

# **Twisted Stories**

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by

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## The Art Teacher

For a college student struggling to make ends meet, the Victorian mansion's converted attic apartment - complete with floor-to-ceiling skylight - - couldn't have been more perfect. Southern exposure warmed the room during prolonged New England winters, the fireplace an economical source of additional heat, given the number of fallen branches waiting to be gathered around the campus quads.

Another asset: plenty of illumination for Rose Stockton's painting. Being an art major, she scrounged blank canvas, scraps of wood paneling, anything which could be covered in oils or watercolors. The sleepy college town's plethora of garage and yard sales made it possible to acquire discarded still-lives and cheesy portraits, which she reused for more meaningful projects.

She even obtained a well-aged, albeit finely wrought pine case for under \$10. The faded red velvet lining cradled assorted brushes, palette knives and a partially-filled sketch book.

Every spare moment Rose wasn't in class or working her part-time job at the football-themed bistro, brilliant hues or subtle tints gave form to images roaming through her mind's eye. Some abstract, others all too realistic, inventing space to prop them while drying grew tiresome.

The very reason, perhaps, a burglar woke her from exhausted slumber on the ratty plaid sofa that December night.

Tripping over seven poster-sized boards, positioned like a house of cards, would've roused the dead.

Moonlight through dusty glass washed the studio with eerie contours; Rose shot upright to peer at the shadowy figure attired in wool overcoat and wide-brimmed fedora.

"What the hell..."

"It's not ladylike to curse," remonstrated a husky baritone.

She retorted, "And gentleman thieves exist only on film."

"I'm not..."

"What other reason..."

"You have something of mine..."

"How can I, when I don't know you?"

For a split-second almost opaque, he stepped before the window as if into a spotlight, sweeping off the hat, fully expecting to be recognized.

Rose hadn't a clue regarding the wavy haired, paunchy elder's identity. She reached toward the cane-woven end table and switched on the lamp.

Her visitor disappeared.

Instinctively, the young woman pinched herself, to ascertain whether she'd been dreaming. The bruise quite real, so was the brown felt fedora he'd thrown on the lopsided armchair beside her easel.

Well, now she *did* possess something of his, and she had no doubt he'd try to redeem it.

Though she didn't hear his approach one cloudy afternoon - not his ascent of the creaky stairs, nor the door's squeaky hinges. She was too busy layering blue pigment in an attempt to create a more authentic sea beneath the beached schooner.

"Your technique is deplorable," boomed that unique voice, almost aristocratic in its inflection.

Nearly jumping out of her skin, Rose spun and sprayed paint in a wide arc...

Except upon this intruder.

She stuck out her hand; he dodged her fingers before they passed through his torso, chastising, "You don't care for your equipment - *my* equipment - like a dedicated artist, either."

Eyes roving from noble features accented by a dimpled chin and thin mustache to bristles threatening to drip on the worn carpet, realization dawned. "Look, mister, if your wife emptied your closet and sold your stuff, it's not my fault."

"Don't be crass, child. You wield no mere tool, but what might've earned me millions, had I chosen a different career."

"Millions, how?"

"My first love was art. If I'd stuck with that, rather than... joining the family business, I might've fared better..."

"Family business?" echoed Rose.

"The stage, and the screen."

"Your family were actors?"

He nodded solemnly.

Her fatigued brain resurrected memories of a few acting dynasties; he didn't match the photos she'd seen on tabloid covers in grocery check-out lines.

"What's your name?"

A shaft of sunlight wiped out the apparition like an eraser voiding notes on a chalkboard. She barely caught his reply, "Barrymore."

Recovering at length from her faint, Rose timidly cleaned the paint splatters on furniture and fixtures. Screwing the cap on the turpentine bottle at her coffee

table-cum-work bench, she noticed the lower corner of the art case bore an inscription, imperceptible due to its clever blending with the wood grain. The initials “J.S.B.” might confirm the phantasm’s claim of ownership.

She checked the fedora’s lining; a stitched tag boasted the same letters.

Bucking the trend among students to own “smart phones” and laptop computers, Rose couldn’t afford the monthly charges. She opted for the six-story campus library, typing the keywords “Barrymore” and “actor” into three different internet search engines to compare information and publicity stunts.

He hadn’t lied about his family’s business. Five generations of relatives - through present day - had been involved in theatrical and film productions. They’d been plagued, too, by addiction to alcohol and drugs. That contributed, most likely, to the rings beneath her visitor’s eyes and his pallor.

It did not, however, diminish his regal profile, the nose straight, nostrils flaring.

John Barrymore, dead nearly seventy years, had stood in her apartment, seeking the return of what may have been, at some point, a valued possession.

His son, John Drew, or daughter Diana, might’ve discarded it after his death, thinking it worthless. Over the years, its provenance had been lost - the previous owner believing it just another storage box.

The burning question in Rose’s mind: why hadn’t Barrymore tried to reclaim it years ago?

Or, maybe he had, scaring others in the process, and accounting for its low price at the garage sale.

She tramped home through mountainous snow drifts, the stairs draining remnants of her energy. Deadbolt unlocked, she discovered the uninvited spectral guest, *sans* overcoat, in a tweed jacket and black slacks, pawing through her paintings, grumbling under his breath.

“Why don’t you go haunt your granddaughter?” Rose challenged, tossing her maroon quilted jacket on the sofa.

Barrymore raised his chin, assuming his trademark pose. “She’s beyond my help.”

“And you’re beyond mine.”

He plucked a recycled canvas from the stacks. “What were you feeling when you did this?”

The rendering of a family Christmas dinner made her shudder. “Nostalgia, I guess.”

“Nonsense. There are no fond memories here. An ad ripped from a magazine has more heart.”

“Forgive me for not being as talented as you,” she barked, snatching the board from his surprisingly firm grip.

“You have ample talent, and - obviously - the discipline to produce. The emotional element which drives it is absent. If you don’t feel what you’re painting, it’s just... dead.”

“Thanks,” she sniffed.

Critiquing another selection, he praised, “Here, you were infatuated.”

“I... was a freshman, adjusting to my environment. I gave my heart too easily.”

“Again and again, it seems.”

“I’ve... dated a few guys.”

“None with honorable intentions.”

“Adam...”

Barrymore squinted heavy lids at the photo-booth strip lying among paint tubes on the coffee table. “An anaemic specimen.”

“He’s an engineering major, already under contract to a research facility in California.”

“Would you leave... this to join his cross-country trek, if he asked?”

She didn’t have to answer.

“You’re not the first, nor the last, to mistake companionship for love,” observed Barrymore. “Why do you think I married and divorced four women?”

“I despise myself for being so weak.”

“We all have weaknesses and strengths. Accepting them, while not letting them dominate our existence - or our talent - is key. We can express our emotions with the brush, yet remain balanced in daily life.”

Rose didn’t respond. What she’d read on-line about this drunken reprobate didn’t mesh with the philosophy he espoused, and she didn’t feel like arguing.

“Ah, I recognize that skepticism,” he chuckled. “On the stage, or in front of the cameras, the words were not my own. I was limited in what emotions I could convey with them. Had I done more than dabble in the arts, I could have kept myself from descending into a liquor-fueled pit...”

“Is that why you want the case?” she queried. “So you can paint again, and salvage your self-esteem?”

“No. I must ensure those items find their way into hands worthy of their... legacy.”

“I don’t want to be part of that destructive legacy.”

Striding to the coffee table, he snatched a brush and palette, mixing colors with the ferocity of a riled tiger. He knocked an unfinished snowscape off the easel, positioning her sole clean canvas on the tripod.

“I... was saving that for my class final,” objected Rose.

“Trust me, you’ll soon be able to buy more supplies than you’ll ever need.”

Come sunrise, Barrymore had vanished, leaving his night’s labor for her appraisal.

Her, gazing toward unknown horizons, green orbs reflecting an elusive gleam, a faint rainbow creating a halo effect above her curly black hair.

One problem with his prediction about the painting’s value: he hadn’t signed it.

Tears streamed down Rose’s cheeks. The brush strokes denoted unrivaled skill, and bestowed on her a beauty she would readily deny.

She had no choice in the matter. Barrymore had thrown down the gauntlet.

The residual of her monthly food allowance bought another canvas at the campus bookstore. A used surface would be an injustice, she’d decided. The next 48 hours, she stopped only to stoke the fire, brew a fresh pot of coffee and splash water on her face.

He gazed over her shoulder as background embellishments were applied.

“A bit younger than reality,” he admonished, “but there’s no mistaking the artist’s urgent determination and, if I may be so bold, admiration for the subject matter.”

Rose flushed. Few artists permitted their work to be scrutinized while the paint was still wet. For Barrymore to view himself as she saw him proved even more embarrassing.

He held his painting level with hers. She hadn’t consciously intended the two portraits to face each other; the effect sent a chill up her spine.

“A matched set, I think,” remarked Barrymore. “The consensus will be they were wrought by the same master.”

“Except, you’re going to sign yours,” the young woman insisted, offering him a pen.

He demurred.

“Why?”

“Now that you understand, collectors will take notice in short order. My signature would... complicate matters.”

“I don’t call preserving my sanity a complication,” she countered. “I could wake up tomorrow, you’ll be gone, and I’ll be left wondering...”

“Like thousands across the centuries, creativity will propel your soul to the brink of insanity. Because your mind operates on a different plane than logical sorts, you’ll always question this experience, whether or not my name is scrawled beneath your divine visage.” He retrieved his fedora, wedging it atop his unruly greying mop.

“Leave me that, at least,” pleaded Rose.

“The case is sufficient.”

She muttered a series of unladylike expletives following his parting. After she slept through Saturday and into Sunday afternoon, she opened her eyes to a tsunami of disbelief. She struggled to recall if she’d gone out and imbibed excessive amounts of alcohol, or been slipped a hallucinogen in her soda.

Consulting mental health counselors at the Student Union would call attention to her situation, and expose her to ridicule. Confidentiality notwithstanding, rumors always managed to circulate about who passed through the unmarked office doors.

She couldn’t muster the courage to touch the case or its contents, instead sitting on a metal dinette chair, staring at the two portraits. Both seemed unreal, ethereal, wrought by a mystical artist in a dream.

Whatever their source, she eventually applied a thin coat of varnish to the canvases, placing them in matching frames pried off other yard sale purchases. Over the fireplace, she hung Barrymore six inches above her and to the right, giving the impression she looked up to him, and he contemplated the heavens.

The bespectacled, thinly handsome Adam, fetching Rose to that Friday’s fraternity dinner/dance, commented on the arrangement. “Most daughters do adore their fathers...”

“He’s not my father.”

The engineer-in-training scowled. “Then, who? Some past lover you can’t forget?”

“No!” She held her coat to Adam, his assistance refused. She cringed. “It’s simple, really. He painted me; I painted him. I respect his talent, the inspiration he’s provided...”

“Oh, an artist.”

Adam’s derisive tone sparked Rose’s hatred. “Get out!”

Teeth clenched, he marched from the apartment.

Rose slammed the door, rattling the paintings. She rushed to them, ensuring they would not dislodge.

Satisfied they were secure, a glimmer of lucidity pierced thick snow clouds beyond the slanted skylight. “Be my teacher, Mr. Barrymore,” she whispered at crackling flames on the grate. “One lesson isn’t enough.”

To coax him, she placed an apple atop the art box’s polished lid. The fruit reminded her of her own hunger, and while she opened a can of chicken noodle soup, a large bite vanished from the Red Delicious.

The core remained when Rose had drained her bowl of salty broth. She placed it and the spoon in the sink, and turned to Barrymore, palms extended as if warming them by the fire.

“How’d you know?”

“Know?”

“The Drews and Barrymores always sent each other a red apple as tribute on opening night of a new Broadway production.”

“I... didn’t,” she murmured. “I was trying to coax you, like a first grader aching to be teacher’s pet.”

“Ah!”

“Do you accept my proposal?”

He deliberated briefly, jamming resigned fists in his trouser pockets. “I cannot refuse. My history of abandoning others in crisis makes it imperative I honor your request.”

Whatever his motivation, Rose had no qualms about taking full advantage of the situation. Since grade school, her art classes had involved large groups of youngsters and one instructor, without time or initiative to provide individualized training. From charcoal to pastels, pencils to watercolors, she’d taught herself, attempting to mimic others - unsuccessfully, if Barrymore’s opinion held any weight.

The pair started from scratch, her mentor revealing a false bottom to the art case, where sketches he’d had drawn decades earlier had been hidden, along with the highest quality supplies.

Using bare trees lining the residential street as models, she might have withered under Barrymore’s caustic tutelage. He forced her to translate boles and imperfections onto the paper, the same with shingled and brick dwellings.

“Texture!” he remonstrated. “Without texture, life is meaningless!”

Though she asked about acting during infrequent breaks, he dismissed the inquiries as distractions. “Concentrate, child. To be the best at anything, absolute dedication is required.”

“Not 24 hours a day!” she moaned.

“Sometimes, yes. The fatal mistake made by many artists - regardless of their media - is allowing themselves to be feted by patrons, or put on display like a prize bull. Display the results of their labor, but let them hide in their inimitable realm, enslaved to the muse.”

“But, sleep...”

“You can sleep when you’re dead. Right now, there is much to do.”

The spring term commencing in mid-January, Rose Stockton had drained gallons of turpentine, stripping old canvases for reuse. Scores of boards propped against walls and in attic closets were gradually covered with vivid images inspired by Barrymore’s booming soliloquies - not from *Hamlet* or *Richard III*, but about humanity’s foibles.

College professors began congregating in the corridors, where students dried their class projects. Her grades rose from C’s to A’s. “What fire has been lit inside her?” pondered the Fine Arts Department Dean.

“Did I not foretell it?” gloated Barrymore when Rose related what she’d overheard. “Before this new year closes, the most prestigious galleries will be vying to own your works.”

“I have you to thank.”

“And I, you. Your vitality and enthusiasm have shown me a world my old jaded soul had long since forgotten.”

His translucence dissipated seconds prior to a knock on the door - the arrival of the head curator for the Museum of Modern Art. He couldn’t hide his amazement at the variety of canvases, large and small. His jaw gaped, though, when he noticed the portraits above the fireplace.

“I must have those, along with the rest!” he stated emphatically.

Rose presented him a mug of steaming coffee. “Those... do not leave this room.”

“Why not? They are your best.”

Again, Barrymore had been right. This expert assumed she’d painted both. “Sorry.”

“Ah, personal eccentricity! The public loves artists who behave oddly.”

Within five minutes, this irritating man was out the door. Rose had agreed to deliver an assortment of paintings before month’s end; they would be professionally framed prior to the March exhibition.

“The pot and the kettle,” rumbled Barrymore once the lock snapped into place. Lounging on the sofa, legs crossed, his relaxed demeanor contrasted the frantic pace of recent weeks. “His eccentricities would make yours look quite normal.”

Rose delivered the pen. "Sign it."

"No."

"Please."

"Why so adamant?"

"I won't take credit for your exceptional talent."

"A minor consideration."

Growing agitated, her pitch increased. "I want to remember the man who recognized my potential and showed it to me in no uncertain terms."

"Explaining how a man dead since 1942 could have painted a woman born in 1990 will be far more tortuous."

"I don't care."

"Ah, child, you will. Painful enough, the status you will so rightly earn, without having my shadow eclipsing the spotlight."

She wept, not to cajole him into agreeing, but from true anguish. He made not a sound, offered no comfort. Wiping the droplets with her flannel shirt sleeve, she punched the vacant cushion. The blow propelled the pen into the lampshade, puncturing a hole in the cloth.

"Shit!"

Rose didn't have long to lament Barrymore's absence. A flurry of activity preceded the museum opening - television and radio interviews, photography sessions, and visits from international art critics. Squeezing in her classes, she debated dropping out before her senior year; Barrymore's fate preempted such an impulsive move. Talent should never stagnate, new techniques and styles should always be tried, if not to improve, then to expand one's repertoire.

That autumn, an anonymous donor from a San Francisco gallery offered one million dollars to "borrow" the two portraits for six months. The phone clattered to the floor; Rose's muscles turned to jelly at the prospect of so much money. Checks inscribed with five figures had been regularly deposited in her bank account since the initial showing.

A million?

"I'm sorry, no," she apologized, having dug the cordless from beneath the armchair.

She would not be party to deception.

By age 25, the Master of Fine Arts possessed wealth beyond her wildest dreams. She endowed the college with a scholarship for impoverished art students, but never managed to move from the Victorian dwelling's attic apartment. Occasions when she traveled on promotional tours, triple deadbolts secured the door - though she knew they would not deter specific intruders.

She never gave up hope.

A midnight return from Italy in her thirtieth summer - where a mural she'd executed for Rome's Termini renovations had been favorably compared to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes - halted her on the threshold. The ceiling fan/chandelier clicked; a single bulb cast a glow upon her portrait and a Red Delicious apple resting on the fireplace mantle.

John Barrymore had called in her absence and left a token in the tradition of his family.

He'd also signed the canvas, scrawling a poem on a blank page of her sketchbook, open on the coffee table:

No master of the brush, I,  
Loathe to pass that sword, still,  
To one so delicate,  
Proven these years of consummate skill.

A vibrant star lights the firmament;  
The Rose has blossomed.  
My case doth well rest;  
Honored your request.

A lone tear dampened her cheek, though Rose felt herself smiling. He'd waited until she weathered the storm of notoriety, so she could cherish both the portrait - and his wisdom - all the more.

## Midnight Circuit

Scrubbing with a fragmented bar of pumice-laced soap at the garage slop sink, Rob Butler contemplated his hands.

His father, months after the introduction of electronic fuel injection and advanced engine computerization, had told him his hands were too large to continue as a mechanic. The elder Butler claimed his son's thick digits wouldn't be able to fit in the limited space under redesigned hoods.

He'd proven the man wrong. A shelf of awards lined the office above the ten-stall bay, recognizing him as the Great Lakes region's best mechanic.

To be honest, though, he preferred carburetors, especially those powering his private collection, stored in a converted stable on the city's outskirts.

That's why he took them racing for pink slips on Saturday nights.

Rob had never lost, though he'd witnessed over-eager teens lose their lives, or their parents' new sports cars in horrendous wrecks. Over the years, sites for the weekly contests had been chosen at random - dark country roads, rarely traversed by ordinary traffic. Potholes or unexpected curves could be the ruin of inexperienced drivers.

Lately, he'd pushed for a strip of concrete north of the old bypass - built as an extension linking two highways, but never completed due to strapped state finances. The competitors placed no one but themselves in danger on the isolated three mile stretch, and the police had no idea what transpired, busy patrolling public roads.

Drying his palms on a clean shop rag, Butler lamented being unable to eradicate the traces of engine grease from beneath his fingernails. He tried to ignore his disjointed reflection in the cracked rear-view mirror laying on the work bench, oily residue ingrained in his forehead's deep furrows.

He debated which car he would drive against all comers that weekend. He could choose the '68 Camaro, totally refurbished once its previous owner scattered transmission parts 100 yards along the track. The '71 Mustang Mach I hadn't seen action in awhile - he never forewarned anyone which vehicle he was bringing. The only non-contender was the '58 Studebaker Golden Hawk, which he kept purely for show.

He checked the locks on the overhead doors before switching off the fluorescent lights. He saw the '74 black Corvette cruise up to the intersection; she was bound for home, herself.

Very few females ever put their rides on the line. Most of them came to watch macho boyfriends get their asses tromped by the veterans. Nothing proved

more embarrassing than having to hitchhike into town, the title to some shiny hot rod now in another guy's pocket.

The girl usually rode home with the winner.

Except for the Corvette. She, perhaps, held second place in number of wins on the circuit, behind Butler. She didn't keep the supercharged toys she won, either. She'd sell them back to the losers for a hefty price - which they paid rather than explain the loss to their parents or spouses.

That practice earned her the nickname "C.D.", short for "C.O.D." - cash on delivery. She didn't take checks, and was famed for punching one joker who dared ask if he could set up a monthly payment plan. Rumors about her sexual preference were based on military-cropped black hair, stick thinness, and boyish clothes.

Rob didn't care about that. They'd never raced each other; issues of timing or weather always preempted the match. He coveted the Corvette, or just a peek at the modifications her crew had made.

For that privilege alone, he'd have to win it.

He also had his eye on Barney's sky blue '67 GTO, and Pete's Oldsmobile 442.

Releasing his waist-length white hair from its pony tail, Rob hopped into his VW Beetle convertible for the drive home. He could laugh at people who pointed and made comments about him being an aging hippie.

The truth was his business, not theirs.

Summer Saturdays, thanks to daylight savings time, heats didn't start until almost 11:00 PM. Access to the abandoned construction zone wound through woods bordering a vast cornfield. A voluntary sentry directed newcomers, prepared to signal if the authorities showed an interest in the proceedings.

Though the legal issues inherent to operating an "official" track were absent in this venue, dedicated statisticians kept records, and ensured compliance with the agreed-upon rules. Titles were surrendered up front to the evening's designated judges, and if anyone refused to sign over a vehicle as required, he was permanently banned from future races.

Odd among this August night's contenders: a 1970 Ford Galaxy 500. Rob had long since learned never to underestimate the "old beaters" and, though this bronze model was well rusted and unwaxed, its driver wore a sly smile, possibly indicative of the cleanest engine among the gathering crowd.

He probably wanted to upgrade, before his floor boards disintegrated.

Rob had started racing for the same reason. He'd bought a dented Jeep at a government surplus sale for \$50, invested every spare minute and three paychecks

earned cranking a wrench at what was then his dad's shop, winding up with respectable acceleration and decent reliability.

He won a '65 Thunderbird on his first outing.

The cycle began there.

He watched papers fill the gift-wrapped shoebox - scrounged from a closet years earlier, and preserved through tradition. Jerry, who'd volunteered to be a judge while his Barracuda languished in the body shop, selected two slips at a time, deciding each match-up.

C.D. drew Nick the Dick and his vintage Porsche, inherited from a rich grandfather. Like other regular attendees, the cocky Italian warranted an appropriate "handle". Rob's was "Robbie", basically "Rob B." run together.

"Barney Rubble" and his GTO were in line for the second race against Curtis the Q, a pool enthusiast on weeknights.

Once the pairings were decided, the lead judge took up a position at the starting line. The other two rode to the finish on a tricked-out golf cart, offloaded from Hiram Minder's Dodge pick-up, which simultaneously hauled his smokin' 1977 Trans Am 400 on a trailer.

Casual observers would've been impressed by the group's professionalism, except for the betting transactions concentrated behind the pit area.

Rob had no idea how much money changed hands in the course of three hours, nor whether anyone bet on him. He focused on preparations for the first run.

The Corvette made his mouth water, idling at a smooth 2,000 RPM. The Porsche vibrated on the concrete, mirroring its driver's nerves.

No doubt from the flag drop who would win. Nick stalled his beast and couldn't recover lost ground. C.D. had no qualms about requiring \$10,000 for the return of his title.

The Dick had the money in his wallet the entire time.

Private debates among the losers before last call at the bar never narrowed down how C.D. used the vast sums she earned. Definitely not on clothes. Her address unknown - who'd ever gotten the chance to see her title beside the judges, and they didn't give those details a second glance - she might've made mortgage payments. She hadn't mentioned where she worked; everybody knew Rob's occupation, his reputation heightened by word-of-mouth.

Another aspect of the midnight circuit: respecting each other's privacy. Not once had any reports surfaced of irate parties harassing those who'd won their vehicles. Keeping the location and identities confidential was paramount.

No one wanted to land in jail.

Rob's El Camino Classic went against the Galaxy 500 in the last contest. The result would've been touted as a stunning "photo finish" on any NASCAR track, the Chevy barely defeating the Ford.

Rob shook the young man's hand, genuinely in awe of the power behind the erstwhile family sedan. He popped the hood and scrutinized the rebuilt engine. "You in auto shop at school?" asked the master mechanic.

"St. Raphael's Military Academy, north of Kalamazoo."

"Who's your teacher?"

"Sister Angela."

Rob choked, not speaking until his throat swallowed his heart. "A *nun*?"

"A pretty cool nun. She turned us on to testing our class projects out here."

"How would she know..."

The youth pointed to a dwindling crowd, admiring C.D.'s Corvette.

"That's her, over there."

If Rob's teeth had been false, they'd have hit the ground.

He said nothing, towing his new acquisition to the stable and crashing until mid-day Sunday. Tuesday, the slowest day for repairs at the shop, he planned to take an extended lunch and run to Kalamazoo.

He passed C.D. in the academy's main corridor, never recognizing her in a blue veil and black calf-length habit. She followed him into the administrative offices, plopping on a molded plastic chair opposite him.

"You here to sign up your son?" she hinted.

"No, I..." Then, he noticed her twinkling blue eyes. "Damn you!" escaped his lips before he could stop himself.

She signaled the secretary they wouldn't need the dean, directing Rob out the door. "You want a taste of my secret life?"

"Seeing you in this get-up, I'm thinking the circuit is the secret."

"Oh, no. My superiors know how I spend my weekends. So do my students. The money I raise selling the losers back their cars goes toward school programs and scholarships."

"Where'd you get the Corvette?"

"An alum donated it when he enlisted in the Army after 9/11. The job we did was so outstanding, I couldn't let it sit and collect dust..."

The compact industrial arts wing hummed with activity. Rob glimpsed the Ford's previous owner cranking on a diesel Mercedes, and a few other familiar faces who'd ventured out to the track on occasion.

"So," drawled Sister Angela, "what's your price to keep mum about this?"

Gently, Rob ran his hand along the Corvette's curved quarter panel. "Let me drive it."

She grunted negatively.

"Let me try to win it, then."

"A pre-set race? What about the random draw?"

"We can convince the judges it's a... special event."

"Which car will you bring?"

"Does it matter?"

"Hell, yes, it matters! If I lose this baby, I'm out of business."

"If you win mine, you can auction it off for a tidy sum."

"You won't buy it back?"

"I've got plenty."

"Which one?" she persisted. "If you don't specify ahead of time, I won't agree to the deal."

A list of possibilities scrolled through Rob's head.

The '74 Nova?

No.

The '70 Dodge Challenger R/T?

Definitely not.

Not that those two couldn't beat the Corvette; he didn't want to risk losing either one.

Nor the '64 Chevelle SS.

Sister Angela had monitored his expression, and must've read his mind.

"What about that sweet Plymouth Road Runner?"

"Why, you think it's inferior?"

"Considering my clothes, Robbie, you think I'm into deception?"

"You've deceived a lot of people on the circuit."

"What, if they knew I was a nun, they wouldn't race me? It's not like God would smite them for beating me."

"No, but they might get the idea you had... an unfair advantage."

She smiled, lighting her bone-thin face. "Maybe I do. It's called skill."

"If that's your lone criteria, and you swear you're on the up-and-up, I'll bring the Road Runner."

"You've got a deal." She extended her hand.

He grasped it, surprised at the strength of her grip.

"Battle of the Champions" as it was transmitted via the internet, generated thousands of dollars in wagers long before Saturday night. When one of Rob's customers mentioned seeing the posting on a social network website, the mechanic

predicted interference by city and county police would send the midnight circuit back to country roads.

Obviously, the masses, uniformed cops among them, didn't care. Rumors of a rivalry - which Rob had never personally felt - made the gathering feel like a football game between the University of Michigan and Michigan State, or those over-hyped wrestling matches.

At least, C.D. - Sister Angela, Rob reminded himself - didn't play on the crowds' sympathies by wearing her "work clothes". The ratty green t-shirt and oil-stained blue jeans placed her on equal terms with his tattered tan coveralls.

The pair met on the center line of the unused highway, flashing cheesy smirks for camera flash bulbs and making a show of wishing each other well. Their inaudible exchange, however, had a much different tone.

"You realize we may both be arrested after we're done," warned Rob.

C.D. retorted, "I have as much faith in people as I have in God."

"This is no time to be cryptic. Those guys are carrying guns."

"My boys have... nimble fingers. In all the excitement, those guns might just disappear."

"You have plans to share your cell?"

"I'm kidding, Robbie," the woman chuckled.

"There's an access road past where the concrete drops off, three miles down. Whoever wins, you take off, and we'll settle up later."

"That's very noble, but you don't think the authorities know where to find me?"

"Too much red tape for the locals to have a warrant issued in another county. They won't waste the time."

Patting his hand, C.D. agreed. "I'll post your bail after the arraignment."

"No need. I've been dodging the town council's request to beef up those heaps the patrolmen drive. I can negotiate a contract that'll get me off the hook and put a little cash in my pocket, to boot."

"You sure?"

Rob nodded.

"Let's do this, then."

Buckling themselves into their vehicles, the noise was deafening - and the engines weren't running yet. Cheers, shouts and screams accompanied last minute formalities: two judges chauffeured to the finish line, and the third setting his stop watch.

The green kerchief waved, and both drivers released their clutches. The drama of having tires squealing happened only in movies, Rob had once noted to a

beginner on the circuit. The most effective way to win was to spin the wheels in forward motion, not standing still, leaving marks on the pavement.

Neither worried about their speedometer. Two streaks shot down the track, black and orange, neck and neck most of the distance. When the Corvette abruptly veered into Rob's lane, he jerked his steering wheel, sending gravel from the shoulder flying. He compensated and shot ahead of C.D., breaking the tape a fraction of a second before she reached it.

True to their pact, the nun sped left on a dirt service road, between picturesque grape arbors. Rob did a U-turn and cruised back to where bodies blocked his route. He was yanked from the Plymouth and carried on the shoulders of Pete and Hiram to where the chief of police held handcuffs in readiness.

"A spectacular exhibition, Rob," hailed the portly official. "But, to discourage some young idiot from wrapping his Dodge Charger around a tree, we've got to take you downtown."

Rob offered his wrists; the handcuffs were too small. Amused, the squad escorted him to a Chevy Impala cruiser.

"You think you can make my Chevy fly like that?" pleaded the corporal at the wheel.

"What've you got?"

"A '57 Bel Air."

"Bring it by the shop next week, and we'll see what we can do."

Beyond sight of the audience, Rob was released on his own recognizance, ordered not to reveal the scam.

The tactic worked, however. It took another two years before the midnight circuit operated a full complement of races on summer weekends - never the same place twice.

C.D. retired her Corvette in Rob's stable, though he let her drive it during summer vacations. He sold most of his collection to younger men, keeping only the Nova, the Mach I and the Road Runner. The power between the three kept him at the top of his game.

Approaching his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, he'd remain there until he died. Retirement - from racing or cranking wrenches - wasn't in his future. He was already doing what he loved.

## Angel Corrupted

So true, the words he'd once spoken: how those in heaven do little more than sit on ornate thrones and yearn for home.

Yearn for any type of excitement.

"Pete, I can't take it," he protested. "I used to drink when bored, and here there's no alcohol..."

The bearded elder clicked his tongue. "You deserved a rest, Sid, after..."

"To hell with rest! I enjoyed my work, and I can't stand lounging around, twiddling my thumbs."

Consulting a clipboard, plentiful white facial hair split to reveal a toothy grin. "One of our top aides received a promotion, so we do have a key vacancy..."

"I'll take it."

"You don't even know..."

"I don't care. I'll do anything."

"So be it."

A flash of blinding light transformed his gold-piped robe into a pair of boot-cut jeans and grim reaper t-shirt. He also realized he stood in the middle of New York's Times Square - where he'd spent many a happy hour.

What Sid didn't realize: he'd become an "escort" - leading souls of the newly departed into the afterlife.

An angel of death - New York region.

Of course, he hadn't inquired about his title or duties. He heard a passing female whistle appreciatively, and whipped toward her receding form. Glimpsing himself in a storefront window, he smiled.

His trim, vital self, somewhere between 30 and 50 - an image left far behind when ALS crippled his body. A shock of grey hair had been restored to its wavy bronze. No double chins, just a fine specimen of manhood, carved by some Roman sculptor.

He could have fun, he mused, dodging tourists and businessmen. He recalled a few nearby watering holes...

"Your presence is required at Bellevue Hospital," reverberated loudly inside his skull.

Pete's voice.

Killjoy.

"I heard that," rang the ancient voice.

"I didn't say anything."

"Your lips don't have to move."

The new angel obscured his rude comment with a series of questions.

“Socializing is the least of your priorities. Your task is to wait until the appointed moment, then ease the deceased’s transition.”

Having suffered uselessly for months, Sid saw no reason for ailing patients to have their discomfort - and their family’s anguish - prolonged a second longer than necessary, just to suit some “divine plan”.

The flood of applicants at the Pearly Gates overwhelmed Pete’s assistants that afternoon.

Sid found himself recalled before 6:00.

“What’s the big idea?” demanded his superior.

Sid replied, “I made an executive decision.”

“Thing is: you’re not an executive in this corporation. Tomorrow, you do it by the book.”

“Whose book?”

“If you can’t follow the rules...”

He sighed. “Okay, okay.”

Worse, perhaps, than sitting idly on a cloud, was pacing corridors of an antiseptic-scented, gloomy facility, wishing some other-worldly signal would herald the designated instant sooner rather than later. He’d been so accustomed to the hectic pace of a Bronx butcher, this vigil was torture.

“You visiting someone?” came a cheery contralto.

He glanced at the middle-aged redhead in baggy plaid scrubs. “Not exactly.”

“You one of the detectives investigating that drive-by shooting?”

How to explain?

“You look like you could use a cup of coffee.”

“I could use a stiff shot of whiskey,” he admitted.

“There’s a quiet little bar about a block past the park.” She consulted her wrist watch. “My shift ends in ten minutes...”

In former times, women weren’t so forward, but Sid didn’t care about protocol at that point. “Sounds good.”

“I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

As she rounded the corner near the elevators, the angel of death licked his lips. It would be good to taste liquor again.

A rumbling audible only to him substituted for a verbal warning of this pending violation.

“Does it really matter if I bring the soul at 2:13 or 2:30?” he griped. “First, you didn’t want them all at once, and now you want them on a precise schedule?”

You should be happy to get them, period! I may start sending them the other direction!”

The tremor increased, causing searing pain behind his eyes.

“If you don’t like it, too bad!”

Sid understood he couldn’t escape the omniscient Pete, but he could still enjoy the interludes between... retrievals.

The pair skirted lush greenery and bustling playground, settling in a booth at the trendy tavern. The lunch crowd diminished, and evening clientele still laboring at their desks, the noise level was, indeed, minimal. That suited Sid, especially after imbibing two doubles.

His companion opted for martinis. She gazed at him dreamily across the stained wood table, averting blue orbs when he looked up from his glass.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“I half expect you to tell me you think we’ve met somewhere before...”

She chuckled, a lyrical melody. “No. But, I think I know where you belong.”

“Where?”

“At the helm of a two-masted sailing ship, or playing the captain in a pirate movie, slicing through the British Navy with your saber.”

He’d once owned a schooner, but had never touched a sword. “What makes you say that?”

“You... you’re the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen. Back at the hospital, I could’ve sworn I saw a halo shimmering above your head...”

Sid laughed self-consciously. “A trick of the lights.”

“Are you hungry?” the nurse prodded. “I’ve got a hibachi, and could grill a couple steaks on my apartment balcony...”

She’d reached over and caressed his arm, collapsing forthwith.

Her soul righted itself, seeking consolation from the angel of death.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized futilely. “I didn’t know...”

Leaving her for Pete to process, he spat a curse before hastening to resume his death watch at Bellevue. “You’re a right bastard. You should’ve told me.”

Pete countered, “You didn’t ask.”

The clock ticked interminably, giving Sid ample opportunity to mull over his situation. He masked his thoughts with reminiscences about life in the Big Apple, and ultimately determined he would use his “gift” to rid the city of political parasites, criminals and hypocrites.

Accomplishing this goal - in the midst of fulfilling his daily assignments - proved easy. Each morning, he read the local newspapers, then visited the jails, city hall, and assorted dives where lesser forms of life plied their despicable trade. Pete never saw these, unworthy as they were of a comfortable eternity.

His antics did catch up to him, however. Collectors from the lower realms found themselves chastised for failing in their mission, and vehemently protested Sid's encroachment on their turf.

Summoned in his underclothes - straight from the flophouse bed where he'd been debating philosophy with a buxom female offered as a bribe by a Brooklyn pimp - Sid felt neither embarrassment nor regret for his actions. He stared Pete in the eye, ready to dispute any reprimand.

"We're not judge and jury," proclaimed the elder. "We're all underlings, charged with doing as we're told."

"Well, this firm needs a change in management. If I wanted to follow orders blindly, I would've enlisted in the military."

Pete confessed, "In a way, this is a military regime. None of us has a choice..."

"Bullshit. We were given free will at birth, and that right isn't rescinded when we've breathed our last. You can tell the boss I quit."

"You might want to think twice about that. If you're caught, you'll end up..." A gnarled finger thrust downward.

"I don't care. At least, I won't be bored."

Thunder and lightning accompanied Sid to New York, where he existed underground, perfecting the art of making death appear accidental. He couldn't shake an awareness the "higher powers" knew of his activities, and overlooked them - just another cog in a vast machine - but he wouldn't risk exposing himself unnecessarily.

A gratifying perk: planning each job to the smallest detail, he never got bored.

## Wisdom of the Fool

“The statue was erected in the late 1800s,” Delray Pierce recounted to his grandchildren - three cousins born on the same day, same year, in different countries around the globe. They’d come to celebrate the elder Pierce’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, and been wandering foothills of the Colorado Rockies, chancing upon a most unusual sight. “Some miner had vowed to build a shrine in thanksgiving for tapping a rich silver vein...”

“But, Grandpa, there’s no statue in the grotto.” So stated Sydney Pierce, blonde and vivacious, name derived from her city of origin. “It was a man.”

“Nonsense. It may resemble a man from a hundred yards off, but it’s a bronze of St. Francis, birds and all.”

Dark, hawkish Lansing Pierce protested, “We were as close to him as we are to you. We saw him *breathing*.”

“Impossible!” Delray insisted. “The sun was playing tricks with your eyes.”

“We spoke to him, Granddad,” murmured Athens Pierce, the burly senior of the cousins by an hour, cranium shaved and tattooed.

“Did he answer?”

“No...”

“See?”

Sydney grumbled, “He moved his head to stare at us.”

Extracting an iPhone from its belt holster, Lansing activated the video player. He’d filmed the incident.

Unfortunately, Delray’s macular degeneration had left him mostly blind. He couldn’t focus on the tiny screen’s images.

“We’ll take you there,” offered Athens.

Delray clucked, “I’m too old to be gallivanting around the mountains. I tell you, though, it ain’t no man. It’s a *statue*.”

The Three - as the Pierce clan referred to these cousins - retired to the kitchen, leaving their grandfather to listen as commentators narrated the USC/Notre Dame basketball game.

“What if he’s right?” puzzled Lansing. “What if the statue is... animatronic?”

“He was flesh and blood, not bronze or any other metal,” Athens swore.

“And I’m going to prove it!”

Sydney glanced out the window over the sink. “It’s snowing harder. You’ll have to wait ‘til tomorrow.”

“Believe me, I’ll wait.”

The family celebration occupied the rest of the day, preparing a lavish dinner and cleaning up after the festivities. Delray received many presents - sweaters, slippers, a crocheted scarf and hat set, a half dozen shirts, and other clothing - which he felt with gentle fingers more than saw with clouded brown orbs. Generations of offspring happily dispersed to their respective bedrooms in the moldering estate before midnight, their outbound flights scheduled for the next morning.

The Three greeted the dawn with no travel worries - their spring break allowed more time to enjoy the wilderness. Thermal underwear providing additional insulation, they bundled themselves in hooded parkas and boots, tramping through wind-blown drifts to where the natural grotto sheltered that controversial figure.

Sitting erect on what must've been the statue's former pedestal, his lean face radiated a tranquility, softening features suited to a Greek sculpture. Skin bronzed from the southern exposure; thin lips neither smiled nor frowned above a dimpled chin. Longish, light brown hair was combed off his forehead from a left part, recently washed. None wished to guess his age - anywhere from 30 to 60.

"The fool!" grumbled Athens, noting his flannel shirt, jeans and sneakers. The day before - a taste of early spring - the trio had worn similar garb, without jackets. For this man to be coatless in freezing temperatures denoted insanity.

Sydney pondered, "Maybe he's homeless."

"You think he'd have the good sense to crash at the town shelter," Lansing said.

Clear grey-green eyes shifted slightly from the glorious vista toward them. "Are you merely curiosity seekers, or have you a desire to learn?" came in an unaccented, resonant baritone.

The Three stood, dumbfounded.

"Thank you for the succinct reply." The neck swiveled to its original position.

Lansing shook himself free of confusion first. "Hey, wait!"

"What?"

"Why aren't you a popsicle in this weather?"

"Geothermal heating."

Athens, studying engineering at MIT, squinted skeptically. "At this altitude, that would mean this is... a dormant volcano."

"Feel the rock."

Three hands extended into the grotto. Warmth penetrated their insulated gloves.

“Cool!” gushed Sydney.

“As your brother...”

“Cousin,” she corrected.

The head dipped an inch, acknowledging her statement. “As your cousin can explain, a source of hot water exists beneath the surface. In some ways, it’s more efficient than modern plumbing. It facilitates my daily shower and, emerging at the summit, cascades down the mountain to provide fresh drinking water.”

“Then, you *live* here?” queried Lansing.

“Yes.”

“This is private property.”

“Ownership is a fallacy. This land flourished long before human beings evolved, and will thrive when other species supplant us. Material goods can be destroyed, stolen or seized for non-payment of taxes. The human body itself is subject to illness, injury and death with the individual having no control over the circumstances.”

Three jaws gaped in unison.

The left corner of sage’s mouth twitched. “I can see you are not ready. Better get home before your toes succumb to frostbite.”

Sydney, Athens and Lansing silently descended the incline. Delray’s house emptied of guests, they lounged before a roaring fire in the rustic living room, unable to articulate what had just occurred.

“He’s nuts,” Athens concluded in mid-afternoon.

Lansing drawled, “I’m not so sure.”

“He’s got water,” muttered Sydney. “Where does he get his food?”

“You want to go and ask him?”

“No.”

“We’ve got to go back,” Lansing declared. “He’s hiding something...”

Sydney shivered. “He could be a murderer...”

“No. He’s... he’s...”

“What?” prompted Athens.

“Hard to describe.”

“To put it mildly.”

Sydney perked up a bit. “He sounded for a second like my Philosophy 101 professor, spouting Kant or Nietzsche.”

“More than that,” added Lansing. “I’ve been reading a series of novels which blend mystery and magic, and there’s one character who’s an old mystic...”

“You *two* are nuts,” Athens groaned, rising from the carpet. “Anybody want more coffee?”

Sydney and Lansing spoke no more on the topic. They did, however, meet on the track to the grotto in late afternoon, eager for a second audience with its inhabitant.

“Then, there were two,” greeted their host. “Cousin at the ranch house thawing his bones?”

“He...” Lansing stammered.

“Doubts my veracity?”

Sydney chimed, “Your sanity.”

“So have countless others.”

“Who *are* you?” inquired Lansing.

“I’m a human being.”

The Pierces waited for additional information.

None was forthcoming.

Lansing pressed, “You must have a name.”

“There are documents to that effect,” replied the sage. “But what purpose do labels serve, except to divide and nurture inequality? It should not matter if a person is a carpenter or a mogul, the color of his skin, whether he believes in a supreme being or not, is wealthy or poor. We are all human beings, and that is how we should view each other.”

It made sense - to Sydney, anyway. “If more people thought like you, there might not be any wars.”

“Precisely.”

“But,” interspersed Lansing, “how else do we distinguish between people? If I stand in a crowded room and yell, ‘Hey, you!’ everyone would look.”

“Ah, you would prefer to keep your circle of so-called friends close at hand?”

“Sure.”

“Every human being should be your friend,” their mentor proclaimed. “Or, at least, they should not be snubbed through some senseless prejudice against their imagined differences.”

The profundity of these words made Sydney and Lansing feel as if the biting wind was blowing through their skulls, dispersing musty ideas which had influenced their lives to that point.

“Home with you, now,” the sage dismissed them. “It’s getting dark, and I wouldn’t want you losing your way on my account.”

Sydney ventured, “May we... come tomorrow?”

“The choice is yours.”

Lansing and Sydney spent the next five days with this singular guru, discussing his unique perspective. He shared space in the grotto with them, so they could chat without their teeth chattering when the temperature dropped. He emphasized his remarks with elegant hand gestures.

Athens scoffed at his cousins' report of the conversations. "He's nuts, and you're both nuts for listening to him!"

"It's pure logic, if you think about it," remonstrated Lansing. "Animals are more rational than humans, because they don't worry about tomorrow, they live their lives until they end, and that's all."

Sydney concurred. "Human beings' main problem is rooted in their fear of death. In the deepest recesses of their brains, they know nothing exists after their last breath. That's why they rely on artificial means to prolong their lives."

"Bullshit!" raged Athens. "There's a lot I want to do in my lifetime. Why would I want it cut short by cancer, or some disease which responds to treatment? *That's* logical!"

"I made that argument, too," Lansing admitted. "He told me, 'Humans see reaching goals, amassing material goods or widespread influence as protection against the emptiness of death.' Ambition, power and wealth are all illusions created by society to deceive us into being less than we're meant to be."

"It's the politicians, the clergy and the educators who are at fault, primarily," snorted Sydney.

Athens barked, "How so?"

"They do their best to create obstacles on the path to truth."

"What utter crap! The politicians, maybe, but the clergy are devoted to *revealing* the truth, and teachers spend years in college just so they can mold young minds..."

"Which lays the fault squarely on their shoulders. Their narrow vision distorts the truth for others," Lansing insisted. "The very concepts of religion are skewed. The ideals of faith, hope and love, for instance."

"For instance?" challenged his cousin.

"Faith permits people who believe in some unseen deity to shun personal responsibility."

"Really?"

"By hoping in a potential future beyond our present form, humans are deceived into valuing accomplishments which actually mean nothing."

Athens rolled his eyes ceilingward.

Sydney defined the last. "Seeking love - or trying to give it - deludes people into thinking they can fill the void caused by denying the truth. They are blinded by some idyllic concept of happiness..."

"You two should be committed!" Athens stomped from the living room, joining Delray to watch the NCAA basketball finals.

"You sound upset, boy," his grandfather noted.

"Those idiots! Wasting their time listening to that... that..."

"Statue?"

"It isn't a statue, Granddad. He's a living, breathing... lunatic, living on the mountain."

"Impossible. He'd freeze to death."

Athens detailed the subterranean heating which permitted the sage to reside comfortably within the grotto.

"He would've had to search long and hard to find such a location, eh?" queried Delray.

"It's an anomaly, unless it really is a dormant volcano."

"Tomorrow, you take me there."

Lansing and Sydney heard that from the doorway. The latter warned, "But, Grandpa, it's a pretty steep climb..."

"I been up that mountain a thousand times, child," Delray spat. "I could do it with my eyes closed, which is what it'll feel like!"

Slow going for the four Pierces, the youngsters taking extra care so their grandfather wouldn't stumble or injure himself on patches of ice, jutting rocks and mud. Sydney ran ahead to notify the guru of the visit; he accepted the news without any reaction.

He did offer Delray his pedestal when the arthritic senior reached the grotto. Panting, the man sank on the cement block, digging a black patterned bandanna from his hip pocket and wiping his brow.

"I must agree with my grandson," he huffed. "You're crazy to be up here."

"Your opinion is your own," responded the sage genially. "Frankly, I like it."

"You like corrupting young, impressionable minds?"

"If you call engaging in spirited converse with your grandchildren corrupting them, I suppose I'm guilty."

"I've never heard such drivel: 'History is cyclical, because humans refuse to accept the truth about their own fears and shortcomings.'"

"How would you describe the endless wars, ongoing persecution and flagrant genocide?"

“The effort to establish right over wrong!”

Lansing glimpsed the mentor bite his lip.

Delray persisted, “We are obligated, by Jesus Christ himself, to establish His kingdom for all...”

Sydney knelt beside the elder Pierce. “Grandpa, calm yourself.”

“I’ll not tolerate this fool’s lies...”

“Lies, sir?” murmured the mountain dweller. “The lie is that human beings have been put on earth for some divine purpose. It’s not our job to make the world a better place. The world was in excellent shape before humans evolved and spoiled everything.”

“Blasphemy!”

“Granddad!” chastised Lansing.

“Silence, boy! As the superior species, human beings must subjugate the earth and those who refuse to believe...”

He received no response.

The Three were astounded by the sage’s equanimity.

Delray continued to spew vitriol, even threatening to summon the county sheriff with eviction papers.

Finally, the elder Pierce ran out of breath. “Get me the hell back home,” he snarled.

Athens and Lansing supported him during the descent. Sydney lingered, to offer profuse apologies.

The man patted her arm indulgently. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve heard far worse, on many less pleasant occasions. I’ve found the ultimate burden to be a distinct awareness of the truth, and the inability to share it with those most in need of the revelation.”

“That’s so sad.”

“I agree, but it’s far worse when people choose to distract themselves from the truth by any means - sex, alcohol, drugs, technology, food... If they would but open their minds, endure the pain of moving beyond their shallow existence, they would see we’re specks of dust on this planet, and nature will eventually wipe the earth clean, leaving no trace of us in her wake.”

Sydney felt tears on her cheeks. “With the reports of storms, wild fires, earthquakes and such, I’ve wondered whether we... pissed Mother Nature off somehow.”

“To be blunt, we’ve pissed *on* nature so long, violent retaliation is the only way to recover the necessary balance. If people comprehended the contrast

between wanting and needing - a simple concept - we might be in a better position to survive.”

“You worry about it?”

“I’ve... dispensed with worrying. Emotions merely upset the equilibrium within the human body. When the opportunity arises - with you and your cousins, for example - I impart my knowledge and let things take their course. You may benefit from it, or not. I understand doing a job well does not imply it has meaning.”

“Are you saying, everything we do is futile?” Sydney prodded.

“Absolutely.”

“Then, why live?”

The sage smiled minutely, resuming his seat. “To wade through the muddle and discover the ultimate condition isn’t happiness, but contentment. It’s why I chose this place. I watch the animals, the trees, the birds, and the people, and grasp - without my interference - the intricate beauty will endure long after I’m dust.”

Following her relatives down the slope, Sydney realized it would take days, months - even years - to assimilate this wisdom. Munching popcorn with Lansing that evening in Delray’s kitchen, they vowed not to forget the hours spent in the grotto.

They also never again mentioned the experience to Athens.

That didn’t mean he didn’t notice the transformation, respect them for it, and try to emulate it in the midst of his MIT classes.

Returning to Colorado for Delray’s funeral that October, the sage had vanished; no evidence of his time in the foothills remained. The circumstances of his coming to the Rockies, his departure - even his name - remained a mystery.

Still, the Three knew their lives had been changed forever.

## Binding Ties

“You’re playing with only half a deck, woman!”

Barry Morrison held Kara Cianchetti’s left hand across the cluttered table, their matching gold signet rings clicking together. The others had gone home, well deserving of rest after a week of hard labor and hefty losses to the company’s resident poker champion.

Kara tried to rise; the aging HVAC technician restrained her. “It’s three in the morning, Barry.”

“A person doesn’t decide to become a nun out of the blue, Kara mia.”

“I’ve been waiting twenty years for this,” she countered. “It’s my last chance. Their cut-off age is forty.”

“What about the business?”

“I signed ownership over to Durant and Williams yesterday.”

Morrison’s blue orbs widened. “What?”

“I... would’ve given it to you, except...”

He released her with a disgusted flourish. “Except, I’m a drunk.”

The curvaceous female rose and crossed to a wall of framed crew photos from six decades of annual company picnics. Morrison knew what was coming next.

“Don’t harp about how much I’ve changed these past few years. It wasn’t the whiskey that spoiled my dashing good looks; it was the stress.”

Joining her, his arm slid around her waist. He detected her wry smile reflected in the glass, a dissipated version of his former self slightly above her shoulder. He could not deny the deterioration from what today’s youngsters called a “chick magnet” into a mustached, sagging, middle-aged lothario. Yet, his relationship with the boss had progressed from viewing her as a little sister - when she’d hung around the shop with her father - to a surrogate patriarch in the wake of that inveterate gambler’s death, to a soul mate.

Now, he was losing her - to a lifestyle in which he didn’t believe.

“Even as an atheist, I’m cognizant you don’t just knock on the convent door and expect them to accept you,” he remarked. “You been writing letters?”

“I’ve been visiting them, down in Lakeville, on weekends.”

“You mean, those trips to the museums...”

She shrugged.

“A foundation built on lies,” he scoffed. “How appropriate.”

Kara twirled within his grasp, raven tresses brushing his face. “I couldn’t tell you, Barry. I... didn’t want to hurt you.”

“So, you decided to deliver the news as a single, devastating bombshell.”

“I thought...”

Their noses almost touching - his straight with flaring nostrils, hers pert and diminutive - he was tempted to kiss her. Instead, he withdrew with a gesture of surrender. “Be on your way, then. I’ll not stop you.”

Her head bowed, she shambled toward the dock exit. “Someday, you’ll understand.”

“Someday, Kara mia, you’ll realize your mistake.” He broke the seal on the last Jack Daniels, draining the liter on the trek to his apartment.

He slept until his alarm woke him on Monday.

A letter stapled to C.C. Heating employee time cards from the Durant and Williams management team assured them no staffing changes would occur in the foreseeable future.

That “foreseeable future” lasted about six months. Morrison, having considerable seniority - and frequent hangovers - was one of the first to be offered an “early retirement” package.

He declined. With no word from Kara, other than an invitation to her “reception” as a novice, his life had little structure beyond the cycle of work, drink and sleep. He spent his spring sales bonus - having charmed five widows into purchasing state-of-the-art equipment rather than waste their money having him repair their inefficient heating systems - on season tickets for the local AAA baseball franchise, never attending a game. Occasionally, he’d pick up a one-night stand at Bill’s Tavern, a block from the office, snoring long before the woman had a chance to satisfy his libido.

Arriving late at the Lakeville Carmelite Monastery on August 15<sup>th</sup>, Kara was already clad in an ankle-length brown robe, white wimple and veil. In a stark parlor, through a wrought-iron grille, he was allowed five minutes with her. His tongue refused to articulate the sorrow gnawing at his heart. She prattled about playing the organ for Mass and prayers, scrubbing floors and tending the vegetable garden, even using her accounting prowess to assist the prioress. Reaching between the bars, he plucked her hand off her lap, pressed his lips against the calloused knuckles, and retreated hastily to his van.

Morrison felt betrayed. Long nights after Chuck Cianchetti died of an aneurysm, they’d lounged on his battered living room sofa, the sports channel droning, discussing religious hypocrisy and the futility of life. Kara’s philosophy had mirrored his atheism, until...

She took a phone call from a high school friend who'd "answered the call" and been ordained a priest. The dinner they shared, and his tales of spiritual transformation, sparked a renewed interest in her lapsed faith.

Their debates still lively, a mocking tone accompanied her arguments, as if she were placating a wayward child.

Twelve years older than Kara, acknowledging his myriad shortcomings in lieu of actually resolving them, Morrison had never summoned the courage to propose marriage. He regretted that failure more than any other. He might've prevented her veering down this bizarre path of isolation and drudgery.

He went so far as to consult the bishop's assistant, on a preventive maintenance call at the diocesan offices that autumn.

"A vocation is a gift from God," Father O'Leary explained. "It cannot be ignored without endangering one's soul. Those who've tried are never content in their daily routine, always seeking to fill the void with idle pursuits. I'm a prime example. I put off applying to the seminary for ten years after college. Never got a good night's sleep."

In Morrison's opinion, this cleric suffered from piteous delusions. Weak minded people could be brain-washed into believing anything. They would defend those beliefs unto death - unnecessary death. How many wars had started because one man's view of a supreme being conflicted with another's?

That night, he'd smashed his television in a fit of intoxicated rage.

Shards of glass ripped his flesh; he bled profusely, despite wrapping a towel around the wounds during the drive to the hospital emergency room.

The physician suturing deep gashes expressed a greater concern for Morrison's alcohol level, and an odd lump on his neck. He ordered the phlebotomist to draw two extra vials of blood for special tests.

The patient was admitted for observation overnight, though this development didn't faze him. A nurse's icy fingers checking his pulse roused him, then a pen-light irritated his pupils.

"What the devil..." he swore.

"Good morning, Mr. Morrison," hailed the doctor, his shift ending.

"Who... are you?"

"Nate Durazo." He tapped ample bandages swathing the technician's right arm. "You had a nasty accident."

"I... guess so."

The youngish man pulled a stool beside the bed. "A fortuitous accident perhaps."

"How so?"

“When did you last see your own doctor?”

“I... years.”

“That’s what I thought. I recommend you make an appointment, as follow-up to remove the stitches next week, and also for a thorough examination.”

Morrison squirmed on the uncomfortable mattress. “Why?”

“I can speculate you don’t eat a healthy diet, if you do eat. Your intake is more... liquid, and key organs are beginning to malfunction. Your own doctor can confirm my suspicions, and I urge you not to delay ringing him.”

Armed with a prescription for antibiotics to prevent infection, Morrison drove himself home after a disgusting lunch served by a rather enchanting blonde nurse. He cut the adhesive tape and peeled off the stained gauze, sickened by the jagged abrasions.

He decided to sterilize his entire body with ample amounts of whiskey. And so the days progressed, until a shrill clanging disrupted his slumber late that blustery February Saturday.

Automatically, he reached for his cell phone, semi-consciously thinking it an emergency service call.

He’d forgotten to plug the unit into the charger, and the batteries were dead, yet the ringing continued.

Who knew his home number? he mused, jostling the bedside phone off its cradle. He drawled into the receiver, “Hello?”

The last voice he expected to hear greeted him cheerily. He righted himself on the pillows.

“Kara?”

“It’s Sister Andre now, you silly reprobate,” she snickered.

In the background, another - harsher - female chastised her choice of words.

Evidently, Kara ignored her. “Are you sober?”

“I... wasn’t last night.”

“We need your expertise, Barry. Our furnace is dead, and we’re freezing.”

He instantly switched into diagnostic mode. “What are the symptoms?”

“My guess is the ignitor module. Bring a couple heat exchangers to be safe, and a stash of 16-by-20 filters.”

“I’ll be there in an hour.”

He rose and found he didn’t need to dress; he’d never shed his jeans and sweatshirt from the previous day. A tall, insulated mug of steaming coffee accompanied him on the drive south, further bolstering his alertness.

A wimpled, smiling face - bundled in a wool blanket - greeted him at the monastery's entrance. "Thank you for coming quickly, Mr. Morrison."

"No problem, er, Sister."

Kara, in similar attire and white veil, hovered behind the elderly figure. She wore his old work hoodie and two sweaters, as well.

"Sister Andre, will you please show Mr. Morrison to the cellar?" directed a third woman, obviously in charge. "Then, you may return to chapel."

"I'll be able to make the repairs more quickly with an extra set of hands," the technician hinted.

Kara eyed her superior, biting back a grin. A curt nod of approval preceded their trek to the stairs.

The finger on her mouth silenced him until an overhead bulb illuminated the dormant antique unit. "Geez, this beast is ancient," Morrison growled.

"Original install," confirmed his companion. "I've tried to convince Mother Colette to replace it but, lacking donations, we can't afford it."

"The story of your life, Kara mia."

"Sister Andre," she corrected.

"You... look radiant, Sister Andre."

"I'm... happy."

"But your housemates aren't happy about your... rather earthy language, I take it."

"Or the fact I climb fences instead of hiking a quarter mile to the gate, and cheat at cards."

He chortled heartily.

"Keep it down!" she warned. "You want them to think we're enjoying ourselves?"

"Aren't we? You're in your element down here."

Testing the ignitor, it was replaced in short order, along with a cracked heat exchanger. He also cleaned the fan and oiled the motor. Replacing the dented cover, he announced, "Good as new!"

Kara flipped a switch and heard the gas ignite. Watching the flames, she jumped when Morrison slipped his hands around her torso.

"What the..."

"From now on, you can play do-it-yourself." He buckled the suede tool belt, giving her waist a quick squeeze. "You've lost weight. Are you eating enough?"

"Plenty. A lot of physical activity, though, and with my high metabolism..." His thick digits encircled hers. "You've taken off the ring."

“I told you I wouldn’t be able to wear it.” She tugged a length of green yarn from beneath her collar, where the gold band shone in the light. “It’s always next to my heart.”

“But... she doesn’t know, eh?” He wagged his thumb at the stairs.

“No. It’s the one personal possession I couldn’t relinquish.”

“Because it means something. None of this...”

She laid her hand on his lips; he kissed it. “None of *that*, Barry. I stand by my decision.”

“Kara mia, I need you.”

“I know. Mom needed me, back in the day. Then, Dad - to restore the company’s reputation. That done, I tried my best to wean you off the sauce, and begged you to get rid of that ludicrous mustache... You *need* to change yourself.”

“If I stopped, cold turkey, would you... abandon this insanity?”

Her teeth grit angrily. “Insanity?”

“You could be anything, *do* anything...”

“I’m doing *this*.”

Their eyes met, and he recognized the determination and sincerity which had spurred her through difficult decades. “I concede.”

“Good.”

Affectionately, she raised his palm to her cheek; they mounted cement steps arm-in-arm. Kara bid him farewell at the exit; he glimpsed her blushing when Mother Colette witnessed him blow her a kiss from the parking lot.

Bestowing his tools upon Kara hadn’t been a mere impulse. Friday, Morrison had received the final ultimatum from Durant and Williams’ corporate office: retire or be terminated. The severance pay would keep him comfortable until eligibility for his pension was established, but the health insurance would run out at month’s end. He’d suspended his distrust of the medical profession - temporarily, at any rate - scheduling the tests Dr. Durazo had suggested so the policy would cover the expense.

He spent hours wheeled from suite to suite, weighed, measured, poked by needles, wired to monitors, x-rayed, and magnetically scanned head to toe. Preliminary results noted no major issues, though he was advised to lose 20 pounds, seek treatment for his alcoholism, and commence a strict gluten-free diet.

Naturally, he disregarded the instructions. He did, however, lay in a supply of fresh fruits and vegetables, eating them raw since he hated to cook. His body rebelled against the influx of vitamins and fiber; only ample portions of liquor dulled the subsequent headaches.

Which, oddly, worsened after he resumed his former habits.

He thought them migraines, the combination of crippling nausea and blinding flashes of pain confining him to bed most days. More frustrating: abrupt losses of balance moving around the cluttered apartment.

A brief respite arrived among the weekly allotment of sale catalogs and utility bills. A square cardboard mailer contained a home-burned DVD and a note from Kara.

Growing up in a business focused on customer service, she'd written many letters - cordial and otherwise - in perfect English. Morrison preferred her bluntness.

She didn't disappoint him by opening with polite salutations. "I've been helping Sister Georgette do research for a biography on our foundress," read the tilted scrawl. "I got an idea for a play, which will be performed on her upcoming feast. Managed to record a dress rehearsal, and am smuggling you this 'preview copy'. I based my role on you, you cynic. For that reason alone, you might enjoy it. All my love, Sr. Andre."

He popped the disk into his laptop, reclining on a stack of pillows while grainy images swept onto a bare set. They occupied two wooden chairs, the "reporter" - Kara, wearing an old-style business suit - jotting notes as she interviewed the "sainted foundress", peppering the dialogue with accusations of heresy.

Kara had lifted some of the statements directly from chats with him. The sole difference, as the interaction concluded, her character professed sympathy for the nun's dedication. Morrison had none.

He deliberated whether Kara softened the ending simply to appease her superiors, or if she truly embraced those tenets.

Through the week, he replayed the DVD over and over, eventually muting the sound, studying her expressive features, pausing on a frame where her smile lit the screen.

Taking pen in hand, he scribbled his comments on a plain sheet, hunting high and low for an envelope and stamp. Descending the stairs to the mail slot, a wave of dizziness overwhelmed him, and he tumbled onto the landing.

He lost all concept of time, opening his eyes to blurred surroundings and a throbbing left leg. In the emergency room cubicle much later, he remembered alternately hobbling and crawling to the parking lot, forcing himself to remain coherent during the trip across town.

Dr. Durazo punched up Morrison's file on the rolling computer. "Your ankle isn't broken, thankfully, only sprained. We'll be taping your cracked ribs before you're discharged." He scanned a series of entries, cleared the monitor and

approached the gurney. “Have you contacted the local hospice? If not, I know the director...”

“Hospice?” the patient echoed vaguely.

“I know it’s a difficult decision, but it makes the end so much easier for everyone involved.”

“End? End of what?”

“End of life.”

Morrison shook himself from an increasing lethargy. “The end of *whose* life?”

“Why, yours.”

“I don’t plan to die for another twenty years, Doc.”

“None of us wants to admit we’re... ill, Mr. Morrison. If you put off making the arrangements, in your condition, it will be that much harder on your family.”

“What condition?”

Durazo recoiled. “You mean, you weren’t *told?*”

“Look, Doc, I feel like shit. Stop playing games.”

“The tests you had...”

“I was told everything came out okay.”

The physician tugged the computer cart closer, reactivating the file. He pointed to MRI films of Morrison’s skull and spine. “Believe me, I’ll request a full investigation into why the staff didn’t notify you. It’s inexcusable. You have an inoperable brain tumor, and the cancer has spread. Had it been diagnosed a year ago, treatment might’ve been successful. Now, nothing can be done.”

“That... accounts for the headaches.”

“Horrendous headaches.”

“What’s the best estimate?” queried Morrison.

“A week, or a month. We’re never sure.”

Bandages and a brace supporting his ankle, others squeezing his chest, Morrison let a nursing assistant load him in the rusty white van, but the key hung dormant in the ignition until past sunset. The autumn chill didn’t bother him; his mind was too busy mulling his forthcoming demise.

The item which kept jumping to the top of his priority list: telling Kara.

He crumpled the letter propped on the center console, holding the wad in his fist. Light from a street lamp shone off his signet ring...

Hadn’t they cheesily promised each other, at the jewelry store, if they were ever separated, and one needed the other, to send the gold band as a summons?

Not that she would leave the monastery. She could meet him there, and they could share a few moments together...

He mailed the jeweler's box, "2:00/chapel" on a scrap of paper tucked in the lid. When she didn't come after three days, he prayed the package hadn't been lost in transit.

Day after day he returned, motivating himself to rise, shower, dress and navigate thirty miles to the erstwhile country estate. Periodically, he sensed eyes peeking between heavy red curtains draped over intricate wrought iron pillars, which hid the cloistered side of the complex from public scrutiny.

Not Kara's eyes.

There came a morning when Morrison's limbs refused to function. He slid off the mattress onto the floor, inching to the bathroom, pulling himself vertical on the doorframe. If not today, perhaps never again, he lamented.

The westerly sun painted the chapel's maple paneling with pastel hues. Thwarting a tendency to slump by gripping the armrest, he sat near the sacristy.

He'd begun to doze when a terse exchange became audible through a gap in the turn.

Through which the pair must've been peering.

"That huddled shell of a man has spent every afternoon in our chapel, since the postman delivered this a month ago," stated an imperious contralto.

Kara's lilting tones responded, edged with annoyance. "Why... was I not given it with the rest of my mail?"

"The parcel arrived damaged. I'd intended to ask you about its significance, but with the preparations for our feast day and the Chapter of Offices, I forgot it in my desk until today."

"Mother, I..."

"Who is he, Sister Andre?"

"You've met him. Barry Morrison. He repaired the furnace last winter."

"He is much changed. Why would he send you a ring?"

"I've known him my entire life, Mother. After my father died, I had to sell the house and furniture to pay off most of his debts. Barry took me in, which allowed me to save enough to satisfy the remaining creditors. We bought these for each other as a token of our..."

"You *lived* with him?"

"Yes."

"Such an omission on your application to join our community is a grave sin, Sister, and places you at risk of not being accepted for profession."

This foolishness exacerbated Morrison's headache.

Kara grumbled, “There’s a big difference, Mother, between sharing a man’s apartment and sharing his bed.”

An ominous pause.

“Did you... Have you...” stammered the superior.

The door slammed open, rattling chalices in their cabinets.

“Afraid to finish the question, you withered old cow?” Morrison hissed.

“Yes, we were intimate. Years ago, this sweet child bestowed upon me her most precious gift. I took it, and... and...”

He staggered; Kara caught him before he collapsed. Convulsed with pain, he accidentally grabbed onto her white veil and ripped it from her head.

She didn’t seem to notice as she steered him back to the pew, settling him on uncushioned wood. Mother Colette observed from the threshold.

Recovering a bit of composure, he smirked at her cropped raven curls.

“You remind me of a plucky little girl...” he gasped.

Tears soaked her cheeks as Kara sank beside him, slipping his ring onto his index finger, the others now too thin. “What’s happened, Barry?”

“The doctors...”

“Didn’t I warn you about cirrhosis?”

“My liver may be the only intact organ I have left.”

“Then, what?”

“Cancer...”

Kara’s sob reverberated throughout the chamber.

“I wanted to see you once more...”

She hugged him; he responded with limited strength. “We’ll go home. I’ll take care of you,” she pledged.

“No, Kara mia. Your life is here...”

She glared at the superior over his shoulder. “Like hell it is. They ignored you, when there might’ve been a chance...”

“Aren’t you supposed to forgive those who harm you?”

“Harm me? Yes. Harm my friends, no.” She wiped her nose on the sleeve of her habit, then lifted him upright. “Come on.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I see now, you were right about me playing with only half a deck. I’ve finally recovered the missing cards.”

He chuckled as they departed the chapel, “I always knew you were a closet atheist.”

Mother Colette closed the sacristy door without a sound.

The next 72 hours were the happiest Barry Morrison could recall. Having Kara close, clad in his baggy blue jeans and extra large t-shirt, holding her hand, swapping humorous stories about past adventures...

He confessed exhaustion following lunch of tomato soup and chocolate pudding. She tucked the blanket up to his chin and kissed his cheek. His eyelids drooped; he exhaled his last breath.

## In Retrospect

It sucks being immortal.

Actually, the phrase “possessing ultra-longevity” better describes the phenomenon.

Vampires are vulnerable to wooden stakes, after all; werewolves can be killed by silver bullets.

Then, there’s me.

I’ve been bored out of my skull on this chunk of rock for three millennia. Not that any of the locals have a clue. Ever since I was stranded when the mother ship took off without me, I’ve blended in quite well - even the kids I played with the first day didn’t notice anything different about me.

Other than the four fingers on my left hand.

Which is, by the way, the proper number. Check out my feet, if you can convince me to remove my custom-made boots. The five digits extending from my right palm are the oddity - on my home world.

Maybe that’s why they deserted me. My disfiguration caused me to be mocked and bullied by schoolmates, so my parents withdrew me and took me on the expedition with their fellow scientists. No more did I exit the interplanetary transport to join a group of children rolling wooden hoops, than the ramp retracted and the behemoth’s anti-grav drive powered it through the atmosphere.

Bastards.

Abandoning a ten-year-old girl in a foreign land.

A ten-year-old who ages only one day every three months. Three thousand years later, I look forty-ish.

I’ve seen so much war, devastation and stupidity, though, I feel really, really old.

But, I can’t die.

Not that I fear death. It’s a natural event. Nor do I fear the coroner getting his greedy gloves on my empty shell, picking apart my alien physiology. My organs are configured differently than Earth-humans, though functioning much the same. If a doctor found a reason to listen to my heart, he wouldn’t find it.

I’ve never been to a doctor, though. I don’t get sick.

Never gave birth to a child, either.

Had I done so, the nurses would’ve fled, screaming, into the night.

I’ve tried to keep a low profile.

Which meant moving around a lot. Nothing piques the collective curiosity more than a person who doesn't appear to age. Twenty years along, my friends were grey and wrinkled, while I still boasted a teenager's face.

They resented it, too.

Relocating in the early days wasn't easy. Women didn't have many rights, and travel wasn't permitted, unless a connection to a royal household could be established, or you were accompanied by your husband. I opted for the former, ingratiating myself with various rulers thanks to pearls of wisdom gathered over the centuries.

Not that they listened.

I could recite a litany of foolish mistakes made by those who wore simple gold crowns, and tiaras bedecked with supposedly precious jewels (on my planet, we use them as ballast). Not my purpose here. Nor is it to recount adventures of which I've been part across six continents. Others have put those stories on paper - some mentioning me by whatever name I used at the time. Funny, in a way, to peruse their biographies and learn what they really thought of me.

They knew what I thought of them from the start.

Only one man respected me for that bluntness. He died in 1782.

I miss him to this day, moreso because I caused his demise.

I don't want anyone to repeat my mistake, whether or not countries continue to war against each other, pollute the atmosphere or spread incurable diseases.

The quote, "It is better to have loved and lost..." is a load of crap.

Another - about letting go of what you love, so it can return to you - falls in the same category.

I was actively searching for the "perfect" mate to fill a void within my soul. The void I feel at being millions of miles from my home is unfillable. I can't remember the names of the thousands of men I've met wandering this lumpy sphere's mountains and valleys. One crossed my path at a particular moment in our joint histories, though, sparking something glorious between us.

Not that I believe in fate, destiny *or* coincidence.

On a three-masted ship roiling across the Atlantic Ocean, Gowan MacDaniel raised my head off the splintered railing after I'd emptied my stomach into the sea for the umpteenth time.

Nasty, primitive conveyance.

Too weak to resist his grip on my hair, I let him lower me atop a coil of wet, slimy rope. Deep brown orbs gazed at me sympathetically; he might've been viewing a puppy rescued from drowning.

“These weeks, ye have not kept down anything ye ate,” he admonished, the burr as thick as his dark, arched eyebrows and bushy mustache, while his longish hair drooped cloud white from beneath a tri-corn hat. “Ye will waste away long before we sight land.”

Broad shoulders supported a woollen greatcoat, while drawn, craggy features hinted at his own illness.

Or, festering physical wounds.

Sensing one Scottish to the bone, I’d dealt with many of those battle-crazed bagpipers in the course of my exile. My hand extended, a silent request for assistance. He clutched it but, instead of scrambling to my feet, I flipped his palm skyward. Old scars and callouses hinted at his participation in many skirmishes.

To his credit, he didn’t flinch at my examination. Nor did he assume a prideful air.

I didn’t have a chance to question him, lurching for the railing once more. He stood by me the rest of the afternoon; I eschewed returning to my cabin, alternately dozing near the bow, or pacing the stern. When I finally collapsed, he carried me below deck to his hammock.

“You’re... crew?” My throat raw from acidic upheaval, the words were little better than a rasp.

“Working m’way to the New World.”

He held a flask to my lips; the familiar burn of malt whisky made me cough. The spasm finally eased; he laid me on a straw pillow, and I fell asleep to the sound of his quiet singing.

Such solicitous care being insufficient reason for forming an emotional attachment to this man, I merely relate the manner of our acquaintance to provide some perspective. I learned in forthcoming days how, well into middle age, Gowan MacDaniel had lost his wife and child in an attack by a rival clan. Laborer and unwilling soldier, he’d seen too much of life, and sought a degree of freedom from his anguish.

We were of like mind in that endeavor. Sailing into New York harbor, neither of us realized we were sailing into the middle of a revolution. British troops searched baggage for evidence of spies, scrutinizing documents at the base of the gangplank for obvious forgeries.

Brits had long viewed Scots as rebels and ne’er-do-wells. MacDaniel would be inherently suspect. To incriminate myself, the pockets of my plain green frock were stuffed with travel permits issued by Irish, French, and Italian officials, painstakingly copied from originals. Anticipating difficulties and potential arrest,

we dove off the quarterdeck into choppy waves, swimming beneath the pier to relative safety.

We could reclaim our belongings after the crowds dispersed.

“For someone who doesna like the sea, ye swim quite well,” commented MacDaniel as we watched traffic pass over our heads.

“Being on it and in it are two different things.”

“Aye, ‘tis true.”

Dusk came and went before we climbed onto the boardwalk, scaled the anchor chain and crept into the hold. Our possessions blindly scooped into draw-string bags, we parted at a crossroads, he northbound and I continuing west.

Except, in the gloom, we had inadvertently switched bundles.

Little need had I for a carved meerschaum pipe and tobacco pouch, no matter how unconventional my demeanor. His breeches were far too long, the boots too large - had I wanted to wear them - he probably found my dresses unflatteringly short.

They weren’t a plaid tartan, so he couldn’t pretend to be wearing a kilt. We might’ve roamed the colonial metropolis aimlessly for days; whatever bond had already been established drew us together on a street of wealthy homes.

Compared to the rampant poverty less than ten blocks away, wealthy. Not by European standards.

We both had our land legs again, and if his cheeks boasted a healthier glow, I hoped mine did, as well. We laughed about the mishap, exchanging bags.

“I didna rummage through the unmentionables,” he assured me.

“I didn’t smoke your pipe.”

“Ye look like the type who might, at that.”

“Not... recently.” I fortunately caught myself before creating an untenable situation. Problematic to explain the rituals of ancient Mayans to a man who’d ne’er seen a century turn.

“I pray m’carelessness didna cause ye inconvenience.”

“I’m on no timetable. I go where I please, when I please.”

“Ye ha’ no set destination?”

“No.” Again, I suppressed a revealing statement about having traveled across this land to the Pacific six hundred years earlier. “I want to see what I can see.”

“A woman, alone? In a pub last night, I heard tales of terrible dangers from savage natives, and the armies fighting for every inch of territory...”

One of the items stuffed among my clothes was an amulet which would identify me to the noble peoples who laid claim to the continent long before white man set foot on its shores. Sometimes, being hailed as a god had its advantages.

I conceded his point regarding the armies. Men with rifles and swords paid little heed to neutral citizens.

“The cousins I sought ha’ been tried and hung as traitors by a fanatical British general,” MacDaniel admitted. “This news leaves me wi’out a destination, m’self. Would ye object to a traveling companion, until we reach less... hostile country?”

“Only if you promise to treat me as an equal, not some fragile treasure to protect at any cost.”

“But, ye *are*...”

I’d never had occasion to use the one weapon my parents entrusted to me when we embarked on our deep space explorations, though I’d seen it decimate the population of an entire city when improperly deployed. MacDaniel didn’t need to know this, in an era when men placed great value on their strength and valor.

“I’ll not walk two paces behind you, nor defer to your judgment,” I professed. “We will discuss all decisions, and choose our route by mutual consent.”

He hesitated prior to enveloping my fingers in his hefty paw. “Aye, lass.”

We dined in an elegant restaurant, then retired to separate hotel rooms on the upper floors. A cacophony of bells jarring us from slumber, we set out while most people shuffled in their finery to churches for Sunday morning services, the sun over our shoulders.

Hitching a ride on an open wagon, we put New York behind us. Had I been the least bit interested, I might’ve informed the brigades of British army they were being stalked by well-concealed colonial militiamen, or reported to village militias the position of tightly formed enemy divisions on the road.

Few people smiled in the midst of this uncertainty. Mothers held their children close when walking the streets, men glanced back and forth, ready to run if gunfire sounded. MacDaniel used his last coin to purchase a pistol, shot and wadding from a farmer as we passed north of Philadelphia. He tucked it in his belt, a visible deterrent to anyone approaching.

Evenings, we bedded down in a barn, loft or, if raining, a tavern’s spare rooms. We didn’t sleep much; MacDaniel liked to talk.

I listened.

The joys and sorrows, delight and disgust condensed into his four decades of life mirrored 2,700 years I’d observed this civilization - or lack thereof. He

shunned belief in any form of deity, blaming religious fervor for prejudice, slavery and armed conflict. Rancor within his own marriage stemmed from his wife's strict compliance with various tenets he abhorred.

"We ne'er had a chance to love each other," he rambled one sultry midnight, stars shining through gaps in the stable's roof. "The match was arranged by our parents when we were yet bairns; she was headstrong and imperious, and I could do nothing to soften her moods."

"She gave you a son," I commented. "You... fulfilled your marital obligations."

"A son now dead. She would give me no more, wouldna let me touch her after our wedding night."

"A trait of African lions."

"Lions? Africa? How come ye to such knowledge?"

"That's not important. In Africa, a male lion mates with many females."

"Ye mean, lions are not monogamous?"

"Nor are many species - birds, fish, apes."

"Barbaric!"

"Not to the animals. It's natural for them. Given my experience, men and women should not live together for prolonged periods. Being trapped in close proximity breeds anger and resentment, not love and affection."

"Love is the greatest gift..."

"It's not a gift. It's a curse."

MacDaniel glared at me, eyes reflecting pale moonlight. "Ye advocate forcing m'self upon m'wife, demanding her submission?"

"A woman, properly... attended, will desire the union as much as the man."

"I showed m'wife every attention, the utmost courtesy..."

"Did you ever embrace and kiss her in the heat of a moment, lift her onto your bed..."

"She grew from a fine, slender lass into a... buxom matron. I couldna hoist her off the floor."

My fists clenched in frustration. This man - many men - deserved better from their spouses. Many wives deserved better from their husbands, also. Traditions promoted by various cultures sanctioned beatings, mutilation, even murder of women for the slightest infraction.

I ached for my home.

"Forgive me for upsetting ye. I ha' not asked about the husband ye lost..."

Stifling my tears, I forced a smile. "I've never been married."

"'Tis hard to believe."

“I... am an orphan. With no dowry, no lineage or title...”

“Ah!”

The accusation in that lone syllable set my nerves on edge. “Your assumption is in error, sir.”

“How else would ye come to possess such a heavy purse if ye couldna be bought for a night’s indulgence...”

I’d slapped princes who’d dared insult my honor; MacDaniel slumped against a hay bale, his nose streaming red.

My negative reaction may have been the first physical contact he’d had with a female in years. Or, the taste of his own blood may have aroused a latent ferocity.

He flipped me on my spine in a split second, pinning me to the floor. “If ye are not a lady of ill repute, ye must be a thief!” he growled. “Why else would ye be missing a finger?”

Pressure constricting a major artery, I maneuvered my right knee into striking position. An ominous rustling momentarily distracted me.

The razor-sharp arrowhead grazed MacDaniel’s cheek. I barely prevented him from crushing me as he sought cover.

I shot vertical; he yanked me off balance. “Leave off, man!” I scolded.

“Ye want to be killed?”

“Hush!”

Silhouetted in the open doorway: three Shawnee warriors clad in beaded animal skin tunics and leggings. I greeted them in their native tongue, which visibly surprised them, as did the mention of my divine tribal designation.

They dropped to one knee simultaneous with MacDaniel’s rising. He presumed his pistol, or his height, frightened them.

“No,” I responded to his egotistical whisper. “They’re glad to see me. They’ve been anticipating my return for many, many years.”

I should’ve kept my mouth shut.

The barrage of harsh questions aggravated the warriors, so I had to soothe them and placate MacDaniel in two languages.

It never dawned on me, prior to that moment, how many dialects I’d incorporated into my consciousness during these meanderings. From ancient Egyptian to Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Aztec, Hindu, Russian, Chinese... To maintain my anonymity, acquiring fluency in a region’s written and verbal communications was mandatory.

Expletives included.

I silenced MacDaniel with a few choice Gaelic phrases, resuming the exchange with the Shawnee. Myself and my “consort” - a god could dally with humans, in their eyes, but nothing more serious - were invited to their settlement, where they would celebrate my coming with a three day festival.

The swiftest of the trio sprinted ahead to notify his people; they must’ve also sent messengers to surrounding villages, because upon our arrival, scores of men, women and children carpeted the path with flowers, served ample portions of meat and vegetables, and danced around huge bonfires.

None of this was new to me. MacDaniel’s discomfort, however, could not be misinterpreted.

Seated cross-legged on the dusty ground, he rumbled in my ear, “If ye are not a thief, nor a harlot, who are ye?”

“I am a woman enjoying a party.”

“But, why this falderal and caterwauling?”

“When your king travels, do his subjects not show similar enthusiasm?”

He cackled, “If the pay is right.”

“Those who treat people with kindness and solicitude need not pay for adulation.”

“Ye are not of their blood. How can ye be their queen?”

“Suffice it we are welcome guests, bringing peace rather than war.”

A pipe stuffed with pungent herbs was passed to MacDaniel; *that* he understood. He inhaled rhythmically before offering it to me. I declined, curious how the intoxicating fumes would affect him.

For some, it augmented the warrior spirit. Others, it mellowed.

I didn’t expect him to grab me and plant a kiss on my lips.

The Shawnee saw the gesture as an affront to my dignity. They froze in their tracks, staring at us, flames heightening the anger in their eyes.

MacDaniel was stretched between two beech trees, his punishment to be branded with hot irons on cheek and forearms.

Showing mercy to this supposed miscreant would diminish my status with the tribe. Yet, when the natives prayed to their gods in difficult times, they expected a merciful response.

“Hold!” I shouted, metal rods heating in the fire. At my most authoritative, I confronted the chief. “You would spoil your tribute with violence? If I was not offended by his display of affection, why should you be?”

“The white man takes liberties no Shawnee would dare...”

“You know as well as I: white men are impulsive fools. They seldom mean to do harm.” MacDaniel wouldn’t detect the insult, gibberish to his ears.

“How would you have the lesson taught?” demanded the chief.

“He can do combat against your strongest brave, which should be fine sport for us all.”

“To the victor?”

“The favor of the gods for the rest of his life.”

Commands to release the prisoner were instantly obeyed. MacDaniel stood, rubbing his chafed wrists, until a cocky warrior thrust a tomahawk into his hand. Still under the influence of the peace pipe’s noxious blend, he squinted at me.

“You’re the evening’s entertainment.”

He protested, “I dunna know how to fight with one of these.”

Feathered and painted, the brave took up his stance on the opposite side of the blaze.

“Then, fight however you can to keep yourself alive,” I advised.

Meaning, since MacDaniel had a definite height advantage, he could block the Shawnee’s strikes and debilitate the younger man with bare knuckles.

The natives cheered for their champion, naturally. I took no sides; no proper deity would. The adrenaline rush and exertion combined to sober MacDaniel, who pummeled his opponent’s face into pulp. Somehow, I imagined him brawling in a Scottish marketplace for an audience of farmers and smiths betting their meager savings, while their wives shopped at the stalls.

Collapsing in an exhausted heap, the brave conceded the contest. MacDaniel, chest heaving and shirt torn where the axe blade had nicked him, offered the boy a hand up in salute to a gallant adversary.

The chief leaned past his wife to address me. “I intended to give you the choice of my warriors as your consort, but I see you have picked wisely. I would not have thought a white man could defeat my own son.”

MacDaniel might not have comprehended the compliments showered upon him by the tribal elders; his lips twitched into a sideways grin beneath his mustache when a string of beads was draped around his neck. We were directed to a cone-shaped hut, providing the required privacy for me to bestow my “favor” upon the winner.

He doused his head in a barrel of drinking water stored inside the arched entrance before, dripping, letting his rage fly.

“Are ye stone mad? Did ye want me dead?”

Stretching out on a pile of furs, I sighed. “I saved your neck, Gowan. Your rugged good looks, anyway.”

“Eh?”

“I didn’t think you’d relish half your face marred by a coward’s brand.”

His adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed his pride. "'Tis that what they were preparing?"

"Yes."

"Because I kissed ye?"

"If a saint descended from heaven, wouldn't your people be appalled if the town beggar did likewise?"

"Ach, 'twould be a scandal."

"I don't blame you. The pipe releases one's inhibitions..." Unhooking the flap from its retracted position, the dwelling went black. "Good night."

MacDaniel grunted, "Where do I sleep?"

"Wherever you like."

He groped for the furs, and closed on my ankle instead.

"My feet aren't detachable," I snickered.

"Right now, I wish m'arms were."

"Sore?"

"M'last fight was in a Glasgow pub." Sitting beside me, he counted quietly. "Twelve year ago."

In the capacity of nurse and nanny, on battlefields and in bedrooms, I'd massaged the cramped limbs of soldiers and potentates. I began with MacDaniel's neck and worked my way along his collar bone. "You're in pretty good shape for an old man."

He patted my hand tenderly, and that's when I felt the first romantic connection with him. Later, his measured breathing merged with the breeze rustling taut walls, I weighed the risk of nurturing the relationship.

Human feet struck me as ugly; mine - resembling a chicken's: three toes forward and one back - would frighten Earth children. Intimacy with anyone would entail disclosing my deepest physiological and psychological secrets. The instant such a revelation occurred...

No man in his right mind would waste his energy on a 2,700 year old woman, even a youthful one. If he wished to feel the accelerated beat of my heart during a passionate interlude, he would be puzzled by its absence from the left side of my chest. Only by sliding his hand to the base of my spine would the pulse be distinguished.

Which is precisely what roused MacDaniel in the wee hours of that chilly morning. Shivering, he'd sought a source of warmth in the darkness, and wrapped his arms around my waist, surmising me a pillow, perhaps. I covered his long frame with a bear's hide. My rapidly pumping ventricles - twice the pace of the human equivalent - shocked him awake.

He kicked off the furs, jerking me from the make-shift bed. "Ye are lucky ye weren't bitten," he panted.

"By what?"

"A wild animal had crawled beneath..."

I stroked his unshaven cheek. "You were dreaming. Come, if we are to leave at sunrise, we must rest."

"'Twill be impossible to close an eye."

"Relax, Gowan."

"The way ye speak m' name..." He caressed my fingers, stooping to rearrange the bedding. "How did ye lose..."

No time like the present. "I was born without it."

"Pity."

"No need for pity. It shouldn't matter."

"Ha' ye not been ridiculed for the lack..."

"Not by those who call me friend, and whose opinions I value."

MacDaniel reclined, drawing me close. I laid my head on that sturdy shoulder, his artery throbbing against my skin. Warm and content, we both dozed.

The next day, riding west on two magnificent horses - a gift from the Shawnee chief - we passed a finely detailed portrait chiseled into the rock face. My companion reined his mount to admire the artistry.

"'Tis ye," he observed.

I said nothing, continuing onward. The truth would sink in soon enough.

"Ye *ha'* visited this place in the past."

Sooner than I expected.

He urged his bay to a canter, catching me on a downslope. "The name these people call ye - I canna pronounce it - can it be translated?"

"Roughly, 'One Beyond Time'."

"Aren't many of the women named 'Girl Who Runs with Deer', 'White Feather' and such?"

"The brave you fought yesterday is 'Eagle in the Clouds'. The chief's... ancestor chose my name, fresh from a seven-day ritual. He and his sons were eating their first meal after a fast, when I emerged from the forest, bathed in morning sunlight. You can guess the rest."

"Aye. Hunger made the chief's grandfather hallucinate."

I let his misinterpretation stand.

Our progress quicker and less strenuous, thanks to the horses - their packs brimming with supplies of dried meat and corn meal bread - we seldom stopped except to sleep and refresh ourselves near a stream. We ignored the European

custom of the siesta until a hot, humid day, when we discovered a secluded river bank where the shade proved too tempting.

MacDaniel snored, while I rinsed my clothes in the rippling water and hung them to dry on a tree branch. I indulged myself with a bath, the dust of half a country seemingly caked on my flesh. To my misfortune, a troop of His Majesty's soldiers were patrolling the area, and decided to ogle the naked lady at her ablutions.

They saw me, not MacDaniel - hidden behind overgrown roots of a gigantic oak. My scream jarred him from his nap; four redcoats splashed in the current before their comrades reacted to the ambush.

I stole into the underbrush during the fray, yanking a blue dress over my head and jamming my feet into my boots. Five against one weren't acceptable odds, and I vowed to do my part.

On my home planet, we attribute the evolution of our feet to the gravel-like soil, allowing us to maintain balance on the coarse surface. The constant crushing of rocks gives these appendages a toughness which can be advantageous in a fight. Conflicts I recall from my childhood involved kicking more than punching and, though travels on this world hadn't thrown me into many situations where use of force was necessary, I could hold my own when challenged.

The soldiers I laid out, shattering their kneecaps, might never walk again.

MacDaniel head-butted another spry youth, backhanding his compatriot into an unyielding willow trunk. The last landed with his nose in the dirt, unconscious.

"Maybe ye should ha' fought Eagle in the Clouds," the Scotsman praised, drinking deeply from the skin flask dangling from his saddle.

Gathering my clothes into the draw-string bag, I leapt onto my horse. "I fight as a last resort and, if we don't want an entire British regiment taking us prisoner, we'd better make haste."

"Aye. I wasted precious years in a British prison. I've no mind to do so again."

At a gallop, we covered considerable ground. In the evening's cool, we unburdened the horses, stretching our own legs the last miles before sunset.

With the passing of weeks, we reached a French trading post on a vast lake - what became known as Chicago and Lake Michigan. We enjoyed a temporary respite from our journey. MacDaniel drank copious amounts of wine in the rustic tavern; I studied crude maps sketched by trappers inbound from the north.

The consensus was for us to veer south, joining a caravan of canoes traversing the Kankakee River through a series of tributaries to the Mississippi

River. New Orleans would provide a pleasant climate for passing the winter, and we could resume our trek to the Pacific in the spring.

We sold the horses and purchased provisions. Autumn foliage accented our route, with squirrels chattering and racing on the banks to gather their store of nuts.

The moments over three millennia I basked in a sensation of absolute peace are few and far between. Floating down the river, accompanied by boisterous, off-key French singing and bawdy conversation, I count among them. MacDaniel and I took turns rowing and, though I was the sole female among dozens of men, they didn't pester me.

I'd heard Indian scouts at the post playing up my importance. Wishing not to offend the natives, the trappers treated me with respect.

We stayed only a few days at St. Louis, a fort awaiting siege by the British. Supply boats made frequent treks to and from the Spanish port at New Orleans; we paid dearly to secure passage.

Compared to present day, life was simpler in the 18th century, less hectic, and equally dangerous. The British had fought the Spanish for this territory, dividing it among themselves during elaborate treaty signings, without a thought for those who had occupied the land prior to the arrival of "civilization".

The greed of governments, leaving ordinary folk to suffer the consequences.

MacDaniel kept his gun loaded and primed on this voyage, the shoreline often too close if a sniper wished for a quick kill. We disembarked at the last stop, no incidents having marred the passage; I fell onto the lodging house bed and slept for two days.

Remember, that's the equivalent of an hour - or less - where I was born.

The elegant city, boasting a mix of French and Spanish flavors, might've become my permanent residence, if not for MacDaniel's desire to elevate me to a position of social prominence. He'd been doing a lot of thinking, evidently, about my "godly" status with the native tribes, and decided I should be hailed in similar fashion by the invaders.

He hadn't grasped how the Indians revered the old and wise; my extreme longevity redoubled their awe. Shallow sorts - who prized youth and beauty, expensive finery and gaudy decor - would fear me.

I'd seen it before, and fled from it.

Had MacDaniel told me his plan, I would've warned him. He might've persisted; at this late date, the result cannot be altered.

If I'd pouted and rejected his advances, a successful tactic for many women to get their way, we might've shared decades together. Instead, those months passed in domestic bliss.

Until he presented me the invitation to the Governor's masqued ball.

He'd made profitable use of his time on our trip, I learned. He established himself as the prime broker for spiritous liquors, arranging their shipment up the Mississippi to the trading posts and outlying settlements. No longer would those remote populations have to resort to home-brew. Their roasted rabbit and buffalo steaks could be properly consumed with the finest wines and, of course, Scotch whisky.

His secrets included cutting his long white mane, a sore disappointment for me. He'd put his wild days behind him, broadcasting the transformation in his outward appearance. He'd taken to wearing frock coats, satin vests and frill-cuffed shirts, which I didn't mind so much. I'd debated how I might design myself a pair of more... genteel shoes, giving up the notion when I glimpsed many women wearing boots not unlike mine on the muddy streets after drenching rains.

"Ye have an appointment with the dressmaker tomorrow afternoon," announced MacDaniel as my jaw hung open reading the ornate script summoning us to the Governor's mansion Saturday fortnight.

"Why, Gowan? I have no need..."

"'Tis a slim chance I will be forming a partnership with other prominent brokers, who envy my reputation as an entrepreneur. M'wife must put the other ladies to shame, far superior intellectually and physically."

"I'm not your wife."

"Ye ha' ne'er answered m'proposal..."

How could I?

His business pursuits hadn't bothered me; each night, we shared a bed, his warmth and fidelity always primary among his traits. This abrupt alteration, however...

Money spoiled everything.

Dating back to time immemorial, dammit.

I wouldn't let it spoil the life I'd created, whether or not it endured indefinitely.

I'd show my "superiority" by initiating a new fashion trend.

The seamstress balked at my idea, despite a historic precedent. I paid her double what MacDaniel had promised, compelling her cooperation.

And, convincing my ardent escort to ride in separate carriages to augment the surprise, I mounted the marble stairs to the grand ballroom in a diaphanous gold toga, a laurel wreath crowning my black curls.

In one collective motion, I swear all the hoops supporting outrageous skirts collapsed.

Drooped, at any rate.

Much easier to dance a minuet in my costume, no collisions with nearby couples or stepping on jeweled trains. Men vied for my attention, wishing a waltz or a gavotte. Their wives bristled at this disservice, complaining to the fiancée of the Governor's aide, himself waiting for the queue to shorten.

That lackey subsequently bypassed the line, as it happened, lambasting MacDaniel for his impudence in bringing a harlot into this haven of respectability.

Humorous that MacDaniel's first impression of me involved unlawful behaviors and, now he knew better, others made the same allegation.

Not humorous when the glove contacted his cheek and dropped onto the mosaic tiles.

The duel was set for Monday morning - permitting each man to make his peace with the divine on Sunday, I suppose.

The weapons: sabres.

In terms brooking no opposition, MacDaniel explained he would employ the same technique as he did with Eagle in the Clouds. The one factor he didn't consider: the wiggled politician boasted a comparable height and physique to his own.

"If 'twere pistols, I wouldna ha' a chance," he concluded.

"You don't have to do this."

"Ye didna ha' to comport yourself in such a manner, either. Being responsible for ye, I ha' no choice."

My regret was sincere. "I'm sorry."

A bit of the former fire lit his brown orbs. "Ye are not to blame. 'Tis those... those... pretentious imbeciles..."

In contrast to those who spent their Sunday in church pews, MacDaniel and I roamed the city - one final stroll, regardless of the duel's outcome.

His defeat would trigger my immediate exodus from New Orleans. A victory would negate any hope of his collaboration with other brokers...

Unless I left him.

We held each other through the night; my tears soaked his chest. He muttered inanities, tracing the curve of my spine with calloused fingers.

"I ha' loved ye," he confessed. "I dunna want ye to leave me."

How I wished to swear we'd be together forever. My forever and his, though, had opposing definitions. He might survive into the new century, given the average life expectancy in the 1700s. Another eight hundred Earth years could be my lot.

Sleep deprived and stressed, he departed at dawn for the park beyond city limits. I followed, defying tradition.

The dastardly scoundrel! Perched on a low branch, I watched the aide's second present the swords and outline the contest's rules. As the duelists took their positions, a pistol cracked, the lead ball piercing MacDaniel's torso from behind.

He crumpled on the grass, the aide smirking in triumph.

Accepting congratulations from his attendants, the last thing he saw was my boot heel caving in his ribcage.

I could not linger to mourn my beloved; once the spectators recovered from their shock, my life would be forfeit. I ran, and wandered, and do still as I bring my tale to its end.

Never have I dared love another human being as I did Gowan MacDaniel. Only those who have never lost someone so exceptional have the gall to claim grief diminishes with time. Mingled with unendurable guilt over my foolishness...

There aren't words to describe the crippling sorrow which has irreparably poisoned my soul.

It sucks being immortal.

## Cold Corner

Poor old Mrs. Shoemaker. She just didn't get it.

Devin Goldthwaite braked the John Deere riding mower and shifted into neutral. Every spring for the past six years, he'd had to remove metal garden fencing the widow arranged around her husband's plot, and uproot the geraniums and petunias.

Unlike Ireland, the cemetery association prohibited families from tending their deceased loved ones' graves. Uniformity - meaning grass only - was the rule.

Mrs. Shoemaker, notified annually by certified mail, refused to abandon the ancestral tradition.

The groundskeeper unhooked a plastic bucket from the tractor, depositing the fresh plants atop other detritus dumped among the granite markers. His cell phone blasted AC/DC's *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*, meaning a call from the boss. He flipped open the cover and raised it to his ear.

The news wasn't pleasant. While Rick, his co-worker, was vacationing in the Bahamas, Lonnie was supposed to cover the northern section of the property, in addition to his own designated acreage. That retired high school teacher had been carted via ambulance to the hospital overnight for an emergency appendectomy.

A funeral Tuesday morning required Devin to mow the northern section before end of day Monday.

The overtime would augment his paycheck, but he'd rather squeeze in nine holes of golf before sunset.

Pulling off his Cubs ballcap, the ex-Army diesel mechanic wiped perspiration from his forehead with the hem of his t-shirt. He'd need a towel to dry his saffron hair, moist against his neck. Somewhere, he had a tube of zinc oxide to rub on his nose, already feeling sunburnt.

The joys of outdoor work.

Mrs. Shoemaker's mess history for another year, Devin continued along the rows, sharp blades clipping the Kentucky blue grass. Before lunch, he repeated the circuit with the string trimmer, so visitors could pray for their departed in picturesque tranquility.

A ham sandwich, banana and cream soda later, he cruised along gravel lanes to Rick's domain.

Closest to the city's main thoroughfare, the amount of trash slowed his progress. Broken liquor bottles, styrofoam fast food containers, beer cans and newspapers were bad enough. The damned cigarette butts were a royal pain.

None of that bothered Devin as much as the dead animals he discovered near what the crew called “Cold Corner”.

Not because the absence of trees failed to block the winter winds, nor the fact more snow fell in that three-square-yard area than anywhere else on the grounds. Even in summer, crossing some invisible line, the temperature plummeted 20 degrees - when, by rights, it should've been much warmer, given the exposure to the sky.

An involuntary shiver ran up Devin's spine as he approached, and again upon examining the first of many birds. This sparrow appeared to have been crushed, squeezed into pulp by some unhuman hand. The same for a rabbit, a squirrel and two field mice. So much blood coated the leather gloves, he peeled them off and tossed them in the bucket with the remains before mounting the tractor and jamming the engine in gear.

Pondering whether teenaged punks had climbed the wrought iron, spike-tipped fence over the weekend, he skipped trimming around the bleached, worn monument at the center of Cold Corner. Not even weeds grew there, just some nasty moss.

Record of who lay beneath had been destroyed in a fire at the cemetery office thirty years earlier. Traces of a “Z” were visible, but no other lettering or dates.

In the corrugated metal utility shed, Devin chugged a tall glass of water from the cooler before grabbing a pen to log his completed duties on the clipboard. He flipped a few sheets to previous weeks on a hunch, but neither Rick nor Lonnie had listed anything unusual in Cold Corner.

Vandals, he concluded.

Snapping the building's padlocks in place, he mounted his Kawasaki motorcycle for the ride home. His two Cocker Spaniels, Sunlight and Shadow, greeted him eagerly, their food bowls empty. They'd missed their play time with the tennis ball in the bungalow's back yard, and wanted their haunches scratched.

Devin flopped on the sofa, obliging the litter mates he'd saved from the shelter. They battled for space on his lap, and he was glad he possessed two hands - one for each.

By the time he felt like cooking dinner, the aging bachelor had relaxed considerably. His compact kitchen didn't allow much room to move, especially with two expectant dogs milling near his feet, hoping scraps of bread, cheese or hamburger would drop on the floor.

This was his tradition, just as it was Shadow's to wake him every morning at six, leaping on the twin bed and slamming his front paws on Devin's chest. A

free face washing was included, precipitating another when the man reached the bathroom.

Digging the hole and installing a new vault in the northern section would be first priority that Tuesday, with the hearse and mourners set to arrive around 11:00 AM. Driving the backhoe to the site, he noticed more mutilated carcasses lying around Cold Corner.

Even though the procession of cars wouldn't pass that area, he stopped and collected the animals, marveling at the sick minds housed in some kids' bodies. That delay allowed thick clouds to roll in, and a steady downpour to commence.

He didn't mind the rain. Kept him cool as he manipulated the bucket, bringing up fresh dirt.

The only problem would be if the muddy mound he covered with a green tarp oozed under the chairs, protected by the pop-up tent he erected.

The backhoe tires getting stuck threw another wrench in his schedule.

So did his shovel getting struck by lightning as he tried to free the deep tread.

Thrown twenty feet into a carved 19th century obelisk, Devin panicked when the slab toppled off his base. Something - someone? - yanked him clear before his skull was crushed.

He lay, rain pelting his cheeks, panting and puzzled. Alone among 1,000 acres of coffins, who had saved him?

The translucent image reminded him of a child's kaleidoscope, or water droplets viewed through a prism. Or, maybe he'd been temporarily blinded by the lightning's electrical charge, because the hand which reached to pull him off the saturated earth was very tangible.

"You okay, man?" drawled the shaggy-haired, tie-dye clad figure.

Devin swayed, grabbing his companion's arm. "A little dizzy." He slumped against the nearest marker and bowed his head to restore circulation to his brain.

"I think you'll need a new shovel."

The groundskeeper couldn't help but laugh at the twisted metal and shattered handle the bell-bottomed hippie plucked from beside the backhoe. "That could've been my insides."

"We wouldn't let that happen. You're a good guy."

Had Devin heard him wrong? "Who's 'we'?"

The question was ignored. "The rain's stopping, so you should be able to finish here and get yourself dry before you catch a chill."

At that precise moment, the sun peeked out, dispersing the overcast.

Squinting against the brightness, Devin didn't see his rescuer depart. He rested a

few minutes more, then hiked back to the storage shed for another shovel and some planks.

He changed his mind upon hoisting the overhead door; it made more sense to use the GMC pick-up and tow strap to extricate the backhoe.

A filthy process, all 'round. Using a garden hose to rinse down the truck, the equipment and himself, he spent his lunch hour drying his t-shirt and boots with a box fan.

He wasn't about to do likewise with his jeans, sitting in his boxers until the fabric was restored to its normal texture. Especially not if a group of 70s leftovers were loitering on the premises.

Maybe they'd come out to pay respects to a friend who'd died. No dress code existed to discourage visitors. Many wore their Sunday best, as a tribute to parents or grandparents. Some let their kids roam at will in this substitute playground.

Devin had seen it all.

The grave-side service took less than 30 minutes. The hole was filled and sod replaced shortly afterward, giving Devin an opportunity to secure a late tee time on the nearby municipal golf course.

Between practicing his drives and putts, and playing with his dogs, he kept himself sane.

Or, so he thought.

More dead animals Wednesday seriously threatened his peace of mind.

The moist ground should have displayed shoe prints of the culprits, who included a cat and a snake among the bodies. Devin saw no trace of trespassers. Another plastic bag filled with decomposing flesh, he went about his duties, mulling the possibility of keeping vigil at the site if this trend continued.

It did and, by Friday, Devin was determined to learn the cause. He doubted teenagers were behind the meaningless deaths; they bored easily, and would move on to more stimulating acts of destruction in the absence of any publicity.

He did a bit of research at the local library, curious whether a "Satanic cult" might be performing blood sacrifices atop the forlorn, nameless grave. He found no obvious references to any ritual-related holidays, nor was it the week of the full moon.

These creatures weren't dying by themselves, so it couldn't be a natural gas leak bringing about their untimely demise.

Someone was responsible, and if it involved wrapping himself in a blanket beneath a convenient tree, he would.

He debated bringing Sunlight and Shadow back to the cemetery, mostly for their company. They'd go nuts, though, with wildlife rustling the bushes and owls hooting. Their uncontrollable barking would frighten away the assholes responsible for the casualties.

Talking to himself to keep his teeth from chattering, he felt like an idiot. A cold idiot. The wind whistled through bare trees, snapping thinner branches and causing thicker ones to scrape the metal fencing, each gust creating a syncopated rhythm.

He might've been cast in a 1950s B horror movie. Half-expecting something to happen at midnight - outdated superstitions - he kept checking his wristwatch. Or, maybe it was just because he was exhausted, and wanted the sun to rise as quickly as possible.

When the hippie plopped down on an exposed root, Devin almost jumped out of his skin. A momentary opaqueness rattled him further. He rubbed his eyes to rouse himself from dozing.

"You ain't asleep, man. Everything's cool."

Devin bristled. "Dude! How'd you get in here? The main gate's locked..."

"We live here, man."

"We', who? I've never seen you hanging around before. You climb the fence and camp out, or something?"

"Or something."

"You homeless?"

"Naw. We enjoy nature, man. Hidin' inside four walls is a cop-out."

Wearing no coat and sandals without socks, Devin concluded the guy was crazy, or on drugs. High school buddies who smoked too much weed had behaved the same way, impervious to heat and cold, mellow in every regard.

"If you don't get lost, I'm gonna call the cops."

"You'd turn us in to the pigs? What a bummer."

"You, or the jerks who've been killing the animals."

"We seen him, man. He's out of this world scary."

"How so?"

The hippie grabbed Devin's arm and peered at the LED readout of the time. "Give it a few. He'll show."

"What, he shows at the same time every night?"

"The run up to his anniversary, man."

"What anniversary?"

The ground trembled beneath them, and the hippie bolted past the trees. Devin found his limbs incapable of movement when a hideous, decayed figure emerged from a fissure in the unreadable marker.

Next he knew, morning dew sparkled on the blanket in which he'd bundled himself, the sun pledging warmth later in the day. Devin rose and flexed his aching joints. He convinced himself he'd either passed out upon seeing the creature, or had dreamed the whole thing.

Mauled cadavers - and his own claw-damaged left sneaker and crushed, bloody toes - proved *something* had transpired in the wee hours.

He limped to the shed, the swelling preventing him from riding his Kawasaki home for a couple hours' sleep. He borrowed the pick-up and drove to the hospital, where astonished medics wondered how he'd sustained such horrific injuries without dropping an anvil on his foot.

Upon entering the E.R. cubicle, an anemic orthopedic surgeon held a series of x-ray films toward fluorescent ceiling lights. Devin glimpsed a name tag: Parmenter. "You should've come in sooner," he admonished. "I can't see how you could stand the pain for a week..."

"It's only been a few hours."

"Impossible! No infection spreads this fast, and there may even be traces of gangrene..." Dr. Parmenter shoved bifocals up his bulbous nose to appraise the severely bruised tissue. "It'll take major surgery to prevent complete amputation."

Kelly, a feisty nurse in cartoon-print scrubs, displayed amazement on her finely sculpted countenance. "Don't these marks look like the impression of fingers?"

"If whoever you were fighting did this kind of damage with his bare hands, he had an awfully strong grip," concurred Parmenter.

"I... wasn't fighting anybody." Or, did he just not remember?

Her skilled ministrations confirming decades treating patients, Kelly fitted Devin with a velcro secured open-toed boot, to support his foot and ankle after bandages were applied. She offered him crutches; he declined, selecting a cane instead.

Pushing him to the exit in a well-worn wheelchair, she expressed concern. "You have anyone to help you around the house? You really should keep the foot elevated, and not move around much."

"Unfortunately, my dogs aren't trained to cook or wash clothes," he chuckled.

She hesitated a moment. "I could... swing by this afternoon and check on you."

“I’d like that.”

It being Saturday, the bosses wouldn’t mind much if the pick-up wasn’t parked in the utility shed. He phoned the office from the hospital parking lot; no one answered. A good sign: it meant no funerals scheduled for the day.

Devin regretted tossing the prescription for pain killers into the trash basket beside the nurses’ desk. Hobbling from the driveway to the house, he thought he’d die. The neighbors were busy with spring yard work and hanging out laundry, while he crashed on the lumpy living room sofa, rather than climb the stairs to his bedroom.

Shadow tried once to jump on his master’s lap. Devin’s agonized yowl terrified both Cocker Spaniels, and they spent the rest of the day hiding under the kitchen table.

Which Devin didn’t mind, since he spent those hours sleeping. By propping his leg just right on the sofa’s padded arm, he could relax.

The phone jerked him awake late in the afternoon. That twitch of his nerves sent tsunamis of anguish through his entire frame.

He let the answering machine take the call.

It was Lonnie, announcing he’d be off another week from work, due to post-appendectomy complications.

Routine blood tests had turned up leukemia.

“I appreciate your help, buddy,” concluded the retired teacher.

At least, Rick would be back from vacation on Monday. He could take over picking up dead animals in Cold Corner.

Unless fate conspired against Devin. He managed to fix himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich while the dogs did their business in the back yard, switching on the television to catch the evening news. The lead story was a wreck on the interstate highway: a semi jack-knifed when its tire blew, hitting five cars. Two drivers were seriously injured.

One was Rick Maginot.

So much for taking a couple sick days, Devin lamented.

Kelly swung by, still in her scrubs, though her auburn locks hung loose over her shoulders. “I’ll ask first: do you want this pig sty cleaned?”

“It’s not a pig sty,” objected Devin. “It’s... lived in.”

“My brothers tried to convince our mother of that. Never stopped her from making them clean their rooms.”

He sighed, defeated. “Go ahead.”

Dishes washed, laundry folded and the dogs happy after running themselves ragged chasing a tennis ball, Kelly settled on the armchair to watch the Bulls basketball game. "If you're not taking the meds, I'll get you a beer," she offered.

"It wouldn't help."

"I read in the chart what you told the doctor, but how you'd really tear up the foot?"

"Something... attacked me in the cemetery."

"In the middle of the night?" queried Kelly, incredulous.

"I work there."

Her disappointment couldn't be concealed.

"You were hoping I was some loon who gets his kicks talking to the dead? There's already one out there."

"Really?"

"Some hippie, claims he and his friends camp on the grounds. I'm gonna report them to the cops on Monday."

"You know his name?"

"We've talked a couple times, but haven't been formally introduced. Why?"

"I grew up around here. Back in the early 80s, there were rumors about a bunch of hippies who OD'd on cocaine near the mausoleum. They'd been camping out..."

"You're saying, the guy's a ghost?"

Kelly grinned sheepishly.

Devin switched off the television with the remote. Cringing, he swung his legs to the floor. "In the twelve years I've been groundskeeper, no one's ever mentioned anything about hauntings. Even those ghost hunting nutjobs ignore us."

"Look, I'm just telling you what I heard as a kid. It might've been a story meant to keep us from hanging out there after dark."

"That makes more sense."

Nonetheless, Devin's curiosity piqued at the idea. Sunday, the pain seeming to worsen rather than subside, he drove to the public library to search the newspaper archives for mention of deaths on the grounds.

A librarian kind enough to bring the rolls of microfilm he requested, so he could sit at one viewer and not aggravate his injury, he read articles which the cemetery association's promotional folders didn't contain.

Gravestones vandalized by college fraternity pledges during an initiation ceremony.

Drunken drivers crashing cars through the fence - near Cold Corner.

The mausoleum robbed of all metal handles and fittings.

Five men and two women found dead in an apparent ritual suicide.

A subsequent update to this last included the coroner's contention the group had ingested tainted cocaine. Cause of death: overdose. The date: April 18, 1975.

Devin's shoulders sagged. What had the hippie said Friday night about an anniversary?

A bit more research provided photos of the deceased and their names. The guy he'd seen - who'd saved him from being crushed by the obelisk after the lightning strike - was Wally Henderson. The same wild dark mane, tie-dyed shirt, even a tattoo of a heart with a dagger through it on his right forearm.

A stinkin' ghost.

In the midst of packed bookshelves and bustling patrons, icy fingers crept along Devin Goldthwaite's spine. Leaning on the plain wooden cane, he could barely make it outdoors to the Chevy. His stomach attempted to rebel; he forced it to wait until he reached the house.

Kelly met him in the driveway. "You okay?" she prodded, grabbing him around the waist to support him.

"You... were right. They're not... alive."

Part of his reaction, according to the nurse, was a mounting fever. "The infection's getting worse. Have you been taking the antibiotics?"

"I... never made it to the pharmacy."

She grumbled something inaudible, locating the prescription on the end table and heading out the door.

He dozed fitfully in her absence, Sunlight and Shadow huddled near his feet. Then, he was being pumped full of clear liquids and pills, tended like an errant child.

Kelly remained couch-side until Monday morning, leaving in time to punch in for her E.R. shift. Satisfied his temperature had dropped, she recommended he call in sick.

He refused. He'd received a text message from the association director: two funerals on Monday.

"When are you going to schedule an appointment with Dr. Parmenter for the surgery?" she pressed.

"When the boss hires someone to replace Rick and Lonnie. Until then, I'm stuck."

Stuck was putting it lightly, in his estimation. Never before had he ached to play hooky from his job. And, not for reasons his bosses would understand: a

mangled foot. He didn't want to be anywhere Wally Henderson might pop up to greet him with his unique wisdom.

"We wouldn't let that happen," he'd remarked the previous Tuesday. "You're a good guy."

How would he know, unless Henderson had been watching him for quite some time?

The next obvious question: why, up to now, hadn't Devin been able to see him?

Something to do with whatever damned anniversary loomed?

Devin needed to clear up this uncertainty with the ghost, but feared it, as well.

He couldn't let it eat at him.

He didn't, with a long list of duties to perform that day, thanks to the main office. They promised to bring in temporary help - possibly Rick's kid brother - by Thursday. Until then, he was on his own.

To mow, trim, dig and fill graves, set vaults, and pick up trash.

And, dead animals.

This time, whoever killed the innocent creatures left them stacked in a mound. As if the deed was no longer random.

Or, the perpetrator was becoming more meticulous.

The latter notion made Devin shudder. He vaguely recalled the stooped, moldering entity which had crossed Cold Corner in Friday night's gloom. He could no longer doubt Wally Henderson's reality; was this being also a ghost - of a more malevolent disposition?

"He's gathering strength," came the reply, unbidden, from behind him.

Startled while bent double, Devin pitched forward into the dirt. He gingerly rolled onto his back, muttering expletives at Henderson's sarcastic smirk.

The ghost lifted him off the grass. "Sorry, man. I thought you heard me coming."

"No, I didn't." Senseless to argue with the ethereal. Devin brushed off his jeans and retrieved his cane. "What do you mean, 'gathering strength'?"

"You know the story?"

Devin rested his weight on the backhoe's running board, reducing the throbbing in his foot. "No."

"His name was Feodor Zakas. Died a century or more ago. Nobody's sure. The one thing that *is* sure: it was April 18th, and he was shot by police after butchering his wife and her lover with an axe."

Devin swallowed hard.

“The reason he tears up the joint in the weeks prior to the anniversary is anybody’s guess,” expounded the hippie. “He scared the shit out of me and my friends the night we were... having a little party over yonder.”

“Snorting coke.”

“Hey, I wrote some of my best music on the stuff. Could’ve had a recording contract...”

“Oh, can the crap,” snarled Devin. “What happened that night?”

“Dead flies began falling like rain. You haven’t noticed those among the birds and the rabbits, because they’re so small. Anything which ventures within six feet of Zakas’ grave this time of year ends up dead.”

“I’ve...”

“During the day. Don’t try it at night.”

“Is that when...”

“Came up on us, absolutely silent. Looked like a giant bat in the moonlight. We thought we were hallucinating, until he grabbed Amy and broke her neck.”

“He killed all of you?”

Henderson nodded.

“Why do you haunt, then?”

“I’d rather be here than in hell, man. Though, this is its own kind of hell.”

“Hell?”

“I wasn’t the most... upstanding citizen. I sure wouldn’t rate a pass through the pearly gates.”

“So, you roam around and kill time?”

“Not my choice of phrase but, yeah.”

“No way to be released?” Devin probed.

“Only if ol’ Zakas goes first. We’re thinking Satan would be glad to get him, and forget about us.”

“The priests and ministers who pray over the graves...”

Henderson snorted. “In the early 90s, they brought out a full-blown exorcist, man. Didn’t work.”

“What will?”

The ghost shrugged.

“I suppose you don’t know why I can see you now, either.”

“The lightning flash-burned your corneas. A different kind of sight you’ve got, man. Like bein’ high all the time.”

Great, sniffed Devin. “Look, dude, I’ve got stuff to do. If you don’t have any helpful suggestions, get lost, okay?”

“We don’t want you getting any more hurt than you already are. Bad enough, losing your foot.”

“I haven’t...”

“You will. Anything Zakas touches dies.”

On that sour note, Henderson meandered toward the veterans’ memorial section. Devin hoisted himself off the mud-caked steel and resumed raking the pile of carcasses.

Kelly found him filling the second grave in the southern section, her silver Chrysler 300 spotted from an afternoon drizzle. “You look like hell,” she hailed.

“Thanks.” Devin eased himself off the backhoe’s seat. “You checking up on me?”

“Sure. That’s what nurses do.”

“Not on their free time.”

“I thought you might show me where the ghosts hang out.”

“Sorry. I’m behind, as it is.”

“Throw me your house keys, and I’ll have dinner ready when you get home.”

Devin groped in his jean pocket, then paused. “Growing up, you ever hear your neighbors mention the name Feodor Zakas?”

The redhead stiffened, her face blanched. “He was... my great-great-grandfather.”

Not what he expected. “Next, you’re going to tell me you lived in the house where he killed his wife.”

“No. That burned to the ground before I was born. My dad built new on the existing foundation. Why?”

“How ‘bout you cook me dinner at your place,” Devin countered slyly. “Since you think mine is a pig sty.”

“Sure.” Her usually boisterous contralto had gone flat, her answer nonetheless sincere. “See you around seven?”

He waved as the car tires sprayed gravel, but left the backhoe idle. For such a tangible connection to exist between the monster ravaging innocent wildlife and a woman he met by chance at the hospital... and his sudden ability to see Wally Henderson, thanks to a bolt of lightning...

It couldn’t be sheer coincidence.

Despite renewed swelling in his foot - he blamed the day’s exertion - Devin rode his Kawasaki home. Pleasant weather precluded any other decision.

Sunlight and Shadow heard the familiar motor rumble up the drive, and peered between the living room curtains at their master. Their entire bodies

wiggled through the action of their uncropped tails. When he unlocked the garage door, they stormed out into the yard, seeking the tennis ball and a place to relieve themselves.

He marveled at the dogs' ability to resume a normal schedule. Such a simple life they led.

Showering precariously, not putting any weight on his greenish-yellow appendage, he succeeded in stumbling and bumping his slightly black big toe on the porcelain. He bit back a shout, instead streaming four-letter words until he hopped to the toilet and sat on the lid.

He debated phoning Kelly and canceling.

This might be his sole opportunity to get a line on how to send Feodor Zakas on his way.

He'd tough it out.

Tough getting on his dress pants, though, which gave him a ridiculous appearance wearing one loafer and the brace. He hooked his cane between the cycle's saddle bags and headed south of town.

The Victorian edifice, more like a dwelling built in the 19th century, surprised Devin. He maneuvered the kickstand down near where Kelly sat, enjoying the evening warmth, sipping a rum and coke.

"Pretty huge for one person."

She retorted. "Used to be a lot more. I had four sisters and two brothers."

"They all moved?"

"To the far corners of the universe."

Devin accepted a beer from the insulated cooler beside Kelly's lawn chair, unfolding another mesh lounger. "Didn't you tell me your dad built this?"

"Based on the original design. Kinda creepy, huh?"

"You're the one who lives here."

"Thing is: Feodor didn't murder his victims in the house. They were having a roll in the hay, back in the barn."

Glancing in the direction she pointed, Devin saw an empty stretch of land. That structure would never be rebuilt.

"If he killed his wife, how'd you..."

"My great-grandfather was off with Teddy Roosevelt, charging up San Juan Hill, or digging locks for the Panama Canal. He didn't find out what happened until years later. Relatives of the other man torched the house in a drunken rage after the funeral, since Feodor was lauded by the minister as a champion of morality, defending the integrity of his marriage."

"Was he?"

“He was insane. His wife was afraid to leave him, because he’d threatened her life. She turned to the farm hand, initially for protection, then... for more tangible comfort.”

“How...”

“She wrote letters to her sisters. They’ve been passed down through the generations.”

“Wow. A genealogist would have a field day.”

“A couple authors have expressed interest in turning the story into a historical novel. I refused their offers.”

“No publicity is better than bad publicity.”

“Exactly.” Kelly rose. “You ready for dinner?”

“Starved.”

They dined in an elegant room, the furniture in keeping with the decor. “My mom made sure every stick was authentic,” chuckled Kelly, placing a platter of roast beef and baked potatoes on the polished oak. “Drained their joint bank account.”

Devin ate heartily, having skipped lunch. Dessert of chocolate mousse topped off the meal to his satisfaction.

“You’re a good cook,” he praised as she led him into a small parlor.

Where a portrait of Feodor Zakas hung above the carved fireplace mantle.

“Why in hell...”

“That’s my doing. I bought it at a rummage sale, years ago. He’d been the city’s first mayor, you see, so he was credited with bringing civilization to this neck of the woods.”

“Why remind yourself of his... crimes?”

“When I get angry - at the stupid rules the hospital administrators try to enforce, for instance - that arched left eyebrow leaves no doubt where anger gets you.”

“Dead.”

Studying the man’s hawkish features, Devin’s toes burned, as if a torch were being applied directly to the skin. He wondered how Kelly could keep the portrait in the house and not go mad.

Maybe by caring for the sick and injured, she was making amends for her ancestor’s misdeeds.

Still...

“Why does he come back on the anniversary of his death?”

“I’m no psychic.”

“If you came out to the cemetery with me, you being a blood relative, maybe he’ll talk to you, tell you why.”

Kelly recoiled. “You think I’m nuts? Look what he did to your foot!”

“There’s a perimeter around his stone where he’s active. My foot must’ve reached past the line. If we stand far enough away...”

“What makes you think he’d even pay attention to us?”

“It doesn’t hurt to try. And, frankly, I’m getting tired of picking up dead birds every morning.”

She groaned. “Okay.”

The Chrysler transported them to the cemetery gates, which Devin unlocked, deactivating the alarm. Parking near the utility shed, they hiked to Cold Corner.

“This whole place gives me the heebie-jeebies,” admitted Kelly, polished headstones sparkling in the moonlight.

“No need to be frightened.” Even though goosebumps claimed his skin passing Wally Henderson reclining against a tree trunk.

“Hey, man. I been waitin’ for you.”

“Why?”

“He’s raging like a caged animal tonight. Two days ‘til the anniversary, when he can roam free and do his worst.”

“Damn!”

Kelly tugged his sleeve. “Who are you talking to?”

“The hippie ghost.”

She stared at vacant space beneath the budding maple. “I don’t see...”

“Stand too close to a lightning strike sometime, and you’ll be astonished what you can see.”

She moved to Devin’s other side, to avoid stepping on any invisible entities.

Feodor Zakas couldn’t be avoided, however. Guttural growls and tormented shrieks originated from Cold Corner, where Kelly and Devin witnessed the disfigured spectre snap the neck of a cottontail rabbit, devouring its raw flesh in the manner of a lion or bear.

“Are you sure that’s him?” whispered the nurse. “The portrait...”

Devin bluffed, “I suppose a man’s soul displays his evil more accurately than his physical form.”

They observed Zakas pluck mosquitoes from the air and eat them whole. Kelly gagged and clutched Devin’s arm.

He patted her hand, stepping from their concealment behind a white-barked birch. “Hey, Feodor!”

What must’ve been the murderer’s head - a black blob with gaping holes for eyes - swiveled toward him, blood dripping from its misshapen maw.

Devin sensed another presence behind him: Henderson. “What the hell...”

“Man, I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Kelly nudged Devin. He shoved her forward.

She resisted.

“You’re his granddaughter,” muttered the groundskeeper. “Talk to him.”

Inhaling, then bursting into a coughing fit, Kelly doubled over while Devin kept her from collapsing entirely.

He suggested, “Make believe you’re in a horror movie.”

“That helps a lot,” she snapped, fighting for air. “Jerk.”

The hipped broke into a laugh, which Kelly couldn’t hear. Devin glared at him, the translucence subdued in the gloom. “Shut up, dude.”

Finally, Kelly mustered her courage, straightening, narrow shoulders squared. “Grandfather.”

The voice wasn’t a voice, *per se*, more a resonant vibration. “You are of the bloodline?”

“Yes.”

“You come to end my exile?”

“If we can.”

“You know the requirements?”

“No.”

“Then, you are no help at all.” Zakas spied a field mouse scuttling across the grass, and pounced upon it.

The two live humans consulted each other, unable to establish what requirements could free the ghost. Having swung onto the lowest tree branch, Henderson imitated the Cheshire cat with his toothy grin.

Devin yanked him off the perch. “What do you know about this?”

“Only bits and pieces, man. We don’t have much else to do besides listen to gossip.”

“Gossip? What gossip?”

“Before the cemetery’s previous owners sold this spread, one of their guys found a canister embedded in stone’s base. Inside were papers, listing the curse which keeps Zakas coming back, and instructions to get rid of him.”

“Where are these papers now?”

“Probably stuffed in a drawer somewhere, man.”

The pair left the ghosts to their ethereal business, temporarily defeated in their efforts. Devin was hired after the cemetery association restructured operations. He hadn't known the former staff, but they'd used the utility shed for storage, and might've shoved the canister in the rickety desk which held the logs and assorted oddities found around the property.

"You want to search now?" protested Kelly.

"If you want to head home, go for it. I won't be able to close an eye until..."

Nursing instincts dominant, she directed, "You need to get off that foot. It'll never heal..."

"Henderson says I'll lose it, regardless of what I do. Better to get rid of your grandfather, then worry about the broken bones."

Pulling the chain on an unshielded ceiling fixture, he hobbled to the dilapidated tool bench, rifling those drawers first. Nothing but old hammers, screwdrivers, pliers and mismatched nails. Beyond the 100 watt bulb's illumination sat the brown metal desk, salvaged from a yard sale or trash heap, Devin suspected.

"You can't see anything!" noted Kelly.

"Maybe not, but I can feel..."

"Spiders and cockroaches."

"And snakes," he chortled, tossing a cut-off scrap of garden hose toward her.

She screamed and fled the building.

Two decades of receipts, saved in case an item proved defective, bottle caps and scratched off lottery tickets annoyed him. A rusted length of copper pipe raised his hopes momentarily; he tossed it in the recycling bin.

Of all places, beneath the doodle-marred blotter on the stained surface, a sheaf of yellowed documents lay, waiting to be read. He rolled and tucked them in the GMC pick-up's cup holder before driving home.

Kelly had abandoned him.

He would have to convince her to rejoin him at Cold Corner, though, given the specifics in the hand-written narrative. Sunlight and Shadow curled on one sofa cushion, Devin occupied the rest, a table lamp shining onto faded, cramped script.

Yolanda Zakas' lover, Eustace Cadbury, had been decapitated by Feodor, and the young man's family resented it bitterly. They didn't see where the farm hand - earning a few pennies to help with expenses - had done anything differently than a gallant, wealthy gentleman protecting an abused lady. Eustace's sister,

Natalie, composed the curse which had, evidently, kept Feodor's spirit prisoner over a century.

One night each year, he could venture beyond the confines of his grave. Natalie meant those hours to be used doing penance for his sins. Violating the terms of that probation, Feodor had compounded his punishment.

Devin dropped an envelope stuffed with photocopies at the hospital on his way to work Tuesday, so Kelly could read them during her lunch break. She rang his cell phone late in the morning, babbling incoherently.

"Slow down, so I can understand you," he pleaded.

She took a deep breath and relaunched her tirade. "You aren't seriously considering going through with this?"

"Aren't you?"

"Hell, no!"

"You want your great-great-grandfather to go on killing, year after year, until some future generation deals with it?"

Silence.

"Well?"

"You're in this, too, y'know," implied Kelly.

"Sure. There's a possibility I can save my foot..."

"No. The library historian is a friend. She did a little research for me and, lo and behold, Eustace Cadbury was second cousin to your maternal great-great-grandmother."

"Shit!"

"So, we do it together, or not at all."

"Meet me at the front gate around nine."

There had to be a way around having a Zakas descendant expiate Feodor's sins by submitting to decapitation by a Cadbury relative.

The murder charges wouldn't be pleasant.

He'd have no way to explain the circumstances, and no living witnesses. More likely than not, if he used the ghost story as a defense, he'd be locked in a padded cell and labeled a certifiable lunatic.

Jail or the psych ward - neither any fun.

There had to be a loophole in the terms of the curse.

Devin extended his lunch hour, his multi-colored left foot propped on the utility shed desk, re-reading the pages. The hatred of Natalie Cadbury for the Zakas family was, certainly, justified. Then again, if Eustace had known of Feodor's violent temper, he should've encouraged Yolanda to escape the

marriage, rather than comfort her where their indiscretion could be readily interrupted.

The description of the curse's remedy left no room for merciful interpretation. The head of the Zakas descendant must be separated from the body with an axe, the hour midnight, near Feodor's grave. No date was specified, which made performing the deed on the eve of the anniversary even more ironic.

He could ignore the curse, except for Feodor's lack of repentance, and the additional deaths he'd caused. Combing local records for odd occurrences in April, on this side of town, could take days. Devin knew of the cocaine overdose incident with Wally Henderson and his friends in the 70s - how many more people had Feodor attacked?

It had to stop.

This seemed the only option.

As a precaution, the groundskeeper collected his personal belongings and tools scattered around the shop, stuffing them in the Kawasaki's saddle bags. If he was arrested, no one would have to clean up after him.

He'd lose his house, everything.

Scrolling through his cell phone's memory for Kelly's number, he planned to call off the deal.

"You can't," warned Henderson, an opaque silhouette in the doorway.

Devin grumbled, "What I can't do is lop off someone's head."

"Sometimes, it takes evil to combat evil, man."

"You guys who burned your draft cards to protest Vietnam dare say that? Killing doesn't solve anything."

"It'll release a lot of souls who'd rather be enjoying their eternal rest."

"How many?"

"Feodor's victims? Hundreds."

"In the cemetery?"

"They keep to themselves, mostly," stated Henderson. "They'll be there tonight, though. I guarantee."

Devin's shoulders drooped. "Nothing like applying a little pressure, dude."

"Nobody's blaming you, man. But you're our best chance at freedom."

"Freedom at a price."

"Can't have freedom without a price, man."

"Shut up and go away."

Left alone, Devin tried to steel himself for the event. He'd never been on the front lines in the Army; maintaining and repairing diesel generators and trucks was a support function. He'd flown in a helicopter once during the first Gulf War,

to a remote Iraqi base where their power was down, but the enemy had already been flushed from desert bunkers.

The arrival of a funeral procession stirred him from his reverie. He'd be moving the casket from the mausoleum chapel to the plot after the final prayers. The family didn't want to see the hole.

Death was a part of life - when it came naturally, he mused. To kill, or be killed...

To perpetuate violence, *a la* the death penalty...

Then, a glimmer of hope: what if Cadbury's sister had changed her mind in the years after Eustace's untimely demise? What if she came to believe no man should be killed, regardless of the magnitude of his crimes?

A last shovelful of dirt tamped on the fresh grave, sod arranged, Devin left for the library.

"Closed for Staff Appreciation Dinner," read the sign posted on the main doors.

The motorcycle left a ten yard long strip of rubber on the cement roadway pulling out of the parking lot.

Only a football game might've drawn a larger crowd, surmised Devin, walking with Kelly to Cold Corner before 11:00. He thought discussing the process might shed some light on a viable alternative...

Kelly expressed similar optimism, though she'd left a copy of her will on the dining room table at home, in case she didn't return.

Feodor paced frantically within the six-by-nine foot boundary, knowing the stroke of twelve would give him 24 hours to kill - literally. He'd taken a reasonable facsimile of human shape and solidity, nourished by uncounted birds and small animals.

"You can't honestly sanction this," Devin proposed, staring into empty eyes.

"Oh, but I do. That whore of a wife, who knows if the son she bore was really mine? I'd rather see the bloodline wiped off the planet than have my name desecrated by their continued existence."

Kelly stormed, "*You* desecrated the family name!"

"Hush, woman! I struck a blow for all husbands, who otherwise would let their wives cuckold them!"

The flesh-and-blood pair gazed at each other, confused.

"Make a fool of him," supplied Henderson, to Devin's immediate right.

The argument solved nothing. With the approach of midnight, Kelly shed copious tears, scorned by her ancestor.

“When you get to hell, I hope the devil roasts you on a spit until the end of time!” Devin swore at the murderer.

Zakas smirked. “A delight, if I can watch those two unfaithful wretches violated with red hot branding irons.”

“Sadist!” admonished his great-great-granddaughter, kneeling on the dew-soaked grass.

Devin retrieved the weapon from where he’d leaned it against a nearby stone marker. He’d decided, tentatively, to sacrifice his own life after beheading Kelly. Wallowing behind bars wasn’t how he’d planned to retire.

He hadn’t swung an axe since he tried, as a teen, to split wood for the fireplace with his father. He feared not making a clean job of it, causing Kelly undue suffering.

“I’m so sorry,” he apologized, adjusting his stance.

“It’s not your fault.” She thrust an accusing finger. “It’s his.”

The blade arced, and a strong hand halted its progress short of the target. Devin glared at Wally Henderson, whose superior strength - even post-mortem - would not yield.

“Don’t prolong it, dude!”

“It’s over,” asserted the hippie spectre. “Look.”

One by one, Feodor’s victims were vanishing - Devin the lone human to behold the phenomenon. Zakas himself howled in agony while being consumed by the wildlife he’d mauled.

Somehow, the very intent to break the curse had done the job. Devin raised Kelly off her knees, her body shaking, but not from the chill in the air. She buried her head in Devin’s shoulder, as the last vestiges of her ancestor were brutally shredded.

Henderson hung around the longest. He clasped Devin’s hand, a mellow grin lighting his transparent face. “You did good, man. We’re all grateful.”

“I didn’t *do* anything,” Devin said.

“You showed guts, and spunk. You stood up to Feodor, when others had caved.” He flashed a peace sign, which promptly faded into nothing.

Alone in the darkness, the pair trekked to Kelly’s Chrysler, which is when Devin noticed his left foot no longer hurt. The nurse bent to examine it; the bones were completely healed, the bruising and traces of gangrene gone.

“You get to keep it, after all,” she concluded.

“If it meant not putting you through this crap, I would’ve gladly lost it.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m serious.”

Kelly shoved him playfully into the car's front quarter panel. "I know a dozen men who would've grabbed that axe from you, just for a chance at my head."

"Love 'em and leave 'em, huh?" quipped the groundskeeper.

"No, just expect them to behave like adults. Which men never do."

Devin grunted his opposition as the engine revved. "See ya 'round."

"Not if I can help it."

As she drove through the wrought iron gate, Devin knew he felt the same. He might never forget what had happened, but reinforcing the memories by socializing with Kelly would do neither of them any good.

Besides, they had little else in common.

Wandering back to Cold Corner, the temperature didn't dip in the slightest when Devin crossed that invisible barrier near Zakas' plot.

A sure sign of success.

In the utility shed, he rehung his calendar featuring the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders. Then, he mounted the Kawasaki and rode home.

## The Indispensable One

Tan, square-toed boots marched along a corridor adjacent to the deserted secretarial pool. Lamps burned on every desk, computers hummed, though not a soul could be seen. That will stop, decided Ryan Cavendish.

This staid, greying entrepreneur had bought Angelus, Inc., after its founder, Mike Rodriguez, died unexpectedly the previous December. Since that foreigner had broken into the software market, competition had been stiff between this and Cavendish's own firm. Amazing, since Cavendish Enterprises was held by tight reins, while Angelus' Chicago-based organization bordered on chaos. The employees appeared to do as they pleased. Yet, Rodriguez won popular acclaim with every endeavor.

A dully impressive executive suite boasted well-cushioned armchairs, magazine racks stocked with the latest trade periodicals, and southern exposure. Having trekked through a building devoid of life, Cavendish was surprised to find a slender brunette, loafers propped on the faux-oak work station near a door marked, "Private".

"What the devil are you doing?" he queried.

She replied, unflinching, "Reading."

"You'll ruin the desk with those shoes."

"They're clean. That's a marvelous accent. Where'd you pick it up?"

"I didn't pick it up. I'm from Boston."

"Boston? Really? I never would've suspected such distinguished gentlemen lived in Boston, given the painted slobs shown on camera during the last World Series. My guess would've been you were Michelangelo's *David* flown over from Florence."

An eyebrow arched at the offhand compliment; thin lips tightened. "I'm Ryan Cavendish."

He anticipated his name would propel the woman to her feet. Her sole reaction amounted to marking and closing the thick novel, centering it on her blotter, and favoring him with a disinterested smirk.

"Welcome aboard," she drawled.

Suppressing his temper, Cavendish stalked into his office. The mahogany desk had been polished and stood in perfect order - not so much as a dust speck soiled either "In" or "Out" baskets. It appeared no backlog existed, despite the absence of any real authority during the last three months.

“Mike let everyone handle their own details,” came an answer to the unvoiced question from the doorway. “The only indispensable person around here is me.”

“That will change,” retorted Cavendish.

“I don’t think so.”

“Such insolence rates immediate dismissal, Miss --“

“Wilhelm. Joanna Wilhelm.”

“So, Miss Wilhelm, if you value your job when so many are unemployed, I suggest you change your tone.” He sank on the black buttoned-leather chair. “You may also wish to locate your co-workers and inform them their next paycheck will be docked for each minute they are not performing productive labor on these premises.”

“They’re in the weekly staff meeting, being quite productive, thank you.” Joanna leaned against the dormant fireplace. “And, for your information, my job is the safest in the country, Mr. Cavendish. You see, I’m not just some phone jockey who does what she’s told. I’m a hacker, like the boys upstairs in Research and Development. My collection of servers and hard drives out there requires a password just to display the time. Mike told me to encrypt the data, too, so no one - not even him - could corrupt any of my programs.”

“Anyone could be trained...” objected Cavendish.

“Oh, sure. You could hire some glamorous, air-headed bimbo to serve the clients coffee and sicken them with her toothy smile, but that would be the antithesis of what you consider productive. I screen the calls, so you’ll never hear about 80 percent of the crackpots and salesmen or their hair-brained schemes. I sign 75 percent of the checks which pay the bills, so your precious hand won’t get writer’s cramp. I make yours the easiest job in the whole organization.”

“My job isn’t meant to be easy. I intend to stay on top of every project...”

“You’ll go crazy,” Joanna chuckled.

“We’ll see. As for you, Miss Wilhelm, I give you two weeks to improve your attitude, or I’ll find myself another executive assistant.”

“My title is Director of Administration, and Mike sanctioned my wages exceeding his own. While I’m on vacation next week, you’ll swiftly learn why.”

“I think I can handle it.”

“Human Resources has my home number, just in case.” The woman spun on her heel and left the room.

Cavendish glared at the door long after it slammed. He wondered what had happened to the old-fashioned work ethic, when employees respected their employer and were grateful for their salary.

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Ryan Cavendish's blood pressure escalated to dangerous levels the following Monday, worsening by Tuesday. Every caller who asked for him at the switchboard was connected to his extension; how aggravating to waste time with insurance salesmen and amateur programmers. He soon took his phone off the hook, forcing the messages into voice mail.

Dawn, a recent high school graduate assigned to cover Joanna's post, knew little of a practical nature. She spent three hours hunting up a file from the archives, which should have been located in five minutes. Her grammatical skills left a great deal to be desired; Cavendish demanded she retype six quotations.

"Where did Miss Wilhelm store the job costing statistics?" he requested Wednesday afternoon.

"I don't know, sir."

"What about the progress reports on the flight simulator upgrades?"

"Perhaps the R and D manager has them."

He grumbled through clenched teeth, "Why don't you ring and ask him?"

"I... don't have access to the employee phone directory."

"Can you at least pull me last year's sales figures? If we don't deliver those financial statements to the auditors by Friday, we run the risk of being penalized by the IRS."

"I'm afraid I don't know how to run that program, sir. I'm sorry."

More than one department head suggested Cavendish phone Joanna. "We had lunch yesterday," noted the mail room supervisor. "She's been painting walls and trying to finish..."

Cavendish dropped the receiver on its cradle, not interested in Joanna's leisure activities. When Dawn deposited a stack of shipping supply catalogs and unopened envelopes in his bin, he nearly exploded.

"That conniving bitch put you up to this, didn't she?" he raged, frightening the petite blonde.

"No, sir, I swear! I'm doing the best I can!"

"If this is your best, then you're fired!"

In tears, Dawn exited the suite. Cavendish didn't regret his actions, pledging instead to terminate any employee who failed to meet his professional standards.

A meeting with the Human Resources team frazzled nerves on both sides of the conference table. The revisions Cavendish submitted for the policy manual were vociferously rejected.

“The contract detailing acquisition of Angelus by Cavendish Enterprises stipulated no changes would be made in the business’ day-to-day operations,” protested the department vice president.

The new owner countered, “Unless such operations negatively effect the corporation’s profitability.”

“I’m sure you’ll see profits increased in the past quarter...”

“Except no one can find the blasted reports!” bellowed Cavendish.

Five people mouthed, “Joanna,” though no one spoke the name aloud.

Their employer stormed, “Why wasn’t she named CEO, then?”

“She would have been, if she hadn’t gotten Mike’s brother convicted on wire fraud charges.” The assistant clamped her hand over her lips when her co-workers glared at her.

“So, she’s on the outs with the family?”

The V.P. supplied, “Mike’s father wanted her dismissed, but Mike defied the old man’s wishes.”

“Good thing, too,” added the stenographer recording the minutes. “We’d be lost without her.”

Frowning, Cavendish acquiesced to his underlings’ opinion, dialing Joanna’s number once he’d returned to his office.

“You’ll have to drive out here,” crackled Joanna’s voice through the line. “My car’s in the shop.”

“You think...”

“It’s only an hour or so from downtown to Oakbrook on the expressway.”

Cavendish had no choice. His white Porsche transported him from Chicago’s Lake Shore Drive west to the well developed suburb of Oakbrook. Joanna Wilhelm lived in a secluded subdivision off York Road.

In the evening twilight, house numbers were difficult to see. Cavendish parked his car in the middle of the block and strode up one driveway - wrong residence. Across the gravel pavement and two buildings east, a porch light reflected off wrought iron 2216.

Despite its external semblance of country elegance, Ryan Cavendish was ushered into a cluttered dwelling. Joanna grinned at his obvious perplexity.

“I haven’t accomplished much in the way of unpacking the last few days,” she explained.

Cavendish laid his briefcase on the coffee table in the living/computer room. One wall boasted ceiling high bookshelves, an overflow of weatherbeaten hardbacks scattered on the floor. A stereo blared Mozart in the far corner. An “L”

shaped corner unit supported Hewlett Packard equipment more elaborate than her hardware at Angelus.

“Am I interrupting?” he wondered.

“Hell, yes. I’m putting the final touches on a novel I’ve been editing for over a year. If I don’t wrap it up soon, my inspiration will disintegrate.”

“What, a two-bit romance for frustrated housewives?”

“You’re a damned chauvinist, you know?” Joanna seated herself at the keyboard and saved the WordPerfect file on the screen. “Over the past 20 years, I’ve written murder mysteries, science fiction, westerns and an occasional true-to-life short.”

“All with a macho hero and a swooning heroine, no doubt.”

“It would do you well, Cavendish, to peruse some of the titles in those stacks. I bought them, mostly at garage sales, when frugality meant survival. They still fall in the category of literature. Then, leaf through a couple of those ring binders on the middle shelf and tell me again about heroes and heroines.”

Clicking a spreadsheet icon on the desktop, Joanna focused on revising the financial statement. Cavendish freed a thick blue binder from the crowded shelf and settled on an overstuffed sofa to peruse the pages.

He didn’t have time to get interested in the plot before multiple copies of grid-lined sheets spit into a collator on the commercial copier. Cavendish jammed the documents in a manila file and shambled toward the foyer. “I do appreciate this,” he confessed.

“I appreciate your admission.” She laughed at his wide-eyed expression.

Cavendish growled, departing the dwelling.

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Monday began as any other normal day at Angelus, Inc. Everyone settled into their usual routines, glad Joanna again manned the executive office. Ryan Cavendish realized a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

Charlotte invited Joanna to lunch at noon; the latter deferred. While most of the staff migrated outdoors, she opened her bottom left drawer and retrieved Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped*. She had kicked her feet up on the desk, when the inner door swung open.

Cavendish’s blue orbs met hers. Though not angry, his somber mien told a story in itself. Simultaneously, a crystal vase of spring flowers was delivered to her, as if he’d synchronized its arrival.

“Enjoy your lunch, Mr. Cavendish,” Joanna called after him, inhaling the daffodils’ delightful fragrance.

## Radio Ether

When Cherri's communications professor presented her the internship listing, the junior thought it strange the radio station's studios were located in the basement of a Greenwich village tenement. Then again, she'd heard a few WCRP broadcasts, and guessed the artistic freedom afforded by such privacy might be worth the inconvenience.

A few classmates joked she'd gotten the "crap" assignment, a campus nickname for WCRP, though the letters actually denoted "College Radio Productions". Descending moldy, warped stairs once she'd located the nondescript structure, she presumed she'd chosen the wrong door in the dim corridor. The guys huddled around a conference table - beyond which a glass booth housed turntables and sound boards - might have been a troupe of pot-smoking hippies.

Except one. Albeit attired in scruffy clothes, the bronze-haired, lean individual might've been her age, or twenty years older. He glared at the newcomer over silver wire-rimmed glasses, while others scribbled notes on an oversized programming schedule. The intensity of his grey-green eyes halted her in her tracks.

"If you're selling magazine subscriptions, we're not interested," he growled.

Cherri inhaled to calm her nerves. "I'm... the new intern."

"When you're in front of the microphone, I hope you don't stammer like that."

"No, of course not."

"Good. Get over here."

She complied, realizing as she squeezed beside him among the crew he was barely taller than her own 5'7". Yet he exuded a superiority which made the technicians and other on-air personalities obey his every command.

"What's your name?" he barked.

"Cherri Gardiner."

"It won't do. Sounds like you own an orchard. We'll call you..." he contemplated her sturdy figure and ebony locks, "Marisa Sheridan."

A loose-leaf script was shoved into her hands. She glanced at the cover page, daunted by the title: *Tale of Two Cities*.

"We're beginning a week-long serial," supplied a pock-marked youth. "Sound effects, background music, and the lot."

"Sounds... entertaining," Cherri remarked.

A read-through commenced, with astonishing professionalism displayed by those seated on rickety chairs and hovering nearby. Cherri read every female part, altering her voice to distinguish the characters as best she could.

She'd never envisioned herself an actor.

"Horrible! Horrible!" moaned the boss, addressed as "J.B." by the senior electrician. "We've got to make the listeners see Madame LeFarge as a creepy, conniving old witch." He demonstrated what he meant; Cherri was impressed.

"You should do it." She meant it as a compliment.

The chiseled features marred by a scowl, he countered, "You're here for experience, and I'll make sure you get it!"

He did.

Cherri not only participated in on-air presentations, vocally and providing sound effects, she also doubled on the master control board. Oddly, she was never required to answer the phone; no handsets were visible on any of the desks.

As the semester progressed, she discovered how WCRP maintained its popularity without the need for outside advertisers. In a room no larger than a bedroom closet - it might have been one year before, given the basement's general layout as an underground apartment - the broadcasts were fed via a tangle of wires and components through the atmospheric ether to a satellite, which transmitted the signals on varied frequencies, overriding the local programming of university operated stations across North America.

Without those stations' knowledge.

A fantastic trick, but Cherri knew the FCC would not approve.

Late one winter Sunday, after sign-off, she lingered in the booth until J.B. rapped harshly on the glass. "Hurry, or you'll be locked in."

She dawdled, deliberately.

He yanked open the door, nearly bumping his head on the microphone boom as he crossed the worn carpet. "What's so important you can't do it tomorrow?"

"I wanted a word while the guys weren't shadowing you like puppies."

"They... got into the business as a favor to me, and know better than to make a move without my sanction."

"Then, it was your idea to run this operation illegally?"

"You don't want to go there, Marisa."

"My name's Cherri. I *do* want to go there, because I won't pay any fines when the FCC catches up with you."

"They won't." He smirked. "They *can't*."

"Why not? You bribe somebody?"

“Nothing so... mundane. If you’d done a bit of research, you’d realize we haven’t had an intern from City College in 50 years. You’d know why, and you wouldn’t be here.”

Abruptly, Cherri’s defiance congealed into fear. She’d been procrastinating about her final paper on the internship, which would include a brief history of WCRP. She knew little about the staff beyond their names, and hadn’t really challenged the secretive nature of the operation until now.

J.B. watched her flee up the creaking stairs. She jogged the distance to the campus library, logging onto the internet and using six search engines to come up with... blank pages.

The reference clerks couldn’t help her, nor did wading through old newspapers on microfiche. WCRP didn’t seem to exist.

After a frustrating, fruitless day, she trudged back to Fourth Street, finding the door locked. She bent and peered through the basement’s smudged windows, stunned by the cobwebs dangling from vacant desks and chairs. If she hadn’t been inside the building a mere twelve hours earlier, she’d have sworn it unoccupied for a decade or more.

J.B.’s words echoed inside her skull: no intern for 50 years. Frantic, she rang the doorbell repeatedly, until a stooped, white-haired woman appeared at the peephole.

“What’s the fuss?” she snapped.

“I... was wondering about WCRP...”

“You’ll have to speak up. I think my hearing aid battery is dead.”

Cherri repeated her statement.

“My son’s radio station?”

“Your... son?”

“He and his friends died from carbon monoxide poisoning, oh, half a century ago. We never suspected the furnace leaked fumes...”

Stumbling off the stoop, Cherri wandered in a daze for hours. For the past ten weeks, she’d been working with... ghosts?

Confronting her professor on Tuesday, she demanded to know why he’d sent her on - essentially - a wild goose chase.

“The request’s been in our file since I got tenure,” he replied. “I thought it legitimate.”

“Show me.”

He dug a small metal box from his desk, and pulled the yellowed card.

The student inspected it, and broke into a laugh.

“What?” puzzled the instructor.

“Didn’t you notice the date?”

He perused cramped script over her shoulder. “No, I guess I didn’t.”

Cherri tossed the card in the trash basket beside his desk. At least she now understood why the FCC hadn’t cited WCRP for violations. Their ethereal broadcasts couldn’t be tracked by conventional means.

There hadn’t been any live transmissions from the Greenwich Village basement since 1959.

Yet...

In her dorm room, she spun the tuner on her clock-radio. She heard her own voice, as Hester Prynne, in WCRP’s dramatization of *The Scarlet Letter*. J.B. had acted Rev. Dimsdale when they taped the series the previous week.

She switched off the device, trembling.

Her major was changed to business accounting the next day.

## Night of the Smiling Buddha

Tricky business, dusting dinosaur bones. That's why my sole task involved cleaning up after the conservators once they completed their task. I got to roll the tarps, steer the power lift back to the dock - all that fun stuff.

The annual inconvenience occurred each spring, with staff working nights to minimize distraction to the museum's visitors. This year, though, the schedule was pushed up by a month, because of an expected appearance by some VIP, whose name I never did learn.

Hank Bines, museum director, also tossed another chore at me in anticipation of this event, in addition to my regular maintenance duties: locating elements of an Eskimo exhibit from the 1970s. The display had been a popular attraction when our esteemed guest had been a child. No burden to admit I was grumbling some choice swear words on my way to the basement, formally known as the archives.

Personally, I called the gloomy, chill space the "junk rooms". Everything from petrified fish to stuffed bears cluttered the shelves and corners. Even with rows of ceiling fixtures switched on, I felt a creeping sensation I wasn't alone.

The Inuit I sought had been made from papier mâché long before more modern techniques were devised. Bundled in moth-eaten parkas and trousers made of faux animal skin, six primary pieces were stacked beside a mock-up of an igloo on an ice floe. Realizing I hadn't brought a cart, I retraced my route past phony palm trees and half an Egyptian pyramid.

Abruptly, I halted, positive furtive eyes watched my progress. I slowly rotated, muttering to myself, and pretending to make a list - though I held no paper or pen. That's when I almost collapsed in shock.

The figure, clad in a red and blue patchwork shirt and khaki trousers, wore a thin-lipped, broad grin, perched atop a dented boulder replica. Shaggy brown locks hung in his face; he might've been mistaken for a 1960s hippy waxwork - I'd heard tales about an erstwhile exhibit on the drug culture of that era - except he blinked.

Once I resumed breathing, I approached the intruder, to be certain I hadn't lost my marbles. Forty-ish, he sat almost Indian style, though his red Converse sneakers hung below his crossed ankles. Entwined fingers rested between his thighs. The amount of hair coating his skin made me suspect someone had been playing dress-up with an old gorilla, replacing its head with a mannequin's.

Until intense blue orbs shifted behind aviator-style, gold wire-rimmed spectacles.

“Shit!” I gasped.

A friendly baritone countered, “Nice greeting.”

“I... didn’t expect...” Recovering my wits, I shook off the fear. “Who are you, and what the hell are you doing down here?”

“I was doing some research, and got locked in.”

“Nobody mentioned...”

“Nobody knew, except the curator of antiquities.”

“He wouldn’t allow...”

“It’s a special project.”

I assumed he meant the forthcoming big do. “Well, the door’s unlocked, you can leave now.”

“Actually, it’s quite peaceful here. I think I’ll stay awhile.”

“You can’t!”

“Why not?”

“I... The security guards will explain, when I call them.”

His voice remained calm. “Oh, don’t do that. Not just yet.” He glanced around. “You’ll be in and out for another couple hours. Let me be, and I’ll take off when you’re finished.”

“Why? You could be a thief, stealing valuable artifacts.”

“How would I get them out?” he chuckled.

True. He had no backpack, not even a notebook. That fact further aroused my suspicions.

“If you’re doing research, where are your materials?”

“It’s not that kind of research.”

Tiring of the game, I moved toward the door. “You’ve got five minutes to disappear, or the guards will escort you to the clink.”

“Haven’t you ever lived in the moment? Really appreciated the now and learned from it?”

This statement confirmed my initial presumption: a stoner. “I don’t have time.”

“That’s why the world is such a mess,” he objected. “The whole human race is busy chasing illusions, instead of enjoying what’s close at hand.”

I confronted him anew. “What the hell are you talking about?”

That grin, and those eyes, aggravated me. He knew something, a deep secret, like some Buddha honored by Eastern religions. Every version of those statues I’d seen - whether on touring exhibits or in Chinatown souvenir shops - wore that same enigmatic expression.

Except for the smile, maybe.

What compelled me to plop on the cold concrete floor, I'll never fathom. Mimicking his posture, I stared at him, and he stared at... what? We neither spoke nor moved for an hour. I listened to him breathe, then connected with the motion of my own lungs. I'd never been into meditation, and wouldn't call what transpired there meditation - my brain reeling with disjointed thoughts - but I grasped the shallowness of my life, chasing the almighty dollar, for no good reason.

In the midst of that discarded history, in a museum basement, I realized the futility of human existence, of ambition, greed, war. Our species had little control over the world's fate - nature showed us that with every hurricane, tornado, wildfire or severe storm. We needed to abandon our delusions...

The radio clasped to my belt squealed, jarring me from this reverie. I scrambled to my feet, my smiling Buddha gone.

As I hauled the Eskimos from their tomb, I wondered whether I had dreamed the whole thing. What I hadn't imagined was the revelation I'd received, however. At the end of my shift, I detoured into the maintenance supervisor's office, announcing, "I quit."

Twenty years, down the tube. Or, perhaps, twenty years too late. Emerging into murky daylight, I trekked through the parking lot to my car. Waiting at the corner bus stop, I recognized that loud patterned shirt. He turned to me, the grin prominent. A cheery salute sent me on my way into the unknown.

## Joy Ride

A psychologically disturbed man could jump the White House fence and elude Secret Service agents for fifteen minutes, uninvited guests could infiltrate a state dinner in the Rose Garden. A security breach like this, however, had never been contemplated.

Air Force One had been stolen.

President Max Tritt visiting family in Southern California for the Christmas holidays, his modified 747 had flown back to Washington, D.C. for scheduled maintenance. Under guard in its hangar, no one suspected when the pilot arrived on New Year's Eve with bottles of champagne and hors d'oeuvres platters that he had an ulterior motive.

His military comrades believed Major Tom Edwards a fantastic guy. They knew he'd made the same impression on the President's nineteen-year-old daughter, Pauline, and not merely because he was tall, dark and handsome in the traditional sense - a "K" shaped scar on his cheek earned falling from a tree as a kid notwithstanding. Their wedding date would soon be announced by the White House Press Office.

Once those on duty sprawled, unconscious, in chairs and on the floor, two vans pulled up, unloading a band and their instruments, while a trail of limousines let off dozens of revelers.

What many assumed would be nothing more than an unofficial tour of the singular craft, quickly turned into an orgy at 35,000 feet.

Air traffic controllers didn't realize no authorization existed for the flight. They had no reason to question Edwards, whose stellar reputation had earned him a chest full of medals.

"Pipe down, you idiots!" he yelled through the cracked cockpit door before engaging the radio. The drunks, including his fiancée, giggled and shushed each other, listening via the intercom to the conversation with the tower.

A smooth take-off and clear skies meant auto-pilot could be set, and the prospective groom joined the festivities without a second thought.

Love can blind even the most level-headed sort.

On each of the plane's three decks, couples had found spots where they could share intimate moments, while the band blasted classic rock tunes from the operations center. Conference rooms and galleys were stocked with enough liquor and food to last well into the next day.

They were only cruising to Chicago and back...

Enjoying a quiet, casual dinner with select relatives, President Tritt ignored the ringing phone. He cringed when the butler entered the dining room and approached his seat.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir,” the servant whispered in the greying Chief Executive’s ear. “It’s urgent.”

“Shit.” Excusing himself, Tritt slipped through the side door and snatched the extension. “What is it?”

The tale elicited additional expletives, prior to the query, “Have you been able to make contact?”

“The plane is unresponsive, Mr. President.”

“Scramble the fighters, and order a media blackout.”

Too late for the latter. Selfies with the presidential seal and other compromising snaps posted to social media, shared by the hundreds, had come to the attention of numerous journalists, already pursuing the story.

A dirty blonde college classmate of the bride-to-be, performing an impromptu strip-tease for the co-pilot in the Secret Service lounge, glanced out the window to see six F-22s approaching at supersonic speeds. “We’re being attacked!” she shrieked, the romantic mood shattered.

Uniform askew, the Air Force captain raced to the front of the plane.

“Tom, we’re busted!” he bellowed, mounting the steps in pairs.

Edwards disengaged himself from a passionate embrace. “Party’s over, babe.”

“What can they do to us?” scoffed Pauline, gripping his shirt. “There’s no harm done.”

“It’s called a court-martial,” explained her captive. “Unauthorized use of government property...”

“You should’ve thought about that before...”

He broke free. “Little fool... You wanted me to prove how much I love you.”

The lithe brunette followed him to the cockpit, where he dropped onto the seat and seized the headphones. Edwards scowled at his associate and cleared his throat, speaking into the microphone.

“Happy New Year, boys!” he stated, feigning nonchalance.

The President’s daughter listened on the spare equipment, usually reserved for the flight engineer. She suppressed her laughter as Edwards concocted a story about testing freshly installed engine components.

“You’ve been out of contact for three hours,” countered the squadron leader, matching speed on the left wing.

“We discovered, after we were airborne, that one of the transmitter wires had come loose while the techs were calibrating the controls. I’ve been fiddling around to get it fixed.”

If his comrades suspected a lie, they said nothing. “What’s your ETA in DC?”

“We’ll be on the ground no later than 0300.”

“Roger that.”

The jets peeled off in formation, leaving Air Force One to make a slow turn over Lake Michigan, heading east. Pauline left her chair and climbed on Edwards lap, cuddling him.

“I’m going to have to be really careful when we’re married,” she chirped. “You’re a damned good liar.”

None of the others privy to the incident, the celebration continued until they were instructed to buckle themselves in for landing. Once the aircraft taxied into its hangar, the crowd dispersed to their waiting transportation, while Pauline inspected the mess they’d created.

“The crew won’t be happy in the morning,” she snorted from the galley.

Edwards remarked, “Neither will your father, I’m thinking.”

“You’re right about that.”

Both spun upon hearing the sharp tenor. President Tritt, blue eyes glaring, lips pursed in a frown, flanked by six officials - all taller than his 5'7" - stood on the threshold, fists on hips.

“Dad!” oozed his daughter, crossing to kiss his cheek. “How’d you get here?”

“That’s my business.”

“Sir, I...” stammered Edwards.

“Hush, Major. I know this isn’t your fault. I should’ve insisted Pauline accompany us to California...”

“Dad, you don’t get it. We just went for a little joy ride.”

The elder Tritt signaled his entourage to withdraw; the galley door slammed shut. “A joy ride which will cost the taxpaying public thousands, and possibly cost me the election.”

“That’s a load of crap,” Pauline sniffed. “Nobody’s going to care...”

“Don’t you think every member of Congress who’s been hoping for a slip isn’t on the phone right now to his hometown television station - or CNN - setting up interviews to blast me for my negligence?”

“There’s no problem, sir,” supplied Edwards. “I told the chase team...”

“I know what you told them, Major. They didn’t believe you, and neither will anyone with half a brain.”

“What... will you do, Daddy?” his daughter whimpered.

The stony expression softened as Tritt noticed tears streaming down her face. He wrapped his arm around her quivering shoulders, and grinned at his soon-to-be son-in-law. “I’ll figure out something,” he sighed.

Together, the trio disembarked from the plane, the advisers lingering at the base of the stairs, uncertain. President Tritt breezed past them to the idling motorcade, grumbling, “Hell of a start to the new year!”

## What If..

Disturbing dreams.

Brioni laughed every time a commercial for prescription medications flashed on the TV screen, listing this among the potential side effects. Every night, disturbing dreams disrupted her slumber, without the aid of any drug.

Her parents - long dead - periodically manifested in outlandish scenarios, along with her estranged older brother and random faces she encountered through the day. Alligators, ducks, snakes and other animals, coupled with train travel, fast cars and bicycles provided additional fodder for flawed interpretation.

She understood why, for the most part. A combination of her fertile imagination and the current world unrest created vignettes which often woke her in a cold sweat. Eyelids drooping, she would shuffle to her computer, pecking away at the keyboard not for the comfort of an electronic journal, but twisting the action into a series of "what ifs" - short stories or outlines for novels.

One particular predawn session filled six pages with single-spaced characters.

The only thing worse than opening the door on a Saturday morning to find it blocked by three feet of snow - the reason I moved from Buffalo, New York, to Northern California - is opening the door on a Saturday morning to see the lawn populated by thousands of angels, sharpening their fiery swords.

On the opposite slope of the Napa Valley, battalions of demons prepared for war.

Brioni's premise: Mideast conflicts making the Plains of Meggido unavailable, Armageddon would be fought in the main character's front yard. To prevent the destruction of humanity and the planet, that woman would intervene and convince the respective leaders to settle the matter with a game of basketball on the court near the mansion's luxurious swimming pool.

Two hours later, her fingers aching, she closed the program, not saving the file, knowing she'd never finish it.

This rarely happened. Her talent such that she could manipulate fictional beings through bizarre circumstances to realistic ends, she could type 6,000 words in a day without regret. The more, the merrier, as a matter of fact. If she could

complete the first draft of a tale before sunset, she hoped to crawl into bed without dialogue and descriptions reverberating *ad infinitum* inside her skull. Which blended with the dreams, compounding her aggravation.

The previous day, for example, she'd knocked off a three-page corker about a Buddhist guru stalked by an overzealous pupil. That was preceded by a brief mystery about a ghost haunting a seaside resort.

In the depths of her heart, the aging author grasped how this situation could be resolved. She stared at her worn features in the bathroom mirror while brushing shaggy, grey-tinged brunette curls, recognizing in dull hazel eyes a lack of hope or enthusiasm for the daily grind. She'd kept her father's Colt revolver in the desk drawer these many years, the unsavory neighborhood necessitating a means of self defense.

A secret fear had prevented her from taking action over the course of five decades. Miscellaneous pains and other ailments, however, urged her to consider the possibility of moving forward with her plan.

She realized death would be a relief, a release. The sense of purpose held sacred by a majority of human beings didn't wash with her anymore. She recognized, on all sides, a futility to life.

No time like the present.

The authorities discovered Brioni's body in a pool of dried blood three days later, while searching for a hoodlum vandalizing cars.