

Twisted
21st Century Stories

by

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Part II

Ten Tigers in Rome

Arriving in Rome on the night train, only looming facades of ancient buildings are visible. Not until the following morning, when I emerged from the Monastery of St. Gregorio al Celio to trod the rain-washed cobbles, did I experience an overwhelming awe at the city's distinctive beauty.

And its oddities.

I'd seen photos of the more famous landmarks in my high school history class: the Colosseum, the Forum and other excavations, where "S.P.Q.R." was etched deeply in stone. "The Senate and the People of Rome" it meant. But, why impress the letters on manhole covers - a far more recent addition to the streets?

Marvels at every turn I encountered, all fascinating. I attributed two decades as a hermit in Arezzo for my unfamiliarity with automobile styles, the two-wheeled *motorini*, and the clothing worn by those I passed en route to the Pontifical Gregorian University. I'd once seen myself as well educated in the ways of the world, especially after the harrowing experiences of World War II, but now, I was a child lost in a foreign land.

Trying to navigate the alleys and narrow lanes, I blamed my superiors for this situation. I'd been perfectly content in seclusion, but events of the recently concluded Second Vatican Council meant the lifestyle of the Camaldolese would be changing. Those in charge wanted someone to have thorough training in the newly mandated documents and practices.

I think my name was pulled at random from a hat.

Or, perhaps the selection occurred because my name was Marini, I knew Italian - taught by my grandmother - and, being American by birth, would be better able to relate to the thousands of other students from across the globe attending the Gregorianum.

The one aspect of obedience I never understood: not having the reasons behind a decision explained completely before accepting an assignment.

Regardless, here I was, in my habit and sandals, on a warm autumn Monday. I'd never attended college as a youngster, and could only suspect the hoops I'd have to jump through to obtain the required textbooks and supplies, and make it to my first class on time.

The Pontifical Gregorian University itself occupied one entire side of the Piazza della Pilotta, its redesigned baroque edifice overlooking the square - built less than fifty years earlier. Men in black cassocks and robes of other religious

orders milled about, enjoying the cool morning air, before entering the auspicious, stifling portals.

As accustomed as I'd been to observing nature from my hermitage, identifying and drawing rare species of birds and plant-life, I can't for the life of me remember one face I saw that day. They ran together in a blur, possibly due to the sensory overload of the new surroundings. It would be more than a week, in fact, before I reoriented myself sufficiently to feel like I fit in among the halls, desks and chalkboards.

The instructors - mostly Jesuit priests - failed to tolerate my discomfort, or that of the other freshmen. Homework began piling up from the first lecture, and I was so out of practice at studying, I feared the inner tranquility nurtured by years of monasticism would suffer.

Most annoying was the schedule. We attended class six days each week, rather than the five customary in America. While in Arezzo, we were allowed a short siesta following the mid-day meal; in Rome, most of the afternoon was spent resting. Stores closed, and work simply halted. Partially due to the excessive heat, and to centuries of tradition, we had sessions early, then late in the day, until 7:00 some evenings. Dinner was delayed until 8:00 at the monastery, leaving almost eight hours since lunch, my stomach left to growl noisily at inopportune moments.

European natives adapted easily to this plan, their smiles ever-present each day. I noticed how they took time away from academics on a regular basis, and returned refreshed from the diversion. Fridays and Saturdays, classes were dismissed at noon, and an impromptu soccer league gathered on the piazza. Kicking around the ball for an hour or so - voluminous sleeves flapping in the wind, scapulars tucked awkwardly into belts - released a load of tension for the participants.

I'd never played soccer, suiting up instead for football and baseball in high school. The laughter and camaraderie among these informal teams appealed to me, however. Rather than return to the monastery one September Friday, I stayed to join a group counting off to split into opposing factions.

No officials and no real rules, the ball bounced off walls, nearly broke a window, and bruised many shins. In fact, had I not collided with an intent Oriental Franciscan focused on aiming the sphere toward his team's makeshift goal, I might never had made the acquaintance of Shang Xian.

He helped me off the bricks, my habit soiled and palms bloodied. The other amateur athletes had moved toward the opposite goal, so we had a moment to brush off the dust and apologize to each other.

Odd how Xian could be described as being of medium height with black hair. Turning to the afternoon sun, I glimpsed another figure who could be similarly characterized. Yet, mistaking the pair for brothers would be impossible.

Beyond Xian's Eastern features, he boasted a solid build, broad shoulders and pleasant grin. The man watching us from the balcony of the Gregorianum's faculty wing might have had his frown permanently cast in stone. Narrow shoulders and a lean physique were topped by a longish, wild mane.

"Who is that?" I paused to ask my new friend in Italian, pointing upward.

Xian followed my finger, then hastily pulled it low. "That's Jan Krystof."

His behavior puzzled me. "Is there something I should know about this Jan Krystof?"

"Did the nuns ever punish you in school?"

I nodded.

"With a ruler, or a switch?"

"Mostly a ruler."

"Professor Krystof uses a cane. He's been known to break bones over the slightest impertinence."

"He's not a priest?"

"One of the few laymen on the faculty. He earned his post by debating the dean of theology on the Church's view of genocide."

The ball soaring in our direction, we returned to the game.

I trudged, soiled and sweaty, to the monastery with only moments to spare before the Vespers bell. Recollections of the mysterious Jan Krystof gazing down upon the soccer game haunted me as I chanted the Latin Psalms. The name smacked of Scandanavian origins, but his dark mien and slender frame reminded me more of Russian laborers I'd seen in old Movietone News clips, not the fair-haired, robust inhabitants of northern Europe

No one else in the monastery familiar with the university or its faculty, I was at a loss to find answers to my questions. Falling asleep after Compline - and reading two chapters of my theology text - I promised myself to seek out Shang Xian the next day and encourage him to finish the narrative he'd started during the soccer match.

Circumstances ensured I didn't have to look far. Seated in the rear of the auditorium for the morning's Evolution of Liturgical Music class, Xian chatted with a brawny Dominican priest from Morocco. I had no opportunity to interrupt their conversation before the subject of my inquiry entered through a side door and approached the lectern.

The elegantly carved and polished cane was poised to dissuade any protests.

Like an idiot, I stood, transfixed. His command to take our seats was uttered no louder than a whisper, yet everyone complied, except myself.

“Paul Marini!” In the silence which had enveloped the crowd, the words reverberated like a bass drum.

How did he know my name?

“Are you awake, sir?” Krystof snarled in English - rather than the Italian common among Gregorianum faculty - with the slightest trace of a New England accent.

Xian tugged me onto the wooden chair next to his. I stumbled over the leg, and pitched forward, nearly causing a domino effect along the entire row. Recovering at the last second, I raised my head and grinned sheepishly.

“Class clown, eh?” the professor scoffed.

“I’m sorry...”

“Be sorry all you wish, just be silent and attend to the exam you are about to take.”

As one, the assembly gasped. Krystof wasn’t the regular instructor for this course; for him to usurp the podium and subject us to such torture... What kind of influence did he have within these walls? I pondered.

Shang Xian and I emerged, exhausted, into the noonday sun after two hours pouring over fifty questions. If Krystof had written the test, he must’ve studied sacred music for decades. Still, given his shock of hair and smoldering eyes, his mind might harbor those creative demons which have the potential to drive a man to the edge of sanity.

“What does he really teach?” I asked my companion, crossing the piazza.

“Renaissance era philosophy.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m going to have his class next term,” he assured me.

“How did he know my name?”

“He knows the identity of everyone who’s been playing soccer. He’s trying to get the games banned.”

“Are you sure?”

“His letter to our General was delivered last evening,” Xian admitted.

“Fortunately, Father Moreau is an understanding sort. He encourages the friars to pursue physical activities, even allowing me to practice kung fu. The balance of body, mind and spirit may be an Oriental concept, but he has taken it to heart.”

“In America, I hear, the idea is taking root, as well.”

“Not in the purest sense. Some pursue the state merely for the experience, even using drugs to hurry a process which takes years to achieve.”

“How do you know so much?”

“We are allowed to read the Sunday newspapers at the General House.”

“Lucky Franciscans.”

Xian sighed. “I don’t know. Rarely are there any positive stories, just crime, poverty, corruption and death. As a hermit, you are spared that knowledge.”

“There, you’re wrong. We still get mail from souls hungering for relief from such affliction.”

Reaching the Via del Corso, we parted company on that note.

Being a hermit by my vows, I was charged with resisting worldly temptations, and the idle curiosity which led souls into sin. I couldn’t help but wish to view the great structures and sites where so much Christian history had taken place, despite this directive. I abandoned my direct route to the monastery, selecting a different course each day, while not technically breaking obedience. This way, I got to see St. Mary Major, the Vatican, the Circus Maximus, and the Jewish Ghetto. I also mingled with residents and tourists and, being multi-lingual, unintentionally eavesdropped on conversations many thought were private.

Sundays were a day of rest, but not for me. Between the horarium of prayers and meals, I put forward my best effort to catch up on my homework. I was steadily falling behind, nonetheless, and was reluctant to ask the house superior for permission to spend extra time at the university’s library, doing research among its 900,000 books.

The horrifyingly low score on my mid-term theology exam prompted me to make the request. I was surprised to learn Father Emmanuel already knew of my struggles, including the Evolution of Liturgical Music test debacle.

“Given that your presence here means a great deal to our Order,” he stated, “we have engaged a tutor for you. You will meet him each afternoon at the library, but are warned against distractions and trivial banter.”

This lucky individual? Shang Xian.

“You volunteer for this?” I queried Monday in one of the reading rooms at the Gregorianum’s six-story library.

“I volunteered for the tutoring program. Once I earn my degree, I’ll be returning to China as a teacher. Helping others learn is good preparation.”

“How many students do you tutor?”

“Right now, four.”

“When do you have time to sleep?”

“During class, mostly.”

We both laughed, then cracked open the theology text and began a hushed discussion of the eighth chapter.

Gradually, my grades improved, and I was able to relax. Moreso when Xian revealed the secret of his tranquil spirit: kung fu.

After one extended tutoring session, he invited me to the Franciscan Generalate for a late meal. He also showed me a secluded corner of the walled - and well tended - garden, where he practiced his art after his brother friars retired for the evening. He moved with unrivaled dexterity, arms and legs mere blurs at moments. I stood in awe of the spectacle.

“My great-great uncle was a Shaolin monk,” Xian explained. “He taught these skills to his nephew, my grandfather, when that honored elder was but a child. It became a tradition for every son to learn them.”

“Aren’t Buddhist practices banned by the Church?”

“For me, it’s not about Buddhist practices, it’s about discipline and focus. If my body is in harmony with my mind and spirit, it is much easier for me to concentrate on my school work and the Franciscan charism. The point is to learn the forms so thoroughly, they are essentially forgotten. They become part of one’s nature, and the self finds peace.”

“Like what happens repeating the prayers of the rosary over and over, or the psalms from the Hours?”

“Exactly,” confirmed Xian.

“Would you teach me?” Perhaps my superiors would deem this boldness a violation of my vow of obedience, but I truly needed to find the focus to excel in my studies...

My first lesson, on the spot, involved breathing. “Few people pay attention to how life-giving oxygen enters and exits their bodies,” Xian declared. “Yet, awareness of this phenomenon is essential to optimizing every movement.”

Ten minutes elapsed in that endeavor. Then, Xian demonstrated simple methods to stretch. “Because you are older, you do not want to train without first preparing your muscles. Otherwise, you might injure yourself.”

He continued how children attend schools from the earliest age where kung fu is an integral part of the curriculum. Those young bodies can readily perform full splits, hand flips or complex sequences, due to their inherent flexibility. Though I’d been physically active, even as a hermit, my body would be functioning in new ways, so stretching would prove vital.

His last instruction during that initial session involved the “horse stance”. Legs wide apart, the torso settled down, as if riding a horse. Xian noted how this

helped with balance and finding a person's own center of gravity, which would prevent the student from falling when executing the forms.

"You can pray like this," concluded Xian. "You will be surprised how your concentration improves."

It surprised me more Xian numbered a handful of those attending the Gregorian as his kung fu students. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, during the afternoon siesta, they retreated to an empty classroom for ongoing training. He chuckled, "That way, no one violates obedience by leaving the grounds or neglecting their studies."

I hurried back to the monastery through evening traffic. I'd missed Vespers, but spent an extra 30 minutes in chapel after Compline - not in meditation on Scripture, but deliberating the connection of body, mind and soul.

Tuesday, I was introduced to the other martial art devotees - a diverse assortment of priests and brothers. While they labored with intricate forms, Xian showed me basic strikes and blocks. To toughen my arms, I punched the room's center pole, and bashed it with the sides of my forearms. Excruciating pain brought a grimace to my face, and my fellows commiserated fully, having stood in my sandals at various points in time.

Lucky our habits' long sleeves hid the bruises.

Shang Xian drew me aside periodically, to observe the more experienced in the group work with the bo - ordinarily a wooden staff, these mop handles borrowed from the janitor's closet - or present the latest form they'd mastered. Each at least ten years younger than myself, I envied their agility and speed. When one priest sank onto the floor, his legs fully extended 180 degrees, I winced with the knowledge my body could never perform such a feat.

"His family were Romany gypsies, forced west during World War II," Xian confided. "He trained in acrobatics, part of a troupe of strolling players earning money to support his parents and siblings."

I felt slightly relieved.

These sessions exhausted, yet simultaneously invigorated me. I discovered new sources of energy to dedicate to my studies, and spent quiet moments at the monastery balanced in the horse stance, or punching my pillow in my cell.

Xian's lecture on chi, the power within the soul, so to speak, enthralled me. Nine eager, robed figures sat cross-legged on the floor, listening with every fiber of their being. No magical nonsense or superstitious tripe, proper breathing combined with focused movements could make a blow accurate and deadly.

In defense of one's own safety, only. Never for aggressive purposes.

Chuckling, I rose. The philosophy fit Xian's Franciscan charism of peaceful coexistence with nature and mankind.

Little did any of us realize we'd be called upon to defend ourselves much sooner than expected.

The soccer matches had moved from the pavement near the Gregorianum to the Piazza Navone, thanks to Jan Krystof's interference. The layman exerted great influence with the university's superiors, and I couldn't understand why. He would pop up in classrooms at odd moments, quizzing students and berating slackers with a crack of his cane. He reminded me of the dean of students at the Catholic high school I slogged through in southern Michigan. That tyrant also had made his presence - and his disdain - well known among the pupils.

I'd never had a problem with authority, when that authority made decisions based on the good of all, not personal ambition. In my earlier years with the Camaldolese, two brothers got under my skin: one charged with reading incoming mail, who delighted in withholding certain letters he selectively deemed "inappropriate" until begged by the addressee; another the tailor, who consistently gave younger members the most ragged hand-me-downs, believing them "undeserving" of robes made from new bolts of material.

Jan Krystof's attitude far exceeded those men's petty tyranny.

And no one I spoke with knew the source of his hostility.

Whether he'd been a cleric and left his order, and carried a grudge against all religious, mattered little. Those who dared oppose him were summarily expelled from the school, their congregations shamed.

Shang Xian had been on Krystof's radar since the day the Oriental started classes. My friend related how his superior at the Generalate received, on average, one letter a week, protesting trifles in Xian's behavior and demanding strict compliance with Krystof's bizarre interpretation of the university's code of conduct. The Franciscan more compassionate, he dismissed such tirades.

Not seeing any change in Xian's demeanor irritated Krystof further. The inner peace flowing from his practice and meditation, however, enabled Xian to ignore the pervasive threat from dark eyes peering around corners and hovering near lecture hall doors.

We continued to train, and I grew more and more comfortable with the limitations of my body. Xian described how the animal-based kung fu styles - crane, eagle, snake, praying mantis, dragon and tiger - made it possible for those with differing levels of strength and coordination to still become adept in the art.

"No one style is preferable to another," he said. "And each can be adapted with elements from the others, to create a comprehensive style for the practitioner."

Integrating bits of tiger, snake and crane, I compensated for my legs' refusal to kick higher than my waist. I could block high kicks, though, and developed a decent level of accuracy when aiming a punch at an opponent.

Some days, I wished that opponent was Jan Krystof.

The uproar when he had Shang Xian banned from the list of approved tutors reached the Jesuit administrators. Not only did students protest, so did their superiors. The letter from St. Gregorio al Celio was hand delivered to the Jesuit Father General at his residence on the Borgo Santo Spirito.

The pleas fell on deaf ears.

Xian delayed in class one Tuesday, I addressed my fellow kung fu enthusiasts seated in our stark training hall. "We must discover why Jan Krystof exerts such power within the university. And, that known, we must bring it to an end."

"What about our vows?" ventured a solid German Dominican.

"Chastity, poverty and obedience will not suffer if we stand up to injustice," I retorted. "Were not men of our cloth called upon to do likewise in the Second World War, and in countries where governments oppress the people?"

A wave of nods rippled around the circle.

"We must keep our eyes and ears open, and discreetly question those instructors who are trustworthy. When we find out Krystof's secret, we can devise a plan to oust him."

My good intentions didn't amount to much, considering I missed blocking a kick to my chest ten minutes later, and wound up with a broken left arm.

At the Ospedale di Santo Spirito, I was x-rayed and treated by skilled doctors, then confined to a bed where gentle Benedictine nurses in white habits ministered to my needs. Knowing I was a student at the Gregorianum, some asked if I knew others who had been patients in the facility.

Familiar names, all bearing wounds from Krystof's cane.

"Sister," I prompted the smiling angel feeding me a bland dinner, "what is the source of this man's power?"

"It is rumored he is cousin to the present pope," she chuckled, stuffing a forkful of overcooked beef in my mouth. "Others say he is with Italian intelligence, charged with rooting out communist infiltrators."

"Unlikely," was my response, struggling to chew the stringy meat. "I'd lay odds he's American, or was educated in the States, given his accent."

My recuperation gave me ample opportunity to ruminate over an endless list of possibilities. I attended class and continued to handle my homework and studies. Being exempted from menial duties at the monastery proved embarrassing, as did sitting and watching the twice-weekly kung fu practices.

We had no more insight into this matter when the new term began after the Christmas holidays. Xian had received a troubling missive from his home province in China: Krystof had written his superior there, in fluent Mandarin, about the situation.

"We know he speaks English, Italian, and a host of other languages," Xian muttered one evening as we strolled along the Corso Victor Emmanuel II. "He writes them equally well. Could he be a spy?"

"Even if he was, he wouldn't have the pull to cause so much trouble for the students," I countered. "He reminds me of stories I read about the Inquisition..."

"The Inquisition exists to this day, under a different name."

I stared at Xian. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. They call it the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It may not be as... visible as in centuries past, or as violent, but those who do not follow the faith to the letter are dealt with no less cruelly."

"How so?"

"Excommunication."

Being excommunicated, for a Catholic, meant eternal damnation. A priest or religious faced with that prospect would, normally, do anything to avoid it. The threat had kept many timid souls in check, though the atmosphere since Vatican II was moving away from the blind obedience of previous decades. Nuns were casting off their over-starched habits, crying to be ordained priests. Priests petitioned to marry. Birth control, drug use, and extra-marital affairs were rampant.

"Do you know anyone at the Vatican?" I puzzled.

Xian replied, "No, but Father Superior does."

"Do you think he could make a call?"

"I'll ask."

In a strange way, it might make sense if Jan Krystof had been charged by the modern Inquisition to serve as undercover "doctrine police". He would definitely object to the introduction of Eastern practices into the daily horarium, and target the instigator. Any unconventional ideas, for that matter, would be suspect.

The next question: to what extreme would he take matters if the situation grew really serious?

My concept of serious and Krystof's did not mesh, obviously. For me, ten men kicking a soccer ball around a park on a sunny Saturday afternoon was not serious. For Krystof, when those ten were suspected of secretly training in Eastern warrior techniques, it was.

He called out the Swiss Guard.

Despite their colorful uniforms and oft-ceremonious duties, these men did have the training to serve as soldiers in battle. Their halberds were carried for show, but did have deadly points - and they carried pistols, when occasion necessitated.

If Krystof intended to publicly humiliate the “heretics”, he didn’t count on one aspect of the European mind: an almost fanatical love of soccer. Our impromptu match had drawn a crowd of neighbors and tourists, young and old, who were cheering for the “blacks” or the “whites” - the colors of our habits. They viewed the parade of Swiss Guards as some sort of military drill, I suppose, because they ignored the patrol, riveted by the tight competition on the grass.

“Stand down!” Krystof yelled in Italian, perched on the pedestal of a statue.

All I heard was a faint echo above the clamor, just before the ball arced into the net..

Signaling a victory for the white squad.

The field was swarmed by well-wishers; the Guard shoved through the crush toward us. My reaction to being roughly grabbed by the shoulder involved twisting the assailant’s wrist before I ever saw his face, or uniform. He lay on the ground with two broken ribs before I realized what I’d done.

My teammates showed more restraint, nonetheless disabling their would-be captors. Krystof, his plan spoiled, summoned the Carabinieri. We’d gone from committing no crime to battery, subject to arrest by the civil authorities.

We escaped the throng of spectators and ran in ten different directions, hiding wherever we could find an open shop or unlocked door.

One problem with being a religious in Rome: our distinctive habits. While many congregations sent their members to school in the ancient city, it wasn’t difficult for a trained eye to pick out a specific person along the streets.

Cowering in the store room of a restaurant, a single course of action lay ahead of me. I had to shed my robes - fortunately, wearing slacks and a t-shirt beneath - then make my way to St. Peter’s, fleeing local police jurisdiction. Vatican City being its own country, the Italians only intervened when requested by the Pope.

I had to see the Pope, to prevent Jan Krystof’s twisted ideals from ruining ten lives, maybe more.

My confreres from the Gregorianum devised similar plans, from what I could guess, because we converged in St. Peter’s Square after midnight. Sneaking into a dormitory through an open window, we commandeered a

selection of black priest's cassocks, much less conspicuous than our respective official garb. We huddled together at the base of the obelisk between the curved, twin colonnades, unable to sleep for the nerves.

Shang Xian whispered, "At first light, we shall seek out His Holiness, and beg him for a hearing. Whatever evidence Jan Krystof has gathered, we will refute it, as loyal sons of the Church."

"Amen," we chorused weakly.

Dawn broke over the mountains east of Rome, finding us crouched in defensive postures, encircling the obelisk, facing an oncoming horde of Swiss Guards.

Hand-to-hand combat is a lost art, I guess, given the development of machine guns, bombs and other weapons. Once the young squad was disarmed, they didn't know how to subdue us without winding up in hospital. Their valiant - and noisy - effort roused the Curia from a deep slumber, and up in the Apostolic Palace, shutters clattered open and a wizened mien gazed down upon the fracas.

The Pontiff's personal guards scrambled into a prayerful genuflection, thinking a blessing forthcoming. We, our black disguises tattered and bloodied, stood shoulder-to-shoulder, knowing this to be our last chance for survival.

The Cardinal Camerlengo sent an escort to guide us up the Scialoja staircase to the Papal apartments. Breviary resting in his lap, the Pope glanced up from his armchair as we filed through the door.

We'd all seen photos of this humble yet holy man, all in white. Viewing him in a quilted green robe and house slippers rattled me and, I suspect, the others.

Except Xian. He was first to drop on one knee, hoping - praying - for a blessing, rather than a reprimand.

His students followed suit.

"It is good to see the ten who fight like tigers showing respect to their elders," quipped the aging Vicar of Christ.

"We have only respect for you, and those rightfully in authority, Your Holiness," Xian replied. "We fight against those who abuse their position to harm the innocent."

The Pope rose, grasping a plain wooden cane. "Someone who works within these walls?"

"An instructor at Gregorian University. Jan Krystof."

A knowing light flickered in the Pontiff's eyes. He hobbled to the ornate desk, plucking a thick manila file from among stacks of papers and bound documents. While we waited on our knees, he rifled the sheets, muttering to

himself. Resting the file on his blotter, he thumped it with the index finger on which he wore the ring of his office.

“Once upon a time, Jan Krystof was a reliable source of information for the Congregation which employs him,” stated the Pope. “He made us aware of errors in doctrine being taught at the Pontifical Universities, and enabled us to... redirect these teachers without having to remove them from their posts. Lately, however, he has become obsessive in his task. I have read the assignments you have submitted, and reviewed your transcripts. I find nothing threatening in your statements, nor in your... extracurricular activities.”

He stepped toward Shang Xian, extending his hand for the Oriental Franciscan to kiss the ring. “I have the utmost respect for the discipline of the East. We need more of it in the West.”

I heaved a sigh, audible to all present. The Pope chuckled, then we joined him.

“I meant to have Jan Krystof recalled from his duties months ago, but pressing matters delayed me.” He signaled us to rise. “I will have my secretary prepare the necessary letters today.”

“And the civil police?”

“Will not bother you,” he promised, signing a blessing over our heads.

True to his word, we walked from Vatican City to the Gregorianum unhindered by law enforcement. Our lives might have returned to normal, Jan Krystof out of the picture - and rumored reassigned to a post in Africa - except for the fame we acquired as the “Ten Tigers”. Shang Xian understood the label, given the legendary Chinese fighters who bore the same designation. We might’ve laughed at the comparison, except for the constant interruptions to our daily lives by those who attempted to hire us to handle their personal squabbles, or even serve as body guards for Cardinals and high-ranking Curia officials.

The Jesuit dean of academics at the Gregorianum posted notices a few weeks later, sanctioning our twice weekly gatherings as a university sponsored program. Our numbers swelled, though many of the newcomers were not serious, merely curious. Injuries abounded, and the undisciplined swiftly abandoned our ranks.

The Ten Tigers were scheduled to present ourselves at the Vatican for an exhibition the evening before Pentecost. Not knowing what would be expected of us, we prepared as best we could, perfecting our forms and choreographing matches to ensure realism without broken limbs.

This sudden fame - bolstered by articles in *L’Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican’s own newspaper, and interviews on Vatican Radio - had major drawbacks. The monks at St. Gregorio al Celio grew more and more annoyed

with my presence. Constant phone calls and dozens of letters disrupted their quietude. Technically a guest, though a member of the same religious Order, they politely but firmly requested their superior send me back to Arezzo, my studies incomplete.

Shang Xian, as *sifu* - teacher - received most of the attention, choosing to share it with us. His superiors, perhaps because of their charisma, saw the young friar as an ambassador for Christ, with myriad opportunities to bring others to the faith through this facet of his native culture.

When I complained about the differences in attitudes between our religious communities, he mirthfully suggested, "Transfer to the Franciscans. It's been done before."

My reasons for being a hermit had not changed with my time in Rome, and even the kung fu training I would take with me into isolation, practicing as one, instead of among many. "No," I replied. "I am what I am."

"You're not thinking of dropping out?"

"No. I will finish what they sent me to do, unless *they* change their minds."

"Good, because you have an exceptionally quick mind for absorbing knowledge, and a reasonably fit body..."

"For a man my age?" I added.

He smirked.

Like a football team preparing for a home game, the Ten Tigers knelt in prayer at the foot of the St. Paul statue, then rose and laid our hands one atop the other. Xian stated, "Let's get this done, and get back to our lives."

He thought the excitement would end after our show.

It was only beginning.

Obedience, like a diamond, has many facets as a religious vow. One of those, since dispensed with in most instances, saw superiors agreeing to tasks on behalf of their communities, informing the involved parties after arrangements had been finalized. So it was for the Ten Tigers, whose destinies were dictated by this vow.

We learned, in the days following our triumphant exhibition, that we had been removed - temporarily - from our roles as students at the Pontifical Gregorian University, and assigned to a "special congregation" of the Vatican. The Pope had bigger things in mind for us than being scholars, teachers or hermits.

He needed a squad of commandos.

Shang Xian, his opposition to China's communist regime not concealed, knew how Catholic priests and bishops were treated in the People's Republic.

Similar conditions existed in the Soviet Union, and many clerics found themselves shipped to Siberia. One Cardinal, a Maryknoll missionary, had fled his imprisonment and was hiding in a small village on the Mongolian border. Old and ill from his time behind bars, he would die if the Church didn't rescue him and get him adequate medical care. His life held value because of the knowledge he'd amassed from years among the communists, and the Pope wanted to use that knowledge to better relations with these atheist countries.

The Ten Tigers would handle the rescue operation.

The Monday after the Feast of Corpus Christi, we drove in two separate vans to an airstrip east of Rome, where a U.S. Air Force C-130E waited on the tarmac. We were ushered into a make-shift conference room above the cargo bay, where seats around an oblong metal table had lap belts.

A cruising altitude of 35,000 feet went unheeded, since our briefing commenced no more had the landing gear left the ground. The team leader tried to deny his affiliation with the American Central Intelligence Agency, unsuccessfully. The very maps he unrolled on the pocked table surface indicated top secret reconnaissance technology. No one else would dare infiltrate Chinese and Soviet air space to capture such aerial photographs.

Students at the Gregorianum required to be bilingual, of necessity - speaking their native tongue and Italian, at least - I found myself translating the mission instructions for my comrades. We would wear black sweats and ski masks, making a low-level parachute drop five miles outside the town where Cardinal Wu was being hidden.

That made a few jaws drop.

"Jump from a plane?" protested Shang Xian, on behalf of all. "None of us has ever..."

"You'll be paired with an experienced paratrooper, who will be armed in case the situation... gets out of hand," I interpreted in response.

Four of those paratroopers would be assigned to carry the litter on which Cardinal Wu would be carried back to the aircraft, which would land on a paved road near the village once they received the appropriate signal. The other six soldiers would be armed to the teeth: automatic rifles, grenades, and even a rocket launcher.

I feared innocent people might get killed, and expressed those sentiments aloud.

"Get some sleep," the agent advised, ignoring my statement. "You'll need to be in top form when we hit the ground."

Impossible for me to sleep on a transport soaring through the atmosphere while simultaneously being refueled. Add turbulence and the droning of massive propeller-driven engines, and I was a wreck by the time we started the descent.

Things went bad from the start. Two of the soldiers - who'd completed countless parachute jumps during their training and careers - landed improperly, breaking bones. Four others from the platoon remained behind to convey the injured to the pick-up site.

Conversely, Ten Tigers who'd learned how to fall emerged from the dawn-lit field intact. We jogged along a rutted dirt road toward the village, in better shape than our camouflaged associates. Shang Xian had recognized the area when he'd studied the aerial photographs, so we had no real need for guides, who lagged behind and nearly imperiled us all.

I don't think they considered a Cardinal's life valuable enough.

The villagers were already stirring when we approached the settlement, as is the way in agricultural communities. Chickens wandered the main street, chased by stray dogs and children. Women toted water jugs or laundry baskets to a nearby stream. Men carried hoes to the rice patties.

And we stealthily crept past the rear of ramshackle dwellings to one notable for its corrugated tin roof. Through a gap in the shuttered window, we glimpsed Cardinal Wu sprawled on a straw mattress, covered by a moth-eaten blanket. He might have already been dead, given his appearance, except for an occasional raspy intake of breath.

The structure's occupants never knew we'd been there - at least, not until they entered the room to check on their guest. The remaining four soldiers demurred when it came time to carry the litter; we grasped the handles with pride.

I had to wonder at this attitude from the paratroopers. Had they been commandeered into this mission, like we had, seeing no purpose to it? Or, had they been ordered to foul things up deliberately, to ensure we'd be captured and the American authorities would not be accused of meddling in international affairs?

Whatever the reason, we made it back to the airstrip, and the plane landed on time. A medic tended the Cardinal en route to Rome, giving him intravenous fluids and medication to ease his fever, and chicken broth until his stomach could handle more solid foods.

Wu received a hero's welcome at the Vatican, as did we. There would be no newspaper articles or radio interviews this time, however. We were sworn by the Pope himself to never reveal our role in these events, allowed to return to class until such time as we were again needed in our special capacity.

The Ten Tigers disbanded when Shang Xian graduated with top honors from the Pontifical Gregorian University three years later. He urged me to assume his place as teacher for the group, but I, too, had my fill of studies and was ready to return to my hermitage.

We embraced that last time at the train termini, and would exchange letters through the years. The best thing about my friendship with him, though, was being able to take the kung fu back to Arezzo with me and practice it in a small forest clearing, continually forging the union of body, mind and spirit in my service to Christ's people.

The Masters Secret

Four women had disappeared in six weeks.

The incidents merited no news coverage - or so the major media outlets agreed - because no connection existed between the women. They were all of legal age, and there were no signs of foul play.

The sole announcement of their missing person status amounted to small photos in the daily paper, and physical descriptions.

Bonita Sanchez worked as a bank teller, dark hair and complexion, 5'5" tall, weighing 130 pounds. Christy Overgaard, blond and leggy, owned The Vine restaurant, a favorite after-theatre dinner spot in the heart of downtown. An exotic dancer, Darlene Wykamp rivaled most twenty-something beauties, with auburn tresses and flashing green eyes, standing a statuesque 5'10". Brunette, buxom attorney Lynn Anderson had a booming divorce practice, occasionally assisting as a public defender.

The only common thread between the quartet: co-workers (no immediate family members) reported the women had left their places of employment on Friday evening, and never returned to work for the next scheduled shift. No use of credit cards or cell phones had been noted after those respective times.

Tingles coursed up Rachel Tinley's spine when she read police reports recounting this information. The *Herald's* publisher, however, rejected her copy intended to make the link public.

"If the authorities aren't overly concerned, there's no need to make a big deal about it," he declared.

Carrying some clout as city editor, Rachel countered, "You'll change your tune when they start finding bodies."

However, she had no intention of waiting that long. On her lunch hour, and after work, she began visiting the businesses where these women spent their days, questioning those who'd last seen them. Nothing clicked as possible clues - no signs of depression, nor reason for any of them to suddenly leave town or go into hiding, no recent broken relationships...

The unexpected sighting of a distinctive individual gave Rachel pause. She'd emerged from The Vine just as the Saturday matinee by the *Rent* touring company ended. Theatre patrons filed from the nearby Underwood Performing Arts Pavilion *en masse*, yet this figure stood out not so much due to his wavy brown hair, erect bearing, sculptured physique evident through black turtleneck and trousers, but because of the mesmerized flock of females following him.

Rachel could definitely see why, but what good would it do them? The man never turned, never paid any attention to his admirers. He approached a sleek 1974 silver Corvette, crawled behind the wheel and roared into traffic.

Disappointed sighs escaped the throng in chorus; they reluctantly shuffled back to their escorts for the ride home.

A prolonged detour into the *Herald's* office preceded Rachel's stop at Ye Olde Dublin Inn, a local pseudo-Irish watering hole. She'd traveled to Ireland numerous times, and knew American versions of the homey village pub were faint imitations. She slid onto a bar stool and ordered her regular: a double shot of Jameson.

Glass in hand, she shifted her focus to an assessment of the other patrons. Journalistic instinct always kicked in during such moments, searching for interesting stories to fill the ever-decreasing columns of the *Herald's* Local section. Not much today, though. Some young families enjoying an early dinner, a few college students...

And him.

He sat at the far corner table, opposite two other men, deep in discussion. Taking no notice of her - or any other women in the room blatantly ogling him - he never once cracked a smile, so she guessed it wasn't merely a social conversation.

"Who is that guy?" Rachel asked, twirling toward the bartender.

The stocky attendant's reaction struck her as unusual. Without replying, he moved along the bar and flipped through an appointment calendar. It took awhile to find what he sought, then he retraced his steps.

"He's David Masters."

"How'd..."

"He came in to reserve the upstairs for a meeting next month. I didn't remember his name off-hand, so I checked the reservation schedule. He's steward for the local brick layers' union."

Rachel whipped around to gaze again toward the corner. That was no brick layer, she could almost guarantee.

Laying \$20 on the table, Masters rose and departed with his companions. Three females abandoned their respective meals to give chase.

A week later, another missing person report crossed Rachel's desk. She recognized the photo as one of the trio who left Ye Olde Dublin Inn that night in pursuit of David Masters.

At least, now, she'd have a reason to approach him.

And she didn't even have to spend time hunting up his address. On her way to lunch, she saw his distinctive silver Corvette stop near a downtown

construction site - another high-rise office building which would mostly stand empty for twenty years until they tore it down, as they had the lot's previous occupant.

Casually, she strolled past the chain-link fence, as he supervised bricks being mortared into place on the quaint facade. The lower floors, evidently, would be retail shops, designed to resemble a village thoroughfare. Above, who knew?

Masters dodged an oncoming pallet of materials, and collided with Rachel. He spun, riveting displeased gray eyes on her. "This is a restricted area," he scolded in a caustic baritone.

She retorted, "Not to members of the press, I'm thinking."

"The press, too. Out, before you get hurt."

"Mr. Masters, I have a couple questions I'd like to ask you."

"Who are you?"

"Rachel Tinley, of the *Herald*."

He turned his back. "I don't give interviews. Contact the union publicist."

"It's not about the union, or this project. I want to know when you last saw Ginger Everett."

"Who?"

"She was at Ye Olde Dublin Inn last Saturday, same time as you, and made quite a show of following you out to the street."

"I don't bother with every bimbo who shakes her ass at me on the sidewalk. Now, scram."

She withdrew reluctantly, wanting to tell him the missing woman didn't qualify as a "bimbo". Her position as assistant county assessor would be held open until she was located or contacted the office to tender her resignation.

How could a man, so attractive to women, not heed the puppy-like procession wherever he went?

How could he display such a cavalier attitude about other human beings?

The editor paused beside the Corvette, running calloused fingers through her wind-blown light brown shag when she glimpsed her unkempt reflection in the driver's side window. A second later, Masters walked up behind her, close enough she could feel the incredible heat his body generated.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Admiring my old car."

This statement flustered him, she could tell, and it pleased her, given his superior demeanor. He snarled, "What do you mean?"

"If the transmission still hangs up a half-second when you pop it into fourth, it's the car my parents gave me for a high school graduation present. A

friend sold it to my dad cheap before the Navy sent him overseas. Same year, same color..."

"I was thinking of dumping it, because no mechanic has been able to fix the tranny problem. Otherwise, I haven't had a lick of trouble since I bought it five years ago."

"The new ones don't look half as sweet..."

"True."

"If you're serious about selling, I'd like to buy it back."

"Why'd you ever give it up?" he prodded.

"I lost it racing for pink slips on the Interstate at midnight."

"Teenagers can be so stupid."

"Six years ago, I'd long since kissed my teens good-bye."

In the curved glass, she saw his steely eyes squint curiously. "If I decide to sell, I'll let you know," he concluded, moving toward the worksite.

At least, he could be civil, she mused, though the gravel in his voice never eased. That still didn't let him off the hook for his comment about Ginger Everett. Did he view all females as mere sex objects, their sole purpose his own personal gratification?

This unjustified opinion didn't prove he'd ever taken any of the women who trailed him around town to bed. And, even if he had, that was no crime. People went missing every single day, whether they wandered away from senior citizen facilities under the influence of Alzheimer's or dementia, decided their life in the present location was intolerable, or fell in the river while drunk. David Masters' biggest flaw might be such matters were dismissed as trivial in his book.

Annoying, but not a prosecutable offense.

Still, history had recorded numerous cases where union officials were convicted of multiple felonies and spent years incarcerated for bribery, racketeering and other crimes. Rachel decided, heading for her lunch meeting - for which she was already late - she would perform an informal background check on Masters.

Which came up clean, except for two speeding tickets - understandable, given the horsepower under the Corvette's hood, and the lead foot of many sports car enthusiasts.

Having his address made it possible for her to catch him off the clock, where he might more readily respond to her inquiries. With any luck, that tough exterior was an act to prevent distractions during the work day.

It wasn't.

The two-story penthouse in the high rise south of town overlooked the river, at just the right angle, and could have comfortably accommodated a small

army battalion. Furnished in Early American, with maple paneling, the decor was pleasant, but not overstated. Rachel judged the sofa hadn't been used since its purchase, the fate of many living room seats when their owner occupied himself with business, much of which cluttered the polished roll-top desk against the wall. Nowhere, however, were there any... personal touches. No family photos, no artwork, not even a dirty sock.

Masters strode across the carpet and poured himself a drink. He didn't offer Rachel anything, moving toward the bedroom door with the glass. She took it upon herself to empty the whiskey bottle into a tumbler; he didn't watch as she drained it in one gulp.

Her philosophy: never sip whiskey. Sipping makes a person look like a wimp.

On the threshold, she saw Masters disrobing. His frame wasn't pure muscle, like so many men who assumed women preferred rippling abs and toned biceps. Fit and trim, he was... perfect.

"You know why you're here," he stated. "Come in, or leave."

An odd precursor for a newspaper interview. Stranger still, when he crawled into the king-size bed, as if to go to sleep.

Not in the least a prude, she discarded her t-shirt and jeans, and slipped in beside him. If this was the way to get him to talk...

No cuddling or foreplay ensued; Rachel had never been with a man who didn't once kiss her during the course of their coupling... until now. He never spoke, never smiled, just thrust deep inside her until she thought she'd go mad. His lust finally sated, he rolled off and positioned himself facing the window. He was snoring quietly within five minutes.

Rachel lay awake, though, contemplating whether she should dress and make her exit, or stay and see what happened next.

She chose the latter.

The alarm clock sounded at 7:00 AM, and Masters sat up promptly. He barely glanced in Rachel's direction, tossing a wad of \$100 bills at her prone form.

She yawned and tossed them back. "I'm not in this for the money and, if I was, you couldn't afford me."

Her harsh tone may have intrigued or impressed him, she couldn't determine by his stony mien. His response: "I'm not in this for the long haul, but if you think you can be a bit more creative in the sack, you can come back tonight."

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't. Your technique could use a little originality, yourself."

He pulled a green terry robe over his boxers and walked into the bathroom, closing the door without another word.

Rachel sighed, grabbing her clothes. She left the bedroom, shower running in the background, halting only when a scrap of paper stuffed in the living room wastebasket beside the roll-top desk caught her eye in the dim light of a single table lamp.

With a quick glance over her shoulder, she retrieved the pinkish stationery before bolting from the penthouse.

The sunrise made sensor-activated street lights blink off and on as Rachel hurried to her car. Not until she arrived home and locked herself safely inside did she unfold the sheet and read.

Ginger Everett had written the suicide note, less than a week earlier.

"Dear David," it began. "It was my mistake to fall for you so fast, and finding out you don't feel the same hurts terribly. The dream I thought we could share has been destroyed, along with my reason for living. Good-bye."

So, the assistant county assessor had killed herself, method unknown. But, where was the body?

And did David Masters have the answer?

A determined smirk lit Rachel's face throughout the day, puzzling her *Herald* co-workers. They didn't know she'd resolved to confront Masters that evening, in a rather unique way.

He let her into the penthouse without any welcome or acknowledgment. As had transpired the previous night, he poured himself a drink and sidled into the bedroom. Before he could strip, however, she restrained his wrists behind his back with a pair of silver handcuffs.

"What the..." he protested, struggling.

"I used to date a cop," explained the editor. "He never realized he'd left these at my place by accident, and I figured they'd come in handy eventually." She twirled him to face her, and slowly began unbuttoning his white shirt. Her fingers caressed the smooth chest beneath. "You underestimate the value of foreplay, David. When both people are excited, it makes the sex much more invigorating."

By the time she worked her way down to unfastening his belt, two powerful hands had freed themselves and pinned her arms to her waist. A strange light burned in Masters' gray eyes. "I used to be a magician," he announced, cuffs dangling. "But I applaud you for the effort."

Tossing her on the bed, he finished disrobing and straddled her. "You've got spunk. I might keep you around awhile. Most women pout when I don't kiss and cuddle them, laying there like dead fish."

“You mean, like Ginger Everett and the rest who went missing?”

He didn't pause in his rhythm. “I don't know their names. Minor details don't concern me. Idiots, all of them. I presented a challenge to their feminine instincts, I suppose. They wanted to change me, soften my heart, make me care. When I refused to reciprocate their sappy idea of love and romance, or let them ensnare me, they...” He shrugged.

“What happened?”

“Two OD'd on pills they must've had in their bags, right here on the bed.”

That statement made Rachel squirm. Lying on a mattress where not one, but two women had died...

“Don't make a fuss,” Masters scoffed, trapping her shoulders. “I bought new sheets. Another slit her wrists in the bathtub. What a mess. One hung herself from the stair railing in the living room. Damaged the finish on the wood. The last jumped from the balcony and, oddly, landed right in the parking lot dumpster. I didn't waste my strength moving her.”

“What about the others?”

“I saved their relatives thousands by tossing them in holes at the construction sites where my guys have contracts.”

Disposing of the bodies must have thrilled him somehow, because he finished with Rachel, stood up and wrapped himself in the terry robe. Stunned, she remained immobile, a myriad of thoughts running through her head.

“What's wrong?” he queried.

She didn't immediately reply, and he snatched the tumbler of whiskey off the night stand, draining it. He tossed the handcuffs on her bare torso. “You going to report me to your ex-lover, the cop?”

“No, I guess not. Being self-centered isn't a crime.” She rolled off the mattress and fastened her blouse, zipping her jeans. Silently, she left, no longer interested in reclaiming the Corvette. The thought of driving it after Masters had touched the steering wheel with his contaminated hands repulsed her.

She had the answers to her questions - questions she'd wanted to put before the *Herald* readers, hoping they would assist in finding the missing women. Good thing, perhaps, her boss had killed the piece. If it had run, she would've been obligated to write the follow-up, recounting the self-inflicted deaths.

Rachel, nonetheless, slumped in her swivel chair, staring at the blinking computer monitor. She wondered how many more women would take their own lives thanks to the heartless, conscienceless, incredibly handsome David Masters.

No Middle Ground

Never did I doubt that if I could survive living with Sean Oliver, I could survive the most devastating natural disaster. I had done so for 15 years, ever since we came to the university. As young, tenure track professors, sharing a two-bedroom bungalow proved economically feasible. I grew accustomed to the brooding of this athletic, broad-shouldered individual after a time - even his periodic bouts of "writing fever". When our paths crossed that of Marca Regis, however, it was an enlightening experience for both of us.

A creature of habit, I accompanied Sean that sunny Wednesday morning from his Tennyson Hall office to the library auditorium for a Shakespeare lecture. Marca overtook us at a jog; we almost collided in the doorway. By the look of her, I would've sworn she had yet to graduate high school.

"Good morning, Professor." A mischievous glint shone in her blue eyes; obvious eccentricity flavored her choice of bell-bottom jeans and psychedelic silk blouse.

Oliver replied, "Good morning."

"Will we be studying *The Merchant of Venice* this semester?"

The question startled him. I knew most recent inquiries from his students had been directed toward his success as a science fiction novelist, not course requirements.

"We shall see," he replied.

As a student in my Music Theory class, Regis did not assert herself much. She scored well on quizzes and tests, and turned in assignments on time, but never spoke. With 300 students to monitor in six courses, this reticence didn't concern me.

Not even the fact Sean had commenced writing another novel at the start of the semester fazed me. I passed my evenings grading papers and reviewing transcripts. I discovered, during the latter pursuit, my estimate of Regis' age had been in error. That youthful face belonged to a 29-year-old computer science major.

One rainy Saturday, I leafed through a dusty stack in Sean's corner of the den - his students' ten page report on their choice of Shakespearian topic. Every year, I eventually volunteered to grade these papers, because they gave me valuable insights into young people's resourcefulness.

My red pen had a field day, correcting punctuation and spelling errors. I couldn't but ask myself: what had happened to the standards of elementary and

secondary education?

Sheet after sheet of pure hogwash taxed my mental faculties. Ready to toss the collection in the fireplace, I seized upon an original title: "*On the 20th Century*, by William Shakespeare". Typewritten, double-spaced, this manuscript boasted 30 sheets. I settled on the daybed, not moving for over an hour.

The author, asserting that the Bard had travelled through a time warp from 15th Century England, lambasted the literary inadequacies of our era. "Instead of romance, sex; music is cacophony, and foul-mouthed insults are poetry's surrogate." When I had digested the last sentence, a "10" marked the cover sheet, my highest score. To whom would I give credit for this essay, though?

Monday, Sean announced the reports could be retrieved by their authors. It did not surprise me when he related how, within hours, all vanished from his office except that masterpiece of ingenuity. Suspicious, I suggested Sean invite Marca Regis to dinner.

"What on earth for?" he challenged.

"I've a hunch."

"I'm too busy to entertain a flighty freshman, Cy. I'm in the middle of Chapter 3..."

A bit more persuasion brought Sean around to my way of thinking. He left a message on Marca's voice mail, and we ordered Chinese food.

While we waited, I positioned the unclaimed research paper on the living room coffee table. Sean paced the den, unlit Meerschaum pipe clenched between his teeth. An hour later, he once more labored frantically at his computer, leaving me to answer the doorbell and welcome our guest.

"I appreciate the invitation, Professor Watson," Marca greeted. "I can't stand dining hall food."

"When the wind is right, we can smell the stench. It doesn't do much for my appetite, I'll be frank."

I offered Marca a cocktail. She declined, though I detected a flash of longing in her eyes. Could one so young be a recovering alcoholic? I puzzled.

She sat on the green plaid sofa and flipped through a copy of *Time* magazine as I mixed myself a martini. Then, her gaze fell on the Shakespearian essay. She picked it up.

"So, you're the guilty one," I chided, joining her on the sofa.

"I'll accept the court's sentence for hunger in the first degree. I didn't have time to swing into town for lunch today."

Not the answer I expected. Oliver appeared at the door then, gray orbs burning with hatred. His manner reminded me of a murderer stalking a victim. I

paid little heed - familiar with his moods - but a frightened Marca leapt into my unwitting embrace.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you," Sean murmured. "The toner cartridge died."

I scolded, "Forget that book and tend to your social duties. After all, you were the one who invited Marca to dinner."

No sign of comprehension softened his intense mien. Scratching his unshaved chin, he snatched the Scotch bottle from the liquor cabinet and shuffled down the hall, leaving me to play host alone.

"I hope he didn't scare you too much," I apologized.

Marca recovered her composure, a hint of blush coloring her cheeks. "Forgive me, Professor. I never thought I'd encounter such a tortured soul again..."

Not daring to ask what she meant, I guided the conversation onto lighter topics. The evening passed rapidly - she had a remarkable sense of humor. As I locked up later, I noticed the mysterious report absent from the living room.

Noises awoke me around 2:00 a.m. At first, I thought Sean was watching television. Gathering my wits, I identified two people talking. I rose, pulled on my robe, and crept to the den.

"If you don't get away from that desk," Sean threatened, "I'll have you arrested for burglary."

A burglar! I raced to the kitchen pantry and grabbed the broom. Not much of a weapon, to be sure, but I refused to be caught empty-handed if the confrontation turned violent.

The argument escalated; I peered through the partially open door. Clearly agitated, Sean circled the cheap mock-oak desk. I could not see the intruder.

"I haven't come across anyone like you in years," a female voice chuckled. "I thought I recognized a kindred spirit from your behavior earlier."

"You obnoxious child, what do you know about living in hell?"

"Only that you won't find heaven again until you've written the last word - and there never is a 'last word'. No middle ground, eh, Sean? You can't just walk away from it, can you?"

"You've got ten seconds to leave the way you came in."

"Keeps you awake, doesn't it?" she persisted. "Makes every nerve tingle and your lungs tight, like someone who's fallen into a pit and is desperately trying to climb out before the tigers eat him."

"Get out!" Oliver roared. When I saw him snatch the letter opener off the blotter, I feared the worst. "No one comes in here to destroy my work and make a mockery of my pain."

I fully expected to hear a scream, or a plea for mercy. Instead, she laughed. I kicked the door wide as Sean raised his arm to strike. Marca dodged the thrust, and the letter opener flew into the fireplace.

"I dare you to try that again," she taunted.

With a hysterical growl, his vice-like grip closed around her throat. Her knees buckled; not until I seized his shoulders did he free her. She collapsed on the shag carpet, chest heaving.

"Are you all right?" I queried, stooping to her.

She panted, "He's a basket case, isn't he?"

"I've never seen him like this." I straightened and faced Sean, who stared at the oblong mirror above the fireplace. "What in thunder is going on here?"

He provided no answer; Marca did. "When I got to my dorm, I couldn't find my keys. Back-tracking, I figured they must've fallen out of my pocket while I was here. Seeing the light in this room, I knocked on the window, but Professor Oliver was asleep. I raised the screen and climbed through. While I was reading what he'd been writing, he woke up and accused me of deleting three chapters."

"What have you got to say, Sean?" I prodded.

"Get her out of here."

"What if she decides to press charges against you for assault?"

"She won't," he rumbled. "She has secrets of her own."

I offered to assist Marca; she grasped Sean's trembling hand and pulled herself upright. A bit weak, she retained her hold, tone grave. "We'll talk more when your manuscript is finished."

He raised her fingers to his lips - an uncharacteristic gesture - before retreating to the desk. Baffled by this awkward truce, I ushered Marca from the room, helped her locate the missing keys, and apologized again as she departed. I returned to bed, aching for sleep.

The sun roused me against my will. En route to the kitchen, I switched off the den's wall sconces. Chapter print outs lay in piles on the floor; Sean was sprawled, snoring, on the daybed. As long as he caused no further trouble, I intended to leave him be.

From past episodes, I knew that element of his life which had become second nature - showering, eating, dressing, etc. - would continue without his mental participation. He was otherwise useless, not answering the phone, taking only half-hour naps, sequestered in the house.

The writing marathon endured into the weekend. Sunday afternoon, Sean drained a fifth of whiskey, enabling him to sleep uninterrupted for 33 hours.

Waking him Tuesday morning, I insisted he come with me to the university.

He complied, more a zombie than a human being. Dean Garrett, head of the College of Arts and Letters, waited at Tennyson Hall when we arrived. He paid Sean the brusque compliment of noticing his sickly appearance.

"You haven't missed a class in 14 years, Professor Oliver," he stated. "To be gone this long..."

"There's a first time for everything," I asserted.

"Was it the flu?"

Sean didn't respond. I supplied my personal view of the situation, "A fever." I knew Garrett never would have accepted, nor comprehended, the way Sean abandoned all obligations to write.

It wasn't like I didn't have my own writing to do, either: a research paper on the revitalization of the Broadway musical for an international journal. Between classes and advising appointments, I proofread and edited the final draft over the next two weeks, printing 50 pages late that Sunday.

I consigned a padded envelope to the campus mailbox Monday morning. Marca Regis passed behind me at the same moment.

"Good morning, Professor Watson."

Whereas the fad of other students ran to logo shirts and bizarre haircuts, this female smacked of the Seventies. As I scrutinized her from a vantage point six inches above, she adjusted the tie-dyed headband holding back long, brunette curls. Her black trousers were painted with smiley faces, and an oversized peace sign adorned her denim shirt. Leather sandals and thick socks failed to protect her feet from the November slush.

Lean countenance set in a hard line, her thin lips betrayed the hint of a smile, a fire smoldering. Then I made the connection: hadn't it been said she had secrets? Marca shared the same creative spark which so often drove Sean Oliver to the brink of madness.

"You look like you could use a cup of coffee," I suggested.

We trekked to the Student Union. The conversation engrossed us to the point she missed her physics class, and I arrived ten minutes late for my lecture on diminished chords.

While Marca displayed traits both practical and extraordinary, Sean's unreliability persisted. Having waited for him in the parking lot with a near-blizzard raging Thursday evening, I wound my way to the Tennyson auditorium, only to hear a stern contralto through the gloom.

"You don't have to elaborate. It used to happen to me all too often. I'd be walking down the street and, bam! Next thing I knew, ten minutes had evaporated."

To whom had she spoken? No one answered.

"I could suggest a number of options," Marca persisted. "You could stay drunk, for instance, under the false assumption you'd eventually forget."

"You talk as if you've had quite a bit of experience," scoffed Sean's harsh tenor.

"Necessary experience, Professor."

"The escapades of teenage drunkards are not what I would deem necessary experience."

"I didn't drink as a kid. I was not a rebellious teenager. I ranked in the upper five percent of my high school class and spent my free time playing any instrument I could afford to buy. I knew I was meant to be a musician so, after I graduated, I hitchhiked to New York, my heart set on Julliard."

I heard Sean's disdainful grunt.

"You're right, it was a stupid thing to do. With my lack of formal training, I wasn't worthy of the school. I started hanging around Central Park between auditions for Broadway orchestras and regional symphonies. One Saturday, a group of strolling players was performing scenes from *Hamlet*. I approached the director on impulse and suggested adding incidental period music with my mandolin. That's how Mark del Coronado was born."

Sean voiced my astonishment. "You scored *Richard III* at the Stratford Festival."

"Seven years ago. My final engagement."

"Why didn't you use your real name?"

"Think about it, Professor. Back in the day when Shakespeare wrote his plays, women weren't allowed on the stage. It seemed more fitting for a man to compose the music which accompanied that hallowed dialogue, even three centuries later."

"So, why did you stop?"

"Burn out, desperation - the kind of madness the masses don't understand. Long after I went to work for a data processing firm, I still composed 17th century melodies at my computer terminal and conducted string quintets in my sleep. I started drinking. It got so I could empty a liter of scotch in a day and pass a sobriety test. When I wised up and dried out, I found I had yet to climb out of the pit."

"You can't be serious."

"Very serious, Professor. The only real cure for this affliction is death, though the bottle does speed up the process. Kills the brain cells which are trying to kill us, but serves no other purpose." I ducked into a doorway when she made

her exit, feeling quite ridiculous for having eavesdropped.

Vague recollections of Regis' award winning *Richard* composition, amazement at her casual attitude, and ongoing frustrations regarding Sean's behavior created a whirlpool inside my head. I walked back to the parking lot, unable to make sense of it all.

Even more senseless was how that awkward truce of days past blossomed into a bizarre alliance. Sean and Marca went everywhere together, quite the odd couple - Oliver six feet, bloated by drink, dark hair silvered at the sideburns; Marca short, narrow and carefree. I hoped against hope she wouldn't fall in love with him. Though her companionship cured him of his morbidity, romantic relationships between faculty and students were strictly forbidden by university policy.

For my part - besides preparing final exams - I concentrated on the spring semester's production of *Othello*. To make it a success, I would need all the help available, including student-actors of near professional quality. I needed a Mark del Coronado to provide the music.

Marca Regis stayed in town during winter break, and became a regular fixture at our house. She challenged Sean to games of chess, backgammon or Parcheesi - even snowball fights in the back yard. They spent evenings near a roaring fire in the den planning a New Year's trip to Bermuda and swapping stories, or at the local comedy club.

Marca helped us sort through old Christmas decorations, select and cut our tree. Venturing to the mall, we gorged ourselves on peanut butter fudge, bought new ornaments and Santa Claus hats with our names in sprinkles. Looking like a trio of elves, we paraded past the shoe stores and jewelers', until a window display caught Sean's eye.

A small but detailed mountain climber charm hung on a delicate gold chain. He offered it to Marca as a Christmas present. I intervened. "If word got around that you gave it to her, you'd both be in trouble."

Sean had some choice words against the university policy. Marca silenced him. "I don't need trinkets to remind me of the truth. Thanks, anyway, for the thought."

Later, we dined at a Mexican restaurant and listened to a mariachi band play Christmas carols. Exhausted yet content, we returned home after midnight.

The following afternoon, Marca arrived while Sean had gone shopping for some new clothes - the first time in years. I decided to take advantage of his absence. Making a show of washing three days' worth of dishes, I offered Marca a seat at the kitchen table and some hot chocolate. "How's your course load for next

semester?"

"Pretty light, actually. I've completed all my general requirements, so I can get started on my major - slowly."

"Good for you. You'll have plenty of time for all those activities college students enjoy so much."

"Oh, no, Professor. I'm too old to be hanging out at bars or making a fool of myself at basketball games."

"That's not what I meant. Aren't you active in any clubs, like the Student Orchestra?"

Marca's face blanched; she choked on her drink. Through a prolonged coughing spell, she glowered at me. "Why on earth would I want to be part of the Student Orchestra?"

Though her reaction flustered me, I forced myself to remain nonchalant. "It's just that we need trained musicians for *Othello*..."

Her expression darkened; I felt a chill run up my spine. No demon could have instilled more terror into a man's soul.

Abruptly, she smiled. "Of course, you're getting Sean involved in the production, aren't you?"

"I hadn't really..."

"Oh, but you must! Who else can help inexperienced actors understand iambic pentameter and the meaning of Shakespeare's phrasing?"

I saw where she was leading me and, if it would guarantee her cooperation, I'd have asked the United States President to join the crew. "That's a fantastic idea," I agreed. "I could use a good technical advisor."

"Better yet, he could direct." Marca drained her mug and rose. I escorted her to the front door, and promised to remind Sean she would meet him downtown for dinner.

In parting, I commented, "It'll be marvelous having you with the production. Too bad, though, we don't have anyone the calibre of Mark del Coronado to compose the score."

She spun on the steps, glowering. "Del Coronado's career ended years ago. Some say he's dead."

"That's a pity." As the door closed, I laughed.

Christmas presents came in the mail two days later: letters from both the journal and Sean's publisher, accepting our most recent submissions. In the same bundle, Sean received a Christmas card from Marca Regis. He read it, dismayed.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I don't know." He thrust the card at me. A stiff, upright hand had

scrawled, "Again Iscariot betrays the Christ. All that is left is the agony of death."

"What does that mean?" I mused.

"She thinks I've betrayed her. I'd swear I didn't tell a soul..."

Within a few hours, Oliver had disappeared, taking a suitcase of new clothes. He returned the last day of semester break, tanned and relaxed. Although he never revealed where his travels had taken him - I assumed Bermuda - his good spirits vastly improved our association.

For this reason, I wasn't too concerned when my Friday afternoon class ran late. I knew Sean wouldn't be too cross about waiting, despite the freezing wind. Reaching the parking lot, in fact, I glimpsed Marca deep in discussion with him.

She sat on the Blazer's hood, smirking like a Cheshire cat. "For a long time now, I've been happy."

"Hypocrite! At least, I admit writing causes problems I can't always handle. You deny the truth of who you are!"

"What truth? That I grew tired of living in a pit?" she cried. "Life is to be enjoyed, not dreaded."

Marca jumped from the vehicle's path when Sean started the engine and lurched forward. Wheels screeched as he stopped to pick me up; I glanced over my shoulder. A corner of my heart commiserated with her, the rest preoccupied with my own problems, foremost of which were the *Othello* auditions.

Why Sean locked himself in the den that weekend with a gallon of Jack Daniels, I could not fathom. Monday, he called in sick, which prompted a rash of inquiries from the Arts and Letters administrators.

"Dean Garrett wants to see you in his office at 4:00 this afternoon," I called through the bolted door, arriving home Tuesday. "He won't tolerate any more excuses."

The knob turned, and a burst of stagnant, whiskey-scented air assailed me. "I'll go on one condition: that Marca is here when I return."

"What's so important?"

"I have to make it clear that I didn't break faith with her."

"You can see her tonight. She'll be at the auditions for *Othello*."

Absolute horror claimed his haggard countenance. "My God, Cy, was it you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I merely asked Marca if she'd like to try out for the quartet. She agreed, as long as you volunteered to help."

"What? You know I won't go near the theatre. You can't risk making her play, either. Lord knows what will happen."

"Oh, please, Sean. Music of this complexity needs her talents..."

We had no chance to continue the argument, interrupted by the doorbell. A peek through the window revealed Marca on the front porch, smiling innocently, garbed in tweed suit and a wide purple tie.

She breezed across the threshold; I noticed her close-cropped hair. She, in turn, had noticed Sean leaning against the den's doorjamb.

"Good Lord, you're bombed," she observed.

He drawled, "And if I am?"

"It just compounds the guilt, doesn't it, Judas?"

Marca dragged him by the collar into the kitchen. I followed, curious. Sean was slammed onto an unyielding wooden chair.

"What are you up to?" he stammered.

"I came to make sure you get to the auditions. Professor Watson thinks you should occupy the director's chair, and I need a pair of strong hands to hold the rope."

"What rope?"

"The rope by which I will climb out of the pit into which you've thrown me."

Sean berated her with obscenities I'd never heard him use before. She listened to the tirade, grinning. When he sputtered to a stop, she remarked, "Now we get you sober and over to Broome Hall."

Resigned, Sean let Marca force a few cups of day-old coffee down his throat. She convinced him to shower and shave, helping him dress in a suit she selected from his closet. Next, she commandeered the Blazer's keys and drove us both to campus.

Of necessity, the auditions took place in the third floor corridor of Broome Hall. Oliver sarcastically commended me on this professionalism.

"I can't help it if the stage floor is being waxed," I retorted.

Sixty-seven aspiring actors competed for thirteen major roles in this Shakespearian tragedy. Sean, Marca and I sat at a card table, watching successive pairs of students read a scene. Nerves were evident, vocal projection mediocre, the phrasing deplorable. As individuals recited various soliloquies, I shuddered.

"Thank God this isn't London," I whispered to Marca.

"Think positive, Professor."

The 25 musicians who performed selections ranging from Mozart to Styx weren't much better.

After the group dispersed, the three of us reviewed our notes. Sean had no opinions. I nominated James Montgomery as the perfect Othello: the black sophomore spoke with the British accent of his native South Africa.

Marca countered, "He'd be a laughing stock with even a petite Desdemona towering above his five-feet-three-inches."

"Who, then?"

"Sam Carew," chuckled Sean.

Marca elbowed him in the ribcage. "Good choice. He's versatile enough to start off the play on a high note and make a point of the Moor's mental deterioration. I'm already constructing the discordant minor triplets..."

So it went, until my watch beeped 1:00 a.m. I collected my papers and shoved back the metal folding chair.

"That's enough for tonight."

With a sigh, Sean muttered, "Thank God."

Two flights below, Marca fell into step with us. "You didn't enjoy that, eh?" she snickered to Sean.

"There's no way I'm going to direct this play."

Her hearty guffaw echoed between the buildings.

I saw his temperature rise. "I *won't* do it! I've got better ways to spend my time than wet-nursing amateurs."

Marca clutched his arms, stopping him cold - an astonishing feat for any woman. Her resolute glare set my teeth on edge. "Look at me, man. I've better things to do than put my life on the line!"

"There's no need to exaggerate," I interspersed.

"Ask your roommate if I'm exaggerating, Professor. He's walked this road many times."

An agile maneuver allowed Sean to trap Marca's hands in an iron grip. "You don't have to do this! No one's holding a gun to your head."

"How else can I prove to you I'm not a hypocrite, that I've accepted your version of the truth about myself? Why should it matter I've fashioned a totally different truth in the years since escaping hell?"

She wriggled free of Oliver's fingers and strode away, the gloom swallowing her silhouette. I drove him home, perplexed by her words. The door of the den closed behind Sean as I opted for my bedroom. He sat into the wee hours, staring at the dormant fireplace, while I worked long nights casting the play.

Surprisingly, rehearsals for *Othello* could not have been a more pleasant experience. The cast made excellent progress, despite Sean's failure to appear, developing their characters even during blocking sessions. From the outset, Marca created harmonies for the period string and wind instruments which accented the decline of Sam Carew's Moor toward murder and self-destruction.

The consummate professional, she endured the honest mistakes of what

had grown into a ten-piece orchestra, followed my directions without argument, and never missed a cue. She didn't complain, though I noticed these efforts sapped her strength.

"I get tired watching you," I told her one evening as we shuffled toward the parking lot. "Are you all right?"

"There's not much left, Professor. I don't think I'll survive until the opening."

"Would it help if you took some time off?" I suggested.

"No," she breathed. "I can tell by the notes you give that you're counting on the music to highlight the show. I won't disappoint you." Her pace slowed. I turned. Illumined by the overhead security light, I saw eyes sunken and bloodshot, her cheeks sallow.

She didn't resist when I tugged her toward the Blazer. Reaching the house, I led her to the den. She refused to knock; I opened the door and shoved her inside. Sean glanced up from a stack of ungraded mid-terms, and I watched his somber expression dissolve in a welcoming smile.

"Marca, I'm so relieved..."

"Oh, God, Sean..."

She fell on her knees beside his chair, slender frame racked with sobs. All Oliver could do was pat her shoulder and whisper soothing inanities. He finally signaled me and, together, we lifted her onto the daybed. She would not release either of our hands.

"Marca, can I get you some water, or coffee?" I offered.

She shook her head.

"What she needs is a thick steak, potatoes and a spinach salad," Sean remarked. "How much weight have you lost since New Year's, Marca?"

"Twenty pounds, maybe more."

I looked at Sean. "Anorexia?"

"Nothing so simple, Cy. The ravages of obsessive creativity."

"You know there's no middle ground for us," Marca wept. "We either must climb out of the pit, or rot there. You threw me back in, to prove what point? That I'm some tower of strength? All my strength is gone, Sean. You're holding the rope; can't you do something?"

Sean cupped his hand beneath her chin and raised her face level to his. "As long as you're still breathing, there's hope. You taught me that. I've discovered something else, too, sitting here, chastising myself these past few weeks: each individual controls what happens in his own life. You have to deal with the consequences of this decision on your own."

She gazed past Sean's head to the mirror above the fireplace, studying her reflection. Thin lips gradually curled in a submissive grin; blue eyes shone with that spark I had envied months earlier.

"You know what you've done?" she challenged.

"Tell me."

"You just let go of the rope." She rose, straightened her headband and buttoned her leather jacket. With a jaunty salute, she left the room.

Sean slumped in the chair.

"You're worried?" I ventured.

"There have been times, Cy, in the midst of my creative fervor, I longed to die rather than keep typing. I never suspected I'd inflict that same torture on someone else. Better had I plunged a knife in her heart..."

"Stop talking nonsense."

"Is it nonsense that I betrayed her, or stole her future?"

I propped myself on the edge of the desk. "It wasn't you, it was me."

"What are you saying?"

"You didn't betray Marca."

"How else could you know about Mark del Coronado if I didn't let it slip in one of my drunken stupors? I was the only one she told..."

I admitted to eavesdropping that night outside the auditorium. "And I was the one who coerced her into composing. I didn't believe anything so devastating would happen."

"We both owe her an apology, then," Sean insisted. "Before it's too late. She may still have a chance..."

The problem: we had no chance. The remaining two weeks of rehearsals assumed a very festive air. I had honed the amateurs into a semi-professional cast, inspired by Marca's music. She avoided Sean and myself the rest of the time.

The curtain rose on our production Thursday, April 6, running three nights, with matinees on Saturday and Sunday. Favorable reviews appeared in the campus newspaper, the local *Tribune* and, given our proximity to Chicago, their *Sun-Times*. The latter noted the "triumphant return of Mark del Coronado."

Spirits soared after these articles were posted in the green room Friday evening. I took the liberty of watching Act II as a member of the audience that night. The costumes' bright colors didn't clash beneath the spotlights; the dialogue could be understood even in the last row of the 1,500 seat auditorium, with the music a phenomenal backdrop.

A cast party was scheduled following Sunday's matinee. Notified their belongings could be redeemed during the coming week, the actors pulled on street

clothes and raced to the Student Union. Sean and I had arranged for a quiet dinner with Marca at a lakeside restaurant, knowing her disdain for college gatherings - the perfect opportunity to attempt reconciliation. Meeting outside her dressing room, Sean knocked; no response. I pushed the door inward a crack, then wide open. Attired in Venetian musician's costume, Marca Regis lay atop her mandolin at the dressing table, dead. Her right hand clutched a .38 calibre revolver, an empty quart of whiskey beside her feet.

Sean crossed the room, raised her cold left hand to his lips. I turned to summon the police, but he called me back. Together we read the epitaph scrawled on the cover of the score: "No middle ground. Even in the next life, there's no middle ground. Just heaven or hell."

An Addict's Fate

“The account of your addiction is fascinating, if that is the right word.”

Not the reply she expected. She'd e-mailed the medical website consultant to get treatment suggestions, not a critique of her writing.

Cyrkle Barnes' ability crafting the English language into highly popular reading material had never been in doubt. Six published novels, three off-Broadway plays and a pending movie deal confirmed the fact.

Her problem involved the creation of these works, the ideas behind the plots.

She compared her brain to a crow's nest, constructed from bits and pieces of wildly assorted junk. The slightest thing - a billboard, a pair of boots, a classic movie, or a snippet of conversation overheard at a bar - could trigger the inspiration for a story.

Not unusual, to be sure. What happened after that initial spark ignited, however...

Had the capacity to tear her to shreds.

Literally.

Mentally and physically.

She hated it.

She couldn't live without it.

The worst sort of addiction, for which Cyrkle had begun to believe the only cure was death.

She didn't plan to die for a long time.

The doctors she'd consulted told her she could live to be 100, her body in excellent shape for a woman nearing the half-century mark. A neurological specialist tried to prescribe anti-depressants; she tossed the crumpled slip in the examination room trash can.

Better to exist on the brink of madness, than lose an integral part of herself under the influence of legalized narcotics.

Lose what? Cyrkle mused in the midst of a particularly dark, sleepless night. The obsession to read a certain author, hear a particular voice every day, or visit a park she'd passed ten thousand times in her car before noticing the flowers on that bush?

Especially tortuous: a bizarre affinity for actors, mostly alcoholic, British and long deceased, with square jaws, deep voices and wavy hair. The “fix” she required to feed this passion - often through as many as six separate short stories and novels - involved searching the internet for any available video clips, raiding

the local library and rental services for DVDs. Photos copied from magazines, biographies or film anthologies would adorn the wall above her desk.

For as long as the inspiration lasted.

Only to be supplanted by another, of equally agonizing intensity.

Throughout this roller coaster ride, her sole consolation came in typing like a fury by the light of the computer monitor. She breathed easier and her muscles relaxed when immersed in realms where her fantasies became reality.

Ordinary routine, however, precluded long stretches at the keyboard. Publishing royalties not as lucrative as some assumed, Cyrkle worked forty hours a week as officer manager for an aircraft parts manufacturer. Between eight and five, she buried her creativity, incessant withdrawal pangs keeping her nerves constantly on edge.

Receiving no assistance from the medical community, the woman tried various home remedies - distraction being the most effective. Diverting her attention from the current fixation with tennis, concerts or stock car racing had the potential to temporarily diminish the anxiety of being unable to find new sources of gratification.

When a distinguished regional community theatre troupe asked if they could produce one of her stage plays as an autumn fund raiser for a consortium of cancer charities, she negotiated cast approval and an assistant director's slot, requiring her presence every night of rehearsal over six weeks. Dealing with the details of sets, costumes and prima donna personalities would eradicate the final vestiges of a lingering summer bout with "dead actor syndrome".

Or, so she thought.

Filling four lead roles and six secondary parts in *Miasma* took three evenings, with another session for call backs. The author maintained very specific opinions, frustrating the more experienced amateurs.

"Cyrkle, you've got to choose from what we've seen," explained Jake Armitage, the director. "It's not like we can call New York and import some talent."

She retorted, "Maybe not, but I could pull bodies off the street and get more versatility. Harold Parker has to be able to look the innocent one second, and be utterly ruthless the next. The audience needs to see the underlying evil in his eyes..."

"There aren't any cameras to do close-ups, Miss Barnes," Linda Stevens stated. "People seated in the last row might be able to see a bit of the action, but they rely on the actors' voices to convey the substance of the piece."

“Fine. Parker needs to be able to manipulate his voice, too. Mellow when he’s flirting, biting harsh when he’s going for his victim’s throat. I’ve neither seen nor heard anyone worthy of stepping into those shoes.”

She rose and strode to the building’s lobby, where the call-backs awaited a decision. An unfamiliar figure grinned amidst an enthusiastic cluster of women, as if distributing lolly-pops to neighborhood children.

“Who?” Cyrkle whispered to Linda, who had followed her from the auditorium.

“Will Fuchs. Used to be one of our regulars, until he got switched to evenings at the factory.”

“Fox, did you say?”

“Spelled F-U-C-H-S. Mispronounced pretty often.”

“I can understand that.”

Cyrkle twirled a strand of straight sandy hair around her index finger, unable to determine whether Fuchs’ wavy mane was jet black or deep brown by the light of the wall sconces. He exhibited other traits she found intriguing and... inspirational: the inherent magnetism, a firm jaw, straight nose and twinkling eyes, among them.

He broke from the clique and crossed to the pair, snatching the author’s hand. “I never dreamed I’d have the honor of meeting the prolific Cyrkle Barnes.”

“If you’d come to the auditions...”

“I wish I had. I just learned today, my request for day shift has been approved. I could kick myself for missing this chance. *Miasma* is a fantastic piece.”

“You’ve read the script?” Cyrkle queried.

“I saw it, last summer in New York. A plum role for the right actor, that Harold Parker.”

Linda commiserated, despite her announcement. “It’s really too bad, Will. Jake is finalizing his choices now...”

“Come with me,” Cyrkle interrupted, tugging him toward the center door.

As they trod down the aisle, Armitage glanced up from the make-shift table propped between the seats. “What the hell...”

“It’s Will Fuchs, Jake,” replied Linda. “Cyrkle wants to see what he can do.”

Knowing the man’s potential, the director acquiesced. He tossed Fuchs a script and waved him onto the stage. The call-backs quietly filed in, to watch from the last row.

“Feed him the lines from Scene 2, please, Linda,” Cyrkle instructed.

This tender scene, meant to set up the dynamic between the ingenue and the villain, needed the type of face which could soften, and a tenor which dripped with lust. The stage manager mounted the steps, and when Fuchs began reciting the dialogue, she completely forgot her purpose and melted in his arms.

By Act II, Scene 4, Harold Parker was known to the audience as a reprehensible murderer and con-artist, as yet to be revealed to those sharing the boards. Discussing an upcoming scam with an associate, his tone dropped almost to a full bass, and his eyes smoldered threateningly. The maniacal laugh built in volume and intensity from a normal chuckle, raising goose bumps on all present.

Fuchs nailed the part, in Cyrkle's mind. Jake and Linda agreed.

The theatre emptied an hour later, all roles assigned and the first rehearsal scheduled for the next Monday.

Cyrkle drove home and attacked her computer, ideas pouring from her head like a fountain.

Employment interfered with her writing, a fact. She reconsidered active participation in the *Miasma* production, since that would also curtail the amount of time available to develop her newfound inspiration.

Being at rehearsals, however, *would* provide her with the fix essential to keeping the inspiration vibrant.

She sat and listened during the initial read-through, and the blocking sessions. The altered dynamic of having a live muse, with whom she could tangibly interact, evoked a shyness she'd never previously experienced. Beginning the second week, she asserted herself somewhat, pointing out nuances in the dialogue or gestures the female leads and minor players missed, but spoke not a word to Will Fuchs.

Her fingers did the speaking on the computer after the cast was dismissed, often laboring into the wee hours, which impacted her job performance at the plant. In ten days, she typed 40,000 words, spread over three stories. The manuscripts were delayed being mailed to Cyrkle's agent, for lack of time to properly format them.

Because an unending stream of characters and plots drove her immediately to start the next tale.

"Maybe you should take a couple nights off," suggested Armitage that Tuesday. "You look beat."

Cyrkle grinned weakly at the lanky redhead. "You don't exactly look fresh as a daisy, yourself. If you can do it, so can I."

"I've been doing it for years. This is my 28th play here."

“And I’m old, right?” She flopped onto a seat, legs wedged under the make-shift director’s table. “Humor me, okay?”

The run through of Act II began with Linda reading Fuchs’ lines.

“Where’s Will?” inquired Cyrkle, straightening.

Armitage replied, “He had to work a double.”

Within fifteen minutes, the director could hear Cyrkle snoring quietly.

Such was the woman’s physical reaction to lack of stimuli. She slept - a lot. The failure of one inspiration to succeed another meant she could spend entire weekends in bed. Her alarm clock would have to ring a full ten minutes before she would rouse herself on Monday morning for work during such lulls.

That’s why the doctors thought she suffered from depression.

Her body, on the other hand, was simply recovering from extreme exhaustion due to months of relentless toil.

The nap made Cyrkle the brunt of some good-natured jokes during ensuing rehearsals. That the play’s own author could sleep through what New York and L.A. reviewers designated “crisp and witty exchanges” earned jabs from the leads, though the stage hands and bit players refrained from taking such liberties, still in awe of the local celebrity.

Fuchs’ sideways grin immobilized Cyrkle when he flipped out the cushion beside her and sank upon it. “Do you dream in color?”

“Another cheap shot,” she muttered, disappointed.

“An honest question. What else could account for your vivid descriptions of the landscape in *Vast Plains Asunder*?”

“Try spending two weeks half-way up a mountain in a log cabin, soaking in the scenery.” A glorious vacation, actually.

“You did that?”

She nodded, then glanced toward the stage, where Jake was adjusting furniture for the next scene. “Aren’t you needed up there?”

“I didn’t think it mattered to you.”

“It matters a great deal.”

“You rail on everyone else, but ignore me.”

“That’s because I want the others to raise themselves to your level. You *are* Harold Parker. Even to what you can do with your face.”

Fuchs squinted at her. “What do I do with my face?”

“Change its shape by the way you set your jaw and hunch your shoulders. You may not be conscious of it, but it’s very evident. In the early scenes, it’s rounder, more friendly. When Parker’s true nature starts being revealed, it grows leaner, longer, and positively evil.”

“Wow. I didn’t realize...”

“Will, on stage!” Linda shouted from the wings.

As he rose, Fuchs laid his hand atop Cyrkle’s and gratefully squeezed. How many nights, through one inspiration after another, had she dreamed - in color - of being so touched by the object of her addiction. Yet, the dead cannot rise and, in those recurring somnabulistic visions, they fled from the restaurant, party or bedroom, never to return to her, exacerbating her anguish. This man lived, with infinite possibilities for the future.

On the computer screen.

Dealing with flesh and blood people didn’t qualify as one of Cyrkle’s strengths. In fact, she despised the stupidity and shallowness of 99.99% of human beings on the planet. One person qualified as her friend, and she’d known him for three decades. Otherwise, the relationships she created between her characters served as adequate substitute for the real thing.

To risk dropping her defenses, to dare interacting with the source of her inspiration, might compromise the very creativity driving her to write at a greatly accelerated rate.

To go out for dinner and have a totally spontaneous conversation might have a grounding effect, after months of spending every spare moment in the world of fiction and near-madness.

Fridays, rehearsal ended early, and some of the cast adjourned to a restaurant down the street from the theatre for drinks and snacks. No specific invitation was ever extended; the crew knew they were welcome to join the fun. Jake preferred the company of his wife and young son; Linda attended if she wasn’t scheduled to work at the nursing home on Saturday morning. Cyrkle tagged along for once, to the surprise of the others.

Pushing four tables together, some jockeying for places occurred, with the lone vacant spot left next to Will Fuchs. Cyrkle surrendered to the inevitable.

“I’m glad you came,” he whispered.

Ever the cynic, the response slipped out before she bit her lip. “Why?”

“You have a maturity and intelligence... lacking in the present company.”

“Lacking in the species,” she wanted to say. Instead, she offered, “Thanks for the compliment.”

“I’ve made you uncomfortable. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. Considering how many publicity junkets I’ve been on - even a Hollywood cocktail party last spring, to introduce me to studio execs - I still don’t do well socializing.”

“Your characters do.”

“They’re... better adjusted than I.”

“If you like, we can make our excuses after the first round, and go somewhere more quiet. I didn’t have time to grab a bite after work, and I’m starved.”

“For more than mozzarella sticks and nachos?”

“A 16-ounce steak, at least.”

She drew from her first novel. “Just a growing boy.”

“Out, not up,” he quoted in return.

“You *have* read my books.”

“Of course. They’re enthralling, suspenseful, and the twists in plot and phrase are unrivaled.”

A wave of guilt consumed Cyrkle, and she stiffened. “I’ve got to go.”

Fuchs reached for her arm; she dodged his grasp. Bursting through the restaurant doors, she jogged to her Nissan Altima and jumped behind the wheel. A light rain, and her own tears, slowed the drive home. Slamming the kitchen door, she turned the key in the deadbolt and sank on the linoleum, sobbing.

She’d researched Social Anxiety Disorder for a story months earlier, and recognized some of the symptoms in her behavior as her heart rate decreased and cheeks dried. Moreso, the necessity of mimicking her own characters to sustain a conversation embarrassed and petrified her.

The slight consolation soothed the woman: her characters directly echoed how she normally talked. She shed her jacket and shoes, plopped on the swivel chair at the desk, and typed until 3:00 AM.

Merely being in Will Fuchs’ presence for a short period helped her add sorely-needed details to a scene which had stumped her for a week. The inflection of his voice, the laugh lines around his eyes, gave the character a more authentic dynamic when relating to his partner.

The phone rang early Saturday, and every hour thereafter. Cyrkle disconnected the line, letting voice mail take the calls. When she missed work on Monday, and rehearsal, a persistent knocking sounded on her front door late that evening.

Jake Armitage thought a strung-out junkie turned the knob, green eyes slits in the blackness. “Cyrkle?”

“What?” she growled.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine. Leave me alone.”

“I... we...”

The woman noticed a cluster of bodies on her porch. “Crap.”

“Can we come in?”

“I’m really busy.”

“Too busy to come to the theatre?”

“Too busy to eat, sleep, or anything else.”

“We need to talk.”

She shoved the screen door outward with a grunt. “Make it quick.”

Without stumbling, she crossed the living room and switched on a table lamp. The sudden bright light made her visitors blink.

“Sit down, if you must.”

Jake, Linda and two crew members did, the rest positioned themselves at the exits.

“I get it,” Cyrkle chuckled. “You’re going to tell me I need professional help.”

“For your own good,” affirmed Armitage.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried? This isn’t like quitting smoking or drinking, or joining a 12-step program. A writer can’t just stop finding inspiration on every street. I’d have to poke out my eyes, rip out my tongue and bust my ear drums.”

“Even if it means you shun your responsibility?” Linda puzzled.

“My responsibility? I wrote the very words you’re producing - *that’s* my responsibility! Sitting and watching it all fall together is... is a... waste of my time!”

Jake rose, offended. “Thanks.”

“Sorry we bothered you,” added Linda.

Cyrkle glanced at the departing faces. “I would’ve thought Will might be in on this.”

“He suggested it, frankly, because he admires your talent so much,” said Armitage. “He had to rush to the hospital when Shannon broke her arm at practice.”

“Shannon?”

Linda supplied, “His fiancé. She’s the girl’s soccer coach at the high school.”

The climactic twist appended to her latest novel’s plot reflected Cyrkle’s disillusionment. Three hours’ sleep to revitalize her, she returned to the office Tuesday morning, later occupying a dark corner during the final dress rehearsal before opening night.

Curtain calls blocked, well-wishers crowded the stage to congratulate the actors. An athletic blonde wearing a sling around a full-arm cast leapt into Fuchs’ embrace, smothering his mouth with a passionate kiss.

The author left the building, turning on the classic movie channel when she arrived home. The titles for an old James Mason film were scrolling across the screen...

To Each His Own

The discovery was heralded by the international media as the find of the century. Archeologists puzzled over the elaborate engravings for months. The ever-present threat Mount Etna might erupt again, and rebury the chamber, concerned not only Sicily's officials, but every religious denomination around the world.

Even those who held no particular beliefs expressed interest in the granite slab. The scientific declaration it pre-dated any known set of sacred writings, yet featured carvings of a myriad of Greek, Roman and Egyptian mythological deities - along with the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed and other prophets - both confused and delighted scholars and atheists.

When the site opened to tourists five years later, the stone's miraculous attributes remained unknown. People traveled the length and breadth of the planet merely to gaze on the marvel. It was a Polish college student - one of three dozen milling about the cave at any given time - who, kneeling before the artifact, inadvertently made the Sign of the Cross in awe. The flash of light above the stone temporarily blinded those nearest, but most recalled afterward seeing the smiling face of the Christ hovering in mid-air.

Rumors of this miracle spread like wildfire, and the number of tour groups increased exponentially. Visions of the saints, Alexander the Great, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and ancient Zen masters were attributed to the stone. Interviews with those who witnessed the manifestations seemed to indicate the spiritual leanings of the person in closest proximity to the slab determined which image was seen.

Within weeks, the hysteria had grown to such a point, guards providing security could no longer handle the crowds. For their own safety, a steel barrier was erected around the cave's entrance, keeping visitors well away from the stone. To study the detailed engravings, it was necessary to watch a video made by one of the archeological teams in a small auditorium built at the base of the mountain.

Disappointment among tourists ran deep. Some risked prosecution for trespassing, climbing the fence after regular viewing hours using only a flashlight or candle to guide them into the cave. A battalion of Italian soldiers was assigned to maintain 24 hour watch at the site, and arrest anyone who violated the curfew imposed in the town.

A unique black market arose around the phenomenon. A pair of Sicilian burglars, recently released from prison, located a second entrance to the cave,

beyond the sight lines of the guards. Two thousand Euros bought tourists their own private viewing of the stone, often complete with a personal miracle.

Until that disastrous June midnight.

The Playboy model had chartered a jet from Los Angeles to Rome, and a yacht to Mount Etna. The paparazzi got wind of her destination and pursued en masse, camera bulbs popping. One photographer bribed a guard and borrowed his uniform, managing to escort the voluptuous blonde and her entourage through the winding cavern into the main chamber.

The disturbing pictures of what happened next were sold to an American tabloid for a million dollars each, after which he smashed his camera and took vows as a Trappist monk.

The model's god had been sex, and her deepest desires had been her undoing.

Oddly, few canceled their trips to the cave in the wake of the woman's horrific death. If anything, a new curiosity was kindled in those whose lurid fantasies encompass more grisly aspects of existence.

The Wall Street investor came to pray for the success of his stock portfolio. He knew, if the publicity warranted, the wealthy would flock to him for advice, and his bank account would grow.

His three assistants stood, transfixed, as a rain of gold coins pummeled him. When the dust cleared, his lifeless corpse lay at their feet.

Another three unexpected deaths convinced the Sicilians to cease their operations, but their alternate access to the stone was already too well known. Others assumed the duties of nocturnal tour guides, for equally exorbitant fees.

When the Buddhist delegation from Thailand arrived, they were treated with the utmost respect, and offered a group rate. To be able to claim at their Bangkok monastery they had seen Siddharta Gautama himself would bring in donations to ensure the longevity of the house.

The Buddha was not smiling when he appeared that night, and the monks returned East in coffins.

A diverse network of European and Asian intellectuals had been monitoring the activities of the stone since the reports of the first miracles. Two of them, for that matter, had been residing in the village since the last eruption. Neither of them professed any faith in the unseen, relying on psychology and science to explain life and its events.

They had interviewed every witness to both the static visions and those which proved lethal. Their conclusion was greeted with disdain.

"How can a chunk of cold rock react to a person's ambitions, whether honorable or not?" protested the head of the British Museum.

“How do you explain why that chunk of cold rock bears inscriptions in languages dating back thousands of years, and figures from as recent as two millennia ago?” countered his assistant (a friend to one of the pair who had submitted the findings).

Pausing to open the day’s London Times, they learned another death had occurred in the cave - an Australian golfer had been crushed by a massive putter.

As lucrative as the stone was for the region - and for the Italian government in the way of taxes - the decision was made to close the site permanently. The main entrance was bricked up, and an electrified fence constructed to further discourage intruders. Caught in the act of leading a group through the alternate entry, the illicit guides were jailed. Explosives sealed that fissure.

That autumn, six mountain climbers ascended Mount Etna for the challenge. They found a previously unrecorded conical opening in the rock face, down which they scrambled. With only a crank lantern to illuminate the cave, they didn’t realize they were standing atop the slab. A half dozen simultaneous visions engulfed them, sending a shaft of light upward through the cone.

A crowd of villagers, headed home from the tavern, noticed the light, then felt the ground tremble. By morning, all evidence the enigmatic stone slab ever existed vanished beneath a thick layer of molten lava.

A Week in Churchtown

Tourists on holiday in Ireland may find the old ways quaint when experiencing them on a temporary basis, to be remembered as photos in a scrapbook, or anecdotes over the company water cooler. Jody Bishop wanted none of that.

When her oldest son asked why she wanted to go to Ireland at all, she answered with the famous explanation for climbing Pike's Peak: "Because it's there." Ever since her childhood, the first time she watched John Ford's *The Quiet Man* on St. Patrick's Day, she'd felt drawn to the island. It seemed the modern concept of "civilization" hadn't marred the beauty of the green hillsides or irreparably damaged the psyche of the people. Life could be relished in a tiny village springing from nowhere along a gravel track.

And now was her time to relish that life.

Jody turned 50 in December; a few strands of white accented her long brown hair. Her youngest son had joined the Navy the previous month. After 30 years laboring in offices, factories and restaurants, the woman knew she'd had enough. When her federal tax refund hit the bank in early February, she booked a ticket on the internet from Chicago to Dublin and stuffed the bare necessities in a backpack.

The Aer Lingus reservation was round-trip, but she had no intention of ever returning to the States.

Nor did Jody plan to play the tourist game. She'd heard of those who, in making the rounds of the major Irish cities, prided themselves on drinking a Guinness in every pub. Others purchased rail passes to travel the length and breadth of the island, never getting off the train long enough to meet the people or share their existence. Some rented rooms with local families or stayed in youth hostels, while more paid exorbitant fees to sleep in a haunted castle.

Kissing the Blarney Stone was definitely not on her list of priorities.

Disembarking from the 737 in Dublin, she set off - walking. Her sons used to laugh that she couldn't beat them running, but she *could* walk miles and miles without her knees twinging. Her own two feet would be her mode of transportation around the Emerald Isle.

Besides, there were so many small villages in Ireland, a hike of no more than five miles or so brought one to another settlement, with a pub offering rooms on the top floor, for an inexpensive night's lodging.

Two months into these wanderings, Jody found herself south of Limerick City, in the northern part of County Cork. She lunched in Newtown, having

learned to enjoy the native fare. She headed southwest, having no map, no watch, and no idea where evening would see her. The lush countryside, with rolling hills partitioned by rows of stone walls, and sheep munching happily on the grass, delighted her senses. She didn't feel rushed; it was as if time had stopped. She could breathe, and not one ounce of stress jangled her nerves.

A village lay ahead. Drawing nearer, she saw the sign, "Churchtown". Simple storefronts, well kept yet plain, had an appeal the more commercial cities lacked. On one corner, naturally, a pub - O'Brien's Bar.

Lettering adhered to the yellow facade of the building, and a single door led inside. Jody marveled at the way the Irish decorated their pubs with highly-varnished wood and, often, natural brick walls dating back hundreds of years. Booths lined the perimeter, and tables in the center of the floor could easily be moved aside if a band struck up a tune and patrons wanted to dance.

Irish pubs weren't just bars, as Americans think of bars. They didn't only serve liquor and hastily cooked snacks. Jody walked into O'Brien's, not surprised to see tea being poured.

Tea was one drink the woman couldn't stomach. In all her years having to fire up the office coffee pot each morning, she hadn't developed a taste for that brew, either. The barman didn't object when she ordered a shot of whiskey.

Upon inquiry, Jody learned a room was available for the night. If the accommodations were comfortable, she would extend her stay, using the pub as a base - strolling to neighboring towns during the days, coming back at night. The tactic had proved useful in counties through which she'd already passed.

Dropping her backpack in the cozy chamber overlooking the street, Jody ventured forth to peruse the shops and the sights. A cemetery in the center of town, dating to the 13th century, attracted her attention; the number of fresh graves proved it was still active, though deserted at the moment. Wildflowers adorned the mounds, giving the place a natural peace absent in American cemeteries, for all their groomed lawns and ornate headstones. More a park or a picnic ground, Jody noted.

A glorious sunset preceded her return to O'Brien's Bar. Townsfolk were eating, drinking and relaxing. Jody occupied a bar stool and faced the crowd, watching, listening. She loved the accents and conversations about ordinary topics and, of course, the latest trout caught in a nearby stream.

She climbed to her room at 11:00. It being a Sunday, most of the locals had returned home in anticipation of the next day's work. Jody fell asleep quickly, only to be roused in the wee hours by sounds of activity on the floor below.

She'd lodged in enough pubs to know things got very quiet after the last bell and alcohol stopped being served. This wasn't the owner washing dishes, or mopping the floor. Could a vagabond be robbing the place?

Jody pulled the blanket around her shoulders - she had no bathrobe - and crept down the winding staircase to a door near the restrooms. A faint glimmer shown along the corridor from the barroom. Barefoot, she slunk in that direction, hoping against hope the floorboards wouldn't betray her.

Her hopes were dashed when the planks near the wall groaned. She pressed herself against the paneling, hesitantly peering around the corner, to see a figure astride a stool, emptying his beer and staring at her.

He slammed down the mug. "Pour me another."

Biting back a hysterical chuckle, Jody stepped forward. "I thought the bar was closed."

"For me, the bar is never closed," rang the vibrant baritone.

"I... don't see how..."

"Don't just stand there, fill the glass, woman!" he bellowed.

Not understanding the man's presence, nor the fact the bar's owner had not responded to the commotion, Jody approached and filled a clean mug from the tap. She placed it beside the empty...

Her fingers froze around the handle. The light from the wall sconce shown through the figure, as if he were transparent.

"Well?" he challenged.

She recoiled, eyes wide.

He laughed, a thunderous bellow. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Jody knew it was impossible. She was still upstairs in her room, dreaming. Or, she was awake, and her eyes were playing tricks on her.

Yet, her ears detected a unique quality to his voice. Not the quality of the average Irishman - it wasn't an Irish accent, at all. The British inflection was clear, and she'd have sworn she'd heard that voice somewhere in the past.

Beyond the recent past, too - before she'd come to Ireland.

He wasn't going to give her time to think about the particulars. He'd drained this second beer, and demanded a third.

Holding the tap, Jody considered his appearance. Wearing shirt sleeves and jeans, he had broad shoulders and a bull neck, with gray hair and scars to the left of his chin. She presented the mug.

"Join me," he ordered.

"I..."

"If you don't like beer, pour yourself a whiskey."

Jody unscrewed the cap on a bottle, and filled a shot glass. She knocked it back in one gulp.

"Good!" he praised. "I despise people who sip whiskey. They think it's cultured, but it just proves they're fools. Have another."

"I... think not, but thanks."

"Then, go back to bed and leave me in peace."

"But, you can't stay here..."

"You don't own the place."

"Neither do you. And if the owner was here..."

He smiled. "He'd welcome me like a long-lost brother."

"Why is that?" Jody queried, incredulous.

"Because this was the one place I felt at home... in the old days."

"So, you've just returned from an extended journey, is that it?"

The reply was an ominous rumble: "A journey longer than you could ever imagine."

Jody's stomach warned her to be frightened. "Well, then, I'll pour you one more, and be getting back upstairs."

She left him on the stool, swilling the last beer. No more did she open the door to the stairs than the single bulb flickered abruptly, leaving darkness behind her.

Eating breakfast the next morning, Jody acknowledged her quandary. The conversation with the lone patron had been intriguing, however, having her slumber disrupted each night would put a damper on her day's excursions through the region. She was uncertain whether she should move on to another village and seek lodgings there, or risk remaining at O'Brien's.

That is, until she overheard the dishwasher, clearing the bar, "Looks like Ollie was in again last night."

The waitress set the platter of bacon and eggs and a glass of orange juice on the table. "What did he mean by that?" asked Jody.

The answer was quick and evasive. "Nothing, mum."

Jody caught her sleeve as she withdrew. "Look, if someone *was* in here after closing, I saw - and talked - with him."

The waitress spun on her heels. "You *did*?"

Jody nodded.

The dishwasher left the mugs in the sink and crossed to the table. "You talked with..."

"As a matter of fact, I poured three of the beers he drank."

"What was he like?"

“You mean, you've never...”

“No one has ever seen him... except you, if you're telling the truth,” said the waitress.

Having her veracity disputed upset Jody. “He was a large man, older, with gray hair, scars, and a British accent.” She glanced from the dishwasher to the waitress, and noticed the cook in the kitchen doorway. A framed photo on the wall caught her eye. “He looked like that,” she pointed, “without the glasses.”

The waitress fainted. The dishwasher sank on a chair at the next table. The cook vanished.

Puzzled, Jody rose to get a better look at the photo. Yes, it definitely was the same man. An engraved brass plaque beneath the frame read, “Oliver Reed, 1938-1999.”

She leaned her head against the bricks. “Oh, hell, it *was* a ghost.”

Her breakfast untouched, Jody left O'Brien's Bar as quickly as possible, but not before paying for another night's lodgings. She needed time to think, and the best place to do that was walking in the open spaces so plentiful in Ireland. She turned southeast, passing through Buttevant, then bearing west to Liscarroll. A huge circle would take her back to Churchtown by nightfall.

Jody felt a bit of relief: at least she knew why she recognized the voice. Over the years, she'd watched a number of Oliver Reed's movies - the musical *Oliver!*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Gladiator*, with her favorites being *The Three Musketeers*, *The Four Musketeers* and *The Assassination Bureau*. The uneasiness persisted, though, because she didn't know why he would haunt that particular pub, or why she was the only person to have actually seen him.

She'd never seen a ghost before, made no claim to any psychic tendencies, and had no connection to the man, other than an appreciation for his acting talent.

“He's buried in the graveyard,” a matron explained as Jody skirted the gated wall of the cemetery that evening. If the woman was referring to Reed, how did she know...

That question was readily answered. Gossip was the lifeblood to many of the Irish, without the malice those in the States incorporated into such idle banter. The entire populace of Churchtown must already know her story.

She'd become a minor celebrity because of it, too.

Her entry into O'Brien's Bar resembled a homecoming. Patrons raised their glasses in toast to her, and offered to stand her a drink. The parish priest suggested keeping vigil with her that night, in order to exorcise the pub of its incorporeal resident.

All Jody wanted to do, after miles on the road, was go to bed. She wasn't even hungry enough to order dinner. The barman kindly stood guard at the door to the stairs after she ascended to her room, so no one would come up and bother her.

She slept like a rock, until she felt her bed shift. In her dream-state, she reckoned her old dog, Corky, had jumped on the mattress to find warmth beside her legs. She reached down to pet him, and jolted upright when she felt the muscles of an arm, instead of fur.

"I need a drink. Come on downstairs," he instructed.

"Why..." she gasped, "why are you up here?"

"I came to *get* you. Come on, now. Wrap yourself in that cover; it's rather chilly."

In some ways, Jody felt like an absolute idiot, bundled in a quilt and following a ghost down the dim stairs. She half expected the barroom to be crowded with curious onlookers, waiting for the spectre to manifest. Instead, it was deserted as befitted a pub at 3:00 AM.

"Pour us both one," Reed stated.

"Only if you tell me why you're here."

"Dammit, woman, I need a beer!"

Jody admitted - to herself alone - she was still scared of what was happening. She complied with Reed's request, and set the mug on the bar.

He drained it immediately. "You know, I once set a record for drinking the most beer in 24 hours."

"An admirable feat," Jody muttered, refilling the glass from the tap.

"But, you don't like it."

"To me, beer tastes funny."

"At least, you handle your whiskey well."

"Because I don't drink too much at one time."

Reed chortled, "I like the effect drink has on me."

"You know what? I don't like the effect being here has on *me*. Now, what's going on?"

"You'll have to be a little more specific."

Jody propped her elbows on the carved wood surface. "As far as I know, you're buried in the local graveyard. You used to be a regular here, but since you died..."

"Do you know what it's like, being dead?"

"Can't say that I do."

"It's *boring*. Nothing to do all day. So, I figured I'd give myself a treat, and share a few pints with friends."

“Except, no one else can see you.”

“To my misfortune. I met some great people within these walls. I’d like to sit and chat with them again...”

“Why me?”

“You’re a distant relative - the first who’s come through here in many a decade.”

“So, blood *is* thicker than water.”

The mug empty, she worked the tap once more.

“More than that. You’ve discovered how to enjoy life, without being a slave to money or ambition.”

“What, no words of wisdom to impart, no messages from The Other Side?”

He swilled the brew. “Not especially, but you can tell Will O’Malley to stop letting his dog pee on my grave. It’s killing the flowers.”

Jody laughed in spite of herself.

“Dammit, is it wrong of me to want a drink and a bit of conversation?”

Reed postulated. “You seem the type who can discuss a variety of topics, without begging for autographs, starting fights, or trolling for a juicy quote to print in the scandal sheets.”

“Oh, I can see the headline: ‘Oliver Reed Speaks from Beyond’. I’d be a prime candidate for the nut house.”

“In America, maybe. Not here. The Irish respect their ghosts.” He waved the glass at her, ready for a refill. “All I’m asking for is a few nights, drinking and talking. It’s not like you’re in a hurry to go anywhere.”

An odd proposition, Jody smirked. No harm in it, really. Reed was limited to four beers at a sitting - time constraints dictated by the immaterial realms - meaning she could still get some sleep and visit surrounding towns during the day. If she kept her mouth shut, the locals shouldn’t bother her too much about the phenomenon.

“Agreed,” she said.

His fourth mug emptied, he smiled, and vanished before her eyes. The barroom was instantly plunged into pitch blackness.

She’d have to get accustomed to that spectacle, trying to breathe steadily as she climbed the stairs.

Her breakfast served as if she were royalty, the waitress, dishwasher and cook hovered nearby and watched her eat that morning. Biting her lip, Jody realized she’d forgotten to clear the mugs off the bar, so the staff knew Reed had manifested, and they assumed Jody was with him.

On the street, as she traversed the village, complete strangers hailed her with friendly greetings. Near the cemetery gate, she saw an elderly man walking his terrier. "Good morning, Mr. O'Malley," she surmised.

"Good morning," he replied.

Dare she tell him what Reed had said? "Nice dog you have there."

"Yes, but he's getting old, poor thing. It's all he can do to come this far and relieve himself in the garden yonder."

"If you'll pardon me, Mr. O'Malley, Mr. Reed asked that you take your dog elsewhere to relieve himself. The flowers on his grave aren't..."

She had no chance to finish her statement. O'Malley's watery blue eyes widened, and he shuffled away as fast as his bandy legs would move him.

"Oh, hell, I'm in for it now," lamented Jody.

This mistake dampened her spirits; the rain dampened her clothes. Ordinarily, she wouldn't have cared, and didn't own a raincoat, but the cold shower en route to Dromina made her shiver. She was sneezing by the time she returned to O'Brien's Bar that afternoon.

The waitress serving tea would not accept her protests, and brought a pot of piping hot Earl Grey. "It'll warm you," the woman advised. "Can't have you catching the flu before..."

"Before what?" prodded Jody.

The waitress retreated into the kitchen. A shopkeeper at a nearby table leaned toward her. "The press is going to be here later, to take snaps of you and do an interview about the ghost."

"Damn," Jody spat. Her knees wobbling, she climbed the stairs and settled feverishly into bed, avoiding the nightly crowd jamming the barroom.

That didn't stop Oliver Reed from waking her. "You look awful," he admonished.

"Thanks."

She reluctantly accompanied him to the ground floor. Rather than have her pour his beer, he sat her in a booth and brought a tumbler brimming with whiskey.

"What the hell is that for?"

"For you, to drink. It'll cure what ails you."

"It'll kill me, you mean!"

"Nonsense. The alcohol will disinfect your insides, and flush the fever right out of you."

Jody took a long gulp.

Reed approved.

Drumming on the glass with her fingers, Jody eyed him critically. "Why here, why now?"

"This is *not* why I invited you. I'll explain it once, and if you bring up the subject again, you won't be so happy with my answer."

He sipped his beer, which amazed Jody. Did he want to prolong his time? she wondered.

"This is a sort of birthday present I've worked out. Every year between February 13 and May 2 - the anniversary of my death - I have ten chances to do as I please on this plane. This go 'round, I've spent three nights harassing my younger brother, who told reporters at my funeral I was some sort of god. Drinking with you will be more sociable, even if you are only a woman."

The insult was ignored. "Thanks."

"Now, it's my turn," he continued. "What have you learned during your weeks in Eire?"

Jody related tales of her jaunts through County Limerick, County Kerry, and the peace of sitting beside the River Shannon. Periodically, Reed nodded, and she knew he understood the love she felt for this adopted homeland.

"The people here don't take life for granted," he remarked. "Nor do they rush from place to place, trying to beat the clock. They work when they need to work; they spend their leisure hours doing what they enjoy." He raised his mug. "Drinking is no sin here, thank God."

"I feel like I've escaped some horrible fate," Jody concurred. "The entire world seems to be going to hell - people killing each other in wars and on street corners, destroying the planet with pollution and over-population - but here, there's a tranquility which can't be found anywhere else."

"You've learned a valuable lesson others often miss. They treat their visit to Ireland like a movie shoot. They immerse themselves in the scenery for a few days, or a few weeks, then go back to their daily routine, and that extraordinary spirit fades all too soon."

While Reed went to pour himself another pint, Jody noticed a movement outside the window. The flu's effects might've been causing a hallucination; she couldn't be sure. Rising to investigate, she was startled when Reed intercepted her.

"Don't concern yourself," he directed.

"Why not? What is it?"

The door burst open, and a series of flashbulbs popped.

"Oh, *hell...*"

As the door blew shut with a resounding crash, Reed led her to the table. "Come, drink your whiskey. You'll forget about it by morning."

“Until I read the newspaper or watch television. And, what if their cameras caught you on film?”

“Their cameras didn’t catch anything, not even you. No press coverage, this time around.”

Jody sighed, and sipped from the tumbler. She managed a weak smile as Reed expounded on a philosophy of life his critics failed to grasp. When she finally returned to bed, the sun was rising.

She didn’t wake until evening, feeling better for the prolonged sleep. She had no regrets for wasting a day she could’ve spent on the road; the steady downpour which started mid-morning would’ve hindered her travels.

O’Brien’s barroom was mostly empty when she entered. The cook poured her a bowl of steaming vegetable soup, and the barman delivered a shot of Bushmill’s.

“Would you like to read the papers?” he asked.

With dread, Jody nodded.

Not one word about the incident with the cameras earned a mention in print. The locals seemed to have accepted Reed’s visit as old news; she was once again just a visitor on holiday.

Her holiday would soon end, though.

Jody was waiting for Reed in the barroom when he materialized that night. “Sleep well?” he greeted.

“Yes, thanks.”

“You look fully recovered.”

She passed him a frothy mug. “Nearly 100 percent.”

“Nearly, but not quite.”

“How’s that?”

“Come. Sit.”

They carried their drinks to the booth they’d occupied the previous night. Reed gulped his beer and glared at her.

“What’s wrong?” demanded Jody.

His rich baritone faltered. “You said something last night, about escaping a horrible fate by coming to Ireland.”

“That’s right.”

“You didn’t... trust many people before you left the States, did you?”

This was one topic Jody could discuss at length. “All you had to do was listen to the nightly news. Surgeons being charged with malpractice, lawyers amassing fortunes by defending murderers and rapists, handling divorces or bogus personal injury suits. Corporate executives misusing funds, accounting clerks

embezzling thousands, politicians taking bribes, clerics involved in sex scandals...”

“So, when did you last set foot in a doctor’s office?”

“Hell, ten years or more. I never get sick, so I didn’t see a need.”

“But, there was a need.”

Her frustration boiled over. “What are you *talking* about?”

“Calm down, woman. You should consider yourself lucky. The worst you’ve felt is an occasional spasm in your lower spine, am I right?”

“How’d you know...”

He refilled his mug twice in succession at the bar, and brought the fourth back to his seat. He topped off her shot glass before resuming.

“It started as a lump in your breast, about three years ago. In the past six months, the cancer has spread to other vital organs.”

“This is no time for jokes, Ollie,” she remonstrated.

“It’s not a joke. You’re dying.”

Jody squeezed the shot glass so hard, it shattered. Shards wedged into her palm, and blood poured onto the table.

“Damn!” she moaned. “Look what you’ve done!”

“Unfortunately, those wounds won’t have time to heal into memorable scars, like mine,” observed Reed, stroking his chin. Delicately, he pulled fragments from her skin, and wrapped the gash in a linen napkin.

“So, why are you *really* here? If I’m dying, have you come to fetch me, to take me to heaven, or wherever dead souls go?”

“I didn’t find out about your condition until after we met. One of the meddling mutual relatives on your mother’s side took great pains to ensure I was informed of every detail.”

“The only relative I know who fits that description was Aunt Annie. We called her the Terrible Tongue. She died when I was a kid.”

“She’s been keeping an eye on you for some time, since she died of cancer herself. She hoped you’d get yourself checked out...”

“Too late for that, evidently.”

“But not too late for you to enjoy the last few days you have on earth.”

Jody slumped in the chair. “There, you’re wrong. If you hadn’t let the cat out of the bag, I might’ve been able to keep walking through the villages until I dropped in my tracks, but now... I just want to go upstairs, crawl into bed, and pack it in.”

“There’s no time for that. Friday is May first. They have a huge festival in the village. An old Celtic tradition to celebrate spring. Flowers everywhere, drinking and dancing...”

"I won't..."

"You *will*. And then you'll come back afterward, and tell me all about it."

His fourth beer drained, Jody had no time to protest. Reed was gone.

When she awoke, Jody untangled the napkin from around her right hand. A sneaking suspicion the latest conversation with Oliver Reed's ghost had been a dream crumbled. Blood stained the linen, but her hand was undamaged.

Yet, the dishwasher was sweeping broken glass off the barroom floor when she descended the stairs.

"What happened last night, Miss?" he inquired. "It looked like a Donnybrook when I got here this morning."

"Sorry," Jody apologized. "A little accident. I'll be happy to pay..."

The laugh caught in her throat and practically choked her. Yes, she could afford to pay for the damage, since the remaining funds she had deposited in the bank on her first day in Ireland would never be spent.

"Are you all right, Miss?"

She sat at the freshly scrubbed table. "Bring me a glass of water, please."

Sun warmed the village, and preparations were well under way for the May Day festival. Jody noticed flyers taped to shop windows, with a schedule of events lasting throughout the day, into the night. When the Irish celebrated, they went all out.

She didn't travel beyond the square, captivated by the scent of baked goods and cart-loads of flowers being transported from outlying fields. It was a beautiful day to watch the people.

Her thoughts bordered on the gloomy, nonetheless. Should Reed be correct in his prediction, Jody had to notify her sons. She visited the post office, buying stationary, an envelope and a stamp. Sitting in the cemetery beside Reed's grave, she consigned her love for the four boys to paper, and told them she'd be cremated in Churchtown, with her ashes scattered over nearby Irish hills.

She wrote those wishes before she arranged them, which she did by visiting the local funeral parlor shortly after noon.

The mortician recognized her from O'Brien's Bar. She paid in advance for his services, shrugging off his kindly, "You don't look like you're dying."

"I may fool the world, but I can't fool the cancer."

And, the more she contemplated Reed's words, the more she knew he was right. She hadn't been feeling exactly normal in recent months, if there was any such thing as normal. Then again, she might be convincing herself he spoke the truth, creating a phantom disease as lethal as the real thing.

No matter. She drank with Reed that night, full tumblers of whiskey, rather than mere shots. She told him about her sons, and the grandchildren she'd never see again. Dissolving into tears, she rested her weary head on his shoulder and fell asleep.

Not too surprisingly, she woke up in the room overlooking the street. Already, music was playing in the village; the festival had begun. She dressed in t-shirt and jeans, skipped breakfast and joined the crowds wearing flower crowns, cheering their friends racing bicycles and on foot, and drinking.

Most of the drinking took place in a huge tent erected in the square. Like an overgrown pub, a temporary dance floor had been laid in the midst of the tables. Fiddles, guitars, flutes and drums played Irish tunes, and Jody found herself swept onto the floor by men she'd noticed at O'Brien's, and others she'd seen in passing.

This was fun the way fun was meant to be. There were contests, baked goods judged, and school artwork awarded prizes, but no one really cared if they won or lost. Cigar smoke wafted on the breeze; Jody searched out the source, and begged one off its owner. When her boys had been young, she'd relaxed at the end of each day with a shot of whiskey and a cigar. A few last puffs wouldn't do any more damage than had already transpired.

She was flushed and happy when she returned to O'Brien's to find Reed waiting for her.

"A good day?" he queried.

"A damned good day."

"I'm glad."

"Is it time?"

"No."

"When, then?"

He poured the drinks. "Tell me about today."

"I've never had such fun. The music was infectious; I couldn't have not danced, even if I'd been tied to a chair. The races, the food... Fantastic, all of it."

The mug empty, Reed shooed Jody to bed. "You've got a long day tomorrow."

"But, you've only had one..."

"No, I had three before you got here."

Her spirits soaring, Jody didn't mind cutting their visit short. She lay in bed, wide awake, until the sun peeked over the horizon.

An early breakfast preceded her trek to the cemetery. Will O'Malley was passing through the gates, his terrier wagging its tail. "He didn't pee on Ollie's flowers," the man snapped as Jody approached. "I had him further along."

She grinned. No one would have to worry about their dog peeing on her grave, because she wouldn't have one. If her memory didn't live on in her sons, and their children, then her life had been in vain.

If it had, she'd enjoyed the last few months of it, at any rate.

She was sitting against the cemetery's stone wall, watching the sun's rays sparkle on the dew. The sparkles congealed into something more tangible, and Oliver Reed stood before her, smiling.

"Time to go, Jody."

She giggled, rising. "Of all the places I could die, they'll find me in a graveyard."

"Regrets?"

"No regrets. Just my gratitude to you for a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

He extended his hand. She clasped it.

Will O'Malley discovered Jody Bishop's body that evening, walking his terrier before sunset. She was sprawled on the grass, eyes open, looking ever so much like she'd seen a ghost.

Never Judge a Book...

Working as clerk in a quaint used bookstore near the college campus meant Gillian Harwood could afford to continue taking classes. More importantly, she would be able to pay her half of the rent on the cramped apartment she shared with Tracy, and buy food on a daily basis, instead of relying on leftover pizza and boxes of croutons for sustenance.

Besides, given her love of books, it was her dream job. She envisioned browsing the shelves during the lulls in business, selecting a rare first edition to read at the front counter between sales. An hourly wage of \$15 made the prospect even more enjoyable.

Her first Monday punching the clock, the sophomore sociology major wore her favorite flower-print blouse and bell-bottom jeans. Long sandy hair hung over her shoulders, and she periodically pushed wire-rimmed glasses up her nose.

"I've penciled the price of each volume inside the front cover," explained Peter Stark, the balding owner. Gillian noticed dark circles under his brown eyes, wondering if he didn't sleep well. His face was drawn and narrow; in fact, he appeared quite fragile, walking with the slight stoop of one suffering from osteoporosis. He wore a frayed cardigan sweater, despite the warmth of the autumn day. "It's strictly a cash business. My regular customers know I don't accept credit cards or checks."

The cash register dated from the 1950s, when Stark's father had opened the bookstore primarily to sell his own vast collection. A solar powered calculator would add the tax to each purchase, and Gillian merely needed to punch in the total amount using buttons on the machine to print out a slender, faint receipt.

Simple enough.

Peter left her to assist a pair of elderly women seeking a copy of Katharine Hepburn's autobiography. Gillian led them past rows of science fiction and mysteries, histories and philosophy, to the biography section. Climbing a step-stool to snatch the book from the top shelf, the clerk was favored with appreciative smiles.

She glimpsed another person in the shop while escorting her customers to the sales counter. Her natural assumption was that he'd come in before she arrived, and was taking his time making his selections. As the bell on the heavy glass door tinkled at the women's departure, Gillian backtracked to the classic literature aisle, where the man had been leafing through a thick tome.

"Can I help you find anything?" she asked.

Four inches taller than she, he glanced up from the page. What stunned Gillian outright was the intensity of his brown eyes. She felt them boring into her soul. His oval face was framed by a close-cropped black mane, and his slender build betrayed inherent athleticism.

“You’ll learn to ignore me,” boomed a rich baritone. “I’m in here a lot.”

One of those who liked to hang around and never spend his money?

Gillian puzzled. “If that’s the case, we might as well be on a first-name basis. I’m Gillian Harwood.”

“My name is... Dennis.”

“If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

Gillian maneuvered along the narrow aisle and rounded the corner. She paused, a strange chill creeping up her spine. Her gut instinct warned her the man had given her a false name, as if he’d spoken the first one which popped into his head.

Maybe he didn’t trust people, which is why he hid in an old bookstore. At some point, when he grew accustomed to her presence, they might both laugh about the incident.

Three more sales before closing - all less than \$10 each - caused Gillian to question her employer’s wisdom in offering the agreed-upon wage. The entire take for the day didn’t match what he owed her.

Things got a bit more suspicious when Peter Stark emerged from the door marked “Office”, keys and cash in hand. He presented Gillian with three \$20 bills, to cover the four hours she’d worked.

Hesitantly, she tucked the pay in her pocket. Perhaps the businessman had encountered difficulty retaining college-age employees, and preferred to pay cash on a daily basis, in the event the often irresponsible kids didn’t return the next day.

“See you tomorrow,” she said in parting.

His doubtful grunt followed her into the street.

En route to the apartment, Gillian strolled through the strip mall and into the supermarket. She commandeered a cart and steered toward the deli. Her stomach craved fresh, red meat, and real Idaho potatoes.

In the check out lane, she waved to her roommate Tracy, busy scanning and bagging groceries. “What gives?” the junior accounting major queried. “You said you wouldn’t have any money until next week.”

“I got paid today. With any luck, I’ll have the rent money by Friday.”

“Good for you.”

Carrying plastic bags two blocks and up a flight of stairs reminded Gillian how tired she was. And she still had homework assignments to complete. It would be a late night.

Groggily the next morning, she made it through her biology lab and ceramics elective before heading to work. She almost fell asleep at the counter with no customers in the store during her entire shift.

It didn't take long for her to grasp she would never have a crowd of people standing in line to make purchases. College students popped in now and again, hoping to find a used copy of needed textbooks. Collectors obviously knew of the shop, searching for obscure editions when they passed through town. Each evening, she left the building with cash in her pocket, regardless of how much she sold.

A short class schedule on Thursday allowed Gillian to arrive at the bookstore a little after noon. Mr. Stark was nowhere in sight, and a customer hovered near a display of antique maps.

"Are you being helped?" she inquired, not stopping to shed her windbreaker.

"Ah, indeed," replied the deeply tanned gentlemen in clipped English. In his turban and beard, he might've stepped out of a television news report on the recent war. "I am waiting for a copy of the *Iliad* in the original Greek."

"Waiting for? Mr. Stark's gone to find it for you?"

"I instructed him to hold the book in my name."

A quick search of the cupboard beneath the counter and under the register revealed nothing.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'll be happy to look further..."

"No need," he snapped. "I will return another time. You will tell Stark to have it ready."

"I will." Gillian grabbed a notepad and pen. "Give me your name, please, and I'll pass along the message."

"I am Ali. Tell him I was here, and he will know."

She gazed at him evenly, trying to determine why he seemed familiar.

"Have we met somewhere?"

"You are a student at the college?"

"Yes."

He offered no further information, bowing slightly before exiting.

Gillian felt strange standing alone in the shop. If Mr. Stark was hunting for a copy of the *Iliad*, he might be anywhere. She slowly searched each section, hoping to let him know she was on the clock.

The further she ventured, the more confused she became. The last few rows of shelves formed a veritable maze, and she grew rather disoriented. Hearing a noise, she turned to find Peter Stark glaring at her.

“What are you doing?” he barked.

“I... was looking for you.”

“No one, absolutely *no one*, goes down the basement, except me. That’s where I keep the more valuable rare stock.”

Basement? She hadn’t known there *was* a basement in the building.

“Yes, sir,” her voice quavered.

“Get back to work.” On that gruff note, he retired to the office.

She lingered at the counter, bored, until she heard a crash beyond the six-panel wooden door. Had a box fallen and injured the old man? she pondered.

With no customers to serve, she decided to check. Her hand raised to knock, the door was yanked inward.

“Don’t bother that twisted, naughty boy,” snickered an Irish-accented tenor from the dimness. “He’s taking out his frustrations on the world.”

A firm grip on her arm, the sunglass and jean-jacket clad figure propelled Gillian toward the front of the shop. “You’re new here,” he remarked.

“Yes.”

“You probably don’t know the story behind what goes on within these walls.”

“No, and I really don’t...”

“Nonsense, girl. It’s a tale worthy of H.P. Lovecraft.”

The reference piqued Gillian’s interest. She stood on one side of the counter, while her companion leaned across the laminate surface conspiratorially.

He was so close, she could smell whiskey on his breath.

“Y’know anything about the Stark family?”

“No,” Gillian admitted.

“They were well-known hereabouts. Rich sorts, real snobs. Sat in the front pew at the church, and all that.”

Gillian waited for him to continue.

“Old man Stark - Peter’s dad - married a school teacher. She wasn’t too healthy, and the docs told her she shouldn’t have kids. The old man wanted a son to inherit his fortune - rather than let the government get their hands on it - so he... well... And she gave birth to a bouncing baby boy.”

“Peter,” Gillian supplied.

“Right. Only problem: ‘bout the time he started elementary school, they realized he wasn’t right in the head.”

Gillian shifted her gaze tentatively toward the office. “Really?”

“Really. They spent thousands on doctors and shrinks, and nothing could be done. They finally locked him up at the state hospital...”

Too preposterous to be true, Gillian recognized the Irishman’s joke. “You’re pulling my leg.”

He shook his shaggy head, glaring at her over red plastic rims. “No, my girl. Old man Stark opened this store because the only way to raise enough for Peter’s treatment was to sell the books he’d so lovingly gathered from the far corners of the earth. When the money dried up, the court ordered Peter released. Thinking himself a failure, the old man hung himself from the rafters in the store room.”

“Are you saying Peter’s insane?”

“He’s been on medication these past ten years, but he still has moments when he...”

Uncomfortable in the extreme, Gillian leapt on the defensive. “You’re lying!”

“The story is common knowledge in these parts. Your lame college library has the newspaper articles in their archives, if you don’t believe me.”

“Why are you telling me this? You want me to quit, so you can take my job?”

He snorted. “I wouldn’t work here if Peter paid me \$100 an hour. I thought I’d do you a favor, is all. Keep you out of harm’s way...”

“Is he violent?”

“He can be.”

So much for the ideal job, Gillian mused.

“I’ll be off, now. Getting a bit parched, I am.” Pleased with himself, he sauntered over the threshold. “If you want to see for yourself how violent he gets, tell him Harry was here.”

“Why should he...”

“Hates my guts, he does. Told me 20 years ago he never wanted to see me again. I come around now and again, just to piss him off.”

The door banged shut behind him.

Gillian was still struggling to digest what Harry had told her ten minutes later, when Peter Stark walked through the entrance, shivering. He wore only a shirt and trousers, and the wind outside had whipped up in anticipation of a storm.

“Mr. Stark, weren’t you in the back...”

“I stepped out to the alley to get a breath of air, and locked myself out.” He extracted a wad of bills from his hip pocket and tossed them beside the register. “Take what I owe you for today. We’ll be closing early.”

Gillian counted out \$75 and hastened from the building. A sudden fear of being in the same room with the possibly disturbed individual moved her feet as fast as they would go without actually breaking into a full sprint.

She didn't slow her pace until she reached the supermarket. She loaded boxes of cereal into the cart, a loaf of bread, cans of soda and the one thing she'd promised as a treat to herself - a large tray of chilled shrimp. She'd last eaten shrimp cocktail the night of her high school prom, when her boyfriend had spent over \$50 on dinner just for the two of them.

Nearing the corner by the ice cream cases, Gillian collided with a middle-aged man who appeared quite lost. She withdrew her cart and apologized.

"It's my fault," came the melodic rejoinder. "I'm looking for the baking soda..."

"It's over by the cake mixes, I think." Gillian would've sworn she knew him, though she couldn't pinpoint how. His wavy black hair and piercing brown eyes would've caught any girl's eye on campus, but he was older than most students who shared lecture halls with her. She didn't realize she was staring at him until he spoke.

"Is something wrong?"

"No... I..."

"Everybody thinks they know me," he chuckled. "I've got one of those common faces."

"It's not common at all," she blurted out, then blushed.

"Thanks." He extended his right hand. "I'm Jack Stark."

She accepted the gesture. "Jack... Stark?" The resemblance - and a renewed apprehension - dawned on her. "Any relation to Peter Stark?"

"He's my older brother."

"Older..."

"That's right. How do you know the old coot?"

"I work at the bookstore."

"Really? You're a brave soul."

"I'm beginning to think so," Gillian lamented. "I didn't know Mr. Stark had a brother."

"Half-brother, to be exact. My father was a bit of a philanderer in his day, since Peter's mom wasn't too healthy."

Made sense, Gillian surmised, just weird to run into him so close to his brother's domain. "I'd love to stay and chat, but I've got to get home. Big report due tomorrow."

"Can I drop you?" Jack offered.

"It's only a couple blocks..."

"That's quite a load to carry so far."

"Okay."

Jack accompanied her to the check out lane, then directed her toward a gleaming blue Chevelle in the parking lot. Gillian gave him directions to the apartment; he decided to take an alternate route.

"Look, I've got to get home," she protested.

He insisted, "We need to talk." The vintage auto braked along a remote stretch of country road, and Gillian couldn't control her trembling.

At least, Jack didn't waste time with polite banter. "You met Harry today."

She nodded.

"Crazy fool loves to gossip and, most of the time, none of what he says is true. There's no need for you to be scared of Peter."

"Your brother's not... psycho?"

Jack laughed. "Who isn't psycho one way or another, these days? The psychological definition of normal doesn't fit a living soul."

"I suppose you're right."

"Damned straight, I'm right. Peter had some problems when he was young. He... couldn't relate to other kids his age, because he was skinny, awkward and rich. To alleviate the pain, he immersed himself in a fantasy world."

"And they locked him up for that?"

"If he would've kept the fantasies private, he would've been okay."

"He didn't?"

"A few of the neighbors - wealthy, stuck-up neighbors, mind you - saw him playing in the back yard, and didn't want him coming into *their* back yards. They made life hell for my old man."

"Did your father really hang himself at the bookstore?"

Jack's turn to nod.

"I don't get why Peter's fantasies should cause so much trouble," Gillian prodded.

"They were fantasy... personalities. He discovered as a kid he could mimic anyone's voice. He would put on a costume, and make-up, and walk around town, seeing how many people would recognize him."

"And they didn't appreciate the practical joke?"

"It didn't take long before it wasn't a joke anymore. Feeling like he had no personality of his own, Peter... became those characters he created. He lost control of them."

“Split personalities?” gasped Gillian.

“That’s what they call it now.” Abruptly, he threw open the driver side door and bolted onto the pavement.

Fading sunset hues providing little illumination, Gillian saw him slumped over the Chevelle’s hood, breathing hard. She scrambled from the car and stood, watching, afraid to approach.

“Do you know what it’s like,” he moaned, “to never know who you’ll be from one day - check that, one moment to the next? The shrinks tried prescribing medication, and things were okay for about five years. The mind can be more powerful than any drugs, though. There’s no telling...”

When Jack raised his face, it wasn’t his face. Gillian could barely distinguish the features, yet it seemed the dark hair had straightened and shortened...

“Dennis?” she whispered.

“I shouldn’t be here,” the shy bookworm muttered. “I’m not safe here...”

As if he vanished into the security of Peter Stark’s body, that character was replaced by Ali, complete with a beard which grew from nowhere. He, too, disappeared quickly, and Harry pulled a flask of whiskey from the inside pocket of the vest Jack had been wearing.

“Bottoms up, my girl! Fun, isn’t it?”

Gillian retreated down the gravel road, turning to run only when she was positive Stark wouldn’t try to pursue her. He was involved in his own interior battle, and she didn’t want to witness who won.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen!” came the hoarse cry. “I knew it was getting worse, but I thought...”

The next sound to reach her ears was the gunshot.

Stumbling into the apartment at 8:30, Gillian collapsed on the sofa. Tracy brought her a glass of water, and demanded she tell what she’d seen.

Gillian declined, too shaken to put the experience into words. A savvy psychologist would think *her* insane, if she claimed to believe any of it. She tossed a handful of money at Tracy. “Here’s the rent. I’m going to bed.”

The headline in Friday’s newspaper proclaimed the truth, “Local Businessman Found Dead.”

Gillian felt quite dead, herself.

The Last Sliver of Sanity

If I could count on anything, I could count on one sliver of my brain staying sane, no matter what happened.

Except, of course, the two occasions - over a 30 year period - when I imbibed far too much whiskey, wound up kissing the wrong men, and sick as a dog.

I mentioned this unique condition to few people, because they didn't grasp the importance of my triune existence. My creativity ran rampant some days, propelling me at warp speed toward the precipice; logic - an equally harsh and obsessive task master - operated the rest of the time. The neutral "monitor" lay dormant, until my behavior required a steadying influence.

Many wrote me off as eccentric, but not due to my attire. I preferred jeans and t-shirts or hoodies, sneakers or Birkenstock sandals. Long brown hair tied in a pony tail. Spectacles riding down my nose, because I wouldn't agree to bifocals, yet couldn't read the printed page - or see my computer monitor - through the thick lenses.

Those I encountered in the course of a day's activity could not look me in the eye. They complained about some intangible fire burning into their souls - the ones who admitted to any discomfort, at all.

Most avoided me entirely.

Which was fine with me.

I went about my business, caring little about the greater scheme of things. Weeks blended into months, then years...

The cycle halted abruptly when I started meeting myself.

At odd moments.

In strange places.

Where I never should have been.

No drugs - of any kind - warped my perception. The only pills I ingested were a daily multi-vitamin and, occasionally, Tylenol for minor aches.

I needed medication, however, to lower my heart rate and respiration after the first incident.

My 2005 blue Mustang roaring along Walnut Avenue early that Saturday, I glimpsed a vaguely familiar pedestrian moving in the opposite direction, wearing the same red flannel shirt and purple sweat pants I'd donned that morning. My head whipped around for a double-take, and I nearly slammed into the rear of a pick-up slowed for a left turn.

A dangerous neighborhood to walk, at any hour. I'd risked it once, as a teen, and swore not to be so foolish ever again.

That fragment of constant sanity kept me coherent until I could pull to the curb and analyze what I'd seen. Indeed, every human is supposed to have one double, or more, in the world, and I'd been mistaken for someone else - usually playing guitar - more than once. This could not have been such a case. Nor could it have been anyone impersonating me. My habits, or lack thereof, brought me through this part of town on very rare occasions. I'd told no one my intentions, so it would've been impossible for such a masquerade to be so perfectly timed.

Besides, I had an extremely unique, crescent moon-shaped birth mark on my neck, which could not be duplicated.

And, in the literal sense, I had no twin.

No dream could be so tactile, nor was I dead - a supposition confirmed by pinching my own arm.

My annual physical exam, two weeks' prior, found no medical conditions which caused hallucinations.

Decades inhaling fumes from the oil paints used creating murals in hospitals and civic buildings might have fried a few grey cells...

I preferred that to the last alternative, which rattled me to the core.

I'd crossed the boundary into a weird, parallel universe.

Impossible!

Already late for a meeting to discuss a new project, I forced the stickshift into gear and merged with traffic. The day's business would take priority over some momentary apparition.

And net me a contract to finish an Indian casino mural, started by a Navajo artist who'd tragically died in a motorcycle accident.

Which would follow adorning the county jail's recreation room with inspiring depictions of rehabilitation.

After the hospital lobby.

The deposits alone, paid by the three clients, would keep me comfortable for until retirement age, minimum.

Pretty good wages for six months' work.

Or, so I thought, until I stood on the scaffold, twenty feet above the jail floor, momentarily distracted from my brush when a parade of orange-clad prisoners - wrists and ankles shackled - escorted by a dozen guards, moved toward an overhead door where an armored van idled.

Fourth in line: me.

I nearly fell off the planks.

A pot of hot-rod red did plummet, splattering the cement. That shred of sanity restored my wits in an instant.

The head guard, interrupted at his lunch, assumed the spill to be blood, letting fly with a string of expletives as he summoned his underlings.

“Hold on!” I shouted, half-way down a precarious ladder. “It’s my fault!”

His response lacked the dignity of his status and rugged good looks. He concluded, “How do we clean this up?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“I can’t allow...”

“If you’re so afraid some criminal will attack me, you can watch.”

“Where will you get the mop and bucket?” he barked.

“Don’t need ‘em. Just a few rags and some turpentine.”

“You carried turpentine into restricted space?”

I bristled. “I had permission. You think someone’ll get his mitts on it and torch the place?”

“In two seconds flat.”

“Fine, I’ll dump it down the sink, and you can figure out another way to eradicate the stain.” I reached for the bottom rung.

He snatched a hunk of my t-shirt. He might’ve been only 5’9”, maybe 150 pounds, but his strength couldn’t be denied.

Had that tidbit of sanity not kicked in, I would’ve reared back and slugged him. As it was, he caught my right hand closing into a fist.

Our eyes met - his, deep brown, framed by dark wavy hair, mustache and goatee.

“You been drinking?” he queried harshly.

“Not a drop.” His reference to my bloodshot corneas... “I... didn’t sleep last night.”

“Then, you shouldn’t risk being up there.”

“I’m okay.”

“The warden would have my ass if you...”

“Nothing’s going to happen.”

He yanked my arm. “C’mon. I’ll drive you home.”

“No!” I shook from his grasp. “Leave me alone, already!”

Hands raised in submission, a sidewise smirk twisting his features, he withdrew. “I won’t be held responsible.”

“Just get your janitors to scrub this mess.”

Resting on my perch a few hours later, I observed the return procession of detainees, myself not included. The guard - whose badge read, "Bell, T.S., Lt." - loitered in the far shadows, probably waiting for me to take the predicted tumble.

The shift change alarm also signaled my departure from the premises. A faint pinkness remained on the rec room floor; the maintenance crew had used badly diluted chemicals, ineffective on the paint.

"You going straight home?" Bell prodded before unlocking the door.

"After I stop for a bite."

"Where?"

"Why?"

"Curiosity."

"None of your business."

From the threshold, he witnessed my clearance through security, including a pat down.

For more than one reason, I was glad to be out of there.

Glad to finish the mural two weeks later, as well.

The casino job, of my recent efforts, proved least taxing. The deceased artist had left his sketches and notes on site, so it required little more than continuing with his template.

Easy money.

Seeing myself pumping quarters into a slot machine smacked of irony - no gambler, I.

Also, I tired of these weird incidents. Abandoning my palate, I planned to confront this mirage...

Delayed by an influx of senior citizens disembarking from their tour bus.

Once past, the doppelganger had vanished.

In frustration, I diverted into the bar, ordering a double whiskey.

"Ah, here you are!" came an oddly familiar baritone from behind. "We're going to lose our dinner reservation..."

I whirled, glass of amber liquid raised.

T.S. Bell, damned fine figure of a prison guard, muttered, "I... thought you didn't drink."

"On rare occasions." Both his presence and his words - signifying some manner of relationship - thoroughly jarred me.

The bartender read my sign language, refilling the tumbler I'd emptied in one gulp.

Bell stayed my arm. "What's wrong with you? Losing at the slots isn't that important."

I jerked free and downed the drink. "How'd you know..."

"You told me when you left the room."

While my limbs began to feel very fluid, the sanity section kicked in, advising that I not say anything which would hint I didn't understand Bell's tale. He'd obviously seen me since I completed the jail mural, though I didn't recall seeing him. Assuming I'd been roaming the slot machines, he didn't know about my current task...

Even though, glimpsing myself in the mirror behind the liquor shelves, I had a sizable smudge of green paint on my neck and shirt.

Stammering, I lurched toward the exit. "I... need to wash up before..."

"Make it quick. These reservations are hard to get!"

Two steps and I spun. "You have the key?"

He dug the plastic card from his pocket and tossed it to me. Luckily, my reflexes still enabled me to catch it.

Lucky, too, the room number was printed on the edge.

What I found in the lavish suite struck me totally wrong. My clothes were strewn across the king-sized bed, my shoes, even my bottle of shampoo - half used - in the shower. I sank on the mattress, hoping to clear my addled brain enough to think coherently.

Descending to ground level after 20 minutes, flecks of green still visible on my skin, Bell no longer stood in the lobby. He must've gone into the restaurant alone, waiting there.

Or, not waiting, as I discovered. Bell and I - the other I - were seated near the windows, chatting intimately. I slipped away, gathered my artist case, and rushed into the night.

Even that small sliver of sanity, so vital to my existence, could not meet the challenge of processing this dilemma.

All night, I stared at the ceiling above my bed, my mind a swirling morass of confusion. A bizarre frailty claimed my physical body; I pondered whether death loomed close.

Time and space shimmered around me, insubstantial and ethereal. For a flash, I believed myself floating above the mattress, viewing my own insomnia.

"This can't be real," I whispered.

My voice answered, "It's very real."

"How?"

"When you stop holding so tight to your sanity, you'll understand."

I woke with a jolt when the alarm sounded at 6:30 AM, thinking the whole thing had been a nightmare while I'd dozed. Another week would see the casino

project finalized; perhaps T.S. Bell and his companion would have checked out before I resumed my labors.

Scruffy and tired, I dragged myself to the tribal enclave mid-morning. I cringed when Bell confronted me behind the plastic curtain suspended from rafters, which was supposed to shield me from public scrutiny and protect the mural from dust and damage.

“What the hell...” I spat.

He retorted, “Where’d you sneak off to so early?”

His accusation bothered me, but not as much as his smoldering brown orbs and those lips which, in some shape or form, I’d kissed. Thus distracted, I didn’t stop to consider my reply. “I never left the house.”

Furrows on his brow reminded me of my precarious situation. “The house? You were... in bed with me until around five-ish, then you disappeared.”

Disappeared. An understatement.

The chuckle burst from my throat, unbidden.

“What’s so funny?” Bell grumbled.

Try as I might, I couldn’t muster a straight face. “My life, that’s all.”

“Well, I’m working the graveyard shift, so I’m starting back to the city. You coming?”

Another oddity: that Bell and... the other I would travel 80 miles to this particular casino.

“I’m good.”

“How will you...”

“Don’t worry about me.” Explaining that my Mustang, parked in the employees’ lot, would provide ample transportation would only exacerbate the eerie scenario.

Which included Bell embracing me and igniting my soul with a kiss capable of melting a solid block of ice.

Releasing me, a cloud passed over his goateed features. “What’s wrong?” he hissed.

“Nothing.” Chest heaving, I could barely speak. “Believe me. Nothing.”

“You... taste different.”

Sarcasm twisted my reply. “What? Chocolate instead of cheese?”

“Actually, yes.”

I could only shrug, and Bell departed in befuddled silence.

Tough to concentrate on painting after that, for sure. I sat atop the ladder over an hour, unable to shake off the jitters. When I did pluck a brush from the turpentine jar, my fingers trembled so violently, I couldn’t hold it.

Nor could they maintain a grip on my cell phone, answering the ring. I set it on my lap, straining to hear the hospital administrator announcing a change to the new wing's dedication ceremony, and requesting I apply the varnish to their mural as soon as possible.

"I have that on the calendar for next week."

"Tomorrow, please. There's an extra \$2,000 in it, if you can squeeze us in."

Two grand would pay for the psychological counseling I'd decided would be needed to recover a semblance of normalcy to my life. "I'll be there."

So was she - her - I.

The eyes bored into the back of my skull, compelling me to whip around and find her glaring at me from the mezzanine balcony - to which access was restricted until the office furniture was delivered that Friday.

"So?" My shout carried across the vacant expanse. "What's with Bell?"

Her words fueled my aggravation. "You tell me."

"How'd you hook up with him?"

"You should know."

"Stop, already! I've been keeping to myself, working..."

"Fostering a delusion."

"Am I schizo?"

"An artist."

Nerves frayed, I'd reached the end. Every ounce of energy went toward sealing the rendering of medical innovations with a protective coating, then I packed my equipment and exited the premises. If it meant sequestering myself at the tiny bungalow I called home, to never cross paths with... I would lock the door and flush the key.

Except, outside, Bell leaned against the Mustang's hood, his expression clearly perturbed.

"We had a lunch date, babe."

I popped the trunk, ignoring him.

"You... deliberately blowing me off?" he pressed.

"No."

The way he touched me, coming from behind and caressing... well, I slumped against him.

"You're not cheating on me, are you?" his baritone arrogant yet seductive in my ear.

"I'm... not well."

"You catch a cold?"

“Mentally.”

He twirled me to face him. “We’ve been through all that. Back in college, I only had basic science courses as part of my criminal justice studies, but your theory about pockets existing in the flow of time... That’s something straight out of science fiction.”

Air scented with rosemary filled my lungs from a nearby hedge. “When did I mention this?”

“You remember: the first time we ate at The Pit Stop.”

A 50's style diner, my favorite place for chili dogs and chocolate shakes. “I’m surprised you didn’t turn tail and run.”

He gazed at me over his oval sunglasses. “I deal with jailbirds all day - druggies, drunks, nuts. Nothing scares me anymore.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“What I *won’t* take is you playing games with me, babe. Either we’re together, or we’re not. Your call to make, now.”

My mouth opened to accept his offer, jaw closing before I verbalized the affirmative. In the recesses of my logical brain, I recalled a reference to pockets in time, but not the source. A farfetched concept, when I’d come across it; might part of me have managed to manipulate this scientific flaw?

That fragment of sanity negated the notion.

The rest of me could not reject the possibility, however, and that which had kept me grounded these many years - or so I’d thought - was blown from my consciousness like a leaf in a blast of winter wind.

Across the asphalt, I strode toward myself, and T.S. Bell shuddered upon witnessing me merge into one before him.

I felt no differently, only calmer.

Bell shook his head, trying to clear it. “Are you... okay?” he sputtered.

Nodding, I added, “One question: what do I call you?”

He responded, slightly puzzled, “Same as always: Tony.”

“Well, Tony. I’m starving.”

He misinterpreted the phrase; my alternate-time self must’ve been wildly promiscuous.

“How ‘bout The Pit Stop?” I corrected him.

He chuckled. “Sure. The Pit Stop, then a pit stop.”

His arm around my waist, he led me to his black Dodge Ram pick-up.

For the first time in months, I knew I was smiling.