

Twisted Stories

Odds and Ends

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Gamer's Heaven

Daniel opened his eyes, jarred awake by a horrendous nightmare: he'd been focused on the computer screen, battling enemies by the horde, when a silver Cadillac SUV plowed through his bedroom wall.

Pale blue orbs half expected to see rubble of bricks and beams piled atop him, ceiling plaster cracked and crumbling. Instead, he lay on a surreal grassy incline, a flock of cartoonish sheep fleeing in fear. Righting himself, he studied this landscape, almost painted in primary colors, a sense of foreboding and familiarity knotting his stomach.

On the opposite hill, a group stood beneath the somewhat abstract statue of an angel, but Daniel heard no sounds. A silent memorial, he guessed. When a pink-winged dragon descended from the sky and landed in their midst, he blinked and averted his gaze.

"I must still be dreaming," he surmised, running tentative fingers through what felt like artificial turf.

Even the flowers, trees, and rocks appeared fabricated, rather than alive. He rose, noticing a sticky redness on the ground where his head had lain. "Ah, that explains it. I bumped my head and have a concussion."

Yet, he didn't feel dizzy, nauseous, or otherwise disoriented. His skull did not throb with pain from the injury. Confused, he decided to approach the crowd and find out what had happened.

This trek required more effort than originally calculated, as Daniel had to climb over a high stone wall, ford a wide stream, and navigate a dense forest before emerging near the statue, now abandoned.

"Shit," he grumbled.

Glancing around, he saw a figure in the distance, and ran to catch him up. As he neared, Daniel noticed the creature carried a broadsword in a sheath across his shoulder, and wore an earth-toned mediaeval-style tunic and leggings. He vaguely recalled his own reflection in the waters as he waded across, his attire similar.

"Excuse me, sir!" he shouted.

The stooped traveler turned a wrinkled visage toward him. "Welcome, Blue Wolf. How may I be of service?"

Blue Wolf? puzzled Daniel. He stared, jaw agape, at what might have been a mixture of humanity and bear. "I was wondering... where am I?"

"You are where you always are this time of day."

Daniel didn't like riddles, and felt his temper flaring. "Which is?" he pressed.

"On your way to level 33."

In the depths of his heart, Daniel sensed he should understand this obscure reference but, at the moment, the meaning escaped him. "Please, be a little more clear."

"Oh, that's right. It'll take you awhile to acclimatize yourself."

"Acclimatize to what?"

"Heaven."

Daniel halted in mid-stride. "Heaven? This?"

"Indeed. The place where all avid gamers go when they die."

"Die? I'm not..." Abruptly, he recalled the force of the SUV's impact, and grasped the truth of his situation. "It can't be..."

"Every individual creates his own heaven, based on beliefs, hobbies, what have you," explained his companion. "You spent so much time here in life, it's only natural..."

"And, there are others like me?"

"Many of your friends. In fact, that is why we were assembled just now. Paying tribute to a valiant warrior who has come to join us."

"You mean, we fight for real, and face all the dangers..."

"No, the humans still living do that. We mainly get to sit and watch the fun, cheering on our favorites, and taunting the awkward beginners while we enjoy a pint or two."

"Sounds... dull."

"You'll grow accustomed to it."

"What if I don't?"

"Some have attempted level 34, but it means oblivion if you fail."

Daniel echoed, "Level 34?"

"The greatest adventure available in the game. True proof of courage, perseverance, and other laudable virtues."

His decision made in a flash, the newcomer queried, "How do I start?"

"You must find the noble lord's castle, wherein lies the sole clue."

"Thanks."

As Daniel set off along the pixelated dirt track, the bear-man bellowed, "I hope you don't regret your rashness!"

A thousand thoughts ran through Daniel's mind as he progressed. Blue Wolf had been his screen name when he logged on to play every afternoon at 4:00, his one extravagance as a history teacher at the local high school. He'd

interacted with many characters and, now he knew his plight, would probably recognize them when he encountered them.

He'd never gotten past the challenge of level 27, so setting his sights on level 34 might involve some difficulty. Entering a tiny village, with its computer-generated mud walls and thatched roofs, he considered passing on that option. He could be quite comfortable sitting in the pub with others of his ilk, chatting and kibitzing away the days.

No one could describe heaven, after all. Movies often portrayed that domain as angels perched on fluffy clouds, an ethereal existence just as boring, possibly. It wasn't within the human purview to comprehend the concept of eternity, when youngsters were raised to spend every available moment laboring toward the accomplishment of specific goals. To merely stop and wallow in timelessness... unacceptable.

"Where, pray, is the road to the noble lord's castle?" he asked the rustic tavern's voluptuous ebony-tressed barmaid.

"You must walk west three days, to a fork near a lightning-split oak. Left another two days, and you should see the turrets of that ancient fortress."

Expressing his gratitude, Daniel gulped the bland ale she served and retreated toward the door.

"Beware night travel!" she called the warning. "Vicious creatures stalk the darkness."

With a cheery salute, he commenced his sojourn. He'd clashed with far worse in real life.

Two aspects of this realm Daniel picked up on as he strode toward the CGI sunset: his feet neither hurt nor grew tired, no matter the distance, and the permanent residents could be easily identified by their pleasant demeanor and lack of aggression. The breathing players of this game, attacked practically anything which moved - friend or foe - their comments captured in text bubbles above their heads.

Kind of humorous, really.

"Welcome, Blue Wolf! Glad to see you!" greeted a bearded face, bent over a blacksmith's forge. "Beautiful evening!"

Daniel distinguished this as an old adversary from the game's early versions. "Hail, MacPherson the Brave!"

"How fare ye?"

"Well, so far."

"Ye are invited to share my supper, and bed down by the fire..."

"I'll accept that offer, with gratitude."

Helping the burly old gentleman finish his day's work, the pair retired to a cozy cottage, where MacPherson's buxom wife prepared a venison stew with vegetables - by the looks of it. By the taste, Daniel couldn't tell. A definite limitation to this world generated by computers: no substance to the images.

Surprising, the need to sleep in heaven, not to mention the dreams which filled those unconscious hours. Mrs. MacPherson hovered over Daniel with a lantern when he rolled off the couch, memories of the SUV jolting him from slumber.

"It will take no little time for you to be reconciled with your death," she advised with a thick Scottish burr. "After that, your nights will be untroubled."

"Are yours?"

"Of course. I've been here... I can't remember how long."

"Were you and MacPherson married... in life?"

"No, we knew each other only through the game. Lived on opposite sides of the globe, we did but, here, we had a lot in common."

"You're content?"

"As best I can be."

"You never considered... moving on to level 34?" Daniel prodded.

"No point."

He poked dying embers on the grate with a wrought iron instrument, debating whether her attitude made sense.

"Stay on this level," remarked the woman. "There are plenty of comely girls who could make you happy."

"I'm not... here for that type of happiness."

"That's not up to you."

"Eh?"

"Did you choose to die?"

"No. There was..."

"An accident?"

"Correct."

"Neither do you have a say in how you will spend eternity. Other... factors will determine your fate."

"That's nonsense!"

She smirked, crossing the large room to a wood stove. "You think that now, but when you realize the futility of your quest..."

Daniel rose and stretched, though his body didn't need to adjust itself in that way. "I thank you for the hospitality," he said in parting.

"No breakfast?"

“I’m... not hungry.” Another unusual circumstance, as his morning habits had formerly involved a large bowl of cereal, toast and coffee on a daily basis. Shuffling beneath a fancifully-colored dawn sky, he contemplated whether Mrs. MacPherson’s homespun wisdom reflected the truth of his situation.

Too wrapped up in their own existence, those he chanced upon his second day. Not that he hadn’t behaved in like fashion while alive. The rigors of teaching gave him an excuse for not getting out into the community to help others, or socialize with other instructors. He could claim to have homework to grade, parent-teacher conferences, or the like. While he relished the interaction with his students, he never gave out his personal e-mail address or phone number. The dismissal bell each day released him to pursue his own interests: the game.

He’d not practiced any organized religion, either, which raised questions about the accuracy of the assumption he now traversed a heaven of his own making.

After passing the night beneath drooping branches of a cockeyed willow, he passed through an unpopulated valley. Flocks of sheep grazed the hillside, occasionally exploding for no apparent reason.

He used to love targeting the sheep, waiting for other players to log on.

Ahead, he glimpsed the fork foretold by the barmaid. Perched on a large boulder wedged against the split oak, a youngish, trim figure scratched initials in the solid surface. Brown eyes glanced up, and Daniel could not judge whether the shag-styled sandy waves and oval face belonged to a male or female.

Clothes indicated the former, but not all females liked wearing dresses. He recalled a cadre of sophomores who preferred baggy black trousers hung with silver chains, and nondescript t-shirts which hid their femininity very effectively.

“Greetings, friend,” came a contralto voice. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Daniel squinted. “You have?”

“Put it this way: I’ve been waiting for anyone coming this direction.”

“Why?”

“You’re bound for the noble lord’s castle, and you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“About the gate.”

“What gate?”

Leaping from the rock, agile fingers brushed off backside and knees. “I wasn’t told, either, for that matter. From their configuration, you could call them the pearly gates of ancient lore, but the secret is: both sides must be opened simultaneously, or they slam shut and amputate specific parts of your anatomy.”

“In other words, it takes two people...”

“Precisely.”

“Do I know you?” asked Daniel.

“Lady Aurelia of the Shire. We gamed together a few times last summer, before...”

He waited.

“Electrical storm. One thing I learned: always listen to your mother.”

“You’ve been here almost a year?”

“Time flies, as they say. I’ll admit: I was getting itchy for some company.”

“Why do you want to find level 34?”

“To get the hell out of here. Hell being the operable word.”

“Hell?”

“Might as well be. Any other spot would be better.”

“I hope you’re correct.”

Aurelia bore right; Daniel didn’t follow.

“What’s wrong?” she puzzled.

“That’s not the way.”

“Yes, it is. Shortcut.”

“But...”

“Left is less dangerous, to be sure, but this will get us to the gate by dusk.”

“Dangerous?” Daniel gulped.

“A few boas, a couple lions. Already dead, but they may have kin.” The diminutive character drew her sword - almost too large for her limited size - and set out.

Protectively, Daniel accompanied her, keeping watch for movement in the roughly rendered underbrush. They skirted the carcasses, undisturbed by carrion, and Daniel got the impression this section had been created then abandoned as unessential to the players’ success.

“Watch out!” shrieked Aurelia, shoving him to the ground.

The plume of fire, shot from the throat of a huge, purple-scaled dragon, torched nearby foliage and congealed the top layer of gravel on the road.

Anticipating a second pass, the pair remained horizontal, but no further threat materialized.

“Odd, not to finish what he began,” Daniel observed.

“A deterrent, is all. Scare you enough to make you turn back.”

“Are we deterred?”

“No,” proclaimed Aurelia.

Over a steep hillock and through another plentiful forest, the imposing, scrolled gate glittered in the last rays of sunlight. Beyond, a castle of white marble dominated the horizon.

“Let’s do this,” Daniel urged.

She countered, “We wait until morning.”

“Why?”

“Prudence, Blue Wolf. We want to see what lies ahead, not go groping through the dark and... run into problems.”

Women were always more cautious than men! Daniel mused. He’d come this far, and had no patience for delays. “If we open the gate - together, now - I can go on ahead, and you can dawdle until tomorrow to continue your quest.”

“How can you be sure you won’t need me again? If this obstacle was set up to promote collaboration, might not there be others?”

“Doubtful. This game was never set up to be about teamwork.”

“Then, why put it on the internet and encourage players to log in and play together?”

“I played alone many times.”

Aurelia spat, “Fine.” She placed her hands on the left section of the gate, signaling Daniel to likewise grab the right. “Push!”

Not a squeak to be heard as the heavy grilles swung inward. Daniel grew the more befuddled: neither food nor drink had taste, yet something so trivial would be given substantial weight?

Still, his muscles did not ache from the exertion, nor was he panting - if he was breathing at all, he remembered. Dead people don’t breathe.

“See you ‘round,” he muttered, moving into the gloom.

“Bullshit!” Aurelia pursued him and fell into step.

“I thought you...”

“Shut up, Blue Wolf. You may need someone to protect *you*...”

“Protect me? What about you?”

“I’m not an impulsive fool.”

Daniel chuckled, “Aren’t you?”

Insulted, Aurelia bit her lip. Daniel kept stride, unconcerned if she could maintain the pace. What did concern him was her eagerness to stay with him.

Finally, he speculated aloud, “You know more about this than you’ll tell.”

She didn’t immediately answer.

“Well?”

“Okay, okay.” She paused, gazing up at a black, starless canopy. “Getting to level 34 is no piece of cake.”

“How would you know?”

“I know folk who’ve tried, and failed.”

“Failed?”

“Once in the castle, if you select the wrong door...”

“Then, why are you going?”

“I’m... not.”

“Eh?”

“I... was sent to prevent you... from getting hurt.”

“Sent? By who?”

“Your friends.”

“What friends?”

“You have many. Didn’t you know? A lot of them are out there, playing the game, and hoping your spirit will live on here, to inspire them.”

“What a load of...”

“It’s true. In fact, come dawn, they’re gathering to pay you tribute...”

“How?”

“You’ll see.” Aurelia clasped his hand; Daniel felt a warmth he’d not experienced since his arrival. “Come, let us away.”

“It’s a four day walk to that first village...”

“Not if you know the game’s secrets.”

“You mean... the portals?”

“They work more accurately for us than they do for the players.”

“I would hope so. I gave up on them long ago, since they were... unpredictable.”

First light found the pair on the same hill where Daniel had awoken after the accident. Hosts of characters - both alive and living in this gamer’s heaven - populated the green beneath the angelic statue, praising his supposed virtues. The tribute humbled him, and brought a realization that he may have touched more lives than he ever dreamed.

One of the elves proved to be currently employed performing upgrades on the graphics in the software’s next release. Daniel drew him aside. “If you could, give the food a little taste.”

Aurelia interrupted, laughing. “It’s mind over matter, Blue Wolf. Once you consciously recall how certain foods taste, your tongue will respond in kind.”

He considered, then grinned. “You may be right.”

“I know I am.”

Together, they stood at the summit of the rise, gazing at a vividly colored expanse. It might take quite awhile for Daniel to adjust to this particular heaven, but it might be a grand way to spend eternity, after all.

Improv on Paper

Always good for a laugh, certain memories. The stunts Charlie and I pulled in high school, for instance. We joked for years he'd earned a B.S. degree - *not* Bachelor of Science, mind - in verbal communication, while my B.S. covered the written form.

We complemented each other perfectly in that regard. When he needed an assignment typed for class, he'd dictate his thoughts to me, and I'd clean up the grammar on the computer. The few times I was required to stand before an audience, he practiced with me beforehand.

Not surprising, really, that he became a comedian. He could pull thoughts from mid-air and deliver them with the kind of humor half-drunken crowds appreciated. Of course, his day job involved convincing corporations to sign with his advertising firm. He lived in a posh 40-room mansion on a hill, which confirmed his aptitude.

While not quite so successful, I made a decent living as a news journalist. I could take quotes from anyone and spin them into a story people enjoyed reading. I called it "improv on paper," because, in essence, the technique paralleled Charlie's gift.

We kept in touch, even after I moved to Boston. The horrendous hurricane that autumn... well, it put New England in a blue funk. By chance, Charlie and I were chatting on the phone shortly after the disaster, and I commented how people really needed a good laugh. He offered to bring a few friends to do a benefit...

Things accelerated from there. It might seem like it takes forever to plan an event of such magnitude, but local business owners willingly signed on as sponsors, eager to help people get back on their feet. We secured the venue for free, and sites where people could watch the action on closed-circuit television.

Two weeks later, private planes converged on the airport, and limousines transported some of California's biggest names to Fenway Park. A capacity crowd filled the stands, cheering and roaring at jokes delivered from a stage behind the pitcher's mound.

Charlie came last on the bill, his name daunting to the other performers. I'd been observing the festivities from the press box, but when my old chum approached the microphone, he summoned me down in no uncertain terms.

I dreaded him making a fuss over my involvement in the proceedings, and declined.

"You've got thirty seconds, Dede, or I'll come and get you!"

My colleagues stared at me. Some chuckled, others shrugged. I hoisted myself off the padded seat and descended the stairs.

All this time, Charlie had been describing our friendship in terms that had the masses nearly doubled over. When I finally joined him, I noticed he'd had a desk, pad and pen positioned beside him.

"What are you up to?"

"A contest," he quipped.

I uttered, "Shit," into the microphone he aimed at me before I could check my tongue. The slip elicited ripples of merriment. "Like back when..."

"Exactly. And, each time you beat me, I'll donate" - his volume escalated - "one hundred thousand dollars to the rebuilding project!"

Studying those pale blue eyes, I knew he'd do it anyway, even if I lost. He'd always been kind and generous, traits not lost when fame propelled him into the international limelight.

"Six rounds?" I proposed.

"Ten. The chance for an even million."

We clasped hands, sealing the deal.

"Who'll pick the topics?"

He grinned, a sight I'd missed these many years. An usher carried a cardboard box forward, overflowing with scraps of paper.

"You planned this ahead of time?" I challenged.

"Sure." He waved me to select a slip. "Go for it."

The way this competition worked: we would get a suggestion of a topic or phrase. Over the next five minutes, Charlie would record his improv on a small recorder, and I would write mine on the pad. Admittedly, having a computer handy was easier, since I typed faster than I could jot my chicken scratch. But, the results were the same.

Judges were the crowd, who danced to music blaring from the loudspeakers during the interim of silence.

Charlie may have presumed I couldn't hold my own in a clutch. Since our high school graduation, I'd earned my B.S. in verbal, too. So, after he delivered his first bit, I rose from my chair, sheets in hand, ready to emote.

"Really?" he prodded.

I nodded.

And, won the round.

He cut a check for \$800,000 before we received a standing ovation near midnight. Amid the clamor, he embraced me, muttering in my ear, "How'd you get so good?"

I snickered, "Practice."

"How 'bout coming on my next tour? I could use some new material..."

"This format? Most audiences would get bored with it."

"No. You and me, together, feeding off each other spontaneously..."

"I'm no good that way, Charlie. I need to write, then talk. Off the cuff, it's a no-go."

"Come anyway. You'll be my muse..."

I'd heard these pleas through our senior year, when he scored a scholarship to UCLA. He wanted to duck out, marry me, and hit the road. I had to keep a level head then, and now.

"What about your wife and kids?"

"Shelly won't mind. She knows about us."

"I don't think my husband will understand. Especially since he's publisher of the paper..."

Charlie's smile faded. "Really? When'd you get hitched?"

"The Saturday before the storm."

"Wow."

What he didn't realize: I was lying. I would never marry, and not because I still carried a torch for this irrepressible genius. The problem with having a mind which could improv at the drop of a hat: it could happen anytime, anywhere, and be decidedly embarrassing. Thus, I kept to myself after hours, limiting social interaction to mandatory gatherings.

I did accompany him to a late supper/early breakfast, a few of the other entertainers in tow, who grilled me about my talent. I fielded their job offers in the same manner as I had Charlie's, whose jealousy could not be mistaken.

Dropping him at the airport as dawn broke over a convoy of bulldozers and front-end loaders hauling debris from the city, he kissed my forehead and both cheeks. "You're special, kid."

"And you're a real piece of work, Charlie."

It would be another decade before I saw him again, crippled by dementia and alcohol. I contented myself with the memories, and continued to improv on paper until my fingers could no longer function on a keyboard.

I installed voice-recognition software, but realized my connection to the words came from my brain to my hands, to the paper. Trying to vocalize my thoughts still didn't work, as it had for Charlie.

Sad to think: two unique individuals unable to use their gifts...

Frustrating, too.

As they say: a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

The Mysterious Moniker

The Federal Communications Commission chairman stared over her desk at the four other commissioners. They'd just finished viewing a video of that morning's brief and inconclusive hearing, part of an ongoing investigation into illegal broadcasting on a massive scale.

"We learned bupkis," she hissed through grit teeth, uncharacteristically agitated. Flipping open the manila file folder, she scoured pages of typed notes. "These field reports are pathetic enough. 'Nemo Moniker translates to Man with No Name.' No photos, no addresses, no details about a subversive who advocates replacing government officials with representatives selected from some kind of jury pool. He preaches peace, equal distribution of wealth, and free education for the poor to lift them out of poverty. Conservative commentators have labeled him a communist, and liberals are frightened of his impact."

Her aide interspersed, "We had no verifiable proof to link Ms. Ames with the recordings."

"She knows who's responsible! She had no lawyer, and by taking the fifth..."

Came the comment, "Whoever's financing her, she's very well protected."

"Well, we're charged with protecting the American people from unauthorized use of the airwaves. I want the number of staff assigned to this... mess tripled. I want results, and I want them by the end of the month!"

Muttered agreement preceded the commissioners' departure. Slumping in her buttoned leather chair, the woman slammed her hand on the blotter, then swore in pain.

The past five years, the charismatic Nemo Moniker had succeeded in gathering a renegade audience through hour-long radio tirades and, more recently, internet video uploads. All attempts to trace his operation's origins had failed, except for today's subpoenaed witness.

Wendy Ames cloaked her fear well in the wood-paneled chamber, glaring at the team interrogating her as if they were ignorant children. Yes, she provided the technical genius which complemented Moniker's oratory, disseminating his sentiments to millions around the globe, and she wasn't going to compromise that arrangement.

Not that he'd retaliate if she did. His rather nonchalant attitude about these escapades, frankly, amazed her. He didn't care if he was caught. Being arrested would merely prove the point he'd been touting.

In fact, he'd blatantly taunted the FCC by using the same closing for each episode: "Special thanks to Scrambled Eggs for making it possible to share my wisdom with you."

He'd nicknamed her Scrambled Eggs, because she took what he sent - via personal courier or his own encoded transmissions - and fed it through a complex matrix, so the authorities couldn't detect the upload's digital signature.

Her sole mistake: leaving her laptop computer open one afternoon while answering the nosy landlord's knock. He'd come to repair the toilet - always suspicious of how this tenant who seldom left her apartment earned a living - and paused long enough to read the progress bar on the screen.

Fortunately, she'd loaded a pair of identical Dells with bogus files. She substituted one when the F.B.I. served their warrant a week later.

Still, they hauled her from LeClaire, Iowa, to Washington, D.C. What a laugh!

More humorous yet, assigning covert operatives to shadow her. She'd had to pay for her own return flight to the Quad City International Airport in Moline, Illinois. Taking a cab across the Mississippi River to the modest apartment building fifteen miles north, she anticipated the crew's boredom monitoring her infrequent trips to the grocery store or The Shameless Chocoholic shop down the block.

Booting up the HP notebook she'd concealed behind a false wall of her bedroom's walk-in closet, a message from Moniker required encryption. The shifts on stake-out wouldn't recognize her alterations to the cable dish mounted on the structure's roof, which synced it to equipment slightly larger than a chunk of space garbage orbiting the upper atmosphere.

"You survived?" he greeted, rich green foliage offsetting his deep tan and shaggy brown head.

"Piece of cake."

"Excellent. I've got the next three files edited and ready to go."

"I'll pick them up in the cereal aisle at Schnuck's next Tuesday."

"Got it."

"How's the weather down there?"

Moniker grinned, showing a slight gap between his front incisors in the midst of a scraggly beard. "I've told you a hundred times: I'll gladly send the plane..."

"And ruin all this?" she chided.

"They can't touch me on my own private island..."

"But, they can cut off your access to the masses."

He pretended to sulk. “You don’t love me anymore.”

Wendy blew a kiss at the screen. “I love you more than ever, Sean. Some nights, I miss you so much, my heart feels like it’s breaking.”

“Then, come.”

“I can’t. Not now. From the news reports I’ve heard, people really might be taking your advice seriously. Crime rates have dropped in some major cities, and social service programs seem to be receiving more donations and doing a lot of good.”

“What about the churches?”

“A smattering in the pews, their utility bills past due.”

“Marvelous.”

Wendy’s nose twitched. “Who’d have thought an atheist could change the world?”

“You, my love. Your faith has given me hope for a decent future.”

“Oh, go and drink your coconut milk.”

His image faded as she broke the connection.

She didn’t want him to see her tears, for a variety of reasons. She couldn’t tell the government officials he’d been an idealistic kid who’d served a tour in Iraq and saw the stupidity of the current system. Shortly before his honorable discharge, he’d won \$250 million in the Powerball lottery, and decided to use the money to recreate the world in a far gentler image.

The traditional chain of command - business, religion, non-profits, the media - hadn’t been receptive to his ideas. That’s why he opted for independence, why he lived alone in the middle of the Caribbean. He contracted a firm engaged in developing space travel technologies to engineer and launch the compact, personal satellite which handled his secure communications.

He’d coordinated massive transportation strikes via his broadcasts, tying up traffic in New York City for four days on the year’s coldest weekend. Food service protests, even Hollywood filmmakers shuddered when conversations included bits of his philosophy about eliminating horror, violence and sex from screens, large and small.

Moniker had discovered Wendy in a suburban Chicago computer repair shop, scraping together minimal scratch. What ended up being like a university level oral exam over a delicious dinner on Michigan Avenue convinced him to hire her at a generous salary; that Friday, they were married.

“Not so you can’t testify against me,” he assured her while waiting for the judge to zip his black robe. “As some have phrased it, you give mind, and that’s an incredibly rare gift.”

His fingers entwined through hers, Wendy had studied the unique profile of this man, two years older and two inches taller than she. Where she had short, light curls and dark eyes, he boasted a wealth of body hair and piercing blue orbs which twinkled with delight as each new concept for his show popped into his brain.

They'd honeymooned in lush solitude, a landing strip the single indication humans had discovered the atoll. He'd constructed a concrete block, bunker-like structure on the beach, with a generator-powered, specially insulated, air conditioned recording studio, bedroom, bath and kitchen.

Moniker's wardrobe consisted of ragged tank tops, gym shorts and sandals. When doing physical labor, he'd tie a folded bandanna around his cranium, to prevent sweat and hair from obscuring his sight. Wendy preferred this primitive look to a suit and tie. She herself spent those months in a bikini. They reveled in each other, swimming in warm waters through the days and making love most nights.

By mutual agreement, the jet fetched her on October 1, Moniker resuming his self-imposed exile. "It's worth the inconvenience, if I can make a dent in this shit," he proclaimed.

Make a dent he had, and Wendy believed he could finally reveal himself as the transformation's author - after so long pixelating his face, and filtering his tenor through a modulator.

Wiping dampness from her cheeks, she replaced the computer on its shelf and fit the drywall wedge into the gap. A quick stroll to the chocolate shop would soothe her nerves.

Her tails stood behind her in line to pay for her purchases of fudge, truffles and malted milk balls at the converted house. The veterans on this assignment loved these little excursions.

Not so much driving into Bettendorf or Davenport for groceries. Wendy never patronized the same store twice in a row, which meant it took her longer to find specific items on her list, besides browsing the sale items. A deliberate means to confuse and irritate them, she liked to duck past the frozen food aisle, then wait for them to come jogging along and collide with her near the bakery.

Schnuck's on Tuesday would be a drop, so she needed to be extra diligent on her rounds. Invariably, a bag of chips or a package of cookies would be added by a passing shopper to her cart's contents - most of which she never ate, but donated to a local food bank. Not a gesture or glance would give away the ruse.

Contemplating cereals and reading nutrition information distracted her companions, idling near the granola bars. She heard another cart approach, a

wheel wobbling and squeaking. She situated herself between the courier and her shadows.

“Excuse me,” a familiar voice hailed. “My girlfriend is bringing her stepsons for the weekend, and I have no idea what cereals kids like.”

“Sean, what on earth!” croaked Wendy at her t-shirt and jean clad husband.

“Hush, babe. No one knows me here. Just play along.”

“I... think they like the sweet ones.” She led him to the over-sugared display, choosing one for his inspection. “Why didn’t you let me know...”

“Mike got sick, so I’m the sub.” He selected a different box. “Six o’clock tonight, be at the Blue Pelican. After dinner, go to the restroom, climb out the window and down the fire escape. I’ll have a boat waiting.”

A half dozen large-sized choices dumped in the basket, Nemo Moniker steered toward the cashiers. Absolutely befuddled, Wendy reclaimed her own cart, bran flakes smashing a loaf of rye bread. She continued in the opposite direction.

The Blue Pelican in LeClaire overlooked the Mighty Mississippi, and attracted wealthy tourists and locals celebrating special events. Wendy had only eaten there once before, and didn’t like the prospect of being at table alone. Her reservation had been made, requesting placement in full view. She ordered filet mignon, a baked potato and green salad from the menu, with raspberry iced tea.

The meal partially eaten, she laid the linen napkin across the plate, ignoring the check. She left her windbreaker draped on the chair when she skirted the dining area to the restroom. Thankfully, she retained enough agility to hoist herself onto the high windowsill, pop out the screen and maneuver onto rust-coated stairs, trees growing from the oft-flooded bank shrouding her exodus.

The speedboat lay at anchor, Moniker at the wheel. She leapt from the bottom rung onto the passenger seat, awkwardly catching his arm for balance.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” she breathed.

“Slowly, babe. Casual. Make it look like nothing unusual.”

The prow eased into deeper water, rating not so much as a second glance from anyone on the restaurant’s deck.

“Where to?” asked Wendy, her muscles unknotting.

“St. Louis. The plane is waiting at the airport.”

“What?”

“I coordinated things very precisely. Flew from the island to Miami, then filed a new flight plan to Minneapolis. Told the pilot to issue a distress call about mechanical trouble, and land at Quad Cities, instead. I took a taxi to the grocery store, and another here. No one suspects a thing.”

“If we’re seen together...”

“Your boys will be pulling out their hair trying to find you.”

“They’re not *that* stupid. They’ll figure on a boat...”

“Lay you five to one odds.”

“Taken.”

Thirty minutes later, Moniker throttled down the inboard engine and docked beneath a suspension bridge. Offering Wendy his hand, he lifted her onto the metal pier.

“What are we doing...” she puzzled.

A swarthy, cut-off jean-clad youth accepted the rope secured to the stern, and hopped aboard. He was northbound before Moniker could escort Wendy to the pristine paddle-wheeler moored a block along the shoreline.

“Sean...”

“I’ve hired the Twilight to take us south. That way, we can get a good night’s sleep...” He chuckled, wrapping his arm around her waist,. “You owe me five kisses.”

“Gladly.”

Their cabin on the upper deck featured a king-sized bed, chilled champagne, three vases of red roses and a box of Lagomarcino’s chocolates. Wendy had brought no clothes, a selection of negligees and dresses hanging in the closet.

“How’d you arrange all this?”

“You know I’m... anal about details. If we don’t want to get caught, I have to be thorough.”

“When the guys pick up the trail...”

“They won’t, at least until morning. I paid the bartender to spike their drinks, and have them taken to a two-star bed and breakfast. They’ll be so hung over, they won’t care what happened to you - and you’ll be home by then.”

“You mean, we have just a few hours?”

“Unless you want to fly to the island with me.”

“What about the broadcasts?” she pressed.

“You can do there what you do here...”

“And, as soon as their scans detect an off-shore signal, they’ll be scouring the Gulf.”

Moniker kicked his feet on the coffee table near the plush leather sofa.

“What if I told you I’m quitting?”

“You... can’t!”

“I’m tired of being alone, Wendy. I’m tired of leading a charge which will never completely succeed. Those with whom my words resonate, have listened and acted. The rest... nothing can convince them to change their narrow minds.”

She couldn’t protest his logic, but a sadness nonetheless enveloped her. “What’ll you do next?”

“You and I will live on the island, and raise a family in peace and tranquility.”

“I...”

“You’ll love it there. We can hop over to Jamaica when the mood strikes us, or Mexico, or the Bahamas. It’ll be a perpetual holiday, at one with nature.”

“I...” He caught her sleeve and pulled her down beside him. She feigned resistance. “It’ll be dull, after being a wanted felon.”

“You’ll be safe, and we’ll be together.”

They kissed, and made up for their lengthy separation, until the morning light - and the boat’s whistle - signaled their journey’s end.

“Get home, and start packing,” Moniker instructed. “I’ll send the plane for you on the 15th.”

“That’s not much time.”

“It’s sufficient to run the last three shows. Then, we’re free.”

Stepping into the limousine which would convey her back to LeClaire, Wendy mused, “I hope so.”

The FCC had raided her apartment in her absence, dumping drawers, stripping the bed, shredding the mattress and pillows. Water and appliances were nonfunctional, because they ripped wires out of the walls and pipes from their fittings.

They did not find the computer, however; other than emptying shoe boxes on the upper closet shelf, they did not damage the walls.

This intrusion confirmed her husband’s rationale. Rather than tidy the clutter, she scrounged some crates from the dwelling’s basement and began sorting out the bare essentials, discarding the rest.

She spent an hour that afternoon uploading videos onto the computer, and scheduling their dissemination at set intervals. She paid the landlord six months’ rent, and a generous bonus to keep his mouth shut about her breaking the lease, before driving a neighbor’s borrowed car north to Dubuque, crashing at the condo of an old friend who spent winters in Florida.

The morning of the 15th, no more had the Cessna landed at the commuter airport than a cadre of federal agents swarmed the tarmac. Wendy observed their

lame search from the air traffic control tower, snickering as the group eventually shuffled to the security checkpoint, shaking their heads in disbelief.

For a price, papers could be forged.

The fugitive rode to the aircraft on a fuel truck, garbed in baggy coveralls. She mounted the stairs and, as soon as the hose was disconnected, the doors were secured and the plane rolled toward the runway, given clearance for take-off in short order.

Stops in Houston, Texas, and Rio de Janeiro preceded the last leg to the island paradise. Nemo Moniker - that name no longer a necessity - welcomed her with a prolonged embrace, before ushering her to their rustic domicile.

He'd built the house on a secluded lagoon, stilts compensating for rising waters. A fishing boat lay at anchor, the dock an extension of the sun deck. Sturdy, rust-proof materials lay behind bamboo trim, and beneath palm fronds on the roof. Six rooms were open to the air, with only mosquito netting to dissuade the bugs. A wind turbine supplied electricity for the stove, refrigerator, water heater and well pump.

Wendy squealed joyfully at this surprise, entranced by the layout and design.

Over a glass of mango juice, she divulged her news: in eight months, they would have another mouth to feed.

Mr. and Mrs. Sean Robbins could put the past behind them, and enjoy a future with their family, though the FCC never closed the file on the incident, despite the illegal broadcasts abruptly ceasing.

As for the world beyond their two-square mile Caribbean haven: it surged along the precarious road to self-destruction, the temporary diversion Moniker caused seen as a glitch on the course "experts" deemed humanity's "de-evolution".

Truth of the Matter

To whom we pray - and for what - has divided humanity these many aeons.

What people don't seem to grasp: the energy released when they utter their oft-repetitive petitions (and praises, for that matter) is what creates the deity - not the other way 'round.

Jesus' supposed admonition, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them," (Matthew 18:20) means the energies are doubled or tripled, etc., during communal prayers, making the constructs more potent.

The same can be said of ghosts, or spirits which "possess" individuals. Only by focusing energy on beliefs in these phenomena are they made real.

Magic - or "magick" as it is spelled by various practitioners of what are called Pagan arts - involves identical manipulation of energies to some specific end.

In essence, humans disrupt the universal energies' neutral balance through their insane yearning for an "other" to watch over them.

Utter nonsense.

This conclusion was reached not through research of the bookish sort, but via concrete, personal experience.

A fellow at State University's School of Holistic Medicine, the brain's potential had fascinated me for decades. Besides my sanctioned, grant-funded study of herbal cures for lymphoma, I initiated purely private experiments using student volunteers to explore the link between guided thought and the universal energy flow.

The results boggled my mind.

I started with one subject, isolated in a stark 10' x 12' chamber - decreasing the likelihood of distraction. Focused on a specific smell, I monitored heart rate and blood pressure. Nine times out of ten, when the door opened after an hour, the air within bore a faint scent of the bacon, cookies, roast turkey, roses, or fresh bread on which that particular student had been concentrating.

Five score of these preliminary tests led to placing two individuals simultaneously in adjacent, identical cubicles, giving them the same directions. I progressed to seating a pair in the same room, then three, four, up to eight. Such a group would emerge, leaving behind powerful aromatic residue.

The strongest indicators unseen energies could be controlled by mental activity occurred especially when either or both of two certain individuals participated. Not concerned with names, each volunteer had been assigned a

number, answering a cursory questionnaire before their first appointment. In analyzing the data, I marveled at the correlation between their low heart and respiration rates, and the conspicuous, palpable fragrance they generated.

Encouraged to adjust the original parameters, I text messaged these prodigies to arrive at the science building that evening before 7:00. I expected serious, mature students, instead realizing after fifteen minutes of idle chatter, they existed on a totally different level than I did.

Jude Rodell fell into the university's "non-traditional" category - a youngish forty who could pass for twenty. His full head of reddish-bronze hair, high forehead, arched brows, brown eyes, straight nose which widened slightly at the tip, and defined cheekbones might've been carved by ancient Greeks. He boasted an amiable grin and even more chilling scowl. His lean frame stood no more than 5'7"; I towered above him, but he didn't seem to mind. He also didn't seem to care about personal appearance, clad in a faded red t-shirt, worn jeans and scuffed sneakers.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Milo Breen came impeccably attired in a grey wool business suit. The 25-year-old spoke in a cultured contralto, with slight indications of a New England accent. If I'd not seen the hazel eyes burning within the full, tanned face, I'd have believed her an albino, with a pure white mane flowing in waves to her waist.

Amenities concluded, I escorted them to adjoining rooms, chairs facing the wall separating them. Rather than instructing them to concentrate on a smell, I asked that they visualize the other beyond the cement block construction.

I'd set up video recorders in the corner of each chamber, activated by remote control from my office along the corridor. By the time I reached my desk and switched on the monitors, the wall between them had vanished, and they pleasantly stared at each other.

Neither broke a sweat, or exhibited fatigue when I released them though, as soon as I opened Milo's door, the wall solidified instantaneously.

"You understand all matter is energy?" I stammered.

Jude warned, "You're treading dangerous ground, Professor. If you allow yourself to view all matter as energy, not only the wall disappears, but the floor, the ground, the entire planet."

"You've... experimented in this vein before?"

"Not scientifically. I..."

He fell silent, nodded stiffly and departed.

Left to glower at Milo, she favored me with a sweet smile. "Jude's right, you know. The truth can be devastating, which is why humans only use ten

percent of their brain. They couldn't... handle being suddenly disembodied when their illusions are dispelled."

"Illusions? How could someone so young possibly grasp..."

I detected a placating tone as she patted my arm. "Professor, who's to say what is young, and what is old. Time is as much an illusion as matter."

With that, she exited into the night.

No spring chicken - and bow-legged, besides - I nonetheless made chase, catching Milo on the quad near Hagerty Hall. When I tugged the sleeve of her belted trenchcoat, she turned a tear-stained countenance toward me.

Apologizing profusely, I still asked, "What did you mean..."

When I received no reply, I considered abandoning the quest. My curiosity got the better of me. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee."

Milo's white mane bobbed vertically. She accompanied me mutely to the Student Union.

Seated at a speckled laminate-topped table in the nearly deserted deli, I leaned forward confidentially. "Tell me what happened to you."

She sipped her espresso, launching into the tale of a tragic car accident when she was 17. She'd been comatose for three days after her boyfriend, drunk, plowed his Dodge Challenger into a tree. He'd died; she sustained broken legs, fractured ribs, and massive internal injuries.

"Fully conscious, I began panicking when my body didn't respond to my thoughts. I couldn't move, couldn't communicate - yet I could hear myself speaking inside my own head," the young woman related. "Once I overcame my fear, I relaxed, and discovered myself disembodied, aware not only of my parents and the nurse in my own hospital room, but every patient in the building. This awareness expanded exponentially, until I felt myself connected with the entire universe."

"What... was it like?"

"Awesome, and frightening. While I lacked my five physical senses, I could see, feel and hear, but on a level which can't be described by the human tongue."

"Incredible!"

"Time, space and matter have no bearing in that... domain. I understood in those moments why the brain uses such a limited amount of its capacity, confined in the body. Complete cognizance would cause this fragile shell" - she pinched her left arm lightly - "to explode."

Considering that possibility, I shuddered.

“Like Yoda told Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back*: ‘Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter,’” she concluded.

I pressed, “And when you awoke from the coma?”

“My knowledge of the truth nearly drove me mad.”

“Then, why are you here, now, helping with my research?”

“Because humanity must evolve in order to release its hold on the tangible.” This from Jude Rodell, who slid a chair to our table and dropped onto the molded plastic. “This planet’s matter is being perverted, and disseminated - space junk left in orbit, on the moon and elsewhere - throwing the universal energies into imbalance.”

He leaned over and kissed Milo’s cheek, supportively entwining his thick fingers through hers. He might’ve been her father, given his chronological age, yet looked as young as she.

“What’s your experience?” I queried.

“I spent thirteen years in a Buddhist monastery.” He must’ve noticed my expression change, as he clarified, “Not as a monk. As a doctor. There’d been an epidemic in the region, and after I treated the last of the locals, I began wondering why the monks weren’t harmed by the germs.”

This particular monastery, it seemed, didn’t follow any of the established “traditions”. They observed the original teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, without the complicated Buddhist rituals developed over the centuries. They believed enlightenment occurred when a person achieved total equilibrium, which did *not* involve sitting in meditation for extended periods.

“They viewed the bacteria causing the illness as integrated within the flow of universal energies, and accepted its presence. It did no harm to them,” Jude explained.

The comment escaped my lips unbidden: “Phenomenal!”

“No, just logical. Uniting oneself with the universal energies doesn’t involve a spiritual transformation. It’s a conscious decision. The brain accepts an undeniable fact. From there, the possibilities are endless.”

“With such knowledge, why are either of you here at State?”

Milo hesitated before answering. “To pass the days in some useful way.”

Glancing at Jude, he wordlessly echoed the sentiment.

I ventured, “In other words, until you’re released from your physical form so you can resume your union...”

Both shrugged in resignation.

“Why participate in the trials? Wouldn’t a temporary experience of that... make this existence the more agonizing?”

“It’s... worth the residual anguish to touch that realm, even temporarily,” confessed Jude.

An idea popped into my head, which caused me to chuckle. “What if... you could be released...”

“Suicide transmits negative energies...” Milo stated.

“Not suicide,” I clarified. “An... experiment. If the two of you together...”

“How?”

“Right now, I’m not sure, but we’ll work on it.”

And work we did. I abandoned my regular research - both funded and private - to devise a method whereby this singular pair could merge their respective intelligences with what they had briefly perceived.

Intelligence, indeed - not merely what is called the “soul”, “spirit” or “essence”. No romantic notion of faith was involved here. I had to admit an order to this flow of energies, coordinated very much by intelligence. As I’d learned - and taught - in physics class: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. A butterfly could not flap its wings without the universe compensating.

Surprisingly, developing a plan didn’t take as long as I estimated. Basing my theory on what had already transpired, I placed Milo and Jude together in a cubicle. They were encouraged to visualize each other as pure energy. Given the rapidity with which the wall between them had vanished in the earlier test...

On the monitor screen in my office, I captured the disappearance of two unique people into what some call the ether. The digital file would never be viewed by anyone else, locked in my desk drawer and, eventually, destroyed when the science building collapsed during a tornado.

I secretly pondered if Milo and Jude engineered the disaster, later realizing there were far too many other factors warping the universal energies to blame that marvelous couple.

That Christmas Schtick

The reasons Georgi didn't celebrate Christmas numbered in the hundreds, if she'd bothered to count.

First and foremost: the middle-aged archivist's earliest memories included how her mother would invite the extended family to their modest domicile, and fuss over the decorations and table settings, to ensure perfection. Then, she'd get drunk during the festivities and argue with cousins she actually resented.

Georgi's limited income - an allowance of never more than forty cents per week during the grade school years - prevented her from buying her parents or older brother lavish presents. The hand-made items she, therefore, placed beneath the tree were roundly denigrated and rejected.

The fact her paternal grandfather died at 11:30 PM on December 25, 1974, not only permanently altered her perception of the holiday, but of death and funerals, in general.

Leaving home at 18, she foundered through three marriages and raised four sons as basically a single mother. On a tight budget, she tended toward wrapping packages of badly needed socks and underwear in bright paper, pretending Santa brought them. The boys joked about this tradition, not realizing how much it hurt her.

One Christmas, the parish priest contacted a charitable group - without Georgi's knowledge or consent - and when a tree and bags of toys were delivered to the duplex, she nearly blew a cork.

The proliferation of Cocker Spaniels and other animals in the house - as her sons grew through their teen years - preempted having a tree at all. Georgi's parents dead, she went from cooking the turkey and trimmings to nestling in her pajamas with a collection of old movies, while the boys accepted invitations from girlfriends or other relatives.

The woman stared, unseeing, into the storefront glass, displays trimmed with tinsel and red bows. A dusting of snow didn't improve her mood.

She related best to the Boris Karloff-narrated cartoon version of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* - the first half, at any rate. She despised seasonal movies which depicted dysfunctional individuals or families who abruptly reconcile or find purpose in their lives due to the approach of Yuletide. She hadn't uttered the phrase, "Merry Christmas," in a decade, and sent no cards. No longer did she shop for gifts.

That date on the calendar, for Georgi, differed not from any other.

With a sigh, the brunette turned to continue her daily hike along the river and through Vanderhoff Park. She traversed the route counter-clockwise, while many passed her, making the loop in the reverse direction. Her knees couldn't take the strain of the hill and, this way, she could always grab the bus if her legs ached after a mile.

She rarely acknowledged others, except with a nod or perfunctory greeting. One greying man, in particular, she initially believed slept on one of the benches, always clad in the same tan Carhartt coat, jeans and Cubs ballcap. He moved at a decent pace, however, and boasted a clean shave, so she doubted her own assumption after a week or so.

When she found him behind her in line at Starbuck's one Sunday, the situation crept her out a bit. Two baristas were serving customers, so they ended up side by side at the counter. He'd removed his hat and, when he glanced over, she noticed his piercing, pale blue eyes.

Unwittingly, she sucked a lungful of air, astonished.

"Good morning, again," he chuckled in a pleasant tenor.

Her tongue would not cooperate, and she felt quite the fool for not responding.

Upon receiving his order of hot chocolate, he departed. Georgi had to wait for her custom espresso, asking the employee delivering her cup if he knew the man's identity.

"Sure," came the cheery reply. "That's Mitch Virgil, the jazz musician."

Unfamiliar with the name, and not fond of that musical style, Georgi determined to research him when she reached her apartment.

Not a difficult task. The internet boasted many pages discussing Virgil's versatility with trumpet, trombone and clarinet. Multiple laments about his premature retirement filled message boards and blogs.

So, he'd settled in this backwater burg? It didn't make sense to the woman. She'd waited most of her life to escape the town, without luck.

During successive walks, Georgi greeted Virgil amiably, knowing he posed no threat of begging funds. She got so accustomed to encountering him by the lamp post on the last curve before the hill, that mid-December morning when he didn't appear, concern tightened her chest.

Chatting up other customers in line for coffee, she learned Virgil had taken a nasty fall, twisting his ankle. Georgi wheedled his address from the manager, who stored the promotional mailing list on his computer.

The vast mansion sat on a bluff above the river, a neighborhood Georgi only dreamed of affording since her childhood. She rang the bell and, hearing nothing, knocked loudly on the frame of the stained glass door.

A hand parted heavy curtains on the bay window to her left; Virgil's singular face visible in the gap. "Come in!" he bellowed.

The door unlocked, Georgi tentatively pushed it inward, gasping at the historic dwelling's ornate beauty. Rather than linger over this new experience, she proceeded into the cozy parlor, where a fire blazed on the grate, surrounded by carved marble.

In the far corner, instrument cases were haphazardly piled.

"Well, this is a surprise," commented Virgil, seated in a gold velvet armchair, his injured foot propped on a matching ottoman. "To what do I owe the honor?"

In that instant, Georgi realized she didn't know why she'd come. "I... wanted to be sure you're okay."

"Laid up until New Year's, maybe. Depends on what the doctor says, next time he drops by."

"Your doctor makes house calls?" the visitor puzzled.

"He lives two houses down." Virgil placed a finger on the side of his distinctive nose, a signal for secrecy. "Don't tell anyone."

Georgi mimicked the gesture, felt herself grin. "You have my word."

"There's coffee in the kitchen, if you'd like to warm your bones."

"You shouldn't be up and around..."

"Frankly, it's yesterday's pot."

An idea struck Georgi. "Would you like me to make some fresh?"

"I'd be eternally grateful."

Indeed, not only the coffee maker needed attention, but dishes piled in the porcelain sink, and laundry overflowing a basket near the utility room.

Georgi worked until mid-afternoon, ensuring Mitch Virgil's well being.

"We're total strangers, yet you show such kindness..." he remarked, when she settled opposite him with a steaming mug of brew.

"I have an ulterior motive," she smirked playfully.

His expression hardened.

"Nothing like that," she assured him, watching him relax. "I just want to know: with your fame and, I suppose, fortune, why retire here?"

He laughed outright. "These rooms hold some of my best memories. This was my grandparents' house. My mom and dad... had issues, so Gran and Paps pretty much raised me. Paps instilled a love of music in me, playing Glenn Miller

and Benny Goodman records. He took me to see Herb Alpert in concert when I was young. Got his autograph. Santa brought me my first cornet when I was eight. I couldn't have asked for a better life."

Abruptly, his face contorted in pain.

Georgi leapt off the sofa cushion. "What's wrong?"

"My... heart," Virgil stammered. He reached for a pill bottle on the round, doily topped table.

Placing the tablets in his hand, Georgi waited while he slipped one under his tongue. Five tense minutes elapsed, before she breathed.

"Would you help me upstairs?" muttered her host. "I need to sleep."

"Sure."

Slowly ascending the carpeted flight, her arm supporting his solid form at the waist, Georgi yearned to ask more questions, but determined to respect the man's privacy. Clear enough, he'd retired due to health problems. He'd duly tried to exercise, but age and entropy itself could be an individual's worst enemies.

The master bedroom hadn't been renovated since the structure's completion in 1892. Heavy oak furniture lined the walls, an old bowl and pitcher adorned the dressing table. A chamber pot in the corner, original paintings of Virgil's ancestors needed dusting.

She positioned him on the four-poster bed, quilt and sheets unmade from the previous night. "Forgive the mess," he murmured.

"This is nothing, compared to how my place looked with four boys," she snickered.

"Thank you."

Gingerly lifting his legs, she made Virgil comfortable, refilling a tumbler with water and placing it on the night stand, next to the pill bottle and telephone.

"Anything else?" she queried.

"No, this is perfect."

"I'll lock the door when I leave."

"You're welcome to stay."

For the briefest second, Georgi considered accepting. "I... should get home."

Virgil scooped up her calloused fingers and kissed them. "You are a blessing."

No one had ever praised her in that fashion. She'd done what needed doing over the course of many decades, without seeking affirmation. She'd been taken for granted, and only now, someone appreciated her efforts.

A tear slid down her cheek.

She bent and kissed his forehead. "I'll leave my number, if you need anything."

"Merry Christmas, Georgi," he stated drowsily.

"Same to you, Mitch."

Tempted to check on him in the days which followed, Georgi decided to steer clear. She couldn't get involved with anyone; her emotions so jaded, she couldn't trust them.

She resumed her regular routine, halting in mid-stride one Saturday morning, when a newspaper headline on a drug store stand proclaimed, "Mitch Virgil, renowned musician, dead."

Why she wept, she couldn't fathom. She hadn't cried at a funeral in forty years. Death so much a part of life, it meant nothing to her, and wiling away one afternoon with an esteemed gentleman reduced her to this?

Perhaps, she'd discovered a truly kind and selfless being in this harsh world, gracious and grateful for her assistance. That night, staring in the bathroom mirror, she recalled his gorgeous blue eyes. If only she'd had a chance to know him better, she might've...

A rustling in the other room yanked her from this reverie. Snatching a ball bat from the kitchen, she hurried to investigate, only to find a worn trumpet case laid open on the sofa, a sprig of mistletoe resting atop the polished brass.

Whatever its origin, Georgi sank on the floor, sobbing.

She must've fallen asleep for, next she remembered, two hands were lifting her, and she gazed into Mitch Virgil's glorious orbs.

"My heart stopped, and your heart broke," he whispered. "Will you come with me?"

Finally, a chance to blow this burg, she chuckled. "Oh, yes, please."

The landlord found Georgi's corpse on Christmas Eve, her right hand clutching the trumpet, a contented smile frozen on her lips.

The Yoga Master

Rose Vandenberg began attending “Lunch Hour Yoga” at the Artistic Living Center that spring. The instructor, Dale Barnell, noticed her in the mirrored studio of professionals taking a break from their daily grind because she consistently parked herself in the far corner, legs crossed Indian style, elbows propped on her knees, chin resting on her hands, and did not participate.

Nor did she disrupt the progression from sun salutation to downward dog, warrior, mountain and tree poses. For six weeks, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, Barnell concentrated on providing his students a tranquil experience. That final session, however, he succumbed to curiosity, approaching the middle-aged curly brunette after the echo of the small gong faded.

Hazel orbs gazed up at the green tank top and sweat pants-clad figure. Her smooth features wore a sideways grin, but she didn’t try to rise.

“I’d hate to think you wasted your money on my class,” he remarked with intended humor, settling beside her.

Rose replied, “I enjoyed it very much.”

“You didn’t *do* anything.”

“I benefitted from watching the others.”

“What, some kind of weird voyeurism thing?”

“No. My body doesn’t move the way they do” - she motioned at the now empty expanse - “but, seeing them bending and stretching, I could visualize myself doing likewise.”

“Did you have scoliosis as a teen?” prodded Barnell, running fingers through his perspiration-damped sandy mop.

“No. I was born with my left side slightly deformed, and had a couple surgeries on my legs as a kid. I took dance classes like a lot of girls - ballet and tap. When I was eleven, my mom signed me up for gymnastics. That year confirmed my lack of agility. I can’t even touch my toes.”

He raised himself on one knee; she didn’t budge. “There’s another group coming in...”

“I can’t move. My back locked about a half hour ago.”

His pointed chin dropped. “Do you want me to call an ambulance?”

“No,” she chortled. “Just give me your hand.”

He did as requested, and she slowly pulled herself upright. Once on her feet, she appeared totally normal.

“Have you tried massage, or acupuncture?” Barnell wondered.

“Why?”

“You could lead a full life...”

“I already do.”

Rose’s attitude confounded - and intrigued - the man. He’d traveled the globe, studying the wide range of yoga techniques and integrating the associated philosophy of balance and centeredness into his routine. He caught her arm before she exited. “Please, have lunch with me. That is, unless you’re due at the office...”

“I’m my own boss, so I don’t have to punch a clock.”

Once they’d changed into street clothes - his: jeans, sandals and an orange-patterned Hawaiian shirt, hers: an oversized white blouse, black slacks and red loafers - they met in the lobby and strolled to Rose’s old Honda Civic hatchback.

“I used to have one with a clutch,” she related, dropping onto the driver’s seat. “Damned sciatica.”

At her favorite Italian restaurant across the river, she indulged in a plate of meat ravioli and a glass of chianti. Barnell, a vegetarian, selected a mixed salad and iced tea.

“Why are you smiling?” he queried once the waitress delivered their order.

Rose wouldn’t admit she found the solidly-built, blue eyed instructor’s attention odd. He could have asked out any of the other women in the class, more fit, more beautiful, and they would have been a jewel on his arm. She imagined herself more a chunk of gravel.

When she didn’t respond, he chewed the vinaigrette-coated spinach and lettuce in silence for awhile. Then, he ventured, “Would you be willing to participate in an experiment?”

“What, for instance?”

“If it works, it might increase your flexibility.”

“If you’d come to me when I was sixteen and still had aspirations of auditioning for a dance troupe in New York, I would’ve said yes. In a heartbeat. I’ve been subjected to chiropractors, physical therapy that felt like my legs were being ripped off, electrical currents run through my bones... It’s too late...”

“Give me an hour or two, and we’ll know if it’s worth continuing.”

She soaked up dribbles of tomato sauce with a hunk of warm bread.

“What’s your theory?”

“It’s... kind of vague at the moment. Give me a couple days to do some research, and we can chat further.”

“Lunch on Monday?” she suggested.

“Sure.”

“You can choose the place.”

He named a bistro one block from the Artistic Life Center.

She snatched the check from his grip and ambled toward the door. “See you there, at noon.”

Barnell stared at the archway long after Rose had vanished, shock and awe temporarily immobilizing him. When he recovered his wits, he laughed. He had a mile’s hike to his own car.

Numerous internet searches, and a trip to the university library, built the foundation for what had been a random impulse. Why he wanted to help this woman he didn’t quite understand, except that her unconventional perspective partly reflected his own opinions .

To their next rendezvous, he brought an invitation for her to spend the afternoon in his care. They didn’t bother to eat: he, too excited about the prospects of success, she having just snacked on a chocolate sundae.

Barnell’s apartment above a former grocery store in what was considered a “bad neighborhood” afforded him space to practice yoga - when not actually teaching - a large bedroom, renovated bathroom, utilitarian kitchen, and living room with a huge plaid sectional sofa.

“Larger than my place,” observed his guest, impressed. “And less expensive, I’d wager.”

“What... do you do, Rose?”

“Journalism and photography, freelance.”

He recalled seeing her by-line in the local newspaper, and a few regional magazines. “You write quite well,” he praised. “That piece you did on the Center...”

“That was the first time I saw you. Snapped some photos of your class through a crack in the door. Inspired me to sign up...” She tested the sofa cushions. “So, what do you have in mind?”

“We start with basic anatomy. You mentioned a deformity.”

Without hesitation, she placed his hands on her hips. “Feel that?”

He ran his digits slowly over the edge of her pelvis and the socket. The left portion had somehow developed at a different angle than the right, affecting the leg and, conversely, her spinal alignment. “Damn!” he muttered, then bit his lip.

“I’ve heard doctors use stronger language,” she chuckled. “That’s the main issue, to which you can add a herniated disc between L4 and L5.”

Barnell fingered her lower spine. “In a way, I’m surprised you’re walking at all.”

“Sheer determination. The day I land in a wheelchair is the day I end things.”

He would have scolded her for such a sentiment, but he felt the same, should infirmity restrict his activities. "Come with me."

Rose followed him into the spacious, sunlit chamber, a massage table its sole furnishing. She didn't need him to direct her, lying on her stomach with her face through the circular gap.

"Are you troubled much by muscle spasms?" he inquired.

"Sometimes, on certain chairs."

Raising her turtleneck, he applied gentle pressure to her back, assessing the tension level. She recounted, "I interviewed a Reiki master once, and she put me through the paces during a session with her friends, so I could see what it was all about. Afterward, she told me the only thing wrong was my overactive brain."

This statement gave Barnell pause. "She found no energy blockages?"

"Nope."

"Good to know."

"Why?"

"Yoga involves moving energy *through* the body, not simply moving the body itself. If your energy is already flowing the way it should be, this... might..."

When Rose dismounted mid-afternoon, she hadn't felt so relaxed in ages. Barnell requested she try to touch her toes, and she nearly collapsed. If he hadn't caught her, she would've slammed her head on the floor.

"Sorry about that," he apologized, letting her head droop on his chest.

"Maybe you should rest awhile..."

"Mmmm," she murmured.

He hoisted her in his arms and deposited her on his king-sized bed. Sitting beside her, he listened for her breathing to recover a steady rhythm, then left to cook himself an early dinner.

Rose awoke in unfamiliar surroundings, the sun setting through west-facing windows. She righted herself, feeling so absolutely refreshed, she wanted to jump for joy. Instead, she bent almost double, her fingers inches from her feet.

"Dale, look!" she called.

Dish towel in his fist, he rushed to the threshold, and smiled.

"Yesterday, I was lucky to reach my shins," proclaimed the woman, straightening. "You're a miracle worker!"

Further comment preempted by her fascination with his pleased expression - upper lip gone, a slight gap between his front teeth - she crossed to hug him in gratitude.

Perhaps, in that embrace, they realized their bond as soul-mates: flawed individuals who complemented each other and whose world view defied society.

When their mouths met, a fire ignited, consuming their awareness of time, place, and responsibilities.

Well past midnight, the last reserves of strength spent, they lay entwined, relishing a heretofore unknown contentment. No words were exchanged; the need did not exist. Nor did the need to solemnize their status, or declare their affiliation publicly.

When Dale Barnell's next class convened that autumn at the Artistic Life Center, Rose Vandenberg could not only fully participate, she assisted the yoga master in demonstrating basics to the newcomers. In sharing themselves with each other, they became whole as individuals, encouraging many to explore novel ways to look at life, love and achieve personal fulfillment.

House on the Heights

Trish fumbled in the Lexus' glove compartment for the bulky white envelope. She'd accepted this Pacific Heights listing from a fellow realtor for one reason: she hoped to acquire it herself, if another year saw it unsold on the general market. The owners of the Queen Anne-style dwelling had died before the turn of the century, and the will donating it to a non-profit health clinic had been tied up in the courts for a decade before a judge ruled the zoning ordinances would not allow the property to be converted for such use.

The remaining heirs - distant cousins - would split profits from the sale.

Sliding the key into the lock, Trish couldn't free the tumblers. Yet, when she leaned against the thick wood panel with its stained-glass accents, it creaked inward.

She stumbled into the foyer, dust motes stirred into a cloud, lit by muted rays penetrating parlor windows.

Recovering her balance, the blonde professional toured the historic structure, built in 1886, and restored after the major earthquakes of 1906 and 1989. Empty rooms, devoid of furnishings, raised goosebumps on her arms. The fireplace mantles, however, attracted her interest, ranging from carved mahogany lions to black marble Grecian nymphs.

Her inspection of the east-facing morning room unearthed a curious mouse, and Trish nearly leapt out of her heels. Once her breathing resumed a normal rate, she heard the singing.

Or, more accurately, monotone warbling.

"So, the joint is haunted," she muttered aloud. "No wonder prospects avoid it like the plague."

All the more motivation to meet with the heirs' attorney and propose a vast reduction in asking price.

"May I help you?" echoed a male voice around the chamber.

Trish spun to find a hunched, white-haired figure wielding a broom on the threshold. She swallowed her heart and retorted, "Who are you?"

"Frank Randolph. I live here and care for the place."

If true, he wasn't much on the "care" aspect of his duties, Trish mused. "No one mentioned an occupant on the premises."

"You mean, those idiots from downtown? Last time they stopped by - six months, I'd say - I was out shopping. I found a business card on the kitchen counter when I got back. Haven't seen anyone since."

"Who... pays you?"

“Nobody. I grew up in this house, and when the old folks died, I stayed.”

“I... don’t think that’s exactly legal.”

“Legal, smeagle. I mow the grass, weed the flower beds, and don’t bother anyone. I used to clean the chandeliers and tackle the cobwebs, but doesn’t make sense, if no one’s around to appreciate the effort.”

Trish grunted, “I’d appreciate it a bunch. It’d help get the place sold, if it looked livable.”

“Sure. I’ll get on it first thing tomorrow.”

“It’s still early. You could start today...”

“If I was young and strong, maybe. These days, I have to limit my exertion.”

Beneath their feet, an ominous tremor rattled the pine flooring.

“Shit!” exclaimed Trish, bolting for the exit.

A surprisingly firm grip on her arm halted her. “Don’t!” warned Randolph. She spun, her features contorted in anger as the vibrations continued. “Let go!”

Yanking against him, the pair both staggered beneath the arched portal, into the main hall, awash in brilliant light, a crowd clad in 19th century gowns and coats circling the floor to a waltz played by a quartet on a dias near the grand staircase.

“What the hell...” Trish gasped.

Her companion advised, “Whatever you do, remain calm. Everything will be fine.”

Glancing at Frank Randolph, she wouldn’t have believed him the same man, if not for the pale blue eyes studying her demeanor. His hair deep brown and wavy, his posture erect, head level with her 5’7”, a tab collar encompassed his neck, grey cravat tucked into a mauve waistcoat. The black frock coat, trousers and polished shoes totally confused the woman.

Moreso, when she glimpsed her own attire: a green satin creation with puffy sleeves and low-cut neckline.

“Do you dance?” whispered Randolph.

“Not since my sister’s wedding.”

“Try your best. Otherwise, people will begin to talk.”

“About what?”

“About our sudden appearance.”

“I wish you’d explain it to me.”

“On the veranda, later.”

Recalling old movies, Trish scooped up a handful of her skirt as Randolph placed his youthful hand on her waist. They glided among the other couples, Trish garnering envious glances. Her ears also detected random comments about her dress, and her partner's business prospects.

"They... seem to know you," she murmured.

"I've been here before."

"Even if you did grow up in this house, you're not old enough..."

"Long story. Be patient."

Trish bit her lip.

A polka, reel and another waltz later, Randolph determined their obligation had been met, except for greeting their hosts, an elegant pair holding champagne flutes and chatting with late arrivals.

"Who are they?" queried Trish.

"My parents."

"Shit."

Randolph instructed, "Just smile and be yourself."

Eleanore Randolph fit the description of a society matron: bejeweled and condescending. When her son introduced Trish, she scrutinized the uninvited female through gold pince-nez spectacles, as if she were a prize horse.

"Honored to meet you, ma'am," she stammered.

Eleanore's lips pursed, glaring at Randolph. "Where did you find this... this..."

"Dear, don't start," chided her husband, a mellow alcoholic, if Trish could judge by his bloodshot eyes and bulbous nose. "She's utterly charming."

"Thanks, Dad," said Randolph.

"Save me a dance, young lady," the patriarch hinted, winking.

That ordeal concluded, Randolph escorted Trish through French doors to the veranda, overlooking gorgeously maintained gardens. A full moon shone above, wisps of fog glowing across its surface.

"Will you tell me now?" pressed the realtor.

Randolph deposited her on a stone bench away from those romantics seeking a modicum of privacy for their illicit tete-a-tetes. "When my parents built this house in 1882, they didn't realize the construction had disrupted a... a..."

"What?"

"The best way to describe it, I suppose: remnants of an alien civilization."

"That's a load of..."

"No, Trish, it's not. I've done my research - over more than a century. The beings must've crash landed millennia ago when they visited this planet. Their

ship used a propulsion unit capable of warping time. Every time there's a quake, no matter how minor, it activates the mechanism, sending those in the house through history."

"Shit!" Leaning forward, trembling hands covered her face. "You could've let me run..."

He settled beside her, tenor low. "My little sister was caught half-way out the door when the effect hit, back in 1912. She died in a most hideous fashion."

"So, you've doomed me to a life in the 1800s?"

"Oh, no!" he chuckled. "Another tremor will restore us to the moment we left."

"But, how long do we have to wait?"

"You know as well as I, small tremors are a constant in San Francisco. It could be a few minutes, an hour, a couple days."

She glared at him. "Damn you for being so flippant!"

"I guess I'm used to the phenomenon," he stated solemnly. "There's... another thing I must tell you."

"Oh, God!"

"The warp field generated by the quakes... alters human molecular structure."

"Meaning?"

"Within the house, you'll age at a fraction of normal speed. Step outside, and the process accelerates."

"Speak plainly!"

"When we do get back, if you leave, you'll die of extreme old age within the month."

"Bastard! What about you?"

"I only absent myself from the house for short periods, on rare occasions. I'm 162 years old."

Trish's jaw gaped.

"You'll see, the upstairs is fully furnished, with cable television and every imaginable comfort."

"I have an office, friends, family," she raged. "What will they think if I vanish?"

"You can contact them, make up a story about moving east, or overseas."

"They won't believe me!"

"Fine. You're welcome to take your chances, but you can't blame me for what happens, because I warned you."

Randolph left her to her ruminations. A grandfather clock chimed midnight amidst the music. Trish's tears flowed freely, until she felt completely spent. Rising, she shuffled into the hall, the vibrant colors and lush elegance boggling her mind.

"This has got to be a dream, a nightmare," she sputtered. "I fell during the quake, and blacked out. When I awaken, everything will be normal..."

A cacophony of screams reverberated when the next tremor struck. Frightened wives clutched their husbands, musicians scrambled to flee. Trish bounced against the door jamb, pitched forward...

And landed on a faded Persian carpet.

Frank Randolph offered his hand; she refused. Brushing dirt from her brown slacks, she gazed at the vacant chamber.

"Why didn't... they all get sucked into the time warp?"

"They did."

"But... they're not here."

Leading Trish into the kitchen, Randolph signaled her to a wooden chair at the stained table. "The effect is limited to a person's own life span."

"But..."

He placed a finger to his thin lips, silencing her. "In our struggle, you were sucked through with me. That, in itself, has implications I cannot predict."

"Well, I'll not let some... spacial anomaly imprison me." Trish stormed from the dwelling, ripping the "For Sale" sign off the lawn and tossing it in the Lexus' trunk. Upon digging her cell from her briefcase, she phoned the building inspector's office. She gave a clerk the Broadway address, requesting a condemnation notice be issued.

No living being would be placed in danger again, she vowed.

Easier said than done. Backlogs in the city offices precluded quick action on the request, and Trish's repeated inquiries caused the paperwork to be buried by a vindictive underling.

While the woman avoided that neighborhood, and noticed no abnormal health problems in the ensuing months, she couldn't forget what had transpired.

Randolph left a voice mail one summer afternoon, inquiring after her well being, inviting her to visit, and noting, "I've been with the family almost two years between quakes."

She deleted the message without hesitation.

Still, every time a tremor shook her coffee mug, he came to mind.

She read his obituary with relief prior to Christmas, his age estimated at 83. She'd suspected a lie somewhere in Randolph's tale; his grandfather, the first to bear the name Frank Randolph, would have been twice that, had he lived.

An autopsy indicated he'd been sitting on the house's veranda for weeks before being found slumped on the stone bench by a passing tramp. She pondered whether he'd stepped beyond the supposed time warp field to prove the truth...

Staring out over San Francisco Bay from her Nob Hill condo, she couldn't dispel the realism of that venture into the 19th century.

She glanced at her fingers, massaging her sore knee. They resembled an arthritic elder's digits.

"Shit."

The Hanged Man

August Corcoran rested his weary bones on a tree stump, gazing across the dirt track along which the stage coach had recently passed, stirring up a cloud of yellowish fog. He'd unceremoniously disembarked that moving vehicle at the sight of a man dangling from the lowest branch of what the driver had called a "Hanging Oak". The perpetrators of this lawless deed rode south from the site, their own dusty trail dissipating as he righted himself from his fall.

The four horses pulling the stage didn't even break stride; Corcoran realized he'd made a fatal error - left alone in the middle of unfamiliar territory. Yet, he could not abide frontier justice. Unsheathing a buck knife from his belt, he raced to sever the rope where the knot fastened it around a jagged rock. The body tumbled atop him, knocking him to the weed-strewn earth.

Gaining his knees, he loosened the noose from the victim's neck. Digging a grave - with whatever implements available - would be the least he could do for the poor soul.

Which abruptly sucked a lungful of air and coughed.

Corcoran recoiled, aghast. He thought himself cheating the buzzards of a meal, now he'd saved a life. And, when the lean figure pushed itself into a sitting position, the sweat-stained brimmed hat tumbled off, revealing long ebony locks cascading down the woman's shoulders.

"What the devil?" grunted the man.

Blood encrusted fingers massaged imprints of the rope's rough braid. "Thanks. I think." Her eyes swollen and bruised, a red stream dry beneath her nostrils, she'd clearly been beaten before being dragged to what should have been her place of execution. An oversized cotton shirt concealed her other feminine attributes, though torn and stained. Scuffed leather chaps indicated she'd been riding prior to this tragedy...

"What... happened?" queried Corcoran.

She retorted, "A lynching, obviously."

"But, why?"

"Got any water?"

He unfastened his pack canteen and offered it to her. She drank greedily, much of the precious fluid spilling onto the thirsty ground.

"Hey, watch it!" he warned.

"Don't worry. There's a stream just beyond the next hill." She extended her arm; he didn't react. "Help me up, will you?"

Embarrassed, he lifted her onto her stocking feet.

“Damn those bastards,” she swore. “They stole my boots.”

“Must’ve been kinda small,” Corcoran remarked absently.

She’d jammed the canteen into his ribs, and hobbled west on the track, leaving him utterly puzzled.

Thus, partially recovered from the ordeal, Corcoran debated why anyone would hang a woman. She didn’t look like a horse thief, or a bank robber. If she’d had a pistol, the mob confiscated it. Dressed in a man’s clothing, though, from what - or whom - had she been hiding?

He understood the need to hide. He’d traveled from St. Louis, down the Mississippi River, then overland via train, mule and stagecoach. He’d killed his wife of twenty years in a fit of rage, after she confessed to an affair with the butler, and lit out before the police could arrest him.

His last cent had purchased the canteen now empty in his fist. He had no idea where he would find the nearest settlement, or his next meal.

The woman must know, though, because she’d set off at a deliberate pace. Gathering his meager belongings, he hiked toward a stand of ancient trees.

A half-hour’s travel brought him to a clearing, a typical one-horse town in the distance. The sun descending over the mountain indicated he would reach the collection of saloons, blacksmith and general store after nightfall. Not a good thing to be a penniless stranger under those conditions.

Lack of food and water decreased his strength, so he fairly trudged the last mile into the valley. Lights burned in a few windows, and discordant piano music reverberated from the Golden Goose, torches illuminating the tall white lettering and a painted bird of its exterior signage.

Two gruff sorts raced through swinging wooden doors, untying their mounts from the hitching post, almost knocking into Corcoran when they spun and spurred the horses to a gallop. A shadowy image rushed into the street, firing six shots in rapid succession. By the yelps which drifted on the wind, the targets had been hit and killed.

Corcoran climbed warped steps to the Golden Goose’s entrance, catching sight of the dark-tressed woman he’d saved, restoring a Colt .45 to its holster. She’d cleaned up quite pretty, a gun belt out of place, however, around the waist of her high-necked, violet lace-trimmed gown.

“You finally made it,” she sniffed, recognizing her hero. “Come on in; I’ll buy you a drink.”

He countered, “I... could use a bed and a bath.”

“There’s a room upstairs. You’ll be wanting a thick steak, potatoes...”

“I’d give my right arm...”

“No need. I owe you my life.”

She signaled him into the noisy establishment, ignoring - or choosing not to hear - his question: “Who were those men you shot?”

At a semi-private table surrounded by an ornate balustrade on the mezzanine, she ordered the slick-haired waiter to bring a bottle of whiskey, water, and the best fare in the house. Otherwise uncommunicative, Corcoran shifted his attention to the roughs and rogues below, the trollops who enticed them, the card games, and the untalented entertainers performing to off-key accompaniment.

“What’s an Eastern boy like you doing so far West, when the gold rush is over?” she finally asked, filling his glass with brown liquor.

“You’ve got a New York twang in your voice, little lady.” He gulped the drink. “Where’d you learn to shoot?”

“Those boys led the necktie party. Didn’t think I’d be back, and they’d be safe coming to town. They were mighty surprised when I opened the show by accusing them of murder. Almost tore up the place.”

“What’s your name?”

“Stella Flagg. I’m Sal to my friends.”

“What happened out there today?”

The conversation was interrupted briefly by the arrival of a platter featuring a blood-rare cut of beef, fried potatoes and a ceramic bowl with something that resembled pie. Corcoran’s tongue licked his lips in anticipation.

“Don’t stand on ceremony,” Sal advised.

A sharp knife tore into the meat, and he chewed while she spoke.

“For about a year, I’ve had my suspicions about a sidewinder who came to these parts, buying - or stealing - the land and water rights. When Ol’ Doc Martin wound up dead after a poker game the other night, I made up my mind to find out what’s been going on. I dressed in some old clothes and sneaked out to Patterson’s ranch...”

“Where you were caught?” ventured Corcoran, between bites.

“Very perceptive. He ordered his boys to string me up, and tell the sheriff I’d been cheating my customers by watering the drinks and providing my dealers marked decks.”

“I’m glad I cut you down.”

Self-consciously, she stroked the collar of her gown. “So am I.”

“It sounds like Mr. Patterson may try some other means to get rid of you.”

“Most likely.”

“I’d... be willing to serve as body guard, in exchange for room and board.”

“I don’t need...”

“What about when you sleep? You can’t stay awake 24 hours a day.”

Eyes which matched her gown studied Corcoran’s tanned, distinguished features. “You ever handle a gun?”

“A rifle, hunting. I’m also good with my hands.” The memory of strangling his wife... he blocked the memory. “Boxing champ at Yale.”

“They don’t use the Marquess of Queensbury rules around here.”

“I... got that impression.”

“You’re hired. Finish your dinner, and I’ll show you your room.”

His quarters turned out to be half of Sal’s own suite. A fire burned on the grate against the night chill, and a make-shift mattress - straw sewn in a burlap flour sack - had been arranged on the floor.

“I’ll get you a proper bed tomorrow,” she stated. “The bath is down the hall. Don’t think I’m... one of the amenities, just because no door stands between us.”

“For reasons I won’t explain at this late hour, Sal, I’ve sworn off women for good.”

Her left eyebrow arched quizzically, and he laughed, snatching a towel off the floral porcelain bowl and pitcher, shuffling along the balcony.

The bathtub proved to be nothing but a horse trough, filled with water from a pump piped through the outside wall - air temperature at best, filthy from frequent use at worst. The entire arrangement disgusted him, but this was the West, and the fate of those who fled comfortable homes.

He stripped off his shirt, trousers, socks and long underwear, laundering them as best he could in a wooden bucket. Then, he washed himself by dumping water over his head, refilling the pitcher five times.

Not perfect, but functional.

Towel wrapped around his waist, brown mop dripping, he retraced his steps to Sal’s rooms. He found her struggling to unfasten her corset. Corcoran had never seen his wife in this state of undress, prim and proper as she’d behaved. He flushed, but Sal twirled toward him.

“Give me a hand here,” she commanded. “There’s a knot...”

Swallowing hard, he approached tentatively, his trembling digits fumbling with the strings. Finally, she was free of the garment.

“I should probably know the name of my valiant savior,” hinted Sal.

He stammered, “August Corcoran.”

“You one of New York’s Park Avenue Corcorans?”

“My... father was.”

“My grandmother served your grandmother as scullery maid, until she got pregnant by the stable boy, dismissed without references. My mom married my dad at 16, and died giving birth to me. He came West, and died eight years ago of consumption, leaving me” - she spread her arms - “this.”

“How old were you?”

“Fourteen.”

“You’ve done admirably, considering the circumstances. Not that I’m any judge.”

“Maybe if you’d worked a day in your life...”

Corcoran snorted. “Can I help it if my mother was heiress to a tobacco fortune, my father an oil baron? I had every intention of spending the millions given me, but...”

“Where are these millions now?”

“In a St. Louis bank.”

“You could telegraph for enough to get back there and resume your decadent lifestyle,” Sal mocked.

“Impossible.”

“I don’t see why...” She paused, squinting, then crossed to a gold-trimmed dressing table, extracting a rolled document from the top left drawer. “Maybe I do.” She flattened the thick paper, which turned out to be a wanted poster. “I snatched this off the sheriff’s desk this morning, before... It’s not a very good likeness, but the bounty hunters will definitely be searching for you, to collect the reward.”

The fugitive joined her, viewing a vague sketch beneath large letters: “Wanted for Murder: August Corcoran of St. Louis, Missouri. Dead or Alive. Reward: \$1,000.”

He retreated, dismayed.

“‘Brown hair, brown eyes, medium height, thin build.’ That could describe anybody,” Sal assured him. “You don’t have any distinguishing marks - scars or the like?”

“No.”

“Then, you’ve got nothing to worry about. From here on out, you’re Lemuel Hitchcock, my cousin Lem from Philadelphia.”

“Why... would you do this for me?”

“You saved my life; I’m obligated to do the same for you. Once things are cleared up, we’ll be even.”

He gulped, “Thanks.”

“Get some sleep. We’ve a long day tomorrow.”

Extinguishing the oil lamp, Sal crawled into her four-poster bed, leaving Corcoran to grope his way to the other room.

When he opened his eyes the following morning, he stared at a new black suit hung on the coat rack, cotton shirt and polished tan leather boots with spurs. Propped in the corner stood a Winchester repeating rifle.

“About time you woke up, sleepy-head,” greeted Sal, her black locks pulled into a pony tail above her flannel shirt and dungarees. “There’s a load of beer steins to be washed, and floors to scrub...”

“Don’t you have... employees to provide those services?”

“Sure I do. You.”

“I...”

“This is the West, dear, not Park Avenue.”

He righted himself on the mattress, scratching his skin where straw had poked through the burlap. “What’s with the clothes?”

“Yours... needed replacing.” She withdrew, so Corcoran could dress. “I need you looking the part of an upstanding body guard, not some down-and-out working off the price of a meal.”

“Is... that what I’m doing?”

“In a way. You get room and board, and fifty dollars a month.”

“Fifty?”

“Doesn’t sound like much to a wealthy buck such as yourself,” she mocked. “It’ll keep you in comfort around these parts, though - even buy you a few women... Oh, wait. You said you’d sworn off.”

“And you want to know why.”

“I know why. Remember the wanted poster.”

“You’re not afraid?”

“A crime of passion isn’t something readily repeated,” came her logic. “The gunslingers you’ll meet on the street, though... watch out. They’ll shoot at the slightest provocation.”

Presenting himself for Sal’s approval, she nodded her satisfaction. “Don’t forget the rifle. You’re to keep it within reach at all times.”

“But...”

“Patterson is a clever dude. There’s no telling what he’ll try next.”

Corcoran fetched the weapon, positioning the butt under his right arm pit as he walked behind Sal down the stairs.

The Golden Goose stank of beer, cigar smoke and vomit. Bullet holes pocked the slat ceiling.

“I eject the idiots who think it’s acceptable to fire a few rounds in celebration of their latest poker success,” explained Sal. “No sense wasting the money to repair the holes, because it occurs once a week, on average.”

“Why not have them check their pistols at the door?”

“I’d have no business, if I did.”

“Ah!”

The pair set about clearing the mess from the previous night’s crowd. By noon, when Sal unlocked the shuttered front doors, the tables awaited new patrons with the glasses sparkling behind the bar.

Traffic remained light until sundown, when ranch hands migrated to town for their evening revels. Corcoran assisted Sal pouring whiskey and beer, until both halted in mid-serve when a barrel-chested, bull-necked, bearded giant of a man made a grand entrance in his tweed suit, bowler hat, and gold stick-pin through his grey silk cravat.

“Who the hell...” muttered Corcoran.

Sal supplied, “That’s Tom Patterson.”

“I’d hate to be his horse.”

“He doesn’t ride. He has a custom-painted four-wheel carriage drawn by a matched pair of Arabians, a coachman and driver.”

“Who’s he trying to impress?”

“Everyone.”

The land magnate, of dubious origins, paused at the bar, smiling condescendingly. “Good evening, Sal,” rumbled the deep baritone. “Business seems to be thriving.”

“And you’re surprised to see me,” she scoffed.

“Indeed.”

“Just so you know, I’ve hired myself a body guard, so if your boys - or you - try anything underhanded, we’ll be ready.”

“Was it he who shot the pair last night?”

“No. That was me. And I’d do the same to you this instant, you stinkin’ bastard, for inciting the mob who wanted to string me up...”

He feigned innocence - badly. “Me? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Like hell, you don’t.”

“I should be offended at such baseless accusations, Sal, but instead I’ll drink a glass of brandy to your health and long life.”

Violet orbs rolled in disgust as she uncorked a special bottle from beneath the bar. Corcoran knew such expensive liquor should be served in a crystal snifter; nothing so elegant existed in these rustic environs.

Nor did Patterson sip the contents, in imitation of cultured Easterners. He emptied the tumbler in one gulp, slammed the glass onto the polished oak, and threw a silver coin at the owner.

“Until we meet again, Sal,” he snarled in parting.

The woman responded, “The longer, the better.”

Corcoran and Sal heard carriage wheels rattle into the distance, and stared at each other. “Was there a point to that?” queried the former.

“Sizing me up for the next battle in this... war.”

“You’ve one ally, and he controls how many?”

Sal shrugged. “A hundred, maybe more.”

“Nice odds.”

“Expensive odds. My guess is that he paid his boys twenty a head for yesterday’s shenanigans. Once word gets around some are likely to die in the effort, he’ll have to up the stakes to secure... volunteers.”

She hailed one of the girls who drummed up trade by circulating among the tables, and filled two steins at her request. Corcoran retreated to the shadows, observing her critically, yet with a newfound respect.

The last customers staggered from the structure into the humid gloom as the body guard extinguished oil lamps outside the saloon entrance. Replacing the soot-encrusted glass chimney on one, he heard a horse approaching at a gallop, and felt a thud on the boards behind him. Whirling, he saw the fuse sparking on a bundle of dynamite.

An instant’s panic preceded Corcoran’s instinctive reaction. He kicked the home-made bomb toward the street, but it hit the hitching post and splashed into a half-full horse trough. He waited a full minute before investigating further, to ensure no explosion was forthcoming.

Carrying the soggy evidence into the Golden Goose, he deposited it on the bar near Sal, washing beer steins. “Someone tried to leave you a present,” he grunted.

“I’ll not be taking bets on who.”

“Me, neither.” Corcoran accepted the towel she gave him, drying his hands. “Why is Patterson so determined to eliminate you?”

“He thinks a woman should confine her duties to the kitchen and raising children. He also knows I could see him convicted in court of a myriad of crimes.”

“How so?”

“He is - was - my husband.”

Corcoran swallowed hard. This information explained a lot, and raised more questions in his mind. Of a certainty, though: he didn't want to be caught in the middle of a family feud.

His attempt to voice these feelings ended with Sal's chuckle. “You're already in the middle. You saved my life, which made Patterson your enemy. No matter what you do now, he's vowed to kill you, too.”

“But, why?”

She leaned her ample bosoms across the bar. “Tom came through Buffalo Ridge three autumns ago. Just passing through on his way east; six days later he dragged himself to my door. He'd been ambushed for his gold poke in the hills, and almost died. Like a damned fool, I nursed him back to health. We fell in love and got married. He'd won his first spread at that very poker table” - she pointed across the floor - “and swore we'd make it a paradise together.”

Corcoran waited for the rest of the story.

Sal brushed ebony curls off the shoulders of her silver-trimmed blue gown and resumed the task at hand. “I didn't know he'd cheated. A professional cheat, in fact. He saw an opportunity to bilk the locals of their hard-earned land, and there was nothing I could do, because he'd bought the sheriff, and his thugs waylaid U.S. Marshals coming to town, not to mention the federal judge.”

She continued, “I filed for divorce, but he refused to accept the arrangement. Finally, I managed to slip a letter to the territorial governor into the express rider's saddle bag - he'd had his people inspecting all outgoing mail - but because he could present duly signed bills of sale, they could take no action against him.”

“The papers were forged?”

“Some of the earlier ones had been legally signed after the poker games. The others...” She shrugged.

“He gave you the divorce?”

“Last week. Called me out to the ranch we were supposed to share, wanted to rub salt in the wound. ‘This is what you're missing,’ he gloated. I took the papers from his two-bit lawyer and spat in his face.”

“Only to be found dangling from a tree within a few days.”

“I wouldn't have been the first.”

Corcoran plucked his rifle from where he'd propped it near the door. “It sounds like Tom Patterson needs to pay for his crimes.”

“You?”

“Why not? My life is forfeit. Maybe I can perform a good deed and redeem myself before I die.”

Sal caught him by the arm before he crossed the threshold. “You’re mad!”

“Probably.” He kissed her rouged lips lightly and strode into the night, only to return seconds later. “Which way is the ranch?”

Reluctantly, smirking, Sal provided directions to property on the county’s north fringe. No more had Corcoran disappeared, than she raced up warped stairs to her room, changing into riding clothes, and snatching her gun belt off the coat rack.

Dawn’s pinkish hues illuminated a troubling sight, from her perch in a sprawling maple tree. A half-dozen roughs had Corcoran on the ground, kicking and beating him. She presumed he’d been bold enough to knock on the mansion’s front door and demand justice. Tom Patterson emerged from the barn, noose slung over his shoulder. His minions hoisted Corcoran from the blood-stained dirt, shoving him toward what had once served as the site of many territorial executions.

Swinging off the branch, Sal retrieved Corcoran’s rifle from when it must’ve been forced from his grip. With that, and her pistol, she would have enough ammunition to kill anyone who opposed her.

Patterson’s men seated their victim on a sway-backed horse, positioned beneath the rope. Wrists bound, Corcoran could not struggle when the loop was draped around his neck. When the group retreated a short distance to better observe the spectacle, Sal’s single shot severed the woven hemp in twain.

“What the devil...” cursed Patterson, whipping his bulk around to find the source of the interference.

Sal didn’t bother to announce herself verbally. With grave precision, she took aim and shot each of her ex-husband’s cohort through the heart, before they could draw their own weapons.

Patterson and Corcoran remained vertical, though the woman realized other hired killers would be roused from their slumber by the noise. She jogged the distance between them, slapped the aging mount’s flank to send it trotting into the woods, then confronted the barrel-chested card cheat.

“You’ve got two days to move on,” she warned. “I never want to see your face again.”

“And, if I refuse?”

The rifle barrel wedged beneath his chin. “Need I say more?”

“You win, Sal. We could’ve loved each other with a passion unrivaled by the most noted literature. Now, you’ll just be some insignificant saloon owner in the middle of nowhere.”

“I prefer it that way,” she replied, daring to turn her back on him.

Her own horse took her along the path Corcoran’s unguided beast had trod, but no tender reunion occurred. The dangling rope had evidently snagged on a thicket, yanking him from the saddle, both strangling him and snapping his neck. He lay, eyes open, staring - unseeing - at the trees overhead.

Sal fetched a neighbor’s buckboard and transported the hero to her saloon, where he lay in state on the roulette table before being buried that evening in the hillside cemetery west of the settlement. His bravery - coupled with her moxie - paved the way for legitimate authorities to restore parcels of land to their rightful owners, so Buffalo Ridge could flourish.

Elected the first mayor, Sal declined the honor. She preferred the atmosphere of the saloon her father had opened, though her dreams were often filled with visions of her and August Corcoran standing on a rise overlooking the valley, arm in arm.

Vox Populi

Electronic monitoring came into the public spotlight during the latter half of the 20th century. The inception of “ankle bracelets” for criminals eased stress on an overcrowded prison system. Of course, other forms of surveillance had been developed by governmental “intelligence” agencies around the globe, so they could - supposedly - avert tragedy in the form of wars, subversive conspiracies or coups.

The most egregious violation of personal privacy - in the new millennium, at least - occurred when said agencies were outed for collecting cell phone data, even on foreign heads of state.

From there, it only got worse.

A secret program, initiated at New York State’s publicly funded hospitals, required physicians to implant tiny devices in newborns, without their parents’ knowledge or consent. Thus every word an individual spoke during his or her lifetime was recorded, the files maintained on a massive hard drive in a reinforced bunker somewhere below Owensboro, Kentucky.

The audio was culled for any references to unsolved crimes, covert plots or radicalized terrorists. In 2032, a specialized National Police Force squad embarked on a series of mass arrests, suspects executed without trial, convicted from their own mouths.

Amazing how many submitted to this arrangement. They’d been coddled into believing technology made the world safer. Technology became their god. Expressions of creativity - dance, art, writing - declined in those decades, because the slightest indication of a seditious message, and people vanished.

The rest of humanity existed in fear, not unlike during Hitler’s World War II scourge of Europe - except no one dared assert this truth. Family members simply didn’t come home one evening, and nothing could be done to track their whereabouts. The only business transacted by cemeteries were cremations of “unknown” traitors, their ashes dumped in mass graves.

It’s tough to describe that era’s weirdness. Cars... well, gasoline and other fuels were reserved for military use, leaving ordinary folk with bicycles, horses, or their own feet. Housing complexes were constructed near factories which manufactured weapons and aircraft, keeping employees in close proximity. Shopping took place in governmentally-sanctioned stores. Notably absent: tie-dyed garments, designer fashions, organic fruits and vegetables. T-shirts featuring pithy quotes from historical figures could only be obtained on the black market and, if seen in public, merited immediate apprehension.

The use of sign language increased exponentially, taught by clandestine underground groups which thrived in larger cities. Attempts to sabotage the system, however, rarely succeeded.

For some idiotic reason, I set myself up to rectify those failures.

Thanks to a free-thinking obstetrician, I'd never received a chip. I remained "off the grid," didn't officially exist, since the encoded serial number served as proof of birth.

Due to my status, I never received formal public education. I'd lived in my grandparent's shingle-sided farm house as long as I could remember. The back road leading to it had never been paved beyond a cursory layer of gravel. No father in the picture may be why the doctor treated my mother so gently. She'd been beautiful but frail, not cut out for the rigors of motherhood, dying before I learned to walk.

Self-taught by reading volumes lining shelves in Granddad's den, and naturally inquisitive, I devoured faded newspapers and magazines, printed long before censorship became the norm. Where most my age knew nothing about our history - barring what approved sources fabricated - I held the truth dear to my heart.

That truth: individuals have a right to speak freely, whether or not they agree with current policies.

My advantage: a barn filled with discarded electronics, and a vast collection of tools.

Admittedly, years elapsed while I tinkered with schematics for a random pulse generator, capable of scrambling the receivers used to track chip transmissions. The team I imagined authorities would assign to thwart my efforts would be hard pressed to locate the final product, no larger than a rabbit turd. Easy to mass produce on a crude assembly line, I embarked on a trek to distribute them and, ultimately, revel in the restoration of democracy.

Affixed with a liquid, permanent adhesive to light fixtures, window frames, whatever came into reach, this labor-intensive task sent me cross-country at a snail's pace. What had once been a friendly society had imploded, every person suspicious and reluctant to greet neighbors or co-workers.

Every night, camped out in remote areas, I'd link the newly installed gadgets to my personal network, via a satellite the defunct space agency had left online. While the media broadcast no news of any anomalies, silent rumors quickly circulated, and the masses again raised their voices.

My heart's deepest recesses kept alive the prospect I would be caught, my mission incomplete, even while triumph loomed. Why I'd planned to end my

quest in Los Angeles, I'll never know. The date: July 21, 2057; the place: Hollywood Boulevard, standing near the former Grauman's Chinese Theatre - a crumbling relic of glories past, many of the cement footprint blocks pried up by scavengers and secured in their concealed vaults.

A vaguely familiar face stared at me from the souvenir shop's boarded up doorway. Difficult to distinguish his features, the salt-and-pepper beard so thick around his chin and cheeks, unkempt locks dangling over his forehead. Two attributes connected to a faint memory: Adriatic Sea-blue eyes and a singular nose.

A black polo shirt and jeans were stained and frayed at the hems. His hiking boots needed laces, down and out like thousands I'd met in my travels.

This near clone of my grandfather should've been impeccably attired in military uniform. Last I'd heard, Mitch Marquardt commanded the National Police Force's Midwest Division, a captain or some such rank. I counted him my only cousin without pride.

He'd aged dramatically since our one encounter at Granddad's funeral, months before the tyranny erupted. To be honest, so had I.

"What the hell..." I greeted as he approached.

He scolded, "That's not the authorized salutation."

"Ask me if I give a fuck."

"No need."

"What's with the get up? Or have you been demoted?"

"There's... no demotion in the ranks, as you should know. Those who... fail in their assignments are..." He made a slitting motion across his throat.

"You're... out of your jurisdiction."

"The nature of this investigation supercedes those limits."

"Wow. Must be major."

"Who would've believed, when technicians noticed freak interference in the audio systems, it would take twelve years to track the culprit, and she'd be my sole living relative."

I couldn't help but laugh outright, tugging his sleeve. "You're incognito?"

"It made contacting our informants and following leads less... obvious."

Sinking on the cracked concrete curb, I gazed at faded stars embedded in the sidewalk. "We've never been close, Mark. Your narrow-minded father rejected my mother when he found out she had no intention of getting married. He rejected Granddad for refusing to sell the farm to developers, before..."

"That's all history." He squatted beside me.

“History is all we have, you jackass. Your cohorts have tried to recreate it in some warped image to serve their purpose, but the truth will out. What I’ve done will make that possible. There are already those who have unearthed library archives, disseminating information the government would rather they didn’t see.”

“No lie there. The revolution began weeks after you planted your first... contraptions in New York City. It’s been progressing west, me one step ahead.”

“What? You think, if you make an example of me, you’ll scare the rebels into surrendering?” I nearly choked on the notion.

“That’s the plan, Ronnie.”

“A stupid plan. Won’t work. The volcano is stirring, and will eventually blow your kind into oblivion.” His eyes glowered; I sensed myself smiling. “Your best bet, now you’re off the radar, is to find yourself a cozy apartment, a regular job, and a woman who likes pompous phonies.”

“No can do.”

“All the worse for you.” Suddenly, I realized my knees had locked up - oh, the joys of aging! “Help me, will you?”

Straightening, Mark extended his right hand; I clasped it. Vertical once more, I reached to adjust my bag of miniature goodies, and he snatched it from my grip.

“Are these your technological miracles?”

“What’s left of them.”

He slipped his fingers between the draw strings, and let out a yowl which gave me no end of satisfaction. I’d sabotaged the burlap sack with a primitive mouse trap, which he desperately attempted to pry open.

Rather than assist him, a brisk pace facilitated my escape. I veered down an alley into an abandoned hotel. From a smudged second floor window, I watched his frantic search, summoning a heavily-armed unit via radio from the local base as reinforcements.

Balanced between sagging ceiling beams, I waited for the inevitable. As night fell, a bullhorn’s crackling echo reverberated through the structure, ordering the men to join troops bound for Riverside.

The revolution of which Mark had spoken had swept the nation, and the last vestiges of a powerful army would see their demise within days.

Content to observe this expression of liberty, I took no credit for my part in the insurrection. Hitching rides on wagons and steam-powered trains - revived by the masses to move themselves overland - I returned to Granddad’s farm.

It will be long after I’m gone that things resume a more normal routine, yet I’m bolstered by hopes for the future.

Stopover

The 747 landed at Agana International Airport to change pilots and refuel that humid December Saturday, giving the passengers a welcome break after 18 hours in the air. When they queued for reboarding, however, they learned an unexpected shift in the path of a typhoon threatened the Philippine Islands, so the flight's continuation would be delayed at least 24 hours.

That left 246 people scrambling to secure accommodations for the night, not a pretty sight. Mara didn't join the chaos, unfazed by this turn of events. She could catch a cab north to Andersen Air Force Base and sleep in the BOQ guest quarters, being a major. For the moment, she just wanted to relax.

Not far from the airport's main entrance, towering hotels highlighted Guam's tourist district. Japanese couples spent their honeymoon in posh suites and on the beaches, much as Niagara Falls symbolized wedded bliss for Americans.

Mara left her bags in a locker at the USO lounge after changing into jeans and a green tank top. Sandy mane tied in a pony tail, she traversed busy roads to reach the cool sands and thatched-roofed bars, kicking off her sandals and sighing with pleasure.

"What's yours?" came a decidedly native voice from the Tiki-Rama where bamboo stools stood empty.

"Whiskey, straight."

"Tough day?"

"Long day," she countered.

Watching the dark young man pour sparkling liquid into a small glass, her eyes moved beyond his sloped shoulders to a shoeless figure wading in the shallows, head bowed as if searching for something.

"You can always tell who's a tourist," she chuckled. "I wonder how many shells that guy will take back to the States, thinking they're valuable."

Presenting her drink, the bartender glanced in that direction. "He's no tourist. I think his name is Lance. He's a Seal stationed at the Naval Station."

"What's he looking for?"

"Nothing. He's meditating."

In a weird sort of way, Mara understood. She gulped the whiskey, chasing it down with the better part of a tumbler filled with ice water. She despised the taste, despised how it made her feel, yet drank on a regular basis to alleviate the stress of being career military.

She ordered another, facing the ocean, contemplating the sunset. A tropical paradise, this could be, if conditions differed. She'd been alone too long, too focused on her duties through three tours in Afghanistan. The Philippines would be a change - she hoped.

Lance approached the bar, greeting the attendant cheerily. When his incredibly blue orbs flashed toward Mara, she gasped.

Even through oval, wire-rimmed spectacles, they dazzled her.

She might've mistook him for a youngish college professor, if not for the Hawaiian-print collared shirt decorated with red and green dragons and cargo shorts, worn with a minuscule smile, his upper lip almost invisible. He carried his sneakers, feet coated with sand. Shaggy brown hair belied his membership in the Seals, unless he'd been on leave for some time. Trim, her equal in height but exceptionally hirsute, he reminded Mara of a semi-evolved gorilla.

A knot in her stomach, though, confirmed an instant attraction.

Mentally, she wrote it off as loneliness and frustration.

He spoke first, a melodious tenor. "Air Force?"

"How'd you know?"

"The ring."

Self-consciously, Mara fingered her Academy class band. "Keen observer."

"Have to be, in my line."

She nodded.

"You been on the island before?"

"Nope."

"Had dinner?" he pressed.

"Hadn't thought about it."

"There's fast food, or more elegant restaurants not far."

"I'll remember that."

Lance chuckled. "I was inviting you out."

"I know."

"Well?"

Mara shrugged.

"There's a great band playing at Roscoe's tonight," volunteered the bartender.

Lance suggested, "Maybe the Teppan Steakhouse."

She agreed, allowing him to escort her to the parking lot, where they both slipped into their footwear. Even in his Toyota SUV, he never seemed to take his eyes off her, and it began to make her nervous.

“What’s the deal?” she finally asked.

“You’re not medical. I’m trying to deduce your MOS.”

“Pilot.”

“Shit, really?”

Mara snorted. “You one of those sorts who thinks women don’t belong in combat?”

“No, not at all. We have three female Seals in our outfit.”

“Congratulations.”

“What do you fly?”

“C-130s.”

“Damn!”

“This time, I’m a passenger. At the mercy of the weather.”

“I’m grateful to the weather. Otherwise, I’d never have met you.”

The major bristled. “You’re frank, anyway.”

They shared a filet mignon with mushrooms and oriental vegetables at the restaurant, along with a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. All imported, of course. Mostly jungle, little food was grown on Guam - even milk had to be shipped in.

That’s how snakes infiltrated the ecosystem. They stowed away in crates being flown across the Pacific and, with no natural predators, proliferated unchecked.

Though not poisonous, they did present a frightening spectre in the evening gloom. Slithering along the restaurant’s gravel walk, Mara squealed and leapt into Lance’s unwitting embrace. He held her until the danger vanished in the underbrush, suppressing a chortle.

“I’m... sorry,” Mara panted, averting her gaze.

“I’m not.”

In fact, the woman felt his musky warmth and perceived their shared arousal. Once their lips met, she knew there would be no avoiding the inevitable.

Lance lived in officers’ housing, constructed of durable concrete blocks capable of withstanding hurricane force winds. Air conditioned, their own heat didn’t cool once they maneuvered through the door, the deadbolt secured behind them.

Another annoyance, geckos which squeezed through the slightest crack and stared at the occupants from odd vantage points. The miniature lizards were totally ignored when the couple landed on the living room sofa, clothes already half shed, dog tags flung in the corner.

“God, you taste good,” muttered Lance, nibbling Mara’s earlobe.

She didn't care if it was a rehearsed line, or genuine compliment. Her last experience with sex had been during an all-too-brief marriage to an enlisted diesel mechanic while stationed in Germany. He'd been... less than adequate in that regard, she'd discovered.

Lance... words could not describe the sensation as his hands caressed her bare flesh. She moaned in pleasure when his mouth sucked at her nipples, spine arching. Pulling him closer, fingers digging into his tight backside, she relished how her every nerve tingled.

This marathon session varied their positions and took them onto the kitchen counter, the bedroom desk and into the shower stall. Their exhaustion caught up to them as dawn broke through the east windows. They slept until noon, a text message on Mara's phone summoning her to the airport for a 4:00 departure.

They renewed their passion one last time. Both knew they would never see each other again, making no promises and harboring no expectations. That didn't mean they wouldn't remember how their bodies merged in synchronized, rhythmic motion, propelling them to the heights of ecstasy.

Lance dropped Mara at the airport's entrance without any emotional farewells. He didn't wait until she passed through the automatic doors. She didn't look back, either.

Nor did she regret this stopover or, licking her lips, how she could still taste the saltiness of that Navy Seal who'd made her muscles twitch like never before.

Facing Confusion

Rob lingered on the sidewalk as the red Mini Cooper convertible sped into the night. He couldn't fathom what had just transpired.

Attending a planning session for the annual Earth Day festival in the school gymnasium, he'd mingled with parents, teachers and neighbors, politely declining a chair at the head table. This wasn't his party.

A young woman, sandy hair dangling in a braid to her trim waist, slid onto the folding metal seat beside him in the fifth row.

"Glad you could come," she greeted, squeezing his fingers.

The meeting wore on, with a variety of ideas voiced by activists and local politicians wishing good press in anticipation of primary elections. As the wireless microphone made its rounds of the crowd, Rob bristled at a number of whispered, intimate remarks aimed at his ear. He ignored her, to avoid a scene.

The organizers compiled a list of feasible options for the April celebration, to be posted on the committee's website, so feedback could be submitted. In taking his leave, Rob found the lithe, peacoat-clad female beside him.

"Walk me to my car?" she hinted.

"Sure."

She slipped her hand through the crook in his arm as they descended concrete steps. Her vehicle was wedged between two SUVs in front of the rectory - convenient, in a way.

Rob bid her good night; she pulled him close and kissed him - tongue assaulting his mouth - stunning him immobile.

"See you tomorrow," she murmured, pert nose twitching as she circled the compact and sank behind the wheel.

Fortunate for him the streetlight on the corner didn't shine this far down the block, so no one had witnessed the potentially scandalous scene. He could not figure out her game, didn't know her name, had never seen her before that evening.

Mounting the steps to the rectory's door, he resolved to wear his Roman collar in public henceforth, rather than casual attire. Brushing his teeth before bed, he studied his reflection in the bathroom mirror. What woman in her right mind would find him attractive?

He'd always been self-conscious about the size of his nose, and how his profile showed his chin pointing into the air. He'd grown his brown mop long, to conceal the cowlick above his forehead. His parents hadn't been able to afford orthodontic treatment for the gap - albeit slight - between his incisors and,

somehow, when he smiled, his upper lip seemed to vanish. He stood only 5'7" tall, with a solid frame. His nickname in college had been "Gorilla," due to an excess of dark body hair.

Perhaps his sole appealing feature: pale blue eyes, inherited from his mother. He'd been told, after giving a rousing homily at Sunday Mass, his eyes lit up like beacons, holding the congregation entranced.

His days filled with administrative duties, sick calls, and visits to second graders preparing for their First Holy Communion, Rob soon forgot the singular incident.

That is, until he received a 3:00 AM emergency summons to the hospital, to anoint a casualty of a horrendous automobile collision.

The security guard at the ambulance dock gruffly denied him access. "What's with the get-up, Robbie? You know you're not allowed..."

Explanations did not alter the supposed ban. Finally, Rob pulled out his wallet, displaying his driver's license and diocesan identification card.

Suspicious, the guard examined both documents at length. "They seem genuine, Robbie, but you're a resourceful guy."

"I'm Father Robin Hammond, of St. Luke's Parish," rumbled the priest. "Whoever you think I am, you're sadly mistaken, and if the patient I'm here to see dies without the sacraments, it's your ass."

"Nice try."

At that moment, the shift supervisor appeared between the sliding doors, demanding, "Have you seen..." She glimpsed Rob, and broke into a grin. "Oh, Father, we were beginning to wonder if we should try someone else."

Mortified, the greasy-maned youth stepped aside without an apology.

"There was... a bit of confusion," summarized the pastor, accompanying the nurse along a stark corridor. "Who is that guy?"

"Must be new."

Rob kept vigil with the injured man's family - his Fiat crushed between a tractor-trailer and a Greyhound bus - until the last breath at dawn. Exiting to the emergency lot, the day shift had clocked in, so the priest didn't have an opportunity to question the arrogant sentry about who, exactly, this "Robbie" was.

Rationalizing the situation during his drive home, Rob grasped that, in a city of two million-plus, there might be someone with a similar name, and similar looks. If such was the case, the guy could claim an exquisite girlfriend, and an unsavory reputation.

The last straw occurred when, en route from a deanery lunch with the bishop to the 5:30 Mass, a police cruiser pulled him over for supposedly running a

red light. He obligingly surrendered his license and registration, befuddled when the beefy corporal returned with pistol drawn, ordering him out of the Chevy Cruze.

“On the ground!” the officer shouted. “On the ground!”

Rob knelt on the asphalt, not fast enough for the growing number of patrols converging on the site. A sergeant slammed his face onto the pavement, another wrenched his shoulders while fastening handcuffs tightly around his wrists.

“Just tell me why you’re doing this!” Rob pleaded.

From somewhere above him, a basso profundo declared, “You’ve outstanding warrants in three states for drug trafficking, attempted murder, and assault with a deadly weapon.”

“For Christ’s sake, I’m a priest!”

“One of your aliases.”

Dragged to his feet, nose bloodied, Rob was maneuvered onto the rear seat of the closest Crown Victoria, the door nearly slammed on his fingers. Transported to precinct headquarters, he sat on a bench while a group of uniformed patrolmen drank coffee and laughed at each other’s jokes.

When a blue-suited DEA agent arrived, Rob was led into a cramped room, its main feature a two-way mirror on the north wall. The metal table and chairs bolted to the tile floor weren’t meant for comfort.

“You’ve been read your rights?” asked the bespectacled gentleman, opening his briefcase.

“Not that I recall.”

Brown orbs squinted at the officer positioned near the door. “If you bozos fucked up this bust, I’ll have you fired!”

The rookie’s jaw gaped; he said nothing.

“You have the right to remain silent...” read the agent from a laminated card, concluding with, “Do you understand your rights?”

“I don’t know why I’m here.”

Rob’s wallet was tossed on the table. “You claim to be Robin Hammond?”

“*Father* Robin Hammond, of St. Luke’s Parish.”

A black and white photograph covered the leather billfold. “If you are who you say you are, then who’s this?”

Rob gazed at the image of his face, partially obscured by a mustache and beard, the hair styled differently. “It’s not me.”

“You’ve never used the name Robert Harris?”

“No.” Rob fidgeted, his arms aching from the shackles. “You can call Bishop Andrews. He’ll vouch for me, if you think my ID is fake.”

Six hours later, the priest stood on the street, his car released from impound without charge. Profuse apologies failed to assuage his anger. He feared his nose had been broken from the excessive treatment, but no one in the building offered to pay for an x-ray or examination.

First thing in the morning, Rob would be phoning a lawyer numbered among his parishioners, to discuss a civil lawsuit for false arrest and police brutality.

His cell rang before he had the chance. “Father Hammond? This is Chief of Police George Stein.”

“How can I help you?” muttered Rob.

“Please allow me to extend my sincere regrets for yesterday’s fiasco. I don’t know if you understand how desperately we’ve been working to capture Robert Harris, and your resemblance to him...”

“Who is this guy, anyway?”

“The worst of the worst, Father. We thought we had him a couple weeks ago, but the crew on stake-out near his last known residence let themselves be exposed, and Harris ran.”

“I would like to forgive your men, Chief, except I felt like the victim of a gang attack at their hands. If an individual is innocent until proven guilty, they shouldn’t be accosting people like they did me.”

“You are absolutely correct, Father. Those involved have been censured, and may be subjected to suspension without pay. In the meantime, I have a favor to ask..”

Rob listened, aghast. A proposal for him to impersonate Robert Harris, interacting with the criminal’s mistress to gain knowledge of his whereabouts, brought a laugh to his throat. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, Father. I’m serious.”

“No, thank you.”

“Then, you can expect to be stopped again, mistaken for Harris.”

Rob growled, “Is that a threat?”

“A fact, until we have him in custody.”

With a sigh, he queried, “Is this girl a... slender, dirty blonde?”

“Depends on which one. Harris prefers blondes, and switches them out every couple months. Keeps them around only for the sex.”

That information didn’t increase his willingness to agree. “I’m a Catholic priest, Chief. There’s no way...”

“There’ll be no need to go that far. You’ll simply need to contact her, and once you get her to spill what she knows, we’ll take over.”

Reluctantly, Rob replied, “When will this take place?”

“If you’ll come to my office, we’ll discuss the details.”

“Today?”

“This afternoon, if it’s convenient.”

“It’s not, really.”

“The quicker we put our plan into action, the quicker you’ll be out of it,” pressed Stein.

“Okay. I’ll be there at 2:00.”

Of all the information Stein and a team of detectives conveyed to Rob - Harris’ usual habits, attitudes, nefarious connections - a major chapter remained missing. “What’s his background?” puzzled the priest after a protracted session.

“He’s a couple years older than you, adopted as an infant by a wealthy family on the east side. Spoiled.”

These facts struck a chord with Rob, who confirmed a rendezvous with the investigators two blocks from Erin Kennelly’s apartment fifteen minutes before the “date” arranged via an awkward phone conversation on the Chief’s extension.

“One more thing,” added Rob. “There’s a young punk security guard on night shift at Memorial Medical Center. You might want to talk with him; he mistook me for this Harris over a month ago.”

Driving to the rectory, Rob debated the wisdom of the evening’s deception. If anything untoward happened, he might end up injured or dead. Fingers trembled while buttoning his blue shirt and, no matter how much mousse he rubbed on that blasted cowlick, the hair would not cooperate.

No need to ring the bell at the main entrance of the high rise dwelling; the police had obtained a duplicate key, assuming Harris possessed his own. On the tenth floor, Rob hesitantly read the numbers on the six-panel doors. He opened 1042 without knocking, crossing the threshold to discover the woman from the Earth Day meeting, clad in green halter top and red yoga pants, dancing to music blaring from the living room stereo.

In mid-twirl, Erin noticed him, and rushed to leap in his arms. His attempt to respond to her kiss didn’t bode well.

“What’s wrong, Robbie?” she prodded, retreating.

Rob bluffed, “Hard day.”

“Wanna drink?”

He nodded.

“Dinner’ll be ready in a few.” She vanished into the kitchen, returning with two glasses of what resembled scotch on the rocks. “Before you called earlier, I’d begun wondering if you’d skipped town.”

“The thought crossed my mind.”

Definitely not an intellectual relationship, this. Erin led him to the sectional sofa, set her glass on the end table, and practically jumped him right there. The best Rob could manage: “Later, babe.”

“But, I’ve missed you.”

He barked, “Later!”

“Okay, okay.” She climbed off his lap. “I’ll check the roast.”

“I’m... not really hungry. How ‘bout we drive over to my place? I’ve got a surprise for you.”

What might have once been an innocent face, now tempered with cynicism, beamed with excitement. “A surprise? Really?”

“We’ll have to use your car, though. Mine’s in the shop.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Blew a rod.”

“You take it to my brother?”

The statement caught Rob off guard. “I... It broke down on the interstate, so I had them tow it to the nearest dealership.”

“I’ve told you, time and again, not to do that,” Erin scolded. “Dealers overcharge, big time.”

“I’ll have it hauled to your brother’s tomorrow. I didn’t want to leave it on the side of the road, for Pete’s sake, and let the cops trace who it belongs to.” To reinforce his lie, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and gave her a playful squeeze.

On the trip across the city, Erin qualified as a distracted driver. Her right hand meandered from the Mini Cooper’s steering wheel, across the shifter and between his legs, fondling him in a way he’d not previously been touched. He tried the “Later, babe,” line; she dismissed his protests.

Located in an affluent neighborhood, Robert Harris’ property spanned three acres. The residence historic in design - possibly Frank Lloyd Wright, if Rob remembered his college architecture courses - it would be far too easy to get lost inside.

Erin braked beneath the columned portico, and Rob took a deep breath before alighting. To this mansion, he held no key.

Timing is everything in police work, and three squad cars sped up the circular drive, freezing Erin before she could flee. Rob, closer to the arched

double doors, raised his hands to continue the ruse, abruptly yanked through the portal while the woman was being frisked.

“What the hell...” gasped the priest. He spun, finding himself nose-to-nose with his double.

“Well, well,” drawled Robert Harris. “So, they figured it out at last.”

“Figured out what?”

“That you’re not me.”

Rob shrugged.

“You know who I am?”

“Partially.”

“Oh, come off it, dude. You wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t put two and two together.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I wanted to rid the city of a cancer...”

Harris chuckled, ushering Rob into a parlor where he could watch the activities through a curtained window. “Our beloved parents conceived me before they were ready to marry. Grandma and Grandpa convinced Mom to give me up for adoption. A year later, after graduating from college, they *were* married, and the following summer, you were born.”

“Only once did I hear Mom allude to her past, and Dad...” He scrutinized the dusty furnishings. “This your adoptive family’s home?”

“I inherited it last year,” Harris boasted. “Do you realize the bundle I dropped to get the sealed adoption files opened? I’d seen your photo in the paper on your ordination day. Creeped me out, literally. You also came in handy, though. In certain situations, a priest has inroads where others don’t.”

“I can imagine,” scoffed Rob. “So, what now?”

He felt the barrel of a pistol wedged against his ribs. “The cops will think you took off, in fear. Once they’re gone, I assume your persona, permanently.”

“Great, a drug dealing priest.”

“Your kind have done worse.”

Flashlight beams flooded the chamber, illuminating Harris with the gun leveled at his brother. “Hold it!”

Harris jerked Rob into a position as shield, but the priest had wrestled in high school and college. He grabbed the criminal’s arm and flipped him onto the carpet. Shaken, Harris stared up at the man, and laughed.

“Good one, bro.”

Manhandled in much the same way Rob had been during his arrest, Harris ended up in the police cruiser, still smiling. Rob bit his lip, seeing that gap between the front teeth identical to his own.

Creeped out, indeed

“Thanks, Father,” praised Chief Stein. “It went very well. If we need you to testify, can we contact you at the parish?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

As the vehicles disappeared, he strolled toward the subway station. He’d be glad to get back to the rectory, and resume a normal, anonymous life.

The Streak

Shopkeepers could set their clocks by Ron Wilcox. A fixture on his custom-made bicycles in town, pedestrians would wave and call a greeting as he pedaled along his route.

What they didn't see was the helmeted figure shifting into high gear as he steered beyond populated areas, passing cars on the 101 like a literal blue streak, given the color of his jersey.

What Louie Bascomb saw on a regular basis: Ron toting titanium-framed cycles into Cal-Frisco Wheels, requesting new tires.

The white-haired bike mechanic and designer raised his eyebrows at the sight of rubber missing all tread. "You sure know how to wear these out, Ronnie," he drawled.

Ron flashed a supposedly innocent, tight-lipped grin.

Louie's daughter, Sandy, would roll the expensive equipment to the workroom, stripping off the old and installing new while the men chatted at the counter. She didn't mind the dirt and grease which coated her hands and arms - sometimes her cheeks. The young woman had lived so long with the concept of creating the ultimate riding machine, she enjoyed every minute she spent in the building her father had owned for four decades.

Prior to discarding Ron's old tires, she examined the rubber for flaws. A check of the repair logs confirmed he'd bought these less than a month ago. No way should routine riding cause such damage.

Plans for a more in-depth analysis preceded her returning the bike to the shaggy-headed Wilcox. "Here you go, Uncle Ron."

"Thanks, kiddo." He kissed her forehead, shook Louie's hand, and easily cleared the glass door.

The pair watched him hop on the seat and head home.

"You don't need to call him Uncle Ron anymore," Louie chided, tucking two hundred dollar bills in the cash drawer. "That was a compromise when you were little, instead of Mr. Wilcox, since he's in here so often."

"Habit." She gazed at her father's worn countenance. "Dad, how do you think he does it?"

"Does what?"

"Burn the tread off his tires?"

Suddenly, it struck her: the operative word was, indeed, "burn".

Without waiting for Louie's answer, she strode to the workroom and grabbed the limp rubber. Her not necessarily expert conclusion: Ron rode so fast, friction melted the tread.

But, how? Even the best bikes Louie had built in his lifetime wouldn't exceed 65 miles per hour going downhill. From her cursory inspection, Ron hadn't altered the gears, yet he managed to decimate tires which lasted years for other customers.

Another set were installed the following Tuesday, when their primary patron delivered another of his collection.

"You randomly select a bike out of your garage?" quipped Louie.

The flippant reply, "Having 30 or so - I've lost count - I pick a different one each day."

Sandy carried a cardboard box of handlebars from the stock room, ready to change the window display. She glimpsed Ron over the top edge, stumbled and dropped her load on the tiles.

Both men rushed to assist her.

"Are you hurt, Sandy?" gushed her father.

The trim red-head straightened and stretched her limbs. "I'm fine."

Squinting at Ron, she grunted, "You're back."

That grin.

"I'm surprised you don't complain about the quality of our tires, or go somewhere else."

"Sandy!" Louie scolded.

"Sorry, Dad. Ever since..." She kicked the container across the floor.

"Never mind."

Stunned by this reaction, Ron retreated. "I see you're busy. Can I pick this up tomorrow afternoon?"

"Sure," Louie assured him. "We'll have it ready."

"Thanks."

Sandy went about her chores, moving clothes racks, rearranging parts hung on the wall boards, sweeping and taking inventory. She ignored the \$13,500 bicycle for 24 hours, until she recognized Ron emerging from the deli across the street.

"Shit!"

She abandoned the last pile of t-shirts and vanished through the curtained doorway. She had the old tires stripped off before Ron discovered her there.

"What's up?" he greeted. "I've never had problems with your customer service before."

“I’ve never been curious before.”

“Curious?”

“I was considering placing a GPS monitor on the frame, or a speedometer to track how fast you ride,” Sandy remarked.

Peripheral vision allowed her to catch Ron flinch.

“Why does that bother you?”

“I... ride as a form of mobile meditation. I don’t pay attention to...”

Ron being no taller than she, Sandy rose from her stool and stood nose-to-nose with him, a determined expression marring her youthful beauty. “Don’t bullshit me. By my calculations, you’re topping out at 100 miles per hour on these babies, and I want to know how you manage it.”

He glanced around, pale blue eyes reflecting desperation. “I...”

“Look. I understand the need for speed. Why do you think I drive that?”

Sandy pointed out a small window overlooking the adjacent parking lot. Her silver 2005 Mustang Shelby GT500 occupied a reserved space.

“Damn nice ride,” muttered Ron.

“I head north, and open it up to around 150, if no cops are out.”

“That’s... kind of dangerous.”

“So is doing 100 on a bike.” She met his gaze. “Now, ‘fess up.”

“Not here. Not now.”

“When?”

He considered. “Top of Mount Tamalpais, 6:30.”

“You’re crazy, but okay.”

Sandy finished the task at hand, and released the bike to its owner. She peered between the curtains, comforted that Ron said nothing untoward to her father as he departed.

Not much speed to be attained on the winding road to Marin County’s most famous peak. Sandy hadn’t visited the state park in years, a fear of heights keeping her close to sea level. Still, propelled by curiosity, she kept her focus on the road, and not the drop.

She had no need to hide her astonishment upon finding Ron Wilcox, helmeted with his traditional blue jersey, waiting for her near the most glorious vista imaginable. He leaned his bike against a post and sat down on a bench. She joined him.

“All right. Talk.”

He swallowed. “Louie ever tell you about how we met?”

“Nope.”

“It was, hell, thirty years ago or more. I had a bit of a problem, and he saved my bacon.”

Unimpressed, Sandy probed, “Why kind of problem?”

“If I tell, you must swear to never mention it to another living soul.”

She rolled her hazel eyes.

“I’m serious.”

“Fine.” She raised her hand in pledge. “I promise.”

“After graduating as a physics major from MIT, I came back to San Francisco to help my mom take care of my dad, who’d been crippled in a bad accident. I took a job teaching at the College of Marin.” Ron continued his tale about discovering an obscure formula which enabled him to transcend gravity, time and space, moving at incredible speeds.

“My initial experiments on campus were... inconclusive. So, I traveled to more remote areas and... soon learned that cotton and standard man-made materials disintegrate rapidly under such conditions.”

“Meaning?”

“I ended up naked on a lonely road in the middle of the night.”

The visualization elicited a laugh from Sandy’s throat.

“The first car to pass was full of drunk college kids, who thought I was loaded, too. They jeered and yelled obscenities as they sped onward, but wouldn’t stop. Then, Louie came along.”

Sandy, knowing her father to be a kind-hearted man, understood.

“After he loaned me a shirt and sweat pants, he drove me home, and we started working on a fabric which wouldn’t shred above 100 miles per hour.”

“That’s how...”

Ron fingered his jersey. “Yeah.”

“Weird that you could run that fast without destroying your knees?”

“If I could explain the formula to you, you’d grasp how the impact on the body isn’t what you’d expect. The peripherals - like the bike tires - are another matter.”

“You’re right, I don’t get it.”

“Then, you probably won’t get this, either.” Ron stood, moved clear of an overhanging tree, and shot into the air.

Sandy’s jaw gaped.

Thirty seconds later, her companion returned, brown mane wind blown and a smile lightening his features. “Well?”

“What can I say?” admitted the young woman. “Blows my mind.”

“Enough for now, in that case.” He lifted her off the wood slats and escorted her to the Shelby. “You’ve got a very sweet ride.”

Pensive, Sandy contemplated this marvel of humanity. “Are you the one they used to call ‘The Streak’?”

“A long time ago, yes.”

“Some guy put out comic books about you, and Dad kept newspaper articles in an old scrapbook...”

“I wanted to use my knowledge for good, and became a sort of superhero.” Ron chuckled at the memory. “The ramifications, and the pressure, were too great. Cops and government officials sought me out, hoping to use me for their own ends. So, I retired from teaching, and vowed to keep a low profile.”

“You’re doing pretty good in that area, and keeping Dad in business by wearing out your tires so fast.”

They laughed together.

Ron held the Mustang’s door as Sandy slid onto the leather bucket seat. “I’ll let you go first,” she stated.

“No. I’ll stay here for awhile. I like the view.”

His tone hinted at an underlying angst, and Sandy’s heart ached for him. Such a secret to keep, and now she shared that burden.

The next time he brought a bike to have the tires changed, though, they interacted as if nothing unusual had transpired between them.

A good man, after all, Sandy would respect his decision.

For Want of a Smile

“If he hates people so much, why does he hang around the Embarcadero?” puzzled Cindy, sipping her cappuccino at the homey deli’s laminated counter.

“He doesn’t ‘hang around,’” replied Andrea, seated on the stool closest to the frosty window. “He walks. Miles a day. That same hard expression on his face. As if he’s looking for something, or someone.”

“And, he found you?”

“Our... paths have crossed a few times.”

Cindy giggled. “Your place, or his?”

“His. A tiny studio, two flights up on Stockton.”

“Chinatown?”

“Over a very good restaurant, as a matter of fact.”

“He bought you dinner?”

“No. I grabbed some take out, after...”

“Is that why Jake got pissed?”

“I don’t know.” Andrea drained her mug of hot cocoa and rose, tugging at the hem of her mini-skirt. The bruise where Jake had gripped her forearm peeked out from the cuff of her blouse. She hid it, self-conscious. “See you later?”

“I’m working the Palace of Fine Arts tonight. Big charity affair.”

“Really? Do you think it’d be worth me having a look?”

“Sure, if Jake gives his permission.”

“He’s my pimp, not my father,” scoffed Andrea. “As long as he gets his percentage, he’s cool.”

Emerging from the building’s warmth into a chill morning breeze, the shapely brunette zipped her fringed leather jacket and strolled north. Pedestrians crowded the sidewalks, en route to their Friday grind. At the intersection, Andrea noticed part of a bold headline, the paper tucked under a businessman’s arm.

Another murder.

Detouring into a book store two blocks from her apartment, she perused the lead article without purchasing the edition.

Good ol’ Mississippi Jake, as he was known on the street - aka Jacob Bernstein - had been gutted with an ice pick on Pier 41, his body dumped in the water and discovered, floating near the Golden Gate Bridge, hours later.

Andrea suddenly understood why she hadn’t seen him since Tuesday.

And felt not a speck of remorse or grief.

Since she’d come to San Francisco four years earlier, the slimy “purveyor of pleasure” - as he liked to describe himself - had deceived, defrauded, and

denigrated her, and many other women. She'd never intended to earn her living as a prostitute; her parents believed she was attending college. Youthful foolishness, however, squandered her tuition money, and she was too embarrassed to write home and admit her mistakes.

A friend from high school, in similar financial straits, introduced Andrea to Jake. He arranged for them to live together while Andrea "trained" in her new profession, even tried to get her hooked on LSD and cocaine. When Ginny announced her pregnancy, she disappeared, and Andrea took sole possession of the modest domicile.

The profits from three tricks a night kept Jake happy and off her back. The rest of the day, she could sleep, shop, or do whatever.

Her "whatever" proved to be writing.

She cast a number of the johns as characters in short stories, some of which she'd sold to national magazines using a pseudonym. Jake couldn't touch that money, which she saved in anticipation of her eventual escape.

Now, with his murder, no escape was necessary.

She reconsidered that notion when, climbing the dimly lit stairs to her apartment, two police officers confronted her.

"Andrea Linton?" the taller hailed.

"Yes."

"Would you come with us?"

"Why?"

"The homicide detectives need to question you about Jake Bernstein."

She soon discovered all Jake's girls had been rounded up for interrogation, their lodgings searched - without warrants - and cars impounded. In a mirrored chamber, table and chairs bolted to the floor, she stared into the tired countenance of a blue-suited elder, who demanded information about every aspect of her life.

"I've got nothing to tell you," she stated. "I last talked to Jake on Tuesday, when he collected... the rent."

"You had no reason to want him dead?"

"I had a lot of reasons. That doesn't mean I killed him."

"No, but you might've hired the guy who did."

"Guy? If the murderer was a man, why am I here?"

"We've no definitive evidence. The depth and force of the... wounds, however, lead us to believe a woman wouldn't have the strength."

"Since you're on top of things, may I go now?"

With a grunt, thick fingers waved her toward the door. "Don't leave the city."

Andrea debated that very option upon entering her ransacked flat. Papers had been scattered, drawers emptied, closet stripped. It took all afternoon to restore a semblance of order.

By then, she just wanted to crash on the double bed and sleep. Selecting a tantalizing outfit from her collection, she realized - with no Jake to hound her - she could take a night off, if she chose.

She could retire her spiked heels and fishnet stockings, too. Settling at the desk, she rolled a clean sheet of paper into the Smith Corona and began typing.

Around 10:30, she got itchy and decided to get some fresh air. Jeans, a Giants sweatshirt and sneakers declared her strictly “off duty”, so no one would bother her. The bars on Fisherman’s Wharf were jumping; she veered into one for a quick scotch and soda.

The lack of pressure rejuvenated her more than the alcohol. She listened to the juke box blasting Beach Boys and Beatles tunes for an hour, before leaving the bartender a generous tip and venturing alone into the night.

“Good evening, Andrea,” came a quiet tenor from the shadows near the Boudin Sourdough bakery.

She didn’t need to acknowledge him - he preferred to fall into step beside her without undue conversation. This habit might have unnerved others, but not her. Chatty johns always annoyed her, and this client seemed to sense that.

On their initial encounter, she’d swallowed her shock at his appearance. Close cropped dark hair topped a wide forehead, accented by large ears which tapered to stern jowls and a pointed chin. While many would claim a sizeable nose his predominant feature, she considered his intense, pale blue eyes quite captivating, even behind the round, silver wire-rimmed spectacles.

The other aspect she noticed: his mouth, lips pressed together into little more than a slash, never cracking a smile.

He might’ve been an athlete in his younger days, given his solid frame and broad shoulders concealed beneath a trenchcoat, his stride determined but unrushed.

“I’m not...” she began.

“Yes, you’re finally free.”

“How’d you...”

“The media cannot ignore such craftsmanship.”

She halted. “Excuse me?”

“Since the era of Jack the Ripper, ruthless carnage has always attracted interest from the masses. More so than a mere bullet through the skull.”

She couldn’t argue the point. Still, “I’m on my way home.”

“I’ll see you safely to your door.”

“That’s kind of you, except...”

“With your newly acquired independence, this will be my last occasion...”

Andrea resumed her hike up the steep incline, aware the generous payment he would leave at her bedside - no longer split with Jake - would cover two months’ rent, or airfare to some distant island.

The wide variety of men who’d done what they’d come to do in her apartment provided fodder for many unusual plot twists in her stories. Some pretended at love, with affectionate kisses and gentle caresses - possibly what they didn’t get from their own wives. Others were brutal, behaving more like rapists. Those who role-played ranged from kinky to childish, with psychological issues which would confound Freud.

This man... barely touched her, as if he hated himself for surrendering to primitive urges. His countenance never betrayed any pleasure in the act, or satisfaction. His blue orbs bored into her soul, as if detecting her own reaction.

So exhausted as midnight passed, Andrea inadvertently fell asleep following his climax. She jolted awake upon hearing an unusual rustling, to see him sprawled on the floral-print sofa, reading one of her manuscripts.

She’d left them piled on the kitchen table after recollating the pages.

“I always suspected your intelligence,” he remarked, his glasses propped atop his head, “but not your creativity. You’re an exceptional wordsmith.”

Andrea swung off the mattress, buttoning her blouse. “Thank you.”

“Will you pursue this as your career?”

“I might.”

“Please, do. My advice is that you ply your trade in a locale far from here, to avoid becoming a victim of...”

“Victim? You make it sound like a major earthquake’s coming.”

“Not an earthquake, but a purge.”

“A purge?” she echoed.

Rearranging the sheets in order, he placed them on the coffee table. “The same fate which befell Jake will consume the weak, greedy multitudes. It’s the only way to ensure the future of the intelligent, the creative, the strong.”

In that instant, Andrea pieced together Jake’s demise. As much as she despised how he’d treated her, he didn’t deserve such a death at the hands of this madman. She eased toward the door.

“Where are you going?” he queried, leaping upright.

She paused, head bowed.

“Not you,” he lamented. “Not you, Andrea. Of all those who cross my path each day, those who make me ache to continue my work, I thought you would grasp the import of such deeds. Going to the police will gain you nothing, for they shall be the first...”

Fear propelled Andrea backward, against the wall. He approached, that unique nose inches from hers.

Also, an ice pick prodded her torso. “Assure me you weren’t going to the police, Andrea. You, who I trusted, and delivered from your enslavement.”

“I...” She wanted to scream, but guessed the consequences. A wave of dizziness consumed her; she lost consciousness and slumped to the floor.

Sunlight streaming through a gap in the draperies roused her Saturday morning. Climbing to her feet, she gazed at her surroundings, despondent. She would have preferred to burn the stack of \$100 bills on the night stand, instead stuffing them in her jeans, cramming an assortment of clothes into a sports bag, and heading out, destination unknown.

At the airport, she phoned an anonymous tip to the authorities. Sunday’s national news proclaimed the attempted apprehension of a potential mass murderer, who fell to his death in San Francisco’s Chinatown.

Andrea may have saved the weak, greedy multitudes but, settled in Nantucket, she couldn’t shake the memory of the man who’d never smiled.

The Joining

He was dead.

The man who she'd loved since she first learned the meaning of the word, who'd made her laugh, brought her inestimable joy, inspired her, taught her the secrets of life... gone.

She didn't attend the funeral. Such rituals - designed to comfort the living and rake in vast fees for the morticians - mattered not to the deceased, one with the universe as they'd become.

Her own particular brand of mourning involved sitting Indian-style on a stone bench in her private garden, listening to the breeze, the birds, leaves rustling. She sensed him so distinctly in this setting, though he'd never visited her there.

Rainy days, this activity precluded, she searched the internet for a medium who might possibly bridge the gap between the physical and ethereal planes. She imagined such a session akin to the scene from the movie *Ghost*, where Whoopi Goldberg is assailed by spirits wishing to contact their loved ones.

She probably wouldn't be lucky enough to find a person with such genuine sensitivity.

Years earlier, she'd visited the supposed local medium, an assigned interview for the newspaper's Halloween issue, and she'd intuited spirits haunting the dwelling, even knowing their names, without the dwelling's present resident being aware of that information. What a fraud!

There might be another way: less expensive, with a greater chance of success. She knew, in the depths of her being, time, space and matter to be illusions. While some practitioners of pagan-style arts used a four-directional circle to enter their magickal realm, she envisioned a triangle, in which she might join with the only truth - pure energy - and with him.

No need for elaborate robes, lit candles, soft music. She didn't want to manifest him in some tangible form, as some projected demons, angels, saints, incubi, succubi, or ancient Greek deities. Asking for trouble, these methods, because a person never really knew what entities might invade their space.

She took her customary place on the bench, blocking out all sensory input, and let her mind go blank - not easy when her mental gears spun at high speed most days.

The first few attempts did not succeed, though she had opened her eyes at one point to notice her feet had become translucent. Jarred back to an earthly reality, she abandoned the plan for a week.

A potential for success gnawed at her the entire period, drawing her again to the secluded corner, a rose bush sending its gentle aroma her way.

Breathing steadily, she couldn't truly anticipate the results. She expected no hokey perceivable image - him coming to fetch her, for instance - merely the certainty of his presence, their unending union. Nor did emotions factor into the mix. Emotions were... deceiving. It would not be a "feeling", the undeniable knowledge would be hers, without question.

When the transformation occurred, she had no concept of how many rotations the clock had made. No sight, no tactile phenomena, no more body, no more a soul ripped from its essence.

Together.

Peace.

A Lesson in Love

Driving from St. Louis, Missouri, to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, ate up most of Brad's Friday, but he enjoyed stopping for lunch in Chicago with a few old friends from Loyola University.

They mocked him for volunteering to direct one of four plays scheduled for the 1977 Cardinal Stritch University Summer Theatre Festival. He found the annual exercise a break from the rigors of teaching nine months each year; he could relish the talents of the young performers without having to grade assignments or papers.

This season, he'd been intrigued by the script sent from the program coordinators: a student adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In the notes preceding the dialogue, the author wrote, "The nineteenth century custom of ignoring basic factors of everyday life, such as cleanliness, leave much to be imagined about the main character's appearance, in both guises. As his 'self', the doctor spent days in his laboratory, stopping his research to neither shower nor eat. This would have created a less than desirable presence. The persona of Hyde, however, being pure Ego, would first wish to dress well and be properly groomed, before venturing forth to fulfill his every desire, without the slightest consideration for others.

"Thus, in fact, Jekyll is physically the more grotesque of the two, though when not in the throes of his scientific endeavors, he persists as a prisoner of social convention - moreso, since he cares so deeply and genuinely for all humanity, regardless of class.

"The roles, as conceived here, played by the same actor, require no special make-up beyond rearranging the hair. Stature and stride will provide the desired effect to the audience."

That actor would be the author in this production - his one stipulation to the festival using the opus. Brad had no objections, since the screening committee had reviewed his audition tape and found him an exceptional talent.

Only one woman figured into the plot, with another eight men to be cast. After a night's rest in the quiet dormitory, Brad crossed the quad to the auditorium, where youthful energy and excitement permeated the air.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," he greeted, mounting the stage. "Today, we're casting Loren Finch's new play. Since it will take longer to cast the males, we'll take the females first. Mr. Finch will read opposite each of you, to better determine the proper chemistry."

Titters from the girls struck Brad as odd, until the shaggy-headed Claremont College prodigy joined him on the boards. Not precisely handsome, in the traditional sense, the young man stood three inches shorter than himself, obviously an athlete, with an unusually prominent nose and sparkling blue eyes.

Lining up the sixteen prospects for Jeannie, the prostitute Hyde plucks off the street to use for his pleasure, four had to be immediately rejected for their height. Not that Brad announced as much. He allowed each to read the scene with Loren, primarily for the experience. The finalists narrowed to two, he would deal with them during call-backs that afternoon.

Loren's lack of height affected the male performers, as well. Requiring Jekyll to crane his neck at his colleagues didn't feel right, so Brad selected those measuring under six feet.

Brad invited the author to lunch at the Student Union. They occupied a table in the midst of chaos, but managed to discuss how Loren envisioned his transformation from Jekyll to Hyde.

"Have you seen the 1920 silent version, with John Barrymore?" asked the student, between bites of cheese fries.

"Years ago."

"After he first drinks the concoction, the camera stays on him as he manipulates his facial muscles into a horrific expression. Only later did they add make-up, including some bizarre point on his head. Thing is, the way Stevenson describes it, Hyde wasn't hideous physically. He exuded an aura of evil, which is what repulsed those he met."

Before Brad's eyes, Loren went from being a staid teenager to a self-indulgent maniac.

"Damn!" said the professor. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Practicing in a mirror."

"Impressive."

"Thanks."

"Which of the girls do you think will work best?"

Loren considered. "The dark haired one."

"Why not Amy, the blonde?"

"The stigma that blonde's are stupid will bias the audience's judgment of her character. Jeannie needs to be strong, to tolerate what Hyde dishes out."

"If you say so."

"You don't agree?" prodded Loren.

"Amy has a better figure, more in keeping with the prostitution thing."

The younger man chuckled. "You'd be surprised, professor. The research I did, nineteenth century whores were often some of the ugliest women roaming the streets."

Brad smirked. "Okay. What if I keep Amy around as understudy?"

His companion didn't have to respond; Brad realized he'd given away his attraction to the University of Michigan sophomore.

Still, Holy Cross Junior College freshman Rachel Pitcher beamed at her confirmation for the role of Jeannie.

Tuesday morning, blocking began. Each of the four plays shared time in the auditorium, limiting their access to the stage. Yet, these aspiring actors maintained the highest professional standards, so Brad's stress remained minimal.

Until he chanced upon Rachel and Loren sharing an intimate moment in her dressing room Friday evening.

He tugged the door closed with an embarrassed, "Sorry." Before he rounded the corner to the stage door, the pair caught him.

"There's no rule against..." Rachel stammered.

"No," said Brad. "It's just, I've seen many a heart broken - and performance ruined - by an ill-timed romance. You both are exceptional artists, with bright futures. Representatives from Juilliard and other programs will be attending next Thursday, and I don't want anything to jeopardize..."

Yet, Brad realized his words fell on deaf ears; he could see the pair had formed a bond which would transcend distance and time. Rachel's angelic mien shone with joy; Loren's blue orbs never left her.

"Get some rest. A long day tomorrow," he advised, resuming his trek homeward. He glanced back as the heavy metal door swung shut, to see them embracing, kissing passionately.

"Shit," he muttered.

And, dammit, if his prediction didn't come true. The tension between the leads could have been cut with a knife at Tuesday's dress rehearsal. Brad detected snippets of a private conversation interspersed between their memorized lines, but resisted calling a halt to the proceedings. He cornered the couple in the wings during intermission, chewing on them right royally.

"If you can't behave yourselves, I'll replace you both!" the director concluded.

Loren protested. "You can't do that! Without me, there's no show."

"Fine, we'll cancel. I'm not afraid to humiliate you publicly for such puerile antics!"

Rachel stepped between the men, whispering, "It's my fault, professor." She gazed at the shaggy-haired actor with smoldering hazel eyes. "I'm sorry, Loren. I shouldn't have accused you..."

"No, babe, I should apologize. It wasn't fair of me..."

Brad watched them shuffle, arm in arm, toward the dressing rooms.

What did kids that age know about love? He'd seen the heights of ecstasy and the valleys of turmoil in twenty years teaching college-level courses. Hormones, more than anything; their brains couldn't comprehend the intricacies of relationships.

Still, he recalled his first theatrical love affair. It'd been a high school musical; he and a flighty blonde from the chorus would burrow into the scenery storeroom and do what came natural.

It lasted all of two weeks. After that, they never spoke to each other again.

Given what Loren had written, Brad presumed a maturity which might have been absent from the student's development. And, though Rachel projected the strength required in the role of Jeannie, she could've been a 16-year-old in search of a romantic fantasy.

Did that desire ever grow old? he mused. Perhaps not.

A special rehearsal, exclusively for the leads, went well Wednesday morning. They'd either resolved their differences or agreed to an amicable truce. When the character of Hyde roughly grabbed Jeannie, however, their kiss bespoke a tenderness out of place with the mood.

Touching to observe, but critics would roundly pan the scene.

"Look, you two," he sighed, hoisting himself onto the stage - not easy at his age. "I know it's tough to set aside personal emotions when you make your entrance. You must concentrate on doing just that, nonetheless. Get into the parts with every fiber of your being for two hours, then you can go out tomorrow night and... celebrate in any way you see fit."

Meekly, they acknowledged the feedback and promised to abide by Brad's dictates.

For opening night, he sat behind the Juilliard instructors, unable to read their faces, while their posture remained alert throughout. He followed the trio backstage after the final curtain - a standing ovation lasting five minutes - and listened as they encouraged Loren, Rachel, and two of the minor players to pursue their goals.

"You should be hearing from us by mid-August," said the bearded dean.

True cause for rejoicing among the entire cast. Brad hosted the traditional party at a restaurant overlooking Lake Michigan, at which drinks flowed in

abundance, with food and good cheer. In a dark corner, Loren and Rachel snuggled, watching the others, occasionally dancing when the juke box played something slow.

Brad, satisfied with his work - and theirs - left them to their love. He envied them, ached for the loss of his own youth, while priding himself on assisting fresh talent to greater achievement.

Intersecting Paths

“Hey, Sis, you want another?” asked the bartender, the LED clock wedged between glass beer mugs reading 1:30.

“I’m good, Jake.”

The paunchy, balding figure remarked, “Not like the old days.”

“Old days?”

“When you’d come in to fetch your errant alcoholics.”

“Yeah. Now I’m close to being one, myself.” The woman laid a debit card on the stained wood, and Jake rang up her payment. “G’night.”

The last customer remained hunched on a stool near the front door, glaring at his Gimlet - vodka and lime juice. His clothes resembled discards from a thrift shop: a rumpled red flannel shirt, baggy black sweat pants, and sneakers with no laces.

Instinctively, the slender brunette paused beside him. “Shouldn’t you be getting home?”

“Home?” The voice he emitted contained an underlying, high-pitched quality which could have shattered the windows if sustained for more than an instant. He blinked, then gazed at her with confused blue orbs. “Too far. Not tonight.”

Crap, she thought. “You’re welcome to my couch.”

“Sis...” Jake warned.

“Hey, certain habits die hard.”

She’d had the habit of offering drunks refuge in a former brick convent beside the abandoned St. Columba’s Church across the street. They crashed on reclaimed sofas, mattresses or in sleeping bags, ate a hearty breakfast the next morning, stayed to help with chores if they chose, or took her referrals for assistance through public agencies.

That was, until...

The man slid off his seat, standing nose to nose with her. And, what a nose! His thin lips pursed, his chin jutted outward. He’d make a good caricature to doodle during bored moments at a meeting.

“I’m Bea McDermott,” she said, extending her hand.

He gazed at her fingers, then his own, flexing them tentatively. “I am Orion... Wolff.”

“A pleasure.”

Bea led the way outdoors, an unwelcome blanket of summer humidity engulfing her. Orion seemed to suck in the air with a straw, given the noises behind her.

The upper floors of the convent had been closed off when funding for her ministry had been withdrawn the previous spring. Through it all, she'd received little encouragement from the Denver motherhouse, so currently...

She ushered her guest into the main parlor, where he scrutinized tattered furnishings. "It's not much, but it's better than an alley," Bea announced.

"Thank you."

"If you'd like to talk, I'll be in my office."

Before she could escape, he spun. "I'd like to talk, very much."

"Then, let me brew a fresh pot of coffee."

"As you wish."

Ten minutes later, both were settled on the lone hide-a-bed with intact springs. Bea sipped from her mug, while Orion stared at the steaming, aromatic liquid.

"I've never seen you at Jake's before," she began, in an effort to break the ice. "Where are you from?"

"All over, really."

"You travel?"

"Frequently."

"Hard to maintain a home, when you're on the road."

"Indeed."

"You seemed to be deep in thought at the bar..."

Orion's blue eyes studied her features, making Bea rather uncomfortable. "I stopped here, in passing, to visit my batch-mate, only to learn he... he... is gone."

"He moved from Boulder?"

"The term you humans use, if I recall, is death."

Bea swallowed a lump in her throat. "Your friend died?"

"Indeed."

"I'm very sorry to hear that. Is there any way I can help?"

"It... happened some time ago. We'd been wondering, because we'd had no communications from him..."

"Did he have family?"

"Family?" Orion repeated the word, as if he had no concept of its meaning.

Bea clarified, "A mother, father, wife or children..."

"Wife and son, yes. They, too, have gone."

“Sad.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, get some rest,” suggested his host, rising. “Tomorrow, you can continue your journey...”

“No,” stated Orion flatly. “I must stay.”

“Why?”

“I must take over his duties.”

Bea glared down at him. She’d wondered about possible foreign origins, and this mention of assuming a dead man’s duties smacked of espionage. She regretted her invitation...

“Tell me about yourself,” Orion urged, flashing an inquisitive smile.

“I’m... in transition just now.”

“Transition?”

Even if she unloaded her burden on him, he probably wouldn’t grasp its import. To have a willing ear, though...

She settled on the cushion. “The past thirty years, I’ve been a nun.”

“None?”

“A vowed Catholic religious.”

“Indeed.”

This might prove more difficult than expected. “With my degree in psychology and social work, I came to Boulder as a high school counselor. When budget cuts eliminated that position, I saw a need among the alcoholics, so I arranged to buy this building as a shelter...”

“Structurally unsound,” Orion blurted.

“I learned that later, but it served a purpose. I got dozens of people to rethink their lives, and they’re presently functioning in society without drinking.”

“Admirable. Are there others like you, who help the less fortunate?”

“In many cities and towns.”

“Why is there no one else here, then?”

“I... am in the process of seeking a dispensation from my vows, so the program has been shut down.”

“Dispensation?”

A tear trickled down Bea’s cheek. “Two years ago, the local bishop ripped me apart in the diocesan paper, and on television. He criticized my approach as ‘unconventional’ because men and women were housed together. He contacted my superiors, threatening to ban them from other ministries, if I wasn’t immediately transferred. I refused the new assignment, and was cut loose. Since then, I’ve lost my faith in a god...”

“In my travels, I’ve heard of many deities. None are real.”

“You’re an atheist?”

“I’m... merely an observer.”

“For the best, perhaps,” Bea sniffed. “By not getting involved, you don’t get hurt.”

“Hurt. That is what happened to...”

“Your friend?”

“Not friend. Batch-mate.”

“That’s one I haven’t heard before. Is that like classmate?”

“We were part of the same test tube batch, meaning we share genetic similarities...”

“Artificial insemination.”

Orion bristled. “Your primitive technology pales in comparison to our advanced methods.”

“Primitive?” she echoed. “Where - exactly - are you from?”

“A planet beyond your galaxy.”

Bea leapt up as if her backside had caught fire. Vaguely, she recalled rumors from the early 1980s of extraterrestrials in the area. Odd incidents and unexplained damage had never definitively been linked to a source, however.

“If that’s the case, this is no place for you...”

“I believe that to be true. Since I learned of Mork’s death, I have reviewed the reports he submitted to our leaders. His objectivity had been skewed by emotional attachments to you humans. Commentaries which were leaked nearly instigated a revolt from radicals wishing a return to our era of pre-enlightenment. It seems your species is only good for contaminating other cultures.” Orion rose. “I thank you for your honesty and... hospitality. I will take my leave.”

Trembling digits caught his sleeve. “Will there - are there - others from your world on Earth?”

“No. And, most likely, there never will be again. We will leave you to destroy yourselves, unworthy of redemption.”

As the door slammed, Bea stood in the foyer, stunned. Ironic, in so many ways, that even those from distant planets saw humanity as a cosmic failure. It also confirmed her suspicions about a supreme deity offering salvation.

No redemption existed for her, or anyone.

Bittersweet Seasonings

A cloth of worn white linen, embroidered blue birds adorning the center, covered the stained square table. Two oxidized brass candlesticks supported wax stubs, their wicks not yet lit. An assortment of cracked plates, saucers and cups created bizarre place settings, though the ornate silverware added a touch of class.

The aroma of delightful seasonings drifted from the kitchen stove, where a feeble fire warmed the evening's entree.

Not enough for two, but he'd eaten yesterday.

He'd found her wandering the streets after curfew, separated from her parents. She carried her meager belongings in a bundle, slung over her right shoulder. She would've been satisfied hunkering down in an alley for the night, but he knew the soldiers - when they found her - would ill treat her, as they had so many others.

He invited her to his hovel, once a happy home where his wife and children had shared a comfortable life. The remnants of what bread and vegetables he had bartered with his neighbors while laboring for their oppressors were creatively prepared, while she showered in the primitive bathroom and washed her clothes.

Her hair glistening with moisture, she accepted the chair opposite him - the one with four sturdy legs. He opted for a short stool, which put his head level with hers, despite his superior height. They didn't bother to pray; both had lost hope in any deity to save them from their ultimate fate.

She lifted her spoon, admiring the design. He'd given her the lion's share of the broth, and she scooped it greedily into her mouth, while he toyed with a thin slice of bread.

"It's good," she praised, draining the bowl to its last drop.

Dessert amounted to half an apple he'd salvaged from a partially burnt tree along the road. Not perfect, but it added a little sweetness to the meal.

Entertainment consisted of a stack of old records and a hand-crank phonograph, electricity only a dream. He thought they would sit and listen to the music, but she begged him to dance with her. They waltzed, polkaed and did a humorous rendition of the jitterbug, her giggles silenced with a warning finger as footsteps were heard outside.

"You dance very well," she remarked, her smile lighting up the dim, stark chamber.

He stammered, fighting the memories, "My wife and I..."

Though he would've preferred to remember that beautiful woman in his arms, his only vision encompassed rifles gunning down his family as they fled the ongoing tyranny.

The girl laid a hand on his arm. "Are you all right?"

"We should get some sleep."

Before he extinguished the guttering candles, she glanced around. A narrow mattress lay in the corner, the other option a woven, oval rug on the floor.

"Do you trust me?" he queried.

She shrugged.

He prompted, "Change into your night things."

"I... have no night things."

"Fine. Take off your shoes, and crawl into bed."

Brown eyes, not so innocent as most girls her age, studied him briefly. Then, she complied. He unfastened his braces and tossed his work boots in a heap, lowering himself beside her, facing outward.

"You're squishing me," she complained.

"Sorry, but it's for the best. If you hear any noises during the night, say nothing and don't move. Come daylight, you can be on your way."

"What are you..."

"Shhh. Good night."

He knew what might transpire; he'd lay awake in the dark, listening to the soldiers' clandestine raids. They didn't target specific houses; they did it for fun. Those bastards with their semi-automatic weapons would break in a door and spray the interior with bullets, not caring one iota who they murdered.

At least, with the girl hidden behind him against the wall, he would take the brunt of the attack when it came, and she would survive.

Three days this routine continued. Peering between tattered curtains each morning, she witnessed the dead loaded on carts and hauled to mass graves beyond the settlement. He rustled up enough food, when not harvesting crops for the troops, to keep their stomachs from growling, but he could see she was languishing without proper nutrition.

He risked his life to steal a bottle of fruit juice from a transport truck which stopped to have water added to its radiator, the squad of uniformed bullies roaming around and harassing the locals. Presented with the gift, she shared it with him, insisting he drink despite his adamant refusal.

"For your sake," he finally agreed, taking a sip.

Again, that smile, which eased his heartache momentarily.

Later, they sat side by side near the broken window, watching a glorious sunset. He felt an unaccustomed peace when he settled on the mattress, able to close his eyes for the first time in weeks.

He never opened them again. Six men riddled his body with projectiles in the wee hours, their cigarette smoke and liquored breath indicative of their callousness. The girl remained motionless behind her protector's bulk until they confiscated what trinkets they fancied and made a raucous departure.

Dawn saw her running full-speed from the place, desperate to find somewhere she could live without worrying about being slaughtered, or why human beings kill each other.

Dedicated to all victims of genocide throughout history.

The Muse

“One, two, three, four.”

“One, two, three, four.”

No one heard Joyce counting at random moments through the day; she hid her condition well. She received not a second glance when, mounting the office stairs from the lobby to her cubicle - or washing her hands in the ladies' room - she would remind herself what day of the week it was. Obsessed with her latest inspiration, she found meetings especially difficult, staring at the far wall while plot twists or dialogue she'd compulsively begun typing that morning interfered with her concentration.

Earphones plugged into her desk PC blocked external noises, a playlist of specific music looping, to focus her labors. Her bosses had no complaints about her efficient and accurate completion of assigned projects.

Still, her mind wandered with annoying regularity. The slightly overweight brunette would spend extended periods struggling to craft an exact phrase, or jotting memos to later add to an unfinished narrative.

Lack of sleep presented a problem; she'd awaken in the wee hours, developing characters or descriptions which kept her from closing her eyes again until dawn. If she didn't scribble the notes on a bedside scratch pad, they looped in her brain, much like her favorite tunes.

She lived for the weekends, rising at 6:00 AM, foregoing breakfast until the initial rush of energy had covered two or three single-spaced pages with Times Roman 12 point font. She could have an entire short story created by noon, moving on to the next after a quick lunch or, possibly, taking a break and catching a nap.

She simultaneously dreaded and craved the stimulation gleaned from chance sources, existing on the edge of sanity.

What transpired that particular October propelled her over the precipice.

Autumn's decreased stretches of daylight and increased clouds didn't elevate Joyce's mental state. Rain compounded the issue that Sunday afternoon; she had three lamps burning in her studio apartment to ward off the gloom.

Experienced digits banged away on the keyboard, her latest "adventure" combining aspects of suspense, romance and comedy into the daily lives of otherwise ordinary people. An abrupt drop in temperature distracted her; she left the cursor blinking mid-sentence to close the window and check the thermostat.

Even cranking the dial to 80 degrees and slipping a blue cardigan over her flannel shirt didn't warm her. The chill so intense, she abandoned her desk, digging insulated gloves from the closet.

She'd heated a mug of milk for hot cocoa and eaten a bowl of steaming chicken noodle soup to no avail, deciding to look up the landlord's phone number on her rental contract, when she noticed the magnet thermometer on her refrigerator gradually rising from the 30s to the 70s.

Joyce peeled off the added layers of clothing, sitting on the floral print loveseat in befuddled shock.

"One, two, three, four."

"One, two, three, four."

She could not wrap her mind around what had occurred. The clock read 7:34 when she crawled into the twin bed, but her eyelids remained wide open.

Three cups of coffee enabled her to survive Monday's crush on the job. She arrived home well past 7:00, thanks to an accident on the river bridge, which rerouted traffic ten miles out of the way.

Hanging her windbreaker on the coat rack, she immediately noticed the bric-a-brac - assorted trinkets from her grandmother and an old cousin - had been rearranged on their shelf above the television. She studied the figurines at length, and realized one was missing. A frantic search ensued; she located it among the towels in the linen cupboard.

"What the hell?" she grumbled aloud. Perhaps a call to the landlord was in order, to determine if any maintenance had been performed in the apartment, and the workers had played a little prank...

She didn't wish to sound foolish, however, and replaced the cell phone on the end table before dialing. She opted for a shower, to soothe her jangled nerves.

Wrapped in a flowing, tie-dyed caftan, she edited a story she'd drafted the previous week, part of a rigid process she observed in her creative endeavors. The first draft would be completed in as brief a time as possible, to ease the pressure on mind, body and spirit - she'd given up writing novels as too intense, for that very reason. She'd ignore the file for a few days, then review and catch any typographical or grammatical errors, enhance the descriptions and clarify details. Another revision would follow before she added it to her latest collection, uploaded on her website.

She didn't write for money, after all. She wrote because she couldn't stop herself. If other people wanted to read her twisted tales, they could do so, free of charge.

Seven times overnight, she scrawled ideas on paper, her exhausted body aching for slumber. When the alarm roused her at 6:30, the sheet lay on the kitchen counter.

As if someone had picked it up to read, and carried it there.

Again, that strange coldness...

Joyce remained beneath the quilt until the furnace took the edge off - much sooner than the prior incident.

Reformatting graphics on a tight schedule at the office prevented her from ruminating about these bizarre episodes but, at the intersection nearest the complex, an urge to delay returning home overwhelmed her. Fear, pure and simple. She pondered whether she had lost her mind, imagining what she'd seen - or dreaming it. A pinch shot pain through her arm; she could not doubt being awake.

Nothing unusual caught her attention when she inspected the premises. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich accompanied her to the desk, the computer overlaying the same looped songs she'd listened to all day with the rhythm of her fingers.

She slumped against the unyielding wooden chair in the midst of a paragraph, a word escaping her. Frustrated and tense, the sensation of hands massaging her shoulders didn't immediately register as abnormal.

The oddity registering in her conscious arrested her breathing.

"Malfeasance," came the matter-of-fact tenor from behind.

She didn't budge. "What?"

"The synonym you're trying to remember."

Considering, she realized he was right.

Whoever he was.

"Thank you," she stammered, letters appearing on the screen.

"Any time."

"Might I... ask you a question?"

"You've been talking to me for over a month. Until now, I haven't been able to answer."

Joyce felt her jaw drop, still facing forward. "Why not?"

"You know perfectly well."

"I..."

"Maybe you'd better reread your Samhain saga."

Her tousled head drooped. "Oh, shit."

"Exactly."

"The veil between the realms of living and dead..."

“Is thinnest at All Hallows.”

“If I’m not dreaming, somebody slipped a mickey into my coffee at work, and I’m hallucinating.”

“No such luck, Joyce.”

She shot off the seat, moving to the kitchen and filling a glass with water, not daring to glance backward. “It’s the OCD. My obsessions has finally driven me out of my mind.”

“It *is* obsession-driven,” her uninvited guest confirmed. “You’ve made me - in various guises - the protagonist in your last two dozen tales. Even the most dedicated muse would be tapped out providing so much stimulus.”

“I’m sorry... there’s not much I can do...” She drained the clear liquid, and belched.

“You’ve got to let go. If you don’t, I’ll be trapped here for eternity.”

“Really?”

“That’s how it works. Kind of like a fence: get drawn across - either way, mind you - and when the gate closes, you’re stuck.”

“And the gate closes...”

“Midnight, October 31.”

She knew if she turned, if she gazed upon that blue-eyed, delightfully unique countenance which had consumed her these many weeks, her resolve to remedy the situation would shatter. “What must I do?”

“Forget me, of course.”

“I...”

“I’m appealing to your logical self. You wouldn’t want me haunting you 24/7/365.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Then, it’s mandatory.”

Her lips moved; she couldn’t speak.

“Think about it. It’s only the thirteenth, and I’ve already been here three days. Your concentration is so intense, you pulled me through what is, at the moment, little better than a crack in the door. Not to mention shaping me into my 1980s self.”

Knuckles whitened as she gripped the formica counter, that shaggy-haired, youthful mien her favorite. “Dammit, I’m sorry!”

“There are doctors who’ll prescribe medication to eliminate these tendencies,” the ghost advised.

“I won’t go through life a zombie.”

“Then, if you won’t voluntarily release me, only one other option exists.”

He didn't need to elucidate. She'd contemplated suicide on numerous occasions, yearning to end the psychological torture, yet afraid to employ gun, knife or drowning - too painful.

"Will you give me these days to finish my remaining manuscripts?" she queried.

"Finish, yes, but start no new ones."

"I promise."

"I'll... stay out of your hair as much as possible," he remarked.

"No! I want to talk with you, be near you..."

"You haven't even looked at me!"

Mustering her courage, clinging to the faux marble for support, Joyce rotated. The wave of bliss which washed over her might have burst her heart; tears streaming, she reached out a tentative hand and stroked his cheek.

Solid as any living creature.

"Oh, damn," she gasped. "You *are* real."

"You made me real, by the force of your own will."

"What happens when..."

"You'll have to experience that for yourself. It's... different for each."

"Will you be with me?"

"I'll assist you across."

"Then, what?"

"You'll be busier than a one-armed paper hanger, getting acquainted with lots of new friends."

"Will I still... Will my brain still..."

"No. You'll be at peace."

"Even if I..."

"Yes, even then. For some, it's the right ending."

"Some claim suicides are selfish," Joyce purported. "Wishing to escape their agony, when they should be brave, for their families."

"It's more selfish to put the family through years of anguish, having to care for the ailing loved one."

"You understand!"

"I've encountered many like you." Pale blue orbs twinkled as he deposited her on the chair. "You can finish this page, then you need to get to bed."

Wednesday morning, Joyce left her boss a voice mail message, quitting her job. She arranged for the utilities to be disconnected at month's end. In between scouring six drafts she had not finalized, she canceled her e-mail accounts and credit cards, then smashed the phone with a hammer from the tool

chest.. She hauled the dress clothes from her closet to the local thrift shop, and donated her aging sedan, declining a tax receipt. The funeral director, presuming her diagnosed with terminal cancer, didn't dissuade her from prearranging cremation services, with no viewing or religious services.

The doorbell connected to her mailbox buzzed repeatedly, ignored as days elapsed. One co-worker managed to breach building security by slipping in the entrance with another tenant, pounding on the apartment door. Joyce merely upped the volume on her music, drowning out the disturbance via her earbuds.

Someone even contacted the police, who performed a "well being check". Allowing them access, she explained the clutter as packing to relocate in California. They apologized for the intrusion and departed.

Rejuvenating slumber reversed a three-decade cycle of virtual insomnia; she felt comforting arms cradle her - as she'd detailed on paper so often. They chatted about his life, her illness, the world crisis, and the mysteries of the universe. Stray ideas which had previously built into an interminable burden dissipated; her brain functioned normally - if such a term could be applied to mundane human routine - for the first time.

A last grocery run to the neighborhood market, she strolled with her bags past homes decorated with goblins, pumpkins and inflatable witches. A crispness to the air, gold and red leaves creating a carpet on the lawns, she inhaled the fragrance of burning wood, at peace.

Halloween night, beyond her window, trick-or-treaters wandered in costume, their pillow cases and buckets filling quickly with candy. Fond memories of her youth brought a smile to her lips.

"Are you ready?" he prodded.

Her contralto tremored, "Yes."

"How..."

"Pills and alcohol."

"Is there any guarantee..."

"With this mix, yes."

"You'd best get started."

"And you?"

"I'll be waiting."

By 11:30, she lay prostrate on the love seat, empty liter of whiskey at her feet, fifteen pills coursing through her veins. A translucent figure floated through shafts of moonlight, clasping Joyce's hand. Her muse led her through the ethereal gate with minutes to spare.