

Dark Vignettes

by

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Clawing at the Darkness

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The Santa Ana winds blew hot and dry across the roof of a nine story office building overlooking Pasadena, and even at 2:00 AM the air was like an oven, tugging at the will like an insistent child at its mother's dress. On the streets below there were only a few cars making their ways home, gliding like barracudas from streetlight to shadow, menacing creatures of steel and glass cruising the concrete currents. From his vantage point on the edge of the rooftop Victor saw the San Gabriel Valley spread out from mountain to mountain like one of the fabled golden Cities of Cibola, with millions of sodium lights glittering through the haze.

Victor considered his current position on the literal brink of falling to his death, and scratched his chest. He felt the now all too familiar knot writhing against his fingertips through his thin shirt, and shuddered. Just two weeks earlier there had been nothing there that shouldn't be, but that seemed like a lifetime ago. First there were the voices, taunting Victor from thin air at all hours. They spoke of foul and unwholesome things, whispering unutterable blasphemies into his ear at all hours of the night, and waking him from nightmares into a terrifying reality. Shortly after this insanity began, the bump appeared in the very center of his chest, where it twitched and moved of its own unnatural volition.

"What are you thinking, Victor," a creepily sexual woman's voice hissed into his left ear.

A small child's voice asked in his other ear, "Does death now look so good to you?"

"But not yet," another woman's voice said from behind. "We're not done with you."

Victor spun around, but found nobody there. "Leave me alone," he half-growled, half-pleaded yet again. He knew it was pointless, but the instinct to respond was overwhelming. He immediately went to the next automatic response of, "What do you want?"

The tumor on Victor's chest squirming beneath the skin, a deeper male voice came from all around, saying, "Only a little longer, Victor." As it spoke, it drifted from side to side, and melted from the voice of another child, and into that of an elderly man. "We'll be there soon, and then you can rest."

Images of hell flashed through Victor's tortured brain, as he collapsed to his knees clutching his skull painfully. He watched as buildings collapsed in flames across the cities of the world, while liquid fire poured from angry skies to the wretched earth below. In his mind's eye he saw great beasts of untold horror rising from the inky depths of every ocean and sea, devouring panicked masses as they fled mindlessly amidst the chaos, and smashing the towers of man into crumpled steel, shattered glass, and concrete dust. At the end, after shadowy fiends swept from the burning sky down upon the broken remains of mankind, the earth itself split open and molten rock poured forth and devoured the land and seas with a furious hunger.

"Just a little bit longer," the ever-shifting voice said with a false seductiveness. "Just a few moments of pain, then we will let you die quietly. No pain, no more suffering for you. We will allow you the solace of the grave." The mass beneath Victor's skin stopped moving as though to reinforce the promise of release.

Victor stood back up, clutching the now quiet lump through his shirt. "No," he said.

"If not you, then another," the voices said, taking on an air of threat. "It is ordained. It will happen."

Taking a step towards the ledge, Victor said, "No... I can't..."

"You will!" the voices screamed in his ears, deafening him to all other sounds. They repeated those two words in a din of anarchy, the mass beginning to push outwards against Victor's flesh. As he neared the ledge, a massive pressure built up until the skin finally split painfully.

Victor dropped to the rooftop, blood pouring out of the gaping hole in his torso, and began clutching at the wound desperately. Something fleshy pushed against his fingers, forcing them out of the way, and tearing through the fabric of the shirt. His back arching in agony, Victor screamed into the night sky, only barely noticing dark clouds beginning to gather above. Suddenly, a long trunk of muscle burst from his chest cavity and towered

ten or so feet over his supine form, writhing in its new found freedom.

"We are coming, Victor," the voices said, almost soothingly. "It will be over soon, and you will sleep." The erect monstrosity thrashed about wildly, smacking against the roof and sending bits of gravel flying to the street.

Dragging himself closer to the edge of the abyss, Victor only repeated the refrain, "I can't." Even operating on a more primal level as he was, Victor knew what would happen if he succumbed to the temptation of an easy death. His fingers clawed painfully until they grasped the empty air just beyond the ledge and he laughed triumphantly. "Not me," he growled as he toppled over into oblivion, the pavement rushing upwards with a shattering and final force.

An hour later the broken and distorted body of one Victor Calderon was surrounded by a few of Pasadena's finest. They had all seen suicides in the past, but never had any of them seen anything even remotely like this.

"That's his intestines, right?" a rookie cop asked a more senior officer, staring stupidly at the fleshy tube stretching out from the dead man's chest.

The older policeman just shrugged and shook his head, saying, "It doesn't look like it, but I sure hope to hell it is." He scratched his chin, and said, "I don't even want to see the autopsy report on this one, though."

After the ambulance finally arrived and took the twisted corpse away, the police began returning to their patrol cars, a strange predawn silence blanketing the city.

"What did you say?" the rookie suddenly yelled at the older cop from across the empty street.

Shaking his head and shrugging, the officer responded with, "I didn't say anything," and climbed into his cruiser.

Rubbing his head, the rookie got behind the wheel of his own car, muttering to himself, "I swear he said something." He scratched a growing itch in the center of his chest, and started the car.

Pyramids

by

Christopher Baughman

Steve stepped out of his apartment, and was greeted by the sight of a twenty foot tall pyramid made of a dull green material sitting in the middle of the apartment building parking lot. He walked around the base of the object, shrugged, and got into his car. The pyramids arrived about a week before in a most bizarre way; in one split second they just appeared all over the world. Nevertheless, he had a steady job at a government agency's downtown office, and did not want to jeopardize that by being late yet again.

On the way in to the office Steve saw that there were numerous other pyramids scattered throughout the city, all of which were the exact same flat green color and all had perfectly smooth surfaces. They were located in apparently random spots, including streets, yards, and even intersecting with buildings. Steve found himself driving slowly around one in the middle of the freeway, joining the crawling movement of cars as they passed around it like a steel current curling around a stone in the middle of a concrete river. He held his temper in check even as traffic came to a complete stop for half an hour. He called into the office to make sure his boss knew he was going to be late, and why, but from the sound of the administrative assistant's voice, Steve knew that he was on thin ice.

There was another pyramid directly in front of the office's main entrance, blocking everybody from getting in. As a backup measure the building staff had opened up a side door and were manually checking each person's badge one at a time. There was a line of office workers stretched out almost to the road, and Steve took his position at the end. He looked down the road and saw that another of the large green objects had taken up residence in a nearby park. He wondered briefly what had happened to the trees that once stood where the pyramid now crouched.

The elevators in the office building were out, so Steve had to take the stairs up a dozen floors. It seemed that a pyramid had appeared in the heart of the building, blocking the elevator shafts completely, and the stairwell was crowded with sweating and puffing people stomping their ways unhappily up to work. By the time Steve got to his floor, his shirt was soaked through with sweat.

"You have to learn to plan for the unexpected when you leave for work in the morning," his boss, Ken Johnson, chided. "There's no excuse for being late for work," he continued, "when you can just get up a little earlier to account for traffic." He stared at Steve from across his desk, his gaze betraying his contempt for him through the lenses of his over-large glasses.

"Yes, Ken," Steve replied. He had wanted to call the man "sir," but had been corrected on that months ago. The management in this small government agency preferred to be addressed by their first names as some sort of egalitarian measure, and the district supervisor had even sent out an email to the staff formalizing the use of first names. "I'll make sure I'm not late again," Steve said.

"See that you're not," Ken said, as he turned to face his computer monitor. "Make sure you record your time accordingly." He then fell silent, his way of letting his subordinates know the discussion was over.

"What do you think they are?" Steve asked a coworker, Eric Busgang, as they stared from a large window an hour later. There were a couple of pyramids in view, one blocking traffic on a one-way street, and the other apparently having integrated itself into the structure of of a bus stop.

Eric shrugged. "Aliens, maybe," he replied. "They say pyramids are sources of power. Spiritual healing and such."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know," Eric said, "but we'd better get back to work. Ken's been watching us pretty closely, and I don't want to risk losing a promotion." He adjusted his tie and returned to his cubicle, leaving Steve to continue to ponder the mysterious objects alone.

A few hours later, on the way home, Steve made a last minute decision to pull off of the road and into a parking lot where

one of the pyramids had appeared. He sat in his car and stared at the green thing for about five minutes, the radio blaring some inane tune about jaded lovers and angry girlfriends. Switching the car off, Steve got out and walked to within a few feet of the olive colored walls. He had never actually been this close to one of them before, and could discern a soft humming sound. He leaned in closer until his hand was resting firmly against its side. The hum passed through the flesh of his palm and deep into his skeleton, resonating through his entire body.

"What are you doing?" a woman's voice came from behind. It had an irritated tone to it, and seemed to be designed specifically for the task of setting a man on edge.

Steve pulled back from the pyramid, and the deep pulse slowly faded from his bones. "I've never really looked at one up close," he said, as he turned to face the questioner.

She was a blonde woman wearing a look of judgment like other people wear hats. Her eyes betrayed her suspicious nature as she glared at Steve, her arms crossed. "Don't you have other things you could be doing, instead of hanging around grade school parking lots?" she asked bluntly, as though social graces were something that did not apply when talking to strange men.

Steve glanced around and saw that the parking lot was indeed in front of a school, and class was apparently about to let out. There were numerous mothers sitting around in cars, waiting to pick up their children, and some of them were staring at him with the same accusatory look this woman had. "I'm sorry," he muttered as he walked back to his own car, not sure what he was apologizing for.

"Who are you?" the woman demanded. "What's your name?" When Steve didn't answer, she ran to the back of his car and wrote down his license plate as he drove away.

As he made his way home, Steve considered what he had felt while in contact with the pyramid. Just before the suspicious woman interrupted, he had begun to move beyond the deep and subtle hum of the pyramid, and passed through a sort of wall. Gravity briefly lifted its iron grip, and Steve could almost feel his body dropping away with it. Something changed within him at that moment, and a seed of unrest settled in his gut.

It was sunset when Steve finally pulled up into the apartment complex parking lot and parked his car next to the pyramid. He

had driven around the city for a few hours, thinking about his life, his job, and the how the pyramids fit into all of that. It wasn't until today that he realized that most people didn't really pay much attention to the things anymore. In fact, he didn't know anybody who talked about them, which was starting to seem really odd to him.

Climbing out of the car, Steve stood and faced the green pyramid that had come to dominate the parking lot. Almost of their own volition, his feet carried him to within a foot of the base of the object, where he stared dumbly at the perfectly smooth face before him. The resonant humming again made itself apparent to him quickly, and he put his hand out to rest against the cool material. The machine's pulse pushed itself into his psyche, and Steve began to understand. His head hung low and he shut his eyes, letting the signal wash over him. He saw, and he understood.

When the police arrived the sun had been down for a couple of hours, and the figure of the man leaning against the pyramid was illuminated from behind by a green streetlight. The police officers were momentarily blinded by what appeared to be a halo around his head.

"Are you alright, sir?" one of them asked as they shined their flashlights on him, but Steve was unresponsive. As they stood a few feet away, one kept his hand on his pistol, while the other cop reached out for Steve's shoulder. When his form collapsed to the pavement, both men jumped back and drew their pistols. They only holstered them once they determined that the crumpled body before them was dead, and an ambulance was on its way.

The Ruined City of Ur

by

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"Tell me, Parmguan, what is it you think you should be looking for?"

Parmguan knelt before the Crone, his spear in one hand and a rare metal knife in the other. He kept his gaze aiming downwards at the ancient stone floor, as it was considered dangerous and disrespectful to look directly at her. He did do that once, when he was a child, but was immediately corrected with a smack across the back of the head from his father. The tribe was both respectful and fearful of the power she wielded. There were stories of other tribes with Crones that ruled with an unforgiving iron fist, but the Aldeshaut tribe's Crone preferred to act as religious figure and adviser to the Chieftain. Still, Parmguan was nervous in his current position, having to answer her probing questions.

"I do not know," he answered anxiously, "but I have to go into the Shold and find it." He heard the other tribe members around him gasp collectively at his statement. The Shold was a region of the Ruined City of Ur that was rumored to be inhabited exclusively by ugly spirits, and no man dared wander into its darkened depths.

The Crone shifted on her stone chair as she stared down at the impetuous youth kneeling before her. He had a history of rebellion. He rebelled against his parents' wishes. He rebelled against the Lead Hunter's will. He rebelled against the Chieftain's mandates. This one was a troublesome young man, and the Crone knew that he was going to be the most important person in the tribe in the coming days. "Indeed," she replied. "The Shold, you say. Parmguan, you have been a cause of much commotion for the tribe in the past. How is this any different? When you bring the angry spirits that dwell within the Shold back to the Tower, what excuse will you offer up?"

Fidgeting on the floor, Parmguan said, "It was told to me in a dream that I should go into the Shold and grasp the artifact so that the Tower would not fall to the Hungry Shadows." He dared to raise his eyes to look at the Crone's feet, and continued, "This dream was given to me by the Guide Nuoshu, and I dare not refuse His visions."

"You heard the voice of Nuoshu?" the Crone asked credulously. She knew that the boy was not bold enough to make such a story up, and visions from the Guides were rare and powerful things. She also knew that the Tower was edging closer to collapse, as she could feel the energies that kept it erect were starting to fade. She had been pondering a solution, only to have this possible situation fall into her lap.

"Yes," he responded simply. "His was the voice of the wind through the avenues of the Hungry Shadows, and the waterfalls from the rains above, and he commanded me to go, Mother."

The Crone reached out with her mind and touched his soul. She found deception there, but not in this particular case. The boy had gone to forbidden areas before, and may have climbed higher in the Tower than any tribesman before him. If anyone could do what he intended, she supposed it was him. "Go, then," the Crone said. "But remember, you go there alone, with no other hunters and no Crone's eye to watch over you."

Parmguan nodded as he began to back out of the chamber. In a way he had hoped she would deny his request, for surely Guide Nuoshu would not begrudge him obeying the Crone, but no such luck. When he reached the room's entrance he stood up and strode away down the stone corridor, sliding his long blade into its sheath. It didn't take long for his fellow hunters to catch up with him, and they surrounded him with questions about his dream.

"What will happen if you don't find it?" asked one.

Another asked, "What is it?"

"How are you going to appease the Shold spirits?"

Finally, after Parmguan proved unable to answer their endless questions, the others wandered away, many deciding he was about to throw his life away to the Hungry Shadows below in an act of madness. He went to the rooms his family inhabited to collect some things, as well as enough dried food for a few days' journey. He stiffened when he sensed his father enter his room.

"So, you are going to the Shold," the old man said. "It makes sense that Nuoshu would give you the dream. You've always been too curious, too adventurous."

Parmguan turned with a scathing retort on his lips, but only gasped. His father stood there with his precious boots and shirt held out before him. "Father," he said, "your hunting gear..."

"Yes," his father said, "but you are going to need them more than me." He handed the shirt over, along with a necklace made of bits of bone from an unknown creature. "They all have secrets I kept from even your mother. Hunters' secrets." He slapped a boot against the wall as hard as he could, and only the whisper of a sound came from the impact. "To muffle your step," he said. "When you wear the shirt, shadows will gather around you, keeping you hidden from casual eyes. It is itchy and hot, but it has saved me more than a few times." He draped the necklace over Parmguan's neck, saying, "This was my father's father's. My father said it would render the words of another tribe into our language. I do not know of this for sure, but it may help should you encounter members of other tribes."

Unsure of how to react, Parmguan gathered the shirt into the bundle, and slipped the boots on his normally bare feet. Claspng his father's hand, tears in his eyes, he said, "Thank you. I promise to return them soon, no matter what." Without anymore words, he left his home before any other family members could stop him.

Parmguan made his way through the increasingly vacant hallways of the Tower, until he stood on a precipice overlooking the Ruined City. From his vantage point he could see the neighboring Towers as vague shapes through the gloom, the nearest of which was a hundred feet or so away. He saw no sign of other people, but that didn't mean a whole lot in this pervasive darkness. Somebody could be watching him at that very moment, and he would have had no idea.

Parmguan's tribe lived in the heart of one of these massive buildings, dwelling about a third of the way up from the Hungry Shadows. It was said that this was around a hundred levels above the deadly surface, where an almost exclusively predatory ecology existed in darkness. Men rarely actually went all the way down, and most hunting took place within the Tower at the lower levels. Going up wasn't as dangerous, but there was little cause to climb to those heights. There was nothing in the way of food in the higher levels, and the tales told around the evening

fire spoke of strange spirits taking up residence there in humanity's absence. Parmguan once climbed as high as 100 more levels, and found only emptiness and strange items for his troubles. His father beat him for that, and threw the few artifacts Parmguan brought back over a precipice to the Hungry Shadows below.

Heading back into the interior of the Tower, Parmguan found one of the many shafts that led straight down the height of the building. He began making his way to the ground, where he would brave the Hungry Shadows of Ur.

The climb took two days, which could only be measured by a brief dimming and lightening of the constant murkiness, and when Parmguan finally stepped out into the Hungry Shadows he was already exhausted. He considered resting another day on the first floor, but decided against it in his haste to get to the Shold. Instead, he put his father's shirt on, and took to the streets, shadows collecting around him.

He only vaguely knew where the Shold was from stories passed down from father to son of previous expeditions out on to the crumbling avenues between Towers. Nightmare creatures prowled these dark streets, feeding off of each other with terrifying ferocity, hence the name, "Hungry Shadows." He kept as close as he could to the ancient walls of the colossal Towers, which other stories said used to be populated from top to bottom by swarms of people. That was before the spirits came, and darkness descended upon the City of Ur.

Parmguan came to a place where he had no choice but to cross the street to the next Tower. He knew he would have to do this a few times, but this first foray out into the open terrified him. Drawing his knife, he crouched low and flitted from bush to rubble, always wary of all sights, sounds, or scents that could give away any beast stalking him. He did once hear the dying screams of some poor animal piercing the darkness, but he judged it to be a good way away. Even so, Parmguan hurried his step to leave the area, not wanting to see just what was eating what. The anguished screeching continued in the distance, fading as he passed along the wretched lanes.

Two days later Parmguan found himself staring into a tangle of brush and trees like nothing he had ever seen before. On the streets there were shrubs and scatterings of tall grass, but plant life was the exception in Ur. The ever-present mist blocked the view of the sky above, which Parmguan had never

actually seen, and strange animal noises issued forth from the darkness amongst the trees. Pulling his blade out, Parmguan padded into the evil looking woods, his fear mounting with every step.

He made his way along a narrow trail that seemed to be laid by a series of flat stones set into the dirt. Tall grass clung to Parmguan's thighs, and try as he might he left a lot of signs of his passage. Out in the streets and Towers of Ur he was light-footed, but in the Shold he was clumsy and lost. The presence of the ghosts that haunted this place nagged at him, a seed of fear growing into terror as he saw shadowy figures flitting between trees. At one point he saw something roughly human shaped, but dark and wispy, walk across the trail ahead as though out on a stroll, ignoring the trembling man hiding in the bushes.

Parmguan eventually came to a small clearing where no grass or bush grew, and moved into the thicket surrounding the area. He had no desire to walk out into the open, and intended to make his way around through the rough foliage.

"This place is thick with fucking ghosts," a woman's voice said from across the clearing.

Freezing in place, Parmguan crouched down on his haunches, his questing eyes looking for whoever it was that spoke. A small group of people stumbled into the clearing in a loud jumble of noise. They were unlike anyone Parmguan had ever seen before, not that he had seen a lot of people not of his own tribe. Some hunters from a neighboring Tower had once wandered into his tribe's Tower, and stayed there as guests for a few days, but that was the extent of his contact with foreigners. These people looked nothing like those men. They wore tight fitting black clothes, some of which were shiny and sleek. Dark makeup covered their faces, leaving their eyes and lips black against pale skin. He knew the tongue they were speaking was alien, and realized that the necklace his father gave him did indeed work. All of them had black hair, which was cut into a variety of elaborate patterns with a mix of colors worked in.

"What did you expect in an abandoned Realm?" one of her companions asked. He was tall and appeared strong, with the least complex hairstyle of the group. His was straight and hung to his shoulders in simple black locks. He wore a long black coat over black cloth, and had shiny black boots on. "Wherever humanity lives, it leaves its ghosts behind." He paused as he

glanced around, and said, "And a lot of people used to live here."

The woman crossed her arms. "So you really think this is Ur?" she asked, doubt obvious in her voice.

"It fits the description," he answered. "And if our Seers are any good, the Azcrot should be in this park. That's probably why we've seen so many ghosts here."

Flipping her hair out of her eyes, the woman, looked around the clearing, scrutinizing the surrounding trees. When her gaze fell on Parmguan, she froze, and said, "We are not alone, here."

The man stepped forward and stared straight at the hiding tribesman, his pale skin shining in the humid air. "You there," he said loudly. "We can see your shirt, shoes, and necklace, boy! You might as well come out here."

Fear seizing his heart, Parmguan stood up slowly, holding a spear at the ready in his fist, and his knife in the other hand. He put on a brave face and stepped out of the bushes, glaring fiercely at the foreigners.

"I think he understands us," the woman said.

The man crossed over to stand a few feet away from Parmguan, saying, "It's the bones around his throat. They've a very complex working on them, but I doubt we would ever understand a single word he says to us." He stuck his hand out in greeting, and said, "Still, it's better than no communication. Hello. My name is Darren."

Leery of the proffered hand, Parmguan simply pointed at himself, saying, "Parmguan." He sheathed his knife, but kept the spear at the ready, just in case.

"Parmguan," Darren repeated. He gestured widely, asking, "What is the name of this place, Parmguan?"

"This is the Shold," the tribesman answered, before remembering that the stranger didn't understand him. "Shold," he said again.

"Shold," Darren repeated. "Not Ur, then."

"Ur," Parmguan said. He mimicked Darren's earlier gesture, saying, "Ur. The Ruined City of Ur."

The woman stepped up next to the two, leaving the rest of their group standing behind. "So it's true!" she exclaimed. "This is Ur!" It was obvious that before she had her doubts, but now she grew visibly excited. "The Azcrot is here, then!"

The man, Darren, remained calm, having already realized where they were. "Yes, but we still have to find it, take it, and leave with it." This tempered the woman's elation a little, but she still looked around with a renewed energy. "Now, Parmguan, do you know where the Azcrot is?"

Shaking his head, Parmguan shrugged. He had never even heard the word before, much less knew where this thing was.

"Darren!" one of the other members of this strange group hissed. "Something's coming!"

The warning was too late, however, as a large shape resolved itself in the shadows surrounding the clearing they were standing stupidly in. The beast leaped across the open air, slamming into the gathered cluster of people with claws slashing and fangs snapping. It was sinewy and graceful, with dull black scales and a reptilian form. Blood sprayed through the air, coating Parmguan and the two strangers with a fine mist of red. A hand fell to the ground at their feet, shocking the tribesman into action.

Parmguan turned and fled into the woods, ignoring the branches and leaves as they slashed at his limbs. He kept a death-grip on his spear, and had the knife out in his other hand as he crashed through the brush. Finally, after minutes of lung-searing sprinting, he came to a stop and crouched down in the shadows gathered by his father's shirt. Immediately after, Darren and the strange woman blundered across him, having followed as best they could through the thick flora.

"Parmguan!" Darren exclaimed as he ran by, "keep moving! There were more of those things!"

Obedying a strange impulse to follow the man's command, Parmguan took off in their wake, glancing over his shoulder periodically to see if they were being hunted. After fifteen or so minutes, they finally came to a stop at the base of a thick, but stunted, tree.

"What were those creatures?" the woman asked, looking at Parmguan. He only shrugged, having never seen them before, either.

"Who knows," Darren replied. "They came on faster than I could bring up my Focus, though. It should be easier in this realm, but they were just too fast!"

The three remained there, huddled against the false protection of the tree, while Darren and the woman discussed their options in hushed tones. After an hour or so, it was decided that they would continue looking for their precious Azcrot, whatever that was.

"I think we should use Power," the woman said.

"Agreed," Darren replied. Immediately a green glow grew around the woman's hands, and her eyes began to glow in the same color, while she concentrated for a few seconds.

As Parmguan stepped back away from the woman, he saw a similar thing happening around the man, only the light glowed a deep purple color. He had seen something similar years ago, once when the Crone blessed a war party, but that was different from what he was looking at now. That had comforted him, while this set his nerves even more on edge.

Noticing the tribesman's nervousness, Darren said, "Relax, Parmguan. This is just... a trick we can use. It helps protect us." The woman grinned sardonically as she saw Parmguan's dismay, obviously enjoying his discomfort. It occurred to him that she was not the nicest person he'd ever encountered, and he resolved to keep an eye on her.

They picked their way cautiously through the heavy woods, fighting the flora for about an hour. The woman paused once, and held her head in her hand as she focused, then pointed excitedly. "It's that way," she exclaimed. Darren did not doubt her, and they went in the direction she indicated. After another hour of trekking through the Shold, they found themselves suddenly standing before a strangely formed building. It seemed to be carved out of a solid piece of white stone, and stood a mere forty or so feet tall in the shape of a dome. Parmguan had never seen a building so small, growing up in a Tower as he had.

They found the entrance after a few minutes of searching. "It's made of metal," Darren said as they studied the portal, which

had strange images etched into its surface. "Can you read this?" he asked his female companion.

After a few minutes Parmguan, tired of watching these two try to decipher the door's writings, reached out and pushed it inwards. The rusted hinges squealed loudly, but the door opened smoothly. It led into a darkened hallway cut straight through the outer wall.

"I guess we go in," Darren said, as he stepped into the arched interior. The violet glow from his hands added an atmosphere of the creepy to the interior, which became even more bizarre when the woman's green glow entered the building. The hallway led only about ten feet inwards, then opened out into a massive open area enclosed in the dome. The floor was a smooth white stone, and with the exception of a pedestal in the center, there was nothing else in the building.

"There," the woman said, pointing at the pedestal. It looked as though it were made of the same single stone that the rest of the building was carved out of, to the point where it was attached to the floor as a physical part of it. As they neared it, Parmguan looked around the room, noticing designs on the walls. As if reading the tribesman's mind, Darren threw his hand up, and light grew like a flower in the darkness from his closed fist.

The images on the walls resolved themselves into horrific frescoes of hideous beasts swirling around upon each other, all teeth and claws rending flesh and bone. Worse than that, there were people represented in the disgusting art that covered every inch of the interior of the dome. People with terrifying forms did unspeakable things that Parmguan would spend his remaining years trying to forget. A pervading sense of evil emanated from the sickening paintings, and Parmguan shuddered at what he was seeing.

The woman smiled at him, saying, "Isn't it amazing?" She seemed genuinely pleased with the art, and the tribesman seriously considered fleeing her nauseating presence at that moment.

Sitting atop the pedestal was a glass sphere, about a foot across. It seemed unremarkable to Parmguan, but he apparently was not viewing it with the same eyes that the two outsiders were using. Their excitement grew as they neared the object, which must have been the Azcrot they were questing after. "The

power," Darren said softly as he reached out to pick up the sphere.

"Do you think this is what happened to Ur?" the woman asked, equally enthralled by the object.

"There's no doubt about it," Darren replied. "I can't wait to get it back to The Prime. We'll be gods!"

Suddenly, a keening sound erupted from the side of the dome opposite of the one they came through. The three looked up and saw the terrifying figure of an ancient woman charging at them. Her edges were fuzzy, however, and Parmguan could see the outlines of the unholy fresco through her semi-transparent image. Fear rooting him to his spot, Parmguan felt a terrible sickness rise up in his throat as she neared.

"Fucking ghosts," the woman said as she and Darren walked around the pedestal with their fists glowing more intently. The wraith lashed out at them with her claws, and slashed Darren across the arm. As the wisps of her form passed through him, frost grew on his flesh, and he howled in agony. He staggered back against the pedestal and knocked the glass to the stone floor, shattering it into thousands of shards.

"NO!" his companion screamed, throwing herself at the sphere as it fell in a failed attempt to save it. Shocked out of his stupor by the sound of her voice, Parmguan snatched up a handful of the shattered glass, cutting his flesh deeply in the process. He heard the spirit shriek behind him again, as well as the pained screams of the two otherworldly companions battling the supernatural foe. Abandoning all sense of his surroundings, he fled the chamber and out into the forest, running blind with terror for hours.

When he stumbled out into the street, some semblance of sense returned to him, and Parmguan took to the shadows. He hid in the relative safety that the shirt afforded as he navigated back to his tribe's Tower through the winding and dangerous avenues. A winged creature passed overhead once, its massive form blocking out what little bit of sunlight made it this far down through the mists, hunting for prey. Parmguan had never seen such a beast before, and resolved to travel more carefully.

He had lost a lot of blood through the gashes in his hand, and the desperate run through the Shold caused much of it to pump out onto the ground. He feared that something may have followed

the blood trail he left behind in his panic, but nothing seemed to be pursuing him. In the first floor of his home Tower, however, Parmguan collapsed as he attempted to climb the shaft back up. He tried again and again, but didn't have the strength to scale the jutting pipes and ledges that lined the shaft's walls one floor, let alone a hundred. He finally fell unconscious, the desperation of his situation fading into blackness.

When he woke up, he was sleeping in the folds of his bed, his sister watching him as he slept. "He's awake!" she yelled as she ran out of the room to fetch his parents.

Rather than the familiar faces of his mother and father, however, Parmguan saw the Crone walk slowly into the room. "Rest yourself," she said as he tried to get up, averting his eyes as he moved clumsily. "You can look at me," she said. "Anyone who has braved the Shold has earned that right."

Parmguan, hearing her words, looked up at her antediluvian face, seeing simply an elderly woman. She did carry herself with practiced authority, however, and he could sense power radiating from her in the back of his head. He still couldn't bring himself to speak, however.

"The glass you brought back was exactly what we needed," she said. "I used it's power to strengthen the Tower, and we will be living here for a long time to come." She sat at the foot of his bed, saying, "Now, tell me of your adventures, young Parmguan."

He told her everything he could remember, from the moment he left home to the moment he blacked out at the bottom of the shaft. After he had related all of this to her, she leaned back and pursed her lips.

"Where do you think they came from, Parmguan?" When he shrugged in response, she said, "Well, they weren't just another tribe, I can tell you that much." What she wasn't telling him was her own theory on the origin of those darkly clad people. In her youth she heard tales of other worlds, spread across reality like the pockets of humanity in Ur. If these people were indeed from one of those other places, and were coming here looking for something, what would that mean for the scattered tribes? She had to ponder this question further, and commune with the Guide Spirits on the matter the next time one would speak with her. "I shouldn't worry too much about them, though, if I were you. I suspect we will never hear of them again. Now you get some rest,

and we will talk more later." With that, she left him alone to consider the events of the past few days.

Parmguan did worry about the strangers. He thought back to his sojourn into the Shold, but that wasn't the thing that kept him nervous. When he thought about the memory of the foul paintings on the dome's walls, Parmguan shuddered as though ice shot through his blood. Worse than the images they showed, and worse still than the sickness they had caused in him, was the apparent fact that those pictures... that horrific art... apparently accurately depicted his home, the Ruined City of Ur.

Performance Art

by

Christopher Baughman

Jerry checked over his camera gear for the fourth time since he got into Derek's car. They were on their way to another piece of underground performance art, and he wanted to be completely prepared. The camera lens was hidden cleverly in his glasses frame with a wireless Bluetooth connection to the recorder in his pocket. A lot of the performance piece artists tended to be camera shy, at least the ones who put on the darker works, and their art was generally only known to a very select crowd. Jerry and Derek saw an opportunity to take advantage of the situation.

"So how did you hear about this one?" Jerry asked as he took a test recording of the dark city streets. These more obscure plays generally only happened in the dead of night.

Derek took a sip from his energy drink, saying, "Through Lori's friend... Tabitha, I think her name is. Anyway, you've heard about this one, too."

Deleting the test footage he'd just taken, Jerry took the glasses off. "Oh yeah?" he asked. "Which one is it?"

Derek grinned, leaned over, and said conspiratorially, "It's the Sphinx piece. We're going to see the Sphinx piece."

Jerry almost dropped the glasses camera in astonishment. "No way!" he exclaimed with surprise. "The Sphinx show? Really?" When Derek nodded, still grinning, Jerry started double checking his gear. He wasn't going to run the risk of equipment failure ruining this job. "How did you get tickets, man?" he asked. "Sphinx is like a legend. Very exclusive."

"Yeah, I know," Derek said, laughing. "It was Lori. She heard Tabitha could get tickets through her boyfriend. He's a

sculptor; really tied into the scene, at least according to Lori. You know how that is, though."

"Don't I know it," Jerry muttered while he readied a backup recorder. He didn't normally take spares into a job, but this one was special. The Sphinx piece was a myth on the underground art scene, and nobody seemed to know what exactly it was. Lots of people thought they knew, but the stories were as varied and strange as the people who told them. Some said it was a simple play, while others declared that it was the sickest cabaret they'd ever heard of. Jerry never met anybody who actually saw the show with their own eyes, and suspected that what he'd heard was speculation at best. After tonight, though, everybody was going to know what the Sphinx piece was all about.

Jerry and Derek were both art school drop-outs. They started together at MSU's School of Art, they both partied together, and they both failed together. It turned out neither one of them had any real creative talent on their own, so they fell back on the one thing they could do using the few skills they had developed.

Journalism.

It was Derek's idea, much to Jerry's surprise. Derek was not known for having the best plans in the world, and more often than not he sucked Jerry into some wretched scheme or another. This one, however, was turning out fairly well for the both of them, and they were actually starting to make some money off of their website.

"Freak Scenes." That was the name of the site. There they posted video footage they were getting from the otherwise secretive alternative performance art scene, much to the chagrin of the artists involved. They'd captured thousands of hours of footage of mock executions, subversive rants, and one piercing fetish suspension after another. Those last comprised the bulk of what Jerry and Derek had filmed, and they were looking to broaden their horizons away from that particular aspect of the scene. Suspension was a simple, yet gruesome, act in which people would force gigantic hooks into their flesh and hang themselves from the ceiling, suspended by ropes or chains connected to those hooks. The two had filmed on as more than one of those sequences went horribly wrong; those videos drew huge numbers of people to their site. They set out to bring rare and challenging art to the masses, but were devolving into a gore-porn site. Being able to put up something as near-

mythical as the Sphinx show would be a feather in their caps, and hopefully catapult them into the role of more serious purveyors of art.

The address Derek was given led them to the end of a clichéd dark alley buried deep in the heart of downtown. Apparently the Sphinx performance was going to take place in an abandoned building that nobody had bothered to tear or burn down. Security consisted of bouncers hired from local clubs, and Jerry recognized one of them. "Hey, Lawrence!" he said as they shook hands. "What are you doing here?"

"Same thing I do at the club," the large man replied. "Making sure nobody crosses the velvet rope without a pass." He held out his hand, waiting for the required tickets. When Derek handed them over, Lawrence pocketed them and gestured for the two to go in.

"What, there's no hand stamp, wrist band, or anything?" Jerry asked.

"I'll remember your face," the bouncer said, grinning. "You better go in. They don't want people hanging around out front." He was a true professional, and performed the requirements of his job regardless of who he was dealing with. He would have turned his own mother away if she didn't have a ticket to get in, or wasn't on the guest list. At least there wasn't a pat-down.

"What do you think they're going to do?" Derek asked in hushed tones as they were led down a dark hallway. The two had first heard of the Sphinx show a year ago, at a suspension event, and all they knew for sure about it was that it was dark. Everybody said it was unsettlingly dark. While Jerry felt he was ready for whatever he was about to see, Derek hadn't really considered it too deeply.

"I don't know," Jerry whispered back. "We'll see."

They were seated in a room that had been painted flat black, from the ceiling to the floor. It was dimly lit by what appeared to be old fashioned oil lamps, and numerous other dark figures sat quietly in the folding chairs. A small stage had been built in the front of the room, its simple blackness dominating the area. Instead of a spotlight, the stage was lined across the front in shielded candles.

"Are you getting this?" Derek asked. It was a stupid question, or at least the timing of it was stupid, considering the number of bouncers and the reputation and secrecy of the show.

"Since we got out of the car," Jerry said. He always started filming when he left the car, and stopped only when returning. He felt that the often covert entry processes that a lot of these underground shows engaged in were an integral part of the videos they posted online, and made sure to capture every secretive and cagey detail.

"Good, good," Derek said, his leg twitching nervously. He was normally a nervous person, but when he'd just had one of those energy drinks he could be completely hyperactive.

Jerry looked around at the other audience members in the hopes of seeing a face he would recognize, but saw only strangers and people hiding their faces behind sunglasses or veils. Brimmed hats and scarves were fairly common, as well. He suspected he probably knew some of the patrons here, but there was no getting around the disguises without causing a stir.

The oil lamps all died at once, casting the audience into a darkness that was only slightly lit by the shielded stage candles. They all sat in silent anticipation in the gloom for a few minutes, which was far longer than most people could sit patiently. Some of the patrons were getting visibly nervous as they fidgeted in their seats, and a couple started to converse in hushed tones.

With a crash the door behind the crowd was thrown open, and a cold wind poured into the shadowed room from the outside. The candles jumped and flickered as everybody turned to look down the hallway, and the strange sound of a bass tone began to rumble beneath the black floorboards, pulsing up through the room and into the bones of every person present.

"What in the hell..?" Derek mumbled as a figure appeared at the other end of the hall, silhouetted against the sickly glow of the streetlights outside. It moved smoothly along the corridor toward the audience with a weird gliding movement, but it was only when the man entered did the people realize the strange truth.

He slid into the dim room hovering least two feet in the air. Not one part of the dark man touched the ground, and as he passed by down the aisle Jerry was struck by the illusion that

this enigmatic being was somehow, in some alien way, floating through the void of space. For a brief instant he would have sworn that he saw the cold glimmer of distant stars beneath the man's black-booted feet.

The door slammed shut as the man, who was wearing what looked like flowing black robes, took to the stage still hanging in the air like a child's unearthly balloon. He had the dusky features of the Middle East, complete with hair that matched his clothes in its blackness, and liquid pools of the abyss in his eyes. "I am The Black Pharaoh," his voice boomed over the growing pulse beneath the audience's feet. "Welcome to our presentation." He seemed to stare deeply and piercingly into each person's eyes for a moment, and then continued. "Tonight you will experience things alien to your understanding of reality," he said hypnotically, "and you will not be the same person when you leave this place as you are right now." It seemed as though he was speaking directly to each individual, rather than a gathering, and Jerry felt a coldness creep down his spine as the Black Pharaoh gazed into his eyes.

The room slowly descended into darkness while the mysterious entertainer spoke, and Jerry found himself struggling to maintain focus. "No, my children," he heard the rhythmic voice of the Black Pharaoh droning in his head. "You will be very different after this night," he said as the blanket of darkness smothered the last candle. The pulsating bass tone shot to a crescendo of chaos that overwhelmed all of Jerry's senses with a blurry pandemonium.

The Black Pharaoh's words, as he continued on about the vistas of madness the audience was about to subject themselves to, were the last things that Jerry remembered hearing that night before everything dropped off into oblivion.

* * *

When he awoke, Jerry found himself in his bed. His head was pounding with a nightmarish headache, and he staggered into his bathroom to pop some pain relievers. The sun seemed brighter than usual as he pulled his blinds closed, and as he sat on the ancient sofa and turned on the TV Jerry tried in vain to remember the events of the previous night. It wasn't until he finally dragged himself into the bathroom that Jerry realized things had gone horribly wrong.

While in art school Jerry grew a short beard, and it was an affectation he kept well after he failed out of class. He fancied at times that it was a similar sort of beard to George Lucas's trademark facial hair, but any such resemblance was absent this morning. As he stared in shocked horror at the mirror, Jerry slowly comprehended the fact that his beard was crusted with congealed blood. Glancing down, he saw that blood had also dried on his chest and stomach, as though he'd engaged in some sort of horrific feast the night before. Numb with shock, Jerry stepped into the cleansing rain of the shower, trying not to look down at the red fluids disappearing down the drain.

By the time he put some clothes on and went back into the living room, Jerry had convinced himself that the blood had to have been from a nosebleed, although he couldn't recollect any such thing happening. He found Derek lounging on the couch watching the news nursing a beer. "Hey, man!" Derek said as Jerry grabbed a bottle from the fridge. "Dude that was crazy last night, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, I think so," Jerry muttered as he dropped into the couch. "From what I can recall, anyway. What do you remember?"

Derek laughed and said, "Man, I don't even remember anything after the door shut, when that Dark Pharaoh guy showed up." He thought about it for a moment, and asked, "Hey, when he came in, was he..?"

"Yeah," Jerry said. "He looked like he was floating. It was some real David Blaine kind of stuff."

Latching onto this bit of what must have been reality, Derek said, "Oh, right! It was some street magic, like Criss Angel or something." He thought about it as he took another drink of beer, and said, "But whoa, man. Crazy."

"Did you watch the video?" Jerry asked.

"No, I didn't," Derek replied. "You want to go look at it?" He was already getting up and walking towards Jerry's editing room. Derek had his own film production setup, but all of their work went through Jerry's outfit because his office was also the center of their website management.

When Jerry stepped in, Derek already had the recorder hooked up to the computer, and the video was running. They were walking

past the bouncer, down the dark hallway, and sat in their folding chairs. The wind gusted past as the dark man glided by, and neither Jerry nor Derek could spot any sign of trickery or illusion. His feet looked as though they were legitimately, if not believably, a couple of feet off the floor. "Come on," Derek said, "we know what happens here. Let's skip ahead."

"How far?" Jerry asked. "There are a couple of hours of video here, and I'm not sure when we left."

"I don't know. Call it an hour," Derek replied.

Jerry took the mouse and clicked ahead on the play bar about an hour further along in the video. They were immediately assailed with the hideous sounds of screaming, and there was a general brawl happening in the room as people flung themselves at one another with a primal anger. The chairs were swept away in the chaos, and blood spatters could clearly be seen on the floor and walls. "Holy shit," Jerry muttered in awe, shocked at the scene playing out in front of him.

"Goddamn," Derek agreed.

One of the people was knocked down in the melee, and everybody around her pounced like animals. They were literally tearing into the poor young woman with their bare hands, and her screams dominated the savage audio track. Jerry felt his gorge rising up as he watched himself in the movie biting into the fallen woman's throat, blood gushing out in a spray. The wet sounds of grisly chewing replaced her dying wails, and Jerry grabbed a trash can to be sick in.

Derek turned off the video and sank back in his chair, the horror of what he had just witnessed showing plainly in his expression. "Goddamn," he muttered. "Goddamn, goddamn, goddamn..."

After wiping his face, Jerry sat in his chair and stared numbly at the video recorder. "What in the hell was that?"

"I don't know, man," Derek said fearfully. "I have no idea what that was." Then, as though it just occurred to him, he turned the video back on, but with the sound muted. He was in no way prepared to hear what they had recorded, but with the volume down he was more able to analyze the video itself. "Hey," he said, "who's holding your glasses?" He glanced at Jerry, who

was still recovering from his nausea, and asked, "Who's got the camera?"

It was then that Jerry realized that nowhere in the orgy of violence on the screen could he see the Black Pharaoh. The stage stood empty, surrounded by people devouring one another like a scene from a particularly gruesome horror movie. Then, as though in answer to the question, the camera shifted quickly and the dark face of the shadowy man stared back at them with empty eyes. The camera returned to terrifying scene, and Derek shut the video down again.

"I guess that answers that," he said quietly.

"What in the hell happened!?" Jerry shouted suddenly, making Derek jump in his seat.

"I don't know, but it's all messed up, man" Derek responded, tears forming in his eyes. It was the only way his psyche could find to deal with the revulsion he was feeling, and the tears started streaming down his face uncontrollably.

Jerry, on the other hand, went deeper into his numb state. He thought about the video in as abstract a way as he could, and tried to detach from the images he had seen on the monitor. "They must've given us something, some kind of drug," he said, while Derek turned in his chair and started clicking around on his laptop.

"Oh, hell," Derek mumbled. "You posted it."

"What?" Jerry leaned forward and looked at the screen over his friend's shoulder. "I don't remember posting..."

"You don't remember eating that woman's face, either, do you?" Derek shouted. "Whether you remember posting it or not, it's out there, and we are getting a lot of hits! The traffic is through the roof on this thing!" He sounded oddly happy about that, the massive success of their site temporarily overshadowing the macabre content of the video. He started playing it from their webpage, and the sound of the Black Pharaoh's voice filled the room.

"...you will experience things alien to your understanding of reality," he said thunderously in the darkness.

"What are we going to do?" Jerry muttered to himself. A million different outcomes flashed through his mind, ranging from prison to suicide. "What are we going to do?" he asked again.

Ignoring Jerry, Derek started looking around the 'net, stopping only after a few minutes of desperate searching and typing. "It's all over the place," he said, as the Black Pharaoh's voice started droning in some foreign language. "It's on YouTube, Live Leak, and hell... Yahoo's even showing it!"

Jerry began to feel a strange swirling in his head as the voice chanted in its alien tongue. It began to fill his head with visions of blood and violence until he finally reached out and turned the speakers off. In that instant he knew they weren't drugged the previous night.

"Christ, man, it's all over," Derek continued, his voice taking on a more feverish pitch as he spoke. He turned to face Jerry, saying, "It's all over the 'net, man. We're screwed. We are so screwed!"

Jerry stood up silently and walked back into the living room, where he plopped down on the couch in front of the TV. Derek followed him in, panic beginning to set in.

"Oh, man, we are so done!" he exclaimed. "It's game over, man, game over! They're gonna put us in prison and throw away the key!"

Jerry stared blankly at the news for a moment, and then cocked his head to the side. There were riots playing out on the screen, but not like any he had seen before. Instead of angry kids throwing rocks in some sort of political defiance of whatever, it was a mix of people attacking each other and the police with a savage viciousness. As the graphic scenes played out in cities across the country, Jerry leaned forward and turned the volume up.

"... not sure what is driving these mobs to attack one another," the anchor woman said, "and it has even been said that there have been numerous acts of..." She paused, gulped, and continued. "Acts of cannibalism, right in the streets of cities all over the country."

"Holy shit," Derek said as he sat in an overstuffed chair. He glanced over at Jerry, then back at the news. "You think..."

"Yeah, I think so," Jerry said as he stood up and crossed over to the apartment's fourth story patio. He yanked the blinds up, and was met with the sight of a city in chaos. Mobs were attacking one another in the streets, leaving blood and torn flesh on the pavement. Massive columns of smoke poured into the sky from fires hidden throughout the city, and the occasional siren could be heard wailing in the distance.

"You will not be the same person when you leave this place as you are right now," the Black Pharaoh's voice said in Jerry's memory, the ominous tone of the words taking on a freshly horrific reality before his eyes. "You will not be the same," he repeated under his breath.

Mysterious Ways

by

Christopher Baughman

The Angel split the firmament, clawing and tearing his way through the bounds of reality. Waves of energy burst from the jagged hole torn in the universe, sweeping stars to the side and reducing entire planets to radioactive dust. Turning his face towards the edge of the galaxy, the Angel Shaftiel spread his ethereal wings and rode gravity currents through eddies of space and time.

It was an age before he spotted his destination. A blue and white world hung in the void, covered from pole to pole by the humans. Shaftiel did not fully understand these people, and had been sent ten times before to punish ten separate nations. Their obliteration was so thoroughly complete that their names were utterly unknown to not only the modern world; they were also unknown to the ancient world.

He hovered over the orb below, considering the fact that this place was normally off-limits to him and his angelic brethren, and began his descent down through the swirling clouds. Shaftiel's wings folded themselves into the shadow of this small island of reality, and he began to dive head first into the pool of gravity. He slammed into the glistening pavement in the middle of a large city in an alley hidden between two ramshackle and deserted buildings. Rainwater poured over the edges of the roofs, plastering the Angel's stark white hair to his head.

Pulling himself to his feet, Shaftiel leaned against ancient bricks, dry heaving and gagging. A few minutes later he shoved himself back from the wall and glowered down to the end of the alley. There was a transient huddled within a shelter made of cardboard, wrapped in numerous filthy blankets and warmed by a bottle of cheap whiskey. Shaftiel could hear the man's sleeping breaths, and his heart beating slowly in his chest. He sniffed the cold air and caught the man's stench through the rain.

Shaftiel began walking bare footed towards the mouth of the alley, waving a hand over the sleeping form as he passed. The homeless man's breathing and heartbeat came to a sudden stop, the body convulsed once, and Shaftiel began to walk with more energy. Such was the long-destined fate of the man, and the Angel took solace in the fact that he was now ensured of eternal paradise as compensation for his sacrifice. He stood straighter, and with a minor trick of reality his hair dried itself and began to slowly writhe as if caught in a breeze. He paused before passing into the street, and waved his hand over another homeless person cowering in the shadows. The man had seen the Angel's power, and was afraid, until he too fell to the ground. These men were in this place at this time specifically for this purpose. Such was the clockwork design of things. Shaftiel pulled the overcoat off of the corpse and pulled it on, buttoning it from the middle button down.

The Angel walked calmly down the street, ignoring the numerous wraiths and spirits fleeing from his presence into the night. Shaftiel peered through the rain at the surrounding city until he found the building he was to enter. Striding down the middle of the street, Shaftiel's dark figure passed between empty cars and vacant windows. As he walked by lamp posts, their sodium bulbs flickered and died, while a slight glow began to appear around his head.

He stood at the double doors leading into a tall cathedral, the towers of which stabbed into the black sky. Shaftiel glanced up into the falling rain, and shook off the gathering cold. The doors opened themselves outwards, causing dust on the stone floor to puff into the air. The Angel walked across the threshold, the dust curling over his shoulders to form the faint hint of ephemeral wings.

A single individual, a young woman, sat huddled on one of the pews, her head bowed in tearful prayer. Shaftiel walked up the center aisle, his bare feet padding softly on the cold floor. He came to a stop at her side and stared down at her. When she noticed his presence through her sad reverie, the girl looked up at the ivory face with awe in her eyes.

A lone priest hurried across the church only to be knocked to his knees when Shaftiel turned his stern gaze towards the man. "The words I have are not meant for your ears," the Angel said, and the priest fell to the floor in a stupor.

"I have something to tell you," Shaftiel said to the girl, his voice soothing and loud at the same time. He bent down and whispered in her ear for a few seconds. As comprehension dawned on her tear-streaked face, the Angel straightening his back, mumuring, "Amen." With that he turned back towards the doors, her fingertips brushing his coat in supplication. He did not look back as the young woman threw herself sobbing to the floor in the middle of the aisle.

The rain continued to pour on the wretched city, somehow unable to wash the filth and the grime from the streets and gutters. Shaftiel turned his head back to the emptiness above and smiled broadly as he spread his arms. His mission complete, he unfurled his faint wings into the world and lifted himself into the sky. He had no idea what the words he said to the young woman meant, but he trusted that there was a real purpose to what he'd been tasked with. This world had a delicate and intricate reality, and often the most significant events were affected by the most inconsequential seeming incidents.

Something had to make the butterfly's wings flutter.

The Story Downtown

by

Christopher Baughman

I sometimes sit on the roof of my apartment building during the night and watch the streets below. Actually, I watch the people walking on the sidewalks, and their sometimes curious shows. During the early hours of the evening the lives you see are fairly pedestrian and straightforward, with only the occasional drunk or mugging livening things up. It is in the deep hours of the early morning that things can take on an air of the surreal, when things you never expected to see seem to turn up on the damp asphalt streets. I once watched a procession of a dozen or so monks passing quietly down the sidewalk. Catholic monks, of all things! They didn't speak a word, and only their footsteps echoed off of the brick walls as they walked on the cracked concrete. There isn't a monastery anywhere nearby that I am aware of, and none of the neighbors ever heard of such a thing, so to this day I have no idea what could have led to such an event. I can still picture their somber appearance, each man wearing an expression of sadness, serenity, and a strange sort of unworldliness, as they trudged through the chilly predawn hours. If I were more of a spiritual person, more inclined towards the religious, I probably would have counted this as a brush with the divine, but I am not, so I let it pass as merely the very unusual.

I work in a downtown office in a cubicle just like millions of other people, and like those millions of other people, I hate my job. To be fair, I can't imagine having a job that I would like, so I just keep plugging away at this one so that I can say that I am gainfully employed, as well as pay the bills. I do take a lot of cigarette breaks, though, to stand outside in the freezing rain and poison myself slowly. There is an amazingly

large number of people in my office building that are also engaged in this slow suicide, and the butt cans fill up early on in the day. The building is located right in the middle of downtown. Downtown during the day is a pretty pedestrian place to be, even with the crazies, the homeless, and the homeless crazies wandering around begging for dimes off of the good, honest, hard-working people like myself. Sometimes I work late, and I found that in the early evening hours these wretched people descend on the smoking area to scavenge the remains of partially smoked cigarettes from the ground and filthy butt cans. They all seem to have the same look in their eyes, though, like they have all been witness to something truly shocking. They all look as if they half-expect your face to split open and a grinning monster leap out at them with snapping teeth and hellish howls. Sometimes, too, some of them look like they want that to happen. When I think about it, though, I would probably have that same expression if I lived at a men's hotel (no guests allowed) across a filthy downtown street from the YMCA and the county mental health drug distribution office. While I can only imagine what such a place would be like to live in, I am fairly certain that what I imagine isn't nearly as awful as the reality of it. With that in mind, I often don't smoke the whole cigarette, and leave a decent amount for one of these homeless people to scrounge up in after-hours.

This makes me wonder just what happens in the depths of the night downtown. If my own little apartment neighborhood gets as twisted as it gets late at night, what must happen in the truly crowded parts of the city? Where the mad and the criminal feed off of each other like beasts, things must get really weird, sometimes. There are, as has been said, things man was never meant to see, and it should make one shudder to consider the possibility that those things often happen in the middle of the very height of human civilization. They occur even while we sleep, protected by relatively flimsy doors and panes of glass that somehow seem to offer inadequate protection. I must admit, after my various brushes with this possible netherworld in my own part of town, I am curious as to just how deep this strange rabbit hole does go. I suppose it's a common theme to see in movies and comic books these days, the idea that there is a strange hidden world that exists alongside our own, and to use a hackneyed cliché, that things are not always what they seem, but the idea of seeing such a thing with my own two eyes has a strong temptation in it for me. Once you get a taste for the herb of the unusual, it's hard to put that particular pipe down.

Eventually, while on my rooftop, my curiosity did get the better of me, and I left my urban perch to make my way downtown via the subway. That trip often proved to be a bizarre experience unto itself, especially after the late night revelers had all gone home, and only a few city employees and a lot of transients were out and about. It's strange, but the same people that we all feel at least a small amount of contempt for during the day seem to carry themselves with more power during these late hours. A man who cravenly begs for any spare change at 1PM seems to carry himself with more of an air of menace and confidence at 1AM. I suppose that, to use another tired cliché, I have stepped into his world, and the roles have oddly reversed themselves. I should have been afraid, and sometimes I was a bit nervous, but after a few such journeys I realized that these people more often than not kept to themselves, with only the occasional sidelong look at this stranger passing by. Still, the obvious crazies that haunted these tunnels also had a very different demeanor than their surface dwelling cousins. These tended to be more morose, like the heroin junkies you see with their backs propped against the wall and their heads bowed pathetically, quietly begging for any change you would give them. Some of these hollow-eyed people on the subway undoubtedly were addicts, but others appeared to only wear this morbid look like a costume, and stared at you with a sort of intensity. I wondered what sights they had been witness to in their pallid existence on and under these streets to make them look like so many walking dead. I never asked, however, as none of them ever seemed the conversational type.

Odd things did happen on just my journeys through the tunnels; Odd, and disconcerting, things. Once, while getting out of the subway car, I caught a strange movement out of the corner of my eye in the pitch black of the tunnel. Strange, as in nothing natural should move that way. I turned my head quickly to see what it was, but saw nothing in the blackness. I turned back, and a pair of the hollow-eyes was staring almost vacantly at me, or rather, through me, from across the platform. It was one of the obviously stoned, dressed in the dingy black and gray that was a uniform common to the goth kids, but this man was not wearing it for shock effect. There was something natural in the way he wore this look, as though he were not play-acting in an attempt to scare the regular folk. He didn't look angry or blatantly deranged; he just had a weird blankness on his face, as though emotion and personality were things foreign to his being. I hoped that maybe he just happened to be staring in my direction, and not necessarily at me, until he raised his finger to his lips and said softly, "Shhhh..." Then he winked at me,

maintaining that alien emptiness in his eyes. I shuddered and ascended out of there quickly, a strange chill at my back. This would not be the last time I experienced that feeling, but it did seem to be unique to the subway, strangely enough. Maybe it was the different kind of lighting. In the tubes they use those sterile bluish-green neon lights that cast a sickly pallor over people. Everything seems to be clearly lit, to the point that every little bit of dirt and muck shows up in brilliant contrast to the white tile walls. In an effort to keep the underground brightly lit, the designers inadvertently made the place look like a post-modern tomb.

Up in the streets, though, everything had an orange cast to it. Gone were the days of the blue-green-white street-lights. Now they were all sodium lamps, which seemed to make everything seem somehow more ethereal. Under the hazy bronze glow of the streetlights things seemed more unreal, and took on a far different appearance than during the day. Stepping above ground for the first time at 3AM in downtown was unearthly. I was surrounded by the darkly lit cathedrals of modern business, eternal testaments to the ambitions of men. It was an odd realization I had at these times that someday these would also become empty memorials to those same men, devoid of any of the energy and life it took to build them. Above the orange glow of the streets, one could imagine these towers rising into the emptiness like ancient fortresses against unnamed foes, or temples to unknown gods. Sometimes you would wander into a place less well lit, though, and could see the massive buildings in a more earthly light. Then they were simply skyscrapers overlooking the city, more often than not filled to the top with cubicle farms identical to the one I worked in every day.

I immediately knew where to go directly after leaving the tunnels, as I had taken the time one day to find the perfect location for watching the streets. I was there right now, and found the large tree against which I liked to lean at the edge of a small unnamed park. I liked this spot because it offered a good view of a relatively well-traveled street, but was itself shrouded in darkness due to poor street lamp positioning. If I were a rapist, mugger, or cop, this would be the place from which to stage my evening ventures. I looked out across a river of orange light from the hidden safety of my small island of shadow. One could see streetwalkers advertising their wares, pimps selling the prostitutes' wares, and dealers offering up various kinds of dreams to whoever offered up the right price. If you knew anything about the modern drug culture, you would know that this price was not always paid in cash, and

everything, at some desperate point, does indeed have a street value. This low point of the capitalist ideology was typically the show playing when I arrived, and tonight was no different than any other, whether it was a weekend or a week night. Yes, it was entertaining, but it was when these social dregs departed that things became truly interesting.

I leaned back further into the darkness and lit a cigarette as the last whore disappeared down an alley. The real show, the open secret that anybody could know, and nobody ever seemed to know, started within minutes, as a single person stepped out of that same alley into the golden lights. It wasn't one of the local hookers by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, she was a beautiful woman with classically dark eyes and wearing a sleek black dress. She looked more like someone you would see down here at noon, grabbing lunch between meetings at the office, not someone you would see at 4AM. She didn't have any of the look of the late night revelers you sometimes saw wandering home from a night of club hopping, nor did she look like any of the goth types that often liked to titillate themselves with a brief jaunt down to the seedy part of town. I held my breath for a minute as she walked slowly up the sidewalk, passing me across the street. It was then that I noticed that she carried no purse, or bag of any kind. Maybe she had been mugged? I ruled that out immediately when I saw she didn't have the shocked look of someone freshly robbed. She was probably looking for a pusher for a late night or early morning fix. If that were the case, she had to be new to this area, because those guys were all gone home to their little gangster beds by now. She would have to really be hurting if that was what she was doing down here at this hour!

She slowed, and leaned against a streetlight almost seductively, like a purring cat rubbing against your leg, before straightening back up and continuing her journey. People do not normally move like that, and she had this almost erotic laziness in how she carried herself. In a strange way, she appeared to fit in down here, even more than the pimps and hookers who had just exited stage left. Maybe she had already found her narcotic pleasure, and was out enjoying the sights as only the truly high can enjoy them. As she turned a corner into another alley for a brief moment it seemed as if her gaze locked with mine. She trailed her fingernails along the wall, until they disappeared into the darkness. Something caught my eye, though, and I walked across the street to that corner. She left something on the concrete wall, but I couldn't make out what it was until I got a few feet away. Where her fingers had touched the rough surface

there were trails of blood, which continued around the corner. In the alley there was only an awful darkness, and the blood (God, but I wasn't sure which would be more terrifying: The blood being her own, or someone else's) led dripping into the shadows. Still, this was exactly the kind of thing I was looking for, and the rush of excitement kept me from running away in terror.

A long and feminine arm beckoned languidly from behind a filthy dumpster a mere ten or so feet in front of me. She was pale, with light blue veins just beneath her gorgeously translucent skin. I was frozen, entranced by her arm's exotic movements, and the intricate tracings of her soft fingertips against the chilly air. A moment later she stepped seductively out into the light, her naked form somehow both contrasting with and belonging to the gutter ambiance of this back alley. There was an ethereal beauty to her, and she walked closer to me with an animalistic grace that set my pulse racing. Another step and she was somehow right in front of me, her breasts like ivory globes of gorgeousness and sumptuousness tugging at my desires. She cocked her head, her black eyes looking into mine with a vixen's hunger, her delicate features and unnatural allure holding me enraptured. At some point she began unbuttoning my shirt with her shapely fingers, and my eyes became heavy and half closed.

Somewhere, in the midst of my lust, I felt something strangely warm and sticky dripping down my chest. It was just enough to bring me out of my gossamer stupor. Her body was pushed up close to mine, her head nestled in my shoulder. I slowly looked down at my chest, where her fingers were still tracing strange patterns, and saw blood dripping from them and down my stomach. Seized by a sudden horror, I pushed her away and fled from the alley and back onto the street. I turned and looked long enough to see her withdrawing back into the shadows, a feral snarl on her beautifully curved lips.

I ran as fast as I could back to the relatively secure feeling of the subway and got on the first car that presented itself. I sat there for what felt like hours, ignoring the transients and early-to-rise workers who must have noticed the pool of blood on my chest. Finally an elderly woman asked me if I were alright, and I nodded dumbly in response. She left it alone after that, content to leave me in my numb silence. Just before what must have been dawn I dragged myself out of the tunnels, and reveled in the safety of my own neighborhood. Here was normalcy, my friends and neighbors, the same police on patrol every night, and the same stores and familiar buildings that I saw every day.

Here was the absence of horror, and I breathed that clichéd sigh of relief.

As one of the regular neighborhood homeless people shuffled past, I shoved a dollar into his coin cup. He paused, turned towards me, and raised a finger to his lips, saying softly, "Shhhh..."

Coils

by

Christopher Baughman

"She's beautiful," Jason Watts said as he crouched over a woman's naked corpse. Rubbing his stubble-covered chin, he studied her lifeless form sprawled face-down on the filthy floor. She was a redhead, and had her hair cut like Betty Page with bangs and a pony tail. Jason fought the urge to touch her.

Homicide Detective Bloomrich stepped into the small hotel room, his massive frame completely blocking the door. He was at least 6 feet tall, and was built like a sumo wrestler. At first glance some would dismiss him as fat, but upon closer inspection it was obvious that he was built for power. There was more than one thug on the streets that could attest to his massive strength and surprising speed. He was a gruff man, and believed in a very cut and dry world. "She's a druggy freak," he said as he looked contemptuously down at her body.

Jason stood up with a camera in hand and clicked another picture. "True," he said. "But beautiful."

Bloomrich laughed harshly and said, "You like that tattooed freaky shit, don't you."

"I guess I do," Jason replied as he angled for another picture of the woman's corpse. He switched to a different camera hanging from his neck that was better at black and white shots than his digital, and clicked off a rapid series of more pictures.

She was a dead angel, naked and exposed to the world. Other than her pervasive tattoos, her skin was flawless. Unlike a lot of the other junkies and street trash Jason had seen in his career, she had no piercings or scars, and her skin had none of the sores and blemishes associated with heavy drug use. The only fleshly evidence of her habit was a fine line of needle holes tracing a delicate vein up her left arm.

Her tattoos, or rather, her tattoo, resonated in his head. Jason couldn't really tell if there were multiple pictures in the same theme that grew together, or if it was a single large picture covering her entire body. Every square inch from her wrists to her neck, and from her neck to her feet, was covered with a writhing mass of tentacles. Everywhere he looked was one tentacle twisting and curling around another, complete with suckers and hooks along sinewy shapes. He'd never seen anything like this almost hypnotic art in his career, and he'd seen a lot of crazy things. He was amazed at what people would do to their own bodies, from branding to cutting, but this was beyond any of that in its utter completeness.

Bloomrich turned and faced back out the door towards the uniformed police in the hallway. "How much longer you gonna be, Watts?" he asked the photographer. "We need to get the medical examiner in here to declare, and get her down to the morgue before she starts stinking up the place." He was always a practical man, even in the face of horrors that would leave most others sick with fear and turmoil. It was this strange ability to stomach the wretched and gruesome that he and Jason had in common. It was probably the only thing they had in common.

"Just a few more and I'll be done," Jason said, distracted as he clicked away. He was determined to capture as much of the artwork embedded in the woman's flesh as he could before Bloomrich and the other cops made him leave.

Impatient with the part-time forensic photographer, Bloomrich drained his coffee and said, "Come on, man, she's an overdose! This isn't a crime scene; it's an accident that was gonna happen anyway. It just had to happen on my watch." The big man hated suicides not so much because of what they did to themselves, but because they were a waste of his time. He felt he could be dealing with real murders instead of standing around watching some photography geek take pictures of a woman too stupid not to shoot up.

"Alright," Jason said as he took his last shots. "I'm done." He picked up his work bag and started putting cameras away, trying to put images of the woman's tattoos out of his head.

As he started to leave, Jason handed Bloomrich the invoice, saying, "I'll let you take care of this since you're Johnny On-The-Spot on this one." He knew the huge detective hated any

paperwork, and took some joy in adding to the pile. He probably wouldn't see a penny for this work for months as a result.

Snatching the slip of paper, the detective snarled, "If I see any of those on the internet, I'll have your ass up on charges faster than the time it took you to sign that non-disclosure agreement. You'll never do work for us again."

"Yeah, I got it," Jason replied. He took a special pride in the fact that he'd never leaked any of his crime scene work, but he also understood the nervousness of the police on the matter. Whenever a new murder photograph wound up on the internet it always caused a scandal in the effected city's police department. "Relax, Bloom, I haven't lost one yet!" he said, patting the officer's shoulder.

"There's always a first time," the Bloomrich said as he directed the coroner's office man into the room. "Do you keep all those pictures, or do you get rid of them after you give us the files?"

Jason lied and said, "I delete them." He didn't want the tough cop to think he was any more of a freak than he already did. As he left, though, the images of the woman's bizarre tattoo played again and again through his head. Even as he went on to his other job of the day taking pictures at a wedding, memories of that gorgeous woman and her images of tentacles kept creeping back to the front of his mind, dominating his thoughts. He couldn't wait to get back to his apartment and start sorting through the photos he'd taken at her unfortunate scene.

* * *

By midnight the walls of Jason's in-house photo lab were covered in printouts and developed pictures of the dead woman. At first he tried to pretend that it was merely professional curiosity that captured his imagination, but gave himself over to a strange sort of obsession as he studied the photos more closely. Before he finally fell asleep sometime in the middle of the night, Jason found himself poring over the minutest details of the tentacles, to the point that he began to memorize their every twist and curl.

She came to him in his dreams that night, once he finally went to sleep, her nude form silhouetted against a streetlamp outside. "I am yours," she said to him in this twilight state as she neared his bed. "I love you." He felt her hand rest on his ankle, her fingers squeezing softly as the tentacle pictures moved slowly across her creamy skin.

"Who are you?" Jason asked dumbly as he studied the alien images on her body.

"Shhh," she replied as she put a cold finger to his lips. "I love you now and forever. I died, and now I am here, with you. For you." With that she leaned forward and kissed him, her tongue sliding between his lips, pushing past his mouth, and forcing its way into his body as she wrapped her arms around him.

He felt the movement of the tentacles as they pulled him closer to her, the screams of his fear and obsession dying against the cold breath invading his lungs.

"Save us," her voice whispered in the shadows.

* * *

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Bloomrich asked as he sucked down an energy drink. He sat at his terminally messy desk, the files and photographs of various unexplained deaths and murders scattered in barely coherent piles. His laptop sat forlornly at the edge of the desk, turned off as it usually was; a fine coat of dust was evidence of its lack of use. Bloomrich wasn't exactly the kind of guy who read his email on a regular basis, much to the consternation of his superiors and coworkers.

"I haven't been sleeping much," Jason replied wearily as he dropped the folder filled with hard copies of the dead woman on the growing mess. He also handed over a flash drive holding the digital copies of each; Bloomrich tossed that to the side.

The detective grunted, asking, "Was it her?"

Collapsing into a chair, Jason ran his fingers through his hair. "Nah," he lied. "Not particularly, anyway. I think I

need a break from forensic work, though. It's starting to get to me. I will say, though, that her tattoo bothered me. There was something... Lovecraftian to it."

Bloomrich leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the piles of paperwork on his desk. He studied the photographer for a moment, and said, "Yeah, it'll do that to you. Lovecraftian, huh? Maybe you do need a break." Reaching across to a filing cabinet that was overflowing with documents, Bloomrich pulled out a form and handed it to Jason. "Fill this out, and I'll get you some light work for the city. Events and such down at the mayor's office. Stuff that'll take your mind off of things." He grinned, and said, "Nothing Lovecraft to it."

Taking the form, Jason stood up and said, "Thanks, man. I think I'll do that. It'll be good to take shots of something besides dead people."

"Oh, I'm not sure you won't be," Bloomrich replied. "Down at city hall they just bury the bodies deeper." He started looking through a report on another case, ignoring the pictures Jason just delivered. This one was a real crime, not just another dead addict with a broken sense of proportion. "Oh, by the way," he said, not taking his eyes off of the report in front of him. "That dead junky woman... the redhead. She didn't OD. She was pretty clean when she died."

"Really?" Jason asked, his obsession piqued kicking in. "How did she die, then?"

Still reading the report, Bloomrich shuffled around the mess on his desk and dropped a sheaf of papers in front of Jason. "Natural causes," he said. "Coroner said her heart just stopped cold. No sign of foul play, no bruises or anything, so she's just another weird entry in the books." He paused for a moment as if thinking, then said, "But you know, there was one other crazy thing. She's still a Jane Doe. There's nothing in any system anywhere. You just don't see that anymore, especially not with a young woman like that. Weird."

Jason showed himself out, images of tentacles on his mind.

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Naked and covered in sweat, Jason sat cross-legged in the middle of his photo lab surrounded by hundreds of pictures of the woman. He had actually managed to bribe his way into the morgue and take hundreds of more pictures a few days before, capturing every single line of the tattoo in high detail. Some were in color, while others were monochrome, and the stark contrast between her red hair and the black and white images highlighted the strange curves and shadows of the unearthly tattoo. He had been focused on an unidentified puzzle in his mind, circling around the artwork arrayed before him for hours. He'd forgotten to turn on the air conditioner earlier that day, and was too intensely wrapped up in this conundrum to be bothered to go turn it on.

The writhing shapes appeared to stretch from one photograph to another across the boundaries of space, and they all began to blur into one large image. The tip of an appendage seemed to flick across his wrist as he reached out to adjust the position of a single picture to better align with its neighbors. Obsession drew his eye along the maddening lines of the overall image carefully arranged around him, and something bizarre began to take shape in his fevered mind. He finally saw the key when his eyes wandered across the thin row of needle holes up her arm, and shuddered.

Jason stood up slowly, his legs burning from the return of circulation after hours spent on the floor. He walked across the pictures, scattering them carelessly as he passed by. They were irrelevant to his new purpose, now. He dug through his closet and pulled out old art supplies that had been stored there. He hadn't sketched anything for years; not since before he discovered he had a talent for photography, but he'd always kept his pads and pencils. He sat down at his desk, shoved everything else out of the way, and began to draw.

* * *

"Man, that is some craziness," Bob said as he looked at the drawings Jason brought him. He was the owner and proprietor of Biker Bob's Tattoos, and a friend of Jason's from his art school days. He glanced up at the photographer, saying, "It's pretty

dense work, dude, and is going to take a long time to just outline; months, at least. Are you sure?"

Jason sat down in the tattoo chair and presented his bare arm. "Yeah, I'm sure," he said. "Whole body sleeve, and it has to be exactly as I drew it. If any of it is off, that'd be bad." He thought back to the redheaded woman whose body was found lying face-down on a filthy floor in a seedy hotel, and a chill shot up his spine. After days of studying her skin art, he finally spotted the flaw in the design, the one minor line that strayed just slightly from where it should have been. The tattoo artist probably went around one of the drug needle holes in an effort to avoid piercing a paper-thin vein. His caution ultimately proved to be her undoing. He grabbed Bob's wrist and said, "I mean it. Absolutely perfect, no deviation," he emphasized. "If you screw any of it up, I will have to go get the error burned off and redone."

Bob looked at him intently for a moment, and nodded. "I understand, man. I'll do all the work myself, and we'll go real slowly."

Placated by this, Jason relaxed a bit, and glanced at the naked, tattooed, and red-haired woman watching him from across the room in silence. He didn't know what would happen when the last bit of ink was laid in, but he had resolved himself to finish the job she started, and maybe save them both.

Closing his eyes as the burn of the needles started in on his arm, Jason saw only the fluid lines of tentacles coiled around one another perversely, forming the pattern that had haunted him for weeks. Forming the pattern of God.

All That Glitters

by

Christopher Baughman

I stood across the street from a ratty little cafe, leaning against a brick wall with my hat pulled low and huddling deep into my coat. It was drizzling and chilly, and the occasional drop of water fell from my hat's brim to the cold wet concrete. I took a pull from my cigarette, and exhaled the stale tasting smoke out into the clammy air, watching the patrons sip their coffee, eat their pie, and act like regular people. The lone waitress behind the counter was an expert at her trade, and hustled from one end of the bar to the other carrying stacks of plates and meager tips in her aging hands. She would probably die in that place.

They were all little more than gray faces seen through a pane of dirty glass and a street's worth of cold rain to my eyes, and I think I preferred it that way. My situation and their situations would never coincide, if they were fortunate. I took another puff of smoke and backed further out of the sickly glow of the street lamp.

She startled me as she stepped slowly around a far street corner, her half-mad eyes burning at me intently, piercing even the winter rain and city darkness. I couldn't see her facial features distinctly, but I somehow knew that she was grinning at me with feral lips pulled back across unnaturally sharpened teeth. She wore paint like a clown, along with a baggy patchwork of clothes that seemed to remain remarkably dry, and she walked across the street towards me with an odd gait that was something between sleek and jerky. Her appearance by itself would make you laugh at her, but coupled with her weirdly dark demeanor, she was something only the insane would giggle at. I knew that running away was no choice, so I lit another cigarette and waited nervously. I wasn't expecting to see her, and this represented a definite change of plans for my night, but she had a way of finding me wherever I was when she wanted

to talk. I figured I would probably want to speak with her, anyway.

"Did you know that a man, not too much different from yourself, just hanged himself in his bedroom closet just two blocks from here?" she asked me as she drew near. "He wore a suit and tie, and had a nice hat hanging on the wall next to his nice coat. He used a power cord from a lamp to do it with. Why do you think he did that?"

"I don't know," I replied, trying to appear quite nonchalant about this whole creepy turn of events. "Maybe he was just tired of this life, and was looking for a new beginning. Maybe he just couldn't find a rope."

She cocked her head to the side at my almost flippant response to her gruesome question. I think it was curious to her that I should begin to develop a certain resistance to her shocking comments, which in turn made me more nervous. It meant that she would have to go further and dig more deeply into the darker recesses of her personality in order to throw me off balance. Some would consider her behavior bizarre, but I had dealt with her for a couple of years, now, and knew that while I was walking a fine line with her every time we talked, I had also lasted longer than anybody else.

"Dear Charlie, I am starting to think that I am becoming boring to you," she said slyly, as she slowly danced at the edge of the light with twitchy weaving motions. She also knew that my name wasn't Charlie, but she seemed insistent, and I stopped correcting her on the matter when it began to irritate her. "A girl might think that you are ready to move on in life, maybe get that suburban house with that green manicured lawn and those two-point-five kids."

I shuffled a bit as her hand passed close to my face, avoiding her touch nervously. "One-point-five," I said. "I think the average is more like one-point-five these days." I knew immediately that I was dangerously close to that line, but backing down now would result in consequences.

Her eyes briefly blazed up at my sarcasm, but she managed to force her madness back down in a heroic feat of self-control. "Oh, Charlie," she teased in her mock playful tone. "You do know how to tweak me, don't you!"

"I do have my moments," I conceded. "So, this hanged man. Did you know him?"

She moved cat-like into the light and leaned against the lamp post like a teen-aged girl attempting, and failing, to appear seductive. "No, but I knew of him. I know of everybody like him. He was a hanged man a long time before he bothered to hang himself, like so many of you. He died of guilt, you know. Simply regretful with his lot in life, yet unable to rise up and change it. Sound familiar?"

I coughed into my gloved hand and threw the butt to the sidewalk. "It might. I don't know, I guess it's a pretty common thing, isn't it?"

Again she cocked her head with her tricky smile. "Is it?" she said mockingly, then pirouetted out of the light and into the icy rain. I heard her giggling madly as she spirited away into the depths of the city, looking for the next colorful bit of insanity in this colorless city.

I stepped out into the street and headed for the cafe to get a cup of coffee against the freezing rain. More than a warm drink, I needed something normal to push the unsettling fringes of madness back out into the night, and maybe feel a little bit human again. When you talk to crazy people a lot, you tend to get a little bit twitchy yourself.

* * *

The apartment was in just the kind of building I was expecting for the part of town it was in. The walls were cinder block, and the hallways were poorly lit affairs with a look of vacancy exacerbated by the filthy gray tile floors. Everything here bespoke a depression that settled over the neighborhood decades ago, and I sensed that there was not a single happy person in this whole building. As I walked down an empty hallway I began to sense the apartment in which the man had hung himself. There was always a musty, yet slightly dangerous, aura surrounding these places, and one almost had to concentrate to prevent the despair from sinking into their own psyche.

I glanced down both ways of the corridor as I stood in front of the door to the unfortunate's flat. Placing my gloved hand on the doorknob, I could almost feel the darkness in the rooms beyond, and took a last breath of relatively fresh air. The door swung inward with a slight push, and in a matter of seconds I was locked in with the stench of feces and death, reconsidering what I was about to do. I looked around the front room, taking in the obvious emptiness of the man's life as exhibited by the random scattering of things spread throughout the place. There were a few lonely self-help books on his bookshelf, each with a dog-eared page where he had lost interest and moved on to the next halfhearted effort to slap a band-aid on his broken life. The television was turned off in front of the the lifeless sofa, the single piece of furniture in the house. I moved around the living room and noticed a single picture of a happy couple hanging on the wall next to the bedroom door. It was obviously taken decades ago, with him sporting the perm and mustache that was popular with men at the time, and her wearing her hair straight and parted down the middle. Both wore muted color clothes, and were holding each others' hands. They appeared happy, and I imagined they were the deceased's parents. I wondered if they were still alive, and how the news of their son's death would impact them. My unease increased as I neared the bedroom, and I rubbed my chin nervously. I always dreaded this moment, but I knew it had to be done. From the moment I stepped through that front door into this charnel house, I was committed.

I stepped into the thick stench of your classic hanging suicide. The urine and feces always poured down the leg and pooled on the floor beneath their feet, open to the air and the foulness unfettered by clothing. I gagged a bit, but at this point in my career I had grown accustomed enough to the smell that I would not vomit. I wasn't always so inured to this, and had had to clean up more than one embarrassing mess in the past. I couldn't go around leaving evidence of my passing at the scenes of various suicides and murders; the police had a way of hunting down people who visit with corpses.

I sat on the bed and studied the dead man hanging a few feet away from me. Just as the twitching woman told me, he hanged himself with a power cord. The flesh around his neck was swollen to the point where the only visible part of the cord was the part the man was suspended by, while the rest was concealed within folds of putrefying skin. As was common in this kind of death, his eyes and tongue were bulging out from his face, and dried spittle coated his chin and chest. I shook my head as I

glanced around this bedroom that was every bit as sad and lonely as the rest of the apartment. I sighed, stood up, and turned the dead man around until we were face to putrescent face. "Sorry about this, old boy, but I need to look through your things. I hope you don't mind too much." With that I began to rifle through the corpse's pockets. A good number of times the suicide will keep those most valuable tokens and trifles that were important to them in life on their person as they commit their final deed, but not in this one's case. His pockets turned up empty, and I was going to have to dig around the man's miserable apartment.

I had no idea what I was looking for as I began picking through the drawers in his bedroom, but I knew there would be something that would fetch a pretty penny. The dancing clown always sent me to fairly profitable scores, and while I got the sense that someday she would want something in return, the fear was not enough to keep me from this easy money. Now, you're probably thinking that I'm a complete low-life, stealing from the dead like this, and you would be right. My life of crime started when I was eight with shoplifting candy from the local corner store. Never getting caught only encouraged my boldness, and it wasn't long before I moved up to petty theft, and, at thirteen, full blown breaking and entering. It was easy, and if you aren't a complete idiot, very profitable. There were some basic rules, of course, that helped keep me out of trouble. You don't try to leave with a big television when you can leave with decent jewelry. You keep a fence on the line, and if he can't move your wares, take it out of town and sell it somewhere else, even if it cuts into the profit. Less money is better than more time behind bars. The cops always check the local pawn shops, so never sell anything there. The list of rules goes on and on, but they aren't hard to figure out if, again, you aren't an idiot. That isn't to say that I've never been caught. I did a two year stretch for my first, and last, car theft, and do not intend to go back in. After that I stuck with what I am good at, which is burglary. I mostly work residential neighborhoods, but sometimes I go commercial. Nothing too grandiose, like jewelry stores, but the big-box stores are pretty easy, and they often have relatively valuable items that are easy to cart out in volume. That usually requires a team, though, which adds to the risk.

After having found nothing of any real value in the bedroom, I moved back into the living room, where the man's parents from the late nineteen-seventies stared down at me as I dug through their dead son's belongings. It didn't take me long to find

what I knew I must be looking for. It was a small gold statue tucked behind some books on his sparsely populated bookshelf, carefully hidden from direct view behind a large tome on how to become a millionaire with government grants, or some such nonsense. The statuette had a fairly strong feeling of the occult to it, as it was a human figure with the head and wings of some kind of bird, and strange symbols etched around the square base that I certainly couldn't place. It carried a tiny human skull in each hand, and instead of feet it stood on very definite looking bird claws. I wasn't as concerned with the form, though, as the material. It was a good deal heavier than it looked, and felt pretty malleable beneath my fingernails. There was no doubt that this thing was solid gold, and I dropped it heavily into my coat pocket as I left quietly through the front door.

I stepped out onto the sidewalk into the cold rain that must have picked up while I was robbing the dead. I walked a block through the icy streets, trying to stay under as much light as I could, and avoiding the dark depths of alleys and doorways. While I would normally be flush with the victory of getting away with the goods, tonight I was nervous and jittery, and had the feeling you get when someone's tailing you. When I got to my car, I happily slid the key into the door's lock, and started to climb into relative safety. I froze in place as I glanced across the street and caught a glimpse of a woman staring at me from an apartment window. She looked to be about twenty years old, had brown hair, and a strangely blank stare on her otherwise beautiful face. I shuddered as our eyes locked, and a knot of inexplicable fear formed in the pit of my stomach. Then, after a few seconds, she raised a finger up to her lips as if to shush me. I quickly shook off as much of the terror as I could, and dropped into the driver's seat. I twisted the key in the ignition and jettied off down the street. I took a fearful glance at the window and saw that it was empty, as though the woman were never there in the first place.

While driving home I managed to lose some of the nagging fear, thinking only of the money I would pull in for this latest acquisition. Nevertheless, a dark uneasiness settled in, and my nerves became as tense as a violin string wound too tightly and ready to snap.

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"I'm going to have a hard time moving this thing."

I was standing in Frank's small warehouse office, talking to him from across his crowded desk. He was my regular fence, and was always pretty solid. Sitting in the middle on a pile of paperwork stood the stolen statue, its vicious looking beak hooking down into a sharp point, a menacing glare staring down a half-empty bottle of beer. "It's a solid gold statue," I said as I shrugged. "If nothing else we can melt it down and just sell that."

He leaned back in his chair and took another drink of beer. "Easy, there, man, I said it would be hard to sell, but not impossible. Things like this you gotta find a special buyer for, like a collector or museum. A long way away." He picked up the the statue, and continued. "We can get a lot more for this as it is, instead of melted down, but it's gonna take a little more hustle than usual. Or we can go low on profit but high on speed and do your idea." Dropping it back onto the papers, he said, "Your call."

I sat down opposite Frank and folded my fingers while I thought about it. I had more than enough cash to get by, in addition to my growing savings, so I didn't need to be in a rush to cash in on this thing. "Go ahead and take your time with this, and let's get a decent haul out of it," I said. "I'm in no hurry."

"Alright," he replied, as he reached into his desk drawer. I flinched instinctively, as it is a shady business I am in, and settled when he brought out a camera and started flashing pictures of the statue from different angles. "I am going to have to shop this thing nationwide if I want to get a bidding war going for it. I assume you don't want me to sell it to the first potential buyer that comes along."

I stood back up and started to button my coat. "That's right," I said. "Get as much as you can for this thing."

Frank nodded, and said, "Hold on a minute, let me get you something." He opened up a filing cabinet and pulled out a small duffel bag, which he dropped on the table. "You're taking the statue with you," he said, as he dropped it into the bag and zipped it shut.

This was unusual, as Frank typically liked to keep things like this in his floor safe. "Really?" I asked. "Your safe broken or something?"

Frank shook his head and said, "No, the safe is good, but I just don't want to have that thing in here any longer than I have to. It's goddamned creepy." He seemed to visibly shudder as he loosened the gold tie he was wearing, as though he were suddenly too hot.

I emptied my bottle of beer and sat it on the desk, picking up the bag. "I get it," I said. "It is pretty weird. I wonder what that guy was doing with ..."

"Whoa!" Frank said, interrupting me loudly. "Whoa whoa whoa whoa! First rule, man! I don't need to know anything about where you got it!"

I seemed to have forgotten this most fundamental law that Frank had always insisted on, and apologized as I started to leave. "Sorry about that, it won't happen again!" His job had its rules, just as my job had rules, all designed to avoid time spent in prison.

"You bet it won't happen again!" Frank said as I left. "I'm taking a bigger cut out of this deal over that!"

I simply waved at him through the office window, the bag weighing heavy in my hand.

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That night I stayed in and watched some television while drinking a couple of glasses of scotch. I locked the statue away in my own wall safe, hidden behind a Rembrandt print; "Portrait of a Rabbi," I believe. I had once entertained the idea of becoming an art thief, like in the heist movies, but ruled that out after I realized just exactly how much I would have to learn about electronic security systems, not to mention art. Still, in my limited research into the field, I did develop somewhat of an appreciation for art. The classics, at any rate. Like most people I just couldn't get into modern art, post-modern art, or any of the Jackson Pollock type abstract

art. Besides, it seemed to impress women when I brought them to my place and they saw the prints hanging on my wall.

I went to bed at around ten, my head still buzzing a bit from the alcohol. While it was normal for me to stay up late while working, when I was off the job I tended to go to bed early, and get up at the crack of dawn. It was the only time I could make myself jog, and in my line of work it was crucial to be in good running shape. As I dozed off, I tried to put images of hanged corpses, dead-faced little young women, and the strange statue out of my head, without much luck. One would think that I would be most haunted by the hanged man, but at this point I had seen quite a few bodies in a similar state, and was no longer really all that bothered by it. No, the thing that bothered me most about that night, beyond the dancing clown who had sent me to that apartment in the first place, was the mysterious woman. There was something about her that chilled my blood, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. I saw her staring face as I drifted off to sleep, I saw it in my nightmares, and I saw it again as I jerked to full wakefulness in the middle of the night. I sat on the edge of my bed and rubbed my face with clammy hands for a few minutes as I tried to make sense of the the insane images leftover from the nightmares. I was left with only horrid flashes of memory and a baffled confusion for my effort.

I stood up and went into the dark living room to pour another glass of scotch for myself. One of the great things about my line of work is that I can sleep in as long as I like, being my own boss and all, and I got the feeling that it would be awhile before I got back to sleep tonight. I crouched down behind the small bar, fished some ice cubes out of the small refrigerator, grabbed a bottle of Johnny Walker Black, and stood up.

A figure stood directly across the room from me, looking at me with an unearthly glare that was somewhere between anger and confused. I dropped the bottle to the floor, where it bounced loudly against the thin carpet. The glass of ice cubes followed, shattering at my feet into a spray of needle-sharp shards as I backed up against the wall, fear seizing my guts in its frozen grip.

"You did it, now," the tormented looking man said, stepping closer to the bar. "They'll come, they'll tell you things no man should have to know, and then they'll die for you. They'll never stop dying for you" He stopped in a deepened shadow, swaying a bit on his feet in silence for a few seconds as though

composing his thoughts, then said, "Tell my folks I didn't mean it. It'll set them still."

Paralyzed with fear at the sight of a man whose corpse I had seen dangling lifelessly from a power cord noose not too long ago, I nodded dumbly. With all thought given over to horrified instinct, my hand slowly reached up along the wall, feeling around for the light switch in the dark. The dead man just stood there menacingly, staring, the faint scent of feces wafting through the air. With a click and a flash, the lights came on, and I found myself once alone again in the otherwise empty room.

I left the broken glass on the floor alongside the bottle of scotch, and headed out on the streets, staying just long enough to grab my coat. I spent the next three nights in a hotel room, drinking myself into a deep and constant stupor, waiting for Frank to call me with a deal to get rid of that damned statue.

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"Where you been hiding out at?" Louis asked me as I took a seat across the bar from him. I adjusted myself on the stool and ordered up a double whiskey, saying, "Just keeping low for a little bit. You know how it is." I fumbled around in my pocket, fishing out a cigarette.

"Hey, there's no smoking in here anymore," the bartender said, as I stared at him stupidly. "New state law, remember? There ain't no smoking in bars anymore."

"Right, I got you," I said, dropping the smoke back in my pocket. "Now how about that whiskey."

Louis grinned at me as he poured. "Sure thing," he said, and filled the glass almost to the rim, knowing how much I liked the stuff. "Say, you hear about that Floyd Kramer guy?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Floyd Kramer," Louis said. When he saw that the name was unfamiliar to me, he laughed. "Really, you haven't heard about him? That guy who hung himself last week?"

My blood turned to ice in my veins at the mention of the dead man, and I took a long drink from the glass. "No," I said nervously, the liquid fire still pouring into my stomach. "Why, what have you got?"

"Oh, wow," Louis said. "It's been all over the news, man! Where have you been?"

"Neck deep in a couple of bottles of bourbon," I muttered. "What about this Floyd Kramer guy? Hanged himself, right?"

"Yeah, but that ain't the story," Louis answered. "Suicides happen all the time, and they don't make the newspapers, but this guy... Look, this Kramer, they say he's been killing women around this state for the past ten years. Lured them to his place, strangled them with an electrical cord, and did things to their bodies. Real sick stuff, you know?" He wiped the bar down, then leaned in close and said in a hushed voice, "They found their skulls in a storage unit the guy had. There were twenty-three of them, last I heard, locked up in a couple of old blue chests. The man was a collector, I guess!"

I laughed nervously at the morbid joke, and drank the glass straight down. "That's pretty crazy," I said, remembering the apparition I had seen a few days earlier with a shudder. The dumpy looking guy who lived in a dumpy looking apartment, and for all the evidence lived a dumpy life, turned out to be a serial killer. I held up the empty glass looking for a refill and shuddered again at the thought of his lifeless form hanging in the closet, and then his all too lively form standing in my living room just a few nights ago. I looked back up and saw my glass refilled, which I promptly drained again. Louis was at the far end of the bar, flirting with a couple of young ladies as only a bartender can do. Deciding to join them, I walked down to sit next to the women, using Louis as my introduction to a little flirtation myself. I ordered another scotch and began to work on forgetting the recent events of my life with a furious desperation.

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I staggered a bit as I walked into my apartment, a fairly drunk woman in tow. Her name was Julie or Julia, I wasn't sure which, and she was at least ten years younger than me. We stopped in the living room and began kissing with the clumsy passion unique to the inebriated. In a matter of minutes we were in the bedroom and nude, engaging in a frenzied copulation that I never knew existed before. There was a sort of frantic element to it, as though we were both trying to escape from something in our lives. I knew I was. Shadows began flitting across the window as I rolled over with her on top, her head thrown back and sweat pouring from her skin.

Without warning she stopped writhing and stared down at me, her eyes twitching frantically behind closed lids. The chilling image of her unmoving body on top of me caused me to stop moving in turn, and a freezing chill crawled up my spine like tiny razors. She cocked her head and grinned, then spoke in a strangely grating voice. "Do you want to know where babies go when they die?" she asked, the gruesome question rolling from her beautiful lips like sewage from a marble fountain.

Paralyzed at the sudden shift to the morbid, I stared dumbly up at her, stammering, "What the...?"

Giggling creepily, her eyes still unopened, the girl said in that fingernails-on-chalkboard voice, "They don't go to heaven, or purgatory, you know." She ran her now cold and clammy palm down my chest, saying, "No, they go to the feast, to be dined on by The Damned, lambs to the slaughter!"

I pushed her away from me and rolled off of the mattress, a strange fear pooling in my gut. "What in the hell are you talking about?" I coughed out, backing up against the wall as she stood up on the bed. Her naked body shined waxy and pale like a corpse in the darkness.

"The devouring of their innocence... Only the truly enlightened know this sound," she continued as she hopped to the floor and walked stiffly towards me.

I slowly backed towards the doorway, then turned and ran into the living room, her hideous presence close behind. I spun around and held up my hands, yelling, "Stay back! Get away!"

The woman took on a more terrifying appearance, the shadows in her closed eyes deepening and her face stretching impossibly into a skull-like grin as a hideous gurgling rose up in her

throat. After a moment of her staring crazily at me, and me cowering against the wall, she charged with her hands upraised like claws. I wrestled against her with all my strength, but could feel myself being overpowered by her unnatural power. It wasn't long before she had me on the carpet, drool hanging from her vicious lips over my face like some hellish schoolyard bully tormenting a hapless victim. I started thrashing about as she leaned in close to my face and snarled, "You're going to hear those screams. You're going to become truly enlightened."

My hand landed on an extension cord that ran along the wall, connecting a lamp to the socket. Without thought I grabbed it and wrapped it tightly around her neck, the veins bulging out on her forehead as I tightened it as much as I could. Her steely grip began to loosen as she strained to breathe. She finally collapsed on me, and I shoved her body away as I scrambled up onto the sofa.

I sat there with my head in my hands for a few minutes before regaining my senses, and a dread realization crept into my consciousness. I stared down dumbly at the lifeless body lying against the wall of my apartment, and a strange sort of panic began to set in. I can only remember the rest of the night in flashes after that. I recall dragging the corpse into the bathtub. I remember the gruesome act of dismembering her and wrapping the pieces up in trash bags. I remember taking them down to the car, and before the hideousness of that night was over with, the body parts were scattered all over the city in various dumpsters. Shortly after I found another bottle of rotgut whiskey to drown the horrific memories as best I could, and began in earnest.

In the depths of another three day drinking binge, hiding in my apartment, I remembered very clearly how Floyd Kramer killed his victims, and ultimately himself. I spotted with my bleary eyes the cord I strangled the girl with, and snatched it desperately from the floor where it had fallen, throwing it in the trash with revulsion.

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Over the next few days I was a tormented man. I tried to sleep, but every time I shut my eyes I could feel presences in the room

with me, watching me. Accusing me. I saw figures just out of the corner of my eye, and heard whispers and giggling from behind my back. I once made the mistake of looking out of my living room window at the street below, and saw a few people staring up at me through the darkness. I couldn't make out their precise details, but knew for certain that they were all young women. Dozens of them. I knew exactly who they were, and withdrew back into my drunken haze, pulling the curtains closed against their accusing stares.

I finally passed out into a deep and darkened stupor, empty bottles littering my bedroom floor and nightmarish images of the young woman I'd killed tainting an otherwise dreamless slumber.

"Oh, Charlie, what are you doing?" the terrifying clown girl said from the shadows, causing me to jump from the bed and slam my head against the wall. She stepped forward into the dim light wearing a short skirt and tight blouse that at one time must have been sexy, but now was somehow more funereal than seductive. Her hair, which was now stark white, hung in sort of a bob, but was frayed and frizzed into wild strands. I backed away from her into a corner, picking up an empty liquor bottle to maybe use as a weapon, but knowing her reputation as I did, I knew it was wasted effort.

"What are you doing here?" I asked fearfully. She'd never actually shown up in my apartment before, and I could feel the inherent danger emanating from her as she drew closer.

She hopped up onto the bed and semi-crouched on the corner of the mattress, grinning her hideously sharp-toothed grin, saying, "I'm wondering why you suddenly have a retinue of admirers, Charlie." She leaned forward and touched my chin with a single fingertip. "I'm wondering why there is a length of electrical cord with bits of beautiful skin on it in your trash, Charlie." She snaked even closer across the mattress until only the heels of her feet were on the bed, grasping the back of my neck with her pale hand. "And most of all, I'm wondering why you still have the statue." She cocked her head to the side, sniffed at me, and said, "What are you thinking, dear Charlie?" Her breath was hot, and smelled faintly of cinnamon, and her tongue flicked out from between crimson lips and lightly touched my forehead. She suddenly spun around and hissed like an animal at a shade standing in the doorway, sending it fleeing away into darkness with her unnatural fury.

I collapsed to the floor, tears streaming down my cheeks, gibbering what I knew to be nonsense between sobs as I pointed at the wall safe in my living room. I was vaguely hoping she would take the damned statue and leave. She grabbed my head in both hands and pulled me up to stare into her mad eyes. This close she had nearly translucent skin that was both beautiful and horrifying, seemingly glowing with an unearthly shine. Her sharpened teeth, too, were almost transparent, and her pupils grew to almost completely fill the whites of her eyes with deep black circles.

"You need to deal with this, Charlie," she said menacingly, licking her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Anymore dead girls, and I will send something to deal with you and this situation. Something uglier and far more terrifying than me." She kissed me on the forehead like some sort of supernatural mafia don from a surreal hell, and leapt backwards across the room, disappearing into the darkness.

I spent the rest of the night cowering in that corner, afraid to face the demons I found myself being punished by. I was beginning to understand why Floyd Kramer hung himself.

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"So what happened?" Frank said, disbelief in his voice. "I finally found a buyer for that thing, and you turn up here with it all melted down! What the hell?"

I dropped a bag of small gold ingots on his desk and took the beer bottle he offered. "Sorry, Frank, I guess I just got impatient. Faster money starts sounding better after a couple of weeks, you know?"

He shrugged, saying, "Whatever, I hear you, but you gotta understand, it took me a lot of effort to hook this up. I'm taking more of a cut out of this," he said as he gathered the bag up. "If I get a reputation for backing out of deals, it's money out of pocket, and I'm not eating that."

I nodded and said, "No worries, I figured as much. Just get rid of it, I don't care where." I took a long drink from the bottle and tried to ignore Frank's stare.

He finally shook his head, saying more to himself than me, "First rule. I don't want to know. I know I don't want to know." He dropped the gold into his safe, shut the door, and sat down, taking a drink of beer. After a few minutes of silence, he asked, "So, did you hear about that Kramer guy? Pretty crazy, huh!"

"You don't know the half of it," I muttered into my bottle, trying to hide the horror of it all. I abruptly stood up and put on my jacket.

"Heading out already?" Frank asked.

I paused at the doorway long enough to say, "Yeah, I've got somewhere to be in about an hour."

"Where?"

I laughed harshly, and said, "A job interview. Wish me luck!"

The Twitch

by

Christopher Baughman

The walls were black and oily, but also somehow a dully gleaming metal. This was the first thing Kristen noticed when she opened her eyes and glanced around the room in confusion. She slowly came to her feet, feeling the flowing metal ripple beneath her lightest touches. Small waves slid out across the floor, walls, and ceiling, gleaming and dancing peaks and valleys coalescing into random patterns. The effect was... surreal.

"Hello?"

The sound of her voice muffled itself, strangely, against the haze created by the rippling walls. One second pulsing, the next buzzing, there was almost a psychic sort of feedback for a few seconds. Kristen resolved to say as little as possible. Then, after a moment of thought, she whispered softly, "Hello? Is there anybody there?" The words hissed through the air oddly, but were easily discernable.

The only sound she heard in return was the fading static of her voice. She noticed that the pulse of the sound seemed to fade and increase in time with the ripples in the walls. Nausea briefly struggled for her stomach, but strength of will won out. She straightened her back and studied the walls more closely, noting the subsiding patterns fade back into an almost mirror surface.

What was she doing before she came to this place? Her name was Kristen, and she was from Wayne, Indiana. She was born April 4th, 1990, daughter of..

Whose daughter was she?

She could not recall her parents' names, or their faces. No memory of voices, habits, or petty grievances. There were other memories she could not bring up. No best friends, no favorite pets, and no birthdays. Her life was a blank.

Stifling a sob of horror and shame, Kristen closed her eyes tightly. She wanted this living nightmare to end. Curling in on herself into a fetal position, her body floated up away from the floor, her toes and the surface almost clutching at one another until that nearly painful moment of separation. Her mind collapsing in on itself with bizarre revelations, she sank into an ocean of bad memories. Cheating boyfriends, abusive siblings, and schoolyard bullies tormented her thoughts. Waves of depression broke across her psyche like dark water across a bank on the River Styx. This was truly hell, in a very real sense of the word.

"Oh, hey, man, what happened to her?"

Kenji got up from his chair behind a glowing, yet transparent, control panel and stepped gingerly over the heavy cables spreading out across the floor of his apartment's living room. He looked over to his buddy, Trevor, who was stretched out across the couch with a beer can on his chest.

"What do you mean?" Kenji asked. "The monitors aren't catching anything out of regular ranges."

"Yeah, I know, man, but look at her. I think she's got The Twitch, man."

Stepping over another bundle of cables over next to the couch, Kenji looked at the young woman they had wired into the Reader. Every muscle in her body seemed to spasm and jerk of its own volition, and completely independent of its neighbors. Her mouth was stretched back in a rictus grin, and her eyeballs were rolling whitely back into her head.

A warning beep emitted from the control panel's speakers, alerting them to the sudden jump in activity that read well outside of the acceptable bounds. "Oh, damn," Kenji muttered. "You're right, she's got The Twitch. Man, I hate it when they do that! Get up and go get the wheel-barrow. She's got nothing left, the idiot."

As he slowly dragged himself into a sitting position, Trevor drank the last of the beer and belched. "Yeah, me, too, man." He thought about it for a minute, and asked, "Hey, what did you mean, 'nothing left'?"

As he unhooked plugs from ports in the back of her neck, Kenji mumbled something to himself about chatty partners. "Hey, I

don't need you trying to figure out the business, man. I just need you to do some heavy lifting and light cleaning."

"Yeah, OK, I see," Trevor said; he was oddly crestfallen.

Kenji felt a pang of guilt at bruising his buddy's ego. "Oh, alright." He crouched down on one knee and gestured towards the young woman's distorted features. "See, what we're doing here is pulling certain memories from her engram. It's really crazy stuff, what they can do to engrams. If you have a Writer, you can turn a shy geek into a raging monster, and back again, if you want. We ain't got one of those, though." He patted the shell-shaped device that was earlier wrapped around her head, and continued.

"What we have is a Reader. You can't add anything to a person with a Reader, but you can sure take it away. So what we do, with the right settings, is pull some of those memories out of her. She comes in, we buy some of her happiest moments, and we pull them out. We then turn around and sell them to guys with Writers, who sell those precious Kodak moments to kids looking for a heavy rush. Hey, I guess you can buy happiness."

It was a dark joke that made its rounds throughout the Puller and Pusher communities. Some took exception to it, while others embraced it, but none felt all that great about the sick truth behind their business.

"But some people get too greedy. We only pull so many times from a single person so we don't take too much, and get The Twitch on our hands. Sometimes, though, you get some stupid ones who go to a bunch of different Pullers around town, and before they know what happened, every good memory they ever had is gone. That's it, they're all tapped out. All they got left is the bad stuff. It's messed up, man, and their brain shuts down. And there you go. It's Puller 101."

"Oh, wow, man, that's crazy," Trevor said. "That's crazy." He started pulling Kristen out of the harness and laid her out across the floor. "I'll go get the wheel barrow."

"Yeah, you do that." Kenji rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he considered the situation. "I'm going to go start looking for more talent. My pool is getting thin. Maybe I'll try for some older ones, like cougars. They've got a lot of hot memories, man, worth some good money."

"Hahaha, yeah, a cougar!" Trevor guffawed as he stepped out the backdoor.

"Yeah, a cougar," Kenji muttered. He was looking to make a move into that higher dollar market, and this might be the best time to try for it. "You take care of this. I'm going out tonight."

Spots and Grin

by

Christopher Baughman

"Dude, I know you've got some kind of racial stereotype to live down to, but really... bridges?" A short red-haired man dropped from a ledge down the side of a freeway bridge just outside of town. He slid to the bottom of the slope in a stream of dirt and stood back up, knocking dust from his ragged olive-green jacket.

A large form loomed out of the deepest shadow beneath the overpass and stepped into the light. His skin was a knotted mess of grayish-green hide stretched loosely over oddly-shaped, yet powerfully bulging, muscles. His all-black eyes squinted in the sunlight, and he grimaced as he sniffed the air. "Right, O'Leary, was it? Or was it O'Brian? I always get you little guys mixed up. You all smell the same to me."

Not missing a beat, the little man spoke with a light Gaelic accent as he stepped closer to the hulking creature. "It's me, Spots, you nose-deaf troll. I swear I never met a troll who couldn't tell a 'chaun from a 'chaun until I met you. What'd you do, blow out your sniffer on coke back in the eighties?"

"Oh, right, Spots." The troll thought for a second, and said, "Yeah... Right, yeah, I remember you. I'm Grin."

Spots waited a few seconds to make sure the troll was done speaking. Grin's mind was generally slow and he often drifted off mid-sentence. "Right. I heard you were looking to do some work. You know what I mean?"

Grin pondered the question for a few seconds, his face frozen in thought. "Yeah, I need to make some cash for... stuff."

"You mean running a toll from under a bridge isn't paying the bills anymore?" Spots knew Grin was pulling a protection racket on the transients that took shelter under the overpass; it was an age old tradition of trolls, and Grin wasn't going to be the

one to break with tradition. Still, he ran the show with a light touch, relying more on his menacing appearance than anything to enforce his will. He also had a reputation for taking good care of his tenants, actually protecting them when they needed it, so he wasn't a complete traditionalist.

"No," Grin said. "A lot of them are late on the rent this month. The economy, you know." He sat down heavily in the dirt, scratching his misshapen head as though deeply considering the complexities of the economy. Maybe he was.

"Well, I got some work for you, if you want it. It's a... stuff deal that's about to go wrong, if you know what I mean. I got a line on these guys meeting up. One side's bringing money, and the other's bringing stuff."

"Oh, yeah, I get it. We pop up between the two and get their stuff."

"And cash," Spots replied. "You get the stuff, and I get the cash." The troll had his priorities, and Spots had his.

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The two met up at the back of a dank alley, the troll standing dumbly in a deep puddle of frigid water out in the middle of the open, completely oblivious to the icy cold. Spots padded slowly along a brick wall struggling with something heavy he was dragging across the concrete. He dropped it with a wooden thud and dusted his hands off.

"Heya, Grin, how long you been here?"

Scratching his forehead lazily, Grin sniffed the air. "Spots. Yeah, I've been here for a little while. No worries, I haven't seen anybody come down this way."

"I'm more worried about the ones who've seen you while you've been standing out in the open like that. Don't mind, that, though. You come heavy and I just don't see it? Or you plan to just swing your knuckles around like a maniac?" Spots knew that with those stone-like fists alone Grin could level a cinder block wall, but he had something even more destructive in

mind. Nevertheless, he wanted to hear the troll's answer out of some sense of bemused curiosity.

"I guess, yeah. I mean, I knocked down a cinder block wall once, you know? I figured that'd be enough to scare those guys off."

Spots lowered his shaking head. "Scare them off. Yeah. Grin, you realize those guys are going to be carrying guns, right? The kind with real lead bullets? Man, I know you're tough, but even you gotta bring something to the table to deal with that." He reached down and dragged a long two by four board out of the shadows.

"What's that?"

"A club. Well, it's a board, but what's the difference to you? What's your reach right now? Five, maybe six feet? With this thing it'll be well over twice that. And if you get in a tight spot you can throw it at them, but only as a last resort. Got it?"

The troll lifted the board in the air, testing its weight in his massive hand with a few short test swings. "Yeah, I got it. I usually only use something like this on cars, but alright."

Spots pulled two large revolvers from beneath his jacket and cocked the hammers back. One was a .44 and the other a .45. He liked them because of the sequential numbers more than anything else. He had briefly flirted with the idea of arming Grin with a shotgun, but ruled that out using the reasoning that the troll would probably just use it as a club, anyway. "If you see them in cars then go wild. If you don't see them in cars, go wild anyway. You see where this is going?"

"Go wild. Sure, man. Cool."

Shaking his head, Spots started back up the alley. "Just make sure to only throw it at them if you absolutely have to. Come on, then, let's go to work."

He just hoped the troll would work out without killing him in the process.

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Spots positioned Grin across and about ten feet back from the mouth of the alley, behind a dumpster. He told the troll to wait until he started shooting before jumping out and clobbering them. He hoped Grin remembered to wait as he took his own position just inside the alley. He looked out at the meeting spot. It was a small abandoned park hidden behind a row of decrepit apartment buildings. Most of it was filled with out of control bushes and wild brambles locked into a strangling death grip with one another, with the exception of a single park bench.

Spots figured the park was probably a place commonly used by the local criminals as an exchange point. If this worked out, he could probably run this same gig once or twice more at this spot before the well ran dry. He settled in to wait for the deal to happen.

The first group to arrive at the exchange point was comprised mostly of middle aged men wearing long coats and obviously carrying heavy underneath. One gripped tightly onto a locked metal briefcase, his knuckles white with nervousness. There were 6 of them, and they all appeared ready for action.

The second group was not too long after, and was a largely younger set. Whereas the first bunch was a more mature sort of criminal, the newcomers were closer to being kids than adults, and Spots immediately recognized that they probably had poor impulse control. They almost openly displayed their own firearms; mostly pistols, but at least one assault rifle under a heavy coat. There were also six of these men.

"Here's the money." The older man with the briefcase stepped forward, wary but not nervous. He'd done this enough times to mask it well, at any rate. He was probably the only one in the group who didn't have his finger on a trigger. That's what happens when you draw the short straw in that organization.

One of the younger thugs stepped out carrying a black gym bag. As he approached the park bench Spots saw his face in the dim light of a streetlamp, and shuddered. The flesh had been carved and pierced through with various metal needles and spikes. That was relatively normal enough these days, though, so it didn't shock him. What did concern Spots were the third and fourth arms that hung from the man's lower torso, twitching and jerking from crudely sewn skin grafts.

"Oh, God," Spots muttered. "Flesh Minions." He began to back up into the depths of the alley with the intention of sneaking away with Grin. It should have been easy enough, save for one minor problem.

"RWARRRRGGGG!"

The two by four flew over the leprechaun's head from the darkness and slammed into the Flesh Minion, crumpling it in half with the disturbing sounds of cracking bones. The troll must have thrown the board like a spear, and the Minion stayed down.

"Damned troll," Spots growled as he spun and pulled out his pistols. "I said only as a last resort! Only throw the board as a last resort!" He figured the troll would probably go after the ones he'd thrown the board at, so Spots decided to focus his attack on the men in the overcoats. One after another collapsed under the short-but-brutal assault he brought down with his .44 and .45, each round striking with inhuman precision. With preternatural speed he managed to drop all of them before running out of ammunition, and quickly turned to see how Grin was doing.

The Flesh Minions were largely devastated by the troll's headlong charge. Three lay motionless, and the remaining three were trying their best to encircle the raging monster. Spots was stunned by the sheer aggressiveness of his large companion and watched with horror as Grin tore the leg off of one of the three Minions and started beating another to death with it. Blood sprayed into the night sky in a dark arc, painting the streetlight a dark crimson. That was all the excuse the last Minion needed to flee in a panicked terror. It was good to see those monstrosities humbled so handily.

"Damn, Grin, where did that come from?" The leprechaun was ecstatic at how the job went, and was already planning the next hit in the back of his mind. His joy faded quickly, though, when the troll turned his baleful eyes on his smaller companion. Spots could tell the troll was still raging, and thought quickly of a way to keep from being crushed. He pointed down at Grin's feet and shouted, "Hold on! Wait! Look, Grin! Stuff!"

The troll paused, and stared down at the gym bag lying neatly on the ground next to the park bench. He bent and picked it up, the anger suddenly gone from his face. "Thanks, Spots. You got the, um... You got the cash?"

Picking up the briefcase, the leprechaun nodded his head. "Yeah, I got it. Let's get out of here."

A bone-chilling howl ripped from the night air in the direction the surviving Flesh Minion fled. Grin and Spots froze where they stood, paralyzed by the frozen chill shooting up their spines.

"Spots, I don't like that."

Understatement of the year. "Yeah, Grin, me either. Let's get going."

The two ran back down the alley they had ambushed the drug deal from, Spots desperately trying to remember if he had any rounds left. He seemed to recall that both pistols were empty, but in his panic was unsure. He didn't want to try to reload while on the run unless he had to. The troll's feet pounded heavily on the concrete, his massive knuckles helping occasionally in an almost ape-like gait. When he fell into his rhythm he reached out and snatched Spots up, tossing the leprechaun onto his massive shoulder. "You're slowing me down," he huffed as he opened up his animalistic lope. The streets and alleys flashed by in a stream as they blasted past parked cars and sleeping homes.

After what felt like about an hour, Spots pounded Grin on the shoulder. "I think we've lost them. Slow down, man!"

When they came to a stop Grin lifted Spots from his back and put him down. "I'm going home," the brute mumbled, almost fondling the gym bag he held oddly delicately in his huge fist. He had his stuff, and was looking to self-medicate after the rage passed. Crashing after a good berserk was an ordeal without some sort of pharmaceutical support.

Watching the troll disappear into the night, Spots began to rethink his plans to try this again. All it took, however, was one look down at the cash-filled briefcase to set his scheming wheels back in motion.

