



Small Victories

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Published: 2009

Tag(s): "short story" "quick read" "Creative Commons" supernatural "science fiction" fantasy horror weird

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I Burn Today

“You have been sanctioned for the use of emotional language, radical proposal and, most damaging of all, Mr. Kurtz, treason.”

Kurtz, hands chafed from the cuffs, for the first time in his life could not find words. A hundred thousand nights before he had no trouble. They came from him as water from the fall, a river meeting its eventual fate.

And now?

“Nothing to say, Mr. Kurtz?” The man behind the desk wore the uniform of a system that Kurtz had described plenty of times before. He had seen only rain and the most miserable winter morning in that uniform. Only winter in the faces of the Ministerial Officers.

Was that his crime? To speak of them as winter men? To assign them the coldest season by way of description?

Still no words, a speaker's block created by disbelief. What possibly could they object to in his writings? What crimes were there in talking of love and life and silver linings? Could there be a crime in honesty?

"The offending texts in question are: *The House of Birds*, *So the Tarot Woman Says* and *In Old Paris*. These are your works, are they not?"

He could no more ignore he was their creator than reject a child.

"They are mine," he said, and in admission he remembered the inspiration for each. Love, Hope and Nostalgia. Each a personal moment in time, captured by another moment in words. There, in the black-and-white rooms of the Ministry he was for a moment caught in the blue-eyes of a woman once loved, a future once hoped for and a time he longed to experience. Precious moments put down so that everyone might feel a little of what he had felt.

The clicking of fingers brought Kurtz from his remembering.

"Eyes front, Mr. Kurtz," the official said, "we'll have no daydreaming here. You're facing serious charges, you do understand what is happening here, don't you?"

Kurtz wagged his head "no".

"You don't?" the official said.

"What crimes have I committed? What did I do?"

The official cleared this throat. He tapped and brought to life Kurtz's words on the screen so that both could see. But the words were not left to that silent voice within the head, now they were flattened, made sour by the toneless voice of the Ministry Man.

"And I quote: *"Her blue eyes were Earth seen from the deepest black, her love stronger than gravity, she pulled me close to her orbit in the following days."* Now, I'm no reader, have no time for anything much more than my daily reports, but you can't deny the language used here is unsanctioned. Do you deny the accusation?"

He could not deny the love, for it was real, and the words had made it all the more real.

"Further to that, Mr. Kurtz, this sentence does not conform to the reading level set by the Ministry. You do understand we have a maximum reading age, do you not, all artists were informed by mandate."

Mandates, bulletins, how was he supposed to take notice of the rules when his fingers itched to type, his brain swelled with words. Pressure had to be relieved, the tap turned on, and their mandates only served as a plug.

"Let us move on, shall we?" And without agreement, the Ministry Man waved his hand and more text appeared behind him. He read from it as though going through the items on a shopping list. *"The future, Ardiss often thought, was only a matter of waiting for the weather to clear. One day the rains would stop, and with it the rain men would wash away into the gutters, forgotten under the glare of the returning sun."* The Man from the Ministry eyed Kurtz. "Now, what is that supposed to mean?"

"It's up to you," Kurtz said.

The Man from the Ministry placed a hand over where there might be a heart.

“Up to *me*?”

“To the reader,” Kurtz corrected himself.

“But what was *your* intent, Mr. Kurtz? A man does not simply write such a thing and not mean anything by it.”

How could he explain the flow of a river, the beating of a heart to a man who had not been caught in the tide or listened to the drum inside his ears? There was no floor plan, no map to desire and inspiration. There was only a moment of clarity, brightness, the sun coming through the clouds and then... typing.

There was only the stopping of time and the stretching of time. There was only the voices and the desires, the telepathy of fingers. None of this would make sense to the Ministry Man.

“The intent was to tell a story,” Kurtz said.

“A story, I’m told, that advocates the eradication of the Ministry, as do most of your works.

Are you a good citizen, Mr. Kurtz? Would a good citizen propose such radical ideas?"

"I don't propose anything."

"The report is here before my very eyes, and I quote *"The distinct aim of Kurtz's work is to foster a dissatisfaction with the rule of law. Kurtz's output regularly offers a path divergent from Ministerial justice. Further it suggests the building of a community outside of Ministerial Jurisprudence. This work is classified T-Alpha. Any and all actions to suppress this material is warranted."*

It was all so clinical and cold. Winter words from winter men who would never understand. Despite this, Kurtz could not help the summer words that came from his lips.

"I've had worse reviews," he said.

"I very much doubt it could get any worse, Mr. Kurtz. Shall we continue?"

"I still don't know what I'm accused of," Kurtz said.

“That will become clear soon enough. We’ll move on to the third infraction. Your novel *In Old Paris*, how would you describe this work?”

Fantasy, Kurtz wanted to say. Longing, nostalgia for a time and a place he could not visit but so dearly wanted to. From mind through fingers he had conjured himself to walk the *Left Bank* with long dead artists, clap hands in the smoky *Beat* cellars with long dead musicians, climb *La Tour Eiffel* and from the top of that grand and long lost monument shout his love for the imagined city. On the pages, in his mind, he had fallen in love with a woman who was that city. A woman who was the *Seine* and *Eiffel* and the music all at once.

He could still remember her now, that imagined creature, a girl in a red dress in a summer that was forever bright in a city that still existed. He could smell her perfume, a thousand-roses strong. Hear her voice, a gentle symphony. Her smile, summer sunshine.

How to describe then, everything that the book meant and brought back to him in a moment?

"It's a love story," he said.

"No," the Ministry Man said, "it is not. It is by classification considered non-classified by our standards. For one, the tense is incorrect."

"How so?"

The Ministry Man smiled and it was a tear in the cloud letting through the sun for a moment.

"You know very well, all scribes know that only Present Tense is allowed."

"And why is that?"

The Ministry Man passed his hand over the words and silenced them, obliterating the past in one swoop.

"The past, Mr. Kurtz, we, none of us need to know of the past. And to think of the future is as much a trouble. The present is all that matters. The here, the now. *As it is, so shall it be.* Have you forgotten the Ministerial Motto?"

Kurtz became the child of another time, his words simple and direct.

"Why?"

"Seriously, you ask me this question?"

"I do."

"Because, Mr. Kurtz, to think of the past is to pause, is to be unproductive. To think of the future invites dreams, the wrong kind of dreams. We must be in the now, always, if our society is to remain strong. *As it is, so shall it be.*"

They were mandate words, rules that Kurtz could not follow. There was always a past for Kurtz, and always the future. The now only a midpoint between one and the other.

To ignore the past was to forget love, to deny memory. To lose his thoughts of the future was to lose hope.

Even now in the black-and-white office with Ministry Man, Kurtz had not lost that hope and love. There was always a way, always a new story to tell, despite all mandates and sanctions.

“What do you think of all this?” he said.
“What’s your story?”

“I have none. I am an instrument of the law. A protector of the official mandate. You’d best heed that, Mr. Kurtz, for I am the one who will decide your punishment.”

“And that punishment?”

His face did not change as he spoke, there was no weight in the Ministry Man’s words as he gave his final decree.

He stood straight, not needing to see the screens, the verdict memorised.

“On the count of ignoring official mandate in the production of text and fictive works, the making available of such texts for no profit, and the sharing of those texts on non-sanctioned channels, you are hereby found guilty. Mandatory erasure of all authored works from the national database and any works that may point to those aforementioned is to be undertaken immediately by the Keepers of the Public Records.”

Kurtz swallowed hard, he felt a lifetime in the motion. Every late night spent in joy or

frustration, every imagined world or woman, it would all be gone in the push of a button.

"I won't exist anymore, not anywhere?" Kurtz said.

"Only within the official Ministerial Records. There will be no public record of your works. Shall we move on to the second charge?"

"There's more? isn't that enough? To take my life's work and just... make it disappear?"

The Ministry Man did not look Kurtz in the eye as he continued.

"On the second count of treason and incitement to rebellion, you are hereby found guilty. You will, at a time of our choosing, be redacted from the greater populace. Your body will be recycled as per Ministry Mandates, and all database records will be expunged. Further to this you are allowed to present one final statement of guilt or innocence, which will be duly noted in the internal manifesto but not viewable in the public domain. You will be allowed a meal of your choice before your redaction, and to contact one member of your family." The Ministry

Man turned now to Kurtz. "Is there any person that I might contact, Mr. Kurtz?"

Redacted, the word chilled Kurtz's mind. It was a word that covered so much, a word as cold as the man who spoke it.

But Kurtz knew the true meaning of the word.
Death.

Simple.

They would kill him for loving and hoping and sharing that love and hope with others. They would erase him from the world he had dared to imagine differently. Gone, without any past or any thought of a future.

In the absence of family, Kurtz had a question.

"How?" he said.

"How?"

"How will I be killed?"

The Ministry Man held up a finger.
"Correction. Redacted, Mr. Kurtz, redacted."

"How will I be redacted?"

The Ministry Man cleared his throat, stared straight ahead and without any hesitation, spoke.

“You will be taken to Ministerial Chambers and there, at a preordained time, incinerated by our technicians. Any more questions?”

Kurtz was lost for words.

His writer's block continued as they ushered him into the tiny cell at the end of a corridor that buzzed with the insect song of strip lights.

Inside he could think of nothing but fires and burning and the past, not the future.

There was no future now. He was left only with a tablet, his frozen fingers, and his thoughts.

They could not take those away, not yet.

He recalled history, seeped in black and white, where words and pages danced in hateful fires. He recalled the smiling faces of children as they threw books upon those fires. The

glee as they tried to do what the Ministry Men could do with a push of a button.

The fires no longer needed stoking, the flames were digital and odourless, unseen by all except Kurtz and the Ministry Men.

Tomorrow he would be a memory in the minds of those who accessed the grand Ministerial Channel. A week from now a vague recollection. Within the year, most would have forgotten him completely.

No need to burn the book any longer. Push a button. Burn the body. It was all so simple and clean.

Nothing left but ashes in the wind and an amnesia that none knew existed.

Kurtz stood, as he has stood so many nights before. He paced, as he had paced out the imagined lands of his stories. He stopped, as he had stopped so many times before when inspiration struck.

This time it was a lightning bolt.

Kurtz sat, his fingers were a thunder upon the slick membrane of the tablet. His ideas a fire a thousand times greater than any to burn books or bones with.

A last stand.

A last memory.

The final story.

If they wanted confession, confession they would have. The confession of a life lived in passions, in glory and joy. A life of words and love and hope. If all that was to be left of him in this life was an unread, inaccessible document within the Ministerial Records then he would make it count.

Tomorrow he would burn.

Tonight he would do the same.

They came for him at dawn and found him weeping and smiling at the same time.

They dressed him in kindling clothes of the deepest grey, then marched him to the chambers of fire.

Before a shaft of blue flame they made him stand with the Ministry Man at his side.

"It's time, Mr. Kurtz," he said, "did you make a confession?"

The smile upon his face was hotter than any flame they would touch him with.

"I did."

"You accept then the judgement placed upon you?" The Ministry Man's voice rose with suspicion.

"I understand," Kurtz said. "I understand everything now."

"Do you have any final words before we carry out the sentence?"

Kurtz searched his tired, exhausted mind, but in the hours before dawn he had used every word, talked of every love, told of every past and possible future. In those true-burning hours he had walked again in his beloved and imagined Paris. He had smelled, heard, touched and kissed a woman in a red dress. Travelled beyond this time and this morning to lands

absent of rain. Lands where the clouds never obscured the sun, where men were never burned for their passions.

All those words, all those imaginings, now Kurtz only had one final thing to say before he was extinguished from this life and the lives of everyone else.

"Read," he said.

"Read?" The Ministry Man parroted.

"Read. Anything, everything. Read. Fall in love, fall out again. Think of the future, the past, do not accept the present."

The Ministry Man drew his hand cleanly across the air before his throat.

Somewhere within the fire chambers a recording device stopped listening.

"Clever, Mr. Kurtz, very clever. But you know that none of this will ever reach the public's ear. What you say, what you were and what you did, after this morning, it never existed."

"I know," Kurtz said, but there was no sadness in his voice.

For he had lived and loved and he'd seen the past and the future. And for those glorious moments, when the world as it was had faded away to nothing but the steady rain of his fingers upon the shimmering waters of a tablet, he had truly known what it was to be alive.

The Ministry Men would never know that feeling.

Theirs would always be a life lived in the now, with no hope and no love and no future but what was written in mandate, sanctified by law.

He felt sorry for them.

And most of all, hopeful.

"You're smiling, Mr. Kurtz?" The Ministry Man said, puzzled.

"I am."

"Why?"

Kurtz eyed the Ministry Man.

"One day you might be lucky enough to know."

“Lucky? What does that word mean?” The Ministry Man said.

“If you’re lucky, one day you’ll know,” Kurtz said.

“Okay, enough of this stalling. It’s time to carry out the sentence, Mr. Kurtz.” The Ministry Man held a hand into the air.

From behind the blue flames the technician’s emerged. Hooded, their black expressionless mirror-faces reflected Kurtz’s ever-growing smile.

They grabbed him and he did not resist. To the steady drumbeat of the Ministry Man’s voice, he was walked towards his end.

“By order of the Ministry, upon this day citizen Alfred J Kurtz will be redacted from the Public Records. All history and works shall be rescinded and any deep links removed. *As it is, so shall it be.*”

For a moment the flames burned bright orange, then, finally, the turned to blue.

Outside the rain poured steadily upon a world that was how it was supposed to be. A world that had not changed since the redaction of Alfred J Kurtz. A world that no longer knew of his existence.

The Ministry Man sat down at his access screen and, with dutiful movements, brought up the reports from that morning.

As it is, so shall it be.

But that morning something had changed. The weather perhaps? Was there a hint of sunshine in the downpour?

No.

The document that appeared before the Ministry Man had a strange title, devoid of numbers and classification. Missing the clean and clear speech he was used to.

He read.

I Burn Today.

He read on.

by Alfred J Kurtz.

He continued to read.

An hour later, wet and shaking with tears, the Ministry Man remembered a man with the same name. A smiling man pushed into blue fire. A man who had spoken a word to him that he did not understand.

Suddenly he was thinking of the past and the possibility of a future. His mind teaming with the world imagined upon the page. Confused by the rush of emotion that had grabbed him.

A single word rose to the surface of his mind. A word that before this day, this morning, he had not understood.

Lucky.

Now he knew the meaning of that word.

Wild Honey

There was no summer without the fear. And without that fear the grass just didn't seem as green, the sun not so bright, the smell of a flower not so enticing.

Well what was summer without bees? Without running for his life? Without that first faint buzz, the bright yellow and black stripes that to most was inconvenience, and to Tom Farrelly as threatening as the hangman's noose.

Nobody knew why they were gone. In faraway places, in sterile white rooms, doctors and scientists had theorised, dissected and written formulas. Some said disease, one that they could not find or locate. Others blamed the warming planet, melting polar ice caps and the nearness of the sun.

In fevers, waking from dreams where he could hear the buzz of wings, Tom had read all the theories, searching for answers. And then

one fine morning when the first flowers had opened he came up with a plan of his own.

“You know that you could be considered quite insane?” his wife Lisa said from the back steps. “Tell me again why you’re doing this?”

Dressed in the finest second-hand astronaut looking bee-keeper costume he could find, Tom stood a few feet from the cobbled together hive, that was part dog-house and yard gate.

“Why?” he said, his voice a buzz through the front mesh of the suit. “Because you can’t have a summer without bees that’s why. Don’t you even miss them?”

Lisa shrugged, taking her folded arms with her in the movement.

“I tell you what I don’t miss, rolling up newspapers trying to swat those damn things. And I quite like being able to sit in the garden without having to worry that one of them has drowned in my tea.”

Tom sighed inside the costume.

Why had he expected her to understand? Everybody else was the same, whoever you asked, they didn't notice that summer wasn't summer any longer. Too busy tanning themselves and drinking lemonade to care.

"Don't you see how crazy this is?" Lisa said. "What happens if you do actually get one of those things to come into your hive, huh? And what if one of those bees stings you. What if I'm not around to take you to the hospital, did you think about that?"

He'd thought, he'd done nothing but think over the last few years.

All his life he'd run from the sound, terrified, but now it was gone he missed those summer runs. This season couldn't be called a season without the annual sprints, winding up exhausted in the house, checking windows to see if they were locked.

"It's worth the risk," he said.

"Oh it's worth it is it? Will you be saying that once you're in the ambulance and you can't breath?"

"I bought the suit didn't I? I'm being careful."

"You're being crazy."

"You won't be saying that when you hear them coming, when you—"

She was gone, the backdoor flapping like wings in her wake.

Tom turned back to his makeshift hive.

There was no movement inside, no matter how many times he checked. The honeycombs were empty. Where there should have been a teeming throng of life, there was nothing but stillness.

I did it all correctly. I checked the books, made sure, he thought. And three weeks in there's nothing.

Maybe I am crazy. Nobody else in the world has an answer to this problem, nobody else can make them stop dying, and here I am building my wishes with old wood thinking I might solve the problem.

But it wasn't just summer that Tom had on his mind.

What if this spread? What if spring birds stopped singing, what if dogs no longer barked on the long autumn nights? What if there were no more seasons? How could any man mark his time when he had nothing in front and nothing behind. Pigeons needed landmarks to guide themselves home, and men needed seasons, he believed.

Days passed, grew longer. The nights cooled and before he knew what had happened, he saw a leaf drop, burned gold.

Summer was almost gone. He thought he could smell burning leaves in the air, and mornings were colder, they pinched at his cheeks.

Still no bees.

And then one midnight, too far from sleep and not close enough to waking, he heard the sound.

At first he thought of rain tapping gently against the window panes.

But this was not rain.

Out of bed he ran to the garden without his astronaut suit, and stepped out onto the cool moon touched surface of the lawn.

He saw first one, then a second shadow. A brief flicker of something out there in the night.

Did bees fly at night, he thought? Could they? Did they sleep?

He had read the books and then forgotten in the wake of his disappointment. Now he wasn't sure one way or the other. But that sound, he knew that sound now he was so close.

Bzzz.

And more, added to the first and the second. They came from the cloudless ink of the night sky, a cloud of their own forming.

Tom's heart beat as fast as any wing. Tears shined his eyes. He wanted to run forward and embrace that sound, take it into him.

He took a step forward.

Froze.

Tom crossed his eyes to see the fat black-and-yellow insect sat on the end of his nose.

She was right all along when she'd said he was crazy. He'd wished for his own death, and now it was here, twitching at the end of his nose.

He wanted to cry out his wife's name, but dared not open his mouth.

Would it sting? He had read, or maybe he had known, that running was the worst plan when faced with a bee. But he could not deny the memory in his muscles. They ached for flight not stillness.

And he dared not blow at the thing. They had been gone too many summers, but that didn't mean they didn't have the same memory in their bodies as him. They would remember earlier attacks, rolled newspapers and chemical sprays.

Had they come back for revenge, he wondered, his mind in a panic? Stayed away only to return for vengeance when everyone had relaxed and stopped covering their drinks?

The bee gave a shrug of its wings, and then he was sure it gave him a pitiable stare before it jumped off his nose and took off into the night.

It took him too long to thaw his frozen body. The bees buzzed, filled the night with their song.

He lock stepped backward into the house, closed every window he could find and then watched them from the window, those magnificent summer beasts come late in the season.

Beautiful, but there was one last thing to do.

Weeks later, out in the garden he scraped the honey from the comb into a jar, and like the astronaut he'd become, he returned to the house one heavy step after another.

He sat, waiting, the jar of wild honey on the table before him, until his wife returned.

"A present," he said, sliding the jar across to her as she sat down.

"This doesn't mean you're not still crazy," she said, dipping her finger into the thick gooey

liquid. She sucked the end of her finger. "It's good."

"The best," he said, his smile too big.

"Doesn't change anything though," she said, pushing the honey back toward him.

"What do you mean?"

She pointed to the window and the buzzing garden beyond.

"They're out there, but nowhere else, haven't you noticed that? Go to the park, anywhere there's flowers and there's not a bee in sight. What happens if they leave again and don't come back again?"

"Maybe this is just the beginning of their return," he said, hope in his voice.

"And we have bees in the middle of the autumn. It isn't summer any more, Tom. No matter how much you want it to be."

His smile faded, and so did Tom in the chair, paling with the realisation she had brought.

Summer had returned for him, but not anyone else. There were flowers heavy with pollen all

over the world, honeycombs without the honey, children never stung. Was this just a momentary reprieve? Next summer would it be the same, or would the parks and gardens be silent once more?

He pulled the jar toward himself and dipped a finger inside.

He ran the sweet liquid over his lips, tasted with his tongue.

Wild honey tasted better than any manufactured, chemical laced, test-tube grown concoction on the store shelves. But it was a taste that soon might be forgotten like the seasons, like the fear.

He stood.

“Where are you going?” Lisa said.

He walked to the back door and undid the latch, then faced her.

“If you’re right, then I’ve got to get the most out of this, don’t I?”

“I don’t get what you’re driving at?”

Tom swung the door wide. He stepped out into the garden and watched the buzzing hive. Soon one of those black ink dots peeled away from the stain and came toward him.

This was it.

The season was coloured orange and brown, burning leaves took the place of fresh cut grass, but he would have one last summer if it killed him.

As the bee got closer, Tom turned and ran.

He ran until he hit the bathroom, where, heart pounding in his chest, hands flailing, he locked himself inside.

The bee buzzed outside and settled on the window, waiting.

Tom laughed and cried.

He had his summer, but would there be any to follow? Would there be any for his children or their children on down the line? Once the bees were gone, what would follow, what desolate unseasonable landscape would be left behind?

"Tom? Are you in there?" Lisa said.

Her shadow grew across the window.

"It's okay," she said. "I'll get rid of it for you."

The shadow grew an arm, and that arm was rolled death.

Tom leapt forward, his hand reaching for the door as Lisa brought the newspaper down upon the bee.

"There, all taken care of, you can come out now," she said.

Her shadow retreated.

The buzzing stopped.

There was nothing left on the glass but a full stop where the bee had once been.

In the Wind

"I'm falling apart," Jeremy said as he stood on the porch and watched the wind pushing hard against the trees.

His wife, Rachel nestled her head against his chest.

"You feel solid enough," she said.

He stared at the black trees as they shook and swayed.

He was solid, for now, but there was something about that wind. How long had it been around now? Four days, maybe a whole week? And each night worse. Each night a new tree fallen, a new gap carved in the line, the horizon pushing through beyond.

And he?

He'd taken to checking his hands for the right number of digits. Running those digits through his hair to check what was left was still left.

"Feels wrong, like... " Jeremy said, but he couldn't figure just what this was like.

"It's just the wind," Rachel said, "bad weather is all."

"Something else," he said.

"Like what?"

He dipped his chin to his chest and looked down at her.

She was solid. Five feet of solid woman who would defy any tornado or tsunami. Sometimes he wondered if she wasn't a statue that had come to life? Only a statue could stand so much and not crumble.

So what was he if Rachel was made of stone?

He was paper, easily rustled, blown away.

Especially now.

But it was stupid to think that this wind would do anything but fell the weaker trees. A man, inside a house could not be felled so easily, could he? A man was not a tree, not even when he considered himself no stronger than paper.

"What's worrying you?" she said, looking up into his eyes.

"Everything and nothing," he said.

"That's no answer."

And she was right, as always. Maybe it was getting older, maybe it was the season, but mostly it was that wind and how it made him feel.

"I don't have any better answer yet," he said.

"You're just getting that, what's it called, a mid-life crisis that's it."

"You think?" he said, with some hope in his voice.

"Maybe, yes. What is it, you're looking back wondering about all that happened and if it'll ever happen again?"

He hadn't thought much about looking back, but maybe she was right.

Yes, that would make sense. A mid-life crisis was better than thinking the wind might blow him away like a stray leaf.

"Yes," he said. "I think you're onto something there. Looking back, that's what I'm doing. Remembering how it used to be."

"It's not bad now though, is it?" she asked.

"No, no, it isn't that," he said.

But maybe it was?

There'd been a time when the wind hadn't bothered him. When he'd come out onto this porch in gales and smiled as those trees were picked and tossed by their roots.

There was a time, yes, he remembered now, when he was happier. When every day had been a pleasure on waking. When he'd... when he'd whistled?

Whistled?

Did I whistle, was that what I did? I wonder why?

"Rachel?" he said.

"Yes."

"Do you remember me whistling?"

"Are you serious?" she said, smiling at him.

"Yes, did I used to whistle?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course you did, you still do, from time to time."

"But not all the time, right?"

She slapped him playfully on the chest. "First you're falling apart, now you're asking me about whistling. This is the strangest mid-life crisis I ever heard about. Usually men your age buy a new car."

"I don't think a car would help me," he said.

"We can't afford one anyway."

"But whistling, yes," he said and stepped down off the porch. "I think I'm onto something here."

She followed him down, her arms folded.

"Whistling?" she said.

He grabbed her by the elbows, and face as happy as a child he said; "Yes, whistling. I remember back when we first moved out here. I'd wake up and before too long I'd be whistling. That old me used to whistle all the time."

She eyed him suspiciously.

"So what are you saying, Jeremy?"

"I'm saying maybe I should start again. Maybe that's what's missing. Just a simple tune now and again. Might do me the world of good."

"And you wouldn't be falling apart anymore?"

He turned to the sky.

He felt for a moment tree-like, pushed and pulled by the winds. His body rustling like autumn leaves shaking their way toward winter.

Was he an autumn man who might never reach that winter?

No, he thought. I've got to go back, find that song that was always on my lips and this feeling will go away. I've got to go back, purse my lips and find an old tune worth the whistling.

"Jeremy?" Rachel said from behind. "It's getting late, why don't we take this inside."

He glanced at the sky, the black trees dancing before the horizon.

No, he would not be felled, not now, not when he had an answer.

He pursed his lips.

"Jeremy? Come on, it's getting cold out here," Rachel said. "Stop this foolishness."

Jeremy stopped the tune before it came. When Rachel wanted something, she usually got it.

He would wait till the morning. One more night wouldn't hurt.

"Coming," he said.

The house rattled Jeremy awake.

Windows were open, shaking under the blow. And so was he.

He stared at his hands in the darkness.

They shook as if caught in a gale. They shook and they rattled and...

Jeremy jumped out of the bed and took himself out under the landing light.

Dear God, it was happening, it was really happening!

He was an autumn man and the leaves were falling, the leaves were falling!

The skin peeled, dropped, and swirled around him.

He held his hands in the air. But they weren't hands now. In a twist of gold and brown he was stripped down to bones.

He tried a scream, but there was no sound.

From the landing to the bathroom he ran and there in the mirror watched as autumn passed quickly to that season of snow that lay beneath all flesh.

No lips to purse.

No whistle to save him from this terrible fate.

This couldn't be happening. What he'd felt out there on the porch was a feeling, not a reality. A man couldn't just fall apart, that wasn't right.

But here was a man doing just that.

A man quickly becoming nothing.

He dragged what was left back toward the bedroom and his sleeping wife.

He tried to reach out, but there was nothing left to reach with. His arms were gone now, blown away on the cruel wind.

And now that wind rattled the house.

It came inside for him, one last gust to blow him from this world.

No, Jeremy thought. No, not like this, I won't leave this world.

With the last of his sight he looked down upon his sleeping wife and wished her awake.

Please, Rachel, open your eyes, see what is happening. Be a stone where I can cling, where I can become a man again.

The wind pushed in, heading toward him.

Rachel's eyes fluttered and fluttered some more.

But he could no longer see her eyes with his own. No longer watch her sleeping, no longer...

No longer... .

He wanted to cry, but everything had been taken from him now. He was no longer a man.

The wind swaddled him, lifted him upward and out into the night.

Toward the trees, the black trees straining under the push of him and the pull of the earth.

Why, he wondered?

But there were no answers.

Just the wind.

The wind.

No, I have to do something. I might be gone, nothing but the wind in the trees, but wind can knock a building down, wind can turn a man's head and make him shiver. Could it also make a sound?

The whistle!

If he moved just right, if he found the right angle he could, possibly, maybe... .

He was nothing more than will now, but he turned and hit the trees hard.

And those black silhouettes trapped him, pocketed him as he passed.

Yes, yes it was working!

If he hit them just right the sound could be heard. He could make vocal chords out of leafless branches.

Jeremy twisted, he turned, fast, hard.

And there it was. The sound, the song.

The trees whistled for him.

They whistled and old and familiar tune from a time in the past when he'd woken in the morning and been a happier man.

And then there was new sound, familiar, he'd heard it so many times on waking that it was like his own voice.

Only this was much sweeter.

"Jeremy, is that you?" Rachel called out.

Yes, yes, it's me!

He pushed through the trees and whistled that old and familiar tune.

"Where are you? Jeremy, stop this silly game and get back to bed right now!" He could not see, but he could hear her. And although she was chastising him it was like hearing angel harps.

If I could just make a word, a phrase, something other than this whistle, he thought.

He turned.

He twisted.

But the trees were nothing but the echo chamber for his movement. No words here in the middle of the night, unless they belonged to Rachel.

"I mean it Jeremy, this has gone beyond a joke. I won't stand you playing these silly games any longer."

I'm not, Rachel! Oh, God. Please. Rachel, just hear me will you. I need you. I need you to help me.

He twisted, he turned, but there was nothing but a whistle in the trees. Nothing but that familiar song he'd once peppered better mornings with.

"That's it," Rachel said, "I'm going back to bed. You can join me when you've stopped this foolishness."

No. Please don't go. Can't you see, can't you hear what's happening here? I've fallen apart, Rachel. Really, I've fallen apart. I need you to be there, need you to be there for me and bring me back somehow.

"One last chance, Jeremy," she shouted. "I'll count to five and if you don't come out from wherever it is you're hiding, I'll march right back to bed without you."

Hear me, help me, he thought.

"One," she said.

Oh, Rachel. You were always the strong one. Always.

"Two," she said.

Be strong for me now. Please be strong.

"Three."

Hear me, Rachel. I need you now more than ever.

"Four."

Rachel!

"Five. That's it. I'm telling you now, you're going to come back to bed and forget all this foolishness that you've been up to lately. Do you hear me, Jeremy? Back to bed and forget this nonsense right now."

Oh, how he wished it was that easy.

If only her will were strong enough to deny the power of this strange vengeful wind and make him whole again.

And why not?

She was the rock, he was the sand. She was the one who held everything together. What she wanted, she usually got.

But this time?

Yes, this time.

As she stomped back into the house, Jeremy shifted through the trees, pulled toward her.

And the wind tried to pull him back. But this was no contest now.

What she wanted, she got.

He was pulled away from the trees by a force greater than nature, a gravity that would make

planets jealous. Pulled, pulled back into her orbit, back into the house, up the stairs, to the bedroom where finally the wind gave up the fight.

In an instant he was reassembled, piece by jigsaw piece in time for Rachel to pull down the covers and face him.

"What was all that nonsense about, Jeremy?" she said.

"You know when I said I was falling apart?"

"Not that again," she said, and drew the covers up. "You just get in bed and stop bothering me."

He looked at her.

She got what she wanted.

He was glad of that.

Jeremy slipped in under the covers and kissed her on the cheek.

"Better now?" she asked.

He smiled.

in his mind he whistled a tune that he thought was forgotten.

The Sunday Machine

No better time to feel guilty than on a Sunday.

Oh, you could pretend not to notice. Really strain not to hear the Church bells ringing for service at the centre of the town. Get in the car and drive far away. But there was no amount of distance that could take you away from your childhood.

You could try.

As Philip tried now.

He stopped at the door, as his wife yawned her way from the kitchen and stood there rubbing her eyes at him.

"Where are you going at this time in the morning?" she said. "Come back to bed."

"It's not so early," he said, jangling his keys, trying not to look guilty.

Easier said than done.

She yawned, but there was enough accusation in that yawn to make him psychic. He knew what was coming next.

"Go on, say it," he said.

"Say what?"

"I know you want to," he said, "go on, get it over with."

"You're crazy, there, that do you?" she said.

No doubt about that.

He was a grown man now, he could make his own choices, forge his own path. And yet, yet...

The church bell rang, he tried to ignore it, gritted his teeth and spoke over the chimes.

"I'm not going to apologise," he said.

She sighed and then blew a disapproving amount of air through her nostrils.

"Yes you are, like you always do. You apologise for things that you don't do half the time," she said.

That was news.

"I do?" he said.

"You do."

"Like when?"

"It's too early to be having this discussion. You know I love you. And you know I hate all this... this baggage.. Go, go and do whatever it is you have to do."

"No, seriously," he said, stepping up to her, "do I really apologise when I don't have to?"

She leant forward and pecked him on the cheek.

"You do," she said, "and that's no bad thing. I just wish you could get over all this religion stuff. Relax a little. Stop carrying that crucifix around the rest of your life."

That was odd. Carrying a crucifix? Did she really believe that's how it was for him?

Sometimes it felt that way.

Well, wasn't he born a sinner destined for a life of sin?

He was sinning now, just standing talking. He should have been thinking about church, but

thinking about it in a good way. Not in the *I'll-do-anything-not-to-go-there* way.

The same every Sunday, every Holy day, every time they rang those damn bells. He should be a nice little boy and attend, but he couldn't, he hadn't in the last five years.

"Go," she said, "go and do whatever you have to. Just come back in time for dinner."

She turned from him at the door.

"Dorothy?"

She stopped, yawned again.

"Yes?" she said, smiling.

"You think I'll ever stop doing this?"

"Being a Catholic, you mean?"

He nodded.

"Maybe when Jesus comes back to life you can give it a shot."

She shut the door.

And he left, trying hard not to hear the early morning Church bells ringing.

There was routine in his self-admitted sinning. A five-year plan that worked out well enough.

He would get up, drive out of town to the big roadside cafe. There he'd pick up a paper, have a big breakfast and wait until he was sure that first mass was over with.

Well, you couldn't attend Church if you weren't anywhere near the place, could you? It wasn't sinning, really, if you were out of town with no Church nearby.

Of course it was stupid, but he couldn't convince his mind of the logic of it all.

Catholicism wasn't something you shook off so easily.

That morning his routine was interrupted by the man at the side of the road, and yet again, Philip felt guilty.

I can't just drive by, I have to stop and help don't I?

He stopped, but there wasn't much in the way of help he could give.

"Help you?" the man said.

Up close he saw that it wasn't a broken down car in need of shock therapy, but a truck parked up beside a pile of wood that the old man was working over with a hammer.

"Sorry, thought you needed assistance. Thought you were having car trouble."

"Nope, every thing's working fine out here."

See, you wasted five minutes here and he didn't even need help. Anybody else would have driven on by. But no, you had to stop and...

"Not in Church?" the man said.

Philip stopped dead.

"Pardon?" he said.

"Sunday morning after all. Getting onto nine o'clock now. Most people in town would be on their way to mass by now."

There was no accusation in the old man's voice, but was there something beneath it? Worry? Humour? Philip couldn't tell. But he wasn't going to let some old man at the side of

the road make him feel any guiltier than he already was.

"And what about you? You're not in church," Philip said.

"You noticed," the old man said.

"Well... "

The old man swung a hammer, hit a nail, then faced Philip.

"Exempt, you see," he said and winked.

"Exempt?"

"Got a get-out-of-church free card about six years ago. I can miss as much as I like, come out here, do what I want."

"Is that even possible?" Philip asked.

The old man came up close. He was ragged, tired and bloodshot around the eyes, he smelled of old beer and too many late nights.

Philip fought the urge to step back and cover his face.

"You listening close?" the old man said.

"I suppose," Philip said.

“Keep a secret?”

“A secret?”

“Oh yes, secret of not caring about Priests and church bells, or getting into heaven and hell.”

Now that was a secret Philip would pay to know.

And here he was getting it for free.

Wasn't he?

“You're joking?” Philip said.

“Nope. No joke. Found out the secret six years ago. You can do all this and still believe, you know. Still keep your faith, go by all those other rules they make up.”

“What makes you think I go by any—”

The old man laughed.

“A man like you, out here Sunday morning, coming from that town? You're running away from them bells as sure as I stand here.”

“Well, I—”

The old man wouldn't let him finish.

"You're built top to toe with guilt. We all are from around here. Now I've seen people come up this way, pass right by me in the last day or so. None of them afflicted with guilt. Every one I'll bet have forgotten the Good Samaritan. Not you though, no sir."

"Okay, okay, so you got it right."

"And any man running so fast from church bells would give his life not to hear them anymore, I'll bet."

Philip didn't say a word. The old man had read him like a favourite book.

"So you want to hear the secret?" the old man said.

"Yes," Philip said.

"Death," the old man said.

"Death?"

The old man nodded. "Take me. Had a wife for sixty years and some more, then all of sudden she's gone." He clicked his fingers. "Just like that. One morning I'm waking up with her

smile next to mine. Next morning all I've got is cold sheets and tears."

"I'm sorry," Philip said.

"I thought you would be. But it's like this, once that happens, once you lose half yourself like that everything becomes clear. You start having some bigger doubts than any of that guilt you might have carried around."

"You mean...?"

Had he turned his back on his faith? It surely sounded that way.

The old man waved hand. "You think I stopped believing in God, that it?"

"Well, I didn't like to say but, yes."

"No, still believe in Him and His Holy son. Still got faith in all the saints and angels. What I lost faith in was those damn bells, those damn men in their white collars telling me every day that she was in a better place now. That I'd join her there eventually." He spat on the ground. "They don't know God anymore than a butcher knows what a pig is thinking."

“You really believe—”

“Not so hard to believe that a man can still have faith without a church, is it? Man can still believe in good and evil without another man telling him so every Sunday from behind a pulpit.” He patted his chest. “God, Jesus and all those saints and angels live in here, not in any building.”

It made sense.

But it still didn't explain the loss of guilt.

How had the old man pulled himself away from that feeling? After so long it had to be as physical as breathing or walking.

“And now you're wondering about what I'm doing here, right?” the old man said.

“Well I wasn't but... ”

The old man pointed to the wood with a hammer. “That's my transport,” he said. “Take me to the other side.”

“What do you mean?” Philip asked.

“That's how I'm going out, crossing over. One morning you're going to come up here and see

the chord pulled, my feet high above the ground with a smile on my face."

Philip took a step back.

"Suicide?"

The old man nodded.

"But how can you believe in God and... suicide is the worst sin, isn't it?"

"It is for sure. But that's why I'm not going to do it, you are."

Philip took another step back.

"You're crazy," he said.

"Nope. You're going to make me drop sometime soon. A man can't commit sin if he doesn't commit sin, am I right?"

Philip was almost jogging now.

"If you think I'm going to –"

"I know you are," the old man said and waved at him. "You're going to send me over. You're going to help me."

Philip got in his car and didn't look back until he was home.

She kissed him on the cheek, she sat across from him at the table and flashed eyes that he hadn't seen in a few years.

"I'm proud of you," she said.

"You are?"

"Of course I am," she said and reached for his hand. She held it lightly in hers. "What's it been, two weeks now?"

"Two weeks?"

He had a paper in his hand that he'd been staring at for the last half hour and not reading. He couldn't get the old man out of his head. Couldn't stop thinking about that crazy old kook with a strange death wish.

"It's been two weeks, two Sundays to be exact and you haven't rushed out. You've been here, acting like any other normal person."

If only she knew about the old man.

"I have?" he said.

“See, once you stop thinking about all the sins and sinners you start really living your life. You can be normal again.”

How normal was it for a man to lose sleep over a chance encounter by the side of the road? How normal was it to be obsessed with saving someone you didn't know, and didn't want to see again?

“I suppose I have,” he said, forcing out a weak smile.

“What is it?” she said. “What's got your worried now?”

“Nothing,” he said, trying hard to look interested in the headlines of the paper.

She squeezed his hand.

“I know when you're worried or not. And you're worried now, come on, what is it?”

Could he tell her, break all the joy she'd built up, the excitement she had about his miraculous change in attitude? Could he tell her the only reason he wasn't rushing out trying to evade

those church bells was because he didn't want to come across that old man again?

No, he couldn't.

But he couldn't tell a lie either. A lie was as bad as any other sin.

"Do you think you can ignore someone in... in danger and that would be okay?"

"What's this now? Who's in danger?"

"Nobody, nothing, I was just thinking that if you knew someone was going to hurt themselves could you just ignore it?"

She scraped her chair over to his side and looked him deep in the eyes.

"Who's going to hurt themselves? Is there something wrong, Philip?"

He tried another smile.

"No, no, it's just a... hypothetical. I was just wondering that's all."

She snatched her hand away from his.

"Well don't do it again. I can take all the guilt and the apologies, but I won't have you scaring

me like that. How could you ask such a question anyway? You know you wouldn't stand by if you knew someone was in trouble."

"I know," he said, taking her hand in his. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said any of that."

"Good," she said, "now that's an apology I will accept."

They kissed,

But he couldn't stop thinking about the old man and now what his wife had said.

He couldn't just ignore what the old man was going to do to himself. He had to stop it, and he had to do it soon before his hypothetical became real.

But what about what the old man had told him?

No, he couldn't think the old man had been anything but crazy. He wasn't going to help, he was going to hinder, if he could help it.

Philip stood.

"What are you doing?" his wife asked.

"Going out," he said.

"Oh no, not this again," she said.

"No, no, believe me it has nothing to do with guilt or sin, it's about something else."

"And that would be?"

He hated to lie.

It was hard to do.

But in this case it had to be done. One white lie to save a man, yes, that was allowed surely.

"I'm getting some milk," he said and left.

The old man was there.

So was his transport.

But it wasn't any kind of transport that had been seen in these parts for over a hundred years.

Philip approached it like an ancient explorer in front of Egypt's tombs.

A gallows. An honest-to-goodness wooden gallows had been constructed by the side of the road. Stood on the platform, a noose around his neck and his feet on a stool, was the old man.

"Welcome," the old man said, but didn't wave. His hands were tied behind his back.

This isn't happening, Philip told himself. No, this is all wrong. I'm having a dream, that's it. A really bad dream. Or I'm being punished for not going to church.

He was ready to believe it was the latter.

"Said you'd come, didn't I?" the man called out.

"Don't move," Philip said. "I'll get you down."

"No, you won't. You're here to pull the switch, friend, send me on my way."

Philip tip-toed forward.

"Please, just don't say a word, I'll get up there and help you down."

"Like I said, you won't. You're here to absolve me of guilt, friend. Send me to heaven with no stops between, and no basement to fry in. That's what you're here for."

"No, I'm not," Philip said.

"Hate to argue with my last words here, friend, but that's exactly what you're going to do. Man can't hang himself if he believes in God, no, that's a one way ticket to Hell for sure. Man needs help when he's about to crucify himself like this, got to have help, someone to do it for him. Need someone to make this Sunday Machine of mine work how it's supposed to."

The old man was crazy, that was for sure. Crazy and getting crazier by the minute.

"I will not help you kill yourself," Philip said.

"Yes, you will, and don't you worry about it none."

"I'm a Catholic; you know that much, and now you're asking me not to worry."

The old man laughed, which was a sight to see as his neck rested inside the loop of the noose.

"I know, that's why you stopped, that's why you're going to help me."

"Good," Philip said, "you want help, that I can give you."

“To kill myself, no, to kill me, that’s a better explanation. Yes, you’re going to help send me on my way.”

There was no arguing with the old man, Philip rushed forward, he would save the man with brute force if he had to.

There were a set of wooden steps leading up to the gallows platform.

Philip hit the first at a stride, then stopped.

The whole platform groaned and ticked like some giant tightly-wound clock unwinding.

The old man laughed

“See,” he said, “I could have paid some chap a lot of money, someone who didn’t believe in a thing to come up here and flip the switch. But that wouldn’t be the same. I needed someone who believed that all this was wrong, who’d flip that switch with a good heart and a good deed in mind.”

Philip tried to be light on his toes as he crept up to the second step.

The platform groaned again as though it might collapse underneath him at any moment.

"And the only man that could do that for me," the old man said, "was a man like myself. Can't cross over by my own hands, that's intent, that's what'll get you an eternity in Hell. And I couldn't have a man willing to flip the switch do the flipping. So I had to have you to make this Sunday Machine work."

"Hold on," Philip said.

He jumped the last two steps and stopped.

The whole platform of the Sunday Machine sagged beneath him, the sound of a clock tick-ticking loudly came from beneath the floor.

"So I built this," the old man said. "Works like a big clock. Take one step it unwinds, another it does a little more. Until... that third step you took. Well, now the alarm's about to go off."

Philip looked down at his feet.

He looked up at the old man.

"What are you saying?" Philip said.

“Goodbye, and hello all at the same time,” the old man said, with a smile on his face.

And then it happened.

The alarm sounded.

The switch was tripped, the lever fallen.

The old man dropped down below the platform of the Sunday Machine.

Slowly, his heart beating thunders, Philip walked to the edge of the trapdoor.

Below the old man swung, a happy smile on his face.

Beneath his dangling feet was the giant coiled brass snake of an oversized death making clock.

Philip stepped backward.

And continued stepping until he reached the car.

Sunday really was the best day for guilt.

In the Morning I'll Be Gone

A whisper brought her from dreams into the darkness of the midnight bedroom.

"Who's there?" Annabel matched the whisper.

No answers from the room. A fog had crept in while she slept and touched the house from top to bottom.

Silence.

Two heartbeats away from panic, she ghosted her way from bed to dresser drawer and found in amongst the soft garments a hard piece of crafted steel. She lifted and felt for a second as though she were holding an animal that might wake from sleep all fangs and gnashing jaws.

Can I pull a trigger and if pulled, will I smell gunpowder the rest of my life?

Do not be afraid.

The whisper came from behind, above, below and each side.

Annabel took on the pose of a mannequin in a storefront display waiting for a magic kiss to make her real.

I mean no harm. I seek only sanctuary. A place to rest my head.

No kisses for the mannequin, but Annabel broke her pose as the the voice rose as a tremor along her legs and into her stomach.

One step forward, two steps to the side, back again, she whirled in the darkness, the snub nose of the gun sniffing at the darkness for the intruder.

"I'll shoot," she said, not knowing if that was the truth or not.

Not you, Annabel, never you.

"How do you know my name?"

We have a date, sometime in the future, but a date nonetheless.

"I'm serious, if you don't leave now I'll..." Her finger shivered against the trigger, squeezing then slipping away.

Leave me be. Sleep. In the morning, I'll be gone.

How to find sleep now, how to close her eyes with the voice and the stranger inside her home? There was no sleep to be had when questions were left unanswered.

“Who you are?” Annabel said. “Tell me!”

She shook her way onto the dark landing, the hard nose of the gun sniffing, sniffing, but there was no scent in the midnight shrouded house. Only the voice.

I am what shall be, what has always been, and what, tonight, briefly, must cease to be.

A thousand TV-born nightmares played inside her head as she reached the top of the stairs. Every late-night terror called her name. Every future burial under some rain soaked sky waited ahead.

“I’ll call the police,” she said to the empty house.

No need. Tonight there is no need for any of them.

“I swear I’ll—”

She dipped at toe into the blackness before her, testing the water for biting monsters, and

when nothing bit, she waded forward, one step at a time.

Halfway down the stairs the voice returned, cutting through the midnight black like the up-turned V of a shark's fin.

No police, no ambulances, no fire trucks. No screams and no pain. No blood and no tears.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Annabel said, squinting to see a shape in her home, but as blind as she had been since waking.

I am tired, Annabel. I want only a place to rest my head this night. One night only. In the morning I'll be gone.

Annabel crept forward into the winter landscape of the living room. Everything here was touched by a white snowfall of light from the buzzing street lamps beyond.

Her breath came out in an albino curl.

Hills rose upon the landscape of her skin, soon forming mountains. She shivered. Shook.

Turned.

In the darkness stood a man, but not a man, the shadow of a man. A man cut from black silk and rain clouds. Faceless, lipless, but not mute.

You know I mean no harm, do you not? And that is why I'm here. To do no harm.

She levelled the gun at the dark, aiming for the centre mass of the mass-less shape.

"I know how to use this," she said, not sure if she did or not.

Bullets won't do a thing. Or knives or poisoned tea or drunk drivers. Not tonight. Don't believe me, turn on the TV.

The words made no sense. Burglars and madmen were never so polite. Ax-wielding maniacs usually wielded axes. Arsonists struck matches and smiled as the fires burned.

But what of the devil?

Didn't *He* arrive as a whisper in the darkness? The pages of a good book were hard to recall, but not totally forgotten. Hadn't *He* whispered his way into the hearts of men and women

throughout time? Didn't *He* come wrapped in shadows?

"I know who you are, and you can't tempt me," she said.

You will know me. Everyone knows me in time. But not this night. No one shall know me this night. See.

The TV bloomed and thawed the winter room with bright faces and brighter smiles.

Annabel dared not look.

"You can't trick me," she said.

No tricks. For one night only I will sleep. In the morning I'll be gone. See. Watch.

She was turned without wanting to turn.

TV channels flipped like blinking lids, from the face of one bright and tanned Anchor to the next. A confused silence had struck the talking heads mute, and when finally they found their TelePrompTer voices they spoke only of what had been and not what was.

No war, no crashed and burning wrecks, fires went unlit, tornadoes touched everything but

those who stood in the way. Ships stayed afloat, last rites went unspoken, a million heartbeats continued to thump without ceasing. Channel to channel there was no news and that should have been good news.

“What’s happening?” Annabel said, but the answer was already waiting on her lips. “Are you telling me you’re...you can’t possibly be...”

Where there was nothing, now a smile that was the flash of a long and curved blade cutting countless dreams short. And the whisper was now an older language, known to all people taking last breaths.

Tonight I sleep. One night only. In the morning I’ll be gone. If you’ll let me.

Her finger uncoiled from the trigger, the gun dropped from her hand. Open mouthed, she stared at the shadow of a man who couldn’t possibly be, but who stood before her. She thought of the past and the future to come, and there was only one question in her mind.

“When?” she said.

Do you really want to know?

“When?”

You don't want to know, nobody really want's to know. Sleep now. In the morning I'll be gone.

The shadows shifted, and brought darkness to the room, a patch of night that the TV could not reach, or any street lamp light. And there the darkness rested his head upon the soft ice grey cushions of the couch.

Sleep now.

And as if a star had suddenly blinked from existence in the night sky, the lids of the faceless man who was darkness and everybody's fear, closed.

Sleep.

His whispered word drifted away and was lost like the sound of a car far away on the night roads.

Annabel took a seat, cold to the bone.

She sat and watched the TV as the world turned, but did not turn. She watched as the coffins were left empty, the graves not dug, the fires never lit and nobody shed a tear. The night

was long without fear. The dawn seemed forever away.

And her mind turned to time and the ticking of a clock that was deep within the blood.

That clock forever unwinding, an alarm set to an unknown time in the future.

Sometime in that unknown future he would return, this darkness now sleeping. His scythe smile would flash, the universal language spoken, a last whisper before she was gone.

Unless...

Annabel picked up the dead weight of the gun from the floor.

She aimed the snub at the darkness.

Could you kill death? End it forever, she wondered? Would a bullet take away all the darkness and the tears and the spilled blood from the world? And what world would that be, where coffins were left unfilled, graves never dug and those tears never shed?

Her finger shivered around the trigger and then stiffened.

Would the clock stop? The alarm never ring again for anyone, for her?

She fired.

A blinding flower of light bloomed.

The darkness was gone.

I did it. I killed death. The world will—

A cold hand touched her shoulder. A whisper brought the winter to her ear.

It's time.

Annabel looked to the TV.

Fires blazed. Coffins filled. Fresh graves dug. And there were tears, plenty of tears to make the news anchors smile again.

Annabel looked down.

There, on the floor, was a woman who had hours before woken from a dream to a strange whisper. A woman who'd pulled a trigger to stop the world turning. A woman struck by a bullet in the side of her head.

Annabel turned.

The darkness met her.

The world turned. The sun rose, tainting the sky gold and orange. It was morning.

And she was gone.

Er

Murder!

No, a massacre, an all out slaughter turned bloodbath, and without the blood.

Calvin turned a blinking circle hoping that what he'd seen could be unseen. That in some magic twist he might be able to make what had disappeared, return.

Nope.

He came to a stop and the library remained empty. Nothing left. Bookshelves, books, even the mobile stairs with the squeaking wheel that he'd ridden to access the high volumes, that was gone too.

There was no need for Holmes, Calvin knew who the killer was.

Damn her!

For months he'd been busy with his collection. Too busy to heed the warnings of his wife about what lay in store. And now... this!

"You look like someone trod on your toe."

The voice came from above, where once he'd stacked ancient volumes of law, medical text books so old they showed their skeleton spines, where the dusty words of two hundred years needed dusting every other week.

"You," he said, fists clenching, "you did this?" But it was no more a question than asking if the sun was shining when it shone.

"About time too. Good riddance," she said.

"Are you insane?" he said, his pitch reaching that of a man straightjacketed and locked in a padded room.

"Turn it around, hubby. I should be asking you that question after thirty years of this madness."

"Books are not madness, you harpy."

"Tell that to the doctor, you fool. You know what he'd say, the doctor?"

"Get rid of your wife, go on a cruise?"

"Har-har," she mimicked a belly-laugh, 'that Doctor would turn around and say a grown

man in his sixties shouldn't spend so much time around books. That's what he'd say. Unhealthy."

"He wouldn't be a doctor then, would he, more likely a philistine."

"I'm surprised you know such a big word, hubby."

Calvin swept the emptiness around him with theatre-wide arms.

"I won't be able to learn any others now, will I, light of my life. Now tell me, what did you do with them?"

She strolled the balcony, her finger looking for dust where there was none, her smile part black-widow and all shark. A fire burned in her eyes, mirror to her deeds, window to the fate of his precious books.

Calvin wasn't sure he wanted to know what had happened now.

He buried his head in his hands and wet the palms with a sobbing voice.

"You didn't... did you?"

"Burn them?"

"Don't say that word."

Palms under chin, she looked down upon her sobbing-terrified husband and smiled a little wider.

"Burned, charred, barbecued."

"Stop it."

"Roasted, scorched, bon-fired."

He lifted his head out of his wet hands and dried his tears with anger.

"You're an evil witch," he said, "worse, you're a non-reader."

"And you're a liar."

The accusation was a slap in the face. He stood for a moment and tried to find words from the books now missing. Any word that would slap her back and make her feel the same.

He found only one.

"What?" he said.

"You, you're a big, fat, liar."

The sting had worn off, he was coming around, fists up for the next round.

Seconds out...

"I'm a liar, am I, and what, harpy, have I been lying about?" he said.

She crooked a finger, swirled it around to take in every part of the empty library.

"This," she said, "your library. The books. A lie."

"You're making no sense."

"You've been doing the same for, well, let's see, five or is it ten years now. All these books and I'll put money down that you never finished one of them."

"Crazy talk," he said, but his words had no substance. A switch flipped in the back of his mind, a dim bulb went on but not bright enough yet to see the truth.

"Crazy?" she said, "you're no more a reader than I am, least I admit it. Least I've the good grace to say it. You, well, you're nothing more than a collector, a sniffer of pages. You, hubby,

have a fetish. Or had one before I put a stop to it."

The dim bulb brightened. The truth was a 100 watts and blinding.

He recalled the books he'd read, or at least started. Never saw Melville's *Whale*, never did find out if Poe's *Pendulum* reached the poor man's body, read *War*, never got to Tolstoy's *Peace*.

And how many more unfinished stories were there?

How many butler-murderers had escaped drawing-room accusation, how many rocket-ships never touched the dry red surface of Mars, how many creatures from beyond time were trapped in the pages never to be vanquished?

Too many.

But they were his books to never finish, his collection, she had no right to burn them. No right to make an empty space where once his life's work once stood.

Revenge!

Yes, he had to take revenge, find something of hers to vanish. He needed his own massacre to counter hers.

"Thinking are you, oh hubby dearest?" she called out in a cooing pigeon voice. "Makes a change."

If only he'd had the books. Just a selection of whodunits and he'd find enough *howdunits* to fit his purpose.

He forced his face around.

"You didn't leave me one measly paperback?"

"No."

"Not even a digest, a magazine of stories? A pamphlet?"

The smile widened, it was the smile of a woman with secrets waiting to tell.

"Something better," she said and her face a balloon filled, ready to burst, she slipped from the walkway to the spiral staircase, and there slid down onto the hardwood floors, where she finally pricked the surface and let out all the air.

"Two-thousand five hundred times better. Follow me."

He followed.

To the ancient and time-stained desk where he would sit nights cataloguing rare finds, lost gems and signed first editions.

On the table a single piece of plastic rested, no bigger than a sheet of paper and white throughout.

"I'm a tease, I know," she said, picking up the object, "but I'm not inhuman. Here. Read to your heart's content."

"What is it?"

"Your library, all two-thousand and five hundred books you had on those shelves. All in this little thing. Amazing, isn't it?"

He was not amazed, amused or anything close.

He *was* dumfounded.

Calvin turned the alien device in his hand and, as he would do with his precious books, he sniffed.

"Stop that now," she said.

He sniffed again.

"Smells like burned plastic," he said.

"Turn it on."

"How?"

"Like so."

She pressed a button that he could not see and the screen came to life, at least some kind of life.

What he saw was the worst grey afternoon, when the rain pounded at the windows and he'd taken comfort in his reading light and basked in the glow of his books.

"Now what?"

She snatched the plastic from his hands, ran a finger over the front and turned it to him.

"You do this, and then this, and see... all your books. Tap again and you can read them whenever you like. It's simple."

"Looks complicated."

"Just tap the screen will you."

He approached with a shaking finger, worried that he might push through and destroy the flimsy rain-grey material of the screen.

Tap.

Tap.

His finger wasn't shaking any more.

Tap.

Tap.

Before him text flowed as if the letters were rising up through a puddle. In tapping, that mind beneath the mind had guided him to just what he needed.

The Simple Art of Murder.

His smile was full of secrets.

"Happy?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said.

She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead.

"This was supposed to be for our anniversary, you know, but you had to come back a day early and spoil everything. Not so bad after all, is it?"

It wasn't.

It wouldn't be.

"Did you really burn all the books?" he said.

She was already halfway to the library door before she turned and answered.

"Of course not. What do you take me for? I gave them away."

"I see," he said, but it didn't matter any more. Burned, loaned or handed out to passing strangers, it was all the same in the end.

They were gone.

And he would avenge their deaths whatever it took.

The art of murder wasn't so simple after all.

Where in the world was he supposed to find a deadly Cobra, or a brand of poison that stopped the heart and left no trace? Where at this hour would he find the wood, the bracket and the spring-loaded noose that would yank her into the air and do the work of the hangman in absence?

He read.

Searching for quick and explainable deaths.

He tapped the screen, from Chandler to Hammett, Cain to Parker. A hundred and more devious death traps were suggested and rejected immediately. Murder, it seemed, was as many and varied as the sleuths he encountered.

And in that simple admission he found the most galling aspect of his vengeful endeavour.

It wasn't so bad after all.

The reader, the tapping of the screen, the grey pages with their puddle-text bubbling up to the surface, was rapidly becoming a guilty pleasure.

She was right, oh how he hated to admit, but she was right.

He'd stopped reading and started collecting. Stopped enjoying the words and instead favoured the smell of old paper. Stories had drawn him in all those years ago, but he'd only been using four out of his five senses for the last five, ten, was it more, years. Now, his eyes used

to the grey waters of the screen, he found himself forgetting the device completely.

Then he would stop himself, snarl in disgust and ready himself to throw the damn burned-plastic-smelling reader at the nearest book deprived wall.

It was a machine, damn it! Not a book, not one of those musty time-machines that smelled of history and the past. There was no romance in plastic. No magic in the grey text river before him.

Worst of all, if he even for a moment admitted that there was something to all this carry-it-around-in-your-pocket world, then he would have to face her. He would have to grovel and admit defeat. The empty space of his library, his world, would soon be filled with *told-you-so's* and *you-should-have-listened-to-me's*.

He could no more grovel than he could turn his back on the memory of his beloved books.

They haunted the library, two-thousand ghosts as leather, dust-pollen in the air. Each

scent a whisper from beyond the grave. All speaking the same tongue, the same calling.

Kill her.

Kill the witch.

He would not ignore them. He would splash through the grey rain and in that hidden library find the perfect sentence, the perfect weapon. It was not a time machine, no, not by any stretch, but a manual perhaps? A map to the days ahead, promising a future not yet written, but certainly readable.

So he read.

And read some more.

There, moments before the witch called the hour, he found his method, his madness on the screen.

Oh so simple after all!

Why hadn't he thought of it before?

The door to the library opened.

He was ready for murder.

"You look as happy as a pig in mud, feeling better are we?" his wife said, lingering in the doorway, half-in, half out of the library.

"Better, oh yes, fine, more than fine." The smile on his face felt bright as an afternoon sunshine when you knew there was no work to come the day after and you could sleep in till whatever hour you liked.

"Getting used are we?" she said.

He held up the device like it was the Olympic torch, Oscar and Nobel Prize in one.

"A miracle is what it is. I'd have never thought such a thing was possible, yet here it is, in my very hands. My whole library inside this flimsy piece of plastic."

Brando, Dean and DeNiro would have been proud of his performance. If there was Method to his madness, then it was here, on the empty stage of the library, half-lies tumbling from his mouth, a smile burning his cheeks.

But none of that mattered if she did not leave the door behind and come to him.

A trap was no good with without someone to fall into that trap. You could dig as many holes as you wanted, but if nobody walked over them, they would always be holes.

“Enjoy your present, hubby,” she said. “I”m dog tired and going to bed. Will you be up soon?”

No! Stay! There’s no murder without a victim, no corpse without a body, he thought.

“Er..” he said, unable to find the actor’s flair for words.

“Make your mind up. To bed, or stay here and enjoy your new little toy for a while longer?”

In his mind he’d pieced together the history of mysteries that had come before, he’d seen her walking toward him, curiosity peeked and flared by his new-born infatuation with her gift. In his head the fiction was real, the reality fiction.

And now that’s all it would be; fiction.

She turned from the door, hand on the frame, body pointed toward the stairs and eventual sleep.

"Wait!" he called.

She eyed him with the suspicion of a cat whose mouse had fought back.

"Why?" she said.

"Er... " Well, well, thousand of books in your care for countless years and all you can come up with is a buffoon's answer. Money well spent, Calvin.

"Spit it out, or suck it in, I'm too tired for games."

He stared at the screen of the device where the moment of his murder was still frozen in the grey river.

"Look at this," he said, the Method gone and now he was a bit-part player in a community theatre confusing a high voice for emotion.

"What's blew down your chimney?" she said.

"Look, come, take a look at this."

"I'll look in the morning, when I'm rested."

"Now," he said, the word as desperate as a man shouting for water and finding only the desert sand.

From curious cat to suspicious hawk, her features shifted, changed. She folded her arms and finally became a statue.

"What have you got ticking in that dusty old clock mind of yours, hubby? I can hear it from here, you know."

"Nothing," he said.

"Nothing is it?"

"Nothing."

"Oh it's *something alright*. You had that same look in your eyes the year you forgot my birthday. Same look when you spent our holiday money on a leather bound Dickens."

"Er... " he said.

"Come on, you know you're going to tell me. What did you do this time?"

Nothing yet. I might never get the chance if you don't come closer sometime soon, he thought.

“Did you empty the piggybank? Crash the accounts? What have you done?” She lifted a hand and clicked her fingers to turn on a light-bulb behind her eyes. “You didn’t did you?”

“What?”

“You haven’t gone and bought more books? After all this you’ve gone and bought more books haven’t you? Started your damn fool collection up again. Well let me tell you—”

He didn’t let her tell him.

A smile warmed his face once again.

“What if I did?” he said.

“You did?”

“I might have.”

“Did you?”

He shrugged and could feel the warmth of his smile fading.

What in Hell’s name did he have to do to get the woman away from the door and within his reach? Hurry it up, witch, and let me get to the deed.

"What are you going to do about it?" he said, hoping to unfreeze the statue and get her moving.

"Oh I'll do something alright."

Still nothing.

She was glued to the door, unmoving, he doubted an earthquake would shake her from the spot.

"What *will* you do?"

And now she smiled, and it was all the times she'd laughed at his foolishness. Every con he'd fallen for, every banana-skin-slip he'd made on polished floors. In that smile was their marriage, a Punch and Judy show where Judy always held the truncheon in hand.

"Can you spell, dearest?" she said.

"What kind of question is that?"

"Considering all the books, all the words you supposedly read over the course of the years, I'd say it was a fair enough question."

"Of course I can spell, I'm not an idiot."

"That's yet to be decided." Finally, shaken not by his words of nature's whim, her own delight brought her from the door. Punishment, it seemed, was a far greater propulsion fuel than petrol or angry words. "I'm going to spell something out for you, slowly, and by the end of it you'll have my answer. This is what I'm going to do if it turns out you spent any more money on books."

Yes, come closer, he thought. Don't back down now, whatever you want to say to me, you better make it quick, harpy. Better make it short and sweet. Later I'll carve these words in stone wherever I find stone just to remind me. I'll dance on any grave I can find and make-believe you're down there in the ground.

"D... I... V... are you keeping up, hubby?"

"Div?"

"... O... R... C... getting it?"

Each letter a step, each pause brought her closer to him, to the culmination of this ruinous library-emptying, soul-crushing day.

"... E," she said.

Calvin stood, calm as spring grasses with no wind in the air.

"Divorce?" he said.

"You *can* spell after all."

"That's your big threat?"

Calvin gripped the reading device like it was the heaviest brick. A tingle, as if a thousand pages were touching his skin, brought the hairs on his body to salute.

Here it was.

Oh yes! Too many years, too many words that were hers and none of them good. Love, it seemed, broke apart quicker than any cheap paperback. Straight out of marriage and into married life, every romantic dream stripped in an instant, every cheap bodice-ripping plot dashed before they'd even reached their home.

No wonder he'd lost himself in the collecting of books. No wonder he had spent so many of those early years forehead deep in other people's happy-endings.

Well it was time for his happy ending.

And the final twist for her.

"A quick divorce, is that what it'll be?" he said.

"Oh no, dearest, we'll spend years on this if I have any say. You put me through hell with all this nonsense. Couldn't adjust, couldn't resist one more splurge on those damn books."

"You're wrong."

"I'm right, I've always been right and you know it."

"Not this time." Calvin brought the reader down in black-and-grey blur of plastic and words.

He struck.

Struck again.

Struck for a third time, blind with rage and too many years of marriage.

Eyes open he surveyed his pulp masterpiece, his work of fiction made real.

There was blood.

A lot of it.

None of it was hers.

Calvin stepped back, shocked by the lightning quickness of his own actions, singed by the laugh that came from his wife's mouth.

"What in blue hell are you trying to do?" she said.

Calvin's mouth opened, numb with words he could no longer think of.

His eyes darted from his wife, to the wall behind her and back to his own hands where the device had broken apart and made pulp of his skin.

"Well you've gone and done it now, haven't you?"

Calvin had no words.

His eyes fixed to the red-stained reader, or what was left of it, he couldn't find anything to say.

"You just went and destroyed your whole library didn't you. Look here, look what you did." She scooped a tiny black plastic shard from the

floor. "You know what this is, don't you, Calvin?"

He managed a word this time, it came from him like the sound of a lock clicking into place.

"What?"

"Here's your library, Calvin, all those books, every one of them. Destroyed, ruined, never get it back now. Happy? I know I am."

He wasn't.

He dropped back in the seat behind his favourite reading desk, under the light that had soothed him so many nights and his stare was as empty as the library around him.

She left.

He heard the packing of cases, the slam of a door, his car starting and then fading away into the future.

Alone and desperate he wished for time travel, machines that might recombine into a whole once broken, and knew that none of it would ever be true.

In his bloody hand he held the reader, hoping that somehow the ghosts of his library were still trapped within the machine.

But all but one were gone, never to return.

The simple art of murder that had started this madness was stuck to the screen, the words jigsaw-cracked and distorted by his blood.

Calvin stared at the emptiness around him and began to sob.

With nothing else to read he turned back to the horrible device that was never truly horrible. Of his two-thousand plus books and countless millions of words, there were only two letters left.

Calvin read them.

“Er.”

Then he sobbed some more.

Midnight in Paris

To the right of the Mona Lisa's smile, Jeff Godfrey noticed another, just as enigmatic curl of lips.

The woman might have been a Louvre exhibit herself she was so poised. A statue, still as Greek marble. Her eyes brushstroke green as if Degas had picked her as canvas.

Her smile grew wider. She nodded in Jeff's direction.

Stricken, he looked around for someone else who would fit the space where her eyes were fixed.

No. All eyes in the tourist line were upon the guide who talked low and dull of DaVinci and the history of a smile.

"Me?" Jeff mouthed as he picked himself out with a finger.

The stranger nodded.

He repeated the question.

The strange woman nodded again.

Confused, Jeff ambled forward to stand before the exhibit woman.

She gave him a compass look, touching the geography of his body North, South, East and West with her green eyes.

"Yes," she said, as though a question had been asked and she had answered.

"Yes?"

"I was right."

"Right? About what?"

"You."

"Me?"

She nodded. "You don't belong here. Not here in this museum, no."

Jeff checked the line standing before Mona Lisa's smile.

They were short and fat, tall and thin, wide and not-so-wide, but all had a common trait. Around their short or fat, wide or not so wide wrists they wore the yellow band of the visitor. The mark of the tourist.

As did he.

Could this woman be a Louvre detective of some sort? A police officer looking for possible criminals hiding under cover of art? Had she mistaken him for some other, less baffled and more dangerous person?

He held his wrist up. "I think you may be confused. I bought a ticket, I'm with that—"

"You don't understand, not yet," she said.

"You're right about that," he said.

"You will though, given enough time. Now tell me, why are you here?"

Jeff shrugged. "To see Paris, to visit the Louvre, Notre Dame, to—"

"This," she said her eyes tracing the inside of the museum, "is not Paris. This is the insect trapped in amber. A picture taken to remember a moment in time. Out there is where you will find what you seek."

Jeff glanced to where he'd been stood only moments before.

The Mona Lisa painting looked back at him, still as enigmatic as ever.

“Seek?” Jeff said, his voice confused.

The strange woman lay a hand upon his shoulder and turned him away from the painted and enigmatic smile and toward her own, just as enigmatic

“You come here to find friends, do you not?”

“Friends, what do you—”

“Kindred spirits, no? You weren’t drawn here to stand in lines and hear what this city is or has been, were you now? Not here to see only the postcard picture, but something more.” She pulled him round, her hand crooked and pointing beyond the walls of the museum to the day beyond. She leaned close to his ear.

“You’ve come to see ghosts and poets,” she whispered.

Her voice was a cool summer breeze and a winter chill at the same time.

Jeff shivered. He wasn’t sure why he was here exactly. One morning he’d woken and the idea

had been there in his head. Time to break a rut, he supposed, see something else of life, *somewhere* else. One city had been the same as another to him, but Paris was closest. But this idea of ghosts and poets, what did she mean by that?

"Ghosts and poets?" he repeated. She smiled and it was as if Venus had turned after at thousand years to greet him. "You'll know soon enough," she said, "now close your eyes?" "Close my eyes, why should I close my eyes?" She reached to touch his lids, but did not touch. "Close them, for a moment, when you open them again everything will be clear. You will see why you came here." Jeff swallowed hard. Could he trust this woman, this strange and mystifying creature who talked of friends, ghosts and poets in the same breath? What if she were a thief, a very odd thief, who had picked him from the line like the weak lamb hunted by the wolf? "I'm not—" "Hush," she said, "close your eyes, trust me." "But—" "Hush. If you do not close your eyes then you will never know what you missed, will you?" "But..." he said,

but there was something about the woman that he trusted. A feeling, yes, but something more, as if he was where he should be at that moment in time. Comfortable, even. And what harm would it do to close his eyes for a moment? Just a moment and then when he opened them she would probably be there holding a pamphlet or some other tourist-trap trinket. Jeff closed his eyes. There was little time behind the lids, nothing that could be measured, no clock that ticked. It was a moment too long and not long enough. Jeff opened his eyes. The Louvre was gone and with it the short and tall, thin and wide tourists he'd followed the last few days. Gone the smile of two women; one trapped in canvas, the other her own canvas. He found himself on a narrow street, where narrow shops were shuttered tight against the night. The night! Jerking his head upward, Jeff took in the sky. The stars dotted the deep blackness directly above, haloed at the edges by the glow of street lamps. Beneath those stars Paris hummed with the nocturnal music of faraway cars and the chatter of people. Panicked, Jeff turned and turned again, looking for

something familiar in his surroundings. Where am I? Where do I go from here, he wondered? How did I—? A new music echoed along the narrow street. At once sounding like footsteps and then only a soft padding shuffle. Jeff froze. A shadow as long as any thrown beneath the lamp posts, emerged from the deeper shadows at the edge of the street. His heart beating out a rhythm that he was unused to, Jeff watched as the shadow grew. Jesus! Have I been drugged, he thought? Is that what that woman did to me? Dope me up so that she could lure me out here to God knows where, with no language to shout for help! Only a voice that might not be understood? The shadow became a shape, became a creature, a cat. Jeff let out a long and relieved sigh. Just a cat, nothing more. There was no harm in a cat. The cat slinked and purred its way along the street, oblivious of human interruption, a master of the world it inhabited. Neither cautious nor too brave. Soon it reached the ground before Jeff. Heart returning to something less than a rapid gunfire, he stooped to greet the new stranger. A cat was better than

a human any day when it came to relief. You could trust a cat not to drug you and then drop you off in the middle of a city you didn't know. "I don't suppose you could tell me how to get back to my hotel, could you?" he said as he stroked the cat's fur. "It's in Saint Germain Des Pres, the Maxim Quartier Latin Hotel. Do you know it little kitty?" His voice was as awkward as his position. If only he'd learned some of the local language before this trip. Of course, it wouldn't matter to the cat. The cat looked up at him with green and inquisitive eyes. "Don't have a clue, do you?" Jeff said. "Well that makes two of us." The cat purred. He continued his stroke as he searched again the narrow and empty street for clues. How far from here would it be to get to there? Was it miles, was it the turn of a corner? And how had he got here in the first place? You couldn't just close your eyes and wish yourself away from one place to another. There was no Dorothy heel-click in the real world that would make such travel possible. Then it had to be a drug of some sort? But how had the woman given him that drug? By touch?

Had she transferred some magic dust when she turned him away from the tourist line and toward her smile? And what of the poets and ghosts? What did she mean by that? Jeff stroked one last time, his mind foggy but clearing. Poets and ghosts, just a joke, surely. He wanted bed and pillow, sleep and rest, not poets and ghosts. He had not come here to be lost on the streets with no language or map to guide him. There had to be a way out. But which way? North, South, East and West, which was which? And which way did he start walking in hopes of finding someone who would be sympathetic to his lack of language? Forward? Into a city he did not know, a people who might not understand him, in the uncertain direction of every lost and wandering soul? There was nothing else for it. He had to start walking now or stay here the rest of the night hoping to be found by a sympathetic stranger. "Good bye kitty," Jeff said as he rose up and pointed himself toward the end of the narrow street. Now or never, he thought. It would be never. The cat tore off toward the shadows from which it had emerged. It took a

leap into that darkness, but did not disappear. It's two green eyes looked out from the black, hovering it seemed six feet off the ground. Jeff caught a breath, stopped his foot from stepping and stared, wide-eyed at what had happened. Drugs, yes, that's what it is. I'm hallucinating that's it. No other possible explanation. Except... A new shadow, a new shape emerged and it was a woman. The woman from the Louvre who'd tricked him. The very same, and here she was on the street. She glided, soundless along the road. Perched like a parrot on her shoulder was the dark inkblot of the cat, its green eyes afire. "You made it, I see," she said as she came to a stop before him. "Made it? Where exactly am I, and how did I get here? Did you bring me here?" Jeff said. "You brought yourself." Jeff shook his head. "Nope, didn't. Don't even know where I am. Maybe you can start with that and tell me where I am exactly?" "Where you should be." "Oh, well, that clears everything up, yes, fine. I'm where I should be, now that's as clear as can be." Jeff's sigh was no longer one of relief, but frustration. He held his

palms out, almost pleading. "Could you please tell me what's going on here? Better yet, would you tell me how to get back to my hotel?" She smiled, that Greek statue smile and it was as if she had been carved a thousand years earlier to wait for this very moment. It was the smile of a woman who knew deep and beautiful secrets that she might never speak. "What is it? Why are you smiling?" Jeff said. The strange woman cocked her head, the smile now one of inquisition rather than pleasure. "You don't see yet, do you?" "See what? What is it I'm supposed to see?" "Why you came here to this city." Jeff closed his eyes and tried to count to ten, but could make it only to four. "I've already told you I came here to visit the sights, to take in the city and—" "No," she said, wagging her head. Beside her the parrot-like cat twisted its head toward Jeff and gave him a disapproving look. "No? What do you mean, no? All I want is to get back to my hotel, to forget any of this craziness happened. I want to go home." The woman held out her long statue marbled hand. Jeff looked at it with suspicion. "What now?" he said. "You

want to go home, do you not?" "Well of course I do, that's what I've been—" "Then take my hand." Jeff reached then pulled back his hand. He'd trusted her once and ended up in the middle of nowhere. Why should he trust her again? What if he didn't take her hand? Would he be left out here alone and wondering how to get home? "No tricks?" he said. She smiled. "Take my hand and I'll take you home." He clasped his hand into hers. "You promise? No more tricks, no more strangeness?" "Home," she said. *** This was not home. This was the city from above, so close to the stars that Jeff thought he might reach out and touch them with his fingers. This was as far from home as could be. Beneath him the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame passed by as he was pulled along by the strange woman. Together they followed the twisting vein of the River Seine through the city. Below the people, the cars like falling stars, streaked across the night streets and avenues. What craziness was this, Jeff wondered? What mad dream, or hallucinogenic could cause such a realistic sensation? "It's not a dream," the woman said

from his right, reading his worry. She floated as if buoyed by an unseen current, the midnight cat still perched upon her shoulder. "Look, look at the city. See it as the pigeon in flight. This is what you came to see. What drove you here. But this is only part of what you must see to understand why you are here." "What do you mean?" Jeff said, surprised that he had a voice as much as he was surprised at his pigeon-eye view. She smiled. And the city rushed up to meet them. Jeff squeezed his eyes shut. This is not happening. It's a dream or an hallucination. My brain is wonky, off-kilter. I've been drugged or hypnotised, or... "Awake." Her voice was a summer breeze. Jeff forced his eyes open to a sight that was neither home nor unfamiliar. He'd seen this place in the brochures. They offered tours around Père Lachaise Cemetery, where you might see the headstones of... "The cemetery, why are we in a cemetery?" he said, but he was beginning to realise why without her help. The stranger flitted away from him, to dance between the headstones. A ballerina in amongst the dead. Filled with life where there was little

life left. Poets and ghosts! Wasn't this the place where Jim Morrison had been laid to rest? The same cemetery where philosophers, musicians and artists also found themselves sleeping the longest sleep? Poets he understood, all those buried in the cemetery might find that name attached to their lives, but ghosts? She couldn't mean...? A shiver ran across Jeff's spine. Ghosts, where else did you find ghosts but in a cemetery? But that couldn't be, could it? Jeff fixed his terrified eyes upon the woman. She danced her way, arching to touch first one headstone, then the next, from there to monuments and statues, from one etched name to another, and each she touched sparked as if a circuit had been completed. And each spark became something grander, more brilliant as it tumbled into the darkness. Jeff blinked, but there was no ignoring what was before him. A firework display of light filled the cemetery, white, blue and red. A waving flag in the dead of night. A country of colour in amongst the shadows and darkness. Jeff watched, awestruck, his mouth open to speak, but unable to find any words that might

fit what he was witnessing. Could an hallucination be so vivid, a dream so colourful? What if this was real? What if... The dance stopped, the flag ceased its waving, and the woman, the cat for company, stood before Jeff. "Are you ready?" she said. He found his voice and it was weak, paled by all he'd seen. "For what? I don't understand." "You will. Take my hand." Hand trembling, Jeff reached out. *** There was no flight, no city from above, or below. Only a dimly lit room in the belly of a building still wet with old stone. There were tables and chairs, and upon the tables candles dripped into empty wine bottles. And soon the empty chairs were filled with a crowd that could not exist, yet did. The names he wasn't sure of, but the faces were familiar. One table filled with artists, another philosophers, and yet a third with musicians. Wherever Jeff looked the ghosts of Pere LeChaise were in view. Poets and ghosts. Poets and ghosts. He turned to the miraculous woman who had picked him from the tourist line. She sat in the chair to his right, the green-eyed cat occupying yet another chair. They conversed

with each other in a language of gestures, a language he was as unfamiliar with as he was French. "How is any of this possible?" Jeff said. She smiled. "Because you came here, that's why." "Just because I came here?" "No, not only because you are here, but because you had a question that needed an answer." "I didn't have a question, I wasn't even sure why—" "Yes, here," she said, reaching over to touch the air in front of his heart, "here is where you asked that question. You wanted to know Paris, but did not know how to ask. You did as others do. You followed a line, seeing but never truly seeing the city. You were as they, a horse blinkered against the true beauty of this city." "But—" She waved a marbled finger at him. "You did not have the language to ask the question that was in your heart. This...all this around us is true the language of any city. Here is your question answered, in the poetry of the people who make their home here. In the spirit that remains after they have passed." Jeff opened his mouth to speak, but had no words. They were locked in his mind, still forming. Pieces of a jigsaw puzzle

he hadn't yet put together. What was the question she talked of? How could he ask a question that was not there? And what would the answer be to that— "Do you want to know the question you asked?" the strange woman said. Jeff nodded. She pointed toward the front of the dimly lit room, where under a new and bright light a long-dead man took his position. A man who had been a lion in his youth, a bearded poet in the last of his short years. At one point he had called himself the King of Lizards, and tonight he was here, in this Paris-strange night to address ghosts and poets. Head lowered, eyes lidded, he spoke as all poets in a voice that caused tremors and earthquakes in the souls of those who listened. And as he spoke, somewhere in the long distant Paris night, a church bell rang the hour. Twelve chimes. Midnight in Paris. Jeff sat back in his chair, a glass of red wine appearing in his hand, and he listened to the words of a long dead man who was, for this brief moment in time, no longer dead. He listened, and finally he heard. He knew the question. And now, he knew the answer, but he had to ask. "What is

your name?" he said to the woman at the table next to him. "You already know, don't you?" "Yes, but I'd like to hear you say it." She smiled, and it was a timeless smile, the smile of a people with poet souls. A smile that was a country, history and the struggle of life. "Some call me Liberty, but you may call me Paris," she said. ***

He woke in the neat bed in the neat room of a neat Hotel that was far removed from the strangeness of the night before. Bleary-eyed he walked to the window to see Paris waking. The cars and the people, the smell of freshly baked bread as thick as any London fog greeted him. Jeff smiled. That strange feeling of warmth filled his stomach as it had the night before when he'd walked the streets of this not so foreign city to find his bed. When he'd wine-drunk, warm from conversation and the words of long dead poets, stumbled through unknown streets. There was no doubt in his mind about what had happened, and what it all meant. Dressed he approached the reception desk and the man behind. "Sir? Can I help you?" the man said. "I think you can," Jeff said, the smile still strong on

his lips. "Is there any chance of booking the room for another week?" "You wish to stay one more week?" the man said. "Would you like me to organise some more tours for you? We have offers on for all the cultural hotspots in the city." Jeff glanced to the doors and Paris beyond. On coming here he'd not understood his motives, or what he might expect to see. But now he knew the secret of the city, of all cities. Out there poets and ghosts haunted the streets. They drank in midnight cafes, toasted the lives of those still living and those never to be forgotten. The spirit of the city wasn't in its monuments or its statues. It was in the people. A city was just people after all. And this city that had taken his hand the day before and whispered him into that understanding. Jeff turned back to the receptionist. "I won't be needing any tours, thank you," he said.

Curator

"I saw you in the darkness, near the birth of man and not far from the big bang," Callum said. "Come on now, you can come out from there."

Callum bent to see beneath the skeleton knees of the mighty T-Rex and there was the *hideaway* trying to blend in with ancient history.

"It's okay," Callum said, "nothing to fear here."

And the hideaway made himself shown.

He offered a hand.

"Sorry about this," he said. "Name's George, George Flannery."

George was maybe sixty, possibly older. He was dressed in tweed and smelled of mint and hair tonic.

Callum shook the man's hand.

"Not a problem," Callum said. "No, not a problem at all."

George Flannery pulled his hand away. "Might be, when you hear what craziness brought me here."

"Oh? Craziness? Do tell."

"It's silly," George Flannery said, his face reddened from the admission. "I've been coming here afternoons, six days a week for the last ten years, but today... today... "

Museums, like libraries had their fair share of men who came in to escape the rain. But Callum knew this wasn't one of those men. He was too well dressed for one, and the odours that came off him might be described as *pleasant* to some.

"Go on," Callum said. "Well, I like the place. Like museums in general. There's always something new to discover, you know. An exhibit, or a new talk and such." Callum smiled and waved at the echoing surroundings.

"Loneliest, busiest place in the world. A lonely man looking for company can find plenty of friends in a museum, right?" "I suppose," George Flannery said. Callum linked arms with the man and started walking. "No, no suppose

about it. Look here," he said pointing to the forever frozen cavemen caught in that moment just as fire was invented, "good company for any man in need of friends. They'll always listen, always be there for a lonely man." "Well, I suppose you could say that." "And here," he said, pointing to an ancient recreated Egyptian tomb and the dusty inhabitants peering out, "Mummy's lips tightly shut but eyes always open. What's a friend for if not to listen, eh?" "That's not—" "Hush now," Callum said, fixing a finger to his lips as he walked George onward. He'd seen this man before. Not George, but others like him, there were Michaels and Tonys and Roberts too. Lonely old men who'd had their friendships and loves robbed by time. Old men who found new friends wherever they could. And where better when age was riding up on you but a museum? Where history was always in one place, fixed, unchanging. "Oh, I know," Callum said, "maybe you came here at first to find some company. Lonely days made a little less lonely seeing people around. But then it changed, today it changed, right?" "Yes, it did.

But how did you—" Callum put a new finger on his lips. "I'm the curator," he whispered. "I keep history safe here for everyone to see. I see history happening out there beyond the museum every day, but I come here and history is static. Over here the dinosaurs still tramp across the world unaware of their fossil futures. And there, the first fires started, ready to spark evolutions of ideas and grow the sponges between their ears. Behind us the accomplishments of man. In front there's nothing, no future. No dying. And do you know what?" "What?" George said. "Well there isn't a man, woman, or beast in here that's ever lonely." George searched the static history around him with a suspicious look in his eyes. "Really?" he said. "Cavemen don't stand alone. Even T-Rex here," Callum said, pointing up to the suspended skeleton of that once majestic beast, "chases his prey forever in here. Not any one alone. The future doesn't exist." Callum watched as the man's suspicion changed to appreciation. "You know, I never did think of it that way. I suppose that's why I came here, you reckon?" George said. "Until today, I'd say

that's exactly why. Simple really. We all die, George, my friend. Reach a certain age and you can't help counting the years left and wishing there were more. But you come here and there's only the years behind." "Yes, yes, that's what it is," George said, the redness returning to his cheeks this time out of excitement. "But something more, right?" Callum said. "Well now that you mention it there was..." They walked past ancient Egypt, beyond the cave-men, far from T-Rex and his forever chase. Callum brought them both to a stop before the black curtain. "This," he said, "is what you came here for." He grabbed the edge of the curtain. "What is it?" George asked. Callum relaxed his grip. No good to shock the man too quickly with revelations. There was some explaining to do, there was always explaining to do as a curator. "You came here looking for company, but you found the past and a future that doesn't need to exist. Are you not wondering now, George, about living forever? Are you not curious, the question in your mind – why, if I could live forever like one of these exhibits, I just might?"

"I never wondered that," George said. "Maybe not the same in words, but the thought must be there in your mind, in every mind that comes here and is exposed to the history we have captured her. No matter how many people say no to the everlasting, everyone wonders from time to time." "I never—" Callum cut him off. "But if you *could* live forever? If there *was* no dying and death, no requiems and headstones, what would you say to that, George?" George searched the museum for a good enough answer, and when he couldn't find one, he said the first thing that came to mind. "I'd say you were insane," he said. "Yet you've walked these halls day to day and seen everlasting life right before your eyes. No death for the cavemen or the Mummy or T-Rex. A thousand and more birds are captured here mid-flight and continue to fly. Why, we can even stop the stars a hundred feet above us. Stop them forever and put them up on the ceiling for everyone to see. Just think of that. Light travels and continues to travel beyond the death of those stars, but we got them here trapped forever, not dead or dying, but forever." George

stepped backward. "What are you saying?" he said. "Only what *you've* been thinking. Only what you wondered about when you came here this day and hid yourself away under the bones of the mighty T-Rex. Tell me you weren't thinking any of this and we'll call it a night. I'll open those front doors and let you go back to that world where you wait for the future, and know what that future is going to be." "Well I..." George said, still stepping backward. Callum wagged his finger. "You were called, weren't you? Couldn't walk out today because something pulled you to this place. An idea in your head. Go on, you can admit it," he said. "An idea, maybe, but nothing concrete." Callum let go of the black curtain. "Tell me, George, what was that idea?" But he didn't really need to hear, he'd heard it all before. He smiled though as George spoke. "Well," George said. "I got to wondering about how I'm living now and what the future would be like when I'm gone. I wondered about what a museum would be like in the future, if there'd even be any museums in that future what with holograms and the like,

and I wondered if a man like me would end up there. Well, I mean I wondered if we hadn't run out of history, I suppose." Callum was listening now. "Run out?" "Well, you know, I wondered if in a thousand years time, a million years there'd be anything we could dig up like we do now. Cavemen had tools and bones, Egypt had the mummies and their golden caskets. But what do we have?" Callum shrugged. "What?" he said. "Bits," George said, "at least I think that's what they call them. You know, computers. Everything here but not here, gone when you blink, no trace, no paper. And we're burning people left and right, nothing left but dust, no bones, nothing left to put in a museum." A smile grew upon Callum's lips. "I suppose you're right, yes, you very well might be, George," he said. "Well, that's what I was thinking. How can you build a museum when there's nothing to put inside?" "And did you come up with an answer?" Callum asked. "No," George said. "Wasn't really a question any case, just a thought on how we're going and maybe where." Callum stepped forward. He had a delightful

surprise for George, the same surprise he'd given to all those that had come before. "What if I said you didn't need to worry about any of that?" Callum said. "Well, I'd say; *why don't I have to worry?*" George said. The smile was warm on Callum's face, comforting as it had been so many times before. "Well, let me tell you, George, there's a future for the now. A museum that'll stand as tall and proud as any that came before, or will come after." "Where is this museum?" George said. Callum thumbed the edge of the black curtain. "Here," he said, "right here where we stand now." "Here?" "The museum of the now, of the solid and unchanged. All the bones you could ever wish for." Callum gripped the edge of the curtain. He pulled. "And what has this got to do with—" George said, then his mouth opened and there were no more words. "Everything," Callum said. *** It would take time, but he had all the time he could ask for. Callum was the curator of this most wonderful new museum. A collector of the now. The preserver of history. And he had a new plaque to put in place. He stepped back to

admire the job he'd one, the intricate lettering set into bronze.

Early 20th Century Bachelor in his native surroundings.

Bird Brain

"Simon, what are you playing at up there?" his wife said, stood on the lawn, shielding her eyes to fully see him.

He crouched, knees up to his chest, his face stuck into the wind. It had all been going so well until she'd arrived. Just a few more minutes and then...

"Nothing," he said.

"Don't give me nothing, you're on the roof and it doesn't look like you're fixing the loose shingles. What is it you're doing up there, besides acting the fool?"

He couldn't tell her the truth, she wouldn't believe him. So as always, he lied.

"I thought there was something stuck in the gutter."

She transferred one hand to her hip and rocked back a little. A sure sign she was going to chastise him.

He wasn't wrong.

"Oh, you thought there was something in the gutter, did you? And what would that something be?"

The gutter was empty, summer had arrived, there hadn't been a rain in days and autumn leaves were just a memory. But boys still played football, and balls still got caught in gutters from time to time.

It would have to do.

"A football," he said.

"A football?"

"Yes, a football."

"You thought you saw a football stuck in the gutter, so you climbed up and just stayed there, is that what you're saying to me?"

"No," he said, because he didn't want to say anything. He wanted her gone, he wanted to be gone himself. But until his wife had left he wouldn't have the chance to leave.

"I threw it back," he said.

His wife took her glare out to the empty street. It was coming up to evening, the sun setting, and all the boys had gone inside. There was nobody out to play, there hadn't been for the last half hour.

She brought her accusing glare back to Simon.

"Threw it back, did you? To who, the invisible man?"

"Some boys," he said.

"Some boys, right. And these boys, did they happen to have names?"

She had him.

It was a small cul-de-sac, everybody knew everybody else, including the children. If there had been a game going on, if there'd been a football to kick or throw or lose on a roof, he would have known who was throwing kicking or losing that ball.

"Well?" his wife said.

"They weren't from around here."

"These boys?"

"Yes."

"So some boys who you didn't know came in to the street, tossed the football up there, and you climbed up and threw it back. And now you're just sitting up there... for *what* reason?"

No, he couldn't tell her. It was crazy, mad, but sane all at the same time.

"What am I doing up here?" he said.

"Yes, that was the question I asked. You're perched up there like some damn bird, and I want to know why."

He had to give his wife some credit, she sure could home in on what was happening. She was close to the truth now, and soon enough, if she probed enough, she would know.

Not that he was going to tell her. No. All he had to do was get her to go back inside and then he would never have to see her again.

"The view," Simon said.

"You're up there because of the view, that's what you're saying?"

He nodded.

"The view of what?"

When he'd first climbed onto the roof it was an act of rebellion. Only a small rebellion against the matriarch that waited below. Rebellious thoughts had been going through his head the last five days.

What if I could just leave? Walk out one day and never come back? What if I never had to hear her voice again?

But the thoughts had grown into something much more concrete.

And then the thought had become action.

In the last five days he'd sneaked his rebellion in wherever he could find a gap. Only yesterday he'd rolled his socks up into odd pairs, and the day before that he'd left the toilet seat up.

And now he was about to take part in a real revolution.

"This view," he said, pointing out toward the setting sun.

But it wasn't just the view, it was what he'd seen the day before. The tiny flapping V's dotting the sky.

Birds.

Migrating birds, flying south, he supposed, for the winter. He'd watched them for ten minutes as they finally faded from view, until a thought popped into his head.

Why not me? Why can't I go south?

Of course, he couldn't fly, no, a man no matter his wishes couldn't just flap his arms and take off. But there was another way to go south, another plan formed.

"Well?" his wife said, "what is it you're looking at? And don't tell me it's the sky, knowing you it's more likely to be some young girl in a window."

She couldn't have been further away from the truth if she tried.

Open windows didn't concern Simon, he'd been married these forty years and women as a species did nothing for him any longer. Sure, at first it was all stirring loins and heavy breaths, but once you got ten, twenty years in you realised that if you breathed hard for too long you ran out of wind.

No, freedom was a greater turn on than all the women in all the skimpiest outfits in the world combined.

When a man reached a certain age he just had to get a different perspective, had to flap his wings and fly just one last time.

“Not a girl,” he said, “no, the trees, they’re very—”

“Stop this nonsense,” she said, “get down here right now and end this foolishness. What will the neighbours think?”

He was counting on the neighbours to make his plan work.

The neighbours waiting behind twitching curtains, their eyes wide for anything that might be happening. He’d been hoping one of them would be watching before his wife had emerged from the house.

“You know what, Cherie, I don’t care about the damn neighbours,” he said, loud enough to guarantee that those curtains would twitch all around the cul-de-sac.

She looked around as though there was a crowd watching and hanging on his every word. The she put a finger to her lips for silence, although she couldn't take her own advice.

"Will you be quiet, you fool. Do you want everybody to hear?"

He raised his hands above his head and shouted; "Yes! Yes, let them here, let them see. I don't care any more. I don't care one jot!"

This was it, he was closer than ever now. He should have done this earlier when she first came out onto the lawn with that look in her eye. The same look he'd had to endure these last thirty years. The look that blamed him for all the bad in the world and none of the good.

And what way, what simple way was there to defeat such a look?

Simple.

He would have kicked himself if he had the agility, but it had been there all along. She didn't fear him, only how he might make her look.

Oh, and now he had the secret in hand, he was going to use it. He would hoot and holler until she was so embarrassed that she had to retreat.

Simon got up off his haunches and started dancing. A merry little jig he'd been saving up throughout the thirty years of their marriage.

"That's it, you see me?" he shouted down to her.

But she was only fitfully glancing at him, her eyes darted from window to window, twitching curtain to twitching curtain.

"Let them all see, let them all see me go insane!" he said, and although never trained, he did a passable imitation of a foxtrot there on the roof for everyone to see.

She pointed a finger at him.

"I'm warning you, Simon. You come down here right now or I'll—"

He stopped the dance.

"You'll what?"

"I'll...I'll..."

Her face burned red like hot coals.

He put a hand to his ear. "What is it dear? I can't hear you all the way up here."

"Get down here, Simon, get down here now!" Her lower lip wobbled, and he knew what that meant.

Oh, did he know.

Marriage had taught him one very important lesson; his wife could get anything she wanted if she just cried hard enough. He'd fallen for it so many times before. Made so many apologies when apologies weren't needed.

But not now.

Not now that he'd found his roost, his view and he had a plan in mind.

"You can forget that," he said.

Her lip still wobbling, she said; "What?"

"Crying. No, I'm not going to fall for that anymore. No, not me. I know your ways woman."

And now she threw in the second barrage, the volley that followed any good lip wobble. She looked up at him with glassy, puppy dog eyes.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she said.

He batted the question away with a hand. "No you don't, woman. You can cry, sob, do whatever you want. This is about me now. Me. *Simon*. It's my time to fly, do you understand that?"

The wobble, the puppy dog eyes were soon stowed away.

"Fly?" she said.

"Yes, fly."

"You have lost your mind, you fool."

"No, I found it. It was here all along, but I didn't know, I just couldn't get hold of it because you were always in the way."

She gritted her teeth at him.

"Oh, I was in the way was I?"

"That you were, dear." He walked the edge of the gutter, looking down, then beyond her. "But now, no, now I've found my wings you won't be in the way ever again."

She crossed her arms at him.

She traced his walk with a walk of her own.

"So you have wings do you? And now you can fly?"

"That I can."

"You're just going to jump off that roof and flap your wings and that'll be the end of that?"

He stared at her with pity, the first time in his life he'd had the courage to show her anything but his yellow streak.

"You don't understand, do you?"

"I understand that you're a fool, that's what I understand."

"No, no, I won't let you put me down any more. I found something up here, I found a way out, a way to live and I'm not letting you stop me from having it."

She sighed. "You want to live up there, is that it? On the roof?"

"Well, it would be better than living down there with you."

"Fine," she said. "You stay up there. Maybe once in a while I'll throw up some breadcrumbs

or bird seed, seeing as how you think you can fly."

She would never understand, he knew that now, she just wasn't capable.

His plan had been simple. He would stay up here, he would let the neighbours see him, see his protest, and eventually she would have to give in. She would have to concede to his demands. The neighbours would make sure of that.

They'd come to her, they'd ask questions about why her husband was perched up on the roof. They would slyly make recommendations, put on the pressure, and she would give up. She would do what he wanted because of the neighbours.

But now?

Now he wasn't so sure.

The plan had seemed foolproof the first time it had hatched inside his head. Just enough embarrassment, just enough caring what the neighbours said, would force her to change.

But she was stronger than he would have liked to believe.

She was a big old rock.

And he was perched on the roof like a bird.

"I'll ask you one last time, Simon, are you going to come down from there?"

He wagged his head no.

"Then you can stay up there and rot," she said, and turned toward the house.

His plan had failed before it had ever had a chance to get started.

He'd figured her all wrong.

"Wait," he called.

She stopped.

"Yes?" she said.

There was one last chance, one last thing he might do to convince her. One last desperate attempt to get her to back down and leave him be.

"I *can* fly you know, Cherie."

"Good for you," she said.

"Look," he said.

Simon stood upright, he spread his wings.

“What in hell do you think you’re—”

Simon jumped.

He flapped his wings.

For a moment he forgot all about thirty years of his miserable marriage and the miserable woman he'd spent it with.

For a moment he was free.

For a moment.

Sleeping Dogs

"The dog isn't just man's best friend," Jones said, "he's more than that. Just you look back and see there's been a dog around every great man or woman."

They were in the park, two best friends for the longest time, walking their other best friends through the summer green lawns.

"You came to this conclusion when?" Chaney said, a laughing smile on his face.

Jones stopped, he knelt beside his Mongrel, Tots and rubbed the dog's grateful head.

"See Tots here, I'd be nothing without this dog."

Tots gratefully acknowledged his master's voice and licked Jones's face.

"And you're a great man, I suppose?"

Chaney's dog, Caesar, was a pure bred white all over, pink-eyed English Bull. Unlike Tots, Caesar had something of the old Roman greatness in him. With his pointy head, he stared off

into the depths of the park, disinterested in both his master's voice and the voice of his master's friend.

"Well, maybe not, but I'm as good a man as I can be," Jones said. "But you're not listening there, Chaney. Look at Churchill, he didn't have a cat by his side, no, no cat for him."

"Churchill?"

"Well, as an example, yes."

"That's only one, name some more."

Jones, now transferred his rubbing to the grateful belly of Tots. He stared at the dog, then chewed at his lip as he tried to think of names.

"See," Chaney said, "you have one dog on your list. And don't you go mentioning the Queen's Corgi's as an example either. I'd as likely say there were as many cats behind just as many great men and women."

"Greyfriars Bobby, there you go," Jones said.

"That's a tale, not anything real."

"Makes my point though."

"No it doesn't. You'll be telling me Lassie and Rin Tin Tin prove this mad theory of yours next."

Jones stood and said; "Why not?"

"Because they're all just stories, Jonesy, nothing more. Don't get me wrong, I like Caesar here, but I'm not going to leap and say he's the maker of me."

Jones winked. "You ever hear about any cats that did what Greyfirsars Bobby did, or Lassie or Rin Tin Tin?"

"Can't say I have."

"And why? A cat can't be a hero like a dog. A cat won't wait around and mourn the grave of an owner. A cat won't rush in there and save the day. You ever heard of a cat sniffing out drugs and explosives. No, you haven't."

"No, I haven't. But that don't make a dog any better than a cat. They're pets, friend, nothing more, nothing less."

Jones bent down next to tots and unhooked the leash from the collar.

"Really?" he said, as Tots ran off into the summer green.

"They're pets, friend. I can't believe you're talking this nonsense."

"Not nonsense, just look at Tots out there. You telling me that Tots is just a pet?"

Chaney shielded his eyes from the sun, he inspected the frisky mongrel as it chased its own shadow across the lawns.

"Four legs, one muzzle, one wagging tail. I'd say that's a pet all right."

"Ever see a cat do what Tots does?"

"Course I have."

"No you haven't. Bring a cat out here and it'd just run up the nearest tree and forget all about you. Now Tots out there, no matter what he's doing, he'll come running back to me when I call. And more."

"More?"

"Much more." Jones put his fingers into his lips and whistled. Tots forgot his shadow and

came running back towards Jones. "Sit, Tots," Jones commanded.

Tots sat.

"Roll over."

Tots rolled.

"Play dead."

Tots corpsed himself.

"See? Now a cat would never do a thing like that. Too busy scratching at your face or chasing a ball of yarn."

"So he knows a few tricks? That's just how dog's are." Chaney glanced at Caesar who wasn't in the least bit interested in learning tricks, old or new. "Well maybe some of them."

"I said there was more, didn't I?" Chaney said.

"What, so you taught him something new? Still doesn't prove your point."

"Maybe it'll prove another point."

"What other point?"

Jones snapped his fingers and Tots came to attention.

"Well, I was thinking about dogs and men, you know that connection, when I got to wondering about Tots here."

"You're doing a lot of wondering lately," Chaney said. "Go on, what wonderful conclusion did you come to?"

"Well I was sat there a couple of nights ago watching Tots here sleeping before the fire. And there he was chasing some rabbit in that dream, or whatever, and I thought to myself how happy he must be."

Chaney glanced at Caesar again.

Caesar didn't look happy. Caesar always looked as if he was staring at the world through some perfectly still lens where everything made sense. But Chaney wasn't about to admit that.

"Dogs are always happy, they're too stupid to be anything else," he said.

"Stupid? You're joking aren't you?" Jones said. "Look at Tots here, happy as the day is

long, happy when the day isn't that long either. All he cares for is the occasional pat, a walk now and then, a game of fetch."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying Tots here has it made, not like us stupid apes stood here worrying about this and that. That's not stupid, friend, that's clever."

"So your dog doesn't have a care in the world, doesn't make your theory any stronger."

Jones stooped, picked up a loose stick and threw it far in the distance.

Tots scampered after it.

"Couldn't have him around when I tell you what else I discovered," Jones said.

Chaney gave him a confused look.

"What nonsense are you talking about now?"

"Talking about what I figured out."

"Surprise me," Chaney said, shrugging.

"Well, like I said, I was watching Tots and I thought wouldn't it be great to be like that. Not

a care in the world, chasing rabbits and sticks in my dreams. Now wouldn't that be something?"

"I tell you what it would be; insanity." Chaney mimed a phone at his ear. "Hello, looney bin, I have a friend here who's in desperate need of a jacket, you know, the kind with the straps in the back. I'd like it in white."

Jones pushed Chaney's hand down.

"No, hear me out, it's not madness, it's sane as this day we're in."

"What, being a dog is sane now is it?"

"No, but maybe acting like one is, eh?"

"No, it isn't. And watch out, your dog's on its way back, it might overhear what you're saying," Chaney said, his voice filled with a mocking tone.

But Jones was completely serious.

"Oh, yes," he said and locked his lips with a quick mime.

As Tots came to a stop at Jones's feet, he reached down took the stick and threw it again.

"There," he said, "now we can talk a little more."

"Have you gone and lost the last brain cell in your head? What you're proposing isn't just madness, it's impossible."

"I'll propose a little more, shall I?"

"Any way I can stop you?"

Jones smiled. "Once you hear, once you know what I'm talking about you'll want more. Believe me."

And before Chaney could offer any more complaints, Tots ran back and the whole fiasco with the throwing of the stick began again.

"Okay, your dog is gone, you can tell me your big secret now," Chaney said.

"Not so big, small really," Jones said. "Sleep."

"Sleep?"

"Dog sleep. That's the ticket."

"The ticket to where? The loony bin?"

"To happy, that's where. You get your head down and dream like a dog, when you wake up

you scamper around without a care in the world. I've been chasing sticks for the last week, I tell you."

Chaney glanced at Caesar.

He wasn't in the habit of talking to his dog, not that Caesar ever listened. But today Caesar was the only sane one in the park.

"You hear what my remarkably mad friend is saying, Caesar?" he said.

Caesar ignored him.

"See even Ceasar here thinks your mad," Chaney said.

Jones pulled him around.

"Now you just listen. I'm telling you, act like a dog, sleep like one and you'll see the world all fresh and new. It's a tonic."

"It's insane."

"Try it."

"I will not."

"Just try it once. Tonight. Get your head down next to Caesar here, think like a dog and I'll

guarantee when morning comes you'll be a whole new man."

"Or I'll be a dog."

Tots came running back.

"Well, nobody can say I didn't try," Jones said.

"That they can't," Chaney replied.

"I'll be seeing you," Jones said as he attached the leash to Tots and walked away.

"Let's hope you don't try and lick my face when you do," Chaney called after him.

But Jones was skipping away and didn't hear a thing.

He sat in the chair watching Caesar sleep.

Madness, utter madness. We're getting old that's all, and Jones is a little older still. He must be losing his mind, that's it. The brain cells just aren't firing like they used to.

But what if there was some truth in it?

What if sleeping like a dog could refresh you, make you skip just like Jones had?

Ahh, rubbish. That skipping, well, that was just some new pills. Something the doctor prescribed. Nothing to do with this crazy idea of his.

You're sure about that?

You ever see a pill make a man act like that, make a friend jump like he was a teenager?

Behind every great man...

Chaney got up, feeling the creak in his joints.

What if it was true though? What if you could run and skip again like a twenty year old? What if Jones had hit upon something so simple that it was brilliant?

He shuffled over to Caesar's dog basket and stopped.

Caesar slept like he woke. He was straight, stiff, on the lookout for something in his dreams. He didn't chase rabbits, he watched them from afar. The only time Caesar ever broke his regal stance was to chase an ice—cream van or a cat.

And if it is true, Chaney thought, then Caesar is no Tots. What kind of dream would I have if I dreamed like Caesar here?

Are you actually thinking about this? Actually going to go through with your crazy friend's ideas?

It couldn't hurt, could it?

Just one night sleeping like a dog. He'd slept in worse places, in worse positions in his life.

And if it was true? Then tomorrow, tomorrow he would be...

He dragged a blanket from the couch, lay it down on the floor and curled himself up.

This is stupid he told himself and closed his eyes.

Dog sleep, what rubbish.

An hour later he let out a small yelp of pleasure.

"I'd like to shake your hand," Chaney said.

"You would?" Jones said.

"Yes, you were right. By God, you were right. Best night's sleep I've ever had. Woke up this morning, well, I could have lifted the world on my shoulders and not felt it."

Jones patted him on the shoulders.

"I told you, didn't I? It's like being born again, or at least happy again."

"I wouldn't have believed it, I didn't believe it. But there I was, just like Caesar here. Not a care in the world. Not a worry."

"In the dream?"

"In the dream, out of the dream. Live like a dog live like a King I say."

"And the dream, what was it, chasing rabbits, running through fields?"

Chaney looked at Caesar.

"Nothing like that," he said.

"Oh, how so?"

"Must be I shared Caesar's dream here. I was sat on a high hill looking down into the fields and knowing that all those fields were mine,

that nothing could come in there and take those fields from me."

"No rabbits?"

"Not a rabbit in sight."

"No sticks thrown?"

"Not a twig."

Jones scratched his head.

"Doesn't sound like much of a dog dream?"

Chaney patted Caesar's head.

"Caesar isn't any ordinary dog. Just look at him. He's majestic, probably a King in his own world now I come to think of it."

Jones craned his neck to look at the dog.

"You might be right there. Does that make you a King now?"

"I'd say so. A King who occasionally chases a car, but a King all the same."

"And me?"

"You?"

"Tots is no King, so that makes me what? A jester in our newly found world?"

"If that's what makes you happy, I guess so."

"It does. Yes, a jester. Me and Tots are jesters. But now what do we do?"

"Do?" Chaney asked.

"Do we tell? Let someone else in on the secret?"

Chaney took a Caesar stance and looked out onto the green summer lawns.

"You know what," he said.

"What?"

"I think we should let sleeping dogs lie, how does that sound?"

And before Jones could answer an ice cream van rattled by on the road beyond the park.

The only answer left was what they did next.

Two dogs and two old men ran through the park and took chase.

The Drowned

The enemy lay before him.

Calm, still, no wind in the air to push or pull, Luis stood looking out at his foe. It had taken him ten years to find the courage to make his way back here. Ten long years of longer nights and days that seemed to go by too quickly.

You made a promise, he told himself. It's time you made good.

He lifted a foot and slipped off one, then both of his shoes. Next came the socks.

He scrunched his toes on the damp wood of the pier.

Once it had been the best part of summer coming here. When they were fifteen they had spent that last summer part aquatic, in the water more than out. Sometimes they'd joked about sprouting gills.

He heard no laughter now.

He heard nothing. No birds in the trees, no rustle of the leaves. This was a summer day lost in time, frozen.

And he?

Yes, coming back here was time travel, it was a journey to the past, but ten years too late.

Luis pulled off his shirt and folded it neatly, he lay it down next to his shoes and socks.

There'd been no such formality as teenagers. They'd stripped, tossing their clothes in the air to land wherever they fell. That was how it had been.

And how it could never be again.

He'd had a family since then, one boy, one girl and one wife. He'd spent ten summers building a life, ten summers trying hard to forget.

But how could you forget?

There was no easy pause, or rewind for what had been witnessed. No easy way to forget about her, that summer day, the last summer day when he'd felt as though he were alive.

Luis undid his belt and folded it next to the shoes, socks and shirt. He undid the top button of his trousers and pulled them down. Soon they were stacked neatly next to the rest of his clothing.

He stared at them, thinking of his life now and his life ten summers before.

Everything had become neat, folded, just like his clothing. The days were just as organised. He knew exactly where he would be at any given time and what he would be doing. And he knew why.

Luis closed his eyes.

A man organised his life when he was afraid, that's what it was. There could be no surprises in a life if you wanted to avoid fear. No mistakes. You couldn't just throw your clothes into the air and let them land where they fell.

That way led to disaster.

He opened his eyes, and stared out at the lake.

Such a calm enemy, showing no malice. Placid, barely moving under the hot afternoon sun.

But still the enemy.

Still the taker of life, a murderer.

How many had died beneath the waters?
How many screaming in silence only to drop
like stones, unheard?

He knew of one. A girl from that summer
long ago. The girl he'd pictured in all his fu-
tures, for the rest of his life.

The girl he spent ten more summers thinking
of, trying to imagine how she'd disappeared.

He never could find the right image.

It was always her smile slowly fading under
blue. An open mouth, a scream that couldn't be
heard. Always quiet, never violent, never urgent
enough.

But he knew it had to be.

He knew that drowning wasn't a quiet death,
no, it was a struggle. Like gravity suddenly fall-
ing down upon your head. Like the world
slowly, painfully crushing you.

And worst of all, he'd been there. His feet
cooling in the water, a laugh in his throat, a

smile on his face while she struggled beneath the blue water, while her last breaths were stolen and finally...

They never did find her body.

For a full week the police divers had combed the lake be looking for her, and yet, nothing.

Where had that body gone? How could it have disappeared when the water was so contained, unable to move beyond its own boundaries?

He had crazy ideas back then, when the summer was about to end and he spent most of his nights crying himself to sleep.

She wasn't dead, no, that was too hard to believe. She had somehow become part of the lake. Through some unfathomable trick, when she had taken the water into her lungs she had merged with those same waters.

Of course, ten summers could dull any idea, and time had a habit of making teenage fantasies more impossible by the day.

Still...

Luis removed his boxer shorts and folded them neatly as he had folded everything else.

Naked, he stood, looking out at the enemy.

The time was fast approaching. All that was left on his body now was a wristwatch, and as he looked, the last minute ticked away.

Ten summers before, at noon, she had disappeared forever.

Now ten summers later he had returned to find her, to fight for her as he had been unable to do as a boy.

He undid the watch when there were ten seconds left, he placed it beside everything else.

He stepped toward the end of the pier, letting his toes grip the edge.

Ten summers ago they'd practiced diving. They'd dropped into this water without any fear. They'd opened their eyes beneath the blue and watched each other in that world where gravity was lessened.

And now he would repeat. He would jump, and open his eyes, and he would not drown, he would not go quietly.

He would find her.

And then the summers could return, all the dreams of the future would be his again, all those teenage fantasies would come true.

Luis placed his hands out in front.

He bent his knees.

And he dove.

Soon, eyes open, he saw the blue world.

Where are you, he thought? Come to me. Don't let it end like this...

But there was nothing in that blue world. No girl, no lost summer, no teenage fantasy made true.

And slowly, slowly, his mouth opened.

He felt the silent crush of the blue all around him.

No, I can't go yet. Not yet. She's here, I know she's...

The voice came through the water like the sound through a tin drum.

Her voice.

Her voice!

“You came back for me,” she said.

He had.

“Forever?” she said.

He let his hand drift out in the water.

Forever was a summer and a girl he’d lost so long ago.

A summer he knew he would return to.

Luis nodded.

He opened his mouth wider.

He took her hand in his, and soon he was gone.

The Neon Dream

As the world turned, so Vladimir slept, and dreamed.

Three feet beneath the earth he rolled and kicked his legs like a dog chasing rabbits in sleep. There was no chase, or rabbits to be chased, but there was a landscape that could only exist with eyes closed, safe from the sunlight.

In this new landscape he was bronzed from toe to top, teeth as white as any ghost, his hair turned from the dark black of night to the colour of a fallen autumn leaf. Vladimir smiled.

Both in the dream and out he turned his face toward the light, touched now by the soft hand of afternoon sunshine as it stroked his skin. He looked out onto a sky without stars, blue like an ocean, deep and seemingly stretching out forever. He reached a dream softened hand to the sky, into the warm depths of that unreachable vision.

Eyes open.

The dream crumbled with dirt above him.

Night was here.

That eternal stretch of blackness without end. There were no days any longer, no sunrises or sunsets, just the similar and the same stars twinkling above his head. Town to town, city to city, country to country the night followed, and was rare to change. Time enough, he often thought, to count each and every dying light. Living forever had advantages, but he had never thought that forever would be taken up with the counting of stars.

There had to be a change.

And soon.

Vladimir drifted up from the dirt and dusted himself down.

He found himself in a field near a town in a country that he had long forgotten the name of. And the town was a mirror for the heavens, as it was above so it was below. Small houses bathed yellow from the inside, sat warmly in the darkness, the hot night breath of the day walkers whispering the same midnight lullaby he had

heard a million times and more. Suspended over the sleeping Main street a traffic light refused to change from one color to the next.

The world sleeps, Vladimir thought, as I wake.

And there lay the problem.

What fun was it to live forever, to be untouched by time when you could not see that time pass? You needed a sunrise and sunset to know there had been a day. You needed one day to pile atop another for there to be time. And no matter the countless years of his life, he had never managed to navigate the years by the endless glow of the North Star.

There was a simple answer.

A suicidal wish easily granted.

Wait and walk out into one of those sunrises. For that brief moment time would touch him again. In seconds a lifetime would come to him and make him dust. The time he had dodged would come back and strip him down to nothing.

But no, he could not do that now. There had to be some other way, some way to measure time or to glimpse a sunrise and sunset without giving away his forever in exchange.

He whispered his way from the dusted earth and onto the empty streets of the town. And like the best of ghosts, he peeked into the life he could no longer have, but wished for every night of his never ending life.

In the store windows he gazed at food he would never eat, clothes he would never wear and photographs that would never be taken. In the window of the town paper offices he saw the notices of passing that would never be his, and thought of the headstone that would never be carved, the undug grave, the undelivered flowers.

On and on.

Tracing his own unfulfilled history in the sleeping town. Upon lamp posts he saw time faded pleas for lost dogs and reached out to feel that time passing. The curled and yellowed paper, brittle beneath his touch, was all the seasons

passed; spring, summer, fall and winter, felt but never truly known.

Vladimir carried his longing to the edge of town and stopped.

The absence of a heart could not stop the phantom beating within his chest. Nor stop a breath that had been lost countless years earlier.

Was this another dream not yet woken from?

An hallucination born out of desire?

Or was it real?

He dared not believe, not just yet, not until he touched and felt and knew the mirage to be made of something solid. And like that man desperate from thirst in the hot desert, Vladimir ran toward the oasis of light before him.

On the edge of the town, where the darkness met the road, where the trees were heavy and prostrate, the miracle sat.

A building with four windows facing out onto the town. Each window three times the height of a man, and behind each window a brightly lit season.

The first, spring, recreated with thick furred green grass and a painted field beyond. And within this miracle diorama, plastic children played with their plastic parents in mimicry of the best of times. And there, caught in mid-leap, a plastic dog bit into a plastic disc, never to bring it back to a master.

Vladimir wept as he rushed from one display to the next.

Spring to Summer, where the plastic people dove into the clear blue water of a pool, where the dog had finally landed and now, tongue out, lolled under the painted yellow sun.

Summer to Fall, and now the scene had been set deep in a recreated wood, where the gold and orange tafata leaves fell in lush piles to be kicked by the plastic children.

Fall to winter and now the world had been powdered white, the plastic dog shook away that white as the plastic family built a plastic snowman and were about to christen their creation with a carrot nose.

What was this place? What had he found without truly looking?

Vladimir stepped back as though he had first glimpsed the Cistine Chapel.

Above the building a Neon sign fizzed like a cat's whisper.

Four Season Apparel.

And below, a smaller whisper.

All year round, we have the best bargains.

And all year round is here and now, Vladimir thought. And will be here and now for how long? Not forever, he knew, but maybe a month, six months, more? Was that not time enough to live a dream?

And what of time when he was immersed in spring one moment summer the next? He could make his own time, live as many seasons as he'd missed in his life, recreate all the unknown summers, walk through the Fall and hurl snowballs with the best of them.

He got to it without any hesitation.

Pulled away a door, and stepped into Spring first.

There he lay on the pantomime dew soaked ground and stared into the clear blue skies.

‘It’s a fine day, is it not?’ he said to his plastic adopted family. They answered in their frozen way, by not moving, by being caught in a perfect moment. ‘Soon be summer, getting lighter every day, days are longer.’

And although the words were only an imitation of the life he did not know, they were enough to bring a smile to his unaging face.

More smiles followed.

Through the night Vladimir travelled the seasons, one by one. Spring to summer to fall he retained a smile bigger and brighter than any he had ever known. He played fetch with the unfetching dog. He swam the plastic waters under the painted sun. He joked and laughed at the jokes of the frozen family around him, and as the dawn drew close he began work on the final act of a final season.

For as the quick seasons passed, so did the dream, and soon enough Vladimir realised what folly this recreation of life truly was.

You could not live in the darkness.

You could not count the stars forever.

There had to be a final season for everyone, even those whose life continued on forever.

And so he packed the fine paper confetti of snow together into a shape, into a man that mirrored the maker.

And he dressed that man in the ancient dirt crusted clothes.

When the sun rose there was nothing left but dust.

And the paper smile of a snowman that might last another season yet.

Walker in the Rain

The man came from nowhere, his face mimicking recent lightning strikes, his breath a rumbling thunder.

He burst out of the rain and onto the emptying promenade, and there he stood. He raised an arm, opened his mouth as if to shout a name and then, when there was no name to shout, he shook his head sadly.

The crowd glanced once, twice and when nothing more occurred, they glanced away.

All but one.

Beneath a nearby cafe awning, dry from the downpour but moist from the smell of coffee, Peter Carfax watched the impromptu bit of drowned theatre and a puzzled look crossed his face.

Where were the rest of the performers, he wondered? The other rain-interrupting modern-day thespians willing to make fools of themselves for fifteen seconds of internet fame? Why was

there only one and nobody holding a camera-phone, or a phone-camera to record this explosion for posterity?

Was there any kind of public theater any longer that didn't involve a crowd?

He had to know.

That morning's paper held as a makeshift umbrella, Peter ran out and splashed down before the saddened and lonely performer.

"Well? What's the deal? What happens next?" he said.

The lonely Thespian lifted his sad and drowning eyes to Peter.

"The same, I'm afraid, that has happened all the times before."

"The same?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? No zombies, no *Sound of Music* performed by a crowd of what could have been just normal passers-by but who are really... "

The sad eyes of the lonely Thespian swam up and spluttered into confusion.

"What are you talking about?" He said.

"You. Aren't you part of some troop, a flash mob that hasn't flashed yet, something like that?"

"No."

Peter, his hands inked wetly with that morning's news, shrugged.

"Then what was all that? Why did you run out here into the—"

The lonely Thespian wagged his saddened and rain-heavied head.

"For a happy ending," he said, his voice as low as retreating thunders, "for the last reel, the moment that should go on forever but never does."

"I don't get it," Peter said, "is *this* part of the show as well? Where are the rest, are they hiding?" He searched the rain and the hurrying crowds and saw nothing but hurrying glances as everyone sought out of the downpour.

Where were the cammers and youtubers, the facebookers and twittterers ready to capture this strange moment in the rain? Where were the

meme-makers, the office-gossipers in waiting ready to take this moment and spread avalanches of email thereafter?

"What show?" The Thespian said.

"*This* show! *Your* show. Don't tell me you ran out here, went through all that rigmarole for no reason. You *have* to be part of some performance...don't you? What other reason could you have for being out here?"

"Were you not listening?"

"I was."

"Then you heard me. I'm out here for a happy ending, at least that was the plan. And it has nothing to do with a *show*." The man spat the words out into the rain as though they were poison.

"A happy ending, that's what you're telling me. You're out here for a happy ending, and what kind of happy ending is it going to be with you soaked to the bone?" Peter said, aware that he too was halfway to drowning under the downpour and all the way heading toward a

good hour of shivering whatever the outcome of his conversation.

The Thespian wagged his head as though explanations would never be enough.

Peter, the last of that days news now nothing more than pulp in his fist, would not let this go.

“Well?” He said, “what kind of—”

“Coffee,” the Thespian said.

“Coffee.”

“Buy me a coffee and I’ll tell you.”

Peter eyed the man suspiciously.

He was dressed well enough, this stranger in the rain. Good suit, not too expensive, but not cheap. Shoes polished, although that might have been an after effect of the downpour. The only out-of-place affectation the man bore was the Gordian knot of a red silk tie hanging down between unbuttoned collars.

A young businessman, perhaps, Peter thought. A go-getter whether he was getting that go behind a desk or in front of one, there was bound to be a desk involved somewhere.

There was nothing, besides the strange behaviour Peter had assigned to street theater, that would hint at craziness.

"A coffee?" Peter said. "That's it, I buy you a coffee and...and what exactly happens then?"

"I tell you what brings *us* out here into the rain."

"Us?" Peter checked the rain-emptied streets for any *us* and when there was nobody else to see, at least no more crowd-busting empty-mouthed business men, he repeated the question. "Us?"

The stranger was not a Thespian, he worked, or *had* worked for an industrial design company some weeks earlier. His name was Thomas.

He was in love.

"Love?" Peter said, burning his tongue far more than he had when the coffee had first arrived at the table. "You mean *love at first sight* don't you?"

Thomas fanned his dripping head over the overlarge coffee mug, diluting the dark brew more than half-milk could have.

"At no sight," Thomas said.

"What?"

Thomas slowly, carefully, brought his over-large cup to his sodden lips.

"Love at no sight," he said, then took a sip from the coffee.

"And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

Thomas took another sip and as carefully as he'd brought the cup to his lips, he placed it back on the cafe table.

"Tell me, are you in love?" Thomas asked.

"No," Peter said, "what has that got to do with—"

"Have you ever been in love?"

Peter squirmed in the seat. Strangers weren't supposed to ask you about love, only for directions or spare change.

"That's none of your business," Peter said.

"It's *all* of my business if you want to know what I was doing out there. If you want me to answer your questions."

"What difference does it make if I've ever been in love? You're the one acting like a loony-tune out there in the rain, not me. You're the one dripping wet from—"

"We're both wet," Thomas said.

Peter was about to protest when he felt the dampness of his own skin touching against the material of his suit. That awful uncomfortable feeling that he hadn't experienced in years. It was coming out of the sea with a bathing costume too close and feeling like it might get closer still before you ever got a chance to dry.

Not So Much a Season

She dreamed of winter, a cold chill on her face, snow as high as her knees. Then she dreamed of summer and spring, finally autumn.

The dreams were as useless as any fantasy on waking.

A mimicry of pine scent touched Charlotte Mark's nostrils. She sniffed, then rubbed the dream from her eyes and brought reality into focus.

Through the portal window the unchanged surface of the colony was a picture-postcard. The lawns always one inch high and no more. The artificial sun rising, as ever, above a false horizon.

Sadness, like a new gravity, pushed her down even as she pulled herself from the bed and slouched over to the couch.

How long have I been here now, she wondered? The calendar says twelve years, but how can I be certain when every day is the same

as the rest? Without a summer, spring, autumn and winter, what is a year anyway?

She knew exactly what a year meant in terms of the colony. Familiarity, duplication. Every day she took the tubes to the Weather and Atmosphere station to ensure the machines created all those familiar and duplicated days. Set a dial here and the temperature would rise, another dial and there would be rain localised to any spot she chose on the base. If she desired a mere gesture would bring winter one hour and summer the next.

Desire was not choice, she had no choice in this matter. Those decisions were made by the scientists, the planners and the council. And the decision was always the same.

Keep the constant, provide the optimum environment for all, no surprises.

No surprise, that wasn't life, that was nothing at all. The children here knew no season, no holiday. They would never build a snowman or feel a cold wind pinch their cheek. There were

no fallen leaves for them to run through, twigs to snap beneath their feet.

Charlotte's gaze once again caught the postcard world they'd built away from the devastation of Earth.

Nothing had changed. The same from waking to sleep and back to waking again. The constant.

A heavier sadness put weight on her shoulders. What were they doing here, creating a new hope for the human race, or breeding a race that was nowhere near human anymore?

The thought, unlike any of the weather, sent a chill up her arms.

I can't live another day in this sameness knowing I'll never see another winter, never smell burning leaves again. And I won't be living if I don't do something.

But what?

The answer was in her hands and fifteen minutes away by the tubes.

Dressed, she rode those tubes to the outskirts of the grand bubble that housed the breathing

lungs of the colony. There she flashed the guards a familiar smile and they flashed their own in reply. Just like the weather it was all so predictable, unsurprising. No surprise either as she swiped her way into the control room and took her seat.

The machine blinked happily, said her name in a friendly mimic of humanity, just as it did every time she came into the room.

All so simple, the flick of a switch, a few delicate fingers crossing the screen and a season would be born. No, not so much a single season, but many, as many as she desired.

Her finger hovered over the execute button.

Am I really going to do this, she wondered?

“Take your hand away from the console, Charlotte.”

Donnie was dressed in his uniform, pale grey from head to foot, his eyes red from interrupted sleep.

“It’s three in the morning, technician, and here I am wondering who’s tampering with my machines. Thought it was a glitch, but here you are, not a glitch at all but...what exactly do you think you’re doing?”

Charlotte’s kept her hand over the button. It would be so easy, just one simple motion and there, the seasons would arrive just as she’d programmed.

Just one simple motion.

Donnie had his own. He pressed his palm into the reader beside the machine and gave the override command.

“Now, explanations, technician? What is it you think you are doing here?”

Would any explanation suffice? Any reason be good enough. Maybe the truth?

“Do you remember earth?” she said.

“What? I asked for explanations, not questions.”

“Earth, do you remember? How long have you been here at the colony, Donnie?”

Donnie's tired face showed confusion.

"You have gone mad, we shipped out the same time, twelve years ago."

"And Earth?" she said.

Donnie laid a hand on her shoulder. "Are you in need of some help, Charlotte? The psych's have some marvellous drugs that can lift any kind of—"

She brushed the hand away.

"I'm fine, better than ever," she said. "I just realised something is all."

"Something that brings you out to the control room in the middle of the night? Something that makes you tamper with all this expensive gear?"

A faraway look came to her eyes.

"I remember wrapping myself two layers deep, zipping up my boots and tramping through the snow. I remember my nose red from the wind." She looked Donnie in the eyes. "Remember Earth, remember the seasons, Donnie, how it used to be?"

"I remember the pollution, being hungry and not knowing if we were going to blow each other up one day from the next. What are you driving at here, Charlotte?"

"We don't have that anymore. Sure we don't go hungry, there's no fighting, but look what we gave up to come here. We're not living, Donnie, not really."

He shook his head in annoyance. "We're alive, future generations will live because of what we do here. I don't know what it is you're suggesting, but we can't go back to how it used to be."

She stood up, charged by thoughts and possibilities.

"We can. Summer, spring, autumn, winter, we can do it just like that!"

"You are crazy. Do you know what would happen to the crops if we had even one week of cold? This machines aren't toys to be used for fun. The delicate balance must be kept if we're all to survive."

“Survive? Is that all we have to look forward to, just surviving? That’s not enough.”

“It will have to do. Step away from the console. I’m going to recommend you take some medical leave once this is done with.”

“No,” she said.

“You don’t have a choice, Technician.”

“I thought that way once, but we do, Donnie, we really do,” she said.

Donnie shook his head.

“Your delusional, Technician. I’ve already signalled for security. They’ll be here within the minute. Stand up.”

Was it over just like that? Just another dream of the seasons cut short? Another fantasy destroyed by reality?

That terrible gravity she’d felt upon waking returned. She carried disappointment and Donnie’s words upon shoulders that weren’t capable of holding such a weight.

What if he was right? What if she destroyed everything they had worked for? Could she really trade a brief season for the destruction of the colony? A moment of unknown weather for the seasonless seasons to come?

A moment.

That's all she wanted for herself, for those out there on the unchanged surface of the colony. Not a week, or a month, but one morning or evening to feel again the surprise of the weather. The joy of cold or heat and not knowing which might come.

A moment.

One morning or evening when the world they had built was not the same. Not enough to destroy the crops and everything they had built, but enough to feel human again.

Charlotte glanced toward the door.

The lights above the control panel were soft amber in colour. Door closed, but not the fierce red of locked.

Charlotte felt gravity lighten, her lips pulled into a smile. She bolted toward the door.

"Now what in hell do you think you're doing?" Donnie said.

Charlotte pulled the panel at the side of the door and reached inside. A quick yank and the door controls came out in her hand. There was a small beep and the door locked with a loud thunk.

"Time," she said. "I'm giving us the time we need.'

Donnie sighed.

"You know you'll be fired for this, don't you? Not just fired, they'll hold you indefinitely under evaluation. Do you want that?"

Charlotte took her seat again.

"If it means we get the weather back, then yes."

"Do you really think that's going to happen, huh? You just push a few buttons and it'll be just like earth again?"

“Nothing is like earth,” Charlotte said as her hands flew across the console. “But it’ll be something, just enough of a taste for everyone to know what they’re missing.”

“What they’re missing?” Donnie said, leaning over the console. “Disease, death, starvation? Don’t you realize what we’re doing here is saving people. It’s not a prison, it’s a sanctuary. The sooner you get that through your head, the sooner you—”

“Done,” Charlotte said, leaning back in her seat, hands behind her head.

Donnie’s fingers scrambled across the console.

“What is it you’ve done, tell me, technician?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” she said.

Donnie shook his head. “There’s no way you could have bypassed all the security, no way. It’s too strong.”

“We’ll see,” she said.

“All you’re going to see is the inside of the evaluation centre once security arrives.”

Charlotte smiled, and it was the first good smile in a long while. Donnie was so easy to read. She'd known him since they'd arrived at Liberty. He was like the weather here, and that's what she'd counted on.

"Tell me what you've done?" he said, his hand on the security access panel.

"You can't turn it around now," she said. "It's too late, it's going to happen."

"What is?" he said, then swiped his hand over the ID panel. The console acknowledge his presence and unlocked.

"The seasons, everyone will experience them. Every kid out there, they're going to wake up to spring, by afternoon it'll be summer, evening the autumn leaves will fall, by the time they fall into bed it'll be winter."

Donnie reached for his lapel and pressed.

"Security, this is Administrator Cole, could you please hurry it up with that detail to the operations room?"

There was a crackle, a voice filled the air around them.

"We're outside the door now sir. Having a little trouble, it seems to be—"

"The door has been disabled this side," Donnie said, glaring at Charlotte. "You have the grips with you, use them."

The door squealed as the grips were applied. Slowly a small crack appeared. The helmeted guards showed on the opposite side.

"And that, technician, is the sound of your dismissal," Donnie said, turning as the door cracked wide.

Charlotte saw her chance.

As she stood, she reached for the execute button and brushed it lightly as though it were a gesture of farewell.

The lights fizzed out and she knew the day had begun.

In the evaluation cell there were no windows, only pale green walls and a solid grey door.

Had it worked, Charlotte wondered? Out there on the surface of Liberty were the children waking to a spring morning, or had Donnie seen through her ploy and deactivated it all. Had her trick worked, or did Donnie notice she'd used his override to usher in the seasons?

The hours passed, at least if felt that way. Nobody had come to instruct her of her fate, no guards, no victorious Donnie.

What did that mean? Had her prank, her desire gone horribly wrong? Donnie had warned of ruined crops, starvation, disease. But one day, one wonderful day of seasons all crammed together couldn't do that much damage, could it?

When the lights fizzed back to life, she knew the day had passed and night had arrived.

With the night her worry grew.

Maybe, just maybe they were all gone. The weather worse than she could have imagined or programmed? And her selfish desire had done the opposite of everything she had meant to do.

Would she die here, alone in the unchanging cell, on a planet devoid of life?

The door to the cell opened whispered open.

The man on the other side was far removed from the man she had seen only hours before.

The grey suit was gone, replaced by a thick coat, a scarf and insulated boots. His face was pinched red, his smile bright. In his hand he carried a bundle of similar clothes.

"What's going on?" Charlotte said.

Donnie stepped inside and dropped the clothes onto the bench next to her.

"Put them on," he said.

"Why?"

"Because, " Donnie said, "it's cold out, and we think it might snow soon. Hurry, or you'll miss the rest of the day."

"You're serious?" Charlotte said.

"The leaves are piled high, all the kids, the adults are out. It's like a holiday. You were right, but I never said that if anyone asks."

She dressed quickly, her heart hammering in her chest.

Spring and summer were gone, but there was still winter to come.

Not so much a season, but it was better than nothing at all.

Johnny

It took only one bullet, and he could afford a bullet.

But not much else.

The rifle was only three quarter's his, and the empty fields, well, the men in suits owned the empty fields. They would come tomorrow, the day after, maybe the day after that. They would "uhmm" and "ahh" and they would write down numbers in columns. He would sign a form and then what was his would be theirs.

Good luck, Johnny thought. Yes good luck to you suited fellows, come here in your black suits and your black cars and worry about the dust making everything unclean. Come see the dying, last in the freak show, an honest man trying hardest to live an honest life.

There was nothing more honest than a bullet.
It really only had one thing to say.

Goodbye.

Johnny smiled.

Yes, goodbye. The best farewell he could throw them. They'd have a lot more to worry about than dust. He would stain this barren land with blood and brains.

Try and build your fantasyland then. Build your expensive dreams on an old man's rotting bones. *Tickets this way, bargain price.*

He laughed.

It was the first laugh he'd had in this dry season.

There'd been little else to laugh about before now. Ten dry summers had passed, along with a wife. Sons, daughters, long gone in other more fertile lands. Nobody called, and if they did, he did not answer.

That was how it was when you were waiting to die.

And oh, how he'd waited.

Ten dry summers of planning, building coffins and tombstones in his head. Every step one closer to the grave. And now, the final step to be taken.

It was as if he were about to be born again. Where he'd slouched, he now stood erect. Where he'd moaned, he sighed with happiness.

A single bullet would say his goodbye, all the words a man needed in that one act.

But when?

Tonight? Tomorrow, early, when the sun hadn't yet reached the empty lands?

He wanted them to see him, blood still warm, the happy smile of a dead man ruining all their plans.

And that was the only drawback. He'd imagined headlines and pictures to match.

Local farmer found dead.

Local farmer kills himself.

Local farmer ruins the plans of corporate bullies.

Pity the dead couldn't read newspapers. He would have liked to see that.

Johnny stood, picked up his rifle, dropped the single bullet into his shirt pocket and left the empty house behind.

Now, where to do this?

It wasn't like any one spot on this desolate moon—scarred land was much different from any other. Even the crows had stopped their visiting. It was a blank sheet never written on.

Until now.

He would sign his name in blood and brains. A declaration of independence. A midnight revolution.

And what if they came and did not see? What if they kicked the dust at the edges of this empty place? What if they never found him?

He couldn't have that.

He needed a friend, a helper, but everyone was gone far away. Except...

As fast as he could muster, he walked to the barn and opened the doors.

And there, leaning like a drunk was another Johnny.

"Hello, old friend," Johnny said, waving.

The other Johnny said nothing, and would never talk. He was born from discarded clothes,

stuffed with a bird's nest of twigs, his smile stitched into place.

Johnny picked up the scarecrow and hoisted it over his shoulder.

"Once more for old time's sake, eh?" he said.

The other Johnny answered as he had answered in the better summers of his life. He rustled. He bobbed his flour and cloth head.

"At least I can rely on you," Johnny said as they walked back out into the fields. "You'll stand firm when they come, point the way to my goodbye, eh? You'll make sure they know what I did here."

The other Johnny rustled.

It was a good enough answer.

He dug a hole and stuck that other man, that scarecrow that had watched these fields in happier times, into the ground.

There was no wind, but that other Johnny swayed as if there was. As if listening to some secret music hidden in this night.

A music that Johnny thought he heard now out in the fields. A music that called from the past to the now and said *Come dance with me.*

"Dance? A last dance?" Johnny said and lay his rifle on the ground. "Well, why not. Condemned men get last meals, why not a last dance?"

Hand on heart he trotted through the dust, eyes closed, partnered with ghosts and memories.

"The music might not be much," Johnny whispered, "but the dancing's all good."

And that other Johnny swayed to this remembered music.

And the dust swirled, and the dancing continued until Johnny was out of breath and could no longer keep the memory close.

"Good times," he said as he picked his rifle up from the ground. "Used to be that there was always a good time 'round here, remember?"

That other Johnny remembered, how could he forget?

He had been a king on this land. He had ruled as far as the eye could see, the scarer of crows, the scourge of all winged beasts. Back when the land had been full with yellow crops and the rain had come on time.

"All we needed was a season, you know that?" Johnny said to the other Johnny. "Just one season of rain, get those crops growing again. But what could grow now, on this, this..." He bent and picked up handful of the moon-dusted land he owned. He let it sift through his fingers. "...this, rock? Nothing, that's what. Makes a desert jealous does this place."

And that other Johnny swayed in answer as he always had. A loyal, silent companion in fair weather and now foul.

"Yes, I know, no use crying over spilled dreams, I know. Get on with it, Johnny, do what you mean to do and say your goodbye."

Johnny put the rifle in his mouth.

He curled his finger around the trigger.

His good bye would have scared the crows away, if there were any left to scare.

He shut his eyes to a darkness too brief to last. Felt no pain. Heard no Angel's strumming harps or Demon's sharpening pitchforks.

The gunshot rang in ears still intact.

He opened undamaged eyes to a world that was altogether different but no longer silent.

"It's nutrient rich, that's what I'm trying to tell you. This top layer here, it's just like someone threw a coat over a stack of gold. That's what I'm telling you here, Bob. We're onto a winner."

"You're sure?"

"Sure as I'm standing here. The old fool doesn't know that he's sitting on a fortune. You know what a vineyard would pay to have this kind of soil, this kind of setup? I'll tell you, it's a lot more than any of those Malls would give us. A *lot* more."

"And what about the old man?"

Yes, what about the old man, Johnny thought? And is that old man me? And where am I exactly?

He opened his eyes and saw dust. He saw the scuffed and once-highly polished shoes of the two men talking.

Dead?

Am I dead?

Ahh, I'm a ghost, that's what. Come back to haunt this place. To make sure that last good bye was heard. No angel's wings for me, never expected to get them any way.

No pitchforks either, which was a relief.

Now, how did you go about haunting when you were newly dead? There had to be some way to float up, yes, when you were dead there were perks to be had.

Johnny strained.

He rose but an inch above the soil.

"He'll sign the forms, believe me. We'll make it so that he thinks we're the ones doing him the

favour. Old fool won't suspect he's being ripped off. Jesus, he'll be glad to get anything."

"Now don't go putting this old man down too much. How long did he fight to keep hold of this land, even after there were no more crops? He might fight us again."

Damn right, Johnny thought.

He would rattle his chains and play Marley for them. He would wake them each and every night and remind them, no past, present or future for them. Only a dead old man smiling and...

Well now, that was odd.

He hadn't thought much about floating, but he'd just popped up another inch above the ground. Now his chin cleared the ground, and he could...yes...he could feel the dust around him.

Ghost's didn't feel, did they? You couldn't haunt very well if you bumped into every wall you wanted to pass through.

If not a Ghost then...

"Listen, we've got to jump on this now before any of those contractors get out here with a survey team. Get the old man to sign the form, then we can start phoning those wine people."

"This is certified, right?"

"Listen, once we take the top layer off this land, we could grow anything we wanted in the soil. It's that good, friend."

Johnny rose another inch.

Grow anything?

Like a man?

Like a dead man?

He glanced down, and there were no see-through parts, no rattling chains, no ghostly goings on. But he was rising, rising, steadily like some strange flower that opened its petals once every full moon.

No moon in the sky, but a bright cloudless and sun-filled sky.

And below that sky, a dead man, brought back to life, grown in the ground he'd thought barren.

Not so barren now, he thought as his hands came free and he pushed down on the earth.

And then he popped out, bulb and all, dusted himself down and smiled.

Well now, this land is good for something after all. And maybe good for a lot more.

By the side of the two men, that other Johnny agreed, his head bobbing in the absence of wind.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Johnny said.

They turned, two very confused and black-suited men who were now worried about eaves being dropped.

"Mr...?" The shorter and more shiny of the two spoke.

"No need for formalities, Gentleman," Johnny said, walking towards them. "You can call me Johnny, and you can say goodbye now."

"What?" The taller of the two took his turn speaking.

"Ta-ta, arivaderci, adios, you can use any word you want, but please leave my land as you found it."

They looked at each other.

"Now hold on a minute, you're being hasty here, Mr...Johnny. We can offer you—'

"Nothing as much as those wine people you were talking about I bet. Be nice that, grapes and vines. This land has needed something to grow on it for the longest time. Now it will."

"But—" Their words were tandem and equally shocked.

Johnny found his empty gun on the ground, he picked it up and aimed it at the two men.

"Good-bye," he said.

They didn't wait for any more talk. They fled. Two black and shiny crows in flight as they saw a new scarecrow man, living but dead all the same.

When he knew they were gone, Johnny dropped the gun to the ground and sidled up to that other Johnny.

"No need for goodbyes anymore, is there?"

That other Johnny bobbed a yes.

“See, now, you’re just the kind of pal I need around here.”

And that other Johnny agreed.

“How about we celebrate?” Johnny said.

That other Johnny wasn’t sure how to answer, but the newly born man beside him had the answer all right.

He pulled that other Johnny from the ground.

Arm in arm they danced.

To a music that hadn’t been heard in ten long and very dry summers.

Summer's Almost Gone

You could bury the body, but what about the damned house?

Oh, but he wished he could take the thing brick by brick and lay it down six feet in the ground. Take the windows and break them like bones, the doors cut to pieces and scattered.

But no.

The house stood. And the house knew it all. The walls were ears, the windows eyes, the doors a mouth. The house was witness.

And now it wanted to be heard.

The doors slammed shut. The windows flapped like loose tongues. The chimney had suddenly decided to roar.

Samuel rushed to each noise and tried to quiet the sound. He nailed planks across those whining doors, bolted down the windows, stuffed the chimney.

It wasn't enough.

The kettle whistled in the kitchen plugged in or not.

The TV the same. Surfing quick through channels to form sentences.

You killed her

“Will you be quiet,” Samuel whispered.

Murdered murderer killer!

He yanked the plug from the TV, but it was the same as the kettle. The house was alive, talking to him, blaming him.

At first he'd thought it was her ghost. Come back to haunt him for what he'd done. But no, it wasn't Summer that had returned, he knew that know.

The house.

The damned house loved his wife more than him. Knew more about her than he'd ever asked.

“I warn you,” Samuel said, shaking his finger at walls and floor, “if there's any more of this I'm going to knock you down. Going to build something new in your place.”

The TV flickered.

The cut and paste of channels replied:

Dare you

“Dare me? Dare me? I’ll show you, I’ll show you what I can do.”

The TV spoke from three different mouths:

You will die

He grabbed the TV by the corners and pushed his angered face up close.

“Don’t threaten me,” he said.

The television crackled at him through an unturned channel.

“Do you hear me? Oh, I know you hear me. You can’t force me out of here, can’t make me. Hear me, do you hear me!”

And when it sat there with its static smile mocking him, Samuel stepped backward.

“I warned you, don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he said and gave no more warnings as he drove his foot into that static smile.

The smile exploded and then the TV was nothing but a shell with nothing more to say.

But it wasn't the end.

The house had it in for him and wasn't going to give up so quickly.

Upstairs the portable radio turned itself on, skipping channels at an alarming speed until there was only one merged voice.

You killed her

Killer!

Murderer!

The voice growing louder and louder.

Enough for the neighbours to hear? Enough for the neighbours to visit?

Oh, they'd been there in the days after he'd reported his wife missing, bringing kind words and baked foods. But now? Now with the house shouting at the top of its lungs would they come with kind words again, or with accusations?

He couldn't allow that to happen.

Beside the protests of the house, he'd committed the perfect crime. Six feet down in the garden was a wife finally silenced. And now a month since that dark night when he'd finally rid himself of her noise, there was this new noise to deal with.

Samuel took the stairs two, then three at a time until he reached the bedroom.

The portable radio sat on the table beside the bed. Her side.

She'd annoyed him with that noise, late into the night. Just one more show, one more terrible noise to kill him slowly with.

I got rid of her, I got rid of the constant sounds of that woman, I'll get rid of everything that makes sound now. Yes, that's what I'll do. This house will finally be silenced.

He snatched the radio and took it into the bathroom where he gave it a quick drowning in the sink.

It protested to the very end.

Murderer

One last sizzle and it was gone. But he was nowhere near finished yet.

As the radio died so the shower head came to life, spitting a rhythm of accusation at him. How? He wasn't sure, but the pattern of water as it jetted out onto the tiles formed a wet throaty sound.

Killer

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" he said to the shower head. "Well not for long."

He snatched the shower head and rung its neck.

And when he'd strangled that noise, the toilet broke the new silence.

It flushed, and flushed again, the ballcock hidden inside the tank bobbing up and down like tonsils.

Murderer!

He ripped the tonsils from it and threw them aside. But this wasn't going to end any time soon.

The kettle screamed.

Sam rushed to it and smothered the scream.

The clocks suddenly struck midnight all over the house.

He ran to each and punched at them until time stopped.

And yet still more.

The vacuum cleaner danced through the living room, shouting killer with each suck, murder with each blow.

He found it and stopped the dance with a cruel one step.

And then...

A knock.

But it wasn't the house this time, it was a neighbour. Curious and worried all at the same time.

"Sam? You in there Sam? Are you okay?"

They'd heard. Dear God the house would have its way and reveal him to the world, reveal the murder!

Samuel stood frozen, his ears pricked for the next move the house would make.

The mail slot popped open.

Samuel fixed his gaze, sucked in a breath and held it, waiting for the damn thing to start talking.

No talking.

Two eyes appeared in the opening and that worried voice returned.

“Sam, Sam can you hear me? Are you alright in there? I heard noises, Sam. Sam?”

He could play statue, ignore the call? But this was a friendly neighbourhood, like some old painting, where people continually poked their nose in and did right by you. That worried neighbour would soon turn to two, then more, and one of them would suggest that the police be called.

He hated them all.

Why couldn't they leave him alone? Why couldn't the house leave him alone?

Because you did something wrong, and everybody who does something wrong gets caught in the end. Crime doesn't pay, remember that from all those old films?

No, he hadn't committed any crime. Getting some peace wasn't a crime. Stopping the noise wasn't a crime. He'd *had* to do it, nothing else he could do after thirty years of marriage.

"Sam? Please, if you're in there call out? Are you hurt? You're hurt aren't you, just wait there I'll get help."

The mail slot flapped shut.

There were footsteps.

In the garden the sprinklers came on and laughed.

Samuel gritted his teeth, closed his eyes.

Don't listen, he told himself. Let it make its noise, you just concentrate on playing it normal like you've played it every other day. They're going to come around soon and you can't be a statue for the rest of time.

He had to be calm. Keep the mask on he'd worn the last month if he wanted the neighbours to walk away and think everything was fine.

He brushed himself as though he were dusty, straightened his jacket and walked to the front door.

He took a breath.

The sprinklers laughed again.

Samuel opened the door.

"Mary? Mary, was that you calling?" Samuel shouted to the woman now leaving the drive.

She held her chest, sighed. "Oh dear Lord, you really had me worried. I heard all this noise and then you weren't answering the door. I thought something....something..."

"Renovations," Samuel said, an aching smile on his face.

How long is she going to stand around here talking? How long before I can go back into that damn house and silence it for good?

She walked back toward the front door, her hand still on her chest.

“Renovations?” she said, trying to sneak a peek over his shoulder.

He stepped out from the door, blocking her way.

“In the bathroom, you know, new sink that’s all. Thought I’d blow some of the cobwebs out.”

“Oh yes, yes,” she said, nodding her head with some seriousness. “That’s the best remedy, get back on your feet, keep busy.”

“It is,” he said.

She touched his shoulder. “How are you feeling in yourself? Still sad, yes?”

He wasn’t sad, he was angry, annoyed, confused, anything but sad. But he couldn’t show her that.

He turned his smile down slightly, took some of the brightness out of the mask he’d worn since Summer’s murder.

“Getting there,” he said.

“Well, that’s good. You know we were all sorry to hear about...well, Summer was a good friend to me, and her leaving like that...well, you never know do you?”

He’d had this conversation with her before, how many times he couldn’t count. Everybody was shocked, everybody couldn’t believe it, but it didn’t take long for them to accept that Summer had run off with some old flame.

“You don’t,” he said.

“Oh well, as long as you’re okay in yourself, I’ll leave you to it.” She patted him one more time as though that would ease all the pain, flashed him one of those pitying smiles, and turned away from the house.

He was free.

At least for the moment.

But the house had other ideas.

Murderer killer

The voice was not a TV or radio pastiche, no the spray from the strangled shower head or the steam-whistle scream of the kettle. So what was

it and where was it coming from? What had he forgotten to silence? What was left inside this house that was capable of being a tongue and vocal chords all in one?

The neighbour stopped.

She faced him.

“What was that?” she asked.

Play dumb, you can’t let on now.

“What was what?” he said.

“I thought...you didn’t hear a voice just now?”

He shook his head. “A voice? What kind of voice?”

“Sounded like a woman but...” She looked up at the bedroom windows, saw nothing there, and looked at him. “...must have been a TV show or something from one of... yes, a TV on too loud.”

“Must have been,” he said.

This was torture. Why wasn’t she walking away? Why was she hanging around if she hadn’t believed what she’d heard?

And the voice came again.

A female voice.

A very distinct voice that he'd heard a thousand times before, but never with these words.

He killed me

The neighbour crossed her arms.

"Now you must have heard that, Samuel?" she said. "That was Summer talking, wasn't it?"

There was no way out of this. No way to cover up. The house had given a voice to the dead and it would talk again, shout, and once one neighbour heard, another and yet another would hear soon enough.

He opened his mouth and the silence he'd so wished on the house came to him.

"Well, Samuel? What is going on here? Is Summer still here and...why did she say that? Why was she talking about you..."

She took a step backwards, her eyes widened by a new thought.

His mouth remained open without any words forming.

“She didn’t leave, did she?” the neighbour said. I thought...I mean, I never saw her go and...Summer would have, she would have told me. Oh dear God!”

Samuel reached out but it was too late, the neighbour was running, screaming along the street.

Damn house, he thought, as he trudged back inside.

Well, you may have beat me, but I’m not going to let you go unpunished, no way. I’ll silence you one way or another.

How long he had, he couldn’t be sure. Soon enough the police would arrive and the house would shout again and probably lead them to the garden and the month old planting of his thirty year marriage.

There was no escape now.

But there was time for revenge. Time to punish.

As the sprinklers laughed, and the doors banged wildly, and the toilet flushed, and the

taps turned on and the kettle boiled, Samuel walked through to the garage.

He took the petrol can from the shelf shook it and found it nearly full.

It would do.

"That's it," he said as he walked through the house leaving behind a slug trail of brightly rainbowed petrol, "you just laugh it up. You won't be laughing forever."

And he walked from the kitchen, through to the living room where the TV was still smouldering, and he marked his burning wishes there as a wolf would mark territory. And he walked the stairs, the bathroom, and finally in the bedroom he stopped.

The house continued to mock him.

And now he heard her voice again.

Coming from the drawer in the bedside table.

He placed the petrol can on the bed, sat down and opened the drawer.

Inside was a small Dictaphone. The one Summer had used for learning that damn foreign

language. She'd listened, stopped, repeated more times than he cared to remember.

He picked it up and didn't need to press play.

A familiar laugh came from the tiny speaker, followed by a tiny familiar voice.

"How many times did I tell you?" Summer said from the past.

"One too many," he answered.

"Well this will be the last," her tape-recorded voice hissed.

"I know," he said as he flopped onto the bed.

As the house laughed, as Summer's voice hissed at him from the past, Sam took the lighter from his pocket.

All he'd wanted was a bit of peace and quiet. Just some silence to fall back on like a big comfortable pillow.

One way or the other he would have it.

The lighter came to life in his hand and he tossed it onto the petrol soaked bed.

He put his hands behind his head and kicked his shoes into the flames.

The house laughed.

Summer's tiny voice came from the Dictaphone as outside the world was filled with the sound of police sirens.

Samuel's smile grew like the flames around him.

Soon enough everything would be quiet.

He would have his silence.

That Jericho Feeling

He could string more than three notes together, but that wasn't the problem.

When the world was deaf to those notes it didn't matter if you could string three, four, or a dozen. The world didn't want to hear, and a man alone is a lousy audience for his own talents.

From one publisher to the next he'd tried to sell those talents. He'd sat at more pianos than he could count, bruised his fingers for the entertainment of agents and producers alike. More than once he'd broken down and cried.

And in return?

Not commercial enough.

There's no market for it.

And the worst of all, the one that cut down deep was:

There's no audience.

There had to be someone out there who wanted to listen, right? A man didn't spend the

best part of a life bashing his head against keys and cutting his fingers on guitar strings without someone wanting to listen.

Tell that to the men with the money. Tell them there was someone out there with their ears open and willing to hear.

No, he couldn't tell it to anyone any longer. His face was too well known around the publishers, they'd seen his smiles and his tears one too many times for him to go that route.

But there had to be *some* route. *Some* way, some *one* who would listen and make all this worthwhile.

There was.

Pity it had to be Jack Dawson, the old crustacean who sat behind the counter of *Strings N Things*.

And that particular face you saw for only two reasons; buying or selling a dream.

"You see," Jack always said, "there's no real profit in making music, only in selling the tools, you understand? Anybody chasing a dream

better be happy with the chase, because nine times out of ten a dream will fail you and you'll just wind up back her flogging your equipment for rent money."

As Dylan walked into the shop that morning, past the graveyard of musical instruments he didn't want any lectures on dreaming the impossible dream. Just some cash to see him through to the next week.

Dawson had another deal.

He passed the expensive guitar back across the counter and smiled.

"Reached the end of the road I see?" he said.

"How much?" Dylan said.

"Well, now, this guitar needs some work, a lot of work, it'll put me out of pocket if I take it on."

"You see," Dawson said, pointing to the strings with smooth fingers. "I'll have to buy a whole new set of strings, the expensive ones. And the scratchboard, well it's scratched. And the whole thing is going to need a polish and maybe a new neck and—"

Dylan slung the guitar over his shoulder.

"If you don't want it, just say so," he said.

"No, no, I'll take it on, I suppose but..." Dawson licked at his lips. "...maybe we can work something else out?"

Dylan eyed him suspiciously.

"Work something out, like what?" he said.

"Well now, I may have a deal for you that you just can't refuse. Something that very well might make your day, as the saying goes."

Dawson reached in under the counter and brought out a battered trumpet case. He blew the dust off it.

"There," he said.

"A trumpet?"

"A *horn* if you want to get technical."

"What would I want with a horn?"

"Well now, it's no ordinary horn you're looking at here," Dawson said, stroking the top of the case with lover's care. "This here's a Jericho horn."

He needed money, not another musical instrument to learn and then eventually abandon to the clutches of the man behind the counter, but Dylan couldn't help be interested.

A musical instrument of any kind was a magnet to a musician like him. Instruments told stories even before they'd been plucked or blown. They were pieces of history, and they could bring that history with them. Every guitar player knew that if the fingers of some genius had touched the strings then that would transfer like some kind of telekinesis.

"Okay, I'll bite," Dylan said and stepped up. He laid a hand on the case.

Dawson pulled the case away.

"Not just yet," he said, "this isn't no ordinary horn."

"So why show it me if I you knew I couldn't afford it?"

"Ahh now, that's the real question I got to ask myself. If I give you this horn here I give you everything you're after, well, that is to say, an

audience. But it's what you're willing to give up in return."

"Do I look like I've got money or anything to barter with?" Dylan said.

"I know you haven't, that's why you're bringing in that guitar, what, you've had since you first came in here at ten years old. I'd say you probably sleep with that guitar next to you in place of a woman."

How did he know that?

"I don't do that," Dylan said.

"Well you'd be the first, 'cause I know my fair share of musicians and there have been plenty who'd kick a woman out of bed and give the space to a *Les Paul* or a *Gibson*. Lot of musicians fall in love quick and hard you see and that love drives them to the edge quicker than most folks. I seen it in here a thousand times. Seen young men and women come in here their heads filled with dreams, see 'em down the line and they're ghosts. Nothing left. That's what I'm seeing happen to you, Dylan."

“What, you’ve suddenly become compassionate about struggling musicians now?”

“A shop owner doesn’t need compassion, it’s bad for profits. But every so often he sees someone on their knees and he sees that he can help out. That’s what I’m offering you.”

This was all too strange.

In all the years he’d restrung his guitars here, in all the years he bought plectrums and blank music sheets Dawson hadn’t once offered help. And now?

Well, the man had to have some ulterior motif didn’t he?

“What do you get out of all this?” Dylan asked.

Dawson tapped the top of the trumpet case.

“You’d be surprised,” he said.

“Surprise me.”

“Well I get rid of this horn here, for one. Takes up a lot of shelf space and I’ve been waiting for years to hand it over to someone special, someone deserving of it.”

"So you're giving it me for free?"

"Not even close," Dawson said. "There's strings attached, and don't try any jokes about it being a woodwind either."

"Strings? What kind of strings?"

And who'd be pulling them? Dylan knew Dawson had to be behind this somewhere, gaining in some way.

"I give you this Jericho horn and you never come back here again. There's no refunds, no returns, understand?"

"That's it."

"That's it. But there's a warning attached to all this."

"I thought as much," Dylan said.

"Well it's like this, a Jericho horn, you've heard of the Walls of Jericho haven't you?"

Dylan scanned his mind.

He recalled something vaguely from school, something religious was it? Something about—

"Walls coming down when the horn was played, right? Something like that?" he said.

"Near enough. But a Jericho horn doesn't just tear down man-made walls, it tears down all kinds of barriers, even the ones you can't see."

"What is this, a joke?"

"Sounds like one, doesn't it? But it's not." He undid the clasps on the case and there was the Jericho horn. A very ordinary looking trumpet, dulled with age, no shine to it. "I got this one when I was like you, back in the old days when I couldn't tell money from a dream. And I used it only once." His face became serious and sour. "I never dared use it again."

"It's just a horn," Dylan said.

"That's where you're wrong. It's a musician's dream, a guaranteed number one every time you put your lips to the thing. But you know the old saying; sometimes you get what you wish for."

"And that's bad?"

"Can be. Then again maybe not. There's no telling with a Jericho horn, it's different for everyone. Me, I knew it'd be the ruin of me after blowing it just that once. Might be a different story for you, depends, Dylan."

"On what?"

"On what you're willing to give up to get what you want. On how much you want your dream to come true." Dawson dropped the lid. "There. Yours for the taking, do with it what you will, but never return it, never come back here. Now what do you say?"

Dylan stared at the case.

Could it be everything Dawson had promised? The musician's dream made real?

Oh, this was all fantasy, it had to be.

But when all his other dreams had failed, there was no harm in following just one more.

Was there?

"Well?" Dawson said.

Dylan picked up the case.

"Goodbye," he said, "forever."

So how did this work exactly? Was it some kind of Genie in a bottle deal, rub three times and get everything you wished for?

And you know how that ended.

Badly?

Or was that something to do with monkey's paws? Dylan wasn't sure.

He sat crossed leg on the bare floor of his rented flat and opened the clasps on the case. He reached inside and took the Jericho horn out.

Didn't feel special. Just a dusty old horn that hadn't been used in a long time. He wondered if he blew would it even make a sound.

Nothing like trying out a theory.

He put it to his lips.

And blew.

The sound that came out was like someone was throwing rocks at a cat.

And this is supposed to be the musician's dream? This is supposed to break down the walls and get me to where I want to be?

Dylan turned the Jericho horn over in his hands.

How in hell did this thing work? Dawson hadn't given any tips, any guidance. So what to do?

He put the horn to his lips again.

Okay, maybe I make a wish and then blow the birthday candles out?

Dylan closed his eyes.

He pursed his lips.

I wish I had an audience for my music.

He blew.

The sound was smoother now, melodic. But it didn't have anything to do with him.

Nothing at all.

Dylan opened one eye, then another, then stopped breathing.

The song continued with no air coming from his lips, no breath being blown through the mouthpiece.

Dylan's pounding heart accompanied the song with a drumbeat that would have made the late great Keith Moon jealous.

He jerked the singing trumpet away from his lips and dropped it to the floor.

It continued to blow without his lips attached.

Dylan scooted back toward the wall.

Now this was wrong, wasn't it? Horns didn't blow themselves. They couldn't.

Musician's dream or nightmare, he wasn't sure anymore.

The horn continued to sing, to blow hard and melodic, a tune that was part mysticism and the great *Satchmo* resurrected.

Is this what he meant by breaking down walls?

Nope, couldn't be. The walls, although damp and in need of something strong to keep them together, were still intact.

Then invisible walls?

Trouble with anything invisible was that you couldn't see it.

The music stopped.

Dylan looked at the trumpet in the middle of the floor as though it were a sleeping dog ready to wake from some terrible nightmare and bite him.

He kicked at it.

The trumpet span then came to a dead stop with no musical twittering.

Hallucination? Well, he hadn't eaten much that day, and he'd drunk less. That kind of starvation could play tricks on the brain.

Not a trick.

The musician's dream, just as Dawson had told him. But what of that dream? Was this it? A lonely trumpet that played itself in the middle of a lonelier room?

No, couldn't be. He was doing something wrong here. He just didn't have the right

abracadabra, he hadn't rubbed this thing the right way.

And when you do, what then?

More music that isn't your own? More strangeness? Not much else?

What did he have to lose?

He reached out for the trumpet with eyes closed, felt his way around the instrument and placed it at his lips again.

Blow?

He pursed his lips, thought of *Satchmo*, that magical old bullfrog, and he blew.

The music came again, but this time his own, something he'd written once and been told to forget.

But different somehow.

He took the trumpet from his lips and looked it over.

The music stopped. No solo without his lips now.

He put the trumpet back to his lips, blew again.

The tune came.

And came.

And was the best he'd heard from his own lips or those of anybody else's, including *Satchmo*.

So this was it? This was the wall taken down, to be able to play this well?

Yes.

Yes!

He had to admit it, this was a music that would find its audience with little help. This was a music that even publishers might like.

But not without a test.

No, he wouldn't not shed any tears over any more keys in any more offices until he knew for sure.

He packed the trumpet away, tucked the case beneath his arm and left the flat without bothering to close the door.

He found the street alive, drunk with songs, the kind of songs a cat might reject out of hand.

But those songs and the buskers who made cat song out of them didn't matter.

Not now.

He lay the case down on the ground, took out the trumpet.

Am I really going to do this?

He was.

Dylan pursed his lips and blew.

The sound was pure delight. He was lost, enjoying the music just as if he were set apart and listening.

But was anybody else?

He risked a peek and they were there.

People.

Not just people, a crowd. Happy faces watching, feet tapping, heads bobbing.

An audience. For the first time in years a real, honest-to-goodness audience.

He wanted to cry and laugh at the same time, but he dared not take his lips away from the Jericho horn and break this joyous moment in time.

So he closed his eyes and continued.

This was it, Dawson had been right. The walls had come down and the musician's dream had been made reality.

He blew some more. And yet some more.

There was no ache, no shortness of breath, no fear.

He could have gone on forever, but there had to be a stop. For when the stop came he could run, find one of those publishers who'd done so much to crush dreams. He would find them and blow the Jericho horn and then he would make them beg for his music.

The future spread out before him.

And the past was right there in front.

As he stopped the audience cheered for more. He was about to take a bow when he saw the

woman step out from the crowd. She glanced over her shoulder, then back to Dylan.

"What is it you think you're doing?" she said.

"Sorry?" he said.

"That, that... noise you're making. Are you mad or just high on something?"

"Noise? You're joking aren't you?"

She folded her arms. "I don't know if you know this, but people around here don't like people like *you* making that... that noise. There are businesses, you know, people out trying to have a good time."

"*They* seem to like this noise," he said, pointing the trumpet at the still cheering crowd.

She looked behind her.

"They? They who?"

"*Them*, are you blind?" He stalked past her toward the crowd. "Look, here. Look at all these...
"

His sentence finished as he walked through one, then two, then three members of the crowd as though passing through a spring rain.

"Who?" the woman called out after him.

"They... " he said, but now he was seeing, feeling what was happening here.

He pushed his hand and the trumpet through the air, and through the top half of a clapping woman.

He waved it the other way and it sliced through the misty audience without any resistance.

"Well? Are you going to move on and take that caterwauling thing with you or do I have to call the police?"

"I... I... I'm... "

No, this wasn't possible. This was all wrong. This wasn't the dream he had been promised. This wasn't the audience he'd wished for.

Dylan ran.

And when he stopped he dropped to the ground.

Who had he been playing for? Who were that audience back there on the street? Ghosts?

The dead?

Yes, the dead. Spirits. The wrong kind of crowd to appreciate his work. The dead would never buy enough CD's to sustain a musician's career.

He lay his back against a wall and sat there drowned in his own thoughts.

It was the end, he knew that now. The walls were down, the wish had come true, just as Dawson had told him.

He peeled his arm back and readied to throw the trumpet.

What use was it now? What good could possibly come from...

He put it to his lips.

Well, he thought, an audience was an audience, a clap was a clap even if it came from hands that shouldn't really make a sound.

That's what he'd wanted after all, a simple wish.

He blew.

And that's what he got.

The dead came.

They clapped.

They cheered.

Dylan had his audience.

Sights a Bird

*She sights a Bird - she chuckles -
She flattens - then she crawls -
She runs without the look of feet -
Her eyes increase to Balls -*

-Emily Dickinson

For what was the use of nine lives if you could not risk at least one of them in the service of adventure? And what was the night if not for searching and sniffing and discovery? And what of the city if not newly discovered each and every night?

From midnight to sunrise, the city belonged to Zelda, and all its mystery was there to be found. A million pirate treasures, and everywhere an X upon the map. But which X to choose?

Choices, choices, and yet none too clear. What she needed was the bird's eye view, but without feathers or flight there was none to be had. Unless...

A shadow in amongst shadows, Zelda purred her way to Montmarte and there took a perch upon the Church of Saint Pierre to see the city from above and find her adventure.

The lights of a million and more souls were bright that night. They loved and laughed and talked and drank and where they could they smoked as others had smoked in secret rooms thick with ideas.

But the humans did not concern her. She had left the humans behind to find something more on the streets of Paris.

Maybe a kindred spirit, another cat to tandem the adventure? Or a sleeping dog to wake, and run out the rest of the night in chase? Or... a snack?

A black and white flutter of wings caught Zelda's narrow emerald eyes.

A magpie, fat and round.

Supper in flight. A meal fit for a King, and most definitely this Queen of the Night.

Zelda licked her lips and jumped.

She followed the bird as a ancient wise man might have followed a bright star. From Montmartre to the foot of the Eiffel Tower, where the black-and-white star fell to perch upon a sign for river tours along the Seine.

The bird watched her.

She watched the bird.

How many times had she played this *Sylvester-and-Tweety* game? Unlike the cartoons she watched with amusement in the apartment of her owner, Sylvester always won when it came to the world beyond the television. But there was something new about this night and this game.

Zelda, belly flat against the ground, the blood of the Savannah deep in her ancestral blood, approached her quarry.

The bird, unafraid, did not flutter or fly.

Zelda paused.

What was this now? Why no flight, why no dropped feathers or chirping? Bird and cat, the oldest of enemies, night and day. But not on this night.

The answer was human and close by.

An artist with brushes in hand and canvas as blank as any novelist's first page, provided the needed comfort for the bird, still watching. He smiled and reached down to pat Zelda upon the head, tracing the contour down to her back.

"Well, well. And why do you visit me on such a night, little kitty?" he said.

Zelda struggled to free herself, but the artist's hand stroked the secret spine beneath the fur. That place where, once touched, triggered purrs and sleep.

She purred.

"I see," the artist said, divining meaning in the sound, "you are here as I am, to see the city under different light. To capture beauty and hold it, yes?"

Zelda wagged her head, a no as universal as mathematics.

“Then you already know the city, yes? You come here not to discover, but to find something new? Adventure, I would wager.”

Zelda curled her spine around the artist's fingers and felt the chemical electric energy of the man and the art. A dreamer he was, unafraid to dream. A story writing itself in life. A story she would have loved to hear any other time.

But not this time.

She curled her way from his stroke.

His hand returned, tickling the secret trigger behind her ear.

Zelda let out a frustrated and pleasurable purr.

“And I'll wager you're wondering why any man would come out under such conditions to paint?” The artist said. “You wonder is there art without light or a blue sky above? How does one see the muse in the darkness?”

She did not wonder, for the city and its people were art under even the darkest night sky. Her wonder turned to the bird. Had it taken to the skies while she was trapped under the artist's fingers?

Zelda turned her head enough to see the bird, silent and unmoved as a taxidermist's pride possession.

Why do you not move, she wanted to say, but instead her animal language was cut short by the hand of the artist by her side.

"I have answers to the questions, little kitty. The muse is here, she has arrived, and you shall be that muse on this fine night. You shall be the inspiration and subject. Do you agree?"

Zelda purred, which was neither a yes or no, but the artist found meaning anyway.

He lifted her up by the belly and framing the Eiffel Tower and the night with one hand, he placed her within that frame. He wagged a finger at her as though she were a common dog.

"Sit still now, long enough for the wine to warm me and the paint to dry."

The artist poured wine and supped a glass dry while he dipped brushes into fresh tar-thick oils.

“Good kitty.”

Without his touch, Zelda lost her purrs and replaced them with a hiss.

How dare he treat me as a dog! I’m a Queen of this night. This is my city. I speak with her and she speaks to me. Pfft! Let him paint thin air and get too drunk on that wine to see straight.

Zelda cocked her head at the artist and faced the bird.

“Wait, Kitty, wait!” the artist called.

But Zelda did not listen.

No creeping left, she stalked forward.

“Well now, bird,” she purred, “do you not fear me?”

“Fear?” The bird chirped. “Why should I fear you, cat? You are too far away to leap. Your claws are retracted.”

“I move fast,” Zelda purred.

"And I fly faster."

"Shall we see?"

"We shall."

Zelda leaped into the air.

The bird fluttered its wings.

Claws out, she swiped, but found nothing but the same air she'd left the artist with.

The bird was gone.

Into the sky.

Hours burned away to dawn, but still she could not find the bird. Where had that black-and-white snack found its perch, Zelda wondered? And why so brave? None of their kind had been so brave before this night.

None so brave, and none so quick either. None who had beat her as she leaped. None before who had managed to escape.

All wrong.

It had to be fixed.

But how, when she could not find the bird, nor sniff its scent upon the night winds? And what if the bird escaped once more? What if she leaped too soon, found only thin air again?

The shame of the bird's victory would haunt her as she haunted the night streets. How could a cat, a Queen of this night, hold her head up high in company when a simple bird had bested her?

She could not.

Home then?

To the apartment and there curl up and forget this night and the adventure that almost was? Warm, safe. But not happy.

There would only be happiness when her mouth was stuffed with feathers, and she licked the last of that bird from her fangs.

A determined scowl upon her face, Zelda followed the night toward *Le Pont du Caroussel*. There she froze.

At one end of the bridge, as still as a statue, the bird waited. Watched. Unmoved by the

couples that strolled by, or the presence of a hungry cat.

Blind luck?

Or did the bird wait for her?

Zelda approached at a unhurried pace.

The bird moved only to preen its feathers.

Closer and Zelda purred a question.

"Why do you wait here, bird?" she said.

The bird eyed her with a contemptible look.

"To rest, cat, to rest. Do you not rest as I?"

Zelda sat, eyeing the bird for weakness, but could find none.

"When the afternoon sun is hot I will take my rest, let that sun warm my belly."

"Then you understand why I must rest, cat," the bird said.

"There is no sun."

"But there is the journey."

"The journey?"

The bird flapped its wings.

Zelda felt her heart jump, her muscles tense, ready for action.

The bird remained steadfast.

"From here to there, there to here I travel. Between I take my rest where I can find it."

Zelda smiled.

"You think you can find rest in my presence?"

The bird, its beak twisted as only a bird's beak could, smiled right back.

"I am not frightened of you, cat. I have escaped once before, or have you forgotten?"

Zelda scowled.

This was not about rest, but a game, she was sure. A game that the bird liked to play and, to her annoyance, was winning. At that moment she would have traded eight of her nine lives just to hold the bird in her claws for a moment.

"Once, bird," Zelda said, "and only once. The next time you won't be so fortunate."

"There will be a next time?" the bird said.

"I vow it."

“Vows are not always kept, cat. After this night I may never see this city again. Then what? How will you find me?”

Zelda opened her mouth to purr a response, but was struck dumb by the bird’s questions.

If the bird was passing through, how would she find it again? How could she make good on the promise she’d made herself? You could not play cat and bird without the bird.

But an idea formed, a plot, a plan of action.

“Tell me, bird, why is your visit so brief? Do you not live here in the city.”

“I call many cities my home, cat. Many places. I have travelled continents from sunset to sunrise. I have followed great rivers and seen the oceans. I have... ”

As the bird recalled its greatness, Zelda inched forward. Closer, closer still. She wore a mask of interest even as her mind prepared the feast to come.

“... I have seen the moon rise over Bologne, Berlin and Biarritz. I have seen the sun fade behind the Alps and... ”

She was within a paws reach of the bird now. No mistakes this time. Soon she would find feathers and blood.

“... I have... ”

Zelda leaped.

Into the arms of a smiling man.

“Hello there!” he called.

A woman joined him.

“What have you there, Philipe?”

Philipe, for that was the man’s name, twirled Zelda around in a dizzying rush.

“Why, I have a witness to our ceremony, Marla, what we could not find anywhere else!”

“Will this kitty-kat do?” Marla said.

“Man or beast, it will do just fine. What do you say, kitty-kat?” Philipe leaned in close to Zelda’s face.

The stench of strong wine and cigarettes filled Zelda's delicate nostrils, made her whiskers twitch. She twisted, but could not see the bird any longer. She clawed, but Philipe held her fast within his arms.

"Do we do it here, Philipe?" Marla said.

"Here, under this Paris sky is as good a place as any." Philipe tickled Zelda's stomach. "And our marriage shall be blessed by you. You shall be our priest, best man, bridesmaid all rolled into a cute little bundle. Won't you now?"

Zelda saw now the humans in their folly. One dressed in white veil, the other in tuxedo and black tie. Ready for an impromptu wedding upon the bridge.

"You start, Philipe," Marla said.

Philipe cleared his throat. "Do you, Marla Robicheaux take this man, Philipe Dumont to be your lawfully wedded husband."

"I do," Marla said, her voice a chuckle. "And do you, Philipe Dumont take Marla Robicheaux to be your lawfully wedded wife?" Marla added.

“I do, a thousand times, yes,” Philipe said.
“And now the kiss.”

He leaned toward Marla, but Marla leaned away.

“No ring, no kiss,” she said.

“Yes, the ring!”

His grip loosened as he transferred Zelda into a cradle of his left arm and searched his pockets for the ring.

Zelda saw her chance.

She saw her victory.

The bird had not taken flight. Laughing, it stood upon the bridge as fixed as it had been moments before. Enjoying its victory.

Not for much longer.

Zelda scratched her way free and jumped.

This time the bird had no chance.

Zelda pinned it to the bridge with both paws, a smile exposing her fangs.

“You were saying?” she said.

The bird, trapped under claws, talked in rapid chirps.

“Leave me be and I’ll tell you a secret,” it said.

Zelda eyed her midnight snack with suspicion.

“I know all the secrets of the city, you cannot tell me anything I do not already know.”

“This you do not know. I promise.”

“I know the spirit of this city, bird, she is a woman and she talks to me come midnight. Do you think there is a secret that I do not know once that woman whispers into my ears? You cannot say anything that will stop me.”

The bird struggled out words. “That may be true and good, but the city is not the world, cat.”

Zelda pushed down hard.

“You talk in riddles.”

“Let up your paws and I shall speak more plainly.”

“And let you fly away? No, I’m not so trusting. Fool me once—”

"Then only one paw, so that I might breathe a little more easily."

"One paw?"

"Only one, I can't fly away if you have one paw on me, can I?"

Zelda had her victory under foot, and the bird was right, it could not fly away if she had only one of her paws fixing it to the bridge.

She lifted one paw off the bird's throat.

"Talk," she said.

The bird coughed.

"I will talk, and I will tell you that this city maybe yours, but the world is ours, cat. From village to town to city we birds carry with us dreams."

Zelda's claws itched for action, but she stalled the instinct.

"Dreams?"

"A man in Lyon looks up to the moon and wishes he were in Paris with his love. A girl in Bologne falls asleep wishing for her father to return from a business trip. We birds hear all

dreams and repeat them to the ears of those who wish to listen."

"Nonsense."

The bird preened its feathers hesitantly.

"I tell you no lies. Have you woken to bird song before, cat?"

"I have heard that cacophony once too often."

"Then you have heard dreams. You have heard wishes made and repeated. Birdsong is telegraph for wishes. Asked and answered."

"Prove it."

The bird fluttered under paw.

Zelda readied herself to fix it once again with her claws to the old stone of the bridge.

"No, hold your claws, cat. I can prove myself. Do you not find it strange that you found me on this night?"

"Strange is that it took me so long to beat you."

"Think, cat, you did not find me, it was the other way around."

“Nonsense.”

The bird tried to wag its head, but with paws in the way it managed only shiver.

“You live with Karin Saint, do you not? She is an artist, a painter. A dreamer.”

Zelda’s emerald eyes flashed with suspicion.

“How do you know this?”

“I carry her wish with me, her dream, cat.”

Zelda swiped an angry paw so close to the bird’s face that a feather jarred loose and drifted away to the waters below.

“You lie,” Zelda said.

“This is no lie. Kill me, cat, and you kill a wish.”

“What wish?”

The bird almost laughed, but thought better and killed the laugh half way through.

“If I tell you then you will kill me and take the wish yourself.”

“And how, pray, would I take this wish?”

"You are wiley, cat, an admirable foe. You would find a way."

Zelda leaned in closer, questions tumbling in her mind.

"You said that you found me, what does that mean?"

The bird turned away, and a blush crossed its beak.

"I was lost," it said in a low chirp. "I meant to follow you home to your owner and then tell my secret."

"A lie," Zelda said.

"Why would I wait here, at the tower? Why would any bird not take to the sky when faced with a cat? I tell no lies."

Zelda hated the logic of the bird's words, but they made sense. Not a game then, but something more. Could it be that this black-and-white feast was telling the truth?

"If what you say is truth, then what do we do now, bird? I will not let you go."

“Let me go, and I will not fly, I promise. I will sit upon your back and you will take me to your owner, then you will see. If I’m lying then you will know once we get to her.”

“You are crazy.”

“And you would sacrifice your owner’s happiness for a meal, would you, cat?”

She would not, for that was home and after a night spent wandering and listening to the city, she always had a place to curl up, food in the dish, and stroking whenever she pleased.

But to trust the bird?

How could she, after the chase, after the taunts and the earlier stand-off? If the bird was lying then she would no longer be Queen Zelda of the Paris night, but just another cat, shamed to a life of dustbins and low company. The city would not whisper its secrets to her if she was beaten by a bird.

Zelda lifted her paw.

“Fly and I will find you, bird. The next time I will not waste so much time with your words.”

"Understood," the bird said.

For a moment the bird did not move, even free from Zelda's paw.

Then it fluttered its wings, beat them three or more times, hopped onto its feet and shrugged away loose feathers.

"Are you ready, cat?" the bird said.

"You were telling the truth?" Zelda said.

"Turn around and you will find out."

"Turn?"

"Turn."

Zelda, nervous and feeling foolish, turned. This was insane, the bird would take to the skies any moment now and everything would be lost.

The night wind touched Zelda's raised fur.

And not long after, so did the bird.

Perched upon the ledge she watched her owner's sleeping body as it woke to the bird song outside the window.

Watched as stretched from sleep, her owner walked to the phone and picked it up. Then listened as a wish became true.

“Zelda! Zelda! Did you hear, did you hear!” the owner said, running to the window, there to pull Zelda into the air and a joyous, twirling dance. “I was too afraid to call, but I just had to, it was... the gallery. Did you hear? They bought my paintings, all of them, they were just waiting for me to call!”

The dance continued.

Somewhere beyond the window, in the Paris morning, birds sang their morning songs. Each a wish about to come true.

The Smell of Roses

"Do you smell that?" Forbes said, moving toward the cockpit and the pilot, Marlboro.

"Smell what?" Marlboro said. He sniffed at the air, shrugged in Forbes' direction. "The air is recycled, did you forget while you were in stasis? Doesn't smell like *real* air, not even when they mix that *real* pine in with the rest. That what you mean? You only just noticed the pine in the air, Forbes?"

Forbes stalked forward, nose in the air like a curious dog.

"No, no, it's not that. Smells like..." He sniffed. "Flowers? Yeah, flowers."

Marlboro shook his head and laughed. "Six hours out of stasis and you're already acting like a kook. Just sit down and relax will you.' He motioned toward the co-pilot seat.

Forbes turned, his nose pointed up toward the bottom of the cruiser.

"No, I'm definitely smelling flowers here. Tulips maybe."

"Tulips? When did you *ever* smell tulips? *Where* did you ever smell tulips?"

Forbes continued his sniffing. "Definitely tulips," he said.

"Are you listening to me?" Marlboro said. "Forbes? Will you stop this nonsense and sit down. I'm no longer asking you as a friend, but as your Captain."

Forbes wagged his head and tramped over to his seat. He dropped heavily into the co-pilot's position and barely flinched as the auto-belts wrapped around his chest and midriff. His gaze was faraway when there was no faraway to see within the cruiser.

"Better now?" Marlboro asked.

Forbes fixed his eyes on the screens in front where a series of numbers, lines and geometric shapes represented the crowded, yet empty blackness of space. He watched but he did not see the *toings* and *froings* of that computer generated cosmos.

That smell, it was so strong, so... .real.

"Better?" Forbes parroted the question.

"Stasis, that's what it is. When I first came out I had a craving for lobster. You know when I last ate lobster?"

Forbes shrugged. "When?" he asked.

"When I was eight years old, that's when. My grandfather was a fisherman, he used to drag the wharf for lobsters. Once a week he'd bring a few home, Sundays most times and he'd boil 'em up in the kitchen. God but they were delicious, not like the *Replo* we get now. No, they were *real*, there was something just... and the butter. When Gramps would smear the butter over the... " Marlboro's usually stoic features melted just like the butter on those remembered lobsters. His grey steel eyes seemed, if only for a moment, to soften. And then he blinked the steel back into them. "Look at me here, getting all sentimental for something I know I can never have again. It's stasis is all, for both of us, and everyone reacts different. For some it's a smell,

others a taste, but you always bring something new out with you."

Forbes glanced over his shoulder.

He wondered if the rest of the crew would have the same experience? A two year dream for all of them. Man and woman mimicking Snow White, waiting for the Princely kiss of the computer to wake them.

"What about the rest?" Forbes said.

"They'll be up and around very soon, you and me we were revived first to take the ship under control. That's how it works, you leave your training behind along with your brain?"

"No, I... I meant the smell. Will they experience the same? What I mean is; none of us experienced this effect on the way *out* to Mars, sir. Why is it happening now and why only to me?"

Marlboro punched buttons and whispered secretly into his button mic. He turned to Forbes.

"We're half a day out from the Moon, a few hours after we'll be back on Earth, Focus on that,

will you. Focus on the questions we're going to face from the Cohort about what we saw on Mars. I need you *all here* Forbes, these last hours are always the most crucial."

Forbes nodded.

But no matter how hard he tried to ignore the smell, it was still in the air. And it still worried him, more so because he couldn't remember exactly where he'd smelled the smell before. That thought alone was a distraction, and one he couldn't let the Captain see.

"I'm fine now," Forbes said, "ready to go."

"Good. I don't need you to lose your control now. A lot of what we achieved and will achieve is due in good part to your efforts, Forbes."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Then you can go see to the rest of the crew. They should be emerging from stasis within the half hour."

"Yes, captain."

Forbes fingered the air above his chest and the auto-belts retreated with a soft hiss. He stood and gave the Captain a weak smile.

How could he explain how those smells were affecting him, how his gut churned and butterflyed every time he picked up a whiff of that summer fragrance? The Captain would think him mad. Just another stasis victim waking from a nightmare into another, but that's where the road forked.

This wasn't a nightmare.

This was a dream. A good dream, one that you never wanted to wake from, and it was there in that fragrance. It was there every time Forbes sniffed the air.

Before he'd turned, the smell hit him again.

Fresh summer flowers. If he closed his eyes he might be back on earth, walking in one of the preserved Dome gardens. The fragrance of extinction all around him.

He resisted the urge to sniff and forced himself to walk to the front of the cruiser.

Out of Captain Marlboro's view, he stopped, closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

Summer.

But now the dream scent had focus, changed. Forbes knew what and where.

A summer ten years earlier, he'd been fifteen at the time. Yes, it was the first summer away from home. The first summer he'd felt as though the future belonged to him and was not under the control of his parents.

And there, before him, the rippling water of a lake.

Forbes opened his eyes and tried to steady his breath.

It had been so real. In that moment, eyes closed, the cruiser was gone, the clean air and the stasis chambers, the clean whites and soft man-made corners had disappeared. He had been there, stood on the shore of that summer so long ago.

But how?

A smell couldn't make you remember, could it? It couldn't trigger such vivid hallucinations.

But oh what an hallucination it had been. Standing there in that long forgotten summer and experiencing it all again. He'd thought he would never have a summer so good, never experience again the heat of first kisses and the heartbreaking chill of parting.

Close your eyes, he told himself. Give yourself a few more minutes back there in that time.

No, I mustn't. The captain is relying on me. I can't just neglect my duties, it wouldn't be—

Forbes closed his eyes.

He stood upon the lake shore. A bright afternoon sun warmed his skin, damp grass caressed his bare feet. He giggled. He reached down and picked up a flattened stone and tossed that stone a few times into the air.

Now, I know I'm supposed to do something with this, but just what?

And then he remembered.

Forbes drew his arm back and let the stone fly.

It skipped once, twice, three times before sinking with a *plop* into the clear waters of the lake.

Forbes reached for another, then stopped.

There was more to this hallucination than he'd bargained. More memories, and now, now he placed that familiar yet unfamiliar flowered scent in amongst the glorious day.

A girl.

A girl with a single rosebud tucked in behind her ear.

She walked toward him across the green grass, the smell of her, the smell of the rose behind her ear as she came in close to kiss him, all of this filled him with a tingling excitement.

Her name? What was her name?

Vonda?

Calista?

He wanted to speak but could not.

What was her name? If only he could...

No, no, he remembered now.

Valerie.

Oh, how wonderful it had been back then. To be with her before life had become complicated. When Mars and the Moon were distant, exciting dreams, not necessities. Not last chances.

And she was closer now, closer than he'd ever thought she would be again.

He perfect lips parted.

She spoke.

"Forbes! What's gotten into you? Why are you standing there?"

Forbes eyes jerked open.

Captain Marlboro stood before him, hands on hips, his face set hard and uncompromising.

"I asked you to see to the crew and you're stood there with your eyes closed and a look on your face like you've just won a prize. What are you playing at?"

How could he tell the captain what he experienced? Would anybody believe that it was possible?

Forbes doubted it.

"I was...I felt a little tired," he said.

"And do you often sleep standing up, is that it, Forbes?"

Forbes lowered his head like a chastised schoolboy. "No, sir."

"Then what were you doing just now? If you're tired, take a nap, don't fall asleep in the middle of the gangway. Is that even possible?"

'Yes, sir. I mean, no sir... it's not possible but... '

Marlboro shook his head. "Calm down, Forbes. What is it, are you tired now?"

"No, sir."

"Then go, do your duty man and stop acting the fool."

They hadn't saluted each other since long before the mission, but Forbes snapped his hand sharply up to his forehead now.

"Yes, sir," he said and turned on his heels.

All the way to stasis he felt Marlboro's eyes stuck to his back, but once the doors had shut and he stood before the stasis bunks he forgot all about Marlboro.

What he saw in front of him could make any man forget such petty exchanges.

Casper, Dwight, Felix and Bardot were out of the bunks and stood in the middle of the chamber. Each crew member in turn had their faces pointed up toward the ceiling as though they were taking in a warm afternoon's sunshine. Each crew member had a dreamy smile upon their lips.

What was this? An epidemic just beginning? A disease that had spread as they slept their dreamless stasis sleep?

What else could it be? There was no denying that they were lost in in similar summer hallucinations to those Forbes had experienced. They were acting as he had, he knew that. Those looks upon their faces, those were the looks of men and women enjoying themselves under a

bright sun, there was no other way to describe them.

He stepped forward, only to step back.

He would not wake them, for what if this was like sleepwalking? Would it be dangerous to break such a trance? What if something went wrong?

Marlboro woke you, didn't he? He shouted at you and nothing went wrong when you snapped out of that living dream.

But he *couldn't* wake them, not knowing what they were experience. How could he stop them from having the same kind of joy as he'd had moments before?

You'll jeopardize the whole mission, you know that? Who knows what this thing is. Who knows what might happen next? You're a crewman, part of this team, you can't ignore your duty. You can't just walk away.

Forbes knew he couldn't walk away.

He ran.

He barrelled along the gangway and before he could hit the crosswalk, he hit something else much more solid.

Marlboro.

The two men dropped to the ground.

"Sorry, sorry, it's my fault, sir," Forbes said as he pulled the Captain up from the ground.

"What in fury has you running, Forbes? What's wrong?"

Forbes glanced over his shoulder.

From here he couldn't see the stasis room, nor see the crew happy in their hallucinations. But he knew without his interruption their hallucinations would continue. That their summer would last a lot longer than his had.

And he knew he couldn't keep it from the Captain for long.

"The crew," Forbes said, "they're in a trance, they're...I can't explain what it is. But...well, it's like... you know when you found me... but... "

Marlboro dropped a hand onto Forbes shoulder and squeezed.

"Slowly now, don't get so excited. What is happening with the crew?"

"They're...you've got to see this, captain, it's...well, I think the same was happening to me. I wasn't tired, I was hallucinating, only it felt too real to be... I think it's a disease, or something...I don't know."

'What was happening to you?' Marlboro said, leaning in closer.

Forbes tried to turn, but the captain had a firm grip.

"Back there, when I said I was sleeping, I wasn't. It was...that smell, when I smelled the flowers, then I was..." He didn't know how to say this, it was impossible, too strange to be believed.

"In another place?" Marlboro said.

"Yes, I...how do you know?" Forbes said.

Marlboro sighed, shook his head and took his hands from Forbes' shoulders.

"I didn't want it to happen this way," he said.

"Captain?"

"We were supposed to arrive back on the colony just as was scheduled, but this...this...well, they never said it would be as serious as this."

"I don't understand," Forbes said.

Marlboro gestured toward the front of the cruiser.

"Walk with me, Forbes," he said.

They walked.

Back in the cockpit, Marlboro dropped heavily into his seat. He closed his eyes.

"Lobsters," he said.

Forbes got closer, leaned over the Captain's chair.

"Captain, what are you talking about?"

Marlboro's eyes popped open.

"See, I was nearly there myself, nearly, but I've been fighting it the last twenty four hours. Every time I think of that old time, every time I smell those damn things it's so easy to slip back. So easy to forget and let it wash over you."

Had the same hallucinations plagued the captain, Forbes wondered? It looked that way.

"Do you mean you've been experiencing the same?" Forbes asked. 'How long has this been going on?"

"Did you not hear me, man? The last twenty-four hours I've been running around this damned ship trying to keep my eyes open, trying not to slip away."

"What is it, captain? What's going on here?"

Marlboro dropped forward and buried his head into his hands.

"I thought if I could get one of you to ignore it, to fight against it then we'd be okay, we'd make it back to the colony. But it's all lost now, it's all lost,' Marlboro said into his hands.

Forbes put a hand on the captain's shoulder.

"It's not lost, sir, there must be something we can do?"

Slowly, Marlboro emerged from his hands and looked into Forbes's eyes. A sadness pulled on Marlboro's face.

"How long do you think you're going to last, Forbes? What, what was it for you? A lost love? The most perfect moment of your life repeated over and over again? Was it a time, a place, or both?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir, I –"

"Yes you do, Forbes! Don't lie to me. I saw you out there, I saw you smiling, your eyes closed. You were back in time, some perfect moment that you never wanted to leave. Be honest with me now, there's no need to lie anymore."

"Okay, yes, but I snapped out of it. I came out of it, surely if I can do it then we all—"

"You really think you can snap the rest of them out of this? Do you really think you can fight this?" There was no hope in Marlboro's tone.

Forbes didn't know what he was actually supposed to fight. How did you fight a scent, a cherished memory? Was it a leak, something they'd picked up on Mars and brought back with them?

"I don't know what I'm fighting, sir. Do you know, have you any idea what—"

The captain let out a grating laugh. "You can't fight this, nobody fights this, Forbes. There's nothing you can do, don't you think I've tried everything I could think of already?" He dropped back into his hands and this time it wasn't laughter but sobs that came out. "I broke free long enough to touch the panels, I could do that, I managed to set the course, but I'm slipping, I can't hold on much longer. We'll crash into the colony, Forbes, we'll crash right into them.'

Forbes grabbed Marlboro by the shoulders. He pulled the Captain's head upward.

He let loose a slap the sound of which echoed around the cockpit.

"Stop it," Forbes said, "you're the captain. There must be something we can do. There must be —"

Marlboro stared into Forbes's eyes and smiled.

"It's over, Forbes. Close your eyes, enjoy that perfect moment while you can. Enjoy it because there's no way you can stop what is happening now."

"No sir, no! Stay with me," Forbes said shaking Marlboro, "you've got to snap out of this."

"You don't understand," Marlboro said, "we're dead, Forbes. Dead, do you understand that? We've all been dead these last six months," he pointed to himself, "this, this is just something before we cross over. Before we close our eyes. We're ghosts, Forbes. Ghosts who can touch and taste and smell, but ghosts still the same."

"You're not making any sense, Captain," Forbes said.

"The only sense here is to close your eyes, live forever," Marlboro shut his lids, his nose twitched.

Forbes launched another slap.

"Wake up, explain what's happening here, tell me what's going on," Forbes said.

The Captain laughed.

"Dead, don't you get it? Six months ago the oxygen failed, we all died. We're ghosts, Forbes, not like back on earth, but something that lives out here in space. Something that shouldn't exist but does."

Forbes stomach tightened, but was it a stomach? If what Marlboro had said was true then there was no stomach or skin or anything of the flesh. They were all just walking mist, something that couldn't exist but did. And all of them together rattling toward a crash down on the Colony, there to make more ghosts.

"How? How is this possible, how can we be... it doesn't make sense," Forbes said.

"The smell, when you close your eyes, when you go to that perfect place, that's heaven, Forbes. That's where you go when you die. I think I figured some of it out. It's space, the change up here, we've been so far out that it takes longer. It's the gravity or the light or stasis, but from dead to the afterlife is different up here. Don't ask me how, I don't know how. I

never believed in an afterlife before, but just look... look at what's happening to us and find me some other explanation."

"It's impossible, it can't be true," Forbes said.

"Close your eyes and you'll see soon enough, go take a look at the crew again, go, look. Search the databases and the histories. I thought you would be the linchpin, that you would bring this whole thing around and get the ship down to the surface. But you couldn't, I was a fool, I was a..." He closed his eyes.

Forbes stepped away from the now smiling Captain.

This was madness, wasn't it? They couldn't be dead, could they? No, that made no sense.

He smelled flowers in the air. The smell of roses from a summer long forgotten. From somewhere far away in his past, a girl called his name.

"No," he shouted, "not yet. Not like this."

He ran to the stasis room and checked the history of the flight.

Marlboro was right.

The oxygen supply had failed while they slept. Six months without oxygen. Six months they'd all been dead.

Forbes staggered backwards.

He breathed, but he knew that he was wasn't breathing.

He smelled roses. A girl called his name from a perfect summer long ago. It would be so easy to answer, so easy to close his eyes and...

Forbes ran back to the cockpit and pulled Marlboro from his seat.

He sat, touched the controls, wondering all the while was he actually touching.

The Moon was in view now. A white circular line on the viewing screen before him. A few more hours and they would hit the orbiting path. Without anybody to guide the Cruiser down it would crash, it would hit the Colony.

Without any *body*.

Forbes opened his mouth and a song he'd thought forgotten hissed across his lips.

*I ain't got no body
And no body's got me*

He sang and he fought the lead weights upon his eyelids. He sang and time took forever to tick away, and all the while a girl called to him from a long ago summer. She called to him and offered joy and the warmth of a summer sun upon his cheeks.

The song changed, he made up new words to an old tune.

*Keep your eyes open
Keep them open till we know it's all right*

Desperate, in tears, Forbes tore at his uniform and rammed the shredded pieces into his nostrils. He blinked away the tears and carried on his song.

Keep your eyes open

Keep them open till we know it's all right

There was only a slight reprieve. Nostrils jammed with cloth or not, the smell returned, that summer smell of roses and with it, the voice of a first love.

Her voice drifting through time as the cruiser hit orbit around the Moon.

She called his name. He could smell summer. He could smell forever.

His lids drooped.

Forbes forced them open.

A few thousand feet to go. Just a few thousand feet and he could steer the Cruiser to a safe landing away from the Colony domes.

Her voice so sweet, so inviting, came to him, a stone skipping once, twice, three times across history.

Forbes felt the soft, damp grass between his toes.

The cruiser touched down.

Emergency crews rushed out across the surface of the Moon.

Forbes closed his tear-stained eyes.

He picked up a stone.

He threw it.

It skipped once, twice, three times and then sank with a *plop!*

When the Road Hits the Wheels

The car was in love, that was the only explanation.

But it was hard to get the showroom man to believe a word he was saying.

"Listen, I'm telling you, *that* car fell in love. Now I'm not blaming you, or the car, but that's how it is," Denis said.

The showroom man was tall and slick as oil. He moved like a snake approaching prey as he came toward Denis.

"I'm sure there must be some other explanation, sir. But it is only a car. A car cannot fall in love."

"Mine did," Denis said.

"Are you sure it wasn't stolen? We can cover the theft of a new car under your insurance terms quite easily. Have another one out to you in a matter of days."

The showroom man flashed his expensive white teeth that lived just beneath his reassuring smile.

Oh, it would have been so much easier if the car had been taken by some joyriding kids, but it wasn't like that. One day the car had been a faithful companion, the next, stricken by lust. The day after, ill from love.

"Listen to me; it wasn't stolen. I'd love to be standing here telling you that it was taken from me, but that's just not the case. It left of its own accord."

More white teeth, more smile, like a shark in front of an underwater film crew.

"But, sir, that's impossible? How could a car—"

"How? You gave it a brain, that's how."

The showroom man waved a chastising finger in time with a disbelieving head.

"Sir, if I may be so bold, the AI reacts to you and you alone. It's specifically designed to tailor

itself to *your* habits and requirements. Beyond that it has no other function.'

Oh, the showroom man was full of answers and shark grins, but Denis had his own answers, his own show to tell.

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out the locator.

"You know what this is, I assume?" he said.

"Yes sir, it's the locator for your car."

Denis switched it on, but kept the screen to himself.

"And what should be on the screen of this locator?" he said.

The showroom man reached for the device.

"If you'll just let me—"

"No, I want you to tell me what you think should be on here? What's the regular screen, when I call up the location of my newly purchased car?"

The showroom man put his hands behind his back, lifted his nose and said; "Well, of course it should tell you the location of your car."

"You're sure about that?"

"Of course, sir. It has only one function and that is to locate your car."

"Fine, fine. So maybe you can tell me where exactly *Roses are Red, Violets are Blue* is?" He turned the locator screen to the showroom man and showed him the offending text.

"Well, now..." The showroom man said, lowering his nose, confused. "...that's highly irregular and....maybe it's a software glitch, yes, some kind of..."

"I'm telling you it's not a glitch,' Denis said, "my car fell in love and now it's out there somewhere wooing whatever other automobile it set its sights on."

"No, sir, that can't possibly be..."

"Would you like me to go through the other two hundred verses of poetry I've found on this gadget since my car disappeared? Would you like to hear about *wandering lonely as a cloud* or maybe about how my car is unfolding *petal by petal*?"

“Well sir, no, but I don’t think there’s anything I can do that would–”

“You can find my car, that’s what you can do. You can find it, fix it and return it to me.”

The showroom man searched for a rescue in amongst the latest shining automobiles. There was no rescue.

“Well?” Denis said.

“Just a moment,” the showroom man said. “I’ll have to talk to my manager. Please, excuse me.”

The showroom man skirted away between the new and the old models, along the aisles of bright machines and pretty colours. Soon he returned with a more robust man, and smaller man beside him.

“Are you playing some kind of prank, sir?” the stocky man said.

“You’re the manager?”

“That would be me,” he said, growing a few centimetres with pride.

“Well, you listen to me. I bought this car in good faith to get me to and from wherever I wanted to go. You promised the AI would be top of the line, I paid extra for such a service. I did not pay for a lovesick machine that goes astray at the first sight of another shiny vehicle.”

“Is that what happened?”

“As far as I can make out, yes. One day I’m going to work as usual and the car stalls at the crossing. The lights flash, and across from me another similar car flashes back. After that it was chaos.”

The manger chewed the idea over but didn’t like the taste.

“It flashed its lights?”

“Yes, it did.”

“And this *other* car flashed back?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

The manager shook his head. “No, that’s not possible. The AI isn’t sophisticated. It’s basic, childlike in its functions.”

“It’s AI isn’t it? It learns? Maybe it learned to fall in love?”

Confused, the manager said; “Can you learn to fall in love? Is that how it happens? I would have thought that falling in love was one thing that *couldn’t* be learned.”

The showroom man shrugged his shoulders.

The manager glared at Denis.

“How do I know you’re not lying to me, sir?”

“And why would I lie?” Denis said. “I’ve had this car three weeks, and now I don’t have it any longer. That’s your problem now, not mine.”

“And how do we know you didn’t tamper with the computer, the software? Maybe you turned this car into...into whatever it is you’re saying it is?”

Denis laughed.

He knew before walking into the showroom that he’d have this kind of reaction. He’d been telling himself for the last few days that all this was madness. To let it go and tell them exactly what they wanted to hear. All he’d had to do

was walk into the showroom, report it stolen and the problem would be over with.

Over with was an exaggeration. *He* wouldn't be happy, *he* wanted to know the why of all this, and more importantly, the *how* of a car falling in love.

"Listen," he said, as calm as he could, "I'm not a love bureau and I have nothing to gain from my car going off and playing Romeo to some other car's Juliet. Don't you see that? What could I possibly gain from all this?"

That stumped the already stumpy man.

"Er...well, you could I suppose...you might..."

"My car is missing, it's run off, eloped, I have no idea where it is. Are you going to help me or not?" Denis said.

The manager had to think about that.

And the Showroom man shrugged again.

"Well?" Denis said.

"Okay, there's maybe one thing I can do, maybe," the manager said.

“And that would be?” Denis said looking at the two of them.

The Showroom man seemed as interested as Denis.

“There is?” he asked his boss.

The manager dragged them closer with a crooked finger.

“Now you didn’t hear this from me, neither of you, but there’s a way to find a car. A way that isn’t advertised.”

“I thought as much,” Denis said.

And the Showroom man said; “How, boss?”

“Follow me,” he said.

They followed, through the gleaming rows of new machines. Back to where the shine had faded. Through a hidden door that revealed a hidden graveyard of cars.

A warehouse of rusted machines and stripped down metal corpses lay before them.

“Well now,” Denis said, “this is a site to see.”

“How long has this been here? How come you never showed me this place before, boss?” the Showroom man said.

The manager faced them.

“Every shop, every store has a backroom. This is ours,” he said, waving at the dead cars, “but not so much a backroom, as an operating theatre, a morgue and mortuary all rolled into one.”

Denis stared at the cars that had lost their shine. Headlights dimmed, windows cracked and broken, rusted from bottom to top.

“A mortuary, a morgue, a clinic, now what are you talking about?” Denis said.

The manager walked to the nearest car and slapped it on the bonnet.

“I lied,” he said, ‘about not knowing what your problem was, sir. Have to lie when someone comes in with a problem like yours, can’t admit the truth straight of the bat or we’d lose customers.”

“What are you saying?” Denis said.

The manager nodded. "It's true, cars do fall in love, it happens all the time."

"They do?" Denis said, amazed,

The showroom man shook his head in disbelief. "They do?" he parroted.

The manager nodded. "Since they put the AI in twenty years ago it's been happening. Nobody knows why exactly, they revise the software, they iron out the bugs, they test, but it's the same every time. You give a car a mind and it does what the rest of us do, it loses it."

"I've never lost my mind," Denis said.

"You ever been in love?" the manager said.

Denis felt that same awkwardness creep over him like when his work colleagues asked him why he lived alone, or when was the last time he'd been on a date.

"Well now...I'm not sure if that's the kind of question...I can't say that it would help if..."

"No, right? Never really truly been in love. Because it's about as close to losing your mind

as you'll get without paying for the privilege. And you usually pay, believe me."

Denis walked over to the car and smoothed away a handful of dust from the bonnet, hoping like the dust, the niggling questions about love would disappear too.

"So what is it exactly you're saying?" he said.

"It's not only love that affects their brains. They get tired, depressed, they lose hope."

Denis laughed.

"Oh now I have heard everything. I was just about convinced that maybe, given the right circumstances and the wrong kind of malfunction, my car could fall in love. But hope? These cars lose hope, is that what you're telling me?"

The Showroom man came over.

"So why are they here, boss? Why do we keep them in this...place?"

"All of these specimens here have lost their will to live, they've lost their hope," the manager said.

Denis wiped some more of the dust from the top of the bonnet.

"How does a car lose hope?" he said.

"If you've never fallen in love, then you don't know what its like to fall back out again. When these cars get jilted or two-timed they limp their way back here. And we keep them. An asylum for the terminally depressed automobile, if you will."

Denis couldn't help the smile that grew on his face.

"You know," he said, "I was expecting the run-around, for you to throw me out on my ear. But here I am, stood in this...this graveyard of old cars having you tell me that all the mad things I believed are actually true. I mean, it's crazy, it has to be a prank or—"

"Are you disappointed? I thought you'd be the type who'd rather know the truth than believe a lie, was I wrong?" the manager asked.

The Showroom man rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I know what I am," he said, "confused."

The manager patted his worker on the back. "Don't you worry about it none. Sooner or later you would have been told. It would have been your job to come in here and administer the treatment when I was away on business."

"The what?" the showroom man said.

"The treatment?" Denis asked.

"Well, they're of no use to anyone like this are they? After a time if they haven't perked up, got themselves out of the rut, we wipe them clean. Start over."

At the mention of the word clean headlights brightened and flashed throughout the warehouse, then died again.

Denis stared at the cars.

He wondered if a car could fall in love, if it could lose hope, could it also be afraid?

Well of course.

Love, hope, fear, it was all part of the same unfathomable pulse that lay beneath the skin of a human being. And now, it seemed, beneath the polished metal of intelligent automobiles.

"How do you wipe them?" Denis asked.

The manager shrugged as though it was nothing. "We put them in the Wiper at the far end of the warehouse. A simple short burst of electricity that goes through the onboard chip and they're back to factory settings in no time. Takes a minute at most."

"It works?" Denis asked.

"Sure...well, most of the time."

"Most of the time?"

Denis stared into the manager's eyes.

"And when it doesn't?" He said.

"Well, that's rare enough as it is. If that comes up, we just send them out to scrap. Either which way, problem solved."

The headlights flashed and dimmed again in the cold hidden warehouse, clinic cum death-row cell.

Denis heard himself gulp.

He wanted his car returned, he wanted everything to be right again, but he wasn't sure he wanted something that could feel love to be

crushed or wiped clean. Didn't seem right, somehow, to crush a thing that loved and could be loved in return. The car had more right to life, he supposed, than his unloveable being.

"Now that you know all this, we'll get down to the bigger matter at hand," the manager said, "finding that rogue vehicle of yours."

He turned.

He walked.

The Showroom man followed.

And so did Denis, his eyes shifting from one car to the next, from one inquisitive headlight flash to another.

Were they watching?

Listening?

Did these cars know their futures, the future of a sibling out there in the world?

Denis didn't want to think about that.

He didn't want to know about hope, and love and fear, not in humans and definitely not in automobiles.

They entered another room, smaller, brighter and the manager sat in front of terminal.

“Each car has a separate tracker implanted, one the internal AI is not aware of. It’s only to be used in cases such as this, when an owner specifically requests the trace. You are requesting at trace, right?” The manager looked at Denis.

Denis tried not to force his smile, but he couldn’t help the grimace that spread on his face.

“You are sure?” the manager asked.

The Showroom man, his awe gone, leaned in to the screen before the manager. “This is expensive tech,” he said, “real under the counter stuff. Where did you get it from boss?”

The manager slapped his worker’s wrist.

“Don’t you touch any of that,” he said. “It is expensive, too expensive for you to ruin.”

Denis watched them.

He thought of running away from all this madness, maybe buying some unintelligent car

out there in the world, but it was too late now. The manager eyed him with suspicion.

“So, do I go ahead, or are you going to let that car do what it wants?”

With a growing queasiness in his stomach about the whole thing, Denis said; “Well, I...”

“One way or another, that car will come back here. Want to make it sooner or later?” the manager said.

Denis closed his eyes.

Could he really go through with this now after all he'd been shown.

Sooner or later?

Sooner.

“Okay,” he said, feeling like he was condemning someone to death.

Far from the dusty clinic of lost and faded automobiles, they found the love struck automobile.

“Just there,” the manager said, “over that crest. There it is.”

He carried with him a portable finder of madness, a bleeping, buzzing radar that located mechanical love gone astray.

Denis followed, not liking where this was going, or that he was along for the ride.

He'd only wanted the car back, not to have it shocked and wiped, the love erased as though it were nothing more than a glitch.

But that's where all this was leading, and where he followed.

Head hung low he dropped into step behind them, no words on his lips, but plenty in his mind.

“Thar she blows,” the manager said.

Below them on a stretch of road not yet completed, but almost halfway there was Denis's car. Beside was another model, the same but painted pink and blue.

“This should be easy enough,” the manager said.

Queasy, Denis stood atop the crest of the hill and stared at the cars. Watching, seeing them there as they blinked their headlights in tandem, rocked to a music that he might never understand, he knew the answer to an earlier question.

No, he'd never been in love. Never dared dream he might ever find someone. He'd given up on that reality for himself. But that didn't mean he couldn't wish that love for someone or some *thing* else.

His car had fallen in love. His car had achieved what had only ever been a dream of his, and never a reality. So how could a man having never experienced love deny that to any other person? Even if that person turned out to be a car.

Denis found words to place upon his wordless lips.

"Wait, just wait," he said.

The manager winked. "You're right, let them get closer together then we'll strike—"

Denis reached for the manager's arm and pulled.

"No, I'm mean stop this."

"Stop it, are you mad? If you keep making noise there'll be nothing to stop, they'll hear us."

Denis stared at the two cars on the halfway complete road. He heard their engines purring in time, their lights flashing in some kind of machine pillow talk.

And he knew he shouldn't have felt a thing. They were cars after all. Two big lumps of metal with no hearts beating, no brain to speak of, no blood or bones. But this was love, just as surely as he'd seen it from afar in the soft focus faces of people he did not know.

"Leave them be," he said to the manager.

"Now I know you're crazy. I'm not going to let such an expensive machine go just because you've suddenly gone soft, oh no, mister, I'm going to take that car back to the—"

Queasy, Denis tried to control himself, but he couldn't and he wasn't sure what he was feeling

now. It was a strong emotion, something as alien to him as love.

Was it compassion?

No.

Then empathy?

No, not that either.

He launched a fist at the manager and knocked him to the floor.

Now he knew what it was. He felt like a father, or maybe a mother, protecting a child from danger.

"Don't get up," he told the manager, and the manager nursing the new bruise on his chin wasn't about to disagree.

Denis faced the two cars.

They were blissful in their machine born love, ignorant of the fate being decided above them.

Denis raised a hand.

"Go!" he shouted. "Run! Run!"

Their engines spluttered, then growled.

Denis shouted again: "Run! Go!"

And he watched as they took off. Their wheels touching the road as if hands reaching out toward one another.

Fare Thee Well

Galveston stepped up to the viewing window and pressed his face against the cool surface.

There she was.

She looked well, not dying, not ready to die. Blue and in parts green. The perfect circle where he had come from and where he would never return.

Earth.

He sighed.

Ten minutes and they would jump away from the dying planet and to the moon, there to mimic what was passed, passing. Under domes they would make new oceans, new lands, a new Earth in miniature.

Only it would never be the same, he knew that. They could create oxygen with the lungs of giant machines, fill false oceans with duplicates, but it would never be home.

"Dear?" Alison said, tracing the back of his head with a gentle touch "Are you okay?"

"Just... thinking that's all."

She wrapped herself around him, her head on his back.

"Thinking?"

He shrugged.

"You ever wonder why?" he said.

"Wonder?"

"Why we let it get out of hand? Why we didn't try and stop it all?"

She snaked around him and came in under his arms.

"You've got to stop fretting over this. There's nothing to be done now except ready ourselves for the journey."

He looked beyond her to the spinning globe.

"I suppose," he said, "but just look at it. Why didn't we do something?"

She pulled his gaze back to her.

"We did, remember? It's not our fault."

"We should have done more."

She gave him a stern look. "We couldn't fix the problems they gave to us, no matter how hard we tried. You know that, deep down."

But did he? Was there something more that could be done? Maybe those giant lungs now breathing life onto the moon might have been used to do the same for the dying Earth? And the money, how many countless trillions fed the hungry machines that now sat on the surface of the moon? Where were the panickers and the last-minute gaspers when this all began? Where were they with their money back then?

His gaze returned to the Earth.

He'd spent years trying not to think about this moment, countless days spent dreaming of last minute reprieves. In his imagination something strange and wonderful would arrive seconds before they climbed into the rockets. There would be no Swan Songs, only joyful Crescendos.

But now, staring out through the cold glass, he knew those dreams would never be realities.

The last note had been played. The concert was over.

“I don’t know how to do this,” he said.

She kissed him again, but it was little comfort.

“Do what?” she said.

He placed a hand on the glass and did what even they could not do, vanished their home. Dead it was, but its corpse would forever tumble in the graveyard blackness of space.

“I’m not sure I can even describe it,” he said.

She took his hands in hers and squeezed them gently.

“I’ve been with you most of my life, I’ve loved you nearly as long as that, and in all those years I’ve never asked for special favours, never wondered about your secrets, but I’ve always asked you to tell me when you’re hurting. Why don’t you tell me now?” she said.

But how could he? This feeling, it made no sense. His gut churned with a homesick motion that had nothing to do with the lack of gravity. And something more... wordless, a fragile mix

that he could not explain but he'd experienced before.

"How long ago did your father die, Alison?" he said.

She let go of his hands.

"Why do you ask that now?"

"How long?" he said.

"You know how long, you were there." She gave him a stern look. "Why are you talking about this now?"

"It's like that, what I'm trying to tell you, how I'm feeling now. But it's more."

"You're grieving?" she said, her voice rising with puzzlement.

"Worse," he said.

"Worse than grieving, what could be worse?"

And now he had to explain, because he needed to hear it as much as her, needed to fit the pieces of the puzzle together if he ever wanted to see the whole picture.

“How would you have felt if you knew your father was dying and you just walked away.”

“What are you saying?”

“That’s what it’s like. Like I’m leaving a dying parent behind, like I’m dumping them off in some home and walking away.”

She jumped forward and littered his face with kisses.

“What was that for?” he said, when she pulled back, a smile on her face.

“For what you said,” she said, “for how you are. I wouldn’t want to be with any other man in the whole universe, that’s why.”

His cheeks flushed red, embarrassment trumped grief no matter what.

“And I have an answer for you,” she said.

“An answer?”

She took his hand in hers, stood by his side.

“Don’t think of it as walking away. You’re not leaving, it is.”

“But that won’t—”

"Listen to me," she said and held up her hand, "wave."

He lifted his arm cautiously and mimicked her movement.

"Now think of yourself standing in the galley watching the rockets take off like you did as a kid. Think of the Earth that way."

"Okay, but... "

His eyes caught the Earth, and through Alison's eyes he saw, imagined the Earth as one of those brilliant firework rockets rising, rising until they disappeared into the blackness above.

"Now, the last part," she said.

"There's more?"

"Yes. Don't say good bye. If you say good bye then it's final. You never say good bye to a friend when you're leaving, so don't now."

"What do I say?"

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

"Fare thee well," she said.

And he looked out, and he copied the words.

Soon the Earth was behind, the moon colony in front. Hand in hand they walked away from the viewing pane and prepared themselves for a life in miniature, where the giant lungs of trillion dollar machines breathed life into lifeless soil, where the created oceans teamed with duplicated life.

From the same author on Feedbooks:

- "*Suggested Oddities*" (2009)



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Food for the mind