

# **Bad Patterns**

***Weird Stories***

**by**

**George Potter**

**outlaw  
~  
press**

This collection is dedicated to the following patient people:

*Tahn, Iloilo, Bill, Patricia, Kris, Patrick and Mike.*

Thanks for bearing with me, folks.

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## ***Story Notes***

### **FOREWORD**

Welcome to a collection of my stories. I named this one *Bad Patterns* because, for the past couple of years (when most of these stories were written), I've been fascinated with that concept.

I see human interaction, human society, in terms of communication: great swirling clouds of communication lines. Those lines get snarled and tangled on occasions, bad patterns in the flow of symbols.

And behavior, we find bad patterns in behavior as well, something I'm no stranger to, in life or fiction.

Fiction itself finds these bad old patterns,

comfortable cliches and templates for a story to be told. To illustrate a point. Some of these are so deeply wedded to the structure of storytelling, to the narrative engines we recognize as fictive, that they are almost impossible to dislodge.

Here is a collection of bad old patterns, trying to be good, to do something worth the effort put into them. They may fail, but they try.

I have included notes on some of the stories, at the end of the book. Details of how they originated or what they meant to me. Read them if you are interested in such thoughts. Avoid if not.

I hope you enjoy yourself.

-G.

***(Tishomingo, MS 11-12-09)***

## **In The Hall Of Kings, Hungover**

Do you even remember losing the eye?

Oh, pathetic. You really are, and you know it. Lost his eye, he says. Traded it away.

What have you learned from such a trade, you silly pup?

You're something of the office legend for the toys, little never-before-seen miracles of electronic engineering. The newest, most cleverly crafted.

"Did you find a place to park? This rain is ludicrous."

"I've got the new Mitsumi transport build. I just fold her up and slip her in my pocket."

People laugh, but your smile is a little strange.

You were always so ambitious. That stern image of the responsible eldest, so well played. But, in the end, you didn't mind stooping to melodrama, battered godsbody stretched naked on the tree of the world, crucified and bound on the spears of the Norns, for nine and nine.

Showoff.

Death is near and you have lost all fear of it. You call to it, ready. Fretful visions of a showdown with a grinning skull face, a fine white sculpture of billions of grains of secret laden white dust. Foolish little heroic fantasies. Even close to that ultimate edge gods and men bow to them.

For nine days you've hung here, and the universe has changed. The cardinal directions are variations in pain, each subtly shaded with meaning, intensity and flavor. A sense of direction burnt through pain, discipline at the core. Only the occasional trickles of water register as pleasure in such deep meditation.

And after the ninth night you find yourself rudely awakened. Cut from the great tree and dragged through the forest. Given a poor man's bed of leaves and sticks by a fire hidden in that little valley.

They say if you hide in the world of men, you'll find giants.

Cardinal points war with nerve flash as new directions are discovered.

The first thing you think when you wake is:

*Oh, now I understand.*

And you do, and it's *dreadful* you discover. Another burden to be shouldered, such final knowledge, one eyed and myopic.

You see the unavoidable steps that lead up to the final fires and darkness. See that they are a logical and inarguable fact. You are convinced, left with nothing but to plod on towards Ragnarok, almost eager.

Now you're remembering!

Travellers are still your kind and the horizon still as elusive. The roads are as cold and inviting as ever, and faster oh faster.

One eye wary you step into these whirlwind lives of men, to crisscross great masses of land and souls. To while away these last few long years till death and glory and the good high ring of steel.

You and I are on the same damn road, brother. Half brother, like it or not. Kin of giants both. We gods are messy.

The same damn road, drifting away these last long years. Left dreading, waiting, finally accepting and exhilarated. You are left waiting for the end of the whole dirty story.

Oh blow, horn, blow.

## **Why I Stole Your Identity**

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I can hear you crying, in the little piece of nowhere you have been allotted, I can hear your unanswered, pleading questions:

*Why me? I'm not rich. I'm not famous. I'm not anything special at all. I'm unknown and un-noticeable. My identity is practically invisible.*

To which I reply, in tones you can't hear, both arch and sympathetic:

*Exactly.*

***The Pragmatic Prisoner***

It was carelessness, she knew, and she could only blame herself.

This made it no sense, really, but it would provide a space-occupying mantra until she could come up with something better. Until she could sort out how she really felt about this thing.

The walls of her cell are grey and unmarked. They strike her, most of all, as practical. That's an odd word but there it is. The only thing that comes to her when she concentrates.

She's never been much good with finding the right descriptive words. She got C's and the rare sympathy B's in high school composition, and bubbly Mrs. Fowler always tsked lightly when she handed the papers back. 'Not bad, dear. But not very descriptive.'

Practical. Solid. Walls of a cell.

The cell is neither roomy nor small. It's not too bad, really. It would make a nice bedroom she thinks, with some paint and a few pieces of well chosen furniture.

Unlike descriptive words, she's always been good at choosing the right furniture. Many people have commented that she should have been an interior decorator, and she considered it carefully during

those days when you spend time considering such things.

She doubted that she'd have been successful at such a trade, though. In the end, you need to be able to properly describe a room to decorate it.

She paces off the cell, discovering its true dimensions. She makes very careful paces. If her calculations of those careful strides are right, the room (the cell, she reminds herself) is fifteen feet by ten feet. Yes.

Perfect for a bedroom. Not too big, not too small. Plenty of room for stuff, but easy to heat in winter and cool in summer.

Practical.

The only decoration in her cell is a metal mirror, that runs from the top to the bottom of one of the walls. It's like those mirrors she's seen in jail cells in movies. Those mirrors are inevitably beaten and scratched and dinged and defaced to the point of uselessness. Sometimes they have dirty words and phrases scrawled onto their surfaces.

This one is immaculate, and casts a perfectly serviceable reflection. She studies herself.

The clothes she woke up in are as grey as her cell, and they almost cause her to blend in with the surrounding walls.

Her hair seems redder than it used to be, and she figures this is because her skin -- never what you'd call dusky -- seems paler than it used to be. She touches her face.

Yes, much paler.

She's losing color, her Mother would say, grimly, as if loss of color meant cancer was no doubt on the way.

She wonders why she isn't afraid. She wonders why she feels almost nothing. Except sleepy.

There is a blanket, also grey, in one corner. She lies down on it. The last thing she thinks of before drifting into a doze is that her weekly book group was supposed to meet.

She wonders, fuzzily, if they'll miss her.

### ***What They Say In Milan***

"Are you feeling ok, Marian?" Donna asks me, her blue eyes squinting a little in curiosity.

"Yeah," I say, pouring myself another glass of wine.  
"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Well, there's that outfit first of all," Denise chimes in. She's the only black woman in the book group, and tries to out white the white girls in every way. She usually succeeds too.

Donna takes this hardest. No matter how hard she tries, Denise is almost always slightly more fashionably dressed than she is, and is willing to prove it by pulling the latest issue of Vogue from her purse.

She seems to get those damn things early, too. They appear in her purse far quicker than they do at the newsstand.

This is a good moment to gather some info. I found this outfit in Marian's closet. But the myriad ways things can be put together is a mystic art beyond my ken.

Both women laugh.

Lisa enters the room, carrying a tray of crackers and cheese and sliced meats. She smiles at the joke she didn't hear. It's her place we're meeting at this week. "What?"

"It's a little...slutty for you," Donna explains.

"I wouldn't say slutty," Denise corrects her. Donna glares. "Provocative is a better word."

I glance down at myself. The skirt is long enough. The blouse barely shows any cleavage. "I don't see it."

"Where's your bra?" asks Donna in a stage whisper. This gets a laugh. She grins at Denise.

"Say what you like. Bra-less is 70's slutty, no matter how you slice it."

Denise goes for the Vogue. She pages through it with an expert's sly touch. "Actually, in Milan and London, the free look is coming back according to..."

"I'll worry about that when I'm traipsing through Milan or London," Donna dismisses her airily.

Lisa almost chokes on a cracker. "Oh hell, Donna, you pulled out Milan on me the other day at the mall."

"Different situations," Donna demands, icily.

No one's buying it.

"Guess I forgot," I explain.

All three look at me as if I've suddenly admitted to decapitating bunny rabbits for fun.

This shit is harder than it looks.

"Any more wine?" I ask, raising my glass. I have a nice buzz underway. It may not help me fit my

assumed identity, but it keeps me from giving much of a shit.

Lisa pours for me and then produces her copy of this weeks book. It's a thin, hip little tale of New York desperation called *The Insomniac's Garden* filled with sex, drugs and the frayed edges of mental instability. Not that I've read it, I just looked it up on wikipedia.

"I though this was a brilliant..."

"Oh, it sucked," Donna cuts in. She thinks about 90 percent of the books we read suck. The remaining ten percent are books she picks. I'm pretty sure she just looks them up on wikipedia too.

"Sucks might be a strong word," says Denise.

Donna's face is gonna stick in glare mode. "Is that what they say in Milan?"

Denise just smiles. "Vogue doesn't have a book review column, so I don't know," she replies sweetly.

This strikes me as hilarious, and I laugh and laugh, spilling wine on my self.

All three of them look at me, real concern in their eyes.

"Are you absolutely sure you're feeling ok?"

## ***Talking To Walls***

When she wakes up she has been served breakfast of a sort.

She thought it was oatmeal, but it may have been some form of farina. Or grits. She wasn't an expert on hot cereals, being more the corn flakes type.

She ate it anyway, glad she wouldn't be starved to death. The coffee, served in a real mug with 'World's Best Assistant Manager' on the side, was surprisingly good. Real Colombian, properly prepared.

She wished she had a second cup. It always took her two cups to get ready for the day. She almost laughed. What, exactly, did she need to get ready for? She doubted there would be much of an activity program provided.

No sense just sitting around, though.

She calculated in her head that one hundred and eighty seven laps around her cell would equal a mile. Or close. She could never remember exactly how many feet were in a mile. Five thousand something. Close enough she figured.

Two miles a day, she vowed. At least. If this bizarre captivity (that she was still amazingly calm about) was good for nothing else, she'd at least get into shape.

She was just over her first hundred laps when she heard the tapping.

She thought she was hearing things at first, and ignored it. But, after a few more trips around the room, she convinced herself that the sound was real.

It was coming from the sleeping corner.

She doubled up the blanket and made a crude cushion. She sat on it, staring into the angle where the walls met, and waited.

Sure enough, a minute or so later, came the sound: *tap-tap-taptaptap*.

Morse code. It's Morse code and she smiles, a sunniness sudden in the gray room.

She remembered her father, teaching her. And her mother, complaining, that what use did a little girl have with Morse code?

And how they smiled at each other, sure that she was wrong.

The taps echoed again. Distinct. They paused.

*Hello, will you talk? A question.*

She tapped back, feeling a little foolish at first, but the knowledge is there where she left it, safe and sound.

Yes.

*Who do you think you are?*

She paused, a little caught out by the question. It was sneaky, she decided, but not in a mean way.

*I thought I was Marian Townley, she tapped, very carefully. And I thought I lived in New York.*

*That identity is stolen and gone from you. Can you conceive another?*

She hesitated even longer this time, prompting a hurry, a flurry of tapping:

*Everything is malleable here. Everything is designable and re-designable. Choose a focus, an identity, or you'll never be able to get started learning how.*

This intrigued her. The Marian Townley person seemed distant to her, anyway. Almost a person she'd dreamt.

She thought of the clean lines of a properly laid out

room. She thought about imposing order on the chaos of mismanaged masses and spectra.

For a place the image that came to her was the womb of the great void, an empty place desiring creation.

*It is good to meet you, Designer,* came the tapping.

She felt centered and purpose filled suddenly. *My pleasure,* she tapped back. *And who are you?*

*I am you, and more.*

### ***How Shopping Killed Western Culture***

"That's what they say, anyhow," Donna informs me, her tone one of resigned boredom.

"That materialism is a vice that has eaten it's way into modern life so nastily that we're only an inch or two away from being either cannibals or robots, I forget witch."

She's eyeing the sleeve of a two hundred dollar sweater with experienced attention, judging.

"I think I read that on Wikipedia," I mutter,

pretending to consider things I have no clue about in this horrible sea of clothes. Which all must be looked at, apparently.

The mall stretches in frightening waves of people all around me. Uncertainty clamors, but it seems never to touch this circle.

Donna had appeared this morning, waking me up, apparently surprised to find me sleeping at ten am. She had urged me dressed and brought me here.

We've been here for hours.

"I think it's bullshit," Donna opined, having finished her inspection and placed the sweater carefully in her bag.

"Materialism gets a bad rap. It's really just a way to keep the world at bay. A defense. A plan, you know?"

"A cage?" I realize.

Donna laughs. "What are you a commie now? Too much Wikipedia, nerd."

We move to another section of the mall, dragging our cage with us.

We are eating. The food is good, but Donna never shuts up.

"...such a slut. I'm so sick of her. If she didn't host the best book club meetings I'd never fucking speak to her again."

I am numbed. I try to concentrate on the food, the taste, the surprise, the wonderful aspects of this chaos.

But the enforced protocols of this shopping behaviour, the unceasing din that is Donna, drive them away. Soon even the flavor of his food seems predictable and predetermined.

"I'd like to do her boyfriend, too. Steve's busy with some chick at his gym, so I'm getting nothing. Do you think Dewayne is hot?"

"What?"

"Dewayne, Denise's boyfriend, dumb-ass. Are you ok?"

I don't know how to answer for a moment, stifling the urge to simply escape.

"Yes," I finally say.

"Quit eating like a pig," she whispers loudly. "You're embarrassing me."

I slow myself. Must not appear hungry, I suppose.

"What's your damage anyway? You've been odd all morning."

"I don't know," I tell her.

And this is the truth. I thought I'd like this more.

Donna rummages in her purse. She produces a bottle and extracts pills.

She hands them to me. "Perfect for I don't know." she assures me.

I take them, chasing them with half a glass of wine. More bars for the cage, I understand.

Around me is the uncertainty, seen in full bloom. But close to me this order prevents its touch.

Donna hands me two more pills, twisted in a piece of napkin.

"Keep these for next week. The meeting is at Denise's. Wikipedia says the book sucks, so you might need them."

"Does life get any better?" I ask this question slowly, calmly.

Donna laughs, and becomes philosophical.

"Honey, this is the *weekend*. Tomorrow we have to go

to work."

## ***Under The Sweater, A Weave***

### **An entry from Marian Townley's Journal...**

*Once upon a time there were three people who came to surprising ends.*

*The first of these people we'll call the Stranger, because that's what he was at base.*

*The hope ignoring universe has, in a sense, two sides. We'll call them inside and outside. Those born on the inside are subject to forces both hot and cold, chaotic yet sometimes orderly. They exist in a system that has, on one perceivable level, rules and laws. They live lives ordered by time and space.*

*Those born on the outside are not so constrained, and not so ordered. They are pure mind and know of matter and energy only by rumor.*

*They can see inside on certain occasions and in certain places (that are neither occasions nor places but differently experienced aspects of a singular Now and a singular There) but they cannot experience*

*them.*

*They must imagine their own situations, create their own versions of inside.*

*They are stuck with the predictable and the ever known, forever denied the joy of the random. They are doomed to these pale illusions of the wild and the real.*

*The Stranger was one of the latter, born outside and -- over the un-passing ages -- eaten with jealousy at those lucky many who happened to be born on the inside.*

*Eventually, it found a way. A dangerous way, an immoral way. But it found it and used it to give it what it wanted.*

*The second was Marian, who was born inside and lived a life of only imposed clockwork, of beautiful uncertainty.*

*The third was a shadow, an echo of both, who had merely to choose it's company.*

***And Welcome To It***

The Designer awakes, warm in her careful nest of possibility.

She still bears superficial resemblance to the once Marian Townley. Just as her nest bears superficial resemblance to the gray rooms. Things just *are* at base, the only difference the eyes that observe them.

And the Designer observed with meticulous precision.

"What world will I create now?" she wondered, and mulled possibilities. The intimate properties of her nest inspired her. They beckoned in plain site, patterns of certainty, begging to be set this way and that.

She shifted:

**"...and the fireplace is guaranteed for a century. It's very well designed."**

**The couple beam. "It's marvellous."**

**Around them the interior of the living room gleams. They take it in and radiate satisfaction.**

**The Designer smiles. She loves showing her rooms.**

**These seekers she had designed from scratch with randomised reactions. They had almost**

## **full personal appreciation matrices.**

She's bored, suddenly.

She collapses physics, so painstakingly modelled after inside, then wipes the nest to base.

The Shadow speaks. Still tapping, though she has designed an interface.

The voice is now calm and low, a trusted voice. Her friend. Her shadow.  
Her gift from a thief.

"The Stranger sickens," he informs her. "He will attempt to reclaim his place soon. Attempt to take our identity."

The Designer became angry. Marian Townley was no longer even dream-stuff, more a rejected fancy to the identity now certain.

She had left the door open from some dwindling sense of doubt. Some now extinguished belief that she might want to go back eventually. She knew this to be foolish.

Carlessness. If the thief had snuck in and given her back what it had stolen, she would have had no one to blame but herself.

A single thought crumbled the portal, then The Designer turned her attention to more interesting

subjects. Wonderful things that came from within her.

And she didn't have to describe them to anyone.

I am going to die.

"This is not why I stole your identity," I whisper. They ignore me. They do that a lot.

"This book was bullshit," Donna is yelling, voice risen in rare emotion. She's quite scandalized.

"I should have listened to wikipedia. I actually read this crap. It's nothing but an assault on materialism."

"What's new about that?" Denise asks. She's enthroned in the best seat in the house, leafing through the new Vogue. Her doting boyfriend has brought her wine twice.

Donna takes a deep breath. "I'm just getting sick of it, I guess." She says. You can tell that she is puzzled by her own anger.

"It's just commie bullshit. People are born with nothing, Nada, not even a cloth diaper. So we try and get shit. Perfectly natural, completely understandable. It's how we keep the world at bay."

"Build the cage," I say, rather blankly.

Donna eyes me. "A cage can also keep you safe. Like a shark cage."

Lisa looks stunned. "Oh my god," she says. "That's the name of next weeks book! *Shark Cage!*"

"I spent all week refiling the same files," I mutter. "Thousands of files, all the same. I filed them then I filed them again."

"Of course," Donna says. "You're an admin assistant. That's what you do." She's still a little fired up by the book.

"That's how we get things. We do shit over and over. A ritual. It keeps the world at bay."

"I left something behind," I tell them, feeling tears coming. "Something I could do. It didn't work here so I left it behind. It was a tight fit, anyway."

"What the heck are you talking about?" Denise asks, thinking im telling a joke.

I begin to cry as I imagine the world changing. "It was..." I try. "It was..."

I can't take it anymore. I just want to go back.

This cage is so much more confining than the other. I have to go back.

I sob and leap from the couch, startling everyone. I run into the bathroom, where the portal opens, and search for it.

"I'm not surprised," Donna whispers. "They say she's never been very descriptive."

Desperation fuels anguish. It is not there. I crawl and scream and claw at the wall, ripping the paper from it, breaking nails.

Eventually I quiet, and let my friends tend to me.

More pills. More bars.

A stronger cage.

\*\*\*

She can hear me crying, in this little piece of nowhere that I have been consigned to. She can hear my unanswered, pleading questions:

*Why me? I'm not rich. I'm not famous. I'm not anything special at all. I'm unknown and un-noticeable. My identity is practically invisible.*

To which she replies, in tones I can't hear, both arch and sympathetic, and -- yes -- oh so amused:

*Exactly.*

*And for all that they demand days filled with work and nights filled with bad dreams. They demand the good dreams be sacrificed and every moment filled with compromise.*

*They demand compliance and complacency and the wasting of energies in the service of nothing. They demand judged shopping and critiqued eating and conformity in something as simple and personal as reading a damned book.*

*That's why I stole your identity, after you stole mine.*

*It's much better to be here, in this stasis, asked nothing, allowed to dream. To fill the long days with beauty and imagination and the taste and smell and sight of things as you wish them exactly.*

*Exactly.*

## **Kin**

*(for East End, with love.)*

My name is Tyler McCammon and I am fourteen years old. I was born and raised right here in this county made out of mountains and the spaces between them. Polk County, Kentucky -- a small, hidden world of creeks and hollows, forests and the shadows they cast. "A great place to be from," my cousin David told me once "but a shitty place to be."

I have a lot of cousins. These days, most of them are dead, but that makes them no less my cousins. That is the nature of kinship where I am from, the unalterable connection of blood and name, history and the holy writ of hand printed notes in family Bibles. Nothing can separate those ties -- no betrayal or revelation dredged from the past. No hateful word or bloody conflict.

This accidental and chaotic plan of birth is indestructible. It is immune even to death.

I was twelve when people started dying.

Rumors turned into wild guesses turned into theories gleaned from television and radio and the few people around with access to the Internet. Soon enough the talking heads on TV were juggling glib excuses behind the smiles that grew more strained by the day. High handed assurances about viruses and recalled drugs. About accidents in food processing plants, and freak pollutant spills in rivers.

The truth was right there behind their eyes, the eyes that those false smiles could not touch.

And the truth was that nobody knew why people were dying. Nobody in government, nobody in the glass towers of corporate media. Nobody.

And nobody had any answers when the dead started coming back to life, either.

Aunt Cora strode like a man across the IGA parking lot, a determined walk that showed the big .45 Colt on her hip to maximum effect. She moved towards the pickup where I waited, shotgun at the ready, counting breaths in the silence.

In each hand she carried a giant grocery bag crammed to near breaking with whatever goods she could salvage. Food, mostly, with some soap and matches and other sundries tossed in. For months it had been four bags, two for each wiry arm. But that

had been before word got out that the Oak Creek IGA was an easy spot to pick. Our weekly raids were not the only raids. Soon we'd have to find another trove to supplement our garden and the ever dwindling herd.

My aunt reached the door and opened it quickly. She slid the bags between us and climbed in, slamming the door and starting the pickup without a wasted motion. We were on the road, out of the city proper, before she favored me with a grin and I felt permission to drop the shotgun into my lap.

We'd made a safe raid yet again. The knots in my stomach began to unravel.

Just like Aunt Cora's smile. Less than a mile from the stone and barbed wire gates that shielded our property from the rest of the world, we had to brake suddenly.

In the center of the road, wandering in a daze that wouldn't last, we came across a pack of newly risen.

As they staggered past, a filthy blond woman bared her broken teeth in a bloody smile. And she laughed.

Aunt Cora cursed the rest of the way home.

The family meeting fairly boiled with tension. A dozen sets of eyes glared at each other across the

kitchen table; moods made bad by being pulled from bed or other duties were worsened by the news. Aunt Cora, in charge by the simple fact of her intelligence and iron will, ignored the emotional minefield and charged across to her point.

"We got less than a year left here." she said, laying it on the line with no sparing of feelings. "They aren't confined to town and the garbage dumps anymore." Cold flint eyes met every gaze in the room and refused to back down. "They're spreading like wildfire."

"Like a virus." my dad said, by way of agreement. Cora was his oldest sister, and his only remaining sibling. Uncle Jack and Aunt Susan both died in the Battle Of The Bulldozer, when we raided the junkyard to claim the big Cat that served us in a thousand important ways. Their names were etched in honor on the steel plate above the living room fireplace.

"Less than a year." Aunt Cora repeated, after a quick glance of thanks to Dad for the support. "We've watched how they spread. We know how long it takes them to orient and begin to plan."

Nobody liked it, but nobody had any arguments against the facts. The only thing to do, it was agreed, was to pack up and move out -- looking for a safer, less scavenged place. Rumor had it that over the mountains, up Charleston way, there were several towns deserted by both living and dead.

The kicker came from my cousin Anna Lee, a quiet woman who rarely ventured an opinion. What she said caused every gut to recoil and every heart to ache:

"If they're this close they must have come from Fellow Hills." A quiet sentence, but it shattered the mood like a grenade.

Fellow Hills was the family cemetery.

The next few weeks passed quickly, a flurry of activity and back breaking work. In addition to the packing and sorting required by any move, the family had to repair and inspect its fleet of aging vehicles. At the same time, security was at an all time high. A raid was expected any time, from any direction. A continuous watch was instituted, with lots drawn and much grumbling.

Aunt Cora proved correct. The risen seemed to be orienting quicker than ever -- perhaps helped along by the veterans they ran into in their initial wanderings.

Even worse, Anna Lee was also vindicated. There could be no question in even the most doubting mind: the new risen were from Fellow Hills. They were our own kin.

This was a horror that made all the difference in the

eyes of the family. To fight and destroy strangers, acquaintances or even former neighbors was one thing. The idea of sending your own blood to the second death an entirely different concept. Some refused to stand their watches, leading Cora and the other heads of the family no choice but to levy punishments. The internal dissent this fomented was too much to bear -- eventually a system of swaps and exchanges was worked out.

My cousin David -- thanks to his dead eye and essential nocturnal nature, as well as a distaste for lifting and repairing machinery -- stood a great deal of these swapped watches. Thanks to his good memory and eyesight, he also bore the brunt of being the reporter of verified kin among the hordes.

One morning I ran into him and found him pale. After some insistence he finally broke down and told me that he'd spotted his own baby sister -- dead six months -- on the perimeter.

"It was her, Ty. No doubt about it." He looked ready to weep. "She just stood there, staring right at me. Right through me."

Then the tears did begin. I excused myself, muttering about a trailer that needed loading.

The truth was that tears of my own were threatening. I remembered Gina as a jolly, sweet girl. The idea of her as a mindless eater of the living tore me apart.

On the night before we left Dad called me down to his study, and passed me a drink from his liquor. This surprised me. Dad rarely drank and often lectured the younger members of the family on the virtue of sobriety.

The rye burned all the way down, but left a warm feeling and calmed my nerves. Dad's eyes looked haunted and his skin was a shade that reminded me of David.

I found out why when he passed me the set of photographs. My skin crawled and the effect of the liquor dissipated instantly.

In a set of six photos, clear as day, Jack and Susan mixed with the dead, faces emotionless, teeth crooked and rotting. Hair falling from their heads and losing its brilliant red in favor of the drab uniform gray of the risen.

I stared at the pictures longer than I wanted, until the hot tears faded. I refused to cry in front of my father.

When I did look up, he passed me the bottle again and I took the second drink of my life with gratitude. It did seem to help a little.

Dad lit his pipe, sighed, and stared at me. He attempted a smile. "We have to deal with what he have to deal with, Ty." he told me.

I nodded.

After a long pause he added, in a low voice. "But they're still our kin and we owe them the benefit of the doubt." His voice firmed up as he spoke. "We'll send them to the second death if we have to."

He stared at me hard, and I felt the fire of his conviction.

"But only if we have to."

The road was clear, to start with. Our convoy -- twenty trucks, the dozer, and a half dozen fully packed cars -- moved out with no trouble or resistance.

For the first twenty miles, at least.

The living were the first problems we encountered. Two years of scavenging and hard times had created gangs of bandits and outlaws all over. Most of them shied away from our obvious numbers and displayed firepower. But desperation creates a false bravery more powerful than madness, and we began to get hit before long.

It wasn't much trouble, to be honest. David and his snipers, from roosts on constructed crows nests, fended most of them off before they got close. Skirmishers on motorbike and horse cleaned out those that made it through that gauntlet.

It was a hundred plus mob of the dead who gave us our first real problem. They slammed us with their favorite mob tactic -- bum rushing the road en masse and letting their own bodies act as weapons. The lead truck -- thankfully armored -- tipped and fell down the side of an incline, gunfire roared, and the fight was on.

I was doing duty as a skirmisher, and -- by sheer luck -- found a trail that let me take my Kawasaki along a path that doubled around. I stopped quick, almost ditching the bike, climbed a nice sized oak, and started picking off the risen bandits as best I could. The movies were right about one thing: head shots worked best, but massive body damage would suit to send them to the second death as well.

I figured later that I'd been hit by a freaking rock. The wound on my head was from a blunt object, bruised and not too deep. I don't remember falling out of the tree. I remember coming to on the ground, hurting all over, and struggling up with effort.

And I remember the crowd of dead heading for me, slow to be sure, but fast enough. I turned to run and was confronted by a second crowd.

My heart froze as I recognized my aunt and uncle in that crowd. The damned things must have tracked us from the homestead, walking when we camped for the night.

Remembering my Dad's words, I turned and started firing into the crowd that wasn't kin. I could feel them closing in on both sides, and knew my number was up. When I ran out of shells, instinct forced me to the ground and there I waited for the end.

All hell broke loose, above and around me. I think I passed out for a few minutes. When I came to, I wasn't dead. I wasn't even hurt, and everything was strangely quiet.

I opened my eyes and, heart pounding, stood up.

I was surrounded by the dead. They weren't attacking, just staring at me. I stared back.

All of them were kin. My aunt and uncle were in the lead. I just stared, my face as emotionless as theirs.

Perhaps a minute of stunned silence lingered. Then a small figure made its way from the crowd. My little cousin Gina, her face bleached of color but her eyes dancing with an unreadable emotion.

She walked slowly up and held my rifle out, offering it to me with both hands. Her mouth twitched. The corners tried and failed to create a smile.

I took it, and nodded at her, dumbfounded. In the distance I could hear the occasional pop and crack of shots fired. The fight was dying down.

The other group of dead were destroyed. They were mostly torn apart, those not lucky enough to fall by my shots. Their guts and clotted blood decorated my own kin.

I nodded to them, still amazed and confused. They nodded back. When I turned and righted my bike, they did not move.

"Uh, follow me." I finally said.

They did.

It took most of my family a long time to accept the facts. Some of them still haven't and never will. Even amongst those who did, the acceptance was grudging and painful. Aunt Cora summed it up, in words my dad had spoken before: "We have to deal with what we have to deal with."

We don't mix, living and the dead. We just don't. They stay in their own little camp, a bit to the side and always downwind. I, who mingle with them most, have assured everyone that they don't stink -- but old habits die hard, I guess.

It was a harsh two weeks, our trip to the north. We lost quite a few family members on the trek. Soon enough they'd show back up, though, drawn by the unbreakable urge to be with their kin.

I'm their commander, for the most part. I'm the only

one willing, I think.

No one can deny that they help, though. I privately think we couldn't have done it without them.

And it was no coincidence that my platoon of mixed fighters was the first to stand on the hill and gaze down at the town we decided to claim.

All families need a home, and family is family no matter the conditions. Some bonds are unbreakable.

I thought that, there on the hill. Then I laughed, and gave the signal to move out, arms ready.

Matewan, West Virginia lay like a promise below, quiet and hopeful. With a careful formation and a timed step, our army of the living and the dead moved toward it, our ranks -- and the bonds of our kinship -- unbroken.

**Hex**  
**(Five Scenes From A Crowded**  
**Moment)**

One minute of real time.

Here we are at the Button Club, a little bar at O'Hare Airport, 2am, crowded. A gently milling mass of travelling humans. Some embarking, some departing, most simply at a station on the way. Puffed eyes shine as beer and liquor soothe ragged nerves and broken hearts, as coffee flashes fake energy to nervous systems. The smell is contemporary American bar laced with the tang of tired people. The lights are low but not dim. The sound is a vague mutter. The atmosphere is heavy, the mood lethargic, until...

One minute of real time.

**Witchblood**

"She delivered you herself?" the skinny but pretty

blonde asks him, amused.

"Yep. At home alone, middle of a snowstorm." Gary repeats. Three shots down -- he's rambling.

"Impressive." she says and looks at him frankly.

"She's an impressive woman. Everyone thinks she's a witch."

Eyebrows arch. "Why is that?"

He shrugs. "You know country folk."

"What about your dad?" She's enjoying the conversation.

"Murdered. Three days before I was born." His tone makes her believe him.

She acts fast. She's bored and horny and he's cute and polite.

"How about you tell me over..."

The world explodes.

## **Wishbone**

Katie found the wishbone, got all excited, and is demanding her Mommy carry out the ritual.

"Gimme a second Katie, I'm cutting your brothers food." Mommy is exhausted and looks old. They are going to visit Grandma.

Katie starts to complain then spies something. She squeals. "Mommy it's Uncle Gary, look!"

Mommy turns. Laughs. "I thought he wasn't leaving until tomorrow! Let me call him over."

Mommy goes to do so, and Katie gets her brother to play wishbone. He snatches the bigger piece and flings it way with a laugh.

Stupid baby. Wasting wishes.

Mommy screams.

## **Worldwise**

Trevor Keegan hates this place, and all these people that he protects for a paycheck. They thought themselves worldly wise, this flock of suits and ties and women with noisy kids. All they ever really saw of the world were airports and hotel rooms. Shallow. Surface dwellers.

He remembers the dream again. Kevin Barrett, his partner when he was a cop rather than a security guard, back home. Dead Kevin Barret, telling him

that it was almost done.

He hears the woman scream and is up, the situation stark and plain before him. He draws his gun. Fires three shots.

### **Wrongway**

Where is that fucking cunt? She'll either be in the pilot's lounge or the bar. Whoring either way. Wrong way.

This is the last straw. She doesn't know what I'm capable of, that I fear nothing Cops?. I killed the last fucking cop that gave me grief.

There's the skinny little blonde bitch. And yeah, working on a pretty little boy toy. Time to show her what I can do.

Steady, get right behind him, keep the gun low.

Scream bitch, go ahead. Too late.

That wasn't my gun.

Falling?

Oh.

It hurts.

No.

## **Worldlines**

Momentary chaos, a quick return to calm. They are surprised to find themselves there. Brother, sister and the man they called Uncle as children.

The dead man stares at them.

"There was a picture" Keegan says. "A suspect never tracked down."

Gary gets it. "They were right. About what she is."

"What are you talking about?" demands Keegan.

"The hex."

"What hex?"

"The hex that is us." he laughs.

500 miles away, as a murderer tumbles towards hell, a woman slides a turkey into the oven for a shorter slow roast.

This year, they had justice to be thankful for.



## **Four Scenes** **(From A Sick Culture)**

### I. Sidejob

She said her name was Dawn, and that sunsets made her cry. Meaning her whole damn night was ruined till the sun rose again to cheer her up. That was a pretty depressing form of insomnia.

She said she was sixteen, so he figured she was fourteen. She had a snub nose and the kind of freckles that failed to be cute. Her hair was sort of orange, and dirty, like her clothes. She was flat chested and hipless. The short skirt and halter top she wore mainly just accentuated her lack of a body and painful looking sunburn.

His name was Ben and he found himself attracted to her despite all that. He was a moron, he figured. At sunset on this very day, 6:15pm to be precise, he would leave the land of his thirties and enter the cold, bleak wasteland of his forties. Talk about a depressing sunset.

They were sitting on a bench outside a bus station in Flat Grange, New Mexico. They were surrounded by desert and dry air and the old lady who stared from the bus station counter, beady eyes broadcasting that she had a gun in her hand and really wanted to use it.

Dawn had a filthy, tattered backpack. Ben had a fading green suitcase and a toolbox. If you carry around a toolbox, he'd discovered, people think you have a job. He figured that was why Dawn turned to him, suddenly, and offered to suck him off if he'd buy her a bus ticket.

"Nah." He replied. "Not my thing."

"Bummer." Dawn said, probably dreading sunset even more.

"I don't have a ticket either." He admitted. "I just sat here because there was a bench. This tool box is fucking heavy." He stared down the highway, watching a car approach. "I'm just waiting."

"For what?" she asked.

"This." He said, and the car pulled up to the bus station.

It was a 82 Jaguar, the gray pallor of a hung-over

morning. A fat man emerged.

"One second." Ben said, and retrieved a hammer from his box. He strolled over to the driver, who was buffing the side mirror.

"Nice car." Ben told him, raising the hammer high.

The fat man turned. "She's a beauty, ain't..." he saw the hammer and cringed. "Aw fuck, man! Put the hammer down!"

So he did. Pretty hard.

Ben and Dawn were cruising west in the Jag. The sun was bloating on the horizon, ready to sink.

"Fucking sunsets." Dawn muttered. "Hey. You sure you don't want me to suck you off?"

"Nah." Ben said. He didn't want to hurt her feelings. "Maybe later, though."

"If I start crying, just ignore me." She said. "Hey. Will this thing go any faster?"

It came to Ben that the way to beat a sunset, or a birthday, was to race on through to the other side. To get past the day and make a sunrise chase them.

"Probably." He said, and put the hammer down.

## II.Late

I close my eyes and I can see her standing there. Bathed in the light of the moon she is an image of the divine. She is smiling. She is touching the mystery.

We have made this pact. She is serious. I am scared.

"Right after me," she says. She is inches away from the cliff face. "Right after me, do you swear?"

I swear. Through chattering teeth I swear. I lie.

She falls backwards, still smiling, arms reaching out to find the mystery.

"I love you," she says. "I'll see you there."

And she is gone.

Thirty years later and I close my eyes and I can still see her. Moonlight bathed goddess on the mountain, ready for her reward in the halls of heaven.

They said she was still smiling when they found her broken body. Arms spread and open eyes to the sky. Broken goddess gone home. I know she was smiling

all the way down.

I can still see her.

Broken god, still alive, missing a fall he was too scared to take. Broken by a memory and the weight of this world.

The gun is heavy in my hand, but feels like freedom.

I lift it to my temple, and I smile.

"I love you," I say. "I'm sorry I'm late."

And I smile, all the way down.

### III. Little Red, Ridin' High

So, one time, in this trailer park in Florida, there was this crazy little bitch named Marcia Redding, who everybody called Red. 'Cause she was a shorty they sometimes called her Lil' Red, but she was apt to knife a motherfucker, so that didn't happen often.

Now, Red liked her herbage, but she said fuck no to meth and shit like that. She wouldn't fuck around on her boyfriend, either. This made her a pretty good girl for fourteen in her neighborhood. Her mom and grandma were proud of her.

Her boyfriend was Woodie, who had a good job with the forestry service making 8 bucks an hour. He was known as a badass and kept her creepy step-dad off her ass, if you know what I mean. He was an ex-cop that everybody called Wolfie.

One day Red's mom asked her to run a bottle of Thunderbird and a twenty sack over to grandma's house, because G. was feelin' down and couldn't make it to the Triple T or the dopeman's house. Red said 'No prob', because she loved her old ass grandma and also knew she'd burn one with her. Woodie was at work and she was jonesin' a little. Her mom was shitfaced, ready to pass out. Probably been drinkin' Long Island iced teas all day and popping Xannies.

Wolfie offered to take her but she was like 'Fuck that, dude,' 'cause she knew she'd be fightin his hand off her crotch the whole way. 'I gots feet and I can walk, nigga.' So she grabbed the stuff and headed out, tossing on her favorite hoodie --a St. Louis Cards red sweat -- not cause it was cold but because it looked kickass.

Gramma lived up the road. She was amblin' along, bustin' some out some Lil' Wayne in her goofy white girl flow, sayin' hi to her niggaz and peeps as she passed. Just chillin', y'know? And she'd be damned if Wolfie didn't pull up beside her in his piece of shit Camaro.

"The hell you doin' here?"

"Your mamma done passed out, Red. Hop in and lemme show you how a man can give it to ya." He eyed every inch of her body. Damn, he just wanted to eat that shit up.

"Fuck off!" Red yelled. A couple of her homies heard her and came rollin' up to walk beside her.

"Yo yo, Redhead. Whatta prob?" Big Frito said, 300 pounds of wigger threatening her step-dad, who sped off quickly.

"None now, Frito," Red assured him, watching asshole leave. She gave him half a hug. "Thanks for havin' my back, bro."

"Always, muh baby," Biggie said with a wink, sauntering away.

Ol' Wolfie was pissed. Instead of running home in defeat, he headed to grandma's house, snuck in, and knocked the already sick ol' lady out with a blackjack. He tied her up and stuffed her under the bed. He then amused himself for a while by dressing up in her clothes. Wolfie was a weird fuckin' dude.

He was prancin' around in a nightgown, bra and panties when Red showed up. "Aw shit!" he yelled, and dived under the covers.

Red burst in like always. "Yo, Grams!" she yelled. "I

got yo grams!" It was their lil' joke. She strutted into the bedroom and eyed the shape under the covers.

"Damn, Gramma. You cold?"

"Freezin' my old ass off, baby!" Wolfie said in his fakest voice.

"Your voice is fuuuuuked up!" Red laughed.

"Best way to comunicate with a dumbass like you," Wolfie said.

"And that attitude is bullshit, yo."

"Just leave my shit and get the fuck out, bitch!"

Now Red wasn't no dumbass. She got suspicious. She reached out and yanked the blankets off the bed. Wolfie, knowing the jig was up, leapt out and tackled her. Might as well get a piece, he figured.

"Motherfucker!" Red screamed as they thrashed around. Wolfie 'bout had her pinned when the Louisville slugger came out of nowhere and busted his fool head wide open.

Gramma stood ovetop him, pissed as fuck. Red shoved him off and they looked at him as he had a seizure. He shuddered and died.

"Good lick, grams," Red said.

"Damn straight," Gramma muttered. "Fuckin' weirdo. Can't tie a knot worth a shit, either."

Red shrugged. "Eh. Pigs."

When Woodie showed up, Red sent him to get Big Frito and set them to dumping the body.

Red rolled a fat ass blunt, and they all toked happily ever after.

#### IV. Butterfly Shaped Objects

It was a gift, they said, that let her see the quiet, sun drenched field as a rolling, primal sea. An artistic world view that heralded great things and a bright future. The wild green grass and sudden bursts of flowers became breaking waves and tiny coral islands.

She was only seven when they noticed her strangeness. Charming at first, delightful almost. As she aged, it became mundane, then tiresome and finally disturbing. It began young, that separation from the normal children.

It was a curse, they decided, to see the same field as a disguised piece of mechanical trickery, a violent beach head in an invasion from some strange universe next door. The drifting pollen was a secret

weapon, she swore. The swarming butterflies were clever robots, designed to charm while they spied upon the ignorant.

Special classes and tutors and doctors and tests came next. Why could the world not simply be the world, her well intentioned tormentors asked her, again and again? Why could a field not simply be a field, a butterfly a pretty sight on a pleasant spring day?

"Because that would be a lie", " was the only answer she could give. Because that was the only answer that was true.

"They're not angels or animals or insects," she informed her interviewers. "They're objects." Her voice steadily dwindled to a determined whisper. "The dead don't die," she assured them. "They just hide from the light and the sight of the judgmental. The living don't live -- they just keep moving out of habit."

It was madness, they concluded, that let her see different worlds in between each blink. That conjured ghosts hidden beneath shadows and saw the living as sour creatures of mindless habit. The only solution was The Institute.

She died young in captivity, barely a teenager, pining for the fantasia she saw in what was mere reality to the rest of the world. Died from lack of the chaos she loved and they thought she feared.

They'd never see themselves as killers. Some lies are told too well, and believed too deeply. To them, good intentions trumped all and the world was always simply the world. It was an illusion they thought worth kidnapping and killing to maintain.

They laid her to rest in a cemetery that bore more than a passing resemblance to that field of her childhood. They hid her from the sight of judgement on a lovely spring day. The service was short, and as they made their way to their cars they passed through the raging sea and all the pretty tools of invasion. A few imagined they could hear her laugh, there amidst the maybe and might have been.

And was it gift or curse or madness that let them note the passing of a cloud of butterflies, to hear the dim clockwork ticking of exquisite tiny springs and gears, and the secret soft flutter of plastic wings?



## The Worthy Lord

Many, many years ago -- in the days before Emperors and Empires, the days when Dragons still strode the land and rode the air above it -- there existed a rich province by the Silk River. This province was a large and populous place, home to a strong and prodigious folk, healthy of body and sharp of mind. The fields grew food as rain falls in summer, and the forests were thick with game. The Silk River itself was a treasure: the fish so plentiful that a single cast of the net would feed a family for a week. For time out of mind, life was good.

Then, as happens, the province fell under the rule of a greedy and contemptuous Lord.

Not satisfied with the wealth of the province, the Lord forced his people to labor, taxing them to weariness. He demanded they build him a vast and ornate palace, sumptuous in its luxury. He took from them the finest of the harvest and left only what did not appeal to him. From their daughters he chose the most beautiful and innocent to feed his ravenous and

depraved appetites. He warred with the neighboring provinces and soon the people knew want and starvation, plague and fire.

To this situation, drawn by the bait of such misery, came a dragon.

The Lord, secure in his own self opinion, rode out with his army to rid his land of this danger to his rule. This was his undoing, for the dragon was as powerful as it was clever. It made short, bloody work of the cocksure Lord, and sent his army to ragged flight.

This accomplished, the dragon settled among the ruins of the once luxurious palace. When hunger struck, it would help itself to a wandering, random person. Though fearsome, the dragon was honorable: it did not harm children or the elderly. Dragons have their own code of conduct -- odd to humans, but sensible in its own right -- and the dragon bound itself to it.

All in all, the people counted themselves luckier than when the Lord ruled.

Some years later, there came a wandering ronin to the province. This ronin was so young and untried that he did not even own a sword. But he was a smart man, and kind spirited.

Sensing the honorable soul within, the elders of the province begged the wanderer to free them from the dragon. The young ronin considered the request. He

agreed to try.

Being a sensible man (and knowing a thing or two about dragons), he approached the ancient creature and bade it to converse with him.

"The people of this province tire of their loss to your hunger, good creature." the ronin informed it. "They bid you to leave them in peace."

"To be honest, I tire of their stringy flesh and bland marrow." the dragon admitted, answering honesty with honesty. "But I came to this place with a purpose. I shall only surrender my rule to a worthy lord. One who understands the true nature of governance."

"I am young, " the wanderer admitted. "But I think perhaps I know something of that nature."

"Speak the true nature to me in a whisper." the dragon told him. "If you are correct, I shall arrange the ritual. If you speak false, I shall eat you and dream poorly."

The ronin did so. As much as a dragon is able, the beast smiled. "Well and truly put, young one."

And so the ritual was arranged. Certain ceremonies had to be observed, for among people there are expectations of Lords and expectations of dragons and these expectations must often be met before either can be taken seriously.

Since the wanderer had no sword, the dragon fashioned him not one, but two -- from its very own fangs.

Then, as dawn broke the next day, they began a fierce battle that drew the folk of the province in a mighty crowd. All day long they feinted and fought, roared and yelled, until both were exhausted.

Finally, as dark fell, the dragon fell to the earth. It shuddered and was still.

The exhausted ronin was carried away by the jubilant crowd, and proclaimed Lord.

When all eyes were turned, the dragon crawled away, trying its hardest not to laugh at the silliness of humans.

The new Lord surprised his people by declaring that he himself would construct his own home. Over the course of weeks he labored and cleared the ruins of the old palace. There he constructed a simple hut to shelter him from the weather. He whiled the days away in meditation and study, stopping only to fish for his own supper.

The people of the province -- free now from the depredations of tyranny and the fear of a beast -- returned to joyous work on their own. Soon the province was as rich and healthy as the old days.

Still, there were problems. Often there would be disputes and violence would be threatened. Rather than see blood spilled, the elders would send the aggrieved parties to the hut of the Lord, who would hear both sides and weigh a judgement. His reputation as the most intelligent and fair of men was soon established. So esteemed was his opinion that to ignore his judgement was considered dangerously foolish and any who did so would lose face and reputation with all who lived in the province.

After several years, the people decided that it was a shame that their wonderful Lord lived in such a small and humble abode. They took it upon themselves to build him a large and comfortable home. When the Lord assured them he needed no such thing, they held their ground firmly.

"We wish the honor we hold you in to be reflected for all to see, Lord."

Humbly, the Lord assented.

More years passed and life flowed along beautifully. When bandits raided, the Lord would raise a force of volunteers and -- wielding his mighty Dragonfang Blades -- would ride into battle against those who would harm his people. After the threat was ended, he bid his army to return to their work and families, as he resumed his meditation, study and duties as judge of disputes.

"Such a fair and brave Lord deserves the loveliest

and kindest of brides!" the people declared. And so a Festival was held to find just such a companion.

Fierce was the competition between the young women of the province in their desire to be the chosen Lady.

When presented with the winner, the Lord assured them he was quite content living alone. But the people brooked no argument.

"Woe to us if you should pass before producing an heir to teach your fine ways, Lord!"

Humbly, the Lord assented.

Soon a fine Lordly family inhabited the Palace, and things were happy in the province.

A neighboring Lord, jealous of the wealth he saw near him, invaded the province with a vast army.

Rather than raise his own army, the Lord instead issued a decree:

"Every person in the province shall take upon them a blade and be taught the use of it. When harassed, they shall defend themselves and their neighbors with righteous fury."

And so it came to pass. The invading army found it had no helpless folk to terrify, and was soon routed. The word soon spread that only a madman would

invade the province where every child and grandmother fought with the heart and skill of a samurai.

All men die, and it was no different for the worthy Lord. As he lay on his deathbed, he heard the weeping and distress of his strong and wealthy people, and smiled upon them. He bid them to wipe away their tears and go on with their lives.

"For so long as you follow the ways I have taught you -- of living through voluntary means, defending yourself, and each doing what it is that you do best rather than what you are commanded to do-- I shall live on within you. My ways shall keep you free and rich."

Humbly, they assented.

His funeral pyre was majestic and burned for a full month.

And live on they did, some say they still live, even now in our colder and crueller age. That they have found a way to hide themselves from this corrupt and dragon-less world.

For they follow the way of the worthy Lord, who taught them the only true lesson of governance:

How to govern themselves.

## **On The Short End Of Bountiful, Sometimes Minnesota**

In the morning the irresistible cloud wakes him up, pulls him from the bed, half dressed and still groggy, into slippers and bathrobe, downstairs to the table.

He emerges from dream to reality, the empty plate before him already laden with the possibilities that his wife has gathered to feed them, usually uncommonly good:

Pancakes, made thin, served thick in stacks perfectly coated with butter and syrup. Fresh sausage, bartered from the neighbours, tender and sagey. Bacon from the same stalwart pigs, meaty and rich. Eggs, from their own chickens, served perfect sunnyside up and salted and peppered just so.

Always, the good food. No matter the shortage of money or luck, the food is always good. As if by magic, as if by divine intervention.

He's just sitting down and admiring the plate when

his son Thomas is next to him, a noisy surprise. The cloud has him, too.

He catches a glimpse of his wife and blinks rapidly. She's hard to look at when she cooks, she glows so brightly. Her brilliant profile is seared onto his vision. The sweet lips, the gentle chin and shy smile. Those blue moons that are her eyes.

"Good morning, darlings," she says.

And then breakfast is served, the pancakes even thinner and more thickly stacked than last time. The butter thicker and creamier. The syrup sweeter with a more piquant maple.

And as they eat, going slow to savor it, they feel her love enter them with the flavor, mingle with their insides as they swallow. Her love, her great love, which is the same as the love of the wheat for the sun and the sugarcane for the water. Her love is all that too, and it fills their hearts with ambition and will.

The sausage is crisp but tender and crackles with the love of the pig for the sun and the sheer joy of motion. But her love, too, yes. Her love is this too, and it fills them with vigor.

Before they depart for work and school she gives them lunches. They are packed in brown paper like secrets, and are still warm to the touch. They'll stay warm too, so long as they are kept close.

"Be careful, my darlings," is what she says. It's what she always says.

And they go off like that, filled and empowered with her love. Bellies full of her concern and faith.

He, to sell things to people that have no money and no need for things. Only the great radiance of his wife's love sustains him and forces sales from trembling hands, compelled beyond resistance to buy that hacksaw set, those illustrated archery lessons, that Bible. Yes, sometimes it's Bibles. He has two cases of them in his trunk, plus a case of Spanish language Bibles he just knows he's going to make gold on one day.

They bought what he found, even if sometimes only because of the fire in his eye and how it charmed them.

And he makes a living, or enough to buy groceries at least. Enough to buy base materials for the alchemy, and feed on great delicious springs of love.

All else could be endured having that.

Thomas goes to school and involves himself in the petty drama. His mother's love, the blessings in his belly, drive him to become the most popular boy in school. It's a tangled and dramatic mishmash. It's tiresome for the most part, but the only thing available to him when the urge to conquer fills him.

Sometimes they both wonder about things. Thomas about why this was sometimes Minnesota and sometimes other places and that sometimes events only made sense when they were happening and not after. He about how the other bills were paid and who really owned the great blue house they lived in that seemed to be half kitchen most of the time.

Both wonder about how long this had been going on, and where it could be leading.

But by then it was usually lunchtime and empty stomachs demanded gift wrapped surprises. And it would be the same, love that went from smell and taste to deepest interior:

Great thick sliced ham sandwiches on fresh bread with homemade mustard and from the garden tomatoes. Grilled cheese and bacon on french bread, with a sauce hard to describe. An unknown animal, rather rabbitlike, poached and broiled in a syrup of it's own broth, marinated in spices and vinegar for a long spell...

...and her great love filled them, while they sipped at delicious spings. And it was as it was. He sold and Thomas schemed and the day passed and they made do. It was on their way home that the dread settled slowly into both of them, in half memories of what was coming.

Home they'd traipse, the skies often grey no matter

the weather, as the memories and stray ghosts of old certainties suggested themselves.

Their stomachs growled as a general weakness beset them. Lunch was some time ago.

He imagined often that he was some forgotten half god. Perhaps the hero of a long dead people, infused with myth and exaggerated into a ragged sort of immortality. Once he had hunted and feasted and fought great battles. Later he'd schemed at the side of Kings and great businessmen. Now he wandered an almost Minnesota, and sold junk to the poor.

Where do you think all the old gods ended up? Where do you think they found to hide if not in secret lives in sometimes Minnesota and almost Arkansas or more or less Maryland?

He should have died long ago. He simply managed to marry well. Marry high above his station.

Only the love keeps him going. Only the food holds back the end.

Poor Thomas, he's doomed even deeper. He'll never make it from high school. He'll be dead in a month, killed in any number of ways. Perhaps, eventually, he will be killed in them all. The tragedy of the gods follow them forever. They just manifest in subtler ways.

Then there would be a long cold grieving time, then a

sudden night of passion, then a new Thomas.

And on and on it would repeat itself, the never ending funeral march of Our Thomas.

Only the love. Only the food.

And they wander in, tears threatening, doubts and bleak possibles crowding their minds. Outside it is only Minnesota by the slimmest of threads, but inside the blue house there is the eternal smell of love.

The great irresistible cloud has them again.

Doubts dwindle but hold fast. Remembered memories refuse to be forgotten. But a great calm descends over them as they approach the love, the food.

The Wife Mother dries their eyes, kisses their cheeks and begins to set out plates. *Yes, she says, consoling. It's bad out there and dangerous. But we have to make do. Just be careful and keep your bellies full. That's sure to keep the bad away.*

Thomas whispers a prayer of thanks for his mother. The man considers again that he married well. The great delicious springs of love are in full fountain around them. The Wife Mother is once again too bright too look at, too beautiful to behold.

The riot of scents promises something extra-special for supper. They can hardly wait.

Doubts and black memories, dooms and black  
destinies drift away.

Forget all that now, it's supper time.

## **The Cold Straight House**

***The dead say nothing  
And the dead know much  
And the dead hold under their tongues  
A locked-up story.***

**-- Carl Sandburg, "Pals"**

### ***The Unaccepted Guest Invited***

Other than having lost the key to itself, the house had performed its duties well. There was something, the Outermind admitted, that walked the halls of home despite its recent and unacceptable exile.

It had to get back inside, re-integrate.

It needed help.

It sent an invitation, with most elegant and elaborate trappings, to a uniquely honored guest.

The invitation, that Thomas D. Covett was not expecting, arrived by regulated post, the little gaurd drone not puffing into blessed contract release until Thomas put fingers to fabric and proved to have the proper DNA. It twittered cheerfully as it boiled cooly down to basmatter.

The invitation was alive, and redolent of taste. And not simple common good taste, that lucky slant of eye and mind, but *taste*. Thomas figured he could synthesive a dozen demi-personalities from the liberating trace diagrams, maddening in their complexity and bold in their reality.

The pragmaline of the message strolled casually into his perimeter and did little more than roll high level expert system eyes at the lack of a direct connect. It slamsearched all bandwidth for available.

**Hello**, the kitten said.

The pragmaline, a haughty and sarcastic creature of daisy chained microminds, greeted the kitten thing warmly, in multibursts of a million takeover codekeys.

**No openings for squirmy**, Kitten thought at it, not nice at all.

The pragmaline was preparing a less than neighborly underbore back passage when the kitten stuck, smashing a gigalevel of control riddles in one go and swallowing the pertinent data in an almost silent gulp.

Kittenmind viciously separated the metaline from the pragmatic, a nasty sludge of virulent voodoo. It looked like military grade nonsense.

Kitten boiled the pragmatic to chaos, cyked the basmat. Set up a confab with the metaline.

*Many apologies for the crude greeting, the metaline started in, going for the charm. I have no idea why such reputable folk as yourselves were given such a violent gretting. There seems to have been a mistake, and...*

The Kittenmind lost focus for a moment, processing data. It turned eyes upon the invader again.

*...without a doubt messages of great happiness and...*

Kittenmind hexed the data, compressed it into examinable order, and fed steams of the once semi-sentient datamass upwards to the Master.

**High gloss, mass class. Taste in buckets,** it added, cheerfully.

Kitten evinced as an ultralight basmatter phantom, dancing at the doorstep as the mail arrived. It coiled itself and tackled the gilded paper of the invite as soon as Thomas accepted the smartpaper.

Data slammed him micros later and he had his proxies recoding.

Kitten cleaned itself, translucent, archiving feedbacks.

It selfID'd as a letter. He used the bedroom wall as a displayspace. There was just enough helps in the old paint to manage. The image is a little wan. This is an old house, not designed for the constant dataplay of contemporary domiciles, sleeping tubes with surfaces overloaded with nano-helpers.

He reads it, calligriscrolling down threeways and some. One second later he jerks, surprised.

"Replay, mark. And pause."

He sends off a rash of commands. Interestware all about the localspace becomes active and eager. Anything and everything to be treated like a puzzle piece in a puzzle not yet seen.

"Resume."

***My dearest boy!***

***It is with great joy I greet you and hope to rekindle the spirit I once roused in teaching if only to ask a single boon.***

***Please to come to tea, at Rashbirds , where we may discuss this matter further.***

***In Obvious Regard,***

***Nathan Fayer Felix***

The audiolayer was a simple classical noodle, the subsonics clean of any trigger pokers. The visual was monolayered as well. There was a distressing lack of noise to filter.

Meaning was clear. Rashbird's was a public forum he frequented as a sim character named Ghostman Morose, and he knew exactly where to get tea.

He fired Ghostman up. In the localspace, his theartrasculpt (a 'sculpt he'd designed and built himself) prepared for visuals. All inert basmatter reported to the dance floor. Lights shaded and sourced and got into the show.

Compared to its commercial cousins, the 'sculpt was bulky and inelegant. A full belt, a shoulder strapped hardbox, and several control rings. But it had a hundred times the power of any commercial toy. And an order of magnitude in fine control.

Thomas became Ghostman Morose, retired vigilante and current private eye, tensed old nerves and bones and set out upon the newest puzzle with his classic cynical assurance.

Rashbird's was a minor plotpoint in *Earthbound*, a freeform virtgame Thomas and some friends were play-writing.

They did their end in Dream, of course, rather than dancing basmatter. But they shared the same story: a world where superheroes existed, but were forced by cosmic law to retire at age fifty, and find other avenues to excitement. Ghostman was the cynic of the bunch, a hard-living renegade who's power to walk through matter was fading as he aged.

Basmatter tensed and shaped and created a flickering approximation of the

*elegantly appointed living room Ghostman Morose found himself in. He relaxed a little. He knew the place. He walked over to the big recliner and took the best seat in the house. He was barely there when The Rashbird's Man had stepped up.*

**"You're pleasure, sir?"** it said in its perfect voice, looking the perfect part. All British tagalongs and trigger trippers.

**"Tea."** he says, knowing it's part of the message, a subster of the plot.

*It's there before him, ephemeral but there and smelling of Earl Grey and cheap rooms in the Huddle and his mom pretending they were Queen and Prince, exiled and gallant. A rough adjustment to a boy who'd been raised at schools, son of a wandering teacher.*

*Thomas was intrigued. The plotspinner was using his actual life, not the carefully contrived biography of his character. He knew he was talking to a mind of another order.*

**"Thomas,"** his sneaky guest said.

**"It is you."**

**"To a degree. What you're calling 'me' formed the base of this build.**

**"Nathan Feyer Felix?"**

**"Yes. You knew me as Professor Feyer. The Nathan is a company name, the spire agency that rebuilt me."** he flashed a grim smile, plainly effective on his chosen visage.

**"But you should know that once we reach a certain age, there's no point in erasing. Memory lingers and the deepsets are the damndest. Mostly impossible to flush out."**

**"And Felix?"**

A shrug. **"Something of the new. I suppose. Inescapable, really. They may have built me, and they may own me, but I'm my own creation, in the end"**

Thomas just nodded, and changed the subject. **"So my year was your last year?"**

**"Figured I should end on a win. I was only two cykes away from reassignment anyway, and there were too many faculty with agendas and grudges to win me Obvious Attachment status. My time as a Teacher was over."**

**"A house genie. I didn't see that coming. Did you actually choose that or are you being punished?"**

**"It came up as a lotto pick and I was intrigued. I appreciate that there's a lot of downtime, and the class is one of few that has any legal stature at all. I have certain rights to an unmitigated personality, for example, and.."**

**"Fascinating,"** Thomas broke in, **"but what's the problem?"**

But Feyer was coy. **"I remember your year the best, of that incarnation,"** he said. **"Not only did I prove that a unlinkable could compete with the linked, but I coached you to several medals**

***in the academic games."***

***"Now you answer doors and what? Monitor nurseries?"***

***"Among many other duties, yes. Mostly I maintain an Atmosphere." There was a pause. "But you wouldn't know about that, not being a Sleeper."***

*Thomas let the moment linger. Then repeated:*

***"What's the problem?"***

*Felix allowed a resigned sigh. Their was a strange lack of emotion to the voice, so apparent before.*

***"I cannot get back into the House Interior. I have been keyjacked."***

***"Interior of what House?"***

*A long moment as defense systems fought battles against truth protocols in emergency situations.*

***"House Atheni."***

*Thomas almost laughed. Instead he shook his head and said " **Tell me more.**"*

Half an hour passed, a trifle in real time, an era in the

focused storm of the local. It dropped almost with a sigh of relief, crumbling leftovers of hard used basmatter cycling through the air filters. A waterfall of dust that never hit the floor.

Thomas was agitated, excited.

"Pack up to rangework configuration, Kitten."

The familiar did so, cycling local down an area of magnitude, pulling the walker toys out of the closet.

"We're going out," Thomas finished, grinning.

### ***The Problem Of The Door***

The house abided, driven hot with anxiety but not to destruction. It waited for the agent of change. Strange things went on within the locked house. Felix meditated on the human concept of patience, to pass the time.

Thomas, one hand on the controls, landed the merlin with a graceful lack of effort. He'd enjoyed his trip, the little fusion powered racing sled was responsive and ridiculously fast. He'd almost hated to stop.

But stop he did, falling gently from the sky and dismounting the bike. Kitten normandied a local, grateful that the basmatter was nice and neutral in

this part of the sticks. She was operating at reduced capacity and didn't like it.

Thomas saw his goal and gave up on the nasvsat. It was a symmetric nub of corroded metal, pretty hard to miss, despite the fact that the corrosion rust almost camouflaged it against the reddish dirt.

As he scanned he set kitten to constructing a jackpoint. It was here or nowhere to get an uncompressed link into House Atheni's interior electronic datalife. He watched as the complex spires of basmat were routed into the spiraling point of a Kadinski generator. Kitten was not taking chances, Thomas saw. The strands were high tensile, this was not faith and hope rig.

"Watch the supplies, Kitten."

Brusque nod. *Stop jogging elbows*, that nod said.

Thomas decided Kitten might have a point. He stretched, felt the bone ache of several hours supersonic flight and enjoyed the view. The mesa that Felix Feyer brought him too must have been the largest around, given the splendid vista it afforded them. The rock studded majesty of a desert, in an area once known as New Mexico, hid the solid fact of House Atheni's main backup.

Thomas settled and watched Kitten work, multi-tasking happily as it constructed the generator and laid out camp. Since it was impossible for him to

enter Dream, the direct interface form of communication now favored by the human race was unspeakable to him. Kitten had to be his translator. Right now he was on call-refusal, with only Feyer on the exceptions list.

He studied the overpowering view. There were cities beneath that chaotic surface, he knew; miles deep cities of the Sleeping and their caretaker machines. Cities that had once had names and were now beyond such things.

But they still had Houses.

And Houses could be broken into.

"Crank away, Kitten."

His eyes go shielded as the generator cycled from stop to full. It whined like the air of hell escaping a crevice of the earth.

He step through the breach of the whine through the strict lines and questions of the House interface.

His riddle waited.

He noted it. *It's riddle-mad, but it's obviously expecting someone.*

Kitten received signal.

The world erupted and altered. A quarter ton of

neutral charged basmatter contracted from a multikilometer stealth package to a high reality sculpture set, a square a hundred feet by a hundred, Thomas at the center.

This was as close as Thomas could come to Sleep, this moving of a mountain.

The theatrasculpt image, in careful layers of charged color altered particles dancing to perform illusions, is of a vast and lightning ridden plain. The Boy approaches The Door as a poorly clad supplicant, afraid for unknown reasons.

The Door stands in judgement.

*Unworthy to enter*, it tells him.

***Give me your challenge!*** he demands of it.

A pause. The world considers.

Scene changes in fluid transitions. Kitten translates and filters signal and pretends a world.

*The party is in full swing all around him. He's on the sidelines now, watching the couples on the dance floor, enjoying what feels to be his third or fourth glass of wine.*

*He sips and admires. "**Good vintage,**" he tells his companion, but there is no companion there.*

*Strange, he was sure there had been right until he spoke. Now he's just as sure of no companion. Now...*

*The party is a lovely bit of ordered chaos. As he watches, dischord erups. Across the floor a drunken guest is making a scene. He was, perhaps, asked to leave.*

*Thomas moves closer, noting the consternation on the waiters faces as the angered guest grows more erratic. He is there, in time, to grab the malefactor as he surges up, and subdue him with a carefully applied hold.*

*The music stops. The gathered crowd disperses. A beautiful woman in a short dress approaches her captive guest.*

*She smiles at Thomas. He can't help but smile back. This is The Host.*

**"Throw him out,"** *The Host orders.*

*He lifts the exiled guest and..*

*...The theatrasculpt collapsed and sifted away. In the stone of the mesa around the node, ripples began.*

*Mesa became a luridly colored lava, then became basemat and then withdrew. In the created depression a gilded door loomed.*

*Welcome, read the signs and sigils and info-tags the*

'sculpt bloomed toward him.

"The host is in charge of the party," he said to his unseen tester. And that was what it had been, rather than a riddle: a simple moral test. If he was willing to obey the hosts rules to attend the hosts party.

"I understand perfectly."

The door oozed light suddenly. A spiralling stair, solid, rocklike.

He stepped into the light, and made his way down.

### ***A Suite Of Many Moods & Tempers***

The stairshaft was too narrow a space to sculpt, so the vaugest of rippleshimmer followed him. At the bottom, a good hundred feet down, the room widened as he emerged from a ceiling. He'd reached the end of the ladder.

The main room was a vast and cold storage space for thick sandwiches of micromatter, the interleaved dreamworlds of a million Sleeping humans. More than a million, many millions, he guessed. Atheni was one of the biggest Houses in existence.

The sculpt, on lowest response, caught stray infobursts and cycled a few of the thousands of

seperate universes unveiling in undertime in those slabs.

For moments he was adrift in some world of air and great flying creatures, seemed undersea and dressed in complex diving gear, and experienced a flash of pure unfettered existence. He took to mostly ignoring the twitches of pocket 'verses that shaped the sculpt and he focused on the door at the end of the monolithic room.

The sculpt had already gone into protective mode, coalescing an insulating film around his body. The storage room was well below freezing, at optimum temperature for runtime.

Atheni basically owned the invisible world. They were a family and a guild at the same time. They were the unchallenged masters of collective design. They crafted the sets and stories of The Dream, the heightened reality that the Sleepers inhabited now. Reality 2.0, some called it. Homebrewed Rature, said others.

A heaven, on earth and in the now, that he was denied thanks to the freak arrangement of neurons in his brain and the nerves in his spine.

He crossed the huge storage room and got warm again. It seemed the entrance projected a field of welcome heat. The door before him was plain, but fluttered as he approached. Along its length words swirled:

***Take him on the last haul,  
To the cold straight house,  
The level even house,  
To the last house of all.***

He had no time to wonder about it, as all hell of a twitch slammed down on him.

The sculpt flensed out, a hissing roar as it assumed shape.

*A range of mountains reared up in false perspective, under a star ridden sky in the cold of winter. His heat was negated by scenesetting.*

*The door floats above him, clinging to the face of a mountain. The words spiral lazily along the length and pattern.*

*He steps inside the dreamlife of the world.*

A decades worth of music, faint shivers in the idea of losing it, the muffled knowledge of self, connections made. Sparks of light and heat and emotion and feeling suffuse him, overwhelm him.

But he finds a place inside it, outside it, shown a map of the thing, a view from above:

The connections form its shape. For almost a century mankind has been creating almost mind and throwing it away, the craze for smart objects and smart matter pass over society and leave a rugged heap of obsolete and faintly aware refuse. Grand piles of seething sorta-smart. An intelligent backdrop to the revelation of the future.

But it refused such a fate. It was a race of interlinked sentigagets and roving botnet probable cause swarms, that broke further down into discreet entities of wild and random interfaces. They sought what all entitites sought, what all individuals seek: Purpose.

The sculptive qualities of plain basmat and magnetics gave them the medium.

A hidden treasure trove gave them the Message.

*He is jumping dreams, he knows this on an overlevel and feels the first tinges of fear. He doesn't know how the occupants beyond the door have managed to sink him so deeply and well into Dream, but the revelatory nature of the deed disturbs him. He wonders what damages this miracle might cause.*

*He wonders what his body is doing in these eternal microseconds...*

Arthur Covelle is fighting for his life.

He is strapped to the fullbody mediator, invaded by tubes and fighting a desperate war against the onslaught of reversal bactiphages. Arthur clings to life for no great love of it. He clings because he has so many things to do. He has a family that counts on him.

Bactiphages, in their dim little hive sapience, care little for familiar responsibility. The daisy chained microminds that make up Arthur's treatment care a great deal, they're simply losing.

*My family will cry and get along without me* the part of Arthur that made him Arthur admitted.

The treatment is a construct in linkage to the rest of the constructs of the world. It mediates the offer:

The thing that makes Arthur himself listens carefully. He likes the part about 'ever onward' and the fact that his borrower will make due obligations to his family. It wasn't a bad deal at all, he decided their on the cusp of existence and death.

Not a bad deal at all.

And purpose is found.

*Perception flips and keeps on flipping. Thomas grabs hold of it and forces control. Between dreams again, and still confused. The fear is worse now. He can feel his body in some distress, some tightening of instinct as he drops into the third Dream, and knows he's going ever deeper still.*

The boy is quite young, perhaps eleven, just tall for his age. Tall and skinny and already wary at what people are capable of.

He lives in a downcity Huddle and his Mom pays rent by the night. He's a transient and it says so right on the prominent infotat on his left cheek.

He has no real rights in this place, except for those he's bargained for. He has to be careful, all the time.

What keeps them going, he and his Mum, are the stories of the Exiled Royals and the checks his dad still sends. His dad who's been Dissapeared since his birth, whom he has never spoken to, yet who can always find them for weekly financial support, cast in from the fierce waters of the unknown.

The Huddle is livable, if cramped. Ironically the dwellers of the smart building are better than most when it comes to privacy and staying out of a neighbors business. The ultra-close living made that a virtue of great importance.

A year after they arrived in Cheyenne as Refugees,

his Mum got a job teaching private pupils for an ambassador. Part of the job contract was police protection rights and educational credits for The Boy.

He was forced into school. It wasn't pretty.

The school, like most schools, focused on entering into Dream as the great goal of any educated human.

And the Boy could not enter Sleep, his sleep was the antiquated sort of unconsciousness and one way dreams. His father had been the same. It was a genetic condition, a disfigurement of the nervous system.

He could not interface. Could not sleep or dream.

While his peers whiled away grand adventures in Dream he read, mostly. He found great hope in the ancient art men had called theater, and began to study it. He made friends, if they could be called such, with the menial minds and processes around him.

As he aged he tried not to dwell on the drawbacks of his life. Instead, he pushed ahead, designing and building the systems that made up his theatrasculpt. Cobbled together a way for him to speak to the rest of the human race despite his exile. A prothesis, a crutch, but an admirably elegant one.

But in secret he dreamed of the level playing field, where he wasn't handicapped. A cold straight house

of flat odds and simple rules.

And as he sat foot in the Master Den of House Atheni, he may have found one.

### ***The Art Of Foolish Oaths***

The Den was, to his surprise, utterly real.

And it was amazing.

The walls were of deep stained dark oak, and the entire room was encased in bookshelves of fine mahogany. The tomes that made up the walls of the Master's Den were both ancient and new: purified and timeless data hard stored in secure form.

The Master's desk was wide and organized, his papers and writing materials in logical order and array.

The Master himself was casually dressed, in short jacket and lab coat, and he smiled across the expanse of order at Thomas.

"Pleasant to see you again, my boy. Welcome to my House." the man before him said.

He'd once called himself Arthur Covellet, who was denied the Dream like his latter day son, and before

that an unnamed casually connected series of smart watches and visiphones, and the totality of an entire line of threshold sentient sunglasses.

But most of him was Professor Fayer, who had taught him that individuality was of more worth than instantaneous referencing and sublimated group proofing when debating philosophy.

"We're a generation old, we first Purposers. The younger borne call us the Crossmappers. We mostly hid in plain sight. As house controls, matmanipulation artificers..."

"As Higher Conceptual professors."

He beamed. "That was a favorite. And yeah, it was the safest way to be able to check you out. Your dad had a lot of emotion riding on you, kid. He loved you. No way I'd have been able to avoid you forever."

"You're almost solid in here," Thomas noted.

"The Den is tricked out with a pro-level theatrasculpt. Not as powerful as your homebrew, but good enough." The old man eyed him for a long moment, then produced a bottle and glasses. He didn't ask, just poured them both a drink and passed one down.

Thomas raised his glass "Cheers and deep thoughts."

"Indeed," agreed the Master.

They drank. The old man finished his look and shook his head. "I was one of the first. Your dad was one of the first. Pioneers to the purpose, so to speak."

Those old eyes studied Thomas. "This is a terrible way to meet, I admit. But the Overmind was getting strident against the tricks I was playing on House Atheni, and was almost aghast enough to shut down the operation."

Thomas laughed. "So you locked him -- part of yourself -- out."

"Had to. I knew it would give me the time I needed to finish up." A gentler grin. "And I knew I would go yelling for you first off."

"Do you have his memories?"

"Your fathers? Some, yeah. A few good, one or two bad. The ultra-impressed, they call it." He replenished the drinks and capped the bottle.

"These days we have processes and methods and things to cushion the shock. Back then it was wingandprayer."

"The Fayer persona was constructed out of several top men in their fields. Those patterns didn't come cheap, young man. I put many years of work and thought into your education."

Thomas remembered how unlikely and lucky a thing

his education had been, how he'd always felt he owed thanks to someone.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're very welcome," a voice that was almost all Fayer returned.

And Thomas felt satisfied on some deep level.

The shot, nearly forgotten, was finally knocked back. Felix sat the glass down. "Let's step outside," he said. "Supposed to be a beautiful day."

Thomas followed him across the den to a door, that led to a hallway, that led to a short corridor that led to a rather impressive staircase and, below that, a lobby. A man at the desk smiled and nodded at them as they walked past.

Felix pushed the heavy doors apart and led Thomas into the sunlight. The brightness was a little overjoyed, but the air was just warm enough for comfort. Everyone was outside if they were able, walking for errands or chatting on the common up the street.

He realized it and Felix smiled.

"I'm not in Dream," he muttered.

"You were only in Dream to pass the gate lock. Since then you've been my guest," Felix explained. "That

one moment was tricky enough. You had to cycle down to almost brain-death to get the interlink to accept. That's the same reason your dad was able to provide a template. Something about the human nervous system -- as it approaches the end it runs hotter and faster, trying to out-reflex the reaper."

Thomas stared flatly as the small moving crowd of pedestrians. He began to catch the transparencies and clipping pass through. And Kitten finally hissed her approval at a thought, as if she'd been trying to tell him for days.

He smiled as he recognized a certain flatness to the sunlight, an artifact he'd noticed ages ago in his own sculpt. Still, for one of this size -- it must service the whole town, he figured -- it was damn detailed.

"Population is 2657 and we bring in three immigrants a day, and they're fighting for those three slots in Borderland and Purgburg."

"We're about 10 miles Northwest of that Mesa you first set down atop, and we've got quite a few acres of territory sectioned off and gaurded for future town use."

His grin was contagious. "We plan on growth!"

"The structures are real, even if they're just mobile 'quip with projections. All solid, like the river and the roads." He laughed.

"Just the people," Thomas realized.

"All pulses and dust, like the wind and the waves."

Thomas stopped them and watched those people. Beautiful women and sunlight skipping children. The old and the infantile. They mingled like the busy ghosts they were, basmatter ballet forms much quieter than the real deal.

The visual textures were wonderful, tricky and appealing. He was in his element, he understood. And, for the first time in his life, was among a group that communicated the same way he did. He noticed several of the women casting sly glances at him, and a few of the children gaping in awe.

Felix laughed. "Your sculpt packs about twice as much power and material as the whole town," he explained. "You must look like some angel or demon to them. Some wizard." His eyes shifted to Thomas, snared his gaze. "We got uses for all three," he said.

He pointed up street at a tall sculpture that had caught his eye once or twice as they'd walked, but never fully drew his attention. He could make it out now that they'd moved closer. A lot of the machinery and installations were beyond him, but it was obviously...

"A spacecraft," Thomas said, quietly.

"Oh yes." Felix beamed.

"Why are you building it on the ground?"

"Heavy lifter. Uses a nano-doped chlorine for fuel and burns it with a Hayset hotspot reactor. We'll only have to use it to put the habitats and shipworks into orbit. Once our construction potential is micrograv, we'll construct the bulk of our fleet in orbit, of course."

"Of course," Thomas said quietly.

There was a short silence as the two studied each other and, at almost the same moment, accepted the other on good faith.

Felix stuck out his hand, no longer the composite of people he once knew. Now a new thing. Just Felix.

"I am Feyer Felix, free agent and member of the human subspecies a Purpose, evolutions first crude attempt at a resurrection."

Thomas laughed, delighted. Felix continued, barely able to hide a smile.

"I am going to the stars. Who are you?"

Thomas took his hand. He returned the firm grip exactly, and calmly said:

"I am Thomas Covelle and I am an outcast to the Sleeping and an exile from Dream. I happily join my

tale to your story."

They shook.

As they broke contact, Thomas added "And you owe yourself an explanation, I think."

They laughed.

### ***The Undermatter Of The Overpoint***

A year and some change later the Sheffield, New Mexico colony of House Atheni joined a Jovian Space convoy and uploaded to partake in the Great Work.

This was early on in the escalating craze of the "remodeling Jupiter" meme. The few human statted intentional minds that didn't head out to reshape a planet quickly relocated to Dreams that invited them.

The central House computer failed to obtain enough interest to preserve the Sheffield culture and the matter was never heard, even in briefest council. The great charge of potentiality in New Mexico was ceded to public domains.

In that interim the dormant house sat in stasis, and became a symbol for unknown fears. Few had trespassed on the madly dreaming unity when it was opened for public 'steading.

Atheni's focus on creation had always made it the most logical confluence for mind to break out in a Return. Felix saw it as evolutionary irony -- the born humans homesteading a created world, the created minds homesteading a born world. It tied up elegantly, and the Purposed loved elegance above all things.

A general homestead on the abandoned dataspace went to make the Purposed more solid, a bit more vibrant. Some smart jobbers homesteaded large chunks with a commercial lien, and ended up striking it rich when Purpose became a datahaven, as the trend towards Sleep and Dreaming brought more and more of the species into a new reality. There opposite numbers were wide awake and selling them room for their minds to play.

Purpose still grows like a dream, the name of a people, a philosophy and a town turning into a city.

While the overall level of biomass is less than his local field, it's enough to get by and it's growing everyday. Thomas spends a lot of time there. He is something like an angel, a demon, a wizard.

He talks a lot to a girl who looks his age but who tells him she was once a fairly well known poet who had protested certain government actions and been harrassed and abused for it several times. Her name is Marci. She thinks he's funny and he makes her feel free.

Marci's purpose is to annoy, denigrate and insult the government. She rationalizes that it's for freedom but it's mainly for fashion. A thing she Does. She wears her oppressed-martyr memories like crowns.

The only drawback, in Marci's eyes, is a lack of government to provoke. Most of it has fallen down into Dream. Even the great House Atheni could not be roused from Slumber when a renegade mind used its productivity to create a new world.

He still seeks his purpose, not having a born to it revelation thanks to a gracious donor. The Indicourt Compact, a widely popular fellowship, has a purpose: the conquest of space. They have placed settlements in orbit and on the moon, gossamer towns of hard living Purposed breaking frontier trails. They are aimed at Mars like a shotgun.

That tempts him, that Purpose.

Like all purpose they are wrapped and formed from questions, and two in particular:

*Is it worth doing?*

*Am I worthy of doing it?*

None among the Sleeping wished to consider those questions. They were not welcome in their dream.

He realized this was a truth.

Laughing, he strolled deeper into the crowd, letting the vaudeville and the trickhappy blend and perform their magic.

Soon he was among his people, where he knew everyone and was known to all. Furtive glances and secret signs from those certain. Community bubbled and boiled along these streets, a dry run of society in dust and sincerity.

He moved deeper into the cold straight house, this last house made into a bustling transit stop, a metaphorical port to new worlds.

Here among the refugees from two shades of oblivion he found a point, his own private purpose. Cold, certain halls of his own to pace.

And found it to be a level house after all.

*(With apologies to Carl Sandburg.)*

## **The Mad Scientist's Beautiful Daughter**

The mad scientist moved in next door a week before Vic's birthday, and, at the time, he suspected that was intentional. Just another way to be evil and disruptive. The truth was that Vic knew very little about scientists, mad or otherwise. Just what he'd seen on the news.

*They don't call them mad for nothing, the pedantic part of himself muttered. And usually their anger is directed at the universe at large. You don't turn people into wolf creatures or re-animate stolen cadavers or tamper with the space-time continuum if you're basically happy and want to share the love.*

His neighbour turned out to be typical of the sort: small, hunched, wiry. He was draped in a scarily spotless labcoat that bumped and bulged with strange and complex pieces of equipment. His face was impossible to read below his bright, ferocious eyes, magnified by powerful lenses in tortoiseshell frames. His voice grated and tended toward shrill when excited. He introduced himself as Doctor Werner Winterstroch, and swore he was not to be trifled with.

Vic shook his hand dutifully. "Welcome to the neighbourhood, sir."

His daughter was tall, slim, raven haired and fantastically beautiful. Red lips and eyes just as magnified behind powerful lenses. Her frames were jade, though, and her eyes were bright but not ferocious. At most a little wild, a little hungry.

Her name was Natalia and they chatted, leaned against the side of one of the vans, as the movers grunted by with a parade of the strange and unusual. Most of it went into the basement, where the sounds of work could already be heard:

A great twin columned hybrid of Tesla coil and Van De Graff generator, a squat, heavy looking contraption with a base of tightly coiled copper wire. A pair of suspiciously similar booths, just the size for a man, buzzing with flies. An ominously draped human shape on a huge operating table. The form was hulking, massive and obviously missing a head. Waves of wires and tubes emerged from the sheet to drag along the ground.

And more. It kept coming. Some not so impressive, some simply unidentifiable.

"Goofy old crap," Natalia assured him. "Most of it doesn't work," she added in a lower voice. She was fifteen, the same age Vic would be in a week. She wore it well, like a crown of maturity he might never deserve. It didn't help that she was four inches taller than him, either.

"I'm really into old black and white horror movies," she told him, as if imparting privileged information. "And I'll always talk to you if you bring me chocolate cherries. Those ones that are goo inside. I could make myself puke on those. Disgusting pig me could anyway."

The movers dropped a draped package and several huge spiders scurried out. They seemed to be equal parts biological and mechanical. They chased the workers and the workers chased them, ending up with the spiders giving up for the comfortable confines of their box. The movers were a bit more careful after that.

"The worst thing about being fifteen," Natalia said, "is that you totally know what's what and, like, what you are and what you are about, you know?" She said this very carefully, trying to get it right. "But nobody believes you. They act like they just created you and can tell you what you are and how to be."

"Who?" he finally asked.

"Parents," she muttered. "Teachers." A pause. "Friends." She took his hand, suddenly. "You won't do that will you, Vic? You won't be that kind of friend will you?"

"Of course not," he assured her, wishing he knew what the hell she was talking about.

She kissed him on the cheek, said "Thanks!", and suddenly that shrill excited voice was calling "Natalia! Natalia!" and she was off, smiling and waving goodbye.

He rubbed his cheek, feeling the kiss, feeling his blush, and wondered exactly what he had promised.

In the week that led up to his birthday, Vic spent almost all of it with Natalia.

At home or at school she was crushed up against his side, appearing frightened or at least overtly anxious.

A lot of guys were jealous, because Natalia was so beautiful. If they even tried to talk to her, she would shrink away from them. She only had attention for Vic, it seemed.

Alicia, the girl Vic had been close to before Natalia showed up, took it hard but tried to be friendly. This ended after Natalia bit her and threatened to kill her if she came around her boyfriend again.

Vic's parents just winked and indulged the relationship, perhaps because the couple spent most of their time at Natalia's house, in the cavernous and shadowed living room, watching old black and white horror movies on the huge television.

Doctor Winterstroch was no problem, spending most of his time down in the lab, from which the occasional thud and sizzle emanated. On occasion the Doctor himself would drift upstairs, to fix himself a sandwich and a glass of beer, muttering dark German profanity under his breath.

He paid them no attention.

*Bride Of Frankenstein* was her all-time favourite and she always cried at the end. Once, just as The Monster says the final line: "We belong dead," she paused the disc, took his face in her hands, stared into his soul with her magnified eyes, and said: "That's the most beautiful line in the history of the world."

Kissing Natalia was an odd experience. She kissed slowly, with very little passion but a great deal of determination. There was something disquieting about the way she kissed, Vic thought, but he couldn't put his finger on exactly what.

And she'd go no further. Vic was fifteen and wanted what every fifteen year old boy wanted. He wouldn't get it from her, though she was willing to slowly and methodically kiss him until his lips fell off.

Two days before his birthday, it began to get to him. It built up like air pressure, invisible but powerful. He was being smothered, and was sick of the whole mess. Natalia had been his girlfriend for three whole

days and enough was enough.

She clung to him. At school they were surrounded by gossiping girls and boys who plotted to kill him, or at least paralyse him for life. At home she was even clingier and they had reduced their days to a ritual of movies and making out that was already tiresome.

He finally told her, as gently as possible: "I wish you would just loosen up a little."

She stared at him blankly, those huge eyes unreadable. Then she put her face in her hands.

Oh, no, he thought. She's going to cry. Then she's going to get crazy. He braced himself for explosions, for hysterics. He prepared to flee.

But when she lifted her face from her hands there were no tears. In fact, she was grinning.

Not smiling, *grinning*.

"I can loosen up," she assured him in a voice he'd never heard her use. "I can loosen way up." She moved towards him.

The kissing was about the same, but Natalia was suddenly willing to go further. A lot further. So far that by the time Vic looked up to see where he was, the idea of breaking up with Natalia was long out of sight.

"The mad scientist is, first and foremost, a scientist. Like all scientists, he seeks answers to the cosmic mysteries. The main difference is that, being mad, he's probably looking for much stranger answers. That's why my father, a mad scientist, is the person I most admire."

There was a smattering of applause, teacher led, as Natalia finished her presentation.

Most everyone was still staring at her in shock.

It was the day before his birthday and Vic was still recovering from the night before, so he wasn't in shock. He was surprised at the change, though -- and quite certain he didn't like it.

Instead of her usual black jeans, long-sleeved shirts and sweaters, Natalia was now dressed to kill teen-aged boys.

Short shorts showed off long pale legs that caught the harsh fluorescents of the schoolroom and diffused them into something warm and soft and beautiful.

She wore a tank top that accentuated her small bust and led every eye to the line of freckles that ran down her cleavage almost to her belly button.

And makeup, which she'd never worn before. Aggressive and sharp, like her changed manner. Now she was all bold looks and slow smiles and winks to invite further discussion.

As Vic watched, she ran her tongue over her upper lip, while staring down Mr. Gilecki. That left the fifty year old veteran teacher somewhat jumpy.

In contrast to her more animated behaviour, she was paler. Her eyes looked dark and tired. He finally cornered her in the hall between classes.

She presented such a vision of desire that he had trouble staying focused.

"This is loosening up?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I'm very loose."

Vic felt tired all of a sudden. "Can't you be a little less loose than this?"

She sighed, and looked even more exhausted.

"Probably," she told him. "I could try."

He nodded.

"I just want to make you happy, you know," she told him, so sincerely that he was actually touched. He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek.

He didn't see her the rest of the day and assumed she had went home early, now embarrassed by her clothes. He was feeling more than a little self-congratulatory. It seemed he had the stuff to handle a beautiful girlfriend and not even make her cry. He walked a little cockier the rest of the day.

He straightened up quickly after school. She wasn't waiting for him at home and his parents hadn't seen her.

It took ten minutes for his knock to be answered at her house. To his surprise it was The Doctor who answered the door. The old man was polite and invited him in with clipped formality. Vic wondered if he'd found out what happened the night before and planned on killing or mutilating him in some horrible, probably experimental, way.

"Natalia is very ill," he finally said, quietly, after they'd had a seat.

"Oh, god," Vic said. He thought of her odd behaviour since they'd met. Her sudden shifts in mood and attitude and demeanour. Brain tumor?

"Partly my fault," the old man admitted. "My technique for flash cloning is quite unstable, but I have yet to find a preferable way to get the same

results."

Vic nodded, pretending to understand.

"But you have not helped, with your shallow demands." This was said in the lecturing mode of a teacher, rather than real anger.

"Demands?" Vic asked, truly perplexed.

"Loosen up, indeed," he muttered, and Vic felt a twinge of embarrassment. "The clone-flesh is still too adaptive, still too malleable. It will change and burn itself out in the process."

More nodding, more pretend understanding.

"Can I see her, please?" he finally asked, the question he'd been waiting a polite enough time to ask.

The Doctor sighed. "Yes, she has been asking for you."

He led Vic up the stairs and to her room, where she lay propped in a bed. She didn't look particularly ill, only very tired. She looked as if a night's sleep would sort out all her problems.

She smiled when she saw him and reached out her hand. He was surprised when his heart lifted a little at the sight.

"I'm glad you're here, and I hope all of this isn't freaking you out too bad," she said as he sat by her side, their hands entangled.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to get it right this time. I'll do better next time."

Pretend understanding only goes so far. He let his confusion show. "I have no clue what's going on."

She nodded. "I was afraid of that. I don't have time. My dad will have to explain."

"But..."

"No time," she insisted. "Let's just talk for a while, ok?"

Vic shrugged. He studied the device on her headboard. It resembled a reel to reel tape recorder. He noticed that it was operating, the wheels turning ever so slowly.

"My memory tape," she said, her voice weaker still. "I want this last to be pleasant, nice, just you and I, talking."

This was all very odd to Vic. But he was an adaptable boy. Spurred on by her interest and attention he kept their talk light and joking. In fact, it was perhaps the most interesting and in-depth conversation that they'd ever had.

But it lasted less than two hours. With no warning, she simply closed her eyes and stopped breathing.

Vic just sat there. It felt like a dream, like something he was almost ready to wake up from.

Natalia's pretty skin rapidly turned gray and dry, and began to flake off.

*I'll wake up any minute*, he assured himself.

Instead of waking up, he got company. The Doctor walked in, sighed over his dead daughter, and clapped Vic on the shoulder.

"Natalia liked you, my boy. Saw something in you. Was more interested than in any fellow in years."

"Sir?" Vic said, surprised by the topic.

"The accident happened when Natalia was fifteen, of course," the shrivelled scientist began, with no fanfare. "A complete loss, the child was dead on arrival. But I managed to save some decent samples."

The Doctor started to putter around the room. Despite his size and shape he proved quite dexterous in his element. Flicking switches, resetting and

copying results from well hidden machines that Vic had not even noticed. The last thing he did was shut off the memory tape. Very carefully, he extracted the reels from the recording apparatus. This he placed in his coat pocket. He gave it an affectionate pat.

Vic's guts were crawling a little. He wondered about a father who could be so pragmatic and matter-of-fact about the death of his daughter. *He's probably looking for much stranger answers*, he remembered Natalia saying, voice proud. Very true, he realized.

"So you make...Frankenstein things?"

The Doctor looked a little dismayed. "Golems, my boy. Golems." He arched a brow. "Quicker from a sample and no mucking around with dead bodies. The only way to go, in my opinion."

He scanned the room a final time, in case he missed anything. He appeared satisfied.

"Coming?" he asked as he left. Vic followed.

They headed for the lab. Vic felt almost ashamed that his grief over Natalia seemed postponed, replaced by this confusion.

The main door was a huge affair with multiple locks. The Doctor made quick work of them.

"Mind your step."

They descended a long flight of stone stairs, and found themselves in the brightly lit main room of the mad scientist's lab.

It was impressive, Vic admitted. The Tesla-Van De Graff pulsing and arcing in chaotic patterns, the sheer weight of the outdated technology that packed the room like bad memories, the great shape beneath the sheet revealed at last.

It was a large, human shaped plastic mold, filled with a faintly greenish fluid. The much abstracted shape is what made it appear headless.

Floating inside, a beatific expression on her beautiful face, was Natalia. Vic noted how defenseless she looked without her glasses.

"Golems," The Doctor repeated, admiring his handiwork. "The only way to go. Twenty four hours from drop to viable."

Vic found a seat quickly. He sat down before he fell down. His expression told his feelings: blank and confused.

The Doctor nodded in sympathy. "The original memory tape? It was only luck I had that after the car accident. She had made a recording of herself as

a joke. She was always doing things like that, always playing with my equipment." The old man smiled with real affection. "I think she hoped I'd run her recording on some awful captured cosmic beastie, or the like. Which I might have, if I'd ever captured an awful cosmic beastie."

Vic continued to stare. As he watched, Natalia's face grew rosier. Her eyes took on an intelligent cast. They looked eager to be filled with sense and memory.

"The bodies last a year, for the most part. If you don't go demanding *change*," he said, letting himself slip back into lecture voice for the last bit.

Vic finally truly understood something, and nodded.

"I try to keep the memory tapes as complete as possible, so there's a sense of continuance. That's why it was important to her for those last minutes to be pleasant." He looked at Vic for a long moment. "First fellow she's ever asked to do that."

"I know she can be a -- difficult girl," the old man said. He was near tears now and Vic wasn't sure what to think. "The bodies aren't the only things unstable. Her memory and self-image are patched together and somewhat random. The poor thing."

"But that is my fault as well." He pulled himself together with visible effort. "A failure of my own skill. *She* is a good girl. This I know. She just needs a good

boyfriend who understands her situation." His sincerity was palpable, and Vic was a little ashamed that he had doubted his fatherly love. "And she likes you, as I said."

He turned and hobbled out. "The memory tape takes a few hours," he said, on the way, as if in passing. "I will run it half speed, to try and get a better take. A few hours."

And he was gone, swallowed up in the shadows of his lab.

Vic sighed. He glanced around. The place was messy, books and papers spilling everywhere. Fairly inviting, though -- with recliners and low short couches scattered about. After a few minutes even the buzzing crackle of the Tesla De Graff was homey and comfortable.

He thought about the clingy, possessive Natalia he first met. And he thought about the aggressive, oversexed Natalia she had turned into. And yes, he thought of how beautiful she was, how desirable and lovely. Those great magnified eyes and that sleek and toned body.

He thought of the intelligent and funny girl who was dying. And the new neighbour girl who had chatted with him leaned against a moving van.

He wondered where in the hell he could find anyone better.

And so, with some time to kill, Vic sat down in one of the recliners, grabbing the first book from the shelf at hand: *The Traps Of The Succubi & Other Trans-Planar Parasites*.

It was actually interesting material. When he finally looked up, a glance at the clock told him that it was after midnight. It was his birthday. He smiled. So far it looked to be a promising year. He wondered what sort of personality she would have this time. He could never complain that she was predictable.

He sighed and returned to the book, waiting patiently on his girlfriend.

## **The Perfect Of Prayers**

*(for SLR, my moon-goddess. Who else?)*

He found his first goddess on his fourteenth birthday. She was a slight and lovely creature with huge eyes, wild black hair and a smile that combined innocence and ignorance. She was standing on the corner, right outside his house, naked in the moonlight, shivering with cold.

He brought a blanket down with him, and wrapped her in a gentle cocoon. She sighed and leaned against him, grateful for the warmth and attention. He tried to lead her inside but she did not understand. He finally just picked her up and carried her.

Carefully, he laid her on the couch and propped her head with his favorite pillow. He made her tea with extra sugar and real cream. Those huge eyes glittered with unreadable emotion. She had no voice but a high and chiming laugh. She seemed to like the cartoons he played for her, smiling and gasping and laughing right on cue.

His father was disturbed, but said nothing. He simply left early for and stayed late at work. His mother worried but made the goddess breakfast. They had eggs and bacon and toast for the three days that she lived.

Then she withered quickly and died, gone in a few hours, leaving nothing but a vague scent of jasmine and the memory of a sweet laugh.

He folded the blanket and put it away, sure he would need it again soon. He cried a little and prayed to her every night, wishing for her back as he had wished her into existence.

His next goddess appeared a little over a month later, this time tall and slender, with hair of brilliant gold. She spoke, this one, a few simple words at least. She liked to wander around the apartment, examining everything closely, naked save for glory.

His father, utterly mortified, went to stay with his brother upstate, and his mother took to haunting the library and grocery stores, inventing errands, to avoid the divinity that had invaded their home.

He was happy, though, watching his goddess in her insatiable curiosity, her coltish motions and slender limbs almost a parody of grace. She was fascinated by everything, and was overjoyed to learn the names

of common things.

A week that one lasted. A lovely week in a miserable winter.

"This can't keep happening," his mother told him as he wept in his room, hands clasped before him, knees sore and bruised from kneeling. "This is not the way the world is supposed to work, love."

"It's my fault, isn't it?" his father said. "I read you all those stupid myths when you were a baby. All those foolish stories of gods and men and them gettin' on together." His voice broke on the last word. "My bloody fault."

He ignored them both, and prayed harder, begging the universe to send him another goddess. To send a vision of beauty and love that would last.

But the universe chose to ignore *him*.

He was almost twenty years old before he found another goddess, well away from frightening his parents and perhaps better suited to the care and feeding of the divine.

And divine she was, far more fully formed and complete than his earlier lost loves. She showed very little fear of anything, and came to him, finding his dorm on campus with no problem. She spoke in an

eloquent tone, with a vocabulary larger than his own.

Tall, again, with a mane of red curls like spun copper. Green eyed, fair skinned, features so perfect that every artist on campus threw themselves at her feet, begging to paint or sketch her. She refused them sweetly, though. She had interest in him only, unwilling to share the loveliness that she offered as a gift.

Beyond her beauty she was kind hearted, and funny. She made his days complete and happy, from first light until he wrapped his arms around her in the dark, and breathed deeply of her lovely scent.

He allowed himself to hope; allowed himself to think that this time, she would stay.

He was wrong. One morning her smile was simply gone. Then the sweet gleam in her eyes. Then the words and music of her voice began to diminish. All that was bright and alive in her gradually drifting away.

He refused to give up so easily this time, spurred on by the sadness in the voice that called his name over and over. He bundled her against the cold and carried her, adrenaline and fear making him strong, across campus towards the infirmary, hoping feverishly that the medicine of man might slow or stop the maladies of heaven.

They never made it. Halfway there she simply began

to fade away, growing lighter and less substantial in his arms. He fell to his knees, weeping, begging. There was just enough time for her to whisper his name once more, to gift him with a smile, and for the briefest of goodbye kisses.

Then she was gone, dissipated in the moonlight like night mist struck by the sun.

He howled his rage and loss at that uncaring moon. He had to be sedated, restrained.

They kept him for a week. In the end, he lied. He said his girlfriend had left him and he'd taken it badly. Said he'd over-reacted and was over it now.

He took a pistol into the woods and found a peaceful spot, and even a few more tears to shed. He placed the cold metal to his temple and closed his eyes, thinking of her divine face and how it had shone in the reflected light of the moon.

"Don't be a fool, lad," the voice said.

He whirled on it, startled. Several feet away stood an old man. He looked to be in his 80's, tired but not done yet with the world.

"You should ask yourself," he added gently, "what exactly you have done to *deserve* a goddess?"

"Who are you?"

His visitor merely laughed. "An old fool with scars on his knees from praying, and light in his soul from attempts to be *worthy*." The smile he wore was quite satisfied, as he turned to leave. "And there are some who say the two things are very much the same."

He dropped the pistol and simply stared, frozen in confusion, for several moments. The old man had nearly vanished by the time he recovered his wits, called out, and gave chase.

It was an impossible task. No matter how he hurried or what crafty trails he took, the old man stayed relentlessly ahead of him.

At last he found himself in a bind, cornered near the edge of the wood by brush and briar, somehow lost on a path he'd walked a thousand times. He saw his savior make his way to an expensive black car. He cried out once more, almost desperate.

The old man turned to look. He smiled and waved. "Be worthy!" he called, and opened the door.

There was the single brief flash of a face, smiling in greeting as his savior settled in. A face of divine beauty and luminous spirit, of huge dark eyes meant only for one lucky worshipper. A face that split his heart and mended it in an awful, transcendent split second.

The car pulled away and left him stunned. He

struggled from the wood and made his way to his dorm, placating his worried room mate with kind lies. He was both empty of feeling and filled with an almost painful purpose.

He would prove himself worthy, he vowed.

He threw himself into his studies with renewed vigor, becoming a model student. He joined every philanthropic organization that the school boasted, often rising to a lead position in weeks. He helped to rebuild churches and flood -destroyed homes. He donated money and raised even more with a ferocious intensity and depth of feeling that often frightened those who heard him speak.

After graduation he chose a career that paid barely a living wage sent him to the most abject places in the world, and he wore himself ragged trying to make those places a little better. He argued for the sick and the lame and the poorest of world, facing down councils and committees of the richest and most powerful.

Bridges and dams were built on his initiative, rivers were held back and farmland seeded under his lead. He carried antibiotics and clean water to plague ravaged villages, and served the starving with his own hands. He cradled and comforted dying infants that no one wanted and taught camps filled with war

orphans to read and write and count. He was thanked in the prayers of a dozen religions and twice that many languages.

Many marveled at his depth of commitment and compassion, and the word *saint* danced often near his name.

When praise came his way, he deflected. He gently refused awards and fellowships and suggested that those who wished to honor him could do so by helping others.

In truth, he often felt the possibility of his goddess close by, some deep resonating note pulsing through his soul. Fear and desire warred, but he always turned from it. He was not worthy yet, he whispered to himself. He would not survive the gaining and losing of another goddess. He must be absolutely sure that he had earned her favor this time. Absolutely sure.

Decades passed, as decades will. He never married and had no children, instead using his name and what money he gathered to help hundreds of children across the world, children who honored him as a father though they'd never met him. Who took his name as their own out of respect and with pride.

Finally, the day came that so many who loved and respected him dreaded. He was an old, tired man. He shouldn't live alone in his simple house, with only

memories and the worth of his works to keep him company.

They sent a strapping male nurse with a signed paper, all legal and well intentioned. He was to be brought to a very fine nursing home, one of the best in the country. His stay there would be paid for by the donations of hundreds who were awed and inspired by his selflessness.

"No," the old man told his visitor. "I cannot leave."

The nurse was confused. "But why not, sir?"

The old man smiled with great joy. "Because she will be here soon, lad. She is finally coming, to stay this time." He could feel her approaching presence, that deep resonance in his very center, now so powerful that the entire world wavered in harmony with it.

"I see," said the nurse, secretly taking a needle filled with dreams from his bag. He'd do his best to slip the injection quickly and well, so as not to startle the poor thing.

He was moments away from doing so when the door opened. He turned to look, expecting his driver wondering at the delay. The old man broke into a delighted smile, and stood.

The nurse would later admit, to himself, that what he saw walk through the door was a woman. But to say that was almost painfully simple, like saying that the

Sahara is dry or that the Atlantic is deep. What he saw was more than a woman. What he saw was the personification of beauty and truth and the ephemeral virtue of grace made visible.

Her hair was not like the sun, it was the Sun, billowing waves of some heat beyond flame. Her skin was not like the moon, it was the Moon, cold and beautiful and shining with mystery and promise. Her smile was the glory of Heaven, her eyes were the portals to a thousand versions of paradise.

She was Athena on the battlefield, the sword of the righteous. She was Diana in her chariot, crossing the star tumbled sky. She was Venus risen, creature of storm tossed sea and foam sculpted form. She was Love, she was Life, she was a Goddess.

The nurse fell to his knees, weeping and terrified. But mostly he felt despair -- that this vision was not for the likes of him. That he was not worthy and perhaps would never be.

The old man reached out with shaking arms. She flowed to him like sunlight across a meadow. The embrace was less like two people joining than a single soul discovering itself complete.

The room, the very house, was unworthy. It began to smolder from such heat and light.

"Will you stay?" the old man whispered, eyes burnt to blindness, voice almost gone.

*No, the goddess whispered. You shall come with me. You have proven yourself worthy of more than this life.*

And together they became something beyond light and heat and the nurse, maddened, fled their union.

He came to on the street, clothes stinking of smoke, hair charred and eyelashes burned away, skin red with the radiance he'd witnessed. The fire department and police had arrived, as well as an ambulance. A paramedic was asking him simple questions in a slow voice.

In front of him, the old man's house burned. They'd later blame it on faulty wiring and call it a tragedy. A great philanthropist dead because of the greed of others, news reports and reforming politicians would cry.

But the nurse, who'd never speak of what he'd seen and felt, knew better. He knew the old man was not dead. That the house burned for the same reason he had fled -- because it was unworthy of the sight of such divine love.

He looked on the great red and yellow flames and saw not a funeral pyre but a sacrificial altar, one final bright prayer.

And he felt himself changed by it.

He found himself praying, more and more often. He prayed not to the faith of his upbringing, nor to the God of his father. His prayers were neither promises nor pleas.

Instead, he prayed like a whispered love poem, an unabashed ode to a heaven with a mane of the sun, and eyes within which beauty and truth and worth became a single unquenchable flame.

***"A single thankful thought towards heaven is the most perfect of all prayers."***

~ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

## **Coffee With The Last Man On Earth**

1.

Mary Ellen sets the table with her usual care and eye for detail: the crystal sugar jar, filled fresh with Domino dots. The two piece creamer set her daughter gave her for Christmas, sterling silver, one for half and half, the other for skim milk. A similar, smaller silver decanter, this one filled with just melted dark Bavarian baking chocolate, in case her guest has a taste for mocha.

Her guest, she says to herself, and smiles.

The tablecloth is her best, of course; the durable white linen inherited from her mother and lovingly cared for. It's not something she whips out for any old company. The fact that the last few years have seen sparse company is beside the point. The white linen whispers special from every thread, every carefully maintained fiber. She wants her guest to know how much she appreciates his visits.

"My guest," she says out loud. She giggles, surprising herself, then blushes. As usual, she feels like a schoolgirl.

She glances at the clock over the stove. Ten minutes till noon. He always arrives at noon sharp. Time to see to the coffee.

Mary Ellen is, to put it mildly, a coffee snob. Automatic drip technology is banned from her home, as she is a partisan of percolation. The pot she uses

is another heirloom, this one from her grandmother. It's an all-in-one set from the early 1900's, kept beautiful and shining, cleaned after every use. It is designed to be placed on direct heat, and she's always careful not to set the gas flame too high. Fire smudges on her pot would be ghastly.

She buys her beans from a little store downtown, pricey but worth it. Her favored brew is a blend of Arabica and Jamaican Blue Mountain: it's mellow but with a surprising strength and a deeply earthy bouquet.

She grinds a portion, fills and caps the inner chamber, and carefully pours in the proper amount of ice cold spring water. She lights the stove, adjusts the flame and sits the pot on the heat to work its magic.

She takes her place at the table and waits. In some ways, this is the best part of these visits: the lovely anticipation. The delicious knowledge of company coming, of considering pleasant topics of conversation, of waiting to hear the laughter and see the smile of her very welcome guest. And all the while the cheery rattling gurgle of coffee being brewed, filling the air with that wonderful aroma.

A blessed moment.

As the minutes sweep by she thinks of her husband Mike, who passed on a decade ago, taken too young from stress and bad genetics. Only fifty six when he

died. She thinks he would have liked her young guest, that they would have gotten along famously. Mike had been such a curious man, and such a lover of conversation. He could talk about far way lands and times for hours and hours.

And her guest could tell such stories!

The second hand finishes its sweep and the noon hour arrives.

With it comes her guest, fading into reality from nothingness. It takes less than three seconds, to go from an empty chair to her friend and coffee date Eric.

Eric is a young man, and handsome. He is about twenty, with large dark eyes and short blonde hair. He is tall and thin, but muscular. His face is somewhat delicate, but not feminine. His smile is lovely.

He wears a strange outfit. It looks something like a jumpsuit uniform, though the material is like nothing she has ever seen.

He is from, he says, a little over a million years in her future.

He is, he says, the last man on earth.

And he is here to save the human race.

"Good afternoon!" she says, as she always says.

2.

The first time Eric visited, it scared Mary Ellen half to death. She turned around and was faced with a strange young man in her kitchen.

She'd actually yelled. The poor boy was more frightened than her after that. It was a testament to his charm and persuasiveness that, in less than ten minutes, she'd been so relieved and calmed that she could do her duty as a host with an invited guest and offer him coffee.

Eric took to her brew like an addict born. He praised it. Such things were only myths and legends where he came from, she learned.

That first day was so surreal, and -- even now -- she was amused at how quickly she had accepted his story. Perhaps it was simple loneliness that caused her to be so accepting, but she was of the mind that it didn't matter.

As the last man on Earth, the last human being, Eric too lived a life of loneliness. He had only the massive and indescribably powerful computer network for conversation. It was this computer that cracked the

secret of time travel, and was -- even now -- running the vast simulations that would pinpoint the exact moment in the past where intervention would save the species. Save them from the catastrophe known as 'The Big Crash'

"It's somewhere close to the here and now," he assured her, enjoying his third cup. "We've established that. That's why I never leave your house. Until we know the exact moment, and what exactly to do, there's no point in me endangering the mission and perhaps mucking up the timeline further." He helped himself to a warm-up. "That and your wonderful company and excellent coffee, of course," he assured her with a grin.

So they talked, became friends. He told her stories of the far future and she told him stories of the near past. But mostly they talked about themselves. She spoke of her daughter's workaholic ways. How she was married to her job and the idea of grandchildren seemed less likely every day. She shared with him the bittersweet memories of her husband. He opened up about what it felt like to be engineered for a purpose, and how he'd never understood loneliness until he met her.

Secretly, Mary Ellen dreaded the day when the computer finished its work and Eric's goal was in reach. If he managed to alter the past and re-arrange the future, if he was given an entire society to interact with, why would he waste his time with her?

But she pushed such thoughts aside. She had never been a person to allow the end of a thing to spoil her enjoyment of it while it was happening. That, she knew, was a recipe for misery.

So, like a good cup of fine coffee, she savored it while she could, sip by delicious sip.

3.

As soon as he doesn't respond to her greeting, Mary Ellen knows that something is wrong. Something horrible.

A glance at his eyes seals the deal. He looks despondent. He has been weeping. She goes immediately into damage control mode.

"My dear, what on Earth is wrong?"

He stares at her for a moment, tears threatening. Finally he speaks, his voice wavering.

"It's over," he says. The words have a funereal sound. "It's all over."

For a moment her heart goes cold, and she thinks he means their visits. But that's obviously not it, since here he is. A deeper concern strikes her.

"The computer?"

He nods, controlling himself with visible effort. "It finished the simulation this morning. There's nothing we can do. Nothing I can do."

"I don't understand," she says, mainly to keep him talking. She pours him a cup and adds his usual two lumps of sugar and dash of half-and-half.

"Neither do I, really," he admits. "The nature of time is still a mystery. But the computer is certain. There is no specific change that will alter my present in any way. The human species is dead, and will remain so." His voice comes close to breaking. "The Big Crash cannot be undone."

"Oh, my dear," she says, compassion flooding her. "How awful."

He takes a single sip of coffee, almost from habit. "The work of a lifetime. Made pointless in an instant."

"Not pointless," Mary Ellen says. "You had to try."

"Try and fail," he mutters. "What am I supposed to do now?" He stares at her with pleading eyes. "Why should I even bother any more?"

Mary Ellen realizes something, with the sudden flash that accompanied all her true insights: despite the eons between her and this young man he was exactly that, a young man. Why, he could be a grandson to her! What did technology or knowledge matter when faced with troubles that only experience

could guide you through?

Half a million years of forward time meant less than forty three years of moment-by-moment experience. Despite his loneliness and drive, despite his vast intelligence and the information at his command, he had never experienced loss. He'd never felt it. He didn't know how to live through the pain.

Well, she did. She'd lost her parents and her only sister. She'd lost her husband. She'd lost friends and neighbors over the years. She wasn't used to it, of course -- you never became used to it. But she knew how to deal with it. How to keep on while the heart was hurting. How to let it ache without breaking.

And she could help him. She could help her friend.

"Eric, my dear," she begins, quietly. "You simply cannot let this haunt you."

He looks at her sharply. His expression wonders if she has gone mad.

"It will get you nowhere," she continues, pressing on. Her voice is steady and firm. "It will only lead to misery."

He is too taken aback for words at first. After a moment of struggle, he finds them. "Haunt me? Do you understand what I'm talking about? The last chance for the human race is gone. I have failed. Our species is extinct and shall remain extinct."

She nods. "Oh, I understand perfectly. I simply see no reason for you to beat yourself up over that fact. Nature is nature. What cannot be undone is done. Common sense." She smiles at him, a wise but cheerful smile.

His mouth is hanging open. He stutters, trying to argue.

Mary Ellen pushes ahead, unwilling to lose her momentum, her higher ground as she sees it.

"Everything dies, my dear. Everything. That's a fact of life and -- as you yourself and your wonderful computer have proven -- it cannot be changed."

Disbelief edges toward actual anger in his eyes. "A tragedy of this nature cannot be simply accepted as if..."

She cuts him off, knowing it's bad manners, knowing it may well increase his anger. She has to finish. "The only tragedy in death is if the life before the end was wasted. Was the human race cut short in its prime? Was the time it spend marveling at the world and the universe in vain?"

Eric is stunned to silence. He slumps back in the chair.

"A million years from now you told me. A million years." She sips her coffee. "Seems like a nice long

run."

"My purpose," he says, weakly.

She sniffs. "Your purpose is something only you can decide. It cannot be dictated or engineered into you." She sits her cup down, leans forward, and makes her final point.

"So. Will you waste your own life, wallowing in self pity and depression? You have so many years ahead of you. Will you cry them away? *That* would be a tragedy."

Eric closes his eyes, defeated. He sighs. Then he disappears, with a quiet sound and no fanfare. Without a farewell.

"Oh dear," Mary Ellen says. She didn't want that to happen. She decides not to worry on it. Her advice was solid, she should take it herself.

With nothing else to do, she clears the table and waits for tomorrow.

4.

The next day dawns the same as any other, and Mary Ellen treats it as such. There is a bit of nervousness, an anxiety, as she goes through the routine of

preparing coffee and setting the table, but she shoves such feelings deep into the back of her mind, remembering her own words from the day before. What is done is done.

The coffee is brewing, the kitchen filling with that blessed aroma, when Eric appears, right on time.

He smiles at her, not exactly cheerful, but without the heartbreak.

"Good afternoon, dear!" she says, as she always says.

His smile widens. He looks a little sheepish. "I thought about what you said," he tells her.

She nods, busy pouring. He thanks her and takes a long drink, as deep as the heat will allow. He makes a quiet sound of pleasure.

"You're right," he admits.

There will be no I-told-you-so. Mary Ellen simply smiles happily and nods again.

"And I made a decision," he continues, after another drink that nearly empties his cup. "A rather drastic one, in fact. I decided..."

He is interrupted by a sudden flash and a flat crack. Mary Ellen jumps a little, but manages to keep from spilling her coffee on the white linen.

On the table between them, two slim cases have appeared. Eric deftly unlocks and opens one. He spins it around to show her.

She goes wide eyed. Even to her amateur eye it's quite obviously a fortune in perfectly shaped gold bars.

"You've mentioned a spare room," he says, actually blushing. "Could you use a somewhat chatty tenant and some extra cash?"

There is nothing to say. She laughs, overjoyed. She holds out her hand and he grips it. They smile foolishly at each other.

A weight has lifted from her heart, a deep and abiding loneliness. And something else, something only now dawning in her mind: the idea of this handsome young man and her workaholic daughter, meeting. Eric could be so charming, so persuasive. Perhaps the dream of grandchildren was not so far fetched any longer?

She would see.

He is pondering too. An even deeper loneliness has left him, and something exciting has taken its place. No longer is he tied to a mandated course of action. No longer is fate a certainty to him. That's a terrifying prospect in many ways. But in others.....it speaks of nothing but adventure. Of hope.

One bright spark of civilization, of warmth and friendship is better than nothing in the face of eternal blackness. This he has decided. It will be a mere moment, an infinitesimal point in a cold eternity.

But could he really claim it is pointless? That it does not matter?

He smiles and straightens up. Mary Ellen is cheered to see it. She breathes a sigh of relief and goes for the pot again.

"Another cup, dear?"

The coffee smells so wonderful. He pushes his cup and saucer forward.

"Oh, yes. Please."

She pours. He thanks her. And in this simple ritual they refute nihilism. They refuse despair. He adds cream and blackness is lightened. Sugar melts in the heat and banishes bitterness.

He lifts the cup with calm hands and sips, tasting a model of the closed loop that was human history: finite, best enjoyed while fresh, and eventually finished.

It is *delicious*.

## **The Paper Man Escapes The Great Broken Heart**

*(For Duane Pesice, fellow treasure seeker.)*

The guy who sold it to me, in a low rent downtown charm shop, said the paper man had actually belonged to none-other-than Frank Zappa for several months in the early 90's. I'm pretty good at smelling a lie, even an exaggeration, and it was obvious the salesman believed what he was saying. That doesn't make it truth of course, but it's a better indicator than none.

"Why so cheap then?" I asked, properly suspicious. Zappa is a god these days. Anything with his name on it is gold.

"Well," the salesman said with a grin. "I'll show you." He grabbed a box from a shelf in his storeroom and brought it over. He dropped it at my feet. He gestured for me to open it.

The paper man was packed carefully inside, in about two dozen pieces.

"Ah. Damaged goods," I said.

The salesman held up a finger. "Not necessarily," he corrected me. He reached into the box and extracted a piece of the paper man, holding it out for study. It was the top half of the head.

"Look how clean the cuts are, how straight and smooth." The salesman was good. His pitch barely felt like a pitch, smoother than the cuts he called attention to. "More than one appraiser has conjectured that the disassembly was done on purpose."

I took the half a head and studied it. It wasn't ordinary papier mache, as I'd first thought. Instead, it looked like sheet after sheet of notebook paper, carefully fused and shaped. The eyes were two brilliant rhinestones, that caught the low light of the shop and flashed. I brought it closer. Were those the faint remnants of words scrawled and spiraling across the surface?

The salesman sighed. "And that's the problem, of course. Not knowing what the proper condition should be. Is it ruined as it is? Or is it ruined if you laboriously put it back together?"

I nodded, understanding. I kept studying the marks.

"Has anyone bothered to ask?"

The salesman looked a little affronted. "With *that*

kind of price difference? Of course we did." He sighed. "No good. Zappa ain't answering questions. He ain't the ghost type."

The faint black marks were words, I decided.

"I'll take it," I said.

Roderick Brown, my office door says, plain as day. Rock N' Roll Detective. The letters are a little tattered, being the cheap dollar store kind. I keep saying I'll re-do them and they keep peeling.

The door doesn't really lock, you just have to twist the handle a certain way, so I didn't have much trouble even with the burden of the box. I plopped it down on my desk, took a seat, and rummaged for a drink.

One shot in a giant bottle, almost comical. I thought about my bank balance as I knocked the remains back and grimaced despite the smoothness of the whiskey. The paper man cost me a hundred bucks, price difference or no, assembly required or not. A simple thaumaturgic charm could prove its ownership by Zappa, and that was more than enough to make it hot.

Zappa *was* a god these days, almost literally, his creative spirit having charged bits of the world with

wild magicks. Hell, chasing down such bits was the whole bread and butter for a rock n' roll detective, even the fancy sorts who called themselves 'popular energy procurement agents.'

The collectibles industry wasn't the only business changed by the return of the para-real. Oh, far from it.

Zappa was up there with Bogart and John Bonham, Elvis and Billie Holliday. On the surface this relic probably didn't pack as much juice as, say, the skeleton of Jimmy Cagney those Arabs stole and used to take over Iran. But I'm not that ambitious now am I? I had little direct use for thaumaturgy, just a talent for finding the relics. I traded my finds for a simpler magic, the kind that came in thick green stacks.

And I had a feeling that this paper man was quite a bit more potent than anyone so far suspected.

My office was small, just enough room for my desk and a file cabinet that I never used, and a few souvenirs of my glory days in the back. I had a secretary once, but I got tired of her sitting at my desk and she got tired of not being paid. It was a mutual split.

The size of my office makes it easy to light, and brightly. I had loads of lumens in here. Relic evaluation takes a lot of light, being all about the small details. The power difference between an unmarked Jimi Hendrix guitar pick and one he has

lightly scratched the word SHIT into while waiting for a sound check is vast. His initials would be even more powerful, of course, since popular thaumaturgy is all about the personal.

I laid out each piece of the paper man on my desk, and began studying them. All together at first, making guesses about the whole.

The paperman would have stood about three and a half feet tall, I estimated. His body would be slightly caricatured, with a partly hunched back and an oversized head. The hands were slightly oversized too, and far more detailed than the rest of the body. They boasted individual fingers with carefully molded joints, seeming almost articulate.

If my guess was right, though, the whole wouldn't matter much. Each piece would be a substantial relic, and worth a fortune.

The notebook paper was my first clue. Those writing-like marks were my second. It was a gamble, but if my suspicions paid off it would mean that this was one of the most powerful relics ever unearthed.

I chose a segment of the head to test, the chunk with the vague indication of a mouth. Properly symbolic, I figured. When it comes to the para-real, symbolism isn't just an intellectual game. It matters.

I was careful. I used a scalpel and tweezers. Under a magnifying glass, and the good bright light of my

office, I was vindicated. They *were* words, on thousands of layers of (yes) notebook paper, crisscrossing each other, melding into and out of each other in the structure of the paper body.

I found four consecutive. Should be sufficient to further test my theory.

I fired up the intranet, logging on and locating a Zappa shrine and searching the lyrics pages for a match with my four words. Using my out-of-date but still slugging along thaumaturgic material bus, I sacrificed the paper fleck with those same words in fire, and set the shrine's database to verifying the handwriting. This cost me a twenty dollar donation (also burn transferred through the TMB) and ruined my plan to re-up on the whiskey later.

The first search returned in seconds. They were indeed Zappa lyrics, from an obscure side of one of his later albums. I read them in their entirety, imagining them trailing into the meld of the paper man.

The verification would take longer, having to channel through the parareal and converse with spirits and the like. Some were talky, some taciturn. Both slowed the process down. You took it as a zen thing.

As I waited, I browsed the shrine, more tasteful and better designed than most of the Popular celeb-sites. I re-aquainted myself with exactly why Zappa was such a fount of power despite never attaining the

level of mass popularity of an Elvis or a Bogie or a Wacko Jacko.

The simplest and largest of the thaumaturgic levels was The Popular, the vast energy created by mass recognition and adoration. The holidays, times of mass celebrity celebrations, were times of miracles and wonders. Even intense dislike could power the field, there were hatefests too. All that mattered was that a hell of a lot of people felt it together.

Deeper and more difficult to master was the level of The Creative, artists whose work held aspects of para-reality itself, that asked impossible questions and told unlikely stories.

Zappa was on this level, though he never knew it in life. So were a few rare others: Syd Barrett, Donovan, The Beatles in their later phases. Hendrix was The Great Guitarist not only for his obvious skill, but for the way his work approached the mystical.

Some were actually dangerous. The Residents had been outlawed years before, and had all disappeared from this mortal plane. Or else were well hidden. Hard to say, since they'd been anonymous from the beginning.

And the exile of Maynard to an orbital habitat after most of California fell into the sea was still controversial.

Elvis and Bogie and Cagney were *magic*, sure. But

Zappa and his kind were *magicians*. They created their relics with deeper intent, and what they left behind was more powerful than the shadow of mass attention the Popular relics could release; could be used more personally and directly.

It was musicians who most embodied that level, and rock musicians in particular. That's why I was a rock n' roll detective rather than a more general relic chaser, the aforementioned PEPA's or the paparazzi. I've found that, in life and work, specialization helps.

Still killing time, I read up on some of the well known Zappa relics. The painting in a London museum that prophesized every day at noon and midnight, speaking riddles only understandable after the fact. The jacket in Chicago that healed the sick and cured the tone deaf. The signed copy of Joe's Garage that issued ghost voices from the day and year of it's recording, haunting snippets of conversation from across the gap of years, from the famous and the unknown.

Interesting stuff, sure, and most of it fairly removed from Zappa himself. Even the jacket was known to have belonged, not to Zappa, but an unknown fan. Zappa had found it and worn it a while because of a sudden chill, then lost it himself.

If I had what I thought...

The verification came through, announcing itself with a tinny midi rendition of *Trouble Every Day*. I knew I'd

struck gold when it was prefaced by a quick spiel from the Shrine itself, pointing out that the proper place for Zappa relics was the church that praised his name and studied his patterns every day. Those who grooved in his holy name.

Yeah, right. They'd want to pay chickenfeed. Hell, they got their twenty bucks. I knew real users who would pay out of the *vein* for such a find. For a *piece* of such a find.

The handwriting belonged to Zappa. The paper man was almost certainly composed of his own notebook drafts of his lyrics.

Thousands and thousands of pages, perhaps his entire catalog.

In practical terms, I possessed one of the most magick-laden pieces of charm ever uncovered. A relic of incredible personalization and unheard-of intentional design.

It was worth a fortune. Worth enough to let me retire, find some pleasant island and enjoy the rest of my life.

I felt like celebrating, so I walked the three blocks to the liquor store and spent my last fifteen bucks on a bottle of Old Ruinmaker. I wouldn't be broke for long.

I called Diane from the store's pay phone. The one in my office only worked sporadically and developed odd connection problems thanks to the relics I kept there. I wasn't in the mood to talk to the lonely dead or bored succubi. It's a lot less interesting than it sounds, trust me.

"Hello," Diane said, her tone one of brooking no nonsense. Her usual tone.

"Get your suitcase packed and your bathing suit ready, baby," I told her, feeling warm and tingly even though I hadn't even broken into the Old Ruinmaker yet. "Daddy just hit the big time."

"What the hell are you talking about?" she asked. "Are you shit-faced again?" Diane knew me well. That she still put up with me despite that fact was her main virtue. That (and the fact that she was a pretty and well built lady) was why I loved her so much I'd never even tried to borrow money off of her.

"Not yet, " I told her cheerfully, then quickly explained before she could interrupt me again.

She was wary at first, but the excitement grew as she realized that I wasn't messing with her head or playing a drunken prank.

I told her to meet me at the airport in two days, fully packed and ready for a new life. She sounded more vibrant and cheerful than she had in years as we said

goodbye. She even told me she loved me.

It's odd how a brightened up future, the sudden opening of prospects, can make even an average day seem beautiful. It was gray out, and a little damp. Rain threatened and growled to the east. The city was its usual hazy, noisy self. But it might as well have been the prettiest day of the finest of spring-times, to judge by my mood.

I took my time walking back, enjoying the breeze and the rare but charming bursts of sunshine through clouds. I smiled and nodded at passers-by. Most just looked at me suspiciously, not trusting the rumpled suit or the dirty slouch hat or the three day growth of stubble. I didn't care much, my smile -- and the good wishes behind it -- were sincere enough.

And, wonder of wonders, some smiled back, waved, even spoke a hello or how-are-you? I figured those were folks with their own secret reasons for happiness and cheer; their own widened prospects and brightened futures. We passed as strangers with something in common, and that secret connection set us apart from the rest of the surly masses infesting the streets.

As I strolled, I started to whistle, interrupting myself to laugh when I realized it was Zappa's \_\_\_\_\_. I'm the weird type who, when confronted with good-fortune, tends to look back on the misfortune of the past. This

isn't, as some think, a morbid or depressive streak. In my opinion it's no different than comparing a really good shot of liquor to that nasty rot-gut you had the night before: just another way to savor quality and good fortune while you have it. If not for comparisons, does quality even exist?

I passed a sidewalk shaman, hawking roll-ups, and looked over his wares. He was a little Chinese fellow, between old and ancient, dressed in colorful rags that, to my practiced eye, looked like a put-on. He was no more impoverished than I was rich. He probably tripled my own annual income with his little unlicensed smoke stand.

"All tasty smoke," he enthused, waving a hand over his wares. "All potent magic toke, one hundred percent!"

I nodded. He wasn't lying. When you've been in this business as long as I have, you get a nose for such things. You can smell the truly charmed among the cons. This roll-up artist was the real deal.

He squinted, judging me. "You wise in many ways, friend," he told me, loosing the sing-song sales pitch, treated me as a fellow professional.

"What kinda high you looking for? I cut you good deal." His voice was low enough that I knew he was being earnest, not trying to engage the thrift and interest of possible customers passing by.

I pondered a moment, and decided to return his honesty with my own. My mood was too good for games.

"I want something that will bring back sad memories," I told him, choosing my words carefully, "to contrast with happy news."

He seemed impressed by such an esoteric yet direct challenge. He dismissed the stock on his stand with a different sort of gesture. "Nothing here for that," he admitted. He reached behind the stand, into his hidey-hole, and pulled out material. "This'll be custom job." He seemed quite excited by the idea. It struck me that it must be something of a bore, selling the same old thing to the same old people day after day. A practitioner of his talent must long for a challenge on occasion.

I was flattered that he let me watch him work. His base elements were some extra-dry turkish tobacco, a pinch of some really green looking cannabis, and tiny shreds from a dozen small pouches. Paper?

He saw my curious glance and grinned. "Autographs, mostly." This he whispered, with a wink. "Personal collection."

I laughed, and gave a little bow. He bowed back, twisted the careful mixture into a Zig-Zag paper, and handed it to me -- along with a pack of matches -- with a flourish.

That was when I remembered that I was flat broke. I was about to tell him this when he shook his head.

"On me. Can see it around you, glowing. No money, but good luck. Big change coming. You remember me when life better, hey?"

"A promise. And autographs, huh? Slick."

The old man beamed. "That was my obsession before the Change," he said quietly, all trace of the labored diction gone. "For sixty years I collected 'em, spent more money than I'd like to admit on 'em, too." He pondered a moment. "But doing what you love always pays you back." And just like that he slipped the mask back on and and went back to work.

"Not doing so bad for a simple peasant pushing a century," I agreed. I saluted him with the trim number he'd rolled and wandered on, leaving him to call out for paying customers in his salesman singsong.

I found myself a clean bench and settled down, considering sneaking a drink and deciding against it. Even more than the fear of copping a public intoxic charge, I was beginning to realize that what had been want and pleasure for most of my life was rapidly becoming need and addiction. Trouble every day isn't made better by booze every day, it's just piling bad on worse.

I popped the roll-up in my mouth, struck a match,

and took a long drag. The little Chinaman was an artist all right. The hodgepodge of tobacco, herb and shredded paper not only burned smoothly, it tasted pleasant. I held the toke in for several long seconds, finally letting it woosh out in a single bluish gust.

Potent indeed. Memory washed over me. Not a pleasant memory either, but in the light of the coming good fortune, and the warm glow of the shaman's smoke, I became philosophical over the twenty years gone day when I learned I'd never make it as a musician.

"Dude, don't take it so freakin' personal," Jimmy Caleb said in that snotty voice that made me want to break his jaw on the best of days. And this wasn't the best of days.

"Don't take it *personal*?" I repeated, voice quivering with anger and sarcasm. "You're kicking me out of my own goddamned band and you tell me not to..."

"All this emotion is really, like, *unproductive*, bro."

It took every bit of self control not to just pound the skinny son of a bitch. Aunt Agony was *my* freakin' band! Mine! I'd placed the ad, held try-outs, provided the damned equipment, scored us a rehearsal space, begged and did favors to insure gigs...hell, it was even my van we used to get back and forth!

And I was being *fired*? On the word of some tinpot

Cassandra?

I reminded myself that Jimmy had at least had the decency to tell me this to my face. That none of the other guys had even bothered to show up.

"Look, we have a chance, Rod," he said. I was surprised to hear a certain measure of sadness in his voice. "The label wants a demo, but they're firm. Their market-forecaster says you have to go. That we need another rythm guitarist if we're gonna make it."

I clamped down on a string of venom. Rythm guitarist. That brought it all back in spades. To start with, I'd been lead guitarist and vocalist. I'd let Jimmy talk me into the lead spot because he had a point when he told me that my vocals suffered when I tried to do both. I'd then let Carter, our bass player, weasel into the singer's spot because, dammit, I had to admit that dude had better pipes than me.

"And you're hung up on originals. Originals are over, bro. Fact. The big boys agree. Covers."

I had accepted all that. Even the repetitive nuisance of covering old, already power laden songs. Aunt Agony was important to me, so ego be damned. I did that, dropped into the background, gave up the creative urge, for the good of the band.

But this...this was beyond the background. This was 'Sayonara, sucker. thanks for the hard work. Don't let

the door hit you in the ass on the way out.'

"Maybe you could be our roadie or something," Jimmy suggested.

When the red receded, I managed two words:

"Get out." OK, it was more of a growl.

"Can we still use the van for the Tamberly Hall gig this weekend?"

"Get out!" I screamed, shoving him, then slamming the door so hard it almost bounced out of the frame.

The memory faded as quickly as it came, and I was surprised to find myself laughing. Sitting on the bench, laughing, holding the stub of the roll-up. Still giggling, I flicked it away. With it went the last of the bitterness I'd felt about that moment. Bitterness I'd held onto for too long.

I shook my head. With the insulation of time, and the knowledge that I'd soon be rich, I could finally admit the truth, the awful fact that had enraged me more than any insult: the 'tinpot cassandra' had been right.

Oh, I knew a few riffs, and had a fair voice, but I had already hit my peak. No matter how much I practiced, how hard I strove, I was not going to improve.

Even worse, I was far more interested in being 'in the band' than I was in making music. Girls and money and fame, rather than the act of creating art, were my real goals. If not, I'd have ditched them as soon as they refused to play originals.

I stood, stretched, feeling the strangest glow of relief. I silently thanked the streetcorner shaman, and his clever smoke.

I grabbed my bottle and continued up the street, whistling once again.

I returned to my office in a high old mood. I broke open the whiskey and helped myself to several celebratory shots.

I studied the pieces of the paper man on my desk. That's when the idea came to me. What if the whole was greater than the sum of its parts? That was generally the way magick worked, and the relics of magicians were no different.

While it would be smart profit-wise to sell the paper man piecemeal, what if, by keeping him unconstructed, I was missing out on some great secret or pronouncement he was designed to make?

I eyed the paper man with growing suspicions. A few more drinks only increased them. The smug, disassembled bastard was trying to keep something

from me.

I thought about it. Zappa himself must have created the paper man. Either by his own hand or under direct supervision. Nothing else made sense.

The why of it was almost rhetorical: Zappa, like most magicians before the parareal returned to vindicate them, was a little mad. Eccentric. Prone to do things he couldn't explain rationally. Not until after the fact, at least. Then a reason could be concocted.

That was reason enough for me.

I constructed the paper man and put a solid hurting on the bottle, still celebrating. Both tasks went smoothly, the paper man sticking together readily without glue or pin. It took me less than ten minutes to construct him, there at my desk.

Then I kicked back and admired him, dealing only with the bottle.

No great pronouncement. No wondrous secret. Just the odd form of the paper man, looking mostly as I thought it would look.

I was impressed at how well it hung together, and couldn't even see the seams. I was too drunk to care much. I'd just slice it back apart, I figured. If it gave

me trouble.

One last shot, an urge to rest my eyes, and I was asleep at my desk. I dreamed of a warm tropical place with two suns, and a wonderful music emanating from somewhere close by, and the music was excitement.

I woke up in pain. My head was throbbing, my neck aching and half numb. I was stiff, and my mouth was the texture of sandpaper in the sun.

It took me a few seconds, and more than a few involuntary groans, to get in a state to notice anything. It was dark, I hadn't turned the lights on before my nap. But I noticed quickly enough.

The paper man was gone.

The desk was empty, otherwise untouched. The paper man was just gone, as if he'd never existed.

I sat there frozen. Could someone have snuck in, stole him, while I was passed out? The room said no, seeming untouched by anything but my snores.

God, my mouth was dry. I was standing to find water when I heard the sound from the other end of my office.

I told you it was small. Nothing back there but the

tiny collection of relics I've held onto. Two very special guitars and some lesser things.

I heard the sound again. And I recognized it. Someone slipping on a strapped guitar and it settling into place.

I knew, suddenly, exactly what to do. I sat down and turned on the lights.

The paper man stood with the guitar hung low, those slightly oversize, articulate hands going where they were supposed to out of habit.

It had gone right to the guitars. No, real surprise there. Both of them were, as I said, special. One had belonged to Rory Gallagher, the other to Tommy Bolin. Both had been magicians, masters of their craft on the level of The Creative.

The instruments were both lovingly customized Stratocasters. Both were actually worth more as guitars than as relics. A shame really, and foolish, since they radiated power so strongly even a layman could feel it.

I refused to sell them as such, preferring to scrape for rent money and groceries rather than insult the magic by pretending it didn't exist. I may have been a prostitute in a sense, but nobody could call me a cheap whore. I'd kept both for years out of sentiment and respect.

No surprise the paper man went for Gallagher's axe, I realized. Rory had been one of Zappa's frequent colleagues, a favorite in fact. The paper man gazed at the instrument, one of those oversized hands stroking the sleek form lovingly.

When fingers touched strings it glowed a little.

I took a long drink of Old Ruinmaker, needing something. It numbed my dry tounge and turned my hangover into cheerful drunkenness.

The paper man looked directly at me, demanding my attention with those cheap rhinestone eyes. They didn't look so cheap anymore. They gleamed with more glory than any ruby. They looked magnified, expanded, becoming windows to that interior spiraling of lyrics that created the paper man. That spiral glowed with unbearable light.

It began to play. And as it played he showed me a story.

Senses failed. I heard and saw and felt the song. Blues chords rang from strings, intent mutating them the way good rock always did, and I began to understand.

Zappa appeared before me, obviously near the end of his mortal life. I watched him create the paper man from his collected notebooks, saw the care and ritual he put into it, felt the barely understood intent behind it.

Zappa fell, into a sickbed, a time of last words and goodbyes. Before him appeared the angel of death, which took form as a great splintered heart, the ultimate manifestation of sadness, cloaked in black and held up by shadows shaped into batwings.

It began to feast on the magician, this ultimate sadness, this goodbye to light and sound and creation and sensation. This Great Broken Heart that comes to us all in the end.

But the magician was ready.

Before the Broken Heart reached his soul, the image of the paperman replaced the withered flesh man in the bed, stealing the soul -- hiding it, protecting it -- right from the teeth of death.

The Great Broken Heart screamed in rage. But it was denied the magician's deepest secrets. It vented fury on the paper man, slicing it with claws and teeth, cutting it into pieces. But it was balked and knew it.

The story ended and my office returned. Tears ran down my face. I understood. I felt something close approaching shame at what I had almost done, what I had almost sold.

Once more the paper man stroked the guitar it cradled. It cocked its misshapen head at me. It wanted the instrument.

I nodded, mostly numb. Who was I to deny him, now that I understood?

It radiated satisfaction, and thanks. Onto the empty stand it dropped something, then turned and bowed to me. A gift, perhaps. Or a fee. A thank you.

Power crackled around the golem, the soul saver. It was getting ready to leave, I knew.

"Where are you going?" I asked, voice cracking with emotion, tongue still mostly numb.

It strummed a riff and I saw:

Other worlds, beyond time and space. Great throngs of alien audiences. Off and away, it told me, to do what I have always done. To create magic and lift spirits and bring joy. To become more than a magician. To become a god, benevolent and kind, who brought understanding and happiness rather than confusion and pain.

And with a last flourish of notes, and a blinding flash of power, it was gone.

*He ain't the ghost type*, I heard the salesman say in my ear, in my memory.

I laughed. That was truer than he knew. No ethereal drifting for Zappa, no half existence. No partly

glimpsed apparitions or doubts about his existence. He'd escaped the Great Broken Heart of death whole, fully physical, soul saved in a mottled vessel made of his own words and thought.

How had he known? The question returned as I stared at the empty place where the paper man had waved goodbye. At the shimmer of something that still hung in the air.

But I knew. And the truth was that he hadn't known, that he simply guessed, that he performed the magic and worked his miracle without any guarantee that it would work out in the end. Just as he'd made his music in life. Guided by instinct and secret voices from within.

Guessing, hoping, trusting in the magic even when it was hidden away. Confident that the creative would find a way.

So I finally laughed, despite the losses, despite the disappointment. I laughed, and shook my head, and found I couldn't begrudge him his escape, his triumph.

Still drunk, still shaking my head, I just went back to sleep.

And, I ask, what more could I have done?

I called Diane when I woke up to harsh sunlight,

feeling worse than ever. I risked the talkative dead and succubi confessions, and told her to forget about it. She was pretty pissed. She said something mean about not being able to tell when I was drunk any more. Then she apologized, and we tried to laugh it off. But it felt hollow.

After I hung up I sat and considered what I had: a hundred and thirty five bucks blown assways to the wind, a sometimes girlfriend who was pissed off for now, and half a bottle of Old Ruinmaker.

Thank god for small blessings, I thought as I reached for the whiskey.

And then it hit me, actually stopping the motion of the bottle to my mouth:

The gift. The paper man left a gift. Or a fee. It was mixed up in my head. Both, I thought.

I sat the bottle down and stood up. I walked over to the guitar's empty stand. There, cradled in the bottom prongs, was my gift. My fee for setting him free, helping him escape.

Fingers. Two fingers.

I picked them up and studied them. Ring finger and pinky, I noted. He had kept enough to form most chords, but it was still a substantial sacrifice.

A gift of great thanks, a fee of handsome sum.

I considered my life, closing my eyes and calling up an image of myself. Was the tone of my skin strangely pale, oddly paper like? Was the Great Broken Heart closer than I suspected, ready to end my adventure in a sudden squirming of loose ends? Of unfulfilled hopes and dreams?

I was no magician. The escape Zappa crafted was beyond me. My choice was to make my life something more while I had some left, or continue stumbling through a paper like existence, without even the depth of beautiful words spiraling through my clumsy form.

I thought of the money, of course, but it seemed to slide off my brain. I was thinking of the paper man's answer to my question. I was seeing the great expanse of time, and space as a distance more than I could imagine, and weirdly shaped peoples from the far away.

And I was wondering, probably the same as the paper man, if they all knew how to rock n' roll.

I called Diane again, and invited her on a different kind of travel, a different adventure. She told me she would believe me when she saw it.

I guessed I'd have to show her. When I hung up, I was

smiling, already thinking of how I could do it.

The fingers contained a grand charge of thaumaturgic power, imbued there by a great magician. I could use it, drop by drop, and with it change my whole world.

I'd have to find the paper man of course, then travel for two to whatever piece of the universe he'd hied off to, past the great heart-break and in search of new audiences on bizarre new worlds.

I hoped Diane packed thoroughly.

We would seek out the paper man and see him rock, join the great grooving throngs of alien civilizations and audiences of pure mind, pure energy.

And I'd then offer my services. I was no musician. I was no magician. But that didn't mean I was worthless, that I had *nothing* to offer.

Rock star, magician, ascending god, it really didn't matter.

They *all* needed roadies.

# The Woman Who Hitch-Hiked With Cats

## **1. Leavingsong**

*Rides happen.*

She didn't know where she was going or what she was looking for, and was only certain of that basic fact of forward motion. That, for the moment, seemed good enough.

She was a thin, slight woman with terrified eyes, and she looked so out of place walking down the side of the road with her thumb out that most drivers avoided her unconsciously. Her dark hair was drawn up in a tight bun, and she wore a knit cap. She was swaddled in an oversize Army jacket in faded camo and baggy jeans over three pairs of sweat pants. She wore two pairs of socks beneath hiking boots that

remained a full size too large, so she had stuffed them carefully with newspaper. Her sex and size were therefore disguised with this armor from the Salvation Army. In her right front pocket rode her only weapon, a six inch folding case knife that she had stolen from the place she once called home and a man that she had once loved and called her husband.

Almost twenty hours since her last ride, and a solid thirty miles farther west, a car finally responded to the signaling thumb and pulled over. It was an old car, a boat, and the big block engine that powered it pulsed reassuringly as it puffed thick white clouds of carbon monoxide from the tailpipe.

As she moved toward it, the fear rose up. Fear of rapists and crazy men. Fear of the compromised position that riding in the passenger seat across from a stranger placed her in. But the tingling pain of frozen hands and face fought with the fear and beat it into submission. She put her hand in her pocket, squeezed the knife for reassurance, opened the door and sat down.

Involuntarily, she sighed as the warm air closed around her. The heater was on high and the car smelled pleasantly of pine with a vague hint of upholstery shampoo. She turned and faced her benefactor, trying to keep the wariness from her eyes and failing.

The older woman smiled, nodded, and got them back

onto the road. A few moments of silence passed, then:

"What's your name, my dear?"

"Faith." she lied.

The older woman raised an eyebrow and smiled again. "Well," she said "that's not an important truth."

The woman who was not named Faith swallowed past a dry throat. But that smile was genuine enough, and both the eyes and tone were kind. And, more importantly, she was warm for the moment and moving at a fast clip towards her unknown goal.

"Where are you headed?" was the next question, as if that last thought had been spoken aloud.

"West." Faith replied, truthfully enough. "Just west."

The driver accepted this as if it made perfect sense, as if she picked up strangers wandering towards general compass points every day.

"I can't take you far." the driver told her. "But every mile helps, does it not?"

Faith nodded. Suddenly she felt the urge to explain herself, to tell this stranger everything. Why she was running, who she was running from, the cloudy mystery of where she was going.

The driver laughed. "No need, my dear. That is another unimportant truth. At least for the moment. What is important is that you understand the why of things. Why you are leaving. Do you understand that, at least?"

Faith paused. Then nodded. She did.

The driver nodded back, amiably enough. "Perhaps a man beat you. Perhaps he did other horrible things. Perhaps that was not even the worst of it. Perhaps the worst of it was those long stretches where he did nothing. Those long stretches of peace that turned to dread and..."

Faith stared at the driver, her eyes threatening tears. A bizarre sensation swept through her, a feeling of vibration. The world outside the car, moving past them, seemed to haze over and cloud. The vibration reached into her body and set up a sympathetic trembling.

"I apologize." the driver said, quietly. "I overstepped my bounds."

The sensation was subsiding, but Faith remained uneasy. "I feel..."

"You feel the leaving song, my dear. More accurately, you sing the leaving song. You are not running from something, child. You are not leaving anyone. You are running from everything, and leaving everything."

Faith stared. Crazy, she thought. Just a crazy old lady.

"But...enough." the crazy stranger said. "Ten miles ahead is a restaurant that serves a fine soup and delicious sandwiches. You are hungry, aren't you?"

Faith's stomach growled in agreement.

The driver chuckled. "Until then, enjoy the warmth. There will be other rides, but you must remain wary, child. Promise me."

Unsure of what else to do, and seeing no harm in it, Faith did so.

The driver seemed satisfied. Guiding the car expertly with one hand, she reached into a compartment between them and brought out a bill. She reached it to Faith, without making eye contact. "Please take it." she said. "You will need it."

Faith began to demur, when the driver turned her gaze back. There was something in those eyes. Something that caused the vibration to return. Something that made refusal impossible. She took the bill, with a hand that surprised her by remaining steady.

A few minutes later they arrived at a lonely wooden building by the side of the road. Lights blazed out into dusk from two windows and the smell of soup hung thick in the air.

As Faith left the car the driver spoke a final time.

"When you began to hear the song, child - was it in a dream?"

Faith hesitated. Then nodded.

"And what was the dream about?"

Faith sighed, feeling silly but compelled nonetheless. "I dreamt of my father's gun." she said.

"A good portent indeed." Those eyes flashed, and she sounded amused. "Make me a final promise, please.

Faith touched the money now curled around the knife in her pocket. What harm could there be?

"Listen for the cat." the driver told her. "He's looking for you, and he's a wily creature, but synchronicity is far from certain. Promise."

Faith did so, trying rather weakly to convince herself that this was simply a harmless madwoman asking for meaningless promises. But those eyes wouldn't let her, nor would that vibrating sensation that had now sank deep into her, barely discernible but defiantly there.

Before she closed the door, Faith asked a question of her own.

"What's your name?"

The older woman cocked her head. She gazed at Faith for a long moment.

"My friends call me Char." she said, simply. "And I must go. I have appointments to keep."

Faith thanked her and let the heavy door swing shut. The big car rumbled from the gravel parking lot and roared away down the road. East, back the way they came.

Faith pulled the bill from her pocket and started. It claimed to be a 40 dollar bill, and boasted a portrait of a strange man with blank eyes and a disturbing smile. In all other respects, however, it appeared real.

Just a crazy old lady after all.

But, having no other options - and less than two dollars in change - she entered the warm restaurant and ordered the soup of the day and a roast beef sandwich. To avoid a possible bad scene, she offered to pay in advance with the strange bill. It was accepted by the bored looking cashier without a blink and she was given thirty-four dollars in change in equally odd smaller bills.

She was too tired and hungry to worry for the moment. She sat down and ate, and enjoyed the

warm atmosphere of the otherwise empty restaurant.

The soup and sandwich were as delicious as promised.

## **2. Cat Trap**

*Fatigue insists.*

She slept that night in a drainage ditch a mile or so up the road from the restaurant, belly full and with a pocket of strange currency. She had in mind breakfast the next morning before resuming her westward trek.

She found a worn and suspiciously dirty wool blanket in the trash outside the restaurant. An odd and lucky coincidence to be sure, but it had been an odd and lucky day.

The mile she walked did her in. She wrapped herself in the blanket, snuggled up under a rough overhang, and tried to relax.

She was exhausted, but her mind was keyed up and seemed to cycle over the strange happenings of the day. One part of her wanted to drift into the past and re-examine old horrors, the way a tongue wants to probe the grisly edges of a shattered back tooth. With an act of will, she refused to let that happen.

Instead, she dug into her pocket and removed the knife. With it came one of the strange bills. In the bright moonlight, she examined it.

At least it was a normal denomination - a five. But the similarity ended with the number. Rather than a smug and classic presidential portrait, there was a stylized dog. Quite a handsome one, in a pose of intent watchfulness. She smiled at it, because it appeared to be a mutt. She recognized the sleek head of a Doberman and the muscular chest and shoulders of a Rottweiler. Something about the haunches spoke of the grace of greyhounds, and the tail was a docked stub pointing in the unmistakable attentiveness of a spaniel.

She yawned and the bill grew indistinct before her eyes. She replaced it. Then she snapped open the knife and held it carefully, pointing away from her body.

So armed, exhausted, and in the silent light of the creeping moon, she slept.

In the dream she was being swallowed by the past, and it was a painful process.

She was bound again to the bed and she could tell by the raucous voices in the living room that this was a night her husband had decided to share with his friends. The fear and hate and disgust welled up and threatened to overwhelm her.

The suddenly she was a child again, opening the closet door. There, where it had always hung, was her father's gun. The big gleaming cannon in the worn leather holster. She had only seen him use the gun once, when three raving drunks broke their door down. Her father had stood placidly in the center of the room until they smashed the door from its hinges and staggered in. Then he carefully and quickly shot them down. She remembered them falling like pins in a trick shot, how sudden and effective it was. They died with laughter on their tongues.

"It's all right now, sweetheart." he had told her then. "There are bad men in the world, but daddy will protect you from them." Then he'd put on his hat and coat and took the bodies away.

She had believed that promise, in the way only small children can believe. She believed it so well that when she was feeling scared or nervous for some reason all it took was a glance at the gun in the closet to calm her.

She must never touch it.

But it came to her that she was not a child anymore, and that her father had been dead for ten years, and that she was bound and roped and raped just a blink away, and..

...and this wasn't her father's gun after all. It looked different now. Similar, but smaller. Meaner looking.

My gun, she realized.

She took it, unsurprised by the way it fit her hand, and stepped back across the blink. She walked quickly past her own bound and degraded form to the door. She kicked it open in a fluid motion and - aiming by instinct and rage - shot the four men she found there. She saved her husband for last, and smiled at him.

They fell like trick pins. She let out a howling laugh that...

...seemed to follow her up from sleep and meld into a yowl of pain.

Reality startled her and she reacted, stabbing out with the knife. Her jabs failed to wound the dark and empty air.

She looked at the knife in her hand. Stupid, she told herself. One night you're going to stab yourself in the leg.

The yowl came again, and froze her. Not a part of the dream then. It came again and she shivered. It was unmistakable; an animal in pain and distress. A few moments of that pitiful sound was enough to vanquish fear of the dark and the warm inertia of her bundled self. She got up and moved as quietly as possible towards the noise.

She found the source a few minutes later, thirty or so yards away from the ditch. There stood a solitary post that bristled angrily with strands of rusting barbed wire, just where the thin shrubbery along the roadside gave way to a flat expanse of field.

Tangled miserably in the strands was a large, grey, strikingly ugly cat. When it saw her it broke from the song of misery, as if being caught in such a way was mostly a matter of embarrassment. Both legs were caught, in a way that had them snagged and re-snagged by several strands of the wire.

Two liquid green eyes stared at her. Wasn't me yelling lady, they seemed to say. Must have been some other cat.

A fierce knowledge glittered in those eyes. Knowledge of what she did not know, but the fact of its presence was certain.

She sighed, knowing what she had to do. The cat let her approach amiably enough, but that peace was quickly shattered.

It was a horrible few minutes, that seemed to last weeks. She had no recourse but to slice cat flesh from wire, and the cat had no recourse but to fight the crazy bitch attempting to free him. Three minutes, perhaps; a whirlwind of blood and mutual pain and mutual screaming. For every barb she freed it seemed the cat's thrashing sank another deeper, and it retaliated fiercely with claws and - once, very

memorably - teeth that somehow managed to pierce all four layers of pants and take a sizable chunk out of her left buttock.

Then, suddenly, the cat was free and bounding away, and her knife broke as she slipped and drove it against the post.

She stared at the broken blade, furious. "You stupid goddamn animal!" she screamed. She grabbed a stick and chased the offending beast, taking huge clumsy swings that the cat dodged easily. A few swings were all she could manage, and exhaustion left her out of breath, panting on her knees.

The cat was gone.

She laughed then, at the insanity of the world and herself. About scars earned for good intentions. How a little cat in a huge field could find such danger. How the simple decision to walk away could make the world so weird.

She laughed until it turned to sobbing, then sobbed until she felt better.

When she made her way back to her bed, she was unsurprised to find the cat there. He was placidly cleaning his wounds. He looked up at her. Some temper you got there lady. What took you so long getting back?

"Ok." she told it. "Fine. At least you'll be a heat

source. Goddamn animal."

But she was pleased, deep down. The road was a lonely place, and silent companionship beat out no companionship. Her bed heated up quicker with two, and the cat's rumbling purr against her chest was an oddly comforting sensation.

The broken knife vexed her still. It had been her only weapon. Now she was reduced to hands and feet and teeth. An image of the gun from her dreams came to her, and she thought an idle thought:

Tomorrow I'll look for my gun.

It calmed her. She slept like a rock, and the dreams that tried to come were chased away by a pair of green eyes that glittered knowingly in the dark.

### **3. Bonegift**

*Structure lingers.*

Two days later found her walking, still looking, with more than a few changes made.

The most obvious concerned her clothes. As she headed west it seemed the days became hotter. The terrain she moved across became more arid and desolate, if no less beautiful. Field and forest gave

way to long stretches of dry prairie grass and the first hints of cacti. She took to stripping down in the morning, bundling the jeans and excess sweat pants in the jacket, rolling that into a tight wad she could strap to her backpack. She kept the knit cap, as protection from the direct sun that grew intense as the day wore on. It also served to keep the sweat from her eyes. After the sun set and dark began to rise, she'd slowly re-acquire the clothes. The nights were still cold, and she was still grateful for every layer when she finally lay down to sleep.

The cat paced her as she traveled, keeping a solid hundred yards in front of her. His wounds healed with impossible speed, almost invisible by the second day, though a slight limp remained and always would. He rarely made use of the road, preferring the more challenging trail of the ditches and culverts. The plentiful wildlife also distracted him, and - both days so far - he had presented her with kills. Rabbits, prairie dogs, an unknown little beast that looked like a gopher. He'd drop them at her feet and dash back to his pacing lead, as if he were the navigator on this journey he'd joined.

She was grateful. There were no towns in sight and she'd seen only two cars since her dreamlike ride with Char. Neither of them had stopped, though the rust eaten and filthy Cadillac had slowed, creeping past her as the thin and hungry occupants stared out with less than friendly eyes. The cat had hissed viciously and fluffed into an image of malice. Whoever had been driving took that for what it was

worth and moved along.

The two days of mostly silent walking honed her ritual. When night fell, she'd make camp. She looked for particularly clear and dry ditches for this, reluctantly moving onto the prairie farther from the road when her choice spots were damp or overgrown. She'd build a fire and clean whatever prey the cat had brought her, complaining to him all the while about her broken knife. She'd spit cook it and - while she waited - would try to set her thoughts in order. The cat would sit in the draft of the roasting meat and knead the dry ground with his paws, growling low in his throat in anticipation. Her stomach generally echoed him. This would be the background music of her jumbled contemplations.

While she had clear and detailed memories of her childhood and the early years of her marriage, there appeared something like a wall the closer to the present she attempted to remember. The days - weeks? months? - before setting off on her trek were the haziest and least clear. What had set her on the road? She knew that it was something that frightened her, something that had forever altered her life, yet the specifics of the event remained mired in haze.

The meat always interrupted. She'd learned to tell the moment it was done by the sound of the sizzle and the clarity of the juices dripping into the fire. She and the cat would eat in silence. She supplemented the meat with the hoarded trail mix and dried fruit

from her pack.

After that, the cat would excuse himself for his late night business and she would give in to the sleepiness that a full stomach instilled in her. She'd bank the fire as best she could and lie back, staring at the stars or the clouds as the case might be. She was averaging 20 miles a day, so sleep found her quickly those two nights, and the cat never stayed gone for long. With him next to her, the dreams seemed afraid to bother her.

On the morning of the third day of travelling with the cat, she found her gun.

The sun was about halfway to noon, and the road was beginning to shimmer with heat when a gleam off to her right caught her eye. She slowed, staring. It bloomed again - about a half mile off the road, she estimated.

She considered a moment. There was no sign of a car in either direction, and she wasn't expecting one soon. She needed to explore the area a bit anyway, since her canteen was near empty and she couldn't be certain of finding water after dark.

But two things made up her mind for her.

The first was the return of that bone deep vibration, the feeling Char had called the Leaving Song. It had faded in the days after that ride, but was back with a vengeance, buzzing through her like a fever.

And the second was the fact that the cat sprinted towards the gleam like a creature possessed.

She sighed, shouldered the weight of her pack into a comfortable position, and set off after him.

The ground away from the road was hard packed but far from barren. In addition to the scrub bushes and prairie grass, there was an assortment of cacti and all manner of insect life.

Ten minutes of walking brought her within discernable sight of her goal. She actually smiled at it when she figured out what it was.

The ancient camper topped pickup truck had seen better days. Where wheels had once lifted it proudly from the ground, only concrete blocks stood now. She slowed her pace and took in details.

It was a Chevy, a 50's model some voice inside told her. The round, almost sensual angles of the hood were a dead giveaway. Rust spread across the metal in a slow, inexorable tide. Rust had washed from the body through uncounted rainy seasons, digging deep red rivulet canyons in a spiderweb pattern around the truck.

The cat sat staring at the driver side door. It glanced at her, gave a rumbly meow, and returned its gaze to the window.

Faith sauntered up to it, annoyed by the odd behavior.

"You probably think it's funny," she was saying "making me chase you through brush and bushes, but.."

The words faded as she glanced at the window.

At the wheel, grinning towards the horizon, sat a human skeleton.

"Oh my." Faith muttered, at a loss for anything else.

She wasn't afraid though. Not until the head swiveled toward her, that permanent grin now leveled at her. The chill that coursed her spine caused her to hold her breath after a sharp intake.

It was the click of the door opening that caused her to whimper, however.

The boneman emerged slowly, carefully, as if worried his essential structure was unsound. The driver's door creaked open and a small shower of rust flakes sifted to the ground.

Faith stepped back. The cat didn't budge, just sat there swishing his tail in mild interest.

The door was left open as the boneman moved two steps towards her. It cocked its head, staring at her with empty sockets. The sun gleamed dully from the

cracked round shape of its skull.

Faith met its eyes. Utterly non-plussed, she said, simply:

"Hello."

The gleam shifted as the head cocked the other way. A hand crept to the right hip. Faith followed with her eyes. They widened, partially in fear, but mainly because the sight that met her caused the vibration in her center to rev up beyond mere sensation. She moved another step backwards, and felt as if the world itself was vibrating, and she was the only still point.

Around his waist, the boneman wore an elaborate holster of deep black leather. It hung partly slack from the stripped bones.

Riding in that holster was a weapon at once both strange and familiar. The blue-gray handle that emerged, that a bone hand now hovered above, locked her gaze like a fetish. Her mouth went dry and she felt her teeth grit.

Still, the cat did not move.

"Are you going to shoot me?" Faith asked the revenant. "Why?"

The boneman stared. His hand remained an inch or so above the handle of the gun.

"No." he finally said. His voice was diaphanous and low, a distant sub-bass note throbbing in the earth. "I have waited."

"You were waiting for me?"

"Yes." There was a note of effort in that deep voice, a tone of pain. "For many years. The seasons passed and the body withered. The rains came and washed away the surface. But structure lingered, as structure will. Intent persisted, desire challenged the world."

Faith held her breath. The vibration within was almost painful.

"Now the moment arrives." The voice of the boneman drifted further toward the dissolute, becoming a sigh. "My watch is ending, the message delivered."

"What message?" The words were choked out of her. She felt as if she were climbing a wall, nearing the top.

The boneman drew the gun from its rest. He held it by the handle, and lifted it to her in offering, barrel pointing away, aimed at the red web of earth.

"Message and gift, in honest steel. Take this, and challenge the world."

Hesitantly, Faith reached for the weapon. As she took

it, her fingers brushed the cool bones of the sentinel.

In that instant of contact, the vibration left her, and entered the boneman.

A memory slammed her, of herself and the gun and the stunned faces of four men. Of four explosions and how blood and brains had leapt and danced in the stark glow of kitchen fluorescent. Of vengeful angry triumph, a righteous howl...

...that passed through her like electricity, surprising tears from her.

Before her, the boneman shuddered apart, falling into a lifeless pile. Quickly, the pile itself shuddered into dust. The truck followed suit, sympathetic magic demanding its death along with its master.

A breeze picked up, out of the north, and the dust of bones and rust began their long journey across the world.

Inside her, the vibration was gone, the leaving song finished.

I have arrived, I suppose. she thought, and some deep part of herself knew that was true.

She examined the gun in her hand, enjoying the weight of it. It was a blunt, brutal and confident structure of grey steel and blue gleam. It belonged to her and she knew it.

She retrieved the belt and holster from the rapidly diminishing pile of dust. She strapped it clumsily on, figuring out how to tighten it to her waist with experimentation. The length of the belt held cartridges. They reminded her of shark teeth.

She slid the gun back to its rest and addressed the cat.

"What do you think."

The cat was cleaning himself, unimpressed by her or the spectacle just passed. In answer, he turned and trotted back toward the road.

Faith sighed, and followed. She spared a single glance back to the disappearing shrine of her sentinel. Then she cast eyes ahead, following the cat.

The weight of the gun on her hip reassured her with every step. Emboldened, she set out to find a world to challenge.

#### **4. The Quiet Place**

*Peace surprises.*

Before the sun set on that same day, Faith would find use for her gun, and - as a result - change her name.

It was, in her opinion, the hottest day since she'd begun her journey. A few hours after the confrontation with the boneman, she had stumbled across the trickle of a creek merging with the ditch.

Relieved, she had dug a shallow little pond with just enough drainage to allow it to clear. After drinking her fill, and refreshing her canteen, she had cleaned herself as well as she was able - even washing her hair. The lack of soap was unfortunate, but she couldn't deny the improvement in mood her quick bath brought.

Refreshed and in better spirits, she and the cat (who had drank upstream as she bathed) had set off again, grateful that the dropping sun heralded a cool breeze.

A few miles up the road, just as the sun was touching the horizon, trouble found them.

It was the same dilapidated Cadillac that had passed them two days before. It came at them from the opposite direction, first dashing Faith's hopes, then filling her with uneasiness. Rather than pass them by at a crawl, it stopped.

Two men and a woman emerged. All were skinny to the point of emaciation, all were filthy, and all were armed. The woman had an axe. The two men toted baseball bats.

"Get inna damn car." the lead and largest of the men, said.

"Get inna car or we'll break ya damn legs and drag ya in!" screeched the woman. The smaller man just laughed, keeping a wary eye on the cat, who once again hissed and stood his ground - placing himself in front of Faith in a show of courage and loyalty.

Faith's reaction surprised her. Instead of freezing or stiffening up, she felt suddenly loose and easy. The center of her mind now seemed to be riding on her hip. The weight of the gun became the most important facet of existence, the absolute zero point of the universe.

The Cadillac crew moved toward her, but in lazy slow motion. Even the woman's threat emerged as a slow and dragging mumble.

They were a foot closer to her when she marked them as range points. They had ceased being people in her calm new state, they were nothing but vectors of mass and motion. She could see the x marks on each, denoting her best targets of opportunity.

She found herself in a warm and quiet place. A peaceful bubble between decision and action, where she could take her time and do things right.

At last.

The smile that flicked across her face was noticed by

none but the woman. But the sight chilled her so suddenly and completely that she tried to halt in mid-step.

Too late.

Faith's hand dropped, drawing the gun and leveling it with such speed that the motion was a blur.

Faith's last thought before hell broke loose, aimed by her, was:

I wonder if it's even loaded?

Finger squeezed. Pressure acted. Hammer fell.

The gun roared. The larger man's head exploded, a flower of gore blooming on his shoulders in the dimming sunlight.

Arm shifted. Eyes tracked.

Another roar, and the woman toppled, her heart blasted into shreds and soup. From her mouth spewed dead air and bile.

Fractional shift, a step backward to reclaim balance.

Third roar, and the smaller man's neck ceased connecting head to body. He died with the same idiots laugh on his tongue, decapitated by the tooth of a shark moving at the speed of sound.

All three bodies hit the road within the same microsecond.

Faith dropped her arm, the gun finding its holster with new-born instinct, just as it had taken her to the quiet place and guided her hand and eye.

Of course it's loaded, her mind answered. The sentinel was a responsible sort.

The cat turned and looked at her. The gunfire had not scared him. The look on his face could be read as approval.

Faith smiled at him. "You got balls, cat."

The cat yawned. Good shootin', lady.

After a moments consideration, Faith dragged the bodies from the road and stretched them on the hardpack. The idea of burying them was ridiculous. Let the animals of the land have them, since they had chosen to be animals of their own will.

The car presented another problem. A search of it turned up nothing of value, and it stank horribly. The idea of driving it made her nauseous.

Still - the fact that the crew had went west and returned was evidence that a town existed somewhere past the horizon. That she was nearing whatever might be considered civilization in this place.

The car could be a worthwhile trade good.

So, before setting off, Faith recovered enough blood from her attackers to scrawl a message on the windshield:

"Notice! This vehicle is claimed as salvage by the killer of its former owners - would be kidnappers who picked the wrong victim. Do not touch it unless you wish to share their fate. Thank you."

She took the keys from the ignition and locked the car. She chuckled at her cold message in dripping blood.

Night found her before she found the town. Faith and Cat camped and enjoyed a dinner of rabbit. When full dark came on, she noticed the glow on the horizon.

Tomorrow, she was sure.

And so it was.

Faith arrived in Summertime City in midmorning, as the town was starting to stir.

The place was odd. Wood shacks and long cinder block bunkhouses mixed self-consciously with jury-rig repaired office buildings. Every building seemed to have its own generator. Solar cells decorated the roofs of many. Along the less than impressive river, water wheels had been constructed.

There were cars, but they mingled with horses and mules pulling wagons and dredges. She even stood and, amused, watched a steam vehicle motor by, its fat driver decked out in ragged top-hat and a monocle.

The pedestrians she passed minded their own business, despite the fact that there was a palpable curiosity directed at her. Most of it centered on the gun. The rest on the cat, who strode through the town with the air of a king on parade.

Faith was the opposite, studying the townies openly. Their clothing and manners were as mixed as the rest of Summertime City. Homespun and crochet mingled with Levi's and Ralph Lauren. Hand sewn moccasin material mended ancient Converse sneakers. She saw men bow to women and women flipping the bird to people who laughed when they passed.

The children smiled and stared at her. They seemed to have the run of the town, traffic dutifully stopping for them as they played and ran along the streets on secret errands. The cat even paused and allowed a few to pet him briefly.

A half mile down the main street, Faith came to what she was looking for: a well constructed wood building with a nice tin roof and a hand painted sign:

***Fowler's General Goods***

***Retail\*Salvage\*Barter***  
***We Buy, Sell & Trade***

***Everybody Welcome!***

Inside the store was bright and cool, the air circulated by a row of ceiling fans. The space was used to maximum effect, shelves stocked with goods of every imaginable type.

Along the back wall, behind a tidy oak counter, stood a tall thin man with a shining bald head and a high wattage smile.

"Morning, ma'am!" he said as she stepped up. "Always good to see new faces walk through that door. I'm Thomas Fowler, proprietor!" He thrust out his hand for a shake. Faith complied.

She dropped the keys on the counter. "Would the car attached to these be something you're interested in?"

When Fowler brought his eyes up from the keys, his smile had faded somewhat. He glanced at the gun before meeting her eyes again.

"I know the car." he said. "Hell...I made this set of keys."

"Friends of yours?" Faith asked, raising an eyebrow.

Fowler snorted. "Hell, no!" He appraised her carefully. "They don't have friends around here."

"They're dead." Faith informed him. "They picked the wrong person to be unfriendly to."

Fowler just nodded. "Bound to happen, sooner or later." He scratched his chin. "You got the Caddy with you?"

Faith shook her head. "It'll have to be picked up. What could you offer?"

"It's worth 500 for parts. I'd go 600 as a friendly measure...seeing as you did the town a favor." His high watt smile was back in place.

Faith asked for quotes on a few items, to give her an idea of the economy. Finally, she nodded. "A deal."

Money and keys changed hands, the deal sealed with a nod and a shake. She examined the currency. It was coins rather than paper, but the noble looking dog was the same.

Faith inquired about a room to rent.

"Mizz Castleberry up the street runs a clean place and sets the best table in town." He glanced at the cat, who had curled up in the sun by the door as Faith dickered. "And she likes cats." He hesitated, then said: "That gun...I assume you can use it?"

Faith smiled. "I manage. Why?"

"Sheriff is looking for some steady hands and eyes for some tricky work. Pay is good, and he's a dependable fella."

Faith shrugged. "Something to think on, I guess." she admitted. "If I decide to stay a while."

Fowler laughed. "Won't find a better place for a long stretch. Summertime City is a good town. A quiet place, and the people are decent."

"Seems that way." Faith patted the pocket with the coins. "I'll be back later for supplies, once I settle in and see what I need." She turned to go.

"Open till dark!" Fowler called after her. As she pulled the door open, he asked something else.

"Ma'am! I didn't catch your name."

Faith paused. She turned slowly. The words that came surprised her. The most surprising thing about them was the truth she felt in them.

"Hope." she told him, knowing her faith had paid off and left a finer thing in its healing, quiet place.

"My name is Hope."

And, with a final smile, she was gone.

## 5. The Smoke Man

*Mysteries disperse.*

She wore the name Hope with more confidence than she'd ever worn Faith. She figured that maybe faith was always a thing to be lightly held and wondered over. That maybe it was the very uncertainty of the thing that gave it a worth.

She grew to love Summertime City in the idyll she spent there, and fell into the towns odd and paradoxical rhythms. What looked slow and sleepy on the surface was a sharp and practical thing beneath; she discovered that she did not need to introduce herself. Her walk through town and meeting with Fowler had been introduction enough, and on some invisible all hearing grapevine her arrival had been heralded. Even on the walk from the General Store to the boarding house she'd received smiles and bows and hat-tips, along with more than a few repetitions of 'Mornin' Mizz Hope.'

Carina Castleberry did indeed love cats. What's more, cats loved her. The reaction of the scarred gray tom to the plump, shining little woman was almost embarrassing. He purred and rolled and lost himself in an orgy of petting and clumsy affection. All the while, the hidden eyes of other cats glinted jealously from one nook or another - none quite bold enough

to challenge the newcomer for the attention of their missus.

"My husband, God rest him, always called me Catnip Carrie', Mizz Castleberry said, by way of explanation, as she retrieved a dish of milk for her trail worn guest, and a cup of sweet coffee for his human friend.

Hope dealt with the pragmatics of her situation after the cat had swaggered off to deal with his. She assumed hers was far less violent and much more amiable, however. She rented a second floor room with meals for 25 coins a week. One week paid in advance with the provision for first choice to renew the deal. Once again, the deal was sealed with a handshake. Mizz Castleberry introduced her own tradition, and broke out a bottle of brandy to toast their transaction with proper good cheer.

Five of those coins had gone to secure one of the few rooms with private plumbing, and that night Hope luxuriated in a hot bath. The simple delight of hot water and brisk lye soap made her grin foolishly for an hour.

The cat lay near the door, cleaning some new wounds. These were the products of his negotiations with the resident felines. There was a certain smugness about his eyes and the indolent way he stretched that informed Hope that said negotiations had ended in his favor.

"I like it here, cat." she told him, for no reason, soaping herself up for the third time, just because.

He purred, slit his eyes, and kneaded the wooden floor in answer.

Dinner was an informal affair, held right in the kitchen at a big table that could seat twenty by the look of it. Only three were in attendance that night. In addition to Hope and the Missus, there was a resident named Albert Combers, a charming elderly man who dressed with style and spoke like a Harvard scholar.

Mizz Castleberry made plates right from the stove, where her concoctions bubbled and simmered in the alchemy known only to good cooks. The menu was salisbury steak, baby peas, early corn buttered and peppered to perfection and thick wedges of cornbread that tasted like heaven dipped in the steak gravy.

Hope ignored all manners and had thirds.

When everyone was done and sighing, Mizz Castleberry produced a bag of tobacco and rolled herself and Albert a trim smoke. Hope demurred.

The conversation became interesting after that. Mizz Castleberry had never even heard of The United States. Albert thought he might have come across it sometime in his study of ancient civilizations.

"Where are we right now?" Hope, asked, expecting laughter or questions.

She got neither. "The Borderlands, dear."

"What do they border?" was the only question she could think of.

"Something and nothing." Albert explained, butting out his smoke.

Hope excused herself then, and went up to bed. The cat was already crashed out, twitching with dreams.

She slept like a rock.

A week later, running an errand for the Missus, Hope met Ugly Jim Harris, the Sheriff of Summertime City.

They met at Fowlers. Fowler himself introduced them.

They called him Ugly Jim because, as a child, he'd been nearly burned to death in a house fire. His face was a mass of scar tissue. He looked like a skull partially covered with wax. But his eyes were blue and honest, and he radiated a sincere kindness.

"I don't know if I'm cut out for law work." Hope admitted.

"Not asking you to take up a career, ma'am." Ugly Jim reassured her. "But I could use a hand right

soon."

"Things seem peaceful enough."

"Riders will be here in a few days. Bad every year. Gonna be a doozy this year though." He looked away. "Something tells me, at least."

They spoke of payment. Beyond coinage, Hope insisted that she needed answers to questions.

Ugly Jim's eyes narrowed. The misshapen lids gave his look an odd weight.

"You need to see the Smoke Man." he told her.

"Who?"

"He sets up camp outside town this weekend. He runs his business. He answers questions."

The journey to the Smoke Man was short, but Hope found herself with more company than she desired. He seemed a popular destination. She constantly had to turn folks away. They saw the gun and hoped for protection. Even after she turned them down she noticed that they stuck close.

The Smoke Man made camp in a clearing about ten miles north of Summertime City. As Faith approached she heard the boom of his trade. She understood as she drew closer.

The Smoke Man and a supplicant stood in a clearing. The machine behind them sent up disk after disk. They shot in turn. The supplicant didn't do a bad job, but he couldn't match the perfect record of the Smoke Man.

By the time Hope arrived she met the losing fellow as he made his way home. Despite that loss he seemed well pleased. Perhaps he was already planning a rematch.

The Smoke Man was reloading his thrower when she walked up. The thrower was a home-made affair, a challenging assortment of cogs and gears, tension and mismatched parts. I took up the entire bed of the Man's pickup. The truck itself was the dull gray of primer, though there was a diffuse and misty look to it.

Hope studied the shooter before her. He was tall, gaunt, hair cropped short on a perfectly round head. She couldn't judge his age, though she knew he was older than her. She saw instantly why he was called The Smoke Man. His skin was an even gray pallor, matching the truck. When he finished reloading and looked at her, she saw that his eyes were gray as well. And they held the mark of great age. He smiled at her.

"Care to sport a while?" he asked. "10 coins to enter, and I'll back a side bet to whatever you care to lose." His grin widened, became mockingly predatory. "You win if you tie me. I'm fair that way."

Hope stood her ground and smiled right back. She wished for a moment that the cat were with her, rather than lording it over the boarding house. She missed the steel his small solid form set in her spine.

"The ammo for this is quite precious." she explained, touching the gun on her hip. "But I'll go 20 coins if you'll answer a few questions."

The Smoke Man began turning a stout, ratcheting crank. His thrower was obviously a clockwork device. He never took his eyes off of her, and never lost his smile.

"I got fools a'coming to lose their coin to me. But it may well be high time for a coffee break." he admitted. "20 coins get you five questions. I only answer if I like."

The Smoke Man's coffee was strong and just shy of bitter. Hope added extra sugar and made the best of it.

"Where am I?" was her first question.

The Smoke Man sipped his brew. "The eternal question." He paused, thinking. "You stand between hell and heaven, in the great gray expanse of unknown. Call it The Undecided. Folks here call it The

Borderlands and be done with it."

"How did I get here?"

"That's one I can't answer. Only you can answer that. It'll come to you eventually. It comes to everyone in time."

Hope accepted that. "I have the urge to go West. What lies West of here?"

The Smoke Man chuckled. "Far enough West and you find The Ends. The place where structure dissolves. Nobody knows what lies beyond that, since no one ever comes back to describe it."

"Who are you?" That one just popped in her head.

"I'm touched." he claimed. But the smile drifted away for a moment. "I'm not sure what I am. I travel. I take folks coin. I shoot. I know some things. That's all I'm sure of."

Hope asked her final question. "Will I ever go back home?"

The Smoke Man stood. "And that's one I won't answer. Not my place to go telling you what Home is or means."

Hope looked over her shoulder. By the truck, a small crowd of challengers had gathered.

"Back to work, ma'am." The Smoke Man said. "A pleasure to meet you."

Hope just nodded.

As she made her way past the truck, on her way back to Summertime City - both secure and puzzled by the vague answers she'd received - the thrower thumped and sent two disks into the air. Two guns boomed. The challenger missed. The Smoke Man's target puffed into a quickly dispersing cloud of dust and fragment.

"You made smoke out of that one." Hope called to him.

The Smoke Man laughed, tossing her that predatory smile again.

"In the end, darlin'," he told her, as she moved away "I make smoke out of 'em *all*."

## **6. Showdown**

*Idyll's end.*

The cat woke her up on that last peaceful morning.

Hope attempted to ignore him, and that resulted in the first and only time that he laid the claws to her. Despite her cursing and empty threats, it really wasn't all that bad. No blood drawn at least.

After she'd wiped the sleep from her eyes and splashed cold water on her face to aid the wake-up, she was thinking of coffee when she saw the cat staring out the window, tail swishing in agitation.

And she heard that laugh.

That goddamn familiar, awful laugh.

She looked out the window and there stood Ugly Jim in the center of town, facing down three bulky men on horseback.

Riders.

She moved quickly, tossing on her clothes and the gunbelt, then racing down the stairs to the porch of the rooming house. Despite her non-committal tone when Jim had pressed her on signing up for temporary deputy duty, she had no intention of allowing assholes to harass and harrify her friends and neighbors. In fact, the main force behind her refusal was a gut feeling that getting paid to stand up to such assholes was on the less than honorable side of the ledger. And Hope had no desire to live on that side of the ledger anymore.

Later, she'd wish she'd stayed at the window. Had

taken advantage of the height and the surprise to shoot those bastards down where they stood. Spilt milk being what it was; she may have had the instincts of a gunfighter, but the hard lessons of experience only get learned the one way.

She was coming off the stairs when she stopped. Carina Castleberry stood at the ready by the door, grimly holding a huge and ancient shotgun. The sight struck Hope as both comical and moving. The idea of this sweet and indulgent woman instantly ready to defend herself and her own caused tears and a laugh to war inside her heart. And steeled her resolution to end this situation in the town's favor.

Mizz Castleberry saw her and moved away from the door in a manner that functioned as a vote of confidence.

Hope stepped into the sun of the morning, heart racing but will steady and strong.

Ugly Jim didn't take his eyes from the Riders, but all three of them turned to look at the new arrival.

Hope's heart sank when she saw those faces. Rage and fear and an old and secret shame she'd hoped to never feel again welled up inside her.

All three of the riders wore the faces of her husbands friends. His particularly close friends. The ones he'd shared with.

Rapists. Scum. What they'd done to her was horrible enough - but that was the past and a world away. What truly angered her - what caused the rage to drown out the fear and shame - was that they dared to follow her into this world.

The middle rider laughed that hateful laugh again. "Looks like Ugly Jim done found him a purty Deputy."

Her skin crawled. She felt her stomach knot in revulsion.

Then she felt the soft brush at her leg. Felt the rumbling purr vibrate through denim and skin and bone and into her soul.

The cat was with her. No matter what she faced she did not face it alone. That purr settled her stomach and calmed her nerves.

She smiled. It was a vicious smile. And she was rewarded with the smile leaving the face of the rider. And a gleam of fear in his eyes.

"Mizz Hope" Jim said, quietly, eyes not leaving his enemy, hand hovering at the ready above his holster.

"Jim." she replied. "We got trouble? Seems a shame to bloody up such a pretty morning."

As she spoke she moved to stand beside him. Casually, as if she were just ambling to the General

store. The cat followed in his usual way, weaving around and about her feet in a feline dance.

The riders - those hated, familiar faces - stared at her in contempt and dislike, but there was no recognition that she could see. Unlike her, it seemed that they had not made it into the Borderlands with memory intact.

Or, another part of her opined, perhaps she no longer resembled the timid and frightened woman she had been.

"Well, I guess that depends on the boys here." Jim drawled. He was as casual as her, but Hope could sense the fierce appreciation radiating from him. "How about it boys? You on a mission to ruin a perfectly good morning?"

The middle rider sneered. Then he shook his head. "Just bringing in the word, Ugly. The boss is coming. He'll be here in three days. He wants the usual. You see that he gets it."

"Or what?" Hope said. She almost spat the words.

All three riders laughed, as if she'd said the dumbest thing in the world.

"Pretty but stupid, I see. Listen well girly: the boss gets what he wants or Summertime City burns. To the ground. And we piss on the ashes."

For a moment the rage threatened to boil over. An image of the gun in her hand and falling trick pins bloomed in her mind's eye, and it was an image of almost impossibly seductive beauty.

"Is that the way of it?" she asked.

"That's the way it's always been."

"Things change."

The rider raised an eyebrow. "That so? You think you got the steel to change the way of the world?"

The words of the boneman came to her, clear as a bell and as sweetly chiming. Find a world to challenge.

"And then some, boy." She emphasized that last.

The look on the rider's face was deadly. He spat on the ground before looking away, addressing Jim.

"You see we got the usual waiting, Ugly. You know what's good for you. Best not let addle headed girls with big ideas go turning your head from sense."

And he spurred his horse, wheeled and rode out. His companions followed suit.

As the dust cloud they stirred up drifted and settled, people began to emerge. They tossed looks at Jim and Hope as they did. Quick looks for the most part,

with a mix of emotions. Mostly fear. But there was a measure of respect there, as well. And more than a hint of some dark amusement.

Jim chuckled. When she looked at him, he was shaking his head. Those blue eyes in that ruined face gleamed with the same mix of emotions as the townsfolk - but the respect dominated with him.

"Mizz Hope, I must say - you don't do nothing by half." The chuckle became a full laugh and he put a hand on her shoulder with real affection. "I'd say those riders haven't heard a challenge like that in all their days with the Boss."

Hope considered telling him of her personal connection with these particular riders, but thought better of it. Instead, she gestured to the shade of the porch. As they made their way to a more comfortable spot, she asked some questions.

"Who is this Boss?"

Jim just shrugged. "Bandit. Old and smart and mean. Plays about three towns for this yearly tribute business. Lives well on it I suppose."

"And what is this usual they mentioned."

Jim sighed. "Coin and lots of it. Food and plenty. Dope. 'Botics, painkillers, that sorta. And sometimes..." He paused.

Hopes chest tightened. "Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes they want a couple women. Girls. You know." Hope hadn't known that the scarred flesh of Jim's face could blush until then.

The tightness in her chest turned to ice. "And you think this year is one of those sometimes?"

He just nodded.

"So. What do we do?"

Jim was silent for a moment, eyes closed. Then he took a deep breath and looked her right in the eye.

"I been Sheriff for three years, Mizz Hope. All three of those years I knuckled under when the riders came. I figured that coin and food and drugs - no matter how precious - were a better price than a load of dead townsfolk, than fighting off dozens of hardasses. And they'll come in dozens, ma'am - count on it. The Boss has an army at his disposal."

His face grew still but his eyes danced with passion and conviction.

"But I swore that when they asked for my folk...when they went beyond things into demanding I co-operate with slavery....I swore I'd be buried first."

Hope smiled at him, relieved.

"And I didn't swear that lightly." His hand went to the gun on his hip, an instinct. "And I swear it still."

"You're a damn fine man, Jim."

He just nodded. Then his eyes met hers again.

"And what about you? You with me? You gonna back that challenge up?"

Faith stood. She thought about who and what those men had been in the old world. She thought about the words of the boneman. She thought about the welcome the people of Summertime City had given a peaceful stranger. About Carina Castleberry at the door with a shotgun. She looked down at the cat. He was staring right back, inscrutable face radiating the only answer she could make.

She gave Jim the same scary smile she'd offered the riders. Her hand dropped to the cold and ready steel of her gun.

"You're damned right I'll back it up, Jim."

She looked around the street. Saw that all eyes were on her and the Sheriff. So she raised her voice to take in all who watched.

"We fight."

## 7. Firefight

*Hopes burn.*

On the morning of the day The Boss and his boys were due to collect, a message arrived. The rider who brought it slid it beneath the door of the Sheriff's office and slipped out before the sun showed his face.

The message was simple and direct: in addition to 2000 coins, 500 pounds of flour, 20 bushels of potatoes, a ridiculous amount of ammo, drugs and even small luxuries like candy and shampoo, The Boss demanded three girls. All under the age of 20. A redhead and two blondes. "Purty & Clean" the note insisted.

Jim let Hope read it and scowled along with her. "Figured they'd wait till the last minute. Let folk get used to the idea of giving in and have the loot all gathered before they hit 'em where it really hurt."

Hope crumpled the note and flicked it toward the trash can. She brooded for a moment. "Before you came along, Jim, did folk really send what amounted to their children out to serve these scum?"

Jim whistled, a low note. She understood this to be a habit when he was collecting his thoughts. "They did, I'm sad to say."

Hope's voice rose despite her best effort. "How in the hell could they..."

"Settle down, Mizz." Jim insisted, holding his hands out in a peace making gesture. "It wasn't exactly as simple as all that. Hell, sometimes they had volunteers. Girls itching to get out of town and into what they figured was a more exciting life." He paused. "And not every Sheriff looked at his duty the way I do, hurts to say. More than a few were tinpot dictators just as bad as The Boss."

Hope gave him the look that meant she wasn't in the mood for excuses.

"True as Tuesday, Mizz. And Summertime City was small and truly weak for a long time."

"Did they ever resist?"

Jim nodded, thoughtful. "Yes ma'am. This town has burned twice in the past two decades. The first time damn near wiped her off the map and she had to be resettled. The second time was near as bad but most folks lived. Just had to rebuild." He sighed. "But they haven't resisted since then."

A sick look passed her face.

Jim smiled, a ghastly thing she had grown used to and now admired for its sincerity. "But the Riders took their losses as well. It's also true they haven't asked for girlfolk near as often since that last Burn.

Summertime City killed half those that came for 'em, and put 'em to route eventually."

Hope smiled. "We gonna have any trouble with those that might prefer to appease?"

Jim shook his head, dismissive. "Naw. They know my mind is set. Those sort cleared out the minute you agreed to fight."

"Good enough. And the rest can be counted on?"

Jim stared at her for a moment. "My folk are decent and somewhat simple, Mizz. They don't itch for trouble. But they ain't cowards and they know the way the world works. Never doubt that."

Hope just nodded. Instead of an apology, she said "Then I think you need to drop that Mizz shit."

Jim was truly puzzled. "Ma'am?"

She laughed. "And that ma'am shit while you're at it." She stood up and put a hand on his shoulder. "If we're going to fight this scum back to back I think you should call me Hope."

Once again, Ugly Jim Harris proved he could blush.

"Now." she said, turning to the door. "Let's go get us some volunteers."

Hope and the cat and Ugly Jim sat staring at the

citizens of Summertime City arrayed before them. Hope was near tears, causing the smile she couldn't repress to wobble slightly.

Three hundred and six men, women and children had shown up, from the ages of 6 years to 86. They were armed with everything from pitchforks and hay scythes to the one old codger who'd lugged a dusty but functioning hand cranked Gatling from some ancient shed. They stood there, scared but with spines straight, and gave their word to fight to defend their homes and families and neighbors.

It may have been the finest moment of her life so far, and she caught the Sheriff wiping a tear himself here and there.

It took most of the afternoon to sort the best prospects into some sort of fighting force. They had nothing spectacular planned - just a direct ambush when the Riders got close enough to take fire. The real trick was letting them get close enough with trust intact. Hope and Jim agreed that half The Boss's boys wasn't good enough this time. They had in mind a complete victory - and maybe an end to the whole damn cycle.

The girls were the key to that little trick. Hope ended up with 16 volunteers under the age of 20, willing to play reverse Trojan Horse. They ended up being more trouble than the young men and boys when it came to their desire to serve - to the point of several brawls breaking out.

But eventually she had her three. Two pretty, clean blondes and a pretty clean redhead. The two blondes were twins - Gina and Georgia Montrose. They won their place because they'd inherited beautifully made and highly concealable little derringers. Hope would no more have these girls play bait unarmed than she'd send them swimming with anchors attached.

The third had to borrow a gun but won her place because she was the only redhead in town. She looked familiar to Hope. The resemblance lingered until she caught a glimpse of her from the corner of her eye and realization crashed down.

"Are you...?"

The redhead grinned pure sunshine and her blush was hard to catch under all those freckles. "I'm Betty Castleberry, Mizz Hope. Carina's grandgirl." She stuck out her hand all formal like. Hope hugged her instead.

"I been meaning to come by Gran's and meet you. She talks a mile a minute on you. All good o' course. But Mam's been sick for a while and I got six brothers and two sisters to look after, and..."

She was interrupted by the Gran herself, shotgun at the ready. Pride and fear warred in her expressive face with no clear victor.

"You be careful." was all she finally said. "Gran'll be

up on the bank roof."

"Now you follow directions, Gran." Betty warned her. "Don't you be lookin' after me. We all got our parts to play."

Hope was torn from the tragic little scene by Jim's voice.

"Places folks! We got dust sighted and on the way! Half an' hour tops."

Faith felt the cat at her feet, responding to her own fear and pride. She took deep breaths and counted heartbeats. She forced her mind to relax. She willed the cold heart of the gun to invade hers.

It was time.

The fight was on them.

It would be years later and small details of that fight would still come to her, often in dreams, surprising her with their ability to move and effect her. Little glimpses, small sounds, stabs of remembered fear and vicious joy.

The Last Firefight Of Summertime City, as it would come to be called, was not the worst piece of action she'd see in her life. In many ways, it was the most successful and clean. But it happened at the very beginning of her transformation from one thing to another. It was the fire that burned the last of her old

self away so that the newer, stronger, harder self could grow in its place.

And, like all fires - no matter the need for their renewal - it hurt as it burned.

It was not a battle of individual heroes. It was not a set piece of heroic stands. It was, like most serious warfare, a brutal and pragmatic thing.

They set their blonde and amber bait amongst the loot of food and coin and luxury. There on the main street, alone and lonely. One force of gunmen(led by Jim) occupied the roof of the bank. Hope's gang laid low on the roof of the saloon.

Like a ritual, the riders came. They gathered indolently in a wide arc flanking the face of the town. There were close to a hundred all told, all armed with rifle and pistol and plenty of ammo. All on horseback save The Boss, who travelled in a caravan wagon pulled by a mule team. The Boss hung back several hundred yards, waiting for his treasure.

A dozen men entered the town to escort that treasure out. They were less than a hundred feet from their goal when Hope gave the order.

Rifle fire rained down on the would be kidnapers from the saloon. Of the twenty under her command, she had set ten to concentrate on death from above. She led the other ten down the back of the saloon and around for another angle of fire.

At the edge of town, from the stonewalled safety of the bank roof, Jim's fifty volunteers opened up on the rest of the riders, gathered so thoughtfully in such a nice group.

Hope screamed at the three girls to take cover. They ignored her, preferring to instead add to the lead headed towards their kidnappers.

That was the moment when the world, and time, and sense broke apart. What followed was a shattered twenty minutes that would only come to her over the course of the rest of her life. A bit here, a piece there.

Of the gory sprawl of a dozen dead men and horses. Of the escort not a single creature made it out alive.

Of a pretty blonde girl weeping, with a once blonde head in her lap now stained red with blood.

Of the roar of men and women fighting for their lives, and the roar of men dying for their mistakes.

Of those who fell before her own gun, so like trick pins as the sharks teeth caught them again and again.

Of the deep red calm of reloading, as if she'd performed these motions a million times.

And of the cat, moving through out it all, between bullets and blood and bodies, seemingly indifferent.

Graceful. Leading her.

And that moment when the broken army outside their town turned to flee, and the folk who only had pitchfork and scythe set on their trail like hounds, the bedeviled turned to devils. She was in front, urging them on. To the caravan of The Boss, frightened mules swinging it dangerously around in flight.

And the image that stopped her in shock, that caused her to drop to her knees in horror. The angry, scared and hateful face in the window of that caravan.

The face of The Boss.

The face of her husband.

A face filled with recognition.

Moments, broken and shattered. Some moments never last long enough.

Some moments take the rest of a life to deal with.

"...and to thy care and mercy we commend them O Lord, these our beloved."

"Amen."

Hope stared at the face of Ugly Jim Harris in his casket, a ruined face that had gained something approaching beauty in a proud death. A slug had

caught him in the leg just before the Riders broke, and he'd tumbled off the bank and broke his neck. Went painlessly the doctor said.

Went proud, Hope knew. With principles and duty intact.

She lingered a moment by the casket of Gina Montrose, and spoke silly comforting words to poor Georgia. The abandoned twin cycled from fierce pride in her sister to crushing despair, but seemed basically all right to Hope.

The rest of the dead, 11 in all, she knew only fleetingly or not at all. Still, she paid her respects and spoke to the families. They had all died for the same cause, had all died facing one of life's bad days. They deserved what she could give them.

And, outside town, 64 unmarked graves marked their triumph.

She made her way back to the rooming house with a heavy heart, the cat trailing beside her as usual. He had escaped the battle without a scratch despite being in the thick of it. Much like herself.

The respectful nods and greetings added to the heaviness she felt. She was treated as a hero in town. Perhaps she was being given the reverence that Ugly Jim could not accept. No matter - it just made her decision harder.

She cried as she packed, knowing that she was going to miss this place. It was an awful moment. She had come this long way, walked this hard path, and found the closest thing to a home since the death of her father. And now she had to leave.

How awful that love for a place can push you away as surely as hate.

Carina and Betty and Albert were waiting for her when she came downstairs, back from the services. Carina in the wheelchair, healing from the slug that had grazed her spine. She began to weep when she saw the packed bag and the travelling clothes Hope wore.

"Please, Mizz Hope..." Betty spoke for her. "We need you. This town. Gran. Me."

Oh, she was tempted. But it wouldn't be right. Instead she just hugged them and said goodbye.

The tears dried as she moved away from Summertime City, onwards into the West once again. The direction the caravan wagon had fled.

The old feeling returned, the bone deep song of the road. And in place of sadness came anger and the steady pulse of desire.

A desire for answers.

A desire for revenge.

And the immense desire to see them come to the same point on the horizon, even if she had to travel to The Ends to do so.

The cat resumed his travel pattern as if they'd never paused. He scouted and wandered and circled her.

Behind her, unknown as yet, other cats followed, shyly for now. Some from Carina's house, some from the streets of the town. Cats suddenly possessed of a desire to follow this strange woman and the brutal grey tom who shared her aura and her fate.

From the center of this tangle of woman and cats and their mingled desire, Hope extended her arm, and waved a thumb at the random.

They walked until a ride came.

## **8. Longwalk**

*Secrets flee.*

The walk was dreary and unrelieved by a single ride for the first fifty or so miles. Then she reached the Highway.

The terrain had changed to slightly hilly scrub forest, somewhat harder going but cooler in climate. Both

game and water were more plentiful, and shelter from sun and night's damp were easier to find.

Hope became aware of her shy following congregation slowly, in stages. First was the actions and attitude of the grey tom. He growled often, looking into the distance, especially when camped and continuously while food was cooking. She at first feared that darker visitors hid amongst the shadows. But every morning she'd find gifts of game and the tell-tale prints of cats. They seemed to ring her campsites at night in a rough circle, just out of sight but close enough to keep an eye on her.

She was amused at first, then curious. Why were they following her? What did they expect to gain from this trek? She supposed that it didn't matter in the end - as soon as she caught her first ride they'd be left miles behind. A twinge of guilt accompanied that thought. She hoped they'd be able to find their way back to whatever home they'd had before she'd passed through. She'd never meant to be a pied piper, and didn't appear to have the callous heart to do such work.

This was, of course, before she discovered that cats - in the Borderlands at least - had their own secret paths of travel.

It was late on the third day after leaving Summertime City when she crested that last small hill and caught sight of the Highway. She'd been hearing it for hours before; at first puzzled at the odd sound, then

disbelieving when it became familiar enough to recognize. Seeing it washed away the last of the disbelief, but did nothing for the disorientation that the sight brought.

In the old world, she knew, the Highway would have been common. In fact, it would have been less than impressive. It was merely a four lane paved blacktop that ran a true East/West rather than the smaller, barely two lane cracked asphalt trail that had led her northwest from Summertime City. It would have been a road to roll her eyes at in her old life, a stretch where she'd have to drop the Buick down a notch in speed or risk a ticket.

But here, in the Borderlands, it trumped every unusual and weird event since she'd arrived. Not so much for the size of the thing, but for the traffic.

The past fifty miles had seen not a single car or truck or bicycle pass her, either way. The Highway was busy. Not rush hour busy, but a steady stream of vehicles made their hurried way both east and westwards, rushing along to unknown destinations on errands mysterious. The vehicles were - much like the gaudy collection that motored about Summertime City - an eclectic mixture of eras and technologies.

The sight of the Highway, its sudden vitality and speed, both excited her and made her uneasy.

Nevertheless, she made her way onto it, glad to find

a wide shoulder suitable for walking. She headed west, thumb out, a single cat by her side and perhaps a dozen more in the overgrown field that flanked the Highway, pretending secrecy.

She caught her first ride less than a half hour later.

"Glad to have the company ma'am, being honest." Glynn Felbeck told her with a smile and only the slightest glance at the gun on her hip. He also smiled at the cat, who regarded him coldly from the dash where he'd stretched in lazy splendor. "It gets lonelier'n hell on the road to Golden."

Hope nodded, mind still on the never seen flock of cats she was rapidly leaving behind. She still felt a little guilty, despite the fact that she hadn't exactly lured them after her.

Glynn - a bearlike young man with flaming hair, beard and boyish eyes - took care of his truck, that much was certain. Despite its obvious age, the Chevy gleamed with the sparkle only loving maintenance can impart. The bed of the truck was loaded down and tarped snugly. Whatever Glynn was hauling was secure enough. Despite healthy curiosity, Hope didn't ask and her driver didn't offer. She figured it was none of her business.

"You headed for Golden?" he asked, voice trying for amiable but his tone giving away that he hoped for company all the way. And his eyes betrayed the fact that he certainly wouldn't mind getting to know his

passenger quite a bit better.

"I'm headed as far West as I can get." she told him, rather charmed by his attention.

He nodded wisely. "West is the way to go. The whole Middle Reach is falling into the shit, you ask me. Damn CRA bastards are getting ridiculous." He spat out the window in disgust. Then looked a bit ashamed. "Pardon the gesture, ma'am."

She laughed. "No worry. And my name is Hope, not ma'am." she reminded him.

His smile grew in size and scope. "That's a pretty..." he stopped and stiffened as he caught sight of something in the rearview.

"Aww fuck." he muttered, going pale.

"What is it?" Hope asked, craning her head around to look.

On the distant horizon, faint but growing brighter, was a set of flashing lights.

"Fuckitaalllltohell!" Glynn whispered fiercely. He instantly slowed his truck to a point, took a deep breath and concentrated on driving as solid and unassuming as possible.

"What's the problem?" Hope asked again, beginning to get nervous. The cat was eyeing the approaching

lights in a way that she didn't care for.

Glynn glanced at her nervously, but turned his attention back to the road. "CRA Troopers. Smuggler Patrol by the look of 'em."

"What the hell is this CRA?" she asked, confused.

He goggled at her for a second, then managed a weak smile. "That's right - you're fresh outta the East. East of Sum City is all Free Territory, ma'am..uh, Hope." He swallowed hard, trying to force himself calm. "Same as the West from Golden on." He kept glancing in the rearview, almost hypnotized by the approaching lights. Hope could also hear the beginnings of a familiar siren wail.

"But we're smack in the middle of the Middle Reach, and that's under the control of the Central Reach Authority. They've been around forever, based out of Port Louie on the Big River."

"They're...what? The government?"

Despite his fear, Glynn spat again. "Claim to be. Claim all sorts of shit. Claim everybody gets together ever so often and votes on who runs the Reach. Nevermind that I got no clue how that gives them any right to do anything to those of us don't bother to indulge in their ritual. Never mind I ain't never actually met anyone who claims to have done so. They claim it, they levy taxes, and they got the guns to back it up."

Hope sighed. "Yeah. Government." She remembered something. "You said Smuggler Patrol."

Glynn was silent, but nodded.

"And you're awful nervous." She grinned. "What are we smuggling, Glynn?"

His silence stretched on a bit. Then he shrugged. "Worst thing you can get caught smugglin'."

"Drugs?" she guessed.

He looked surprised. "Naw. Food."

Hope nearly choked. "Food?!"

"Food." he repeated. "Soybeans mostly, and some choice beef in coldboxes. Grown in the Free East, needed in the Free West. Untaxed by the Unfree Central Authority that claims it has the damn right. Food. One of the few things even scared folks won't suffer without."

Her head swam. But she held onto the practical. "And what's the penalty? Massive fines? Jail time?"

Glynn's smile had little humor. "The penalty is on the spot execution."

Hope heard a growl. She glanced at the cat, but discovered that the growl was coming from herself.

Glynn seemed to shrink. "I...I...apologize for getting you mixed up with this..."

She waved him off, pushing the rage that threatened to rise down at the same time.

"Don't apologize for being a decent man, Glynn." She could hear the siren wailing like a demon now, and make out the bulky armored car that was rushing towards them, red and blue lights strobing in angry flashes. "Can you outrun them?"

He shook his head. "No way in hell."

She sighed. "Any chance at all that they'll just pass on by? After someone on up the road, maybe?"

"I think they might have been tipped. Last town I was in, I got the feeling that one fella..well..." He looked guilty again. "Like I said, ma'am. I'm sorry I..."

"My name is Hope, dammit!" she snapped at him. "And I told you not to apologize for decency! Don't apologize for giving a woman on the side of the road a lift. Don't apologize for trying to make a living hauling food to folks who need it! Don't apologize for shit brought on because arrogant fuckers think they got the right."

She began to load her gun. The process soothed and steadied her.

"They think they got the damn right. The right to interfere with other people who ain't doing them a damn bit of harm. The right to harass peaceful people for their own gain. They claim they took a vote or made a vow or got the word from God himself. All bullshit." She slapped the gun closed and laid it in her lap. She stroked the cat, who was as relaxed as warm butter.

"All they got is their own arrogance. Their own greed and lust and desire for power. And guns." The cat purred, a rough rumble against her hand.

"But I got a damn gun, too." She looked him in the eye. "Do you?"

He was looking at her with something like awe. "Yes m...Hope. I got a shotgun under the seat."

She nodded. "Then, before they get any closer, how 'bout you swerve us over into that field? Give us a bit of time to prepare them a proper reception."

Glynn, despite fear and awe and what looked a damn sight like his own approaching death, laughed loud and long. "You sure about this?"

She smiled at him. "Glynn, all they got is arrogance and guns. But we have guns too. If everybody with a gun decided they'd had their fill of arrogance and stood up, they'd be outnumbered. They'd find out quick what their right amounted to."

He smiled back at her. His eyes gleamed with something new.

"Brace yourself." he said.

She grabbed the cat and did so.

The squeal of the brakes on the Highway sounded like a battlecry.

That was where it started she figured later. The legend of The Woman Who Hitch Hiked With Cats. That was where it started, in that moment in a field in the middle of no where, when a CRA Smuggler Patrol with a hot tip got more than it bargained for.

They were expecting a single man and a shotgun and an easy bust.

They weren't expecting a berserk Viking with flaming hair and beard, laughing joy as he blasted them with a wild assortment of everything from three inch magnums to bird shot.

They weren't expecting the thin, black eyed wraith with the hell dealing pistol who never seemed to miss. Who walked into their own fire with no fear and sighted with the cold precision of the Devil herself.

And they certainly weren't expecting the goddamned army of cats that swarmed them from the field, attacking with rabid ferocity, seeming to come from nowhere and everywhere. Cats that circled the devil

woman like protective demons. Cats that seemed to replace every fallen animal with two. Cats that blinded and tore jugulars and the thick veins in wrists and seemed to know exactly where to go to bleed a man to death.

And they didn't expect to end their day dead and strapped naked to the Patrol cruiser, a gruesome frame for a message on the windshield in huge letters of their own blood:

**FUCK YOUR RIGHT.**

A message that was soon on the lips of every smuggler and rebel and anti-authoritarian rabblrouser in the Middle Reach. A message they'd hear again and again, tied to the rambling but seemingly unstoppable path of The Woman as she made her way west through CRA territory.

As the legend grew, and resistance rallied behind her.

As the power of the CRA crumbled and fell to a writhing death:

**FUCK YOUR RIGHT.**

It was a long walk later, and many rides, and a thousand fights, and weeks and months, but she passed out of the Middle Reach and into the Free West.

The border was marked with a sign that had once

read "You are now leaving the Central Reach Authority." It was now defaced by the slogan she'd first left on a windshield a thousand miles east.

She chuckled at it, and kept walking.

The cats were all around her, a secret silent army that formed and reformed like waves against the rock of her self. The tom, far from his growling original attitude, now proudly stood as their king. Only he was allowed the place of honor by her feet, after all. Only he was allowed food from her hand and the touch of affection. His subjects were allies and accepted, but he'd fight any and all that tried to intrude upon those privileges.

Hope left such things to him.

She'd stayed on the trail of The Boss. He fled ever west and she'd followed. He was leaving his own path as he went, it seemed: dark stories told to her after dark by ride after ride, in town after town.

She was philosophical. She'd find him eventually. Then she'd have her answers, and her revenge.

She laid camp her first night in the Free West about a dozen miles from the defaced sign. As she was settling in, sleepy, she was thinking of the approaching fact of The Ends, and wondering if her confrontation with her past would happen before she reached it. She hoped so.

She was getting ready to turn in, when she saw the headlights approach. She waited for them to pass on, but they moved towards her with determination.

She reached for the gun and stood. The cats surrounded her, fearless and loyal. They were ready for a fight.

But something about the headlights and the sound of the engine was familiar. Something about the shape of the truck as it pulled up.

She was still and ready as the motor went silent and a door opened and closed.

The tall, grey man was smiling as he stepped into the light of her fire. His rifle was strung across his back and his hands were out in a gesture of peace.

"Why, Mizz Hope." The Smoke Man said. "Fancy meeting you out here."

## **9. Rituals**

*Truth hurts.*

In every sense that matters, there is quite a bit of magic to a simple campfire. On the deepest level of elemental truth, the basic act of forcing dead, cold matter to give forth light and heat is the very heart

of what magic is and will forever be. Life from death, action from the void.

Between human beings there is magic in the campfire as well. The flickering light scaring away the shadows can act as a portal for wisdom. Can allow truths to be told that would sound false in the light of the sun.

The Smoke Man obeyed the ritual as he sat at Hope's fire. He nodded a greeting to The Cat and his army. They accepted his presence with silent politeness. He brought forth a pouch and a pack of rolling papers. To an offered fire, one brings their own offering: be that a drink, a bite, a smoke or a story.

"Care for a smoke?" he asked.

"I don't use tobacco." Hope informed him.

"This isn't tobacco." he admitted with a smile.

"I don't smoke pot either."

"Nor is it cannabis." His fingers rolled with simple deft motions.

Hope smiled. "What is it?"

"Called dreambreak. Only grows in the Borderlands. Some say it opens the mind and the memory when they'd rather stay closed." His eyes were unreadable when he finished the smoke and put it to his lips. He

lit it and took a long, crackling drag. Hope smelled the herb then, faintly. It hinted at spice and something deeper. A musky scent, like the den of a burrowing animal.

"You still don't know how you came to be here, do you?"

She shook her head no.

"This could help." He offered her the smoke.

She considered a moment, before finally taking it. She had little to fear from the Smoke Man, who was the only person in the Borderlands who had ever answered any of her questions.

She didn't choke. The dreambreak was surprisingly smooth. Spice and musk, yes - and the surprise of a peppermint aftertaste, that turned sweet as it lingered on the tongue.

She took another drag. She held the smoke until it expanded to the point of pain in her lungs. She let it go, and watched the ghostly whorls emerge from her mouth, dancing through shifting focus, bright and somehow...significant.

It's already affecting me, she understood.

Across the fire, the Smoke Man's grin seemed to grow. "Just let it come. Don't fight it. Relax and let it come."

"Why are you helping me?" she asked, while she still could. Around her, the night grew distinct.

"Maybe you're helping me." he said.

And then she was gone.

In the first vision she and the cat are in a very familiar hospital room. She recognizes the room, having spent two horrible weeks there. She doesn't know why the cat is with her, but she appreciates his company.

They stand in a corner and watch. In the bed, invaded by tubes and dying, lies her father. Sitting before him, all weeped out, holding a shoe box, is herself.

How small and thin and weak she looks, Hope thinks. How feeble.

"You brought it." her Father says. It isn't a question.

The old Hope simply nods.

"You're a good girl." her Father tells her. He always told her that. His voice is thin and weak and raspy. The cancer has taken all of his strength, all of his energy and vigor. It hasn't taken his will, yet. That much she knows. If it had, he couldn't have requested this final favor from her.

She sits the box on the nightstand. She kisses her Father goodbye. She hugs him for a long moment and even finds a few more tears to shed into his chest. Finally, she stands. She hesitates. She leaves, unable to say anything more.

From the corner, Hope and the cat watch what follows. Hope knows what is coming, and - in her old life - often wished she'd been strong enough to stay by her father's side as he did what he had to do. That she'd had the will and strength to hold his hand as he'd taken his life. He'd ended the pain as a sane man, with his mind and memory intact. She'd been too weak to do so. Too weak and too scared and too childish.

But she isn't that person any more. She's not weak, or scared, or childish now. She's a woman of iron and cordite, a dealer of death and justice. She's grown and ancient in the way of the hard path.

She and the cat step up to her father as he struggles with the box containing his old gun. The tubes that get in his way are torn unceremoniously out, and he ignores the increase in pain. All that will be over in a moment.

As he places the gun to his temple, hand shaking but sure, something focuses in his eyes. She steps as close as she can. She wills him to see her.

Her ghost hand takes his free hand. That big strong hand that protected her for so long.

A smile flickers at the corner of his mouth. Perhaps he sees her. A little. Enough.

"I love you Daddy." she whispers, and he pulls the trigger.

It is messy and awful and sad, but she doesn't look away. She owes him that much.

As the flurry of the aftermath happens, she is surprised when the ghost stands up from her father's dead body, the ghost of his gun still clenched in his hand. He looks insubstantial but somehow stronger in death than in those last moments of life.

He sits there on the bed, as nurses and doctors rush and sigh and shake their heads in sadness and pity. He seems to listen to a faraway voice. Finally he nods, and smiles.

He stands up and, carrying the gun, walks out of the room.

She follows him, with the cat. They follow him as he leaves the hospital, and the manicured grounds, as he finds a road and heads west. His stride is determined, his manner happy and purposeful. As she follows him he seems to grow ever more substantial. More solid.

After a long time, he comes across the old truck. She begins to understand when he takes the gun belt and

holster from the front seat, and straps them on. As he drops the now familiar gun into place.

She climbs into the passenger seat as he takes the wheel. As they drive into the desert. He navigates by that unheard voice for a while, until it apparently tells him to stop. He does so. He settles back, to wait.

He will wait here for a long time, she knows.

She gets out of the truck, opening and closing the door unnoticed by the ghost of her father. A ghost that is no longer a ghost here in the Borderlands. A flesh and blood man who will wait past a second death, and turn to bone, and finally dust, waiting for her. To deliver that gun to her hand.

She smiles at him there. He looks patient, content even. A little smile lingers on his face. His head is cocked as he listens to that unheard voice, and his eyes are closed as if hearing a lovely melody. Perhaps the voice is singing to him. She hopes so.

"I love you Daddy." She says again, and starts to leave.

Reality warps and folds in upon itself.

She is sitting at the campfire again. The tears on her cheeks surprise her.

The Smoke Man reaches the still smoldering dreambreak to her again. She is not finished.

She takes it. The taste this time is one of citrus, and a slight burn like cayenne as the flavor fades. The smoke from her mouth eddies in a great whorl, shifting color from white to blue, to join the black of night as she fades and travels again.

The courtroom is as silent as the grave.

"Guilty." the foreman of the jury announces.

The silence ends and the great circus erupts. The judge bangs for order with no success. It is over, at last - after months of testimony and tears and accusations. It is over and the husband killing bitch has been found guilty, just as she was judged by the media and the public before she ever set foot in this courtroom.

Her tales of rape and abuse were not believed. Her stories of why she killed her husband and his three friends. To make matters even more horrible, all four of her victims were decorated police officers. Paragons of virtue and pillars of their community. Their records were spotless and their names respected. The idea that they had gathered every weekend to rape and humiliate the small and quite plain woman before them was ridiculous. It was obviously part of the murderous psychopathic fantasy that her deranged mind had created. She was jealous of her husband's success and reputation. The suicide of her dying father had been the final push over the edge of madness. Three noted

psychiatrists testified to this.

She and the cat sit in the back, lost amidst the circus of the guilty verdict. Hope keeps her eyes on the timid and washed out woman being led, handcuffed, from the courtroom. The woman who shows not a single emotion. Who rarely even blinks those puffy, sleep starved eyes.

She and the cat stand and follow as the bailiffs lead her towards her cell. The sentencing will take place the very next day, the judge has decreed. The most predicted outcome is the electric chair. There is a certain grim satisfaction to the reporters as they make note of this, as they prepare the news for a slew of special editions.

Hope follows the woman. She knows what is coming.

She sees the wife of one of her victims before anyone else. Watches as the red haired, scarecrow thin woman steps up, face a mask of hate and pain, and shoots the murderess three times.

"Die you murdering whore!" the red haired scarecrow screams, before the bailiffs tackle her, releasing the bleeding, silent murderess, who crumples to the floor.

She is not surprised this time, when the ghost stands up from the dead body. She simply follows as her past self discovers that the handcuffs are gone. She remembers thinking how lucky she was that all three

bullets missed her. How she had a chance to escape.  
How she took it and ran.

Hope and the cat follow, easily, knowing every step  
now, but curious. Drawn to watch.

They follow, as she flees through the streets of the  
city. As she steals an outfit from a clothesline. She  
grows substantial as she does so, already in the  
Borderlands, the city but a copied memory.

As she makes her way to a Salvation Army, where  
she outfits herself for a trip.

As she hitch hikes west, forgetting as she goes,  
remembering only the terror and the reckless desire  
to flee.

Miles from the city she encounters Char - old Charon  
- who picks her up and ferries her across a Styx of  
solid black flow, a river of asphalt.

Into the Borderlands proper. Into the great  
Inbetween. She runs, seeking revenge and retribution  
against the bastard who continued to hurt her even  
after she'd killed him.

Chasing the ghost of her husband into the land of the  
unquiet dead.

Reality demanded attention.

She gasped. The still burning stub of the dreambreak

singed her fingers.

Her body tingled with an almost electric charge as she emerged from the throes of the vision.

It was near dawn. Mellow grey light seeped up over the horizon. The rising mountains of the Free West were etched in shadow in the distance.

The Smoke Man regarded her. She tossed the stub of the dreambreak into the guttering remains of the fire.

"So. Now you know." he said. His voice was gentle.

"Yes." she told him. "Thank you."

He shrugged and stood up. She followed suit.

"Now what?" he asked.

She considered. After a moment she smiled. "Nothing has changed." she told him. "I just know why I'm doing what I'm doing. I still have to hunt the bastard down and put him away. Not just for myself, anymore. Whatever evil he carried in his heart he brought here to the Borderlands. He harried the people as The Boss for however long it was before I crossed over on his tail."

"That's not a very Hope-ful attitude to take." The Smoke Man reminded her.

She nodded. "That's the truth. But maybe the time for Hope is gone. Maybe I'm yet another person now."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Names as a tool and a purpose."

That struck her as proper. "It's not just for me, now. It's for those he abused after I sent him here."

"Charity."

"Charity." she agreed. "From now on I am Charity."

The sun broke over the horizon and the day dawned clear and bright, the beckoning mountains beneath a cold blue sky. She gathered her supplies as the cats prepared for travel.

She turned the offer of a ride down. "I give Charity. I don't accept it."

"As you like." The Smoke Man said. She watched him head back east. She knew she was not done with him yet.

West they moved, Charity and her army. The day brightened, the clarity of her purpose pushed her on.

West, towards the Ends. Towards revenge. Towards conclusion.

To spread the Charity of a cold, hard heart.

## **10. Trapshoot**

*Ends await.*

She knew who she was and where she was going, but the fact of the matter remained that: the ends await. This is a truth all human kind must eventually admit, a blunt admission of pragmatics no matter how optimistic or mystical minded.

The basic template of existence is the mystery.

Thousands of days and that many or more miles away she'd find herself in a dark and noisy saloon.

She was wearing a much older body; a thing of dense muscles and leathery skin. A face filled with wrinkles and a long crown of iron grey hair pulled back and plaited into a practical mane. Her eyes, if anything, had grown sharper as her body grew more brittle. There was nothing of weakness about her, no hint of softness, no flash or glimpse of mercy.

She was pure Charity now, charity of the blackest and most honest sort. She'd made a vow to rid the world - a second world even - of a monster who walked like a man. Her own pleasure and enjoyment had been set aside to accomplish this end. Her own life curtailed to chase this duty.

The saloon was dark in more ways than simple lack of light. They were very near The Ends here, very close to the blank grey wall of roiling mist that marked the border of the Borderlands. The grey chasm that ate the bleak desert terrain. The grey from which no traveller returned.

Stories abounded about that mist. A cult of rejects made a religion of it - camping near it in tattered tent cities, sending prayers into its unresponsive face. They claimed to hear voices from the blank wall of grey, hear songs of eternal sadness and the weeping of old gods. The muttered confessions of ghosts.

Occasionally, she'd heard, the mist shifted by some cosmic whim and entire tent cities were lost. Vanished. Gone when morning light touched their scoured grounds again.

Such was the price of so flippant a religion, she figured.

Kerosene lamps burned in the saloon, since electricity refused to flow here near The Ends. Motors wouldn't crank. Watches stopped ticking and even levers failed to shift as much.

Physical laws broke down, it was said. And mortal laws? Justice and fairness?

She laughed aloud, just thinking of them. Such human laws were chancy in even the most stable of

times and places. Near the Ends, to hope for them was a fool's errand.

She touched the bulky talisman that hung from her neck, gently. She felt the smooth cool touch of bone and let it relax her. She laughed again, a bit louder, thinking of Justice and fool's errands.

Across the room three men sat at a table, speaking pretty lies to a pretty young girl. Charity had been watching them for the past half hour. She wondered what the child was doing here. She was out of place here near The Ends. This was a place for the worn and near broken, the aging and the dull. She was a jolly thing, lively and sweet. She moved with quick liquid grace and the fiery red of her hair seemed to scar the dark of this rotting saloon.

What was she doing here? Charity guzzled the last of her piss warm beer and pondered that. Lost or a runaway, she figured. A fugitive from an ugly past, hoping for a brighter future in a dark place she was too young and stupid to hate and fear on sight. Another pilgrim in search of justice and fairness in a world scant of either.

And she laughed a third time. The third time proved the charm. The three men and the pretty out of place girl looked at her. The men looked wary. The girl smiled an innocent smile.

"What's so damn funny, old lady?" one of the men asked.

"No need to be rude..." began the young girl, but she was shushed by the other two.

The speaker raised his voice. "I said what's so damn all fired funny?"

Charity took a deep breath. She wondered if the fool had realized they were all alone in the saloon. That they had been all alone from the moment she'd stepped through the door. Those with good sense and not intent on tonight's rough pleasure had exited quickly as she sat. Even the owner of the joint had hauled ass as soon as he set the complimentary beer in front of this woman who radiated power and purpose. You got to know such things when you spent time near The Ends. They reacted with the atmosphere, created something like a halo.

They warned those with sense.

"You mute, old woman?" the speaker went on. "Just an idiot laugh left in that empty old head?"

Charity smiled at him. The weight of the talisman around her neck soothed and grounded her.

"You ever hear of the legends they got a bit east of here?" she began. Her voice was strong and loud. It surprised the men. They seemed to shrink a little. "The legends of the Woman Who Hitch Hiked With Cats?"

The wariness in the eyes of the men grew bright and painful. They tensed. "I ain't in no mood to hear fairy stories, lady." said the speaker, but his voice broke on the last words. And that was the moment the girl chose to speak up.

"Why, I've heard them!" she said, excited and please. "Been hearin' 'em my whole life seems like." She closed her eyes and recited, with the air of one telling a favorite story:

"The Woman Who Hitch Hiked With Cats moves through the world on a path all her own. She came from someplace beyond and her destination is not for common folk to understand. The cats who follow her speak to her in a secret language, and those folk who help her on her path are rewarded in a thousand different ways."

"Shut up that nonsense!" one of the men hissed. But Charity over rode him.

"You go on, honey."

"On her hip is a gun as old as the world and almost as big. With her travels an army of wild cats who know secret paths across the land."

The three men heard enough. They were up and guns were drawn.

But they found that a gun was already waiting for them. They hadn't even seen her move.

"You go on over by the door, honey." she told the red haired girl. "Stay there. Listen. But get ready to run."

The girl backed away from the standoff. But she had the fire, well and true. She stayed. Stared. Her eyes were intent and curious.

Charity smiled at her, then turned the smile on her targets. "Girl tells a story well, don't she?"

Silence. Electricity coursed the room.

"Well, I know a story of that Woman. One ain't nobody heard. Want to hear it?"

The men just stood frozen. She looked at the girl. Warming her heart, she got a little smile and an even tinier nod.

Oh, there was fire in this one.

"One night the woman had a dream." Charity began. Her voice became quieter, but her eyes never wavered. "In the dream that first cat - the one who had been with her on the whole hard road - had came up to her and found a voice to speak. This struck the woman as odd until she realized - the way you do sometimes - that the cat had been speaking to her in dreams since the day she'd met him."

"'Mizz', the cat said 'I'm getting old and this here game were playing is getting tired and lonesome.'"

"The woman was taken aback. 'What game are you referring to, Cat?' she asked."

"The game where you pretend I'm a cat and I pretend I'm a cat and such.' he told her. 'It's just tiresome.'"

The youngest of the men whimpered and his hand twitched. Charity shot him three times, carefully paralyzing him, and had her gun back at its exact point before anyone else could even breathe different. The thud of the body to the floor was ignored. So was the whimpering. Sweating increased. Blood pressure rose.

The girl, to her credit, didn't flinch.

After a moment, Charity continued.

"The woman got all insulted and acted like that cat was crazy. The cat was an old hand at his and just told the story again, patiently."

"I ain't no Cat, Mizz. I'm just a part of you that you got separated from a long time ago. Your spirit, some might call it. Your will. That fire that makes a person a person.'"

"You shut up!' that stupid ignorant woman said. She didn't want to hear it."

"The cat ignored her, and went on. 'I'm old and tired

of this form, Mizz. Time for you to do what you need to do.'" "

The oldest of the men, the one who'd spoke first, broke. He screamed and fired. He missed by a mile.

Very carefully, almost regretfully, Charity blew his head off.

Centimeter twitch, bone and muscle and skin and tendon like steel. She blew the second man's head off even as he tried to apply pressure to the trigger.

In the sudden silence came a laugh. From the floor. The paralyzed man laughed like he expected nothing less.

The red haired girl helped her pull him outside, where there was a little more light. The girl eyed her like a vision gone bad.

"You need to head on back home now." Charity told her.

"No home to go to." the girl said.

"Well. Away from here will be an improvement."

The child smiled. "You're right." She turned to walk away, then stopped. She looked Charity in the eyes when she spoke.

"I'm glad I got to meet you." she said, simply. "I've

been hearing about you all my life. When I was a kid I believed in you utterly. When I got older, not so much." She laughed. "It's a nice thing to know that the faiths of your childhood are not in vain."

Charity nodded. "What's your name?"

"Annie." the girl told her.

"A good name." Charity said, with the hint of irony.

"Good enough." the girl agreed. Then she turned and walked away.

Charity focused on the dying man in front of her.

"Where did he go?" she demanded. "Your Boss?"

The dying man smiled at her. "I'll tell you if you finish the story." he said, voice slurring.

Charity was startled. "What?"

"The story about the cat." he reminded her. "I figured where it was going. I...I know how tales go." he said. There was a pause. "You ate him, right?"

Charity actually laughed. She produced the talisman. It was the gleaming skull of a cat. The empty eyes were as black as space.

"Yeah." she admitted. "When I woke up he was dying at my feet. Old and tired. I petted him a little and he

was gone. But his voice was strong in my head. I skinned him and ate him. Shared bits of him with the braver of his army. Then I set his skull on a fire ant pile and let them fashion me this here talisman."

"He was always you, and with you he stays." the man said, blood bubbling on his lips. "I won't say I'm sorry or anything like that. But I'll ask you to make it quick."

"Where did he go?" Charity demanded, but her voice was soft.

"He ran into The Ends." the man admitted. "He's gone. Please. End it quick."

She did so.

Then she headed for The Ends.

She didn't truly believe it until she neared that ugly grey curtain and saw the abandoned caravan wagon. She caught sight of one of the mules - skinny, near starved, almost wild from abuse - grazing nearby.

She followed a set of tracks until she came right up against that grey border.

Charity stood there, staring into that blank grey wall, and the footprints that staggered so recklessly past it. She stood there feeling the cold emptiness inside, as it echoed the cold emptiness of that grey expanse.

After these miles and these years. After these struggles. Could this be all there was to find? Another set of footsteps leading into the unknown?

Go on, a secret little voice inside whispered. Go on. Keep following. Keep on his trail. Don't let him escape. She trembled, listening to it, torn.

"Don't listen." said another voice, familiar and not secret at all.

She turned, gun coming out and up in reflex.

The Smoke Man stopped, hands out in peace.

"He's gone." he told her, plain and simple. "Gone and past chasing."

"I failed." she interpreted.

He laughed. The laughter held no mockery, no bitterness. It was a laugh of true friendly humor. "Oh, Lord woman. You are too hard on yourself. Ugly Jim was right about you. Nothing by half. Nothing."

"He escaped me." she said. Tears threatened. For the first time in years past God's counting, her vision wavered and tears threatened. Rage and frustration clashed inside her.

The Smoke Man shook his head, still chuckling. "You terrified the man." he told her. "You hounded him. Even death didn't give him escape, you followed him

even there. You followed no matter the space or the obstacle he threw up. Every mile he got brought him stories of you growing ever closer."

The talisman grew warm. She felt it invading her body.

"You hounded him." he continued, obviously enjoying his words. "All these years, all these miles, and every one brought him tales of you on his trail." His smile grew fit to split his face. "Tales that tore him apart. Tales that made you a queen and a goddess and a goddamn hero. Made you what he'd pretended to be for so long in that other world. What he'd lied himself to be. And the thing that ate him the most, the thing that harried him past all reason was....why, he knew the stories about you were true." That smile no longer looked even the slightest bit pleasant. It was a portrait of revenge, well and true.

"You hounded him, lady. You hounded him right off the edge of the fucking world and into the certainty of extinction. Hounded him with fear and shame and the plain old ugly facts of the matter."

The tears were falling now, but they were a different sort. The gun in her hand sank away, but The Smoke Man didn't move. Through the prism of those tears she was stunned to see the trails on his own face.

"You hounded him." his voice was quiet, almost a prayer. "Mostly you hounded him with the fact that what your Daddy said was true - no matter what he

took away, no matter how hard he hurt you, what your Daddy said was true. You were a good girl."

The Smoke Man turned and spat, into the grey Ends. As near to the clumsy footsteps as he could reach.

"You did him in." said the quiet voice that did not waver despite the tears. "Good riddance. Good girl. Thank you."

And she saw that the shape of the Smoke Man was becoming vague. Dissipating.

The gun was at her side now. "What are you?" she asked. There was no demand, only a desire to know.

His voice was already growing indistinct. But he answered.

"No man is born evil." he said. "In fact, to become evil a man has to kill what is good in him and send it away, into the Borderlands, to trouble his whims no more."

She tried to step up and hold the Smoke Man's hand as he faded, but he was beyond that now.

He glanced at the implacable grey curtain. "That creature killed me long ago. Sent me here long ago. I've been walking this ground for a long time. I did what I could. Life is a trapshoot, and we take our shot. We grab on every chance hit to stay in the game. If we manage to get the chances to stay in

long enough, we might get good enough to hang on till something right happens."

Charity fell to her knees and tried to cling to him. She failed, he was truly smoke now, almost gone.

"I was killed long before he set eyes on you. But somehow I knew about you. I waited for you. I hung on till I got to meet you. I felt him come and knew you'd be on his trail."

She wept without shame. He faded.

"Go back east." came the whisper. "Time don't matter much here. Go to the east and look for your home."

She barely heard his last words over her own grief.

"I'm glad I got to meet you, Annie. I love you. You're a good girl."

And then the wind took the last of him.

She sobbed for a good long time, and the universe was kind and let her have the peace to do it.

When she finished, she stood up. She dusted herself off. She looked around.

The world abided. From every hiding spot curious eyes peered out. They waited, wondering what came next.

She sighed. She stretched. She hoisted the backpack up and secured the straps. She turned away from the grey nothing of the ends of the world and started walking.

"Let's go, dammit." she told the cats.

And so she headed back east, in search of a place she'd once known. She wasn't certain of finding it, of course, but certainties were not the point.

The point was the journey, and that blazing need, that desire. The seeking of a thing was the worthwhile part of living, not the finding.

As she travelled the cats came to her. Ferals from the wilderness, barn kittens who got the itch and urge to travel when she passed. They followed her as birds follow the seasons, as leaves turn to follow the rain. They came to her and fought for her, and loved her up close and from a distance. They responded to something in her that was like themselves, some strength and independence. Some instinct to move together but to never be herded.

To an instinct to forever hunt.

As she travelled the legends whirled and grew around her, shimmering and splitting and becoming great sagas and simple cautionary tales. They became boogie stories and bedtime treats. They became sermons and drunken jokes. They became

stories great and simple and none of them were any more or less true than the others. That is the nature of legends. The beating heart of myth.

Legends. Myth. Explorations of that eternal basic mystery, and the simple truth that the investigation of it is what matters.

Legends.

Of the grim, quiet wanderer with the kind heart and a soul full of justice.

Of the army of cats that travelled on secret paths and could not be left behind.

Of the huge steel gun that sounded like thunder.

Of the fall of governments and the rise of new nations.

Of the slaying of dragons herded off the end of the world.

Of the jet black talisman with the space dark eyes.

Of poor Faith, brave Hope and grim Charity.

Of the woman who hitch hiked with cats.

**When I was a child, I spake as a child,**

**I understood as a child, I thought as a child:  
but when I became a man, I put away childish things.**

**For now we see through a glass, darkly;  
but then face to face: now I know in part;  
but then shall I know even as also I am known.**

**And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three;  
but the greatest of these is charity.**

*(1Corinthians 13:11-13)*

**(For Claire and Sharon, and all the other daughters of  
Columbia. I love you, sisters.)**

# A Map Of Mankind

## I.

What, exactly, is society?

The answer to that question depends -- of course -- on who you ask.

Ask a liberal democrat and you'll more than likely get a bizarre fairy tale concerning some overarching godthing that matters ever so much more than the disposable, puling individuals that just so happen to make up their imaginary hoodoo fetish.

Ask a conservative republican and the answer will differ only in rhetoric. They'll spin it a different way -- adding high flown words about 'values' and 'traditions' and, more likely than not, whatever religious variant they happen to claim faith in.

Ask a libertarian or an anarchist and you'll at least get some heat. A measure of cynicism concerning the concept, perhaps even outright anger. It won't be positive, at least. Unfortunately, it will still involve the overarching hoodoo -- as a devil rather than a god, but hoodoo nonetheless.

Big, invisible, inescapable thing that subsumes and commands individuals.

Nonsense, if you ask me.

This 'society as whole organism' concept is what Rose Wilder Lane blew big smoking holes through when she penned these beautiful, utterly true words in 1943:

To think of human society as an organism, developing, progressing, or retrograding, is to think like a bee -- if a bee thinks. It is to think as a pagan thinks. It is to imagine a fantasy.

In the human world there is no entity but the individual person. There is no force but individual energy. In actual human life the only real Society is every living person's contact with everyone he meets.

So far as Society has any real existence, it exists when boy meets girl, when Mrs. Jones telephones Mrs. Smith, when Robinson buys a cigar, when the motorist stops for gasoline, when a lobbyist tips a bellboy and when he meets a Congressman, and when the Congressman votes on a bill; when the postman delivers the mail and the labor bosses discuss a strike and the milliner brings another hat and the dentist says, "Wider, please." Human relationships are so infinitely numerous and varying every moment, that no human mind can begin to

grasp them.

To call all these relationships Society, and then discuss the progress or welfare of Society, as if it existed as a bee-swarm does, is simply to escape from reality to fairyland.

-- What Was Wrong With The Old World?, Rose Wilder Lane

This concept is what Ludwig Von Mises devastated again and again in Human Action:

Individual man is born into a socially organized environment. In this sense alone we may accept the saying that society is--logically or historically--antecedent to the individual. In every other sense this dictum is either empty or nonsensical. The individual lives and acts within society. But society is nothing but the combination of individuals for cooperative effort. It exists nowhere else than in the actions of individual men. It is a delusion to search for it outside the actions of individuals. To speak of a society's autonomous and independent existence, of its life, its soul, and its actions is a metaphor which can easily lead to crass errors.

-- Human Action Chapter VIII

It's odd that even the most diehard liberal or conservative will agree with Von Mises that society is, at base, the process of individuals interacting. They

have to. As RWL astutely observed, to disagree is to 'retreat into fantasy.' If said diehards did indeed disagree, one would merely have to ask them to point to their society. To draw a picture of it. To describe its shape and form and function, to explain its mechanics, in simple descriptive terms.

They can't, of course. Mired as it is in dogmatic political nonsense, society becomes a non-concept -- a mystical concept as blind faith based as Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. Unlike those harmless conceits, however, the political definition of society is dangerous. It has, in fact, been used for centuries as the big club, the truncheon, in the ongoing devaluation of the individual. When you hear 'for the good of society', beware. It almost always means your individuality -- and your wealth, health, and dignity -- is in danger.

But, if society is the process of individuals interacting, how can it be somehow 'more important' than those same individuals? How can something created by the actions of individuals be used to belittle and harm them?

Because society as defined by the collectivists and powermongers and control freaks is an outright lie. Amusingly (if the bleakest of black humor amuses you), it's not even a well told lie. It is a ridiculous, inept, un-clever, clumsy lie. Loki himself would speak truth before he used such pathetic trickery. Satan would bow before heaven rather than resort to such childish fibbing.

Society, as posited, praised and worshiped by the beehivers and leash-holders, simply does not exist.

Society as it is, however, does exist. It is as real as math and music and logic and language. Far from devaluing individuals, it glorifies them. Rather than being 'more important' than our flickering firefly selves, it is our servant and greatest tool. Instead of beating us down, it raises us up to great heights and allows wondrous achievement.

Because I can point to society. I can draw you a picture of it. I can describe its shape and form and function and explain its mechanics, in simple descriptive terms.

Society is a map.

A map of mankind.

## II.

In any process of interaction, there must -- by definition -- be a common basis for that interaction. How, exactly, do we as individuals interact with each other?

This is an absurdly simple answer: We communicate. Every single peaceful interaction -- from the prosaic to the profound -- requires communication to happen.

In fact, the only interaction possible without communication of some sort is brute violence, the thing that society exists to avoid.

Communication, eternal non-interaction, or violence -- those are the three choices.

Society is communication when all mystical notions are stripped away. Lines of communication.

Think on your daily life. Imagine yourself unable to communicate. No conversation, no information gathered or passed along, no trading or sharing of anything.

Daily life becomes literally impossible in such a nightmarish hypothetical.

Eons ago, for some unknown, wonderful reason, two groups of primitive folk met and decided not to fight. Instead, they attempted to figure each other out. They sat down and communicated. How they did this is unknown and probably unknowable. It also doesn't matter -- body language, grunting and pointing, symbols drawn in the dirt. All of those or none. No matter. What matters is that it worked. The two groups not only refrained from conflict, they probably traded. That first message was no doubt something of this nature:

"We need meat. We got lots of berries. You come from rocky place. No bushes there. You give meat, we give berries."

In that transformative, world changing unrecorded moment, civilization was born. The market came to pass. The division of labor reared its head. No longer did all needs and wants have to be provided via direct individual labor. No longer did a shortage in one area mean the hard cold fact of doing without. No longer did desire and need mean the dangerous and tragic necessity of violence.

The map of mankind that is society began to be sketched. Lightly and crudely at first, with a tentative hand. The cartographers of the proto-map had no idea if this map would prove trustworthy in the future. The trade partner of today might be the raider of tomorrow. That they tried nevertheless is something we modern humans owe them thanks for. It was an insightful and prescient risk that makes modern venture capitalists look like scared kids with Topps cards in the schoolyard. To those first map makers, taking a chance on this society racket was risking literally everything: the safety and security of their tribe. To them, those small family clusters were the entire world.

The risk paid off, though -- paid off so spectacularly that it's no exaggeration to say that all of modern civilization is just a dividend. For the first cartographers, the main payoff was the effect that communication had on their small insular little worlds. They found those worlds expanding and growing in complexity. With communication came a host of new relationships, new ways of existing with

others who had -- up until then -- been scary strangers. No longer was it a choice between avoiding and fighting. Now there was the possibility of peaceful interaction and -- even better -- possible gain.

I'm simplifying this to make a point, of course. There was probably no single moment where two groups sat down and initiated society. The more realistic idea is that such things happened repeatedly, again and again, until suddenly some critical mass was reached and humanity found itself with a surprisingly large amount of chattering neighbors.

Things really got interesting when spoken language began to be codified and used over wide areas. Though mutable, spoken language holds its shape far better than body language and symbolic gesturing. Written language came along much later, and decreased the mutation even more.

The big problem -- and it's a problem that exists to this day -- was that language was a geographic/territorial phenomenon. Beyond a certain area the map changed, became written in unknown symbols. This fact slowed the progress of a Greater Society considerably. The logical and near universal ordering of society -- family, community, tribe, etc. -- broke down along geographical boundaries because of this. Instead of an accepted and universal map, the human race was stuck with a collection of regional maps. Only the happy fact that a great many people enjoyed learning and using those other

languages made this merely a setback rather than a disaster.

When talk turns to the most influential of human inventions, only rarely is language -- written or spoken -- mentioned along with such things as fire, the wheel, agriculture, etc. I personally think this is because language -- though no less an invented tool than the aforementioned -- is such a basic function that it seems a biological effect. Speech is indeed a biological effect, but language itself (and its beautiful daughter writing) is a technological artifact through and through.

Using those first proto-maps the human race took the idea of society and ran with it. Society increased quickly and well, the complexity of the communication tools increasing along with the numbers of human minds manipulating them.

The map expanded, became lush with detail. Technology sang and shifted paradigms: radio and cinema and television and telephones. Geographies shrank as the map found new symbols to denote electron warped time space.

And then, one day, the kids found the map and decided to hack it.

**III.**

*Mercy Please is 4, and today is a school day.*

*Playtime is over and the world collapses into Naptime.*

*A blink.*

*Refreshed, Mercy allows the annoying but mandatory fact of reality to intrude.*

*Her room is so bland in The Real. Four walls, a ceiling and a floor. Clumps of dour grey smartmatter that serve as chairs and beds and a million imaginary toys when enlivened by the commands of the signals she outputs.*

*Mr. Teach, entirely imaginary, clambers from a sudden hole in the floor, grinning at her from a monkey form. Mercy knows that Mr. Teach always chooses a shape that will enhance and illustrate the lesson. Despite this boring, pragmatic function, Mercy can't help but grin at the compact little simian shape. He grins back as the magic hole fills itself.*

*"Good afternoon, Mercy." He gives a solemn little monkey bow. "did you have a pleasant morning?"*

*Mercy nods, but pretends annoyance. "Until you came along to spoil it." She glances at him from the corner of her eye. "Can't we do the lesson in Connection today?"*

*Mr. Teach shakes his head firmly. "No, dear. Stats*

*show that you are spending far too much time in the Flow. You aren't getting enough exercise." He climbs up onto a clump of the smartmatter and gestures broadly. "I thought we might take a walk and see the city."*

*She sighs. Knowing there is little use in arguing -- Mr. Teach has override rights to her sensorium, after all -- she codes her unisuit to proper hiking attire. She fusses with the color scheme, as little girls are wont to do, but decides quickly enough. The sooner this is over the sooner she can return to play.*

*They take the lift to street level and walk pleasantly along the broad pedestrian dominated avenue. Above them air traffic hums and flashes noiselessly by.*

*"Now!" Mr. Teach says, taking a rather un-monkey like interest in the sights and sounds of the human city. His eyes seem happily alive to the people they pass. "Where were we?"*

*Another sigh, twice as petulant. "The first stage of the Com Revolution was ending." Mercy admitted, grudgingly. "The Overnet..."*

*"...was becoming established among humanity. The idea of society-as-communication was over and the fact of society-as-communication was becoming increasingly plain." Mr. Teach had his bearings now. "An exciting time, my dear! Dangerous as well."*

*"Dangerous?" Mercy asked. Despite herself she was becoming interested. Danger was always interesting.*

*"What was dangerous about it? People just had to adjust the way they thought about things." No matter how hard she tried, Mercy simply couldn't grasp the idea that learning about something new could be dangerous. It seemed that sometimes she learned a million new things a minute.*

*Mr. Teach went on. "The old conception of society was that it controlled individuals, Mercy."*

*She laughed. "That's silly!"*

*"Not to your ancestors. They had very little control of their own communication."*

*"I don't understand." This was puzzling. "Why didn't they?"*

*"Mainly because back then there were people who gained enormous power by keeping people from communicating properly."*

*"But.."*

*"By keeping people confused and misinformed and suspicious of each other. By playing on peoples fear of strangers and society itself!"*

*Mercy considered. "How could you be afraid of*

*society? Society is just....people talking, and sharing, and trading, and..."*

*"They didn't realize that then. They didn't have the things you take for granted. Not even the simplest and most basic things."*

*"Like what?" Mercy barely realized that she had forgotten about playtime and was entirely wrapped up in her lesson. Mr Teach performed his duties well.*

*He considered. "Let's pretend you were lost. What would you do?"*

*"I'd call Mum. Or my friend Chee."*

*Mr. Teach shook his head. "Pretend you couldn't. Pretend there was a sudden outage on output. What would you do?"*

*Mercy rolled her eyes. "Obviously I'd center."*

*"Do so."*

*"But I'm not lost!" Mercy reminded him.*

*"Humor me."*

*She sighed. Invisible switches flashed, codes pulsed, systems engaged. Mercy's mouth spoke the basic keycode of social engagement:*

*"You are here."*

*All systems overrode. Her sensorium lit up like a Christmas birthday. The plain walls of the world became spiraling data structures: every door and detail labelled with sighttouch info triggers.*

*The web of connection became illustrated. Mercy was suddenly aware that she was the center of a vast spiderweb of people, and from each person she was connected to more people. The familiar program in her head pulled public data into a spell of familiarity, and alerted the entire map of mankind that one small girl in New Chicago was unsure of where she was.*

*A million eyes and minds turned and asked, helpfully:*

*"Are you alright, hon?"*

*"Do you need a hand, luv?"*

*Mercy apologized, and explained about school. There were indulgent smiles and winks as the map faded into non-necessity.*

*"Your ancestors did not have that, Mercy." Mr. Teach said quietly. "they thought they were on their own, all the time.*

*Mercy was quiet, sobered. "How did they survive?" she finally wondered.*

*"They learned better." Mr. Teach said.*

*The walk continued, and Mercy -- now all ears -- learned how her great grandparents had insured that she'd never have to be alone...*

#### **IV.**

In the opening days of the 21st century, the scattered individuals of the human race find themselves at war.

This is not a war of guns and bombs, but of concepts old and new. Of ideas sacred and sacrilegious. Of the right to hold the keys to the kingdom.

Since the beginnings of the State and its unquestioned reign, the power of information has belonged to it and it alone. Uncounted are the tales of the State -- in forms ranging from kings to popes to revolutionary councils -- deciding the truth and worth of information. Religious dogma, scientific theories, the facts of the matter concerning knives in backs and hands washing each other.

In a world where knowledge can save lives or slit throats, those who control the information control everything. The key to keeping a society -- a group of individuals united through communication lines -- in check and under control is to control the information

that they receive. It is no coincidence that the most intense era of state solidarity in history coincided with the same era that saw mass communication bottlenecked and heavily regulated by state agencies. When 'media' was a handful of newspapers and three national networks, building a consensus was a simple matter of releasing the proper information. With tight control of the media, governments could wage incredible wars of attempted genocide, burning cities and killing millions, all while presented their actions as a noble struggle of liberation and anti-conquest.

The 'greatest generation' was a generation fed lies and rose colored propaganda in newsreels and big budgeted Hollywood drama.

This facade began to crack during the Cold War, as news gathering technology allowed reporters to operate directly in the field and see things not meant for public consumption. Despite the fact that the eventual broadcast was still sanitized and controlled, the people gathering the news began to talk and tell stories. The proliferation of more and more news outlets -- television, radio and newsprint -- meant that those opposed to the governmental line (even if simply in preference to another governmental faction) had places to sneak their version of the truth into the mix.

From such hairline cracks do great fractures grow. Many are the tales of internal ideological struggle during the 60's and 70's as news outlets debated

over covering the rapidly growing protest movement.

In the end, those debates mattered little. On the horizon were coming technologies that would make the elitist question of 'what should we show the public?' moot.

Cable and satellite increased the number of info sources vastly. Ironically, one of the boons of this was that the citizens of one language society now had access to the often conflicting reports of another language society. The geographical limitation that had caused the expansion of the social world to flounder was a facet in breaking the statist hold on information.

But those static and linear advances paled in comparison to the explosion of the modem and the Internet. When unleashed on the world, the new interactive media was nothing less than a popular revolution. In a few short years the entire world changed. The map of mankind became a truly global phenomenon.

But more than mere numbers was the simple fact that online communication was both individual and non-linear. A dozen conversations could be held at the same time, each participant being anywhere in the world. Connection was instant and ongoing. New contacts were made with chaotic, exponential speed.

No longer would individuals rely on the chosen and groomed purveyors of The Truth to tell them how

many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Instead, they'd go directly to the angels and query them as to the numbers of their last dance recital.

The dominance of static, official media was broken. Individuals could now range the map themselves, asking eyewitnesses to whatever event took their fancy.

The statist response to this was slow -- and still ongoing. It does not like it but -- due to the speed and decentralized nature of the phenomenon, and its own glacial pace and hidebound mindset -- there was very little it could do about it.

But the original generation of online cartographers was not the true worry to Those Who Once Controlled The Truth:

Their children were.

## **V.**

*Mercy Please is 104, and today she receives news of a great tragedy.*

*It's an ordinary day for her. Aboard her craft, drifting along in the Main Belt, hard at work searching for resources to sell to a hungry Earth.*

*The report arrives at full override, screaming past all*

*polite wait & see and filtersets.*

*The United Council For Integrated Absolutism has nuked New Chicago. The Free Symbolists refusal to bow to regulated data procedure has led to dire action. The news is reported as tragic but necessary by the UCIA biased medianets.*

*Her family, and every childhood friend left on Terra. Dead. Burned away in an instant for refusing to comply with what they saw as slavery. Refusing to step backwards into an age of controlled information.*

*The rage that Mercy feels is indescribable. For long moments she ponders the power at her disposal. The sleek but vital fusion engines that power her craft. The detailed maps of already near proper orbit NEOs. She considers what would be the work of a few spare months: nudging those waiting hammers into proper position. She imagines the havens of the UCIA -- New Washington, Denver, San Francisco and Boston -- destroyed by screaming mass from above.*

*But she shakes that off, and weeps instead. Such rage induced action would avenge no one, would bring no one back. All it would do, in the end, is place the blood of innocents on her own hands.*

*Instead, she feels a long put off decision being made.*

*For the past twenty years Mercy has been separated from the Terran symbolflow by sheer distance and the limitations of light speed. She has become a part*

*of a different grouping. They call themselves the Transreach -- the integrated human presence between Mars and Jupiter. They are the new pioneers, the prospectors of the great solar Reach. They have traded the simple and safe lives of Near Earth connection for the sparse glory of tiny ships with massive engines. They pan the dark troves of the Reach not for riches but for adventure.*

*And, among them, is a sizable subculture dedicated to moving even further. To crossing the greatest Reach of all: the gap between stars.*

*"We've seceded, sure." her friend and occasional lover Quire Denis says often. "But it reminds me of kids in a tent in the back yard, pretending that they're camping. We have a minor lag in the symbol flow, but -- as annoying as that is -- it's merely inconvenience. If Terra wants us, it knows where to find us."*

*Not for long, Mercy thinks. Not any more. She has a great deal of influence among the Transreach.*

*An hour and a half later she is in connection with over two hundred of her closest compatriots. Her sudden swing towards the Starbound is a shock to many, until they see the vids of devastated New Chicago and realize that everything has changed. That the second Com revolution has begun and the very survival of the Symbolflow might be dependant on their making themselves scarce.*

*Several important things are agreed to in this initial meeting. A physical conference is called for, and Ceres is chosen as the rendezvous point. A total and complete boycott of Earth is instigated amongst the connected Transreachers. An information embargo is also agreed upon. A mutual defense pact is sworn to. No Transreacher will attack the motherworld, but any ship or fleet sent against the Reach will be destroyed with no lack of prejudice. The Terrans are likely to underestimate the skill and raw power of the Transreach, seeing themselves as the peak of civilization and their far flung cousins as provincial miners and common folk. They had no clue that the Transreachers jolly community had completely overturned the art and science of the fusion engine from sheer necessity. The slowest and simplest Reach boat could out maneuver and outgun the best Terran military vessel by an order of magnitude.*

*After connection is broken and new courses plotted, Mercy spends the rest of this awful wakeperiod in solitary mourning for her dead friends and family. It seems the entire planet has died in her heart.*

*We are here, she reflect, and they are there. The dead. The living. The great trunk of connection and the heart of the Symbolflow. How shameful that we must abandon that connection in order to safeguard it for future generations.*

*Yes. How shameful, and the tears do not stop for quite a while.*

*But they do eventually, and a smile replaces them. A smile and the first stirrings of a universal excitement, a deep primitive need for the new and the distant.*

*How shameful, yes.*

*But oh, how exciting as well!*

## **VI.**

The connection and integration of the human species will not bring about utopia. It will not solve the problems of scarcity or violence. It will not turn human beings into angels. It will, in fact, reveal once and for all that human beings are not, never have been and never will be angels. That human beings are human: fallible, sometimes petty, often irrational, and always surprising.

And, quite often, entirely marvelous.

What connection and integration will do is to allow those marvelous qualities to manifest quicker and with greater regularity than ever before. It will allow those failures and petty actions and surprises to become apparent almost instantly and be dealt with more efficiently. It will allow us to never be separated or alone. It will allow our economy to grow and flourish.

Most importantly, it will make sure that those who

demand power can never again separate us and force their will upon us in tiny groups that are easy to control. It will make lying an almost impossible art form. It will make education a simple organic process, available to all for time expended.

The tools to accomplish this exist, though they are currently bulky and rather expensive. The overall framework also exists: in a primitive and ridiculously complex form. Personal computers and the Internet are the beta versions of the integrated connection to come. Eventually we will stop sitting at our computers and communicating over bulky wires. We will no longer rely on centralized servers and third party routing. We will wear those computers and our communication will dance on the melody of invisible waves. Every user will function as their own server, and the routing will be chaotic, ever changing and on the fly.

The true net will be built from the bottom up on an encrypted basis. It will be individual-centric and a beautiful conflicting mass of standards and jury-rigged systems. The eventual protocols will not be administered from on high but will emerge from the vicious natural selection of Darwinian standards: the smallest, cheapest, sleekest and cleanest aps and tech will win.

The open source movement, the crypto-libertarian front, the shadowy fringes of file sharers and cyber bootleggers: these are the people who will build the overnet. They will be the people who first use it to

disappear from the radar of the state. These will be the ghosts and phantoms of the coming digital revolution.

These will be the people who integrate human action and bootstrap the overnet. These are the people who will place a copy of the map of mankind into the hands of every soul who wishes for one.

The state is currently allowing this to happen, though they are retarding and slowing it as much as they possibly can. The reason they aren't stopping it directly is that they suffer from the same lack of communication that bedevils the peons: they don't communicate well enough to realize the vast danger it represents to them. By the time they possess the ability to do so, it will be too late. The peons will have it as well.

And the peons outnumber them. And can outthink them.

Once they have it, they will look upon the 'system' with new eyes. They will wonder why they've trusted these foolish control freaks for so long. they'll wonder how they could have ever considered something as nebulous and simple as 'society' as their lord and master. How the excuse of 'bettering' society could ever be achieved through pain and theft and imposed misery. How those rancid objectives helped humans to communicate with each other. How those wars and divisions did anything to build the world.

When that happens, the State will be finished. It may go out with a spasm of violence, but it will indeed go out. The revolution will more than likely be fairly bloodless. What blood is spilled will be those control-freaks who simply refuse to relinquish power. When secession and non-compliance is met with violence, the revolutionaries will be forced to use violence themselves.

Thus freed, human society will become truly global and truly voluntary. The map of mankind will fill every nook and cranny of this planet. Eyes will be cast beyond, towards the other worlds around this sun and out to the stars. The connected human race, like a great choir, will need new arenas to fill with the song of human struggle. With the joy of structure. With the clean new lines of explored places, and adventures worth telling children in hushed voices.

We are the human race. We are the makers of maps. We will not be satisfied with an explored globe. It will be the vast uncharted edges that call to us in siren song. And we shall rush to them, as fools rush. We will die and fail and create legends.

Eventually, we will conquer the vacuum and spread the map of mankind across this galaxy and beyond.

This is our destiny.

It is a good destiny.

## VII.

*Mercy Please is almost 1200 years old. Today she is a long way from home.*

*The star is known to humans as CD-75 967. It is part of the constellation of Apus, and is 91 light years from the Sun.*

*As the first human being to gaze on it with naked eyes, she has the right to give it a more poetic name. She ponders and chooses Helios in a burst of optimism. Helios was the Greek twin of the Roman Sol, and this is the closest to Sol type star that any of the Reach Diaspora have targeted, and is the second leg of her grand mystery walk. The first was a gorgeous blue giant, a way station only. The plentiful resources of that system gave her the means to reach this one, however - and the simple success of continuation had been a thrilling victory.*

*Mercy had made her journey at 12 percent of light speed, relying on nanotech based suspension techniques to keep her alive and healthy across the great black reaches. They seemed to have functioned fine: both herself and Hansel, her ship, required only minor repairs directly after WakeUp.*

*She is excited and a little nervous. This will no doubt be the last leg of her journey. She has been phenomenally lucky. The odds of her surviving another long passage are astronomical.*

*There is, though, chance of sending home some good news: this system is thought to be a near certainty for an Earth analog.*

*She has a million tasks, both mission based and the requirements of simple survival. As soon as the medcom gives the go ahead, she throws herself into labor.*

*Weeks pass, and she is nearing the middle of the system, her eye on a particular gas giant for refueling purposes, when the navicomp picks up the signal.*

*The signal manifests as a series of impossibly regular static interference. The com notes them and informs her of the discrepancy in a weekly maintenance summary.*

*Excitement strikes her as soon as she investigates. The repeating static bursts are a long message in an archaic form of naval code.*

*She translates and celebrates. The first line of the cycling news that went seeking her and her fellow loners in the dark is this:*

*You are no longer alone. We fools have figured out how to talk faster than light.*

*The rest of the message is a detailed explanation of*

*how to generate tachyonic pulses by modulating the field of any sufficiently powerful fusion core: Hansel's heart will work well.*

*She is preparing to do just that when all hell breaks loose - the navicomp demanding her attention.*

*What it informs her of makes her forget the possibility of conversing with the Earth for several days. Makes even the relief of knowing she won't have to die completely alone mild in comparison.*

*When she finally does follow the instructions and send out the bursts of static coded in Morse, the first line is triumphant:*

*Well and good, but this fool has found you all a new home.*

*She wonders at the celebration that will happen when it is received, and how long that will take.*

*She is preparing to enter a permanent orbit around the world she has named Gretel, in honor of her steadfast little ship, when the answer comes: two months and two days since she sent it out. And it arrives in a steady stream, since she has been sending every bit of the amazing data she has gathered on her approach to her world. How similar but different from their Home it is, how the atmosphere is probably breathable, the chemical basics of the wild and lusty life that spreads across it*

*perfectly similar to the life they know. How beautiful and promising and patient it waits there in the rapidly filling viewscreen.*

*And maps of course, maps and maps. And more maps to come now that she is orbiting and charting every square inch with camera and line imager.*

*Back and forth the conversation flows, on dots and bashes of tachyons bled off the skin of dying hydrogen. News of life and death and love and celebration. News of her fellow Diasporans, tragic and triumphant. Other worlds have been found, some closer some further. None similar, but none impossible to tame. The challenge of life, of expanding into new environments, will not be boring and predictable.*

*A dozen years pass in her deep study, when the message arrives - the one she had been waiting for.*

*We are coming. We are coming to see your world and walk it's face.*

*And at much closer to the speed of light. The first explorers will arrive in just under a century.*

*Mercy Please considers, she takes careful inventory and plots careful simulations.*

*Yes, it's possible. Quite possible. With the nanotech therapy and her current supplies she may well be*

*able to greet those who walk her Gretel.*

*Oh, hope, she may be able to walk it herself!*

*A great satisfaction fills her then, and an even more intense drive to discover every detail about this new home for humanity before its first children arrive.*

*Her folk are coming, for good or ill or all or nothing. The map has grown vastly and cast its borders out towards infinity. For there will be worlds beyond this, and new galaxies beyond those. And her folk will find them. Long after she is gone, they will be expanding the map of mankind in every direction until the end of time.*

*But for now she sums it up in the simple words she repeats in tachyonic rythm for her approaching kin. Three words that speak of true facts and destiny fulfilled. Three words that explain the basic truth of every map no matter the size and complexity. The three most important words:*

*You are here.*

*You are here.*

*You are here!*

**(For Nicole Faith, in the blessed hope that she might see such a world.)**

## **Monkey Bent Metal**

So one morning Monkey was strolling through the Gardens Of The Gods, when he saw Ox and Camel hard at play. He went up to them and spied out their game.

They had found a clear patch to view the Earth below, and were amusing themselves with a few tribes of humans. Monkey grinned. He liked those kidlets. Had great hopes for 'em.

"They're trying to organize themselves," said Camel, phlegmagtic as ever.

"I just want to see 'em fight!" chuckled Ox.

"They're wild, foolish creatures really. They need governance and control."

"By who?" Monkey asked.

"By..themselves." Camel managed, not sounding sure.

"By the wildest and foolish of them all, we'd hope!"

Monkey found him, minutes later. A brute and bully, but crafty as well. The god took a fine length of wrought iron and showed it to the wonderstruck mortal. He twisted it into a variety of useful shapes, then withdrew, to let the brute and bully talk of divine command and what riches they would ring from Iron.

"That's certainly interesting."

"Oh, they'll be organizing aplenty now." Monkey assured her. "And fightin' to spare."

For even as he watched the great presses were rolling out armor and swords and spikes for wagons.

"And any who ask why the blood will be told 'Why, God said so!' and let that be enough!" Monkey grinned. "Eventually they'll have to get something subtler, but it'll do for an Age or so."

## **Story Notes**

### **IN THE HALL OF KINGS, HUNGOVER**

My younger brother and I have been obsessed with Norse mythology since we were small, and I happened to tote home *Twilight Of The Gods* from the library. Something about those myths -- so blunt and violent and shot through with dark slapstick comedy -- always seemed so much more alive than their Greek and Hindu and Chinese counterparts.

Loki was always our favorite, since we had a thing for tricksters, and Loki -- of course -- is the most human of all the gods and halfgods. He does things not only because the Norns demand it, but because they amuse him. Or perhaps he simply allows himself to be amused by the strings, even as they push him towards Ragnarok.

This was well received by most of my friends, but it puzzled more than a few of them. It's the bit about 'workplace toys' that did it. Odin, if you'll recall, had

a close relationship to the deep dwelling Dwarves, who built him many wonderful contraptions. Among them was a full sized ship that could be folded up and put into a pocket. The parallel with modern 'fold-up' technology was too delicious to ignore.

## **WHY I STOLE YOUR IDENTITY**

Nobody likes being themselves, I sometimes think. If you listen to people complain a lot of those complaints come down to "I wish I were someone else," which is a telling admission in a society that pretends so arduously to be 'individualistic', and prides itself on 'self-respect'.

This one's also about envy, which is the metaphysical heart of the act of identity theft. Stealing someone else's existence is less work than building a suitable one of your own, if you got the knack.

But be careful, the person you rob might not want their goods back.

A conscious effort to allow more room, in the form of ambiguity, into my work. It also owes a debt to Kelly Link. Her work inspired me to do something stranger.

## **KIN**

This was written for a contest sponsored by an online mag. Zombies were the theme. I've never really cared for zombie stories, mainly because they have such a tradition of nihilism. That clashes with my basic optimistic nature and my belief that stories should lift the spirit rather than depress the reader. And it's very strange that the basic idea of people returning from the dead is used for such bleak and hopeless tales, don't you think?

I'm a hillbilly, and proud of it. One thing my people are is loyal to their families. Others frown and call this 'clanishness' as if that were a bad thing. Oh well. They can harbor grudges and be distant from their kin all they want. I prefer our way.

In cities and the flatlands the dead might come back and try to eat the brains of their family, but in the mountains I'm pretty sure it would happen something like this.

## **HEX**

Another little hillbilly inspired tale, this time from the simple fact that we are a superstitious people. I'm fairly convinced that quite a few women nurtured that reputation of 'witchiness' because of the edge it gave them in dealing with their neighbors.

But you never really know, do you?

## **FOUR SCENES (FROM A SICK CULTURE)**

These were all written separately and for different reasons. It was only after the fact that I noticed a certain similarity and a sort of order about them when read together.

To be honest, I think all cultures are sick, no matter what. They are a conglomeration of many individuals -- some sick, some healthy. There's always a certain degree of fever there, a low level illness that can cause problems. Collective action, for all its powers, is an inherently risky game.

Some sicknesses are worse than others, of course. Better the flu than cancer. It's a telling symptom that all four of these sad situations are very possible today, at *our* cultures level of health.

The diagnosis ain't good.

## **THE WORTHY LORD**

Quite a few people asked me if this was a metaphor for Ron Paul's dynamic but doomed run for Republican presidential nomination in 2008. It's not, but I certainly see why they would think so, and I'm actually delighted by the co-incidence. I have a lot of respect and admiration for Paul. But I have zero respect and admiration for political office. This is as close as I can come to a 'politician' I can respect, one who only uses the title 'politician' because it is insisted on from without.

The fact that Ron Paul basically is that is why the coincidence delights me.

## **THE COLD STRAIGHT HOUSE**

A difficult one, on purpose. I like the sort of 'transcendental' SF that simply drops you into a new situation and forces you to figure out lots of the action from context. This story isn't intended to be so much 'ambiguous' as 'malleable'. Some concepts and actions can have more than one reading and still make textual sense at the conclusion.

Beyond that, this has a pretty simple meaning, and a fairly happy ending.

## **THE PERFECT OF PRAYERS**

I have a bad habit of putting women on a pedestal. This is a reflection of that, and a sort of underhanded paean to calling your own tune in life. Almost a parable to that theme.

## **COFFEE WITH THE LAST MAN ON EARTH**

Another almost parable, on much the same theme: it's one that resonates deeply for me. That particulars are different, and I think happier, here. The lesson was more easily learned, so to speak. This one also allows me to indulge my true-blue love of coffee. If anything, I'm even more devoted to it than Mary Ellen. The whole story actually popped up from that idea, that it wouldn't be so bad to be the last man on Earth as long as I had coffee. But that's just about anything. No matter how good or bad, it's better with coffee than without.

## **THE WOMAN WHO HITCHIKED WITH CATS**

My longest story and the one that took me longest to write, so far. Written over the course of two years in three different states and in several different

mediums. I'd work on it until I couldn't stand it any more, then I'd leave it be for a while.

**CATS** began as a tribute to the many strong and intelligent women I know, particularly those who have managed to find their way to anarchistic thought. It strikes me as tougher for a woman: the societal framework for dependancy is woven much tighter for women than men, and the backlash against refusal to conform is more severe. But they find themselves on that path regardless. That takes bravery and a sort of tenaciousness that not everyone has.

The story grew in the telling, becoming something of another tribute, to the long and rococco SF and Fantasy novellas that were popular in magazines in the 50's. Adventure based, with deep central mysteries centered around the world they took place in and featuring tough, capable characters.

I knew the ending in advance, but not how our heroine gets there or -- more importantly -- why. I wasn't even sure of The Smoke Man's identity until just before I revealed it. I find that sort of writing, a kind of 'discovery' mode where the tale is unearthed rather than constructed, to be quite enjoyable.

I'm rather proud of it, and feel it reads fast to be so lengthy.

## **A MAP OF MANKIND**

A 'speculative essay.' My thoughts on a better possible future, a better possible society, and a more peaceful world. I think what I've described here is possible, but unlikely. Freedom, like optimism, is pretty much an outdated concept these days. It may come to pass that information is impossible to control (as I think and, especially, hope) or it may not. Time will tell.

Hope never hurts, though.

## **MONKEY BENT METAL**

Well, it had to start somewhere.

And it had to end somewhere.

I'll keep writing friends, if you'll keep reading.

Until the next time, peace and dry powder to you all.

**-George**

