to the old man. It just had to be.

“Well if you’re just gonna stand there, least you can do is speak up. Did Lundstrom send you? Did he give you the watch?”

Sebastian’s hand went instinctively for the ticking and ancient timepiece that the wizard had given. He placed a hand over the bulge in his pocket as though the motion might, somehow, shield it from being noticed.

“Come now, boy. I’m old enough to know my competition and his cheap tricks. You don’t think you’re the first to brave this bad weather and come out here to dig up gold, do you? But no, it wasn’t gold he reeled you in with, no sir. Another lie perhaps.”

Any fear Sebastian might have had was gone in the face of that simple question.

“What do you mean, lie?”

“Even a blind man could see through that fat trickster’s lies.” Silence, the house settling in time with the nature outside. And in that silence a new tide crashed upon an old shore as the man’s laughter bubbled up from his throat. “Oh boy. Oh boy oh boy. He said he could give you back your sight, didn’t he? Lundstrom said he’d give it back. What was it, boy? You take my last breath, take my vision with it? Take a dying man’s eyes for your own?”

Sebastian’s head dropped, sinking with his hope into a dark tide that no light might illuminate.

“Something like that,” he said.

“Boy did he find himself a rube this time. A real lottery ticket.” The stairs creaked along with the bones of the old man as he descended. “You’re a cherry when it comes to magic, right? Don’t know the Balance? What is given is always taken away, you heard that?”

Sebastian shook his head, a slow movement that felt like he was standing on the moon, stranded and with no shuttle to return home.

The old man put a hand on Sebastian's shoulder.

"Don't you take it to heart, son," he said in the kind of voice that was reserved for relatives of long standing, "there's plenty come out here who were blinder than you, only none of them came for sight."

The old man made a gesture before Sebastian's eyes that was undecipherable under the blur.

"Forgot myself," the old man said, "you can't see much of anything can you. I was just saying, least I was showing, those who came before came for the money. Cold hard cash. Least that's what they were told. You know what they left with?"

Sebastian shook his head.

"Tails between the legs, that's what. Each of them came up here full-blood junkyard dog,

but they all left like puppies, once they understood the truth.”

“The truth?” Sebastian said.

“Truth it is and was, truth enough so that even a blind man could see it. You interested?”

Sebastian felt a De Ja Vu stiffness in his bones . Wasn't this the same, or close enough to what Lundstrom had said in the office? And if that was a lie, then what of the old man?

“You said Lundstrom was a liar. How do I know you're not lying?” Sebastian said.

“You don't, but maybe that's for the best, son. You took a leap coming up here, what's one more going to harm now?”

“I don't know,” Sebastian said.

“Exactly. You don't know. You're cherry when it comes to the ways of magic, and fear brought you up here on Lundstrom's whim. You know what would have happened if you'd put that timepiece over my heart, that's what

he told you to do, right? Put it right there over my chest and take my final breath.”

Sebastian nodded.

“Thought as much. Lundstrom isn’t after any buried treasure, or cash hidden in the walls, he wants what’s hidden inside my skin. That fat reprobate ain’t got enough magic to conjure himself up a cup of coffee, let alone give you back your sight.”

“So what was he after?” Sebastian said.

“Power.” As the old man spoke he walked, and he took Sebastian with him. Back out into the grey, paint-run world where the ocean washed into the colourless sands. “I got the power, he ain’t. You’d have put that timepiece over my heart and all you’d have got for your troubles was a shallow grave somewhere out there on the flats. Not long after Lundstrom would have waddled his way up here and picked up that watch with me inside and then...”

The ocean took his words away into the grey skies.

“Then what?” Sebastian said.

“You deaf as well as blind?” the old man said.

Sebastian felt the cold salt wind on his red embarrassed cheeks.

“I’m thinking maybe you can add dumb to that list, if what you’re saying is the truth,” he said.

“Oh it’s the truth, boy, no clearer. See, Lundstrom is a pretender. What he knows of magic is all book learning, and that’s never the kind of learning that’ll get you far when it comes to magic. Thinks he can take my power and walk around like he’s the King of England, everything at his command. See, thing is, he never figured on you.”

“Me?”

“Sure enough and yes, you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Walk with me,” the old man said, but he was already walking. “Lundstrom doesn’t know I been waiting for one of his little rubes

to come up here, the right kind of one, someone like you. Those others came for money and fame, they all had dollar bills in their eyes and hearts like combination locks. Now you on the other hand.”

“I’m not following,” Sebastian said.

“You will, in time. But let me pose you a question now, son. What are you going to miss when the world goes dark? What’s it you can’t stand losing that would have you believing in magic to get at it?”

Sebastian flipped through the images in his mind that hadn’t been touched by the blur of a world fading from view. There he located a summer as a child, a day that seemed to last forever, and then a moment just before the light faded and the world was a purple and yellow gold stretch of never-ending sky above his youthful eyes.

“Sunsets,” he said.

“One in particular I bet.”

Sebastian nodded.

“One you carry around with you even now with the night coming on and no more days to look forward to?”

“Yes.”

“And what of all the other sunsets and sunrises before and after? You remember them?”

Sebastian flipped through the clearer images in his mind, but could find no other as vivid or easily remembered.

“I’m not sure what you’re driving at?” he said.

“Only this. We all go through life and there’s a million sunsets, just as many sunrises we see, give or take. But it’s the one or two we remember. You’re not looking to keep your sight, but hoping for another one of those moments to remember. Scared that without the light you’ll miss out on the one and not the million others you’d easily forget. But you’re forgetting, boy, that there’s some things that you’re better off not witness too.”

Sebastian's face crumpled in confusion like the wind had shaped it that way.

"Like what?"

"TV for one. A greater parade of sadness there's never been. You ever see any joy on the news? No sir, not an ounce. They're too busy showing you ways to die to ever show you what's good about living. Better off being blind to all that."

"But what about all the rest?"

"Don't get me wrong," the old man said, "there's plenty of joy and beauty left in this world. Pity that most of us are too busy looking in the other direction to ever see it. Let me tell you, if there was a magic in this world that could give you back your sight, you'd forget just as soon and ignore all that joy around you within a day or two. Is that what you want, to forget, to walk through this life never taking a moment to stop and just appreciate what's around you?"

"I don't suppose so."

“No suppose about it, son. You got yourself a lifetime of one-offs, moments you can look at any time you drop your lids and the darkness comes on. Not one of them dug for, but each a diamond in its own right.”

“So that’s it?” Sebastian said. “I walk away from here and...it was all just a big con? There’s no magic, no way I can get my sight back?”

“Partly,” the old man said, “like I told you, I was waiting for one like you before I took my last breath. I still got enough magic left to give you a parting gift.”

Sebastian’s voice caught in his throat, strangled there by excitement. Was the old man hinting at a reprieve from the darkness? Was he offering a light that would cut through the encroaching night?

Excitement finally let go of his throat and allowed him to speak.

“You can do what Lundstrom promised?” he said.

“Nobody can, son. Not a magic on this earth that can undo what nature saw fit to do in the first place. That’s not how magic works.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“Only this; I can give you something to take into that darkness with you. Something that’ll last longer than any flashlight.”

“Something?”

“You got that watch on you?” the old man said.

Sebastian felt the lost promise, a dead weight in his pocket. But what if this had all been a ruse to get to the watch? What if Lundstrom was the one in the right and the old man was the one who was bending the truth?

“Well, you got that timepiece or not?” the old man said, when Sebastian didn’t reply.

“What are you going to do with it?”

The old man sniggered.

“What else would a wizard do with a timepiece? I’m going to stop time.”

“You’re going to do what?”

“I got maybe five minutes of shallow breath left in me before I’m an ex wizard. I’d like a couple hours more if I’m being honest. I give you what I can, and I’ll get those hours. You’ll get something to take with you.”

“How?”

“Give me the watch and you’ll see, at least you will until Lundstrom comes looking for that watch of his. Four hours is my best bet, but they’ll be four hours you’ll never forget, that I promise.”

Sebastian closed his hand around the watch, feeling there the gold and brass that had promised him so much and now might be the way to something even more than he’d thought.

He took the watch from his pocket and held it out into the grey and paint-run world.

“I don’t know if I should trust you?”

“Then trust what you feel,” the old man said.

But Sebastian was all confusion and regret. Which way was he supposed to turn, when every way promised the forever night and the loss of the day? What could this old man, this self-announced wizard really give him? Would it be just another promise unfulfilled? Another disappointment?

“Unsure, aren’t you, boy? Well let me ask you this; where was that sunset you remembered so well?”

The image came instantly to Sebastian’s mind. The beach, the palm trees, that sunset that was forever and went by too quickly.

“Hawaii. I was thirteen. A vacation my mom and pop took—“

“Look, see,” the old man said, guiding Sebastian away from the grey and toward a new light.

There, forming as if the paint on the artist’s canvas was running backward, the world changed.

Golden yellow replaced grey, the wind changed, turned warm.

A smile as warm as that wind and as colourful as the setting sun grew on Sebastian's face.

"It's impossible," he said, but didn't want it to be.

"Will be if I don't get that watch and soonish."

Sebastian didn't hesitate.

He handed the watch over as the sky and the land changed around him, as time spun backwards to a forever summer when he'd been thirteen and his eyes hadn't begun to rebel.

And there he stayed for four hours until the sun finally set, the wind cooled and the world became grey again.

The magic gone, Sebastian turned to see beside him the fuzzy outline of the old man, now dead, and beside him a small speck of gold.

Sebastian picked up the gold in his hand and ran his fingers over the surface.

The watch.

Its face was cracked and splintered, the hands stuck in time.

Sebastian stood and tossed the watch aside onto the colourless sands of the beach.

He faced a world that was dimming. A night that would never become day, and he smiled.

For where before he'd seen the nothing in the days to come, now he saw something more. It was there on the back of his lids, bright as the sun.

A warm memory.

He basked in the afterglow.

The Insane Blue

Chocolate to the left of them, chocolate to the right...and not a bite could be eaten.

If Mark took even a mouthful of that sweet and delicious food of the Gods then it was hospital time and six weeks of recuperation until he stopped resembling a purple balloon.

"Why in three shades of hell did you bring me here, Abigail?" Mark asked as they were ushered past the great bronze vats and the conveyor belt where eighteen different types of wonderful and deadly passed by.

"Anniversary gift," she said.

"So what is it, you want a new husband and you brought me here to kill me with chocolate?"

She giggled and pinched his cheek.

"If I wanted a new husband I wouldn't be bringing you here. What I want is a happy husband."

"Happy? Sure, with this kind of torture I'm going to be happy."

"You will be soon enough."

Where the conveyors ended and there were no more vats there was a set of steps leading up to a room that overlooked all the dangerous and delicious brown stuff.

And in the room an important looking man in a stiff white coat and the requisite pens sticking from his top pocket greeted them.

"Ahh, the guinea pig is finally here," he said, pumping Mark's hand.

"The what?" Mark said.

"Didn't you tell him?" The doctor shot a glance at Abigail.

"It's a surprise," she said.,

"You're not kidding," Mark said. "Can someone please explain to me what is going on?"

The scientist nodded. "Of course," he said, taking Mark by the elbow and leading him across the room, "what we have here is a new

form of chocolate. A very experimental branch that should solve the problems of people like you and millions of others."

"And you want me to test it? Is that what you're driving at?"

The scientist nodded.

Mark shook his head. "Well you must be crazier than my wife then, because I'm not putting a thing into my mouth that isn't—"

"Wait," the scientist said, "you don't know what it is yet, or what it can do."

Mark held up a hand to stall any more talk.

"If it's chocolate then all I know is that it will probably kill me, and you know what, I like being alive."

Abigail came up behind him, wrapped her hands over his shoulders.

"Just give it a try, Mark."

"No, no way. You know I'm allergic to this stuff and you know—"

She nestled into his ear, her voice a warm and loving whisper.

"This is for you, Mark. A present because I love you."

Those three little words had made men start wars before, so how he could refuse now when it was only a bar of chocolate? A bar of chocolate that might, who knew, not kill him?

Mark turned to the scientist.

"You guarantee this won't affect my allergy, it's totally safe."

"Not only will you not have an allergic reaction, but you'll be able to eat as much as you want without gaining a pound in weight."

"Impossible," Mark said.

"I'll take three tons of the stuff if that's true," Abigail said.

The scientist walked over to a table and upon the table was a velvet cushion and draped over that cushion was a bright red velvet cloth.

"Beneath that cloth is the greatest breakthrough in food science since the discovery of flour. A chocolate bar that has zero calories, zero fat, no lactose and no additives. A chocolate bar that triggers the same kind of endorphins as other chocolates, but that is totally non-addictive." The scientist grabbed the edge of the cloth and pulled. "I give you Nodding's Super-Bar."

Both Mark and Abigail had a strange look on their face, but it was Mark who spoke first.

"It's blue," he said.

"Yes."

"Chocolate shouldn't be blue, it should be...chocolate coloured. Who's going to eat a blue chocolate bar?" Mark said.

The scientist looked perplexed.

"Can't you see what a breakthrough we have here? Women, Men, Children and all those afflicted with allergic reactions will be able to eat as much of this stuff and never get fatter, have their teeth rot or any other of the

bad things we associate with chocolate. It's a miracle."

"But it's blue," Mark said.

The scientist waved away the concern. "People will get used to the colour once they've tasted it."

"Are you sure about that?" Mark said. "Doesn't look too appetizing to me."

The scientist reached over and broke off a square from the bar. He held it out to Mark.

"Taste it and then tell me it isn't the greatest miracle ever."

Mark took the blue chunk in his hand and turned it over. It felt like chocolate, that sticky but lovely sensation when it was just warm enough to coat the fingertips for later licking. But it looked like a bright children's plastic brick toy.

"I don't know," Mark said.

"Neither do I now," Abigail said, "doesn't look very tasty."

The scientist broke off another chunk and handed it to Abigail.

"Taste it and tell me it isn't tasty," he said.

Mark and Abigail looked at each other, a marriage and all the trust they'd accumulated in that look.

"What do you think?" Abigail said.

"Well it is our anniversary. If it works then...well wouldn't it be a great present for both of us."

She nodded.

They intertwined arms and as if holding wine glasses they popped the blue chocolates into each other's mouths.

An explosion of taste made Mark shiver. It was like some wonderful drug that made you feel like you could hold the world in your palm and then fall into that world at a moment's notice.

It tasted like chocolate, but the best chocolate he'd ever tasted in his life. And there was

nothing to follow, no tightness in the throat, no itching, no puffy red blotches on his skin.

He made a smacking sound with his lips.

So did Abigail.

"Now," the scientist said, "what do you both think?"

They giggled in tandem.

"Just what I thought. Tastes just like chocolate doesn't it, and no nasty side-effects," the scientist said. "This is going to take over the world."

"No doubt," Mark said, "so where can we buy it?"

The scientist's brow wrinkled. "Buy? I think you might be under a false assumption. This is the only bar we have, we're nowhere near mass production yet. You were here because of your condition. We knew if there was no effect on yourself then it was ready for the next batch of tests."

He couldn't sleep and he knew she couldn't sleep, but he didn't want her to know that he wasn't sleeping.

She had to be having the same dreams as him, the same thoughts.

All he could think about was that damn blue chocolate and how he wanted more of it. Just one more bite, he'd convinced himself when they'd left the chocolate factory behind. That would do him. But he knew in those secret un-sleeping moments that it wouldn't just be one more bite. He had years and years without chocolate to make up for. And if the blue chocolate had no calories and no side-effects then he could eat as much of it as he wanted.

If there was any available, that was.

But there was only one bar and that was in the factory and after that was gone....

For a week he walked around thinking of chocolate. At work everything had a tint of blue, everything became a chocolate bar that he needed to eat. He caught himself more than once unwrapping a Mars and a Snickers bar

just to taste something near to that small chunk of blue heaven he'd had upon his tongue.

Two weeks later and it was like he was in a fever. He had to have one more piece of that chocolate. He had to have it and he would do anything to get it.

Abigail wasn't much different.

They barely talked any longer, and when they did it wasn't talking it was shouting. The house had been filled with nothing but arguments since the visit to the chocolate factory.

There was only one cure.

He would get that chocolate bar and he would share it with Abigail. Their life could go back to normal then.

Only he didn't think they would ever reach that place they'd been at before the visit. How could they? One more bit of the blue heaven and they would crave it again. Swings and roundabouts, only there would be no getting off either and back onto the playground.

Whatever the outcome, Mark had made up his mind. He would have the chocolate and he would have it soon. He would share it with Abigail, and even if it brought back a small portion of the happiness they'd had before, it would be worth it.

Now all he needed was some burglar's tools, a dark night, and a whole heap of luck.

The chocolate factory slept in thick sugary darkness as Mark crept through, suitably black-hatted and black-faced. As he crept along he thought he could hear the blue chocolate calling to him like some half-naked fantasy lover crooking a finger for him to join her in a cold, soon to be warm, bed.

Mark licked his lips in anticipation, almost tasting the chocolate again.

He couldn't wait, and now he was so close, he was having doubts about how much he would give to Abigail.

I could save her maybe a quarter of that bar, he thought. Or maybe just a square. A square was better than nothing, right?

How many squares were there on the bar though? Sixteen, and they'd had two of them, and maybe more guinea-pigs had come in since their visit and there was nothing left at all.

Mark picked up his pace, his heart hammering to the thought that there might be nothing at all left.

He soft-shoed it up the stairs to the scientist's office. He knelt beside the door and fished out the burglars lock-pick set he'd bought the day before.

With an unsteady hand he inserted the lock-pick into the keyhole and...

The door swung inward.

A yelp followed soon after. A very familiar yelp that he'd been married too for a long time.

"Abigail?"

Mark brought the torch out from his burglar's bag and poked the beam into the darkness.

Illuminated under the light, coiled into a foetal position with blue smearing her lips like she'd been eating crayons, was Abigail. In her hand was a single piece of the blue chocolate.

Mark didn't have a whisper of a soft-shoe left in him.

He ran full-tilt toward her, shouting; "Gimme, gimme!"

The doctor had left them both behind and now the scientist arrived.

He stood between the beds, an over-large and over-flowered gift basket in his hand.

"Mr and Mrs Billingham, we're sorry about all this, and our parent company wishes to express their sincerest apologies for the events that transpired during the testing of...the testing of our new product." He offered the

basket. "In a spirit of forgiveness, we hope you will accept this basket of goods in good nature."

Mark pushed the basket away.

"Just tell me what happened to us."

The scientist glanced at his feet.

"It's complicated," he said.

Abigail pulled herself up in the bed. "Make it less complicated. We damn near killed each other over a bar of chocolate, so you better explain and quick."

"Well," the scientist said, "the thing is, because of the experimental nature of the chocolate there were some...let's say some of the chemical reactions were unforeseen."

"And that means?" Mark said.

"You regressed," the scientist said, "you became children, the both of you."

Mark looked to Abigail.

Abigail looked to Mark.

They both looked at the gift basket with a wanting gleam in their eyes.

"And—" the scientist said, but couldn't finish.

Mark and Abigail both grabbed the basket at the same time and a tug-of-war began.

"Mine," Mark said.

"No, mine," Abigail said.

The scientist wagged his head in exasperation.

"...and the effects haven't totally worn off yet, either," he said.

The Moonlit Skye

The sound of the dance was a distant and beautiful thunder that reached all the way to the lonely sands of the moon touched beach. From there, as electric quick as a thought, it triggered a secret wish, a tremor in Carly Argyle's legs.

A tremor that would never become a full blown earthquake.

She slammed her fists down on either side of the wheelchair and fought the tears that threatened to drown her.

A year ago she would have been in the barn with the others, dancing in the céilidh. Knees high, higher still as the music rose and the laughter rose in time with that music.

Carly didn't feel much like laughing and the accident had set her legs into a permanent stillness.

"Not fair," she mumbled under her breath as the music and the laughter travelled again to meet her on the beach.

Along with another sound.

A voice.

"Well, what have we here?"

Carly turned as much as she could to see a stranger strolling along the beach toward her. He was dressed in a fine-tartan suit, so fine that the cross-hatching of colours were barely visible to any but the untrained. Upon his head he wore a beret and upon his face he wore a smile.

"Scuse me?" Carly said.

The stranger strolled over, hands behind back and rocked forth on his heels as he inspected her.

"Well, lass, I never did see someone so alone and sad in my life. What brings you out here, away from the dance?"

Carly glared at him.

"Oh, I don't know, my legs were getting tired," she said, her words as stinging as a gale force wind.

The stranger laughed.

"Cò leis a tha thu?" He said.

Carly snorted. Presumptuous of him to think she understood Gaelic, which she did, but he didn't know her from Adam and she might just have been another tourist. The words were meant as a she warm, inclusive welcoming – Who do you belong to? – We all belong to each other.

She didn't want to belong to anything at that moment.

"What?" She said, playing the tourist angle for all it was worth.

He chuckled and held the chuckle in with a big hand over his stomach.

"You know our tongue, that's for sure, but if you must insist on English, then so be it. Pity

though, there's music in that tongue which can cure any ill."

Carly glanced to the deep darkness behind her where the music of the céilidh still roared like thunder. She felt it even now in the ghosts of her limbs, a calling that she could not answer, a lightning that wanted to strike but could find no earth.

"Why don't you go away and leave me alone?" Carly said.

"Impossible," the stranger said.

"Just leave me alone."

The stranger turned toward the rolling seas and the clouded skies above.

"Moon will be out soon enough. Only for a short time though." He turned to her. "Ever make a wish on the moon?"

Carly rolled her eyes.

"No, but I think I might do tonight."

"And what will you wish for?"

Carly smiled.

"For you to be gone."

"And that you'll have before too long, but not so quick, first we dance."

She looked at him as though he was insane, then tapped the useless ghost limbs stuck forever in the same position.

"Are you blind? I can't dance, why do you think I'm down here on my own, because I want to be? Don't you think I want to be up there with the rest of them?"

"I know," he said, "and I know you'll never dance in the céilidh again."

"So why did you—"

"Because of the moon and how it makes us all feel from time to time. Because tonight you'll dance with me, if only for a few moments."

"You're crazy."

"We all are when the moon comes out, doesn't change a thing, Carly. Soon enough you'll dance and you'll wonder why you were ever so sad."

She snorted derisively. "Want to make a bet on that, do you?"

"That I do. I bet you, Carly Argyle, that you'll dance tonight. You'll dance and you'll feel better and you'll know what it was like to dance."

"How much?"

"If I'm wrong then you get to tell me so. You get to go all over this island and tell them that I was wrong. But if I'm right—"

"That isn't much of a bet," she said.

"Listen to me now, if I'm right then you get to take something with you that you never had before."

"And that would be?"

"A secret," he said.

"What secret?"

He smiled. "Do we have a bet?"

"Not until I know what the secret is. My mother never raised a child so stupid as to take on a bet that—"

The stranger reached over and placed a finger on Carly's lips.

"Moon's coming," he said, "no more time for words."

She batted the hand and his finger away.

"I'm not making a bet with—"

"Hush," he said, "you already did."

The stranger turned back to the rolling sea and the cloud-filled sky.

"Here it comes," he said.

Every year she came back to the Isle of Skye on the same night to the same beach where she'd first met the stranger and learned a secret that had kept her going in the darkest of times.

Her legs, still the ghosts they had always been, were now covered beneath a shawl. Her body, fifty extra years of age and gravity weighing it down, sat hunched in the wheelchair.

Carly Argyle looked to the cloud-covered skies and there, a diamond glint at the edge of those clouds was the moon.

She smiled.

As the moon broke free, so did Carly Argyle.

The ghosts gained weight and form as she jumped out of her chair and began the dance.

There was no music now, no céilidh thunder to greet her as eyes closed she danced along the beach partnered by the moonlight. But she did not need the music. She had a secret, a wish made real only once each year on this night and in this place.

She remembered the words of the stranger that night.

"Cò leis a tha thu?"

Who do you belong to?

And Carly Argyle knew the answer when she danced, when under that moonlight and for the briefest of moments she was no longer trapped and made ghost by her body.

Who do you belong to?

We all belong.

We all belong.

When her husband came to pick her up, he asked the same question he asked each year as he looked at the sand and the footprints cut deep there.

"Who do you meet here, Carly?"

"An old friend, dear, just an old friend who I don't want to lose contact with."

Gamelan and High Tea

At first Carlos thought it was raining, but when in history had it rained flowers? And if such an incredible event had occurred, was it also accompanied by music?

He thought not.

Stepping away from the sidewalk, he shielded his eyes against the flower-petal rain-storm and looked upward to a window two stories above, and there a woman looking back down at him.

At least he thought it was a woman.

Whoever it was, and whatever sex they may have been, they were hiding it beneath a dark green veil.

“Hey, what do you think you’re playing at up there?” he shouted, not expecting an answer.

The woman, or was it a man, leaned further out of the window. No, it was a woman.

“Come up,” she said, waving at him.

“Come up?” he said, sensing something about to happen, but not sure if he wanted it to happen to him. “What do you mean *come up*?”

“Up here,” she said. “It’s important. You must come up. I have something for you.”

Carlos checked the street for hidden cameras and vans that might have those cameras hidden within. When he was sure he wasn’t the victim of a TV prankster, he took another step backward to see what he could see.

The woman was still there, still waving at him, that universal sign language of ascendancy; the lifted hand.

“What could you possibly have up there for me?” he shouted, making a meagre megaphone from his cupped hands.

The woman stopped waving; she looked over her shoulder into the apartment, and then returned.

“If you don’t come now I’m afraid it will be too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“Your wish to come true.”

He opened his mouth to speak, then couldn’t. A wish? What was the woman talking about? Had he been spiked with some exotic drug before leaving the bar? A drug that made you see veiled women and flower petals?

“Are you high?” he shouted, and then added under his breath, “or am I?”

“He says you don’t have much time. You’re the one who noticed the flowers and you’re the one who gets the wish.”

“Who says?” Carlos asked.

“Come up and you’ll find out.”

Carlos tried to shake off the weirdness like a dog that had come fresh from a river. This was the big city, well, not so big after you’d lived here a few years, but he knew the unwritten rules. You didn’t just go up to a

stranger's apartment because they promised you a wish. What next, would he climb into vans to see puppies? Buy lottery tickets?

"Sorry, I'm late," he said, making a feeble excuse.

"Whatever you want, he can give you, but only if you come up now."

Carlos took two steps and then stopped his retreat.

Anything he wanted? Well that was an offer you didn't get every day, and there was lots he wanted. He'd made a list three years ago when he'd first moved to the city. A list that grew bigger every day, not, he thought, much unlike his nose.

What if this wish was real? What if whoever was up there throwing petals and playing music in the middle of the afternoon could do what all the plastic surgeons had refused to do? What if he could get rid of the Cyrano curse with the wave of a magic wand?

And what if pigs could pilot aircrafts?

“I’m sorry but—“ he said.

He was talking to an empty, flowerless, music absent window.

“Crap,” he muttered under his breath. Even if none of it was true, he’d still have had a story to tell. Something to amuse the regulars at the Spitting Viper Bar. Something other than the self-deprecating jokes about his own gigantic proboscis.

He turned, ready to walk away, when the veiled woman came bounding out from the apartment complex.

“Come, come, this is a rare treat,” she said, pulling him toward the entrance, “he doesn’t give wishes all the time. I thought he’d stopped altogether. But then you come along and you notice the frangipani and everything is good again.”

Her accent was that kind of mixture of somewhere far away and all too close to be recognisable. Everybody in the city had a variation on that theme. But he wasn’t concerned

with her geographical heritage, just the strange word.

“The frangi-what?”

He was already being walked up the stairs by the time she answered.

“Frangipani, they’re beautiful flowers aren’t they?”

He was about to answer when she bundled him into an apartment and continued her own rushed talking.

“I thought he was ill, yes, very ill. All he does all day long is play that gamelan and throw the petals, hasn’t barely eaten any of his food. But then you come along and—“

Carlos batted away the beads of a door curtain that were threatening to strangle him. Then emerged into a room that might have doubled as a set for the Arabian Nights.

The floor was deeply rugged, the walls dripping in strange and golden artefacts, and in the corner, the oddest decoration of all.

Sat, with what looked like cartoon-flattened guitar over its lap, was a monkey.

“Okay, what the hell is going on here?” Carlos said. “Did one of the boys at the Spitting Viper put you—“

The monkey strummed the instrument and cut off Carlos’s question. It was the same sad and lonely music he’d heard coming from the window.

“This is Luigi, he’s a magical gibbon,” the woman said, introducing the animal with a courteous bow.

“Are you high?” Carlos said.

The monkey, gibbon, whatever it was, cleared its throat and in a voice that belonged to an English BBC Radio announcer circa 1946 said:

“On the contrary, she is as lucid as I, dear chap.”

Carlos swallowed his own amazement and it got lodged somewhere on the way down to his stomach.

A choking cough bent him forward.

“No...way,” he managed to say.

“In every way,” the monkey said.

“This isn’t—“

“Sit, sit,” the monkey said, pointing a paw to an overlarge beanbag on the opposite side of the low table that separated them.

Carlos coughed himself into an upright position and walked stiffly to the beanbag, where his shock dropped him into a seated position.

“How is this possible?” he said, addressing the woman and not the monkey.

But it was the monkey who answered.

“Did Farah not tell you I was magical? I distinctly heard her say such words.”

“But—“

The monkey raised a paw for silence.

“I have been experiencing of late a terrible and debilitating sadness, one that I feared my heart could no longer take. I have not laughed in as many months, and my eating is so near

to starvation that it does not merit the name.” The monkey illustrated his point by kicking a leg at the table, where a half-eaten plate of food was still present.

“It is true,” Farah said, “he’s barely touched his mee goring.”

“His mee-what?”

“That should be no concern of yours,” Luigi the magic gibbon said. “Concern yourself now with only one matter. A wish that I will grant you.”

“A wish, you’re serious?” And Carlos couldn’t believe he was serious in asking the question.

“You have brought a smile to my face, at least, you will do. You noticed my flowers and the music of the gamelan I played. You bothered to stop and ask the question that no other has asked. For this you are granted a wish.”

A talking monkey, flower-petal rain, the strange instrument, this was weirder than

that time he'd accidentally eaten an LSD cake and spent three days running around the desert thinking he was Jim Morrison.

But what if...?

Carlos swallowed his doubt along with a little bit of remaining fear.

"Anything? I can wish for anything?"

"Whatever your heart desires and I shall make it so."

Carlos ran through his list, and as always there was one desire that remained at the top. He was about to make that desire into words when he remembered all the stories he'd read as a child, all the Twilight Zone episodes he'd watched late at night.

"Wait a minute, this isn't some Monkey's Paw kind of deal is it?"

"Monkey's paw?" Farah asked.

"Yeah, you give me a wish, but whatever I wish for it turns out to hurt me in the end."

"I don't understand," Farah said.

“Well I wish for money, and I’m on my way home and a safe full of cash falls on my head, that kind of thing.”

The monkey placed a hand on his monkey chest.

“There will be no safe. I promise,” he said.

“No twist in the tail?” Carlos said.

“You give me what I need and I will give you what you need,” the monkey said.

Carlos wagged his head, a big unbelieving grin on his lips.

“This is ridiculous, but okay...I wish....I wish for...”

The monkey leaned forward.

“Yes?” he said.

“I wish that...that my nose wasn’t as big. There you go. That’s what I wish for.”

The monkey nodded solemnly. He raised a paw and clicked his monkey fingers.

Farah scuttled away into the back room.

“Well?” Carlos said, reaching up to feel the unchanged nose attached to his face. “I don’t see any magic, talking monkey man?”

“In time,” the monkey said, “first we have tea.”

“Tea?”

“High tea and then magic.”

“Is it magic tea by any chance?”

“Ordinary tea, but it is good.”

Carlos sat back, hands behind his head, in a state of absolute amusement.

This was crazy, out of it and several other explanations that wouldn’t fly right with the boys down at the Spitting Viper. When he retold this story they wouldn’t believe a word of it, not one word.

Five minutes of the monkey strumming the instrument and Farah returned with a pot and two small glasses. She poured out the tea and handed one to Carlos the other to Luigi the magical gibbon.

“Is everything settled?” she said, asking Carlos.

Carlos raised his glass. “Sure. Your magical monkey here is about to give me what every plastic surgeon said was impossible. What’s not to like?”

“And you, Luigi, are you feeling better?” Farah said.

“Soon enough I will be. Let us drink first.”

The monkey downed his glass in one.

Carlos took one sip and then retched.

“What the hell is this stuff?” he said.

“It won’t taste so bad in a minute. I promise you,” the monkey said, “now, are you ready for your wish to come true and for my smile to return?”

Carlos spat out what he hoped was the last of the awful tea.

“Anything’s got to be better than that vile liquid.”

“Okay then, close your eyes,” the monkey said.

“Close my eyes?”

The monkey waved a hand in the air like a stage magician about to produce a dove from thin air.

“This won’t work if you’re looking,” the monkey said. “Close your eyes.”

Carlos shrugged. He’d come this far, why not the whole way?

He closed his eyes.

“Now, state again your wish.”

“I want my nose to be smaller, flatter. I don’t want such a big nose anymore.”

“Your wish is my...command.” The monkey started giggling.

Carlos opened one eye a crack.

Just in time to see the monkey paw, now a monkey fist, come hurtling toward his face.

There was no time to duck or bring his hands up, but he tried both in any case.

He wasn't quick enough or agile enough to do either.

The monkey's fist crashed into his nose and a sickening crunching sound echoed around the apartment.

Blood ran down Carlo's nose and into his mouth.

"What did you do that for?" he said, wiping the blood and mucus away from his destroyed nose.

The monkey rolled sideways, holding onto his monkey ribs for fear they might break out of the skin.

"You...wanted...your....nose to be....flatter...now you...have your....wish..." he said, grabbing the words between howls of laughter.

Carlos jumped up.

"Jesus! It is a monkey's paw," he said, "it's a bloody monkey's paw routine you bastard."

Holding his nose he ran from the apartment and back out onto the street.

There were no petals coming from the window, but a new tune had started to fill the afternoon.

An odd tune.

It sounded like the opening bars to the Twilight Zone mixed in with a monkey laughing.

Spider Dreams

When he wasn't lying, Bill, for everyone called him by that name, liked to play pranks. Now, any other man might have been forgiven for this behaviour, but Bill was not like any other man.

"Mr. President, sir, the First Lady is here to see you," a tall and granite-faced secret service agent said that morning as he came into the Oval Office.

"Call me Bill," Bill said.

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, Bill, remember?"

The secret service agent had something new carved into his otherwise stony features. Fear.

"Forget it, son, send my wife on in here."

The First Lady, or what some referred to as "The True President" strolled in calmly and majestically as always.

"What is it, honey bunch?" Bill said.

She took a seat across from the desk, crossed a leg and said in that plain and powerful way.

"Revenge, that's what it is."

"Revenge? On who, flower of my life?"

"You, Bill. You."

He chuckled in that way that could convince young interns to get their dresses messed up without a second question.

"Revenge on me, sweetie. For what? And who's taking this revenge? Do the secret service know—"

She held up a hand.

"Revenge on you from me, Bill. That's what it is."

It wasn't often that Bill was without a smile, but in that moment he lost his.

"Are you serious?"

"Deadly."

The smile was back as Bill waltzed his way from behind the desk to stand by the First Ladies' side.

"You're joking, right, sweetie? It's some kind of April's Fool?"

"It is neither April or a joke, but you are most certainly a fool." The First Lady uncrossed her legs and gave Bill a stare that she reserved only for when the camera's weren't rolling and the interviewers weren't asking questions. "What did you do last week, Bill?"

"The usual," he said, "jogging, couple of press conferences and oh...you know, being Leader of the Free World."

"And that new intern, what was her name, Sarah Horowitz was it?"

Bill, quite often red in the face through no fault of guilt and only his pale skin, now blushed like a summer Rose finding the light.

"I don't know what you're talking about, honey bunch. Never heard the name."

The First Lady sighed.

"Of course you've heard the name, and tomorrow it will be all over the Washington Post. But tonight you're going to pay like you've never paid before. This time, Bill, you're not going to get away with it."

"Get away with what."

The First Lady reached into her purse and brought out a picture. On that picture was a spider, a very bright coloured spider with what looked like a smiling face painted upon its back.

"I was in New Orleans last week, Bill, and I made an appointment with a Voodoo Priestess."

"You never told me about—"

"Of course I didn't. She gave me this spider, it's a truth spider."

Bill took the picture and looked it over.

"Fancy name for a fancy creature," he said.

The First Lady stood. "I put that fancy creature into your ear last night, Bill. It's now burrowing into your brain. Come this

afternoon you won't be able to do anything but tell the truth. No more pranks, no more lies. You're cooked, mister."

The red-rose wash of embarrassment gave way to a whitewashed pallor on Bill's face.

"You did what?"

"I put the spider in your ear last night. For the next seven days, while it makes it's home up there in your brain, you have to tell the truth."

"It's a joke, right, honey bunch?"

"No joke. Oh, and Bill..." The First Lady dipped into her bag again and this time produced a legal document. "These are the papers for our divorce."

With that the First Lady left the oval office and Bill's life for good.

His dreams were filled with spiders. Giant spiders and him just a tiny insect of man trying to fend them all off with a bobby-pin lance.

On waking he felt better, back to his old self and not so worried any more about the fanciful threats of his soon-to-be ex-wife.

Truth spider, now what kind of nonsense was that? Voodoo Priestesses, the woman was obviously mad with jealousy.

And who wouldn't be, Bill thought as he stood naked before the full length mirror in the bedroom. Fifty-five with the body of a teenager. He was everything a woman could want. Everything—

You hate yourself, Bill. The voice was his own, but the thought came from nowhere it seemed.

He blinked it away and admired himself a little while longer in the mirror.

Look at that flat stomach, those finely muscled upper arms that—

You're just a little boy who nobody liked. Bill jumped around expecting somebody standing behind him, but no, the room was empty and

the secret service wouldn't be so lax as to let anybody in unannounced.

It's nothing, nothing at all, Bill told himself as he dressed, but the voice returned.

You know why you do this job, Bill? Because everything else you failed at in life. You needed the power, that's what it is. You needed to be the bully for once in your life.

"Shut up," Bill said under his breath as he left the bedroom behind and went about his daily briefings.

But it wouldn't shut up, and it was getting louder.

When a prominent foreign dignitary came that morning for a press conference, the voice drowned out any other thoughts.

Look at that waste of a man there, Bill. Look at him. Him and his whole country should be wiped off the map. And you could do it. A simple order and you wouldn't have to deal with these greasy assholes ever again.

Bill plastered on his biggest falsest grin, but it did no good. By that evening he couldn't use his own voice any longer, and it was that voice inside his head that spoke for him.

At a fancy dinner when the ambassador of a Middle Eastern Country enquired about his plans for the Gulf, Bill turned around and said;

"We're going to bomb the shit out of everything you love and hold dear. Then with all the tanks and soldiers we can, we're going to sit in your country until we have control of all your oil. Once we've done that, we're going to sell off whatever we can and get the hell out of there."

Ten minutes later he was bundled into his private doctor's office.

Dr. Hammond flashed lights into his eyes, checked his the pulse and blood pressure and then let out a long and sustained tut.

"Bill, you're as fit as a twenty year old. I can't see anything wrong here."

"Check my ears for a spider," he said, unable to control what he said.

"A spider? What are you talking about Bill."

"That bitch put a Truth Spider in my ear, I think it's burrowed into my brain."

The Doctor smiled. "Is this some kind of prank you're pulling, Bill? If it is, then it's way out there. Nobody will fall for a—"

Bill couldn't control himself. He grabbed the Doctor by the lapels and shook him.

"Check my goddamn ears or I'll get the CIA to fake your death and take you to one of those torture islands we have off the coast of Costa Rica."

"Bill what the hell is going on with you?"

Bill let go of the doctor and hopped around the office banging the side of his head as though he were trying to get some water out.

"I'm telling you that bitch put a Truth Spider in my ear and now I can't do anything but tell the truth."

"Bill, I think you're working too hard."

Bill let out a raucous laguh.

"Working too hard? I don't do anything. I just shake people's hands for a few hours a day, screw what I can, when I can and then get drunk on a weekend. Work I don't do—"

A half hour later and Bill was in his bed and sedated.

There he dreamed more spider dreams. Only this time the spiders were much bigger and he was so much smaller than before. The bobby-pin was still the same size.

At three that morning he was woken from the nightmares by his Chief of Staff and escorted to the ready room.

A high ranking general appraised him of the situation.

"We have troops massing on the Afghani borders. We're thinking Russian, but can't be sure. We should have more in the next few minutes, Mr. President."

"Nuke 'em," Bill said.

"Sir?" The general replied.

"I want everything we have flying over within the next ten minutes. No more games, no more pussyfooting around. Nuke the bastards."

"But sir, we don't know who they are and what their—"

"Are you disobeying a direct order from your Commander in Chief, General?" Bill said.

How it came about, nobody was left to say afterwards. Cowardice, possibly, the chain of command being so strong that nobody would dare break it. But before the night had ended the Third and last World War Began.

A few hours before the world ended a freelance photographer snapped a picture of the last American President.

In the ensuing panic and hurry-scurry the picture was all but ignored. But one internet site with an above average number of viewers published the image before the world was suddenly brightened into silence.

In the picture, Bill, for he liked to be called Bill, was naked on the Whitehouse lawn one hand covering a bloody ear.

On the floor beside him was what one visitor described as:

A spider with a smiling face.

Wisconsin Heat

The ice was too thick to crack. Four hours and Jimbo Donn had little more than a fist-sized hole dug out from the surface, not enough to pull out a fish, let alone slip a body into.

And this wasn't any ordinary body.

The eight foot tall statue of Hiawatha barely fit inside the fishing shack. Its feet touched the flimsy door, its head rubbed against the far wall.

Jimbo slashed at the ice again, but it did little more than spider crack around the edges of the hole he'd already managed to carve out.

Goddamn locals. Why in hell didn't they keep a supply of tools in these shacks? You'd think if they were here to ice fish they'd have some kind of pick or a handle-turned drill or something? But no, all that he'd been able to

find in the lonely little shack was a kitchen knife, a fold-up stool and a down parka jacket.

Back in Florida this would have been a breeze. He could have taken the damn statue out to the Everglades and dumped it into a swamp. No need for tools out there, just a fishing boat and enough time.

There was little time left now.

He could feel it ticking away in his head like he had a goddamn clock instead of a brain.

How long would it take them to find the truck, and then how long after that until they saw his footsteps in the fresh snow leading out to the lake? Couldn't be more than an hour. He'd only managed to lose the rest of the band about an hour back.

Jimbo snorted as he cracked the ice again.

The band, Jesus but that was a stretch to call the four of them a band. Snot had said they could start up a new scene out here. A punk revival in the middle of the goddamn frozen wastes of Wisconsin.

Jimbo feared that snot had been sniffing paint thinner again.

There was no scene out here, just a lot of cold people doing whatever they could to get warm. You couldn't be a punk when you had to dress three-layers deep just to feel human.

Well screw the band, and screw Wisconsin. Once he'd dropped the goddamn Hiawatha statue into the water the band would be done with. Back to Florida and the heat. Maybe he'd start up a new band? One that didn't have a stupid name.

The Hiawatha's, who the hell was it picked that name for a punk band? What was punk about Hiawatha? It was a goddamn ancient poem about Native Americans, not about doing what you wanted, when you wanted and how you wanted.

Not that any of Jimbo's wants were being fulfilled at that moment.

He leaned back from the hole he'd dug and wiped the sweat away from his eyes.

Wasn't big enough to fit a garden gnome through, let alone the giant statue. And the time was still ticking away in his head.

He did some quick math.

Ten minutes to make the hole, and the hole had to be at least five times this big. So that meant ten times five, and that was...

He'd flunked math too many times to be able to count, and he wasn't getting any better with age. But he knew what the equation meant whatever happened. Not enough time to get done what he needed to get done.

He stabbed at the ice again, three more times before an idea struck him.

The statue, the goddamn statue!

Where they'd picked it up from he couldn't remember, but it was the band's mascot, and that mascot had a headdress made from solid wooden feathers. Feathers that tapered to a point.

Maybe it was heavy enough and sharp enough to crack through the ice where the kitchen knife had failed so miserably?

Jimbo Donn was willing to give it a try. Once that goddamn statue was down under the ice then the band was done with. Broken up for good. There could be no punk-revival or Hiawatha's without the Hiawatha statue.

He smiled as he wrapped his arms around the neck of the statue and heaved.

And then lost the smile in favour of puffed cheeks and a strained grimace.

It hadn't been this heavy before, he was sure. He'd carried the damn thing over his shoulder from the back of the club to the car. He'd carried it across the ice to the shack. Couldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds, but now it felt like he was trying to lift the whole goddamn shack over his shoulder.

The sweat pouring from everywhere sweat could pour; Jimbo Donn took a step backward and looked at the statue.

If there was a rock and hard place, Hiawatha was stuck there. Wasn't the weight of the thing that had got in the way, just the position.

Jimbo went for the feet next, trying to dislodge them, but that was no use. However he'd managed it, they were stuck fast against the door.

He went back to the head.

Same thing.

Then he noticed the kitchen knife laying beside the hole.

Well, he only needed the head and the feathers there to break through the ice. The headless statue would do for his purposes. And cutting through wood with a kitchen knife had to be easier than trying to break the ice with the same tool.

Jimbo got to work on decapitating the mascot.

The clock ticked in his head as he sawed.

Where would Snot and the rest be now? Would they have found his car already? Were they already on their way, tracking his foot-steps across the snow-covered lake?

He sawed harder.

The ice was a bitch, but the wood on the Hiawatha mascot was a tame puppy in comparison. He was already halfway through when he heard the voice.

"Jimbo! You there Jimbo?" Snot's voice calling from out on the snow covered lake.

No time left to saw, Jimbo stood and launched a boot at Hiawatha's neck.

When they get here you'll be gone and there won't be any damned band left. Over. Done with. Kaput—

The neck broke.

So did the ice just beneath.

Not such a small hole any longer. Easily enough to fit a body through. He just never expected it to be his own.

Snot opened the door of the shack and popped his head inside. Behind him the other members of the band crowded in to take a look as well.

"Jimbo, are you in here?" Snot said, but there was no reply.

Snot, pushed by the band members, tumbled inside only for all of them to come to a stop when they saw the decapitated head.

A wooden carved and smiling Hiawatha face looked at them from where it had lodged in the ice.

Snot bent down.

"Strange," he said, pulling the head from the ice and holding it up. "What do you think this means?"

The drummer, Nailbomb was the first to answer.

"It's obvious, man," he said.

"Not to me," Snot said.

"It's like that film, *the Godfather*, you know the one where they leave the horse's head in the bed?"

"This isn't a horse's head, Nail," Snot said.

"But it is a message, right? He wanted to break the band up, so he went and did this. He's telling us he wants out, that's what it is."

"He could have just left us a note," Snot said as he stood up, the Hiawatha head in his hand.

"Nah, not Jimbo. He likes to be all dramatic. Remember the fuss he kicked up about us coming up here, remember that?"

They left the cabin together, Snot out in front.

"I wish he'd just let us now, you know, said something to tell us what he wanted. It would have saved all this mess."

Jimbo Donn was trying desperately to do what Snot had suggested.

Trapped beneath the freezing ice it was impossible to make anybody hear you.

The Pouf

The Zephyr Model 74 automated mannequin had one serious flaw. Well, more than one if Pedro Vasquez was honest, but the biggest flaw of all was that it just wouldn't take orders.

"Okay, back in the box, right now," he ordered, but the Mannequin as ever, climbed halfway in and then back out again. "I mean it. If you don't get back in that box right now I'll—"

The Model 74 ran away into the store room.

Pedro sighed. Was this how it was going to be for the rest of the day? Him chasing the damn Mannequin when he was supposed to be dressing the window for that evening's opening?

He shook his head and gritted his teeth then stepped toward the store room, only for the

doorbell to ring and a gust of wind to hit him in the back of the head.

Customers? Now, when the shop wasn't even open?

The man who entered was dapper, tall and sheepish enough to win a sheep impressionist's competition.

"Sir, I'm afraid the shop—"

"I was told you sold Pouf's, is that correct?" He said and added a wink to make sure there was no doubt he wasn't asking for a Pouf.

"We do not sell Pouf's, or whatever the hell you think a Pouf is."

"But the advert on the—"

"Sir, we do not sell Pouf's, we're not even open yet. Please leave."

"Fine," the dapper man said and retreated.

Another gust of wind hit Pedro in the face and twisted his lips into a grimace. He spied the Zephyr 74's shipping box and decided to take some of his anger out on it.

"Today of all days," he said slamming a fist on the container lid to close it, "and I have to have all this pressure on top of my head. Today of all—" He hit the lid again, but it sprang back up into an open position. He hit it three more times, but the damned thing wouldn't close.

Pedro let out a low growl.

Which was cut short by the doorbell and another gust of wind.

Another man walked in, just as dapper and sheepish as the first.

"I heard you sell Pouf's," he said, and added a wink just as the first man had.

"No Pouf's, we never sold them, never will, and I don't know what you think this place is but—"

"But the advert said—"

"Leave," Pedro said, pushing the man outside.

No sooner had he closed the door and was heading toward the store room when the

persistent wind hit him again in the back of the head and another dapper and sheepish man walked in.

Pedro didn't let him talk this time.

"No, we don't have Pouf's and the advert lied. Get lost!

The man had his mouth open to speak but thought better of it and jumped back out on the street.

That was it, he didn't have any more time for this nonsense. The Pouf-seekers, the damn box lid that wouldn't close, the persistent wind slapping on the back of he head would have to wait. He had to deal with the damned Zephyr 74.

He stalked through to the store room, ignoring the bell and the wind that chased him there.

"Where are you? Come out now, I won't have any more of this foolishness," he said.

There was no answer from the Zephyr 74, but there was a sound. The clatter-of keys

being hit from somewhere on the far side of the store room.

His keys.

On his damned terminal!

Pedro sucked in an angry breath and stormed to the rear of the store room.

There, sat before the terminal, typing away as merrily as anything, was the Zephyr 74. On the terminal screen was a Wire-Bulletin advertising FREE-SEX to whoever came to Pedro's shop and asked for "The Pouf".

Pedro slapped the Zephyr 74's hands away from the keyboard.

"What are you, defective?" He said, already knowing the answer to the question. Of course the Zephyr 74's were defective, that's why they were so cheap. They didn't take orders, and somewhere along the line an errant streak of mischievousness had crept into their AI sub-routines.

The Zephyr 74 model gave him a programmed response of sadness.

Pedro rolled his eyes.

"If I wasn't on such a tight deadline you'd be history, you understand that? I'd have sent you back by now. But I don't have time, so you just better behave or...or...." Pedro spied the glue wand beside the table. He swiped it and advanced on the Zephyr. "If you don't do what I ask I'm going to glue your head to your ass and make you walk around like that for the rest of your serviceable life. Understand me."

A programmed reaction of fear crossed over the Zephyr 74's robot face.

"Nod if you understand me," Pedro said.

The Zephyr 74 nodded.

"You're going to do what I ask?"

The Zephyr 74 nodded.

"Good, now go get dressed. I want you in my number 36 and waiting in that front window once we open. Got me."

The Zephyr 74 shuffled away to dress and, finally, behave.

Pedro put the glue wand down and let out a big sigh of relief.

Two more hours till the grand opening, he just hoped there were no more surprises.

By opening time Pedro was almost happy.

They Zephyr 74 stood behind the unveiling curtain dressed in the number 36, the Pouf-seekers had gradually trickled away to nothing. So, the shipping box still wouldn't close, but that was a small hindrance, nothing more.

Pedro counted down the seconds, his hand on the unveiling button as outside a crowd, a good crowd who weren't looking for Poufs, gathered.

Three...

Two...

One...

Pedro pressed the button.

The curtain fell and Pedro waited for his applause and congratulation, but there wasn't any. Just a crowd of confused and some angry patrons all looking toward the front window.

Pedro followed their displeased gaze.

Stood in the window, wearing what could only be described as the clothing of one gender and the genitals of all, was the Zephyr 74.

Three holes were present, torn out of the number 89 Fall Women's Collection dress.

One was in the crotch area, where a robot penis and robot vagina showed in some confused Dante like level of hell that wasn't possible. The two other exposed a pair of robot breasts.

How the Zephyr had managed the feat, Pedro wasn't sure. Robots were genderless and could be programmed for either, but not both together at the same time. And he wasn't thinking about it for much longer.

He watched the shock faces of the crowd, he saw them looking at him with their accusing eyes and Pedro promptly fainted.

The sound of the doorbell and a rush of wind woke him to the sight of a dapper and sheepish man standing over him.

"Are you okay?" The dapper and sheepish man said.

Pedro climbed to his feet, shook away the fuzziness and remembered everything from that day. The box that wouldn't close, the Pouf-seekers, the wind and the damned Zephyr 74.

"Wait," he said, "let me ask you something?"

"Fine," the dapper and sheepish looking man said.

"Are you here for the Pouf, is that why you came?"

The dapper and sheepish looking man wrinkled his face in confusion.

"No," he said, taking a card from his top pocket and handing it over. "I'm from Mann-E-Kin. We traced a prank robot to your store and we've come to collect it. We would have been here earlier today, only the robot sent us somewhere else. Strange though, now you should mention it, but it was a shop that sold Pouf's."

Pedro smiled.

Then promptly fainted again.

Strange Weather

Lydia couldn't help but think that the old poem might be true.

Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses.

There was little in the way of passes, even without her spectacles. Taken from her eyes it would not matter if they made that pass or not, she wouldn't be able to see them. The world without her glasses was nothing more than an abstract moving blur. Sound with little in the way of fury.

And yet...

She sat, as most mornings, in the front booth of the Mermaid Cafe, her gaze on the street and all those in love and out. She reached, as most mornings, for the rim of her spectacles and with an expecting hand, removed them.

One day, she thought, there would be a voice. A man's voice making small talk in deep

tones. He would ask if he could sit. He would say he had noticed her from across the room. And then...

"May I sit?"

A tremor of panic shook her hand as she brought the glasses back to her eyes and took the blur from the world.

Stood beside the table was a tall man dressed in sharp clothes and a soft smile. He had one hand on a chair, the other gesturing toward her.

"Please," she said, the tremor in her hand transferring via a wildly beating heart to her voice.

"Thank you," he said and with a graceful ease he slid the chair out from beneath the table and himself into the seat.

There was a moment that seemed to stop the world, paint it in static and brilliant colours. A moment where her dreams were possible. Where her morning café thoughts were more than inventions.

A moment that soon passed.

Of course the man was only here to meet someone else, she thought, someone who might be noticed across crowded rooms. A woman who did not spend her mornings watching the world through a window. A woman not so invisible to the world.

Lydia picked up her book from the table and lost herself in the familiar words.

In words she found comfort. In words she became whole, not so invisible any longer. In the absence of her own adventure, she would live the adventures of others.

"What is your name, miss?"

Slow as a rain cloud moving across a bright sky, Lydia pulled the book down from her eyes to check who the man was addressing.

The stranger had his eyes fixed upon her, there was nobody else at the table.

"Me?" Lydia said.

"Yes, miss."

"Why?"

He smiled and leaned forward.

"You're not often asked your name, are you? And even less by strangers, I fear."

Lydia searched for a voice but found nothing but a croak.

"Yes, yes, perfect, that's what you are."

Lydia strained to see if there was some other, less invisible woman standing behind her, and then returned to the man.

"Me? Are you talking to me?"

"Indeed I am, miss. Unless there is another as perfect as you sitting alone in this café with only wishes for company?"

Fear and excitement mixed to both chill and warm her.

"Is this some kind of trick?" she said.

"No tricks, only offers made and deals bargained. My card." With a magician's flair he produced a black-all-over, soft as velvet, name etched in gold, card from his jacket pocket. "Armand Wood of Wood's *Pandemonium Carnival*, at your service."

He followed introductions with a theatrical roll of his hand.

Lydia stared at the card. She stared at the stranger.

"Is this some kind of joke?" she said.

"No joke, but all the same odd, would you not agree?"

"Odd isn't the word for...this."

Armand shifted in his seat, crooking his leg over the other while losing none of the warmth in his smile.

"Would you have felt more comfortable if I'd opened with a cliché? Strangers talk often of the weather, do they not, when first meeting? Should I talk of the weather now?"

Confusion blinked Lydia's eyes for her. This was not how her morning fantasies played out in her head. There were fewer questions and more proclamations of love at first sight.

"The weather? Are you serious?"

"Not any kind of weather, I confess, but the strangest of weather, indeed. The strange

weather that brought me to you, Lydia. That brought *us* to you."

Fear locked her to the chair, made vice grips of her hands around the seat.

"You know my name?" she said.

"Of course, I know the names of all those who I am drawn to."

"Then why did you ask me-"

He swatted away her concern as if it were nothing more than a dust mote obscuring his vision.

"A test of sorts, nothing to concern you. Now, let us talk of the weather you and I. Tell me, Lydia, have you watched many cartoons?"

He was crazy, that's what she was dealing with here. Certified, A-grade, marbles lost, no sandwiches left in the picnic crazy. What a shame then that the only man who'd noticed her in too many unnoticed years had to be mad.

"Excuse me," she said, making a move to leave.

Armand leaned across the table and upon his smiling lips he placed a finger to hush a secret whisper.

"I know what you want, what you desire, Lydia." His voice was a ghost tapping on windows to wake the sleeping.

A butterfly flap of her stomach later and Lydia found herself still standing, unmoved from the spot.

"You want to hear, do you not?" Armand said. "You cannot let such an opportunity pass you by as you have been passed by so often. What if, Lydia, what if you walk away now and never understand what could have happened on this day? It would be a story with the last chapter torn out, a poem with a missing stanza, a song missing the last bars."

It was as if he had tuned into her thoughts, listened in on some chemical shortwave broadcast from her soul.

Adventures began with risks, not turned backs. Could she turn her back now? Walk away without hearing what happened next?

She couldn't.

"Tell me," she said, taking her seat.

"Why, to be known, of course," he said. "An invisible girl made visible. To be loved, Lydia, to simply be loved. Am I correct?"

More than he knew, and could know. How had he played this trick, for trick it had to be? To randomly pick her from the crowd, this invisible girl suddenly visible to the stranger was a magician's feat at the very least.

"And if you're wrong?" she said.

Armand wagged his head with the confidence of a man who knew the world as he knew the skin upon his palms.

"I asked if you had you watched many cartoons, do you remember?"

"Yes, but I don't see how that has anything to do with—"

He held a hand into the air and her words were lost.

"Then you'll remember the cartoon cat haunted by thunderclouds while the mouse stands in sunshine, yes?"

Lydia nodded.

"Would you like to take a guess which of them you are?" He did not let her answer. "You are the cat, Lydia. You wear the clouds as a bonnet. Attract the strange weather and that same weather attracted me on this day."

"But—"

"You still do not believe me?" Armand offered his hand. "Come with me now and I'll show you the world as you have never seen it before."

In that hand was the turn of a page, a second stanza to the poem and the beginning of a symphony that might be dark or light.

Could she turn that page, read that stanza, and open her ears to the rising of the music?

"Well, Lydia?" Armand said.

Lydia searched the café for worried glances and warnings of impending doom and found yet again no faces turned toward her.

Turn the page or close the book and walk away?

Lydia stretched out her hand.

The day was as so many days she had experienced before.

Crowds, like the waters of a river, moved around her as though she were nothing more than a small pebble. There were no second glances, or first glances for that matter. She was, as ever, an invisible woman.

And Armand played guide.

With a finger shaped into the barrel of a gun he fired off cause and effect, wishes and regrets in each and every target that passed by. He talked his way through one street and the next, until finally the waters ebbed and the crowds were replaced by open and empty grounds.

There was no revelation Lydia could hear or see. No new world, only the old world she woke to every day. Only a smooth talking man inventing histories and characters on his way.

Was this what she had made the leap for? This her adventure? Or was it simply that she'd wanted to believe more than anything else that her fantasies might become realities?

Standing with the stranger looking out onto the empty fields, Lydia was as embarrassed as an actor in a play who had forgotten his lines and which character he was meant to play.

How could I have been so gullible? Did time and loneliness rot the brain; make you susceptible to smooth talk? What next, will I open the door to every fast-talking hawker and open-handed beggar?

No.

The foolishness had to stop.

She would return to the café and her books and her lonely mornings spent watching the

world go by. It wasn't so bad, after all, to live alone, to dream and hope that those dreams came true. Not so bad to live the Dickinson life.

But what if...?

Maybe a minute more and the unseen world Armand had promised would be seen? Maybe his magician's flair would return and from his empty hands he would produce a full explanation that eased all her worries?

And maybe one day a tall, dark and most certainly handsome man would come to her on her lonely table and say—

“Look up, Lydia,” Armand said.

Lydia snapped from her worried thoughts at the sound of his voice.

“What?” she said.

Armand pointed to the clear sky above the empty grounds, and there, like spilled wine, a stain emerged, dark and ominous. A cloud that grew bigger and moved toward them as if propelled by the unseen and unfelt wind.

“The world is here, Lydia, come now as we greet it together, you and I.”

Lydia shook her head as if to clear a fog, but there was no clearing this.

“The world, what are you talking about?” she said.

“Watch,” Armand said. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back a few steps.

The cloud lowered like a balloon losing air and just before it reached the ground, folded out. A dark origami trick occurred as it lost all its soft edges and became a red-and-white candy striped Circus tent. It touched down upon the empty ground but did not fold again, instead tent pegs drilled themselves into the earth, ropes guided themselves and it was as if the tent had been there all along.

Armand took a theatrical bow.

“Welcome to *Wood’s Pandemonium Carnival*,” he said.

Lydia shivered. This was no welcome, this was a fantasy that, even on her most lonely

mornings in the café, she would never have imagined. Clouds didn't become tents; a circus couldn't just appear out of nowhere.

Yet here it was, as real as the earth it now occupied, as real as the clear skies above. But still she found it hard to believe.

"I'm dreaming, right?" She said, rubbing her eyes, and when she'd finished rubbing the tent remained.

"Not a dream, but soon enough recognition, yes, and more besides." Armand offered the crook of his arm. "Will you join me, take a tour, see the world, your future?"

Lydia took his arm as if in the dream she now wanted to wake from.

Armand led her forward.

"From Istanbul to Idaho, from Morocco to Marrakesh, you will find us," he said, gliding her through the flaps of the tent that opened up to greet them, "we the lost and loveless. We the seekers of recognition in a world that deems us unrecognizable. We, the providers

of this singular and most unique of entertainments.”

A hand waved and the darkness before them birthed light, but a premature glow that was nothing more than puddle in the middle of the greater darkness beyond.

Lydia felt Armand leave her and enter the darkness, only to grow into the scant light at the centre of that darkness. As he moved, the light shifted, fit him like loose coat.

“Here at *Wood’s Pandemonium Carnival* you will find performers unlike any that have come before. Acts that astound and mesmerize.” He flicked a hand out and the light followed the direction of his pointed finger. A lightning strike of yellow illuminated a chair, and the man sat within that chair.

Not so much a man that Lydia had ever seen before, but a man so frail and grey and washed out that he might have been pencil-sketched to life. At the centre of his chest was a dark and confused scribble.

Lydia, her fear half-swallowed, leaned forward to get a closer look.

What could it be, that dark stain on the frail man's chest?

Armand had the answer.

"Our first exhibit," he called out. "Francis, a man rejected so many times by so many that he loved, he soon imagined his heart nothing more than an ashtray, where cigarettes might be extinguished."

Lydia shook her numb head, swallowed her fear only to have some more stick in her throat.

This couldn't be real.

"Show the lady your trick, Francis!" Armand called.

Francis struggled to his feet, and from behind his back drew out a lit cigarette. One wheezing breath later he puffed out a silver stream of smoke into the air. It curled above his head and formed a question mark.

Lydia let out a relieved sigh. For a moment she'd thought...but no, that couldn't happen...whatever Armand had said, this was just a trick, a circus sideshow performance, there couldn't be any way that...

Francis turned the cigarette, glowing end, toward his chest.

"Go on Francis, show the lady," Armand said.

Pale eyes narrowed, Francis stubbed the cigarette out on his chest, at least where a chest might be. But this was no ordinary trick. The cigarette was halfway gone and he turned it as though he truly had an ashtray where there should have been a heart.

Lydia stifled a scream with her hand, turned for a quick escape, but the darkness before was darkness behind. The flaps of the tent and the day beyond were gone from view. There was nothing but a starless night and that night stretched on forever.

"You don't want to miss our next act, Lydia," Armand said, "come, turn around and see.

See Clarisse, that woman so heartfelt and worrisome in her everyday life, so in touch with the feelings of others that she grew a heart upon her sleeve.”

Lydia didn't want to turn. The darkness was fine, for what was under the light was more disturbing than anything that could hide in the night.

“You're missing the show, Lydia,” Armand said.

“Good,” Lydia said under her panicked breath.

“That won't do, you know,” Armand said.

“Tough luck, I'm not—“

Without wanting to move, Lydia was spun like a top and came to rest facing Armand and his latest spotlighted oddity.

A woman, no more than thirty in body and face, but with a thousand years of tears in her glinting eyes. An eon of hurt in her weak and forced smile. She stood.

Lydia tried to turn, but her head was fixed with unseen restraints. She tried a blink, but her eyelids popped open like a spring was attached.

She had to watch, to witness, there was no other option.

Clarisse reached for the shawl that covered her shoulders and slowly, with a new pain troubling the troubled waters of her eyes, she removed the cover to show an exposed arm, and there growing like the dark bulb of a withered flower, was a heart. A heart that beat out a rhythm in time with the tears that flowed from Clarisse's eyes.

"No more, please, no more," Lydia said.

"Ten more, Lydia. Ten more lost and loveless souls, hearts yearning to be recognised, the invisible made visible. A floorshow that will embarrass the ignorant, taunt the unfeeling and bring tears to the dry souls who are witness to our show."

"This is wrong," Lydia said. "How can you do this to these poor—"

Armand's face flashed a darkness that was deeper than the night black that surrounded him.

"I? How can *I* do this? These are the casualties of a silent war that never ends. A war that has raged since we became aware of each other and ourselves. These forgotten souls, passed by on streets, their love ignored, left alone to conjure themselves into new shapes. It was not I who made them this way. Not I who forced them to become these strange creatures you see before you now." Armand stepped from his spotlight and became the darkness.

Lydia felt a newer and stranger weather than any that had she'd witnessed that morning. An ozone touch against her skin as if a thundercloud were about to clap. A winter breeze at her ear that soon became a voice.

"Meet Terrence, the third of thirteen," Armand said.

A light exploded in the darkness to reveal yet another lost soul sitting in a chair.

“Terrance was a composer of music, a man who put his heart and soul into every note, every phrasing. A man unconcerned with fame or money, but who yearned for recognition. So much so, Lydia, that he...”

She did not hear the words for the end of the sentence appeared before her as Terrance stood.

Where any other man might have had flesh and bone, Terrence was configured as instrument. Black and white bruises in the shape of keys marked his pale flesh. His long fingers ran across that human instrument and a song began.

With every breath exhaled so was the song, and in tandem his fingers keyed his body with an expert flare. And that music, so familiar. The sound, that of accordion.

Armand emerged from darkness.

He took her arms and pulled her free from the tight and unseen grip that had held her in place.

“Twelve of thirteen, one is missing, do you know who that someone is, Lydia?” he sang as he pulled her into a dance, and as they danced the lights burned around her, bringing to life each oddity in turn. Lipless men and sightless women. The lost and loveless here to entertain a crowd of who, Lydia could not guess, but she did not have to guess at what Armand wanted of her now.

She was to become part of the show.

The thirteenth chair.

It was lit now, empty, waiting to be occupied.

Waiting for her.

“They will come in their hundreds. They will flock here to stare and lose their breath in the sight of the main attractions of my Carnival. And you, Lydia, you will have your recognition, no longer invisible to the world. You will be seen!”

She pulled.

He pulled harder.

She twisted, but her wrists were locked tight under his grip.

“Stop!”

He brought the spinning to a slow and gradual stop, his eyes fixed upon hers.

“You have something to say?” he said.

Lydia glanced to the arranged chairs and the oddities trapped in light.

“I’m not like them,” she said, feeling guilty about the separation but too scared to ignore a way out.

“How so? Are you not invisible with those glasses of yours on?”

“I feel invisible, that’s all, I feel, but it’s not real. All those people out there can still see me, I know that. And they’ll see me when they come here.”

Armand’s smile spoke of untold secrets.

“Are you sure?” he said.

“Of course I’m—“

“Out there, maybe,” he said, pointing to a spot beyond the darkness, “but in here? Can you be so sure, Lydia?”

Fear grabbed her first and twirled her around in a dance that even Armand could not match.

Then excitement followed, a slow waltz with her eyes closed.

“In here it’s different, is it?” she said.

“Undoubtedly. In here the world is as *we* see it, Lydia, not how *they* see it.”

Fear returned to dance with her, but only a quick tango before she found her words, her way out.

“Then *this* should work,” she said, and like so many mornings before Lydia reached for her glasses and took them off.

For a moment the world was a darkness smudged at the edges by light, and then...

Lydia put her glasses back on.

Armand’s face twisted with shock.

“Do not play this silly game with me!” he cried.

No game. Lydia was moving already. From one chair to the next, whispering in one ear then another.

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but it is no use,” Armand shouted as he turned, spun, searched for her, “you are part of what we are. You cannot defy me. You cannot defy the secret wish that lives in your heart. You are as the rest, Lydia. You are lost and loveless and that is all you can ever be.”

Not so lost any longer, and loveless, well love might come one day if she was patient.

Patience was not her motive at that moment in time.

She whispered her way from one oddity to the next.

For in whispers there was freedom. In a simple truth revealed there was freedom. At

each and every ear she repeated the same mantra, the same simple truth.

“He’s wrong,” Lydia said.

And like a key that fit a rusted and ancient lock, the tumbler minds of each oddity fell into place. They rose, from chair to chair, and stepped out of the light and into darkness.

“What is this? What do you think you’re doing?” Armand said.

But it was too late.

A song played as the light died, it was a strange and haunting melody that lasted only as long as Armand breathed.

Soon that song ended.

She sat watching the world through the cafe window. Watching for signs of the strange weather that had marked her as a possible exhibit in Armand Wood’s strange carnival. Were there other souls out there marked as she had been, rain soaked with loneliness even on the brightest day? And if so...?

He came into the cafe, his eyes shifting nervously from one patron to the other before fixing upon his own shoes. And in those shoes he shuffled to the counter, ordered, and found himself a spot in the far corner. In one hand he had a book, in the other his coffee, and in his eyes was a faraway look.

Lydia could see no clouds, but she did see a silver lining.

Her smile as bright as summer she left her table, book and coffee behind.

The stranger did not look up as she approached, but when she spoke he had something of the summer in his eyes. Something of days spent in darkness only to realise there was light.

“May I sit,” Lydia said.

Hidden Obviousness

She had the look of a woman who regularly broke promises and smiled while doing so. Then why did he love her so?

He decided to ask her that morning as they walked to the Mermaid Cafe.

“You know I don’t know how we’ve stayed together so long?” Marty said. “It’s got to be some kind of record. We don’t have anything in common. You hate everything I love and vice versa. And as to the—“

“Sex?” she said.

“I wasn’t going to put it so bluntly, but yes, the sex hasn’t been up to much lately, has it?”

“Are you blaming me?” she said.

“I’m not blaming anybody. I’m just saying, it’s not the same.”

She let out a snort.

“Of course it hasn’t. How could it be when we’re breaking up?”

The surprise stopped him even as she walked on ahead.

“What did you say?” he said.

She turned and rolled her eyes at him. Which, even in this moment of pure astonishment, he had to say were as deep and blue as a poet’s words.

“Didn’t you know?” she said.

“Unless you whispered it to me while I was sleeping, no, I didn’t know. What are you talking about?”

She strolled toward him; her long and impressive legs making it all look so easy.

“You must have noticed how things were changing?”

He shrugged.

“Obviously I didn’t.”

“We’ve been together four years, what else did you think was going to happen now?”

He blinked, and blinked again but he still wasn't sure that he hadn't woken up during a weird dream.

"I don't know," he said, "engagement, maybe. Buy a house, a dog and two cars, something like that."

She laughed and he felt it somewhere near his heart as though someone had punched him.

"You really should take your head out of those books of yours once in awhile. Maybe then you'd see what was going on around you. You didn't honestly think this was going to last much longer did you?"

Marty looked down at his hand, where he had *one of those books* held tightly. Maybe she was right? He'd been lucky to pick up with her, no, not just lucky it had been some kind of miracle worthy of its own entry in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

For years he'd spent his time reading and longing and fantasising about a perfect world

where a perfect woman would fall in love with him.

“I hoped it would,” he said.

She shook her perfectly symmetrical head, and her perfect platinum hair with it.

“Hope? Come on now, it was obvious from the very first day we got together that it would never last.”

“So why did you—“

“Hook up with you?” She shrugged. “Thought it would be fun to be with someone different, i suppose. You’re not exactly demanding, Marty.”

“Was I supposed to be?”

“Most men are, whether they like to admit it or not. You never got jealous, gave me all the freedom I could want and more than I needed. You never argued with me. You always let me finish first and—“

“Wait,” he said interrupting the list of what he’d thought were his strengths and now

turned out to be weaknesses, “didn’t I do everything right?”

“That’s the problem, Marty, you did everything right. Where’s the fun in that? I mean, even when I lied to you and you knew I was lying, you never once pulled me up on it.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, his voice rising with sarcasm.

She stepped close to him, close enough to smell that perfume that made his knees weak.

“I’d have more respect for you if you were truly sorry, but you’re not.” She said. “You thought you were being honourable, noble even, when you let me get away with those lies. I bet you thought I’d feel guilty and tell you, is that what you thought, Marty?”

His cheeks flushed red. Was he that obvious? Was he the readable book and she the book still wrapped in cellophane with a cover missing?

“What if I did think that, what’s wrong with—“

“Everything, Marty. You’re like some wide-eyed cartoon character who doesn’t know how the world works and thinks everybody is honest and good at heart.”

“What am I supposed to be?” he said.

“Well if you were anything like anybody else, you’d know how this all goes.”

“Educate me.”

She rolled her perfect eyes and flipped her perfect hair out of those perfect eyes.

“It won’t do any good now. Maybe after all this you’ll start seeing the world for what it is.”

“Maybe I don’t want to?” he said.

“I wouldn’t be surprised, but you’ve got to know that this is how it is. Whatever fantasies you while away your mornings on in that cafe aren’t ever going to come true.”

He grabbed the book tight at his side.

“So that’s it, we’re done with, it’s ended?”

She smiled at him, then like some proud mother reached and pinched his cheek.

“Don’t be silly,” she said.

“I’m being silly now, am I? You just said we’re breaking up. What am I supposed to think?”

“See, you’re angry, if you’d been like that from the start we might have had a chance. But it’s too little too late.”

His anger flared and it felt good as he pointed a finger at her.

“Listen, just tell me straight, are we breaking up or not?”

She took some time to arrange a look of pity on her face.

“You really don’t understand how this works, not in the slightest.”

“I’m willing to learn if you’d just give me a straight answer.”

“There is no straight answer, that’s not how it works.”

He was bubbling now, fit to boil.

“Tell me how it works then.”

She lifted up one of her manicured hands and counted out the way of things on her delicate, suntanned fingers.

“After that you have about a year where you’re getting comfortable, not so many fireworks, but you still get a decent bang every now and then.”

“Charming,” he said.

“Let me finish.” She knocked down another finger. “So then when the fireworks are over with and you’re all used to each other, then comes the annoying year.”

“The annoying year?”

“Sure. You know everything about each other, the habits the likes and dislikes. When the sex happens it’s more for relief than anything else. It’s about then that everything you

thought was cute becomes annoying and, well, you start thinking about what might be.”

“Maybe you did but I never—“

“Wouldn’t surprise me, but then again, you’re not exactly familiar with the game.”

“The game, fireworks, what else didn’t I know that I’m only just finding out?”

“Probably everything. We already went through the fireworks and the familiarity, and we’ve way passed the annoying year.”

“So where are we?”

“The long year.”

“And that means?”

“It’s the longest year of the relationship, where you don’t talk as much, where you make your plans for escape. The first year is the quickest because everything is new, after that time slows. Haven’t you noticed I’ve been going out with my friends a lot more lately?”

“No.”

“Well I have. And that’s when you start missing everything that came before the relationship. That’s when you start looking at other people and wondering if you haven’t made a mistake. Remember those films you watched about the Prisoners of War?”

“What does that have to do with—“

“The long year is like one of those movies, where they’re making all the plans to dig the tunnel and what clothes they’ll wear once they’re on the other side of the barbed wire fence.”

“So I’m a Nazi prison guard now am I?”

She wagged her head. “Of course not. You’re the camp, Marty.”

He bit at his lip, four years of bad words coming to mind, but then rejected in the face of her strange similes.

“So I take it you’ve already dug the tunnel?” he said.

“Near enough.”

“And when’s the big breakout?”

“This week maybe, or the week after. But we have to break-up properly first.”

“You’re making no sense. Are we broken up or not?”

“Officially, yes, this is the big breakup talk. But it doesn’t work like that. It doesn’t just end.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Of course not. You’ll call me, or I’ll call you, and then we’ll get back together for a week or two and then we’ll break up again, and then we’ll...you see where I’m going?”

He wagged his confused head.

“I wish I could, but wherever it is I don’t want to be there.”

“What are you saying?” she said.

Four years of being the nice-guy and playing it the right way had only led to this moment in time, this street and the non-ending that she was offering him. Well, it was going to end properly, whatever she wanted.

“See this?” Marty said, holding up the book so that the pages showed.

“What’s a book got to do with—“

“Everything,” he said. “I like books with a beginning, middle, and an end. The end is the most important thing in any story for me. Without it there’s no point reading.”

“So?”

“Before I met you all my fantasies had the same pattern as the books I read. There was a beginning, middle and an end. There weren’t any extra chapters, no maybes; the stories were wrapped up, finished.”

Her perfect eyes became imperfect for a moment as the truth of his words came home to her.

“You’re ending it? Are you serious?”

“Oh yes. You said I did everything right and that was everything wrong about me. Well, that’s who I am, and who I am can’t stand a book without a proper ending.”

She chuckled derisively.

“No, you wouldn’t do that. Whatever you think of me, I’m the best you could ever get. If I call, a week from now, a year from now, you’ll come running. You won’t be able to help yourself.”

There was a moment where he believed her, where he remembered how he’d felt when they’d first met, when they’d first discovered each other in a hot bedroom one hot night. But it wasn’t enough. He couldn’t start that book again knowing there would be no final chapter.

He clapped the book shut.

“Goodbye,” he said and walked the street toward the Mermaid cafe.

What would come now, he wondered? Would she call as she’d said, and would he answer? Would his life go back to morning fantasies in the cafe and wondering if he’d find love again?

He didn’t know.

But he was ready to read another book.

One with a proper ending.

Tequila Mockingbird

"You know what I hate about Susan Swan?" Francine said and downed another Tequila Slammer from the table.

Barbara narrowed her eyes and captured the Prom Queen's table far, far away from the rest. And in those eyes she captured Susan Swan, that never-aging, always pretty, teeth as white as the whitest snow beauty.

"No, what?" Barbara said.

Francine jammed her empty shot glass on the table, picked up another, knocked that back and wiped the spittle from her streaked-lip-sticked mouth.

"Everything," she said.

"Glad you could narrow it down so succinctly."

Francine slouched forward, one hand keeping her chin from crashing against the table.

"Ten years, Barb, and she still looks as young as ever. Doesn't that make you sick to the stomach? How come there are some people in this world that are like that, huh? And look at us?"

Barbara felt her inner thighs rubbing against each other as Francine asked the question. Ten years earlier it hadn't been much different. But ten years earlier she'd always imagined that ten years in the future she wouldn't be chafing if she walked.

"Everything I eat goes to my thighs," Barbara said.

"Thighs? That's nothing. I can't eat a slice of cake without looking like I'm pregnant." Francine shot an angry and drunken look in the direction of Susan Swan. "Just look at her. I bet she could eat as much cake as she wanted and nothing would happen. She'd probably lose weight, the bitch."

Barbara needed something to cheer her up in the face of the one-time Prom Queen and all that looking at her brought back to her mind.

Something stronger than Tequila that would last longer.

"You know, she was a bully too, remember that?"

"Oh yes, I remember. Used to call me Barney the Dinosaur all the time. Bitch."

A cruel smile crept over Barbara's mouth.

"We're not in school anymore, are we, Francine? And she'll be alone at some point tonight."

A spark cleared the drunkenness in Francine's eyes.

"Are you suggesting...?"

"Let's do to her what she did to us. Let's see how pretty she is with all that makeup rubbed off and no dress. Whatever secret she's hiding, I bet we can get to the bottom of it."

"And we get to kick her too, right?"

"Kick her?"

"She kicked me once, and I've been waiting ten years to get her back. Tonight seems as good a night as any."

Barbara shrugged.

"Okay then."

Francine raised a glass.

"To the Prom Queen, high-and-mighty soon-to-be humiliated bitch, Susan Swan."

They clinked their glasses together and followed it with a sinister laugh by way of a toast.

Susan Swan walked serenely beneath the Class of '89 Banner on her way to the ladies' toilets.

Behind her Barbara and Francine, shoes off, digital cameras ready, followed.

As soon as the doors closed and Susan Swan was gone from view, they picked up their pace. Outside the door they each took a side like

cops in a TV drama, heeled-shoes drawn like guns ready for the call to action.

"Now?" Francine said.

"What do we do once we get inside?" Barbara whispered.

Francine slapped the heel of her shoe into the palm of her hand a little too hard. "How about that?" She said

"We might kill her if we do that, how about we just go in there as though we're using the bathroom and see what happens?"

"What kind of plan is that, Barb? What if she comes out when we go in?"

"She still might do that if we stand out here all night talking. Besides, someone's bound to notice us. We're not exactly inconspicuous, Francine."

Francine's Tequila-clouded eyes swam out of focus for a second.

"In-con what?" She said.

"We stick out like two insane drunken women ready to mug someone with their shoes, any clearer?"

Francine giggled, and slapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh yeah," she said through her fingers.

"And you have to stop giggling. She'll hear us coming a mile—"

The door to the bathroom flew open.

Shocked, Barbara dropped to a knee as though she had lost a heel and was trying to fix it. She risked a glance upward, but it wasn't Susan Swan who'd emerged from the bathroom.

Carole Anne Porter swayed in front of the ladies' bathroom. Her eyes twice as glazed as Francine's who she was now trying to focus on.

"Don't tell me," Carole Anne said, "it's...wait, it begins with an...were you in Mr. Carter's class with...who was it now?"

Francine tried her best to roll her eyes in annoyance, but the Tequila had taken away that facility.

Rolling eyes had always been the traditional response when meeting Carol Anne Porter. That always dizzy and forgetful super klutz of high school, who hadn't changed one bit in her klutziness.

"Francine, it's Francine," Francine said.

"Oh yeah, I remember and..." Carole Anne swayed around as though she were stood on the deck of a ship and looking for the right way to the lifeboats. "Francine and Barbara, yes, I remember," she said, pointing a swaying finger in Barbara's direction.

Barbara rolled her eyes and it was much more than the usual reaction.

How long could they stand out here with Carole Anne making so much noise? Surely, Susan Swan had heard the klutz speaking by now and whatever they planned wouldn't get further than in their Tequila soaked minds.

Barbara placed a hand on Carole Anne's shoulder and dredging up a memory from ten years earlier, said:

"Wasn't that Jimmy Franz I just saw going into the hall? You know I think he's single, Carole Anne."

Carole Anne's eyes lit up.

"Single?"

"Single and looking, so I heard."

"Excuse me ladies," Carole Anne said, "nature calls." With a wink and a sway she went off in search of a long-held crush that had never been fulfilled.

"I never saw Jimmy Franz?" Francine said.

"Neither will she, but she was making too much noise. Now, are we going to do this or not?"

"Do what?" Francine said, confused.

Barbara pointed toward the ladies' bathroom door. "Susan Swan, remember?"

Francine giggled and caught it in her hands again. "Oh yeah, what was it we were going to do again?"

In that moment Barbara found her plan and it was so good it felt like she'd just consumed a full cake and knew that none of it would go to her thighs.

She held up the camera.

"Susan Swan, Prom Queen and all around Belle of the Ball will soon be making her debut on the internet. Let's see what secrets she's got under that tight fitting dress shall we?"

Francine giggled.

"I bet she wears one of those corset things that pushes you in and pulls you out in all the right places."

"I bet she's had so much surgery done she's got a ribbon in back of her head that will undo it all."

"I bet she's wearing so much make-up you'd need a shovel just to get to her face."

They would soon find out.

The two Tequila Mockingbirds entered the bathroom ready to sing as loudly as they could about Susan Swan, to whoever would listen.

The bathroom was empty, the stall doors all open, except one.

Fingers at lips to ensure silence, Barbara and Francine crept into the stalls on either side with camera's ready.

A moment of guilt washed over Barbara as she sat there and turned on the camera.

Was she really going to do this? It seemed such a petty revenge and she knew that once the Tequila had worn off she would regret the whole affair. But the Tequila hadn't worn off and that part of her brain that it had affected was shouting "Do it! Do it now!"

Barbara listened.

Stockinged feet on the toilet lid, she hunched down, camera ready. A giggle rose up inside her chest to tickle her throat.

Oh this was going to be fun. Ten years wasn't such a long time and she hadn't forgotten one day of Susan Swan's reign over the high school.

Perfect in every way Susan Swan. Grade A, dating the Quarterback, head cheerleader, Susan Swan. It was like she was cut from a standard and expensive cloth that nobody else had access too. The model student, the model girlfriend, the model life.

Well tonight, Susan Swan, whatever secrets you have are going to be laid bare. The makeup washed off, the Emperor's Clothes stripped and your real face shown to the whole world. Not so model now when a picture of you squatting on a toilet like every other human being out there is available.

No, not much of a perfect person now, Susan Swan. Not so—

Barbara brought the camera up just as a giggle escaped from the stall on the opposite side of Susan Swan's.

The camera flashed and then dropped out of Barbara's shocked hands.

She couldn't believe what she was looking at, or what she'd just photographed.

Neither could Francine.

But she didn't just drop the camera, she fainted.

The man inside the booth had a long glass tube fixed to his mouth. Cradled at his feet was what looked like a portable oven. And bent double just in front of him with the glass tube sticking out of her rear, was Susan Swan.

On shaky legs, Barbara stood in the now open door of the stall looking at the craziness before her eyes.

There were a thousand questions to ask, but she asked only one.

"What the hell is going on here?"

The man took the tube away from his mouth and an embarrassed smile crossed his chapped lips. He shrugged.

"You don't think someone like her just comes out of nowhere do you?"

"You mean Susan Swan?"

"Yes."

"So you're telling me she's not real, is that it?"

He snorted. "How could she be? You know anybody this perfect, this good at everything. Have any friends that are anything like her, do you?"

Barbara closed her eyes and tried to swim through the mess that was just behind them.

If Susan Swan wasn't real then what about all those other perfect and pristine Susan Swan-like women out there? Were they just—

Barbara opened her eyes.

"This isn't possible, what you're doing here, it's not possible."

"Are you calling me a liar?" The man said.

"I'm calling myself insane, because this is insane and I'd...I think I've had too much to drink."

"I take pride in my work. I won't have anybody telling me that my models aren't finely crafted. See, every one marked with my initial," he said and lifted up the back of Susan Swan's dress.

There on her perfectly formed butt cheek was a carved Z. Not a tattoo, but a thin white trace of flesh.

"Z?" Barbara said.

He bowed as much as he could while sat on a toilet.

"Paulo Zabrin, master model maker and crafter of the finest Alpha Models that you will find, at your service."

"Who do you make these models for?"

His face crumpled with confusion.

"For everyone of course."

"No, I mean who hires you, who pays you?"

"Pay? I receive no payment, my only compensation is that I make the world a better place."

"No, I mean—"

But Barbara didn't get to finish.

Francine had come to and was now leaning over her shoulder.

"Jesus it's—"

Francine promptly fainted again at the sight of Susan Swan.

"You might want to help your friend there," Paulo Zabrinini said, nodding in the direction of the swooned Francine.

Barbara took a glance.

Francine lay flat on the ground a big, happy Tequila infused smile on her unconscious face.

"She'll be fine," Barbara said, "now how about you tell me what the hell is going on here?"

Paulo Zabrinini shrugged.

"What has always happened, of course," he said.

"And that is?"

Paulo held up his hands and made an hourglass sculpture before his eyes. "There are those who are perfect and those who are not." The mimed hourglass became flattened at the edges, tapering out where it should taper inward. "The perfect are few and far between, and for good reason."

Barbara tapped her foot impatiently and crossed her arms over her less than perfect chest.

"I'm waiting to hear what that reason is?" She said.

"A simple matter of aspiration."

"I'm not dumb but what the hell are you going on about?"

Paulo wore the smile of a man who knew the answers and was about to give them.

"Exactly, you are not dumb. Tell me, what do you do?"

"I run a small travel agency with my husband, but I don't see—"

"Of course you don't see, that's the whole point of these models we build. When you were growing up and you looked at this model here, how did it make you feel?"

There were so many feelings, too many to count and not one of them good in relation to Susan Swan.

"Have you got about a week?" Barbara said.

"Let me tell you what you felt, shall I? Jealousy, anger, sometimes depression. You wondered how you could ever measure up in this life to a creature as beautiful and naturally talented as the one you see before your eyes now."

Barbara reached up to her throat to check she was still breathing. Everything he'd said was exactly what she'd felt growing up. But it was no surprise, really. Didn't everyone feel that way when they were growing up? Wasn't everybody an outcast in some way? She'd even imagined that Susan Swan must feel that

way, when she was feeling particularly generous.

"Everybody feels that way," Barbara said.

"Of course they do, and they need to or there would be no struggle. No way to measure success. Without Susan Swan you wouldn't have fought to make something of your life. You wouldn't have found your true strengths without having a comparison. Do you see?"

Barbara wagged her head.

"No, I don't."

Paulo Zabrinini made a tutting sound with his chapped lips. "Let me put it this way," he said, "without a Susan Swan in your life, there would have been no point in trying. Every moment in your life bad and good has in some way been a measure against what you thought of the model here."

"You can't know that," she said, but was already beginning to understand what the strange man was hinting at.

"I do know. That is why the models exist, and why I and the others make them. When you fell in love, your first kiss, there was a moment, was there not, when you thought of Susan Swan?"

"No," she said, but looking back she knew it was a lie.

"Yes you did, and I can tell you what you thought too."

"Try me."

Paulo cleared his throat.

"Just before that moment when the lips touched, or maybe during you thought to yourself, this isn't real, how can this be happening to me? If I was Susan Swan then all this might make sense, but I'm not, I'm just some plain and ordinary girl. Yet here I am, my stomach made of butterflies, a strange heat all over my body and I'm not Susan Swan."

Her mind tumbled back ten years to the past and that first kiss under the bleachers. That young girl's mind melted into the mind of

the woman standing before the bathroom stall, and she remembered. His words weren't her words, but they were near enough to send a shiver over Barbara's body.

"See?" Paulo said. "I am right. And in those moments, so many that it is hard to count, you have always measured yourself against the model here. Through those years you have come to a conclusion about life."

"What would that be?"

"The same conclusion as all the others. I may not be as perfect as Susan Swan, but that doesn't matter, I still succeed in my own way. I don't need to be perfect for this life to be a good life."

Paulo's smile was as hot as the small burning stove cradled between his feet. A smile that could only burn in the knowledge of absolute correctness.

"And now you have a choice to make," Paulo said.

"What do you mean?"

"Now you know the models exist and their creator is real, but what will you do with that information?"

Barbara shrugged.

The strange man was right in everything he'd said, but this was too big of a discovery to keep a secret, wasn't it? She couldn't just walk away and not tell anybody about the discovery she'd made.

Or could she?

"I can see from your eyes that you are conflicted," Paulo said, "so let me make my case before you here and now."

"Case?"

"The case for you never speaking of what you've seen here." He cleared his throat. "If the models are discovered, if you make them known, then whole generations will lose what you had as a child growing up."

"Oh, you mean the pain and the loneliness and the sadness? That doesn't seem like such a bad thing to lose if you ask me?"

"And also the fight, the aspiration to be as good as you can be. Whole generations will lost that moment of revelation when they understand they don't have to be perfect in this life. They don't have to be a Susan Swan to make something of themselves, to find love and happiness. That is what they will lose."

Barbara chewed at her lip, she glanced at the still Tequila soaked and unconscious Francine.

"Well?" Paulo said.

"I'm thinking."

"You don't have much time. The slow dance will begin shortly, before that there's going to be a lot of full bladders in here wanting to be empty. Make your choice, and make it fast."

Barbara hummed and ahhed.

There was a lot in the balance here and it wasn't going to be an easy decision.

"Okay," she said. "I've made up my mind."

Francine, half-awake and fully drunk slouched in the chair opposite her as Barbara, palms sweating, waited for her moment.

The music stopped, the leader singer of the band asked for quiet.

But Barbara couldn't be quiet, not now she'd seen what she'd seen.

She stood.

"Wait up. I have something to say," she shouted.

The singer chuckled. "Well folks, looks like we have an impromptu speech before the last dance. Come on up."

All eyes on her, Barbara took the stage and the microphone in hand.

She looked out onto the faces, now matured of all those who'd surrounded her ten years earlier. There, as bright and beautiful as she'd been ten years previously, was Susan Swan. There was no fear on her face, not a hint that anything was wrong in her world.

Barbara cleared her throat.

"First I'd like to say thank you to someone," she said.

There was a round of applause and one very Tequila soaked chuckle.

"Susan, Susan Swan," Barbara said.

There was a gasp that sounded like ten years of surprise and a few more years of bad memories all rolled into one.

"Susan, I'd like to thank you for making me realise something about myself."

Another gasp, and a "What the hell" from Francine.

"Looking at you now and looking at you back then I always thought I'd never be able to match up. We were nothing but shadows in the light you cast." A wide and bright smile came to Barbara's lips. " But you know what, Susan, we all find our own light eventually and cast our own shadows, so in that spirit I'd like to have this last dance with my husband, and dedicate it to him. Jimmy? Are you out there?"

The husband, an embarrassed smile on his face, shuffled forward.

Barbara took the floor with him and as the music started, they danced.

They cast a shadow under the diamond light of the glitter ball.

It wasn't such a perfect shadow, lumpy in some places, straight where it might have been curved. But Barbara didn't mind so much anymore.

If Not, Then What?

Hovering above the date, scrawled with a childish glee, was a picture of a flying saucer.

April 1st.

A day for pranks and bad jokes, but not this year. This year, William Smith would become the first human to be visited, and not just in fever dreams or hallucinations, by an alien intelligence.

The first visitor was a squat, bug-eyed individual by the name of...well, there'd been no name, just an understanding without words that he was an ambassador from somewhere far, far away. Will had taken to calling the squat little visitor Charles, as he'd once known a circus midget with the same name and they were about the same height, give or take an inch.

Charles had told him the date and the time and the etiquette of such a visitation. At least

that's what he'd understood of the alien's perfect, yet broken English.

They wanted something from him.

Something only he could give them.

Although he'd puzzled over why they had chosen him out of all the great musicians that inhabited the earth. William Smith, composer of desert songs on his missing-the-last-string guitar wasn't exactly Rachmaninov or Debussy.

Still, he'd soldiered on and composed them the welcoming song that they insisted upon.

Four choruses of desert blues that one might lull the crickets to silence with.

He was proud of the song, and prouder still that soon he would be playing that song to the interstellar travellers. Proud enough to wipe the dust from his one and only suit and don that outfit before heading out of the house and into the empty land surrounding his lost-in-the-middle-of-nowhere home.

Who'd a thought, he thought, that fifty years being alone and my first visitor would be from out of this world. Sure, there were neighbours, fifty, sixty miles away on the highway, but his real neighbours were the coyotes and the snakes that made the desert their home beside him.

Standing out under the clear night sky a tingle of excitement ran him through.

Fifty years in your own company could make a man awful crazy in the head, he thought. But I never, not once, wanted company out here. Didn't want the hustle and bustle of this world and I got what I wanted.

But now, alone in the field, waiting for his audience of faster-than-light visitors, a feeling fifty years lost was returning.

Joy, was it? A little more than excitement? Yes, he was actually looking forward to the company.

Jesus, but after he'd performed the song and welcomed them to the world just how Charles had instructed, then there would be plenty of

questions he wanted answering. Why him was a good starter, and then why now, and why not fifty years before? And was Roswell really just a cover up? And what about all those madmen and Elvis-witnesses who claimed they'd been whisked away to the stars to be told secrets and...

A light bloomed in the sky. At first a shooting star, then a new moon.

The spaceship!

William thought he might cry at the sight of it. Charles had only ever come in the middle of the night to interrupt his sleep. There'd been nothing as grand as all this.

The ship blocked the sky, a million spotlights beneath rippling red-green-orange and then they blinked out, leaving only a single one behind to make William the centre of attention.

This was it! The moment, the grand introduction and welcome that only he would be privy to and partake in.

William cleared his throat, brought the guitar up to a comfortable level and rested his homemade, plastic bottle pick on the top string.

He was no master of the guitar, no Hendrix or Robert Johnston, but he could pick out a tune as good as any. And this was by no means an intricate song. A standard twelve bar blues progression with little in the way of flair.

Good enough, he supposed, especially when there were no other acts to rival his on this night.

He began.

A nice slide transferring into the first bars of the song.

And then, in his dusty-desert blues voice came the lyrics.

*Woke up this evening,
The night in my eyes
The Earth had some visitors*

Which was one big surprise

Silence, even the crickets weren't chirping.

William's hand shook around the chords, a nervous blues coming from his missing-last-string guitar.

This wasn't good. Weren't they supposed to roll out a red carpet by now, or whatever equivalent the aliens had in their mothership? Silence was no response to a musician, not on Earth, and he didn't suppose off-Earth either.

He carried on, struggling now to sing the second verse.

They came from the stars

Offering hands

But all that was waiting

Was one lonesome old man

The mothership hovered silently above, that single spotlight as focused and unmoving as a rock under the hot afternoon sun.

May as well have been the middle of the afternoon. That goddamn spotlight was burning him now and the sweat was running down into the fold of his neatly starched collar.

Why weren't they responding? What were they waiting for, him to end the song? Was that it, did he have to sing the whole thing before they talked to him?

Like the President of the United States exiting *Air force One* while a fanfare played.

He wasn't imagining anything like that now as he hammered on a note and wiped his sweating pick-hand on his one and only good suit.

Got to soldier on, he thought. Two more verses and then we'll see. Only a few more bars and then this spotlight will be off me and we can get down to the real important stuff of this night.

So he carried on.

Into the third verse and out again.

Still nothing, all he could hear out there was the night wind picking up and the bored crickets starting to notice him.

He soldiered on.

Fourth verse and then a last strum of the strings to finish.

William waited for applause, for the spotlight to fade, for anything at all, but the spotlight continued to burn and the night was just as silent as it had been through all four verses of his welcoming song.

He shuffled nervously and kicked up some desert dust with the motion, but still there was no reply.

He couldn't wait out here all night, no sir. The cold was already coming on, enough to make his fingers twitch. Aliens or no aliens there was a limit to how long a man could be ignored and take that ignorance in silence.

William cleared his throat.

“Hello? Is there anybody up there?”

No voices replied but he was granted a reprieve from the heat of the spotlight.

It blinked off leaving the Mothership above without any illumination.

Impolite he would say, if he had anybody to say it to.

“Can you hear me up there? Charles, are you there? What’s happening?”

The Mothership continued its silent hovering, ignorant of any questions, unresponsive.

William laid his guitar on the ground and cupped both hands around his mouth.

“Hello, is there anybody home?” he called.

A single light bloomed beneath the dark dish of the Mothership and illuminated a spot a couple of feet away from William. Trapped within that light was what at first looked like a falling Autumn petal, but soon was recognisable as a hand-written note. It reached the dusty ground and lay there, unmoving.

William looked up for any other signs, but the Mothership was getting smaller to his eyes, which had nothing to do with his age or the need of spectacles.

Leaving?

Jesus, it was leaving!

“Wait!” He chased after the retreating alien craft, one hand in the air as though he was still a child convinced he could reach the moon with an outstretched palm. “Don’t go!”

It was gone.

Retreated into a shooting star in the black then nothing at all.

William hung his head like a chastised dog and kicked the dust back to where the note still lay upon the ground.

He bent and picked it up.

Looked like normal paper and a very neat hand had written the message.

Dear William,

Thank you for participating in this round of Interstellar Idol. Sadly our judges have decided not to allow your planet through to the next round. We appreciate your planet's entry, and we would like to ask you to apply again next year.

Yours

Quezeafldxxxgergock (Charles)

Talent Spotter – Interstellar Idol.

Figments

The cat, the dog and the bird weren't speaking to him. Which was odd. The last time Harold Dove had checked, he was still certifiably insane.

The certificate to prove his insanity took pride of place on the main wall. He'd spent days making the damn thing the last time they had him in the white padded room. And he used a whole box of colourful crayons too.

Not that any certificate mattered now, not with a house filled with silence and disapproving animals looking at him.

"Okay then, which one of your started all this?" he said, arranging his pets in a row, eyes front. "Is this some kind of strike? Did you form a union the last time I was out?"

The dog, the cat and the parrot remained mute.

"This is a non-union house. You all know that, don't you? I won't have union pets, no

sir, nothing but trouble when a Union is involved. Now, one of you speak up and tell me what's going on."

The dog, the cat and the parrot had nothing to say.

Harold shook his head disapprovingly.

How would you like it if I put up a kennel in the yard? No more sleeping at the foot of the bed for you."

The dog didn't move.

"And you, cat. That flap I fitted to the back door so you could come and go as you please. How would you like it if I'd boarded that up? No more coming and going as you please, no sir."

The cat didn't have a meow to give, not even a purr.

Harold moved onto that usually talkative, but now close-beaked of his pets, the Parrot.

"Well, you've got a cheek to call yourself a friend, a real cheek."

The parrot stirred, a quick preen of the feathers and a disgruntled look.

Harold threw up his arms.

“Well at least you’ll acknowledge me, unlike these two ingrates you’ve fallen in with.” Harold rubbed at his chin. “Maybe I should separate you three, is that what I should do? A little time on your own might get you in the talking mood.”

Only the parrot responded. It gave a shake of its tail feathers and opened its beak, then said nothing at all.

“Come on, spit it out now. If you’ve got something to say, then say it.”

The parrot shook its head like a spurned lover.

Harold got in closer, lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“Forget them,” he said, casting a sickened glance at the two silent pets to his left, “you know it’s always been me and you, pal. You

were the first. We're best buds, amigos, come on now, you can talk to me."

The parrot hopped forward and nestled its beak at Harold's shoulder.

"Bodies," the Parrot said in a whispering chirp.

"Bodies? What bodies?" Harold said, mirroring the whisper.

The parrot gestured to the two silent but still listening pets as if to say he didn't want them to hear any more.

Harold nodded. He offered his arm for the parrot to make a perch. Once the pet had hopped onto the offered arm, Harold whisked them both to the kitchen and closed the door behind.

"Go on, we can talk now, they won't hear," he said.

The parrot looked once at the door then hopped from its flesh and shirted perch to the tabletop. A few more nervous hops and it turned toward Harold.

“You know what I’m talking about,” it said in a patchwork imitation of other angry voices.

“I don’t, I really don’t. What bodies?”

“The ones you buried, Harold, the ones you buried.”

Harold blinked three times to clear his already confused head. He knew he was insane, there was the certificate after all, and only insane people talked to and were talked back at by animals. But in all his confused and odd days he couldn’t remember anything about burying bodies.

“I don’t recall any bodies,” Harold said.

The parrot shook its head.

“Thirty three, Harold. Thirty three of them at last count. Are you telling me you don’t remember?”

Harold mimicked the mimicking parrot and shook his head. He stared at the door and felt the silence beyond, and then like a particularly colourful crayon drawing, a revelation bloomed behind his eyes.

“That’s why you’re all giving me the silent treatment, isn’t it?” He roared.

In the absence of limbs and digits, the parrot waved a wing for quiet.

“Keep it down, you don’t know who might be listening.”

Harold threw up his arms.

“I don’t care whose listening. If those two ingrates out there want to give me the cold shoulder just because they think—‘

“Not them, someone else.” The parrot’s tone was an imitated concern, picked up from other conversations.

“What someone else?” he said, his voice lowering. “There’s only me, you and that dog and cat out there in this house, that’s all there’s ever been.”

“And the bodies.”

“What bodies? There never were any bodies? You’re just trying to make me lose my marbles.”

The parrot sighed a parrot sigh that was like a tape-recorded voice played a little too slowly.

“You’ve been marble-less for a long time now.”

Harold smiled. He waved his insane finger insanely.

“That’s as may be, but I never, not once, buried a body. Oh no, you won’t catch me out on that one, no sir. I may be twisted in the old brain, but I never not once—“

The parrot coughed, and following the cough it hopped onto the top of the refrigerator.

“What’s in here, Harold?” it said.

Harold shrugged.

“Food, what else would there be?”

“Milk and butter and eggs, salad maybe? That kind of thing?”

“What else would be in a fridge?” Harold said.

“Why don’t you take a look and tell me?” The parrot gestured toward the refrigerator handle with its beak.

“This is a trick, isn’t it? Something you cooked up with those two silent conspirators back there.”

“Take a look and you’ll see.”

“You’d like me to do that, wouldn’t you?”

“It would prove a point,” the parrot said.

Harold approached the refrigerator with a suspicious grin on his face, which wasn’t much different than every other grin he’d had, they all were of a twisted kind and interchangeable.

He reached a hand out, touched the silver handle on the door, and then paused.

“I know what’s going to happen,” he said.

“You do, well enlighten me then,” the parrot said.

“Simple, really. I open up that door and inside is one of those snakes inside a can

contraptions. I open up that door and I get a face full of snakes, that's what."

"Then you won't mind opening up the door, will you."

"It's not the snakes I mind so much," Harold said, his grip slipping from the handle, "it's the laughter."

The parrot peered over the edge of the refrigerator with a confused look upon his beak.

"What laughter?"

"Oh you know. You and those other two, that's all I'll hear for the next week. I can stand silence, but not you lot laughing at me every time I come into the room."

The parrot wore a serious look and shook its head to match.

"There'll be no laughter. I promise you. This isn't something that would make anybody laugh."

If this wasn't a trick, then what could it be? Nothing so bad could be contained within a fridge, could it? Nothing so terrible? Yet the

parrot's voice was as serious as if it had watched a twelve hour marathon of documentaries on the Second World War and was repeating the highlights.

No, it had to be a trick. And that's what the parrot was counting on, clever little bird that he was. He'd planned all this with the dog and cat. The whole silent treatment, the nonsense about bodies, all to make him jump when those damn rubber snakes exploded into his face.

He wouldn't give the parrot the satisfaction.

Harold ignored the sweat on his palm and yanked the refrigerator door open.

There were no exploding snakes.

But what he saw made him a shivering statue.

"No, can't be," he said, his voice as far away as if he were shouting from the bottom of a deep well. "Isn't real."

The parrot leaned over the edge, took a glance, then straightened up.

“Mrs. Wainwright. Number twenty-three, I believe,” he said.

Harold stepped back away from the refrigerator, expecting at any moment for Mrs. Wainwright, at least what was left of the woman, to jump out like those snakes he'd expected to be there.

“You picked her up at a village festival in the summer of ninety-eight. Her car broke down just outside the village and you...are you remembering any of this?” the parrot said.

The drawings weren't so colourful any longer. There were only a few crayons left in the box of his remembrance and they were all shades of grey. Behind his eyes a painting formed, a lonely road, a grey rain-soaked field, a man with a shovel digging the earth...a man...

Harold clasped his hand over his mouth to stop the fright from jumping out and taking his body with it.

“It's coming back to you, isn't it? You're remembering, aren't you?” the parrot said.

"I don't want to," Harold said, shaking his head and hoping he could get rid of the terrible images like a build-up of wax in his ears.

"Thirty-three, Harold. Thirty-three lives you took, and there's thirty-three bodies somewhere out there waiting for proper graves. Thirty-three families waiting to put their loved ones to rest."

Harold covered his eyes to try and block the light from giving life to the horror show now playing behind his eyes.

No use.

The theatre of the past played a marathon of movies with the same star in each and every one. The same mad grin affixed to the same mad face in the performance of mad actions. And that man was...

"Where are they, Harold? Where did you put them?" the parrot questioned.

He knew exactly where. The location of each and every body was as vivid in the theatre of his mind as was the parrot, the dog

and the cat. Blind he could have walked to each and every shallow grave, plastered over wall and lime drowned basement.

But what used would it do to tell of those dark tombs and hidden bodies now?

You couldn't undo the past, reverse time, or stop an insane hand after the action had been performed. There was no resurrection for the thirty-three dead, and nobody who would want to listen to Harold's forgotten confessions.

"Start with number one, Harold," the parrot said, "tell me and you'll feel better. I promise you'll feel better."

Harold's hands dropped slow like a curtain at the end of the main feature.

"It will?" he said.

"Guaranteed, hundred percent better."

"I won't see them anymore. The bodies?"

The parrot cocked its head.

"They'll all be gone. Vanished."

Hands shaking, Harold opened his similarly shaking mouth and began his purge.

“Number one was an old woman. Her name was Martha Thomas. I remember I—‘

A thunder shook the house and Harold’s slight grasp on reality.

“What was that?” he said, his eyes fixing on the door to the kitchen.

“Nothing, go on,” the parrot said, its voice rushed and panicked.

“No, I heard something. It came from—‘

The voice didn’t belong in the house, it came from the sky above, it seemed. The boiling roar of an angry and questioning God.

“Tell us where you hid the goddamn bodies you psycho! Tell us now!”

Harold played the three wise monkey’s trick and tried to cover eyes, mouth and ears at the same time. He scuttled away to the corner of the kitchen. There he found a comfortable rocking motion with which to block out any noise.

And there he stayed.

The strange and horrible movie marathon played behind his lids, watched by a single viewer, never to be repeated or reviewed.

“Six months!” Dr. Sanchez said, turning away from the two-way mirror that looked into the strange cell of Harold Dove. “Six months of hard work and you waltz in here and ruin it all with one sentence. Tell me, Detective, did you know anything about this case before you came out here?”

Detective Simon Branch had no defeat, surprise or guilt on his face.

“You’ll get him again, no fears,” he said. “I was just trying to speed this thing up.”

Dr. Sanchez blew out a sigh.

“All you’ve done is slowed everything down, you dolt! Do you understand how long it took us to get him to trust those animals? How long it took for us to convince him that they were talking to him?”

Detective Branch shrugged.

“So you’ll do it again,” he said.

“Not likely. You don’t know what kind of man we’re dealing with here. He’s unique, understand me? Jesus, you could write ten volumes on Harold Dove and still have material left over for another five.”

Detective Branch glanced at the two-way mirror and the padded cell beyond.

“He’s a nutjob,” he said, facing Sanchez, “just another whacko who thought he could go around killing people. Well we have him now, and we have all the time in the world. So you just get back to work doctor and we’ll find those bodies soon enough.”

Dr. Sanchez shook his head.

“It isn’t so simple.”

“Why?”

“Why? If you’d actually done your research, if you’d been here and watched instead of bursting in like some charging bull, you would have seen.”

“So I missed this drooling maniac drooling, big whoop.”

Dr. Sanchez shook his head in anger.

“No, Detective, you missed the breakthrough we had today. That parrot was the first of the pets that he actually opened up to. We nearly had him with the dog, better results with the cat, but the parrot was the one that cracked it.”

“So, he’ll talk again.”

Dr. Sanchez walked over to the window and looked into the padded cell decorated by the insane hands of Harold Dove. His sigh steamed the glass and obscured the strange world for a moment.

“No, Detective,” Dr. Sanchez said, “he won’t talk again. Not to the parrot.”

“So try something else,” Detective Branch said.

Dr. Sanchez wagged his head slowly, closed his eyes.

“We can’t.”

“Why?”

Dr. Sanchez ran through the alphabet of pets in his mind that he and the other doctors had tested over the last six months. Guinea pigs, rats, bunny rabbits and everything between. The dog, the cat and the parrot had been the magic combination. Perfect companions to Harold Dove’s crazy imagination.

“Because, Detective, there are no more pets to try,” Dr. Sanchez said.

Beyond the window, in the twisted world of Harold Dove, a sound made both the doctor and the detective turn.

It was a man’s voice, but a man mimicking an animal.

It sounded almost like a parrot being choked to death.

Suddenly September

"Have you heard?" Goldblum said.

Derrick Cavannah lifted his head from his inspection of the Tabulator and seeing only the annoyance that was his desk partner, refused speech in favour of shrugged shoulders.

"You're a man who doesn't get excited by much, aren't you, Cavannah? Here I am with earth-shattering news and all you can do is look at me like I'm some percentage deduction on a yearly tax statement."

Cavannah found his voice, and it was a calm and flat as a set of books always in the black. "What news?" he said.

"The Shakespeare Initiative, you dolt. Those bods in R&D are talking about pushing it out before September."

Cavannah let out a meagre sigh and turned back to his machine and the numbers there that were never surprising, that never

brought news, good or bad. Numbers were easy, they made sense, unlike Goldblum.

“Are you listening?” Goldblum said.

“I’m trying very hard not to.”

“Well you better listen up, Cavannah, because this is bad news, really bad news.”

Cavannah tried to focus on his machine and the comfortable numbers, but there was no hope.

Goldblum stuck his head over the desk separator.

“Twenty-two, does that number ringer a bell with you?” he said.

“Number of times I’ve wished you’d shut up this morning?”

“Funny, really funny. It’s the number of chartered accountants that used to work here until last summer, that’s what.”

“So you can count, maybe there’s hope for you yet.” Cavannah kept his eyes on the machine and the numbers, wishing, hoping that

he had invested in those ear plugs he'd seen a month before.

Goldblum would have made an impression on a deaf man.

He came around and settled himself on the desk, leaning in to obscure the Tabulator screen.

"Don't you see, Cavannah, we're for the chop," he said, miming a blade that slowly cut his throat.

Cavannah found himself wishing that the blade was real. And then when that beautiful fantasy had passed, he realised what was being said.

"Fired?" he said.

"What else would it be? They axed twenty of us last summer; it was only a matter of time before they replaced me and you."

"No," Cavannah said, shaking his head.

"No, are you so sure? Come on, these machines cut out twenty of our colleagues in one day. You don't think those same bods up

there stopped, did you? They're working on something else, something that'll make you and me redundant."

Cavannah stared at the machine before him. The great and confusing octopus armed, Christmas-tree lit beast was a gift from on high, or so the R&D bods had said. It could do the work of ten men easily. And so it had, two times over. But he didn't want to think that there would be something else, something more which would make him obsolete.

"How can you be sure about this, Goldblum?"

"The name, the goddamn name for starters."

"What about the name?"

"Shakespeare initiative...*initiative*...don't you remember what these beasts were code-named before all the layoffs?" Goldman pointed to the two machines on either side of the desk.

Cavannah had as good a memory as he had a grasp of mathematics. The first hint of the

Tabulator had come from a lowly office clerk who pushed around the rumour about a new project dubbed The Wordsworth Initiative. Twenty redundancies later and it wasn't so much a rumour.

"Damn," he said under his breath.

"Exactly, and that's what we're both going to be if this turns out anything like last time, damned. There isn't much work out there, if you bothered to look. And if they bring in a machine that can take us both out, then what do you think will happen next?"

"It won't be good, I'm guessing."

"Good? Of course not. If this new machine can replace us completely then there won't be any of us left. Not a single one. Everyone will buy the machine and that's that."

"What do we do then?"

Goldblum tutted. "Do? There's nothing we can do if this is on the horizon."

“So that’s it, we just wait? You said it was earth-shattering news and you’re just willing to stand there and watch it shatter?”

Goldblum dropped off the edge of the desk, walked around to the other side of his divider and picked up the daily newspaper from his desk. He held it in the air.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do, Cavannah, and what you should do.” Goldblum opened up the newspaper to the want ads. “Look for another job and pray you get one before September rolls around, that’s what.”

Goldblum disappeared behind that day’s printed calamities, leaving Cavannah all alone.

Alone and worried enough to forget the numbers on his screen.

September was a month away. Four short weeks and then it might be the end of him. He couldn’t go looking for a job at this age in life. He couldn’t start pounding pavements and handing out Resume’s like he was some sidewalk pamphleteer.

Too old for that now.

But old enough to know what he could do next.

He just hoped that it would lead somewhere other than a gold watch and a commemorative plaque for twenty-five years of service to the company.

The books, as ever, were neat. As neat as Cavannah had made sure they would be. But in every record, no matter its pristine nature, there were clues that only a Chartered Accountant would notice.

Three weeks of after-hours reading and he found his anomaly.

Porridge.

A metric ton of the stuff had been delivered to R&D in the last six months, and not, as he would have suspected, the canteens. Not that the canteen had ever offered anything but an

unsatisfying melange of unappetizing and indistinguishable pulp.

He asked the purchasing clerk about the order and that's when the pinball machine of visits began.

From purchasing to requisition, requisition to budgets, budgets to the warehouse manager and back again, nobody seemed to know why or what the porridge was needed for, only that R&D had made the order and rushed it through.

What the hell were the bods working on in their secret strip-lighted underground caves? What new and octopi-armed machine would take his place and that of Goldblum? Maybe he was just being dragged along on a ride that would lead nowhere?

No, there was definitely something going on. In the grey corridors and the grey offices of the company the grey-suited managers talked in whispers as he passed. He half expected the shout of "Dead Man Walking" to come from their lips.

But he was no dead man walking, he was still very much alive, and like every good accountant he needed to know what was coming next. You couldn't calculate anything without a good sense of what number might follow the one that came before.

Three days before the season of September began Cavannah tightened his top button, straightened his tie and took the elevator to the secret cave of the R&D bods.

This would either lead to nothing or something he didn't want to know.

Either way he was making the journey.

The doors whispered open onto an unlit space as vast as the reaches of space.

Cavannah stepped into that empty gravity and felt himself pulled into the orbit of a voice.

"Savannah, isn't it? Lightman, Frank Lightman, head of Research."

A man emerged from the darkness like an exploding star. He wore a white lab coat, a shock of red comet trail hair blazed from the empty and shining crater of his skull. He offered a blue-gloved hand.

Cavannah shook it.

"It's Cavannah," he said.

"Yes, yes," he said, "Cavannah, that's the ticket. You're senior accountant, working with the Tabulators aren't you?"

Cavannah nodded, but there was no time for words.

Lightman wrapped an arm around Cavanah's shoulders and guided him towards a fresh light that had grown in the darkness. Under that light a bank of machines and screens and other contraptions blinked in an irritated rhythm. And around those irritated lights were the irritated, white-coated insect men who checked and deciphered those strange blinking rhythms.

“I was about to ask you to come down here,” Lightman said, “see what we’ve cooked up.”

“Cooked up?”

“Oh yes, as Senior Accountant you’ll be the one in charge when we go live with Shakespeare Initiative.”

“I will?”

Lightman pushed him down into a seat before a screen that had come to life.

“Take a look.”

On the screen a chimpanzee sat behind a desk. On the desk was a smaller, less-tentacled version of the Tabulator.

“What am I looking at?”

“Four years hard work, that’s what.”

“A chimpanzee, what has that got to do with—“

“You ever hear that saying about if you give a chimp a typewriter it’ll eventually write the complete works of Shakespeare?”

He had heard, but being a man of numbers and good memory, he couldn't help but correct the quote.

"If I recall, it's an infinite number of monkeys with an infinite number of typewriters and they will eventually write the complete works of Shakespeare. But I don't see how—"

"Monkeys were too volatile, that's why we turned to chimps. But the rationale is the same."

"The rationale behind what?"

"Watch," Lightman said and reached forward to press a button that amplified his speech into the unknown room and to the ears of the monkey that waited there. "Giggles, could you please begin."

Cavannah watched on in dumb amazement as the monkey placed a pair of pince-nez upon its nose and then began the work that Cavanaugh had done so many times before.

"Is that monkey really...is it..."

“Tax returns for one of our research assistants, yes,” Lightman said with pride.

“Wait,” Cavannah said, standing up, “are you telling me you’re replacing Goldblum with this monkey?”

Lightman chuckled. “Of course not. There’s no way one chimp could do the work that Goldblum and yourself accomplish with the Tabulators.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

Lightman flicked a switch and the chimp accountant’s image faded from view.

“What I’m doing is offering you a very lucrative position.”

“Doing what, fetching bananas?”

“No, we’ve found that a rich GM modified porridge is the best food for what we have planned.”

“And that is?”

“Well we could never have hoped to get the complete works of Shakespeare out of a chimp, that’s just impossible. But we found, through

some training and careful behaviour modification, that we could teach them to do accounts.”

Cavannah felt like he'd been slapped in the face, twice.

“Them? And what are you saying that accountants are on the same level of chimps?”

“Of course not. Giggles here we rescued from a Russian zoo and, like the rest we modified the gene structure of his brain to favour numbers. It's exactly what we did with the rest.”

“The rest? There's more?”

“Yes, and that's what you'll be in charge of, Cavannah, you'll be the mentor to our chimp accountants. You'll be the one who teaches them the rudimentary basics of accounting. Double your pay grade too.”

He didn't want to sit down, but his legs wouldn't keep him standing any longer.

Cavannah crumpled into the seat and shook his confused head.

“This is all too incredible.”

“And profitable too. The cost of our chimps is a fraction of one Tabulator and the man to run it, and that’s including the porridge. So what do you say? Would you like the job or not?”

Cavannah had to think.

But he didn’t have much time to do that.

Not much time at all.

Suddenly it was September.

All the months and days leading up to that morning were gone, it seemed, in the blink of an eye or how long it took a monkey to balance the accounts on a one income, no mortgage household.

Cavannah stepped into the room where he would now be the ringmaster to a horde of trained apes and their machines.

He cleared his throat.

He pressed the button.

The warehouse-cum-offices of the chimp accountant employees came to light.

This was all wrong, but having a job was better than having no job at all. There was only one upside Cavannah could see.

“Begin,” he said and a thousand intelligent chimps ran to their desks where the company’s accounts were waiting in neatly stacked piles.

One upside.

Chimps hammering the keys of miniature tabulation machines were a far sight better than Goldblum talking to him over the desk partition.

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