

CREEPING HEMLOCK PRESS PRESENTS

NIGHTMARE

M A G A Z I N E



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EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

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Welcome to issue two of *Nightmare*!

Our launch last month was a rousing success, and we've had a lot of great comments on the stories from readers and have gotten some good publicity for the magazine in some high profile places—which will hopefully translate to some new readers. Thanks again to all of our Kickstarter backers and to everyone who bought issue one and/or read the stories in our online edition. For those who read it, I hope everyone enjoyed issue one; if you haven't yet, well, what are you waiting for?

This issue will be published on the first day of this year's World Fantasy Convention, which means that shortly thereafter we will know the results of this year's World Fantasy Awards, for which your humble editor is again nominated. The awards will be announced on November 4, starting at 1p Eastern Time, so if you want to follow along, head to the internets around then. (As usual, there are plenty of examples of horror on the ballot, so if, as a horror fan, you haven't paid much attention to the award due to its name, you might want to check it out.)

The World Fantasy Convention will also see the debut of my new anthology, *Epic: Legends of Fantasy*. *Epic* is an anthology reprinting the best epic fantasy short fiction, featuring authors such as George R. R. Martin, Brandon Sanderson, Patrick Rothfuss, Robin Hobb, and more. If you'd like a sneak peek at what you'll find in the anthology, check out "As the Wheel Turns" by Aliette de Bodard; you'll find that story both in this month's edition of our sister magazine, *Lightspeed*, and in the anthology. And if you want more free reads (and/or interviews with the authors), head over to johnjosephadams.com/epic.

In this month's issue, we have original fiction by horror legend Ramsey Campbell ("At Long Last") and up-and-coming writer Desirina Boskovich ("Construction Project"), along with classic reprints by Joe Haldeman ("Graves") and Poppy Z. Brite ("The Ash of Memory, the Dust of Desire"). We also have the latest installment of our column on horror, "The H Word," and part two of our in-depth interview with Peter Straub. All that, plus author spotlights with all of our authors, and a showcase on this month's artist.

That's about all I have for you this month, but before I step out of your way here and let you get to the fiction, here are a few URLs you might want to check out or keep handy if you'd like to stay apprised of everything new and notable happening with *Nightmare*:

- Website: nightmare-magazine.com
- Newsletter: nightmare-magazine.com/newsletter
- RSS feed: nightmare-magazine.com/rss-2
- Podcast feed: nightmare-magazine.com/itunes-rss
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Thanks for reading!

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor of *Nightmare* (and its sister magazine, *Lightspeed*), is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as *Epic: Legends of Fantasy*, *Other Worlds Than These*, *Armored*, *Under the Moons of Mars: New Adventures on Barsoom*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, *By Blood We Live*, *Federations*, *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. He is a four-time finalist for the Hugo Award and a four-time finalist for the World Fantasy Award. Forthcoming anthologies include: *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination* (2013, Tor), *Wastelands 2* (2013, Night Shade Books), and *Robot Uprisings* (2013, Doubleday). He is also the co-host of *Wired.com's The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

Construction Project

Desirina Boskovich

We begin in August, when the summer nights are ripe and voluptuous. Moths beat against the window seeking solace from the darkness. August brings violent thunderstorms; cut power lines draw the darkness closer. We cup a flickering flame and make love that brings purple bruises.

Softly we have come to understand that the creature is waiting. It searches for sustenance and tracks the scent of blood.

So we build.

Our apartment is on the third floor, but that doesn't mean it's safe. There are brittle window penetrable cracks. The glow of our lights can be seen from a distance.

What we need is wood.

Eli goes to the lumberyard. He comes back with loads of plywood, hauled in the back of our station wagon. Sarah helps carry the plywood up two flights of stairs.

In the parking lot, our downstairs neighbor is walking her poodle. She waves, smiling curiously. One of us nods, the other smiles; our arms are filled with planks. It's late afternoon and the air shimmers with dripping heat, attracting pregnant banks of clouds.

We board up the windows from the inside. The nails are long and sturdy, sinking into the wood stroke by stroke. Eli hammers his thumb and curses in a private tongue. Sarah kisses the swelling bruise and brings ice.

Between the glass and the plywood, we keep the blinds lowered, so no one on the outside can see the barrier we've erected between the two of us and all of them. No one can know about our construction project. They wouldn't understand. They don't know the creature that terrifies us.

On the bedroom window we build a special pair of shutters—heavy plywood affixed to the wall on steel hinges, a hook attached to latch it shut.

After the plywood is nailed into place, we make another trip for building supplies.

There are cracks in the wood, insect-sized crevices between the walls and the boards. We know that the creature can make itself very small. Through fissures and fault lines it finds its way, following the scent of love.

We seal the edges with epoxy, just to be safe.

But this is just the beginning.

September comes, and we both go to deliver the rent check. Our landlord eyes the apartment number on our check before sliding it into his folder. "You know," he says. "The lady below you two. She mentioned hearing some hammering."

"Sorry, we were hanging some pictures," Sarah says. She's always the quickest on her feet.

"We'll drop by to apologize," Eli adds.

We're sorry for leaving her exposed to the beast, but we can't protect everyone.

Together, we make another trip to the lumberyard and buy materials until the station wagon is full.

We buy unwieldy two-by-four beams and stacks of four-by-eight softwood plywood, C-grade. We listen patiently while the gray-bearded sales attendant explains about I-joints and trusses, and then we buy some more. We buy weighty sacks of dusty concrete that we struggle to lift. We sort through bins of small hardware, letting tiny screws and miniature bolts and two-inch nails sift through our fingers.

Sarah loves the smooth clinking and rattling; it reminds her of a bucket of colorful beads. Eli loves the crisp smell of metal; it reminds him of his first set of keys.

We buy all this so we can build our safe room.

The safe room will be in the area that formerly served as a dining room—to the right of the kitchen, across from the front door. We move the table and chairs into the living room, blocking the TV. We don't have time to watch it, anyway. We have too much to build.

We mix the concrete in the bathtub. We do the hammering on Tuesday afternoons, when our downstairs neighbor is at her water aerobics class.

All September, we build, working slowly and steadily, filling evenings and weekends. We take our work seriously. We measure twice and cut once. One of us makes neat pencil marks on two-by-fours and plywood. The other sorts hardware into sandwich bags with sticky labels.

All the time, we feel the creature's presence closing in.

The finished safe room is four feet tall, six feet wide, and six feet deep—just big enough for the two of us to fit, side by side. It smells comfortingly of chilled concrete and off-gassing polyurethane.

Eli makes a midnight run to the grocery store and buys foil-wrapped protein bars, plastic tubs of syrup-rich fruit cubes, six-packs of Gatorade in rainbow colors. Sarah drags mounds of dingy feather pillows and musty sleeping bags into the safe house, in case we need to spend the night.

The next day, we're more focused. We flip carefully through our reference books and make a list of items for our survival kit. Then we spend the day shopping, and buy them all.

A basic first aid kit: Bactine, Neosporin, gauze, tape, bandages, a thermometer, and a cold pack.

A red Swiss Army Knife: a can opener, a bottle opener, a screwdriver, a hook, and a three-and-a-half inch blade.

Five gallons of bottled water.

And two oxygen masks.

October has come. Winter is closing in and the darkness comes early. Sometimes, on especially quiet nights, we imagine we hear the beast's footsteps, pacing beneath our window.

We buy locks. Padlocks, combination locks, bicycle locks, door chains.

We buy more concrete.

We buy fifty yards of braided nylon rope, dandelion yellow.

We buy antique furniture, sturdy pieces built from ancient oak, nicked and scratched but still as heavy as ever. It takes us two hours to get our new chests and dressers and chairs up the stairs. We heave. We strain. We pull. We grunt. We wipe salty sweat from our eyes and suck blistering fingers. Our downstairs neighbor comes out to watch. "You could have had it delivered," she suggests.

"We're on a budget," Sarah says.

When we finally get the furniture upstairs, it takes another hour to arrange it into barricades. Eli already has the maze pencil-sketched on graph paper, so we only have to move the pieces once.

Afterwards, we're so tired and hungry, we order three cheese pizzas. We meet the delivery driver in the parking lot; it's better that way. But we end up eating only two.

We make love inside the safe room.

Eli adores Sarah's wide blue eyes. Sarah delights in Eli's square wrists. Eli cherishes Sarah's tiny hands. Sarah treasures Eli's knobby knees. Eli longs for Sarah's sharp collarbones. Sarah savors the sound of Eli's beating heart.

Inside the safe room, we hear every rustle and creak.

Sometimes we talk about the creature. Neither one of us knows what it looks like, exactly.

Sarah imagines it as a pale reptile, covered in thousands of shifting scales the color of dirty snow, ~~bloody spit, spoiled milk. She imagines it has bony claws and a long dry tongue that cuts with a razor sharp edge.~~ Privately she's named it Belb, but she's only spoken this word once.

Eli imagines it as a dark monster, coated in sheaths of matted, dark hair the color of rotting wood, black fungus, a sticky oil spill. He imagines it roars like a bear, showing rows of cruel teeth that drip with saliva. Privately he's named it Reesher, but he's only spoken this word once.

Maybe the beast takes different forms.

All we know is that it *will* come for us, the way it came for Eli's parents, the way it came for Sarah's. Perhaps it's already come for the lady downstairs; maybe that's why she doesn't seem afraid. An emptiness lingers about her. An incompleteness trails her.

We can't bear it.

"We'll keep it out," Eli promises. "We're smarter."

"We're stronger."

"We're safer."

"We'll keep it out."

We use the yellow nylon rope to build our rope ladder. Eli was a Boy Scout, so he knows how to tie the knots. Sarah has a library card, so she checks out a book to brush up on what Eli's forgotten.

We fasten the top of the ladder to the inside of the bedroom window, the one with special shutters. We add a padlock to the flimsy latch.

Now, whenever we need to get out, we can throw the rope ladder outside the window and climb down. Only one can go at a time; there has to be someone to guard the window and let down the ladder. It's safer that way.

We're almost ready.

November has arrived. The trees are gaunt and bare. The darkness is oppressive, coming early and staying late. The world smells like ice-hard earth.

The creature is here, too.

We catch glimpses of it. It prowls in the parking lot, flattening itself beneath cars. It lurks behind the bank of mailboxes, searching for clues. It scales the trees, trying to get a look inside our boarded windows.

We don't have much time.

We make a last run for supplies. We check each one of the rope ladder's knots. We inspect the boarded windows for cracks. During the daytime, we turn off all the lights, and use epoxy to seal up every last pinpoint of light.

Then, we mix one more batch of cement.

Eli brings it out to the living room in bucketfuls, muscled arms tight. Sarah scrapes it across the front door with a cement trowel, skinny arms taut. Together, we seal all the cracks, until the front door is covered in concrete.

We let it dry, then we slather on another layer to strengthen the seal. When that layer dries, the wall is complete.

Now we're safe, inside a house without doors.

We go from room to room and check each one of the windows—all boarded up tight. The last window we check is the back window with the rope ladder. The ladder is looped up inside, the shutters locked in place.

We check the maze we've built, inspecting each piece of furniture. Each is in its proper place.

bulky as a battleship. We run our wondering fingertips along the cool, hard concrete encasing the space where our door used to be. If the creature wants to get in now, it will have to blow this wall down with dynamite.

“That’s not its style,” one of us says.

“No, definitely not,” the other agrees.

Our work is finished.

We stand in the center of our apartment, dark as a desert but for the two flickering candles on the coffee table. We hug each other. We laugh. We sigh. We let the relief slide down our fingertips and trickle through our toes.

Then we stand back and eye one another curiously.

“What do we do now?” Eli asks.

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?” Sarah says.

“I don’t know,” Eli says.

We’ve been working on our construction project for so long, we’ve forgotten how to do anything else. What did we used to do to pass the time, before we started building our fortress?

“We could play chess.”

“We could play checkers.”

“Or maybe charades.”

“Or maybe hide-and-seek.”

“There’s so much to do.”

“What’s that noise?”

It sounds like breathing.

“Hold your breath.”

We stand there, silent as rocks.

The breathing continues. It’s the sound of the universe expanding and deflating, the lull of salt surf breaking down steel.

It’s come to us. It’s here. We thought we locked it out, but we only locked it in.

“Quick, to the safe room,” Eli whispers.

We scramble inside. We heave the door shut. We lock, and double-lock, and triple-lock.

Sarah strikes a match and lights a candle. She cups the flame, and the flickering light illuminates the hollowed panes of her face, the terror in her eyes. Eli crawls beside her.

We strain to hear the rasping breath and padding footsteps. We kneel side by side. We wait.

The shudder of its movement draws closer. Its footsteps are the sound of a rusty iron door clanking shut. Its scales rattle like metal coat hangers in an earthquake. Its presence is the smell of rotting meat and morning nosebleeds and childhood humiliations.

Its claws rap impatiently against the door.

Inside our cage of concrete and steel, each noise echoes like a canyon.

“Now what,” Eli whispers.

“You know what to do?” Sarah whispers back, and we feel the tremble of her question mark.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

We take out the first aid kit and the Swiss Army Knife, our breaths shallow in the monster stench. Eli swabs the knife’s longest blade with rubbing alcohol. Sarah begins unbuttoning her shirt, lingering long at each button. We close our eyes and whisper a silent entreaty to the gods of love, but they remain aloof as ever.

Sarah lies back on the cold concrete floor. Eli rolls up her sweater into a pillow and cradles her head against it.

We are afraid.

Eli rests his ear against Sarah's chest and listens for her heartbeat. Sarah feels his hot breath tickling her bare skin and tries to steady her pulse for his sake.

Outside, the creature toys with the second lock.

We look into each other's eyes as Eli makes the first incision, the knife steady in his right hand tracing the contours of Sarah's pulsating heart with his left. Blood bubbles up like a spring and darkens the lines of his palms.

We can hear the creature salivating; its breath quickens.

"You're so brave," Eli says, as he makes the second incision, cutting carefully around the edge of her heart.

"You're the brave one," Sarah says, her eyes bright.

"Why do you say that?" Eli says.

"I could never face this world without you." In the hollow of her throat is a pool of blood.

Sarah is whispering. Eli hears regret in the rattles and rustles of her fading voice. "If only we could have . . . we wished we would have . . . we knew we might have . . . we thought we would . . ."

"What? What did you say?"

Sarah's whispers grow quicker and fainter, faster and slicker. Eli leans closer. "If only we could have?"

"The boat beside the lake your grandmother's locket the falling rain the broken mirror the missing page my favorite book . . ." Sarah's voice fades. Eli leans closer, but there's no sound but the damp breathing outside, a beating heart (Sarah's), a beating heart (Eli's).

"I love you," Eli says.

Sarah doesn't answer.

Eli holds Sarah's heart in the palm of his hand. The rasping claws sound like nails on blackboard. Panicked, the creature pleads for just a taste.

Eli tilts his head back, allowing the warm blood to drain from the palm of his hand, down his throat, into his chest. He slurps the gobs of pulsing viscera from cupped palms. He doesn't stop to chew.

Closing his eyes, he cradles her body, drawing in the last waves of her fading warmth.

Outside, the creature slinks away, thwarted and hungry, leaving nothing but claw marks and the odor of disappointment.

Eli waits with Sarah as she becomes cold, then skeletal. Eli does the same; he has nothing left.

In the silence, Eli contemplates other universes, alternate ways to defeat the beast. They could have built a trap. They could have changed their faces, and their names. They could have hired a mystic. They could have fled to Panama. If only they'd been more innovative.

But as their parents learned, there's no escape. The beast will destroy everything eventually, only through the dread of it.

Finally, he understands.

He unfastens the first lock, then the second, then the third. He swings open the door and gulps the fresh air. He descends the rope ladder and stumbles into the dark, waiting night.

Desirina Boskovich has published fiction in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Clarkesworld*, and in the anthologies *The Way of the Wizard* and *Last Drink Bird Head*. She is an '07 graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Workshop. Find her online at desirinaboskovich.com.

Graves

Joe Haldeman

I have this persistent sleep disorder that makes life difficult for me, but still I want to keep it. Boy, I want to keep it. It goes back twenty years, to Vietnam. To Graves.

Dead bodies turn from bad to worse real fast in the jungle. You've got a few hours before rigor mortis makes them hard to handle, hard to stuff in a bag. By that time, they start to turn greenish, they started out white or yellow, where you can see the skin. It's mostly bugs by then, usually ants. Then they go to black and start to smell.

They swell up and burst.

You'd think the ants and roaches and beetles and millipedes would make short work of them after that, but they don't. Just when they get to looking and smelling the worst, the bugs sort of lose interest, get fastidious, send out for pizza. Except for the flies. Laying eggs.

The funny thing is, unless some big animal got to it and tore it up, even after a week or so, you'd still got something more than a skeleton, even a sort of a face. No eyes, though. Every now and then we'd get one like that. Not too often, since soldiers usually don't die alone and sit there for that long, but sometimes. We called them "dry ones." Still damp underneath, of course, and inside, but kind of like a sunburned mummy otherwise.

You tell people what you do at Graves Registration, "Graves," and it sounds like about the worst job the army has to offer. It isn't. You just stand there all day and open body bags, figure out which parts maybe belong to which dog tag—not that it's usually that important—sew them up more or less with a big needle, account for all the wallets and jewelry, steal the dope out of their pockets, box them up, seal the casket, do the paperwork. When you have enough boxes, you truck them out to the airfield. The first week maybe is pretty bad. But after a hundred or so, after you get used to the smell and the godawful feel of them, you get to thinking that opening a body bag is a lot better than ending up inside one. They put Graves in safe places.

Since I'd had a couple of years of college, pre-med, I got some of the more interesting jobs. Captain French, who was the pathologist actually in charge of the outfit, always took me with him out into the field when he had to examine a corpse *in situ*, which happened only maybe once a month. I got to wear a .45 in a shoulder holster, tough guy. Never fired it, never got shot at, except the one time.

That was a hell of a time. It's funny what gets to you, stays with you.

Usually when we had an *in situ*, it was a forensic matter, like an officer they suspected had been fragged or otherwise terminated by his own men. We'd take pictures and interview some people, and then Frenchy would bring the stiff back for autopsy, see whether the bullets were American or Vietnamese. (Not that that would be conclusive either way. The Vietcong stole our weapons, and our guys used the North Vietnamese AK-47s, when we could get our hands on them. More reliable than the M-16, and a better cartridge for killing. Both sides proved that over and over.) Usually Frenchy would send a report up to Division, and that would be it. Once he had to testify at a court-martial. The kid was guilty, but just got life. The officer was a real prick.

Anyhow, we got the call to come look at this *in situ* corpse about five in the afternoon. Frenchy tried to put it off until the next day, since, if it got dark, we'd have to spend the night. The guy he was talking to was a major, though, and obviously proud of it, so it was no use arguing. I threw some C and beer and a couple canteens into two rucksacks that already had blankets and air mattresses tied to the bottom. Box of .45 ammo and a couple hand grenades. Went and got a jeep while Frenchy got h

stuff together and made sure Doc Carter was sober enough to count the stiffes as they came in. (Doc Carter was the one supposed to be in charge, but he didn't much care for the work.)

Drove us out to the pad, and lo and behold, there was a chopper waiting, blades idling. Should've started to smell a rat then. We don't get real high priority, and it's not easy to get a chopper to go anywhere so close to sundown. They even helped us stow our gear. Up, up and away.

I never flew enough in helicopters to make it routine. Kontum looked almost pretty in the low sun, golden red. I had to sit between two flamethrowers, though, which didn't make me feel too secure. The door gunner was smoking. The flamethrower tanks were stenciled NO SMOKING.

We went fast and low out toward the mountains to the west. I was hoping we'd wind up at one of the big fire bases up there, figuring I'd sleep better with a few hundred men around. But no such luck. When the chopper started to slow down, the blades' whirl deepening to a whuck-whuck-whuck, there was no clearing as far as the eye could see. Thick jungle canopy everywhere. Then a wisp of purple smoke showed us a helicopter-sized hole in the leaves. The pilot brought us down an inch at a time, nicking twigs. I was very much aware of the flamethrowers. If he clipped a large branch, we'd be serving much pot roast.

When we touched down, four guys in a big hurry unloaded our gear and the flamethrowers and a couple cases of ammo. They put two wounded guys and one client on board and shooed the helicopter away. Yeah, it would sort of broadcast your position. One of them told us to wait; he'd go get the major.

"I don't like this at all," Frenchy said.

"Me neither," I said. "Let's go home."

"Any outfit that's got a major and two flamethrowers is planning to fight a real war." He pulled his .45 out and looked at it as if he'd never seen one before. "Which end of this do you think the bullets come out of?"

"Shit," I advised, and rummaged through the rucksack for a beer. I gave Frenchy one, and he popped it in his side pocket.

A machine gun opened up off to our right. Frenchy and I grabbed the dirt. Three grenade blasts. Somebody yelled for them to cut that out. Guy yelled back he thought he saw something. Machine gun started up again. We tried to get a little lower.

Up walks this old guy, thirties, looking annoyed. The major.

"You men get up. What's wrong with you?" He was playin' games.

Frenchy got up, dusting himself off. We had the only clean fatigues in twenty miles. "Captain French, Graves Registration."

"Oh," he said, not visibly impressed. "Secure your gear and follow me." He drifted off like a mighty ship of the jungle. Frenchy rolled his eyes, and we hoisted our rucksacks and followed him. I wasn't sure whether "secure your gear" meant bring your stuff or leave it behind, but Budweiser could get to be a real collector's item in the boonies, and there were a lot of collectors out here.

We walked too far. I mean a couple hundred yards. That meant they were really spread out thin. I didn't look forward to spending the night. The goddamned machine gun started up again. The major looked annoyed and shouted, "Sergeant, will you please control your men?" and the sergeant told the machine gunner to shut the fuck up, and the machine gunner told the sergeant there was a fuckin' good one out there, and then somebody popped a big one, like a Claymore, and then everybody was shooting every which way. Frenchy and I got real horizontal. I heard a bullet whip by over my head. The major was leaning against a tree, looking bored, shouting, "Cease firing, cease firing!" The shooting dwindled down like popcorn getting done. The major looked over at us and said, "Come on. Whi

there's still light." He led us into a small clearing, elephant grass pretty well trampled down. I guess everybody had had his turn to look at the corpse.

It wasn't a real gruesome body, as bodies go, but it was odd-looking, even for a dry one. Mold like someone had dusted flour over it. Naked and probably male, though incomplete: all the soft parts were gone. Tall; one of our Montagnard allies rather than an ethnic Vietnamese. Emaciated, dry skin taut over ribs. Probably old, though it doesn't take long for these people to get old. Lying on its back, mouth wide open, a familiar posture. Empty eye sockets staring skyward. Arms flung out in supplication, loosely, long past rigor mortis.

Teeth chipped and filed to points, probably some Montagnard tribal custom. I'd never seen anything like that before, but we didn't "do" many natives.

Frenchy knelt down and reached for it, then stopped. "Checked for booby traps?"

"No," the major said. "Figure that's your job." Frenchy looked at me with an expression that said it was my job.

Both officers stood back a respectful distance while I felt under the corpse. Sometimes they put the pin on a hand grenade and slip it under the body so that the body's weight keeps the arming lever in place. You turn it over, and Tomato Surprise!

I always worry less about a hand grenade than about the various weird serpents and bugs that might enjoy living underneath a decomposing corpse. Vietnam has its share of snakes and scorpions and megapedes.

I was lucky this time; nothing but maggots. I flicked them off my hand and watched the major turn a little green. People are funny. What does he think is going to happen to him when he dies? Everything has to eat. And he was sure as hell going to die if he didn't start keeping his head down. I remember that thought, but didn't think of it then as a prophecy.

They came over. "What do you make of it, Doctor?"

"I don't think we can cure him." Frenchy was getting annoyed at this cherry bomb. "What else do you want to know?"

"Isn't it a little . . . odd to find something like this in the middle of nowhere?"

"Naw. Country's full of corpses." He knelt down and studied the face, wiggling the head by its chin. "We keep it up, you'll be able to walk from the Mekong to the DMZ without stepping on anything but corpses."

"But he's been castrated!"

"Birds." He toed the body over, busy white crawlers running from the light. "Just some old geezer who walked out into the woods naked and fell over dead. Could happen back in the World. Old people do funny things."

"I thought maybe he'd been tortured by the VC or something."

"God knows. It could happen." The body eased back into its original position with a creaking sound, like leather. Its mouth had closed halfway. "If you want to put 'evidence of VC torture' in your report, your body count, I'll initial it."

"What do you mean by that, Captain?"

"Exactly what I said." He kept staring at the major while he flipped a cigarette into his mouth and fired it up. Non-filter Camels; you'd think a guy who worked with corpses all day long would be less anxious to turn into one. "I'm just trying to get along."

"You believe I want you to falsify—"

Now, "falsify" is a strange word for a last word. The enemy had set up a heavy machine gun on the other side of the clearing, and we were the closest targets. A round struck the major in the small of

his back, we found on later examination. At the time, it was just an explosion of blood and guts, and he went down with his legs flopping every which way, barfing, then loud death rattle. Frenchy was on the ground in a ball, holding his left hand, going, “Shit shit shit.” He’d lost the last joint of his little finger. Painful, but not serious enough, as it turned out, to get him back to the World.

I myself was horizontal and aspiring to be subterranean. I managed to get my pistol out and cocked, but realized I didn’t want to do anything that might draw attention to us. The machine gun was spraying back and forth over us at about knee height. Maybe they couldn’t see us; maybe they thought we were dead. I was scared shitless.

“Frenchy,” I stage-whispered, “we’ve got to get outa here.” He was trying to wrap his finger up with a standard first-aid-pack gauze bandage, much too large. “Get back to the trees.”

“After you, asshole. We wouldn’t get halfway.” He worked his pistol out of the holster, but couldn’t cock it, his left hand clamping the bandage and slippery with blood. I armed it for him and handed it back. “These are going to do a hell of a lot of good. How are you with grenades?”

“Shit. How you think I wound up in Graves?” In basic training, they’d put me on KP whenever they went out for live grenade practice. In school, I was always the last person when they chose uniforms for baseball, for the same reason—though, to my knowledge, a baseball wouldn’t kill you if you couldn’t throw far enough. “I couldn’t get one halfway there.” The tree line was about sixty yards away.

“Neither could I, with this hand.” He was a lefty.

Behind us came the “poink” sound of a sixty-millimeter mortar, and in a couple of seconds, there was a gray-smoke explosion between us and the tree line. The machine gun stopped, and somebody behind us yelled, “Add twenty!”

At the tree line, we could hear some shouting in Vietnamese, and a clanking of metal. “They’re gonna bug out,” Frenchy said. “Let’s di-di.”

We got up and ran, and somebody did fire a couple of bursts at us, probably an AK-47, but he missed, and then there were a series of poinks and a series of explosions pretty close to where the grenades had been.

We rushed back to the LZ and found the command group, about the time the firing started up again. There was a first lieutenant in charge, and when things slowed down enough for us to tell him what had happened to the major, he expressed neither surprise nor grief. The man had been an observer from Battalion, and had assumed command when their captain was killed that morning. He’ll take our word for it that the guy was dead—that was one thing we were trained observers in—and not to send a squad out for him until the fighting had died down and it was light again.

We inherited the major’s hole, which was nice and deep, and in his rucksack found a dozen cans and jars of real food and a flask of scotch. So, as the battle raged through the night, we munched pâté on Ritz crackers, pickled herring in sour-cream sauce, little Polish sausages on party rye with real French mustard. We drank all the scotch and saved the beer for breakfast.

For hours, the lieutenant called in for artillery and air support, but to no avail. Later, we found out that the enemy had launched coordinated attacks on all the local airfields and Special Forces camps, and every camp that held POWs. We were much lower priority.

Then, about three in the morning, Snoopy came over. Snoopy was a big C-130 cargo plane that carried nothing but ammunition and Gatling guns; they said it could fly over a football field and put a round into every square inch. Anyhow, it saturated the perimeter with fire, and the enemy stopped shooting. Frenchy and I went to sleep.

At first light, we went out to help round up the KIAs. There were only four dead, counting the

major, but the major was an astounding sight, at least in context.

~~He looked sort of like a cadaver left over from a teaching autopsy. His shirt had been opened and his pants pulled down to his thighs, and the entire thoracic and abdominal cavities had been ripped open and emptied of everything soft, everything from esophagus to testicles, rib cage like blood-streaked fingers sticking rigid out of sagging skin, and there wasn't a sign of any of the guts anywhere but just a lot of dried blood.~~

Nobody had heard anything. There was a machine-gun position not twenty yards away, and they had been straining their ears all night. All they'd heard was flies.

Maybe an animal feeding very quietly. The body hadn't been opened with a scalpel or a knife; the skin had been torn by teeth or claws—but seemingly systematically, throat to balls.

And the dry one was gone. Him with the pointed teeth.

There is one rational explanation. Modern warfare is partly mindfuck, and we aren't the only ones who do it, dropping unlucky cards, invoking magic and superstition. The Vietnamese knew how squeamish Americans were, and would mutilate bodies in clever ways. They could also move very quietly. The dry one? They might have spirited him away just to fuck with us. Show what they could do under our noses.

And as for the dry one's odd mummified appearance, the mold, there might be an explanation. I found out that the Montagnards in that area don't bury their dead; they put them in a coffin made from a hollowed-out log and leave them aboveground. So maybe he was just the victim of a grave robber. I thought the nearest village was miles away, like twenty miles, but I could have been wrong. Or the body could have been carried that distance for some obscure purpose—maybe the VC set it out on the trail to make the Americans stop in a good place to be ambushed.

That's probably it. But for twenty years now, several nights a week, I wake up sweating with a terrible image in my mind. I've gone out with a flashlight, and there it is, the dry one, scooping steaming entrails from the major's body, tearing them with its sharp teeth, staring into my light with black empty sockets, unconcerned. I reach for my pistol, and it's never there. The creature stands up, shiny with blood, and takes a step toward me—for a year or so, that was it; I would wake up. Then it was two steps, and then three. After twenty years it has covered half the distance and its dripping hands are rising from its sides.

The doctor gives me tranquilizers. I don't take them. They might help me stay asleep.

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The Ash of Memory, the Dust of Desire

Poppy Z. Brite

Once, I thought I knew something about love.

Once, I could stand on the roof of the tallest skyscraper in the city and look out across the shimmering candyscape of nighttime lights without thinking of what went on down in the black canyons between the buildings: the grand melodramatic murders, the willful and deliberate hurt, the commonplace pettiness. To live is to betray. But why do some have to do it with such pleasure?

Once, I could look in the mirror and see the skin of my throat not withered, the hollows of my eyes not gone blue and bruised around my eyes.

Once, I could part a woman's legs and kiss the juncture like I was drinking from the mouth of a river, without seeing the skin of the inner thighs gone veined and livid, without smelling the salt scent and the blood mingled like copper and seawater.

Once, I thought I knew something about love.

Once, I thought I wanted to.

Leah met me in the bar at the Blue Shell. It was six o'clock, just before dinnertime, and my clothes were still streaked with the dill-cream soup and Dijon dressing we had served at lunch. The fresh dill for the soup had come on a truck that morning, in a crate, packed secure between baby carrots and dewy lettuces. I wondered how many highways it had to travel between here and its birthplace, how many miles of open sky before the delivery man lugged it up to the twenty-first floor of the posh hotel. "The Blue Shell on Twenty-one" read the embossed silver matchbooks the busboy placed on every table, referring not to avenue number but to floors above street level. Way up here they kept it air-conditioned, carefully chilled . . . except in the heart of the kitchen, where no amount of circulated air could compete with the radiant heat of a Turbo Ten-Loaf bread oven. In addition to the residue of lunch, I felt sheathed in a layer of dry sweat like a dirty undershirt gone wash-gray with age.

The bar on ground floor was as cool as the rest of the hotel, though, and Leah was cool too. As cool as the coffee cream when I took it out of the refrigerator first thing every morning. For her appointment today she had dressed carefully, in the style affected by all the fashionable girls this year. Leah was one of the few who could get away with it: her calves were tight and slender enough for the clunky shoes and the gaudy, patterned hose, her figure spare enough for the sheath-snug, aggressive-colored (or, for a very special occasion, jet black) dresses, the planes of her face sufficiently delicate to sport the modified beehive hairdo, swept up severely in front, but with a few long strands spiraling carefully down the back. "There was a long waiting line," she told me, toying with the laces of her shoestring bodice. I imagined her sitting in one of the anonymous chairs at the clinic, hugging herself the way she did when she was defensive or less than comfortable—an unconscious gesture, I was sure. My cool Leah would never have chosen to do something that so exquisitely exposed her own vulnerability.

I was supposed to feel guilty. I was supposed to feel neglectful because I hadn't been able to get anyone to work lunch for me; thus I had sent fragile Leah into a dangerous situation unprotected, in a situation of possible pain without the male stability she craved. Something in me cringed at the accusation, as if on cue. Until now I had only sipped at the boilermaker I'd ordered; now I drank deeply, and was vaguely surprised to see it come away from my lips half-drained. The taste was good though, the sour tangy beer washing down and the sweet mash of the whiskey lingering. Bushmill

The kitchen staff drank free after getting off a shift, and the bar brands were damn tasty.

“They hurt me,” she said next. “I don’t see why I had to have a pelvic. Jilly didn’t have to have pelvic when she went to her private doctor. They just tested her pee, and when they called her on the phone later, the nurse already had an appointment set up for her.”

“Jilly’s boyfriend designs software,” I told her. “Jilly can afford to see a private doctor.”

“Yes, but listen.” She spoke excitedly, mouthing her words around the various straws and skewers they’d put in her drink. She drank fruity, frothy stuff, drinks you couldn’t taste the alcohol in. Drinks that more properly belonged on a dessert plate with a garnish of whipped cream. A dark red maraschino cherry bobbed against her lips. “Cleve went with me today. He says he’s got some money saved up from his last gallery show. If you help too, I’ll have enough. I can have the operation at a private doctor’s office—the clinic’s going to call and make me an appointment.” Her hand set her drink down on the bar, found mine, tightened over it.

I noticed the way she said *operation* before I thought of anything else. Casual, with no more pain in the twist of her mouth than if she were saying *new dress* or *boyfriend* or *fuck*. Like something she was used to having, that she couldn’t get used to the idea of not having whenever she wanted it. It wasn’t until my next swallow of whiskey that I registered the name she’d spoken.

“Cleve went with you?”

Again the casual twist of the lips, not quite a smile. “Yes, Cleve went. You couldn’t get off work. I didn’t feel like doing it alone.”

I remembered standing in the kitchen two days ago, slicing a carrot into rounds and then chopping the rounds into quarters. I kept my eyes fixed on the big wooden cutting block, on the knife slicing through the crisp orange meat of the carrot, but in the corner of my vision I could see Cleve twisting his battered old hat in his hands. Between his long fingers, the hat was like an odd scrap of felt. Cleve’s hands were large enough to fit easily around my throat; Cleve stood a head and a half taller than me, and his arms might have been strong enough to throw me half the length of the kitchen. But I knew he would let me kick his ass if I wanted to. If I was hurting so bad that I wanted to pour his head against the floor or punch him in the face until his blood ran, then he was prepared to let me. That was how deep his guilt went. And that was how bad he still wanted Leah.

“I can’t work for you Wednesday,” he’d told me. “Any other day I’d do it, you know that. I’ve got to see this gallery owner, it’s been set up for weeks.”

He wouldn’t meet my eyes. I thought he was just upset at the idea of me having to run the kitchen alone, having to make the thousand little decisions that go with the lunch rush while all the time I was worried about Leah . . . imagining her getting off the bus at the last stop before the clinic, having to walk through blocks of the old industrial district. Other parts of the city were more dangerous, but to me the old factories and mills were the most frightening places. The places where abandoned machinery sat silent and brooding, and twenty-foot swaths of cobweb hung from the disused cogs and levers like dusty gray curtains. The places that everyone mostly stayed away from, mostly left alone with the superstitious reverence given *all* graveyards. But once in a while, something would be found in the basement of a factory, or tucked into the back room of a warehouse. A head, once, so badly decomposed that no one could ever put a face to it. The gnawed bones and dried tendons and other unpalatable parts of a wino, jealously guarded by a pack of feral dogs. This was where the free clinic was; this was where certain doctors set up their offices, and where desperate girls visited them.

And while Leah was making her way through this blasted landscape, while I was slicing goat cheese for the salads or making a delicate lemon sauce to go over the fresh fish of the day, Cleve would be ensconced in some art gallery far uptown. I pictured it like the interior of a temple: lavish

brocade and beaded curtains, burning sachets of sandalwood and frankincense, carpet lush and rich enough to silence even the tread of Cleve's steel-toed cowboy boots. There Cleve would be, kicking back in some cool dim vast room, trying to say the right things about the colorful paintings that came from some secret place in his brain, about the sculptures he shaped into being with the latent grace of his big hands. I liked the idea of Cleve bullshitting some spotless hipper-than-thou gallery owner, someone who attended the right parties to see and be seen, someone who had never been to the old industrial district or any of the rough parts of town except for a quick slummy thrill, someone who had never got mustard all over his shirt or scalded his hands in hot dishwater.

But Cleve hadn't been bullshitting anyone except me.

Leah extricated her hand from mine and adjusted the hem of her skirt over her knee. Her fingernails were painted the cool blue of a blemishless autumn sky; her movements were guarded and deliberate. I caught the glimmer of her frosted eyelids, but in the semidarkness of the bar, I could not see her eyes.

I took a long drink of my boilermaker. Warm rancid beer; the flat taste of whiskey settling spiderlike over my tongue.

One of Cleve's passions was his collection of jazz and blues records, most of them the original pressings. No digital techno-juju or perfect plastic sound, just the old cardboard sleeves whose liner notes told the stories of entire lives. Just the battered vinyl wheels that could turn back time and rekindle desire, just the dark sorghum voices. Billie and Miles, Duke and Bird . . . and more obscure ones. "Titanic" Phil Alvin, Peg Leg Howell. I had given him a bunch of them, and he knew I loved them too. One night he willed them to me over a case of Dixie beer. (Cleve had made a special trip to New Orleans when the Dixie brewery finally closed, and there were still a few cases stashed in his studio closet; I had helped him drink another five or six.) "Jonny, if I got jumped by a goddamn kung-fu gang on my way home—" he paused to light a Chesterfield "—or if I walked in front of a bus or something, you'd have to take 'em, man." He gestured around the room at a series of little jewel-box watercolors he was doing at the time. "My paintings could go their own way—shit, they can take care of themselves. But you have to take the records. You're the only one who loves 'em enough."

The records were Cleve's sole big indulgence. The rest of his extra money went to buy paints and canvas and an occasional luxury like groceries. He never collected them out of any kind of acquisitiveness, and desire to possess and catalog. It was just the feel of good heavy vinyl in the hand, the fragrant dust that sifted from the corners of the dog-eared cardboard, the music that spun you back to some grand hotel ballroom where you danced beneath a crystal chandelier . . . or some smoky little dive renting space in the basement of a whorehouse. The records were magic rabbit holes that led to the past, to a place where there was still room for romance. And I loved them as much as Cleve did.

And right then, in that moment at the bar as Leah withdrew her hand from mine, I could have taken a hammer and smashed the records all to bits.

We walked the four blocks from the hotel to the train tunnel half-staggering, almost drunk off of one drink apiece. Leah had not eaten because of her appointment; I, after wracking my brain over concocting delicious menus day after day, could hardly eat at all. Forsaking a free dinner at the Blue Shell meant we would go to bed hungry. Our refrigerator at home was empty of all but the last paring of our life together: an old rind of cheese on the shelf, a vegetable or two that neither of us would ever cook withering in the drawer, a flask of vodka I had stashed in the freezer.

As we left the hotel behind, the street grew shabbier. The buildings along here were old row houses of brick and wood, once fashionable, now unrenovated and nearly worthless. Children and teenagers sat on some of the stoops, hardness aging their faces, their grim eyes urging us past. More

unnerving were the houses that stood vacant: I could not imagine what face would look out from the dirty darkness behind the windows. Leah pulled my arm around her. I felt her skin and muscle moving under the thin dress. I thought of that strength moving with me, around me, like snakes wrapped in cool velvet. We had not had sex in three weeks, had not made love in so much longer than that. Whenever I was not with either Cleve or Leah, I imagined them together, drowning in ecstasy, dying their little deaths into each other.

Cleve had told me first, as soon as he realized that Leah didn't intend to. Away from the kitchen, away from work, in a neutral bar with a fresh beer in front of me, he confessed in a hesitant voice, telling me what a dumbfuck he was and how anyway there was only *lust* between them, no love, no respect, seeing how that would hurt the worst. He bought me another beer before I finished my first one. Maybe he just wanted to know where both of my hands were.

Leah was in bed but not asleep when I went home. She'd heard me coming up the stairs and was fumbling with my key, and rolled over when I came in. Some nights she slept naked; tonight she was wearing something as sheer and weightless as ectoplasm. I saw the line of her shoulder silhouetted against the light, a filmy silver-white, somehow more erotic than the curve of her hip or breast. I sat on the edge of the bed.

"I waited up for my story," she said. It was our custom for me to tell her a tale before we fell asleep at night: sometimes just a shred of hotel gossip or a memory from childhood, sometimes a dream, one of the plans I only told her and Cleve, one of my schemes to get away from the kitchen and into a grander, larger, more leisurely world. These were made of the finest ego-spun gossamer and collapsed in the telling; nonetheless it was pleasurable to tell her, like placing a drop of my heartblood on her lips.

"I'm not telling you a story tonight," I said. "Tonight it's your turn."

She didn't move then, only looked up at me with her eyes dark in the darkness of the room: she knew I knew. And four weeks later she finally came up with a story to tell me in return for all the ones I'd given her. She was carrying a living, breathing, bloodsucking piece of meat inside her, and it might be Cleve's meat, and it might be mine.

Leah always liked to feel passive when she had sex. No, it wasn't just that she *liked* to: she *needed* to feel passive, needed to feel she was being acted upon. I could kiss her anywhere, manipulate her knees and elbows and the strong curve of her back, pretend she was a department-store mannequin I was posing for some pornographic window display. She would press her face into a pillow and whimper, enjoying the power of pretended helplessness. I could dine on her tangy juices all night if I wished, could stay inside her as long as I pleased, come when I wanted to. Only when I asked her what she wanted would Leah get angry. She had to be the little girl; she had to have someone take control.

Not on the morning of her operation. I woke in the still, stuffy light of predawn, unsure what had caused me to surface. I thought I had heard a distant sound, something separate from the intermittent cacophony of voices and sirens that punctuated the night. A train whistle miles away, or a telephone ringing in a far-off room.

Then, before I even knew Leah was awake, she sat up and in one liquid movement was straddling me. I had not felt her body close to mine in so long that it startled me into immobility. Even when she pressed up against the urgent sharpness of her nipples, up into the syrupy heat of her crotch, I wasn't ready.

She tensed above me. In the waxing light I saw surprise on her face, and faint annoyance. She began to grind against me. In the unfamiliar position I could not think how to respond. Leah hard

ever got on top—maybe five or six times in the three years we had been together. It didn't fit her penchant for being acted upon, and it played up the fact that she was almost as tall as me. She had told me that one of the things she liked best about Cleve was his bigness. His hands could enfold hers as her hands were baby birds. Her bones felt more delicate when she pressed them against the solid bulk of him.

My overactive imagination served me up plenty of Leah-and-Cleve snapshots, plenty of inevitable intimate moments, generous helpings of feverish speculation. I was helpless to push them out of my mind once they held sway, but that was not the worst thing about them.

The worst thing about them was that occasionally—usually when I was feeling low and tired and ugly—these thoughts would give me a moment of masochistic excitement.

I thought of Leah's flower-stem spine pressed flush against Cleve. I thought of him kneeling above her, his back covering hers, his big hands cupping the tender weight of her breasts. I knew Cleve preferred to fuck doggy-style. He was a confirmed butt man, loved to ride between those sweet snow globes. I thought of him just barely entering her, the petals of her opening for him, slicking him with her juice. Cleve had a thick penis, heavily veined and solid-looking; he told me the only time a girl had blatantly propositioned him was once when he had been modeling for an art class.

Imagining it going into Leah, searching out the fruit of her heaven, I began to get hard too.

She grabbed me and then suddenly I was deep inside her. One thrust upward and I felt I was pushing at the heart of her womb. She came the way women do when they only need one good deep touch: quick and hard, with an animal groan instead of the little feathery noises she often made. I thought of the lump of meat that grew inside her, thought of bathing it with my sperm, melting away its rudimentary flesh, melting away the past few months and their caustic veneer of pain. Then I did come. The sperm didn't reach far enough: it pulsed out in long, aching spasms that flowed back down over us, into the sticky space between our thighs. The months of pain did not melt away. The lump of meat remained—it would have to be scraped away, not drowned in the seed of sorrow.

As she was pulling away from me, the telephone did ring. The noise jarred something in me, a faint, grating edge of *déjà vu*: I wondered again what had woken me. Leah hunched over the receiver. "Yes," she said. "Wait—let me get something—" She grabbed a pen from the bedside table, a glossy magazine from the clutter on the floor. Her breasts hung ripe as eggs when she leaned over. She scratched something on the cover of the magazine. I rolled my head sideways on the pillow and looked. *217 Payne Street*, she had written—the doctor's address, which the clinic wouldn't divulge until the morning of the abortion. An address in the disused industrial district of the city.

"Thank you," said Leah, "yes . . . thank you." Gently she placed the receiver back in its cradle. The weak light was growing brighter behind the dirty curtains. Leah got out of bed and hurried to the bathroom. I was still lying there when she came out thirty minutes later. She did not look at me. She pulled fishnet stockings the color of smoke up over her long smooth thighs, fastened a wisp of a garter belt around her waist, zipped up a sleeveless, black-lace shift. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and cried.

I held her hand and touched her face with all the tenderness I could summon. Her mascara did not run—some new waterproof kind, I supposed. Her lipstick was perfect. I tried to comfort her, and all I could see in my mind was Leah lying back on a stainless steel operating table, some black-rubber vacuum-tube apparatus snaking up into her. Her labia were stretched wide as a screaming mouth and she was wearing nothing but the lacy garter belt and the fishnet stockings.

It was an image Cleve would have appreciated.

“Yes, Jonny, I know you try to be sweet to me. You’re a saint, Jonny. But you know what you have. Only that damned *little-boy* sweetness. You can’t take care of me. You could cook me a million gourmet dinners and when I finished them I’d still be lonely. Cleve has a special kind of sweetness—

“I know, I know. Cleve’s sweet the way a dumb dog is sweet. You like ‘em big and stupid, right? When I was with Cleve I could not hate him. Only my arguments with Leah could convince me that Cleve had ever meant me any harm, and only then could I say cruel things about him. We had started arguing on the way to the doctor’s office. Walking through the abandoned factory district made me tense—the landscape was falling to waste, long stretches of broken glass gleaming dully here and there like quicksilver sketched onto a monochromatic gray photograph. The silence in the empty shabby streets seemed deafening. Leah mistook my own silence for indifference: I wasn’t listening to her gloomy prattle, wasn’t even thinking of the ordeal about to happen to her.

The buildings here loomed low and oppressive, blotting out the sun. Years ago this place had been a toxic hell of factories and mills. We passed smokestacks blackened halfway down the towering stalks with soot and char. We passed burned-out lots that made me think of crematorium grounds. The smell of death was here too—the odor of burning crude oil is somehow as humanly filthy as the odor of corrupted flesh. These places had been abandoned over the past twenty or thirty years, as the heart of the city’s industry gradually moved north to the silicon suburbs. Out there you could live your whole life shuttling between a superhighway, an exit sign, a gleaming building made of immaculate silver glass, a house and a yard and a wide-screen TV and the superhighway again.

More frightening to me than the empty lots, more oppressive than the huge corrugated-steel Dumpsters that overflowed with thirty years’ forgotten trash, were the dead husks of the buildings. Some of them went on for blocks and blocks, and I could not help but imagine what it would be like to walk through them—endless mazes of broken glass and spiderweb and soft sifting ash, with the corners laved in shadow, with the pipes and beams zigzagging crazily overhead. I thought of a poem I had written once for some long-ago college class, in some idealistic day when the city was far away and I only cooked the food I wanted to eat. A few lines came back to me: *When the emptiness in you grows too large/You fill its vaulted chamber with the ash of memory/ With the dust of desire.*

“I don’t want to fight,” Leah said suddenly. “There’s not enough time, it’s too soon. Hold me, Jonny. Help me—” She pressed me back against a wall and covered my mouth with hers. Her lips were lush, her tongue was moist and searching, and again I was reminded of loving her. Not the sterile and functional fuck this morning, but the real love we had once shared: the soft friction of skin, the good long thrusts, the liquid sounds of pleasure. But these memories were receding rapidly. Soon they would be just a point of brightness on a dark horizon, and I knew now that they could never return. As I kissed Leah I became conscious of the rough bricks at my back, of the vast empty space behind me. I grasped her shoulders and gently pushed her away. “Come on,” I said. “You can’t be late. What are you looking for—Payne Street?”

She nodded, didn’t speak. We kept walking. In all the blocks since we’d gotten off the train, we had only seen two or three other people: sad silent cases who walked with their heads down, who looked like they might vanish from existence as soon as they turned the corner. Now it seemed we were alone. The streets grew ever shabbier and emptier; a few of them had signs whose letters were half-obliterated, spelling out cryptic messages, pointing to nowhere. None of them looked like they might have ever said Payne Street. At one corner, a long spray of dirt lay across the sidewalk. Leah could not quite step all the way over it, and when we were past I saw a dark crumb stuck to the heel of her shoe. The delicate tired lines around her mouth and eyes seemed etched in dust. I began to feel that the landscape was encroaching upon her; she would leave here forever marked.

If it could erase the mark of Cleve from her, or rather the mark of her love for Cleve, then I would bless this blasted landscape. Maybe then I could love her again.

I thought I wanted to.

Soon, it was obvious that we were getting to the fringes of the industrial section. The buildings here were more cramped and ramshackle. If anything walked here, it would be the wraith of a drudge who worked to death in the sweatshops, dead of blood poisoning from a needle run through her finger. Or perhaps a tattered ghost, a hungry soul mangled by machinery from a time that knew no safe regulations.

The sidewalk was fissured with deep cracks and broken into shards, as if someone had gone at it with a sledgehammer. I saw weeds sprouting at the edges of the vacant lots, leaves barely tinged with green, as furtive and sunless as mushrooms. “You think the doctor’s office burned down?” I said.

The look from beneath Leah’s eyelashes was pure sparkling hate. Leah disliked getting around the city, and when she had to find a place by herself, she got panicky and sometimes mean. “He said we should come out of the tunnel and turn left. It was supposed to be three blocks down past the cotton factory.”

“They had cotton *mills*, Leah, not factories, and any one of those buildings we passed could have been the one you want. By the time we walk all the way back there, we’ll be a half hour late.” A little flame of rage snapped in my chest. If she didn’t have her directions straight, and if we arrived too late, we could miss the appointment. Appointments with a private doctor who would perform this particular operation were difficult to get, so difficult that if Leah missed this chance, she might be too far along by the time she could get another.

Without a word, she wheeled and started walking back the way we had come. I had to hurry to keep up with her; despite my anger, there was still the old reflexive fear that she might twist her ankle in one of the cracks or break into a run and escape from me or fall into a giant hole that would open like a mouth in the ground beneath her feet. You hold onto what you have; you do not give it up easily, even when you know it is poisoning you.

We walked quickly for a long time. Leah was sure we had turned at a certain corner; I didn’t remember, and we argued over that. Somehow she managed to bring Cleve’s name into it. “If you were with *Cleve*,” I said furiously, “you wouldn’t be bitching at him. You’d be all contrite and saying how stupid you were to get lost. You’d whine until you tricked him into taking care of you.”

Leah spun on her heel. “Well, Cleve *isn’t* here, is he? He had to hang his stupid gallery show today—he couldn’t come! I’m stuck with you!”

“He was never going to go. He said you and I should go alone—said maybe that would help you decide. Make you quit stringing me along, I guess he meant.”

“Yes, that was what he said he told you. But Jonny, I was going to meet him this morning. I was going to tell you I wanted to go by myself, that I’d decided I had to do it alone. Then I was going to meet Cleve at the train station. But when I called him this morning, the bastard backed out. He decided to spend the day playing with his damned pictures.”

Only the fact that I was still somehow pitifully, stupidly in love with Leah allowed me to do what I did then. I turned and ran from her. If I had stayed I could not have kept my fingers from round her throat; in my head I would have been choking her and Cleve at once. Never mind the total illogic of it; never mind that both Leah and Cleve knew I would never have let her go off alone; never mind that I did not really believe Cleve would betray me so completely, not even for Leah, not even though I knew he was pitifully in love with her too. Something had woken me up this morning at the first pale light of dawn; it could have been a cry down in the street, or a jet plane arrowing through the smog from

overhead. Or it could have been Leah murmuring into the phone, cursing her conspirator in a whisper when she realized he wasn't coming. Then replacing the receiver ever so gently—wanting to slam down—and flowing over on top of me. Making love to me to spite Cleve, even if only in her head.

I had the spreading cancer of jealousy in me; it had been eating away inside me for a long time. Now at last I thought I was in its death throes, suffering its *final* agony. And, like any dying man, I tried to run from it.

We had already lost the way we had come by. Now I ran deeper into the maze of streets, not looking or caring which way I went. For a few moments I sprinted, desperate to get away, wanting nothing but to run and run. Then the sound of Leah's heels ticking frantically behind me began to slow me down, began to pull me back to here and now and what I thought I wanted. I walked fast, jogging when she got too close, not letting her catch up with me but not completely losing her. I was afraid I might never find her again; I was afraid of having nothing to crawl back to.

Then I turned a corner and didn't look over my shoulder soon enough. When I did glance back Leah was gone.

I froze. How could I have lost her, not meaning to? I waited a few seconds to see if she might follow. If I ran back around the corner and she was still coming, my game would be up—it would be as good as admitting that I hadn't wanted to run away at all. But if she'd gotten disgusted and started back to the train station, I had to catch her. I had to get her to that appointment if I still could. If she needed dragging there, I would drag her.

I came around the corner and the sidewalk was empty. For a moment I vacillated between anger and the stark terror of abandonment. But farther up the street, at the mouth of a narrow alleyway, I saw a smudge on the sidewalk—darker than the drifting ash, and shiny. I walked back to it. The smudge on the sidewalk was blood, twin patches of it ground into the cement. A few feet away, half-hidden beneath a blackened flake of newspaper, lay a tube of scarlet lipstick.

Leah had tripped over her heels, fallen, spilled her purse, skinned her knees brutally on the broken sidewalk. But where had she gone after that?

I looked down the alleyway. No one there. Nothing—
—except a sign.

I hadn't seen it at first. No one walking quickly past would have noticed it; it had been placed only three or four feet up the wall, at waist level instead of eye level. And it was so faded, the edges of the letters seeming to blend into the dusty brick, that it could hardly be read. But I imagined Leah sitting up after her fall, her smoky fishnets torn and the raw ganglia of her kneecaps screaming, her eyes filling with tears. She would have sat there for a moment, dazed, not quite able to get up. And the sign might have caught her eye.

Pain Street, it said.

The alleyway led between two empty factory buildings.

Suddenly the sky seemed too wide and bright and heavy, the silence too big. A fragment of sidewalk shifted under my foot. I saw little drifts of refuse piled against either wall of the alley—soot and ash, more bits of charred paper, the razor confetti of broken glass. I did not know if I could step a foot in the alley; I did know, however, that I could not go home alone.

One wall was blank and featureless all the way to the back of the alley, where more trash was heaped. At my approach, a bottle rolled lazily down but did not shatter. I thought I had walked into a cul-de-sac until I came to the end of the alley. There, set back in an alcove of crumbling mortar, was a heavy steel door wedged open with half a brick.

Someone had taken a nail or a shard of glass and scratched the number 217 on the door.

The door made a gritty ratcheting noise as I pulled it open, but there was no trash in front of it and the hinges swung easily. Someone had opened it before me. I paused for a moment, drinking in what little dirty sunlight managed to filter into the alley. Then I stepped inside. It was easy. Leah always led me to the places I feared most, and I always followed.

The air inside the building was as cool and dim and stagnant as the air in a sarcophagus. In the dark rafters and pipes of the ceiling it hung like a cloud of bats waiting to fly, rustling their parchment wings, exuding their arid spice smell.

The ash of memory, I thought dreamily, the dust of desire. Walking in this air was like moving through a syrup of fermented ages; the silence in here could wrap you up like cloth and preserve you for a thousand years. As my eyes adjusted to the light, shapes began to resolve themselves around me: a huge mesh of Gigeresque machinery, cogs hanging in the air like dull toothy moons, rubber belts and hoses gone brittle with dust, steel spires soaring up to the apex of the great vaulted chamber. And a row of hooks as long as my leg, sharp metal hooks that looked oddly organic, as if they should be attached to the wrist-stump of some enormous amputee.

I walked a few steps into the chamber, and my foot punched through something dry and papery. Like a giant vegetable bulb, I thought, like an onion or a shallot kept too long in a root cellar, rotten and desiccated from the inside. Not until I pulled my foot back did the fragile rib cage crumble, collapsing like the swollen shell of the belly and exposing the scrimshaw beadwork of the spine.

A younger woman than Leah, almost a child, half-buried and half-dissolved into the grime and ash of the factory floor. Most of the face was gone. I saw scattered teeth gleaming in the dust like fragments of ivory. But the curve of the cheekbone—the tiny hand—surely she could not yet have been sixteen. And I wondered why she had come at all, with the once-ripe swell of her belly; she had been too far along in her pregnancy to have hoped to live through an abortion.

I could go no further. I could not walk that gauntlet of machinery, not even to find Leah. I could not turn my back on it either. I stood over the husk of the young girl, and the machinery stretched out mutely as far as I could see, and time hung motionless inside the old factory, not disturbed by me or Leah or anything in the city. It seemed impossible that just a few miles away the trains were still running, the drugs were still changing hands, the endless frantic party went on as if time could not be stopped.

Very nearby, magnified by furtive echoes, I heard the click of a high heel.

“Leah,” I called, not knowing if I hoped to save her or if I wanted her to save me. “Leeeeah . . .” When she walked into the far end of the chamber, I could no longer be ashamed of the pleading note in my voice. Her face was smeared with tears and makeup. The blood from her scraped knees had begun to cake, gluing her torn stockings to her legs. Her face twisted with relief and she started toward me with her arms out as if in supplication. In that moment Cleve might never have touched her, never have tasted her. We might have gone home together, might have slept in each other’s arms again. I might have rested my cheek on the burgeoning mound of her belly, and found peace.

Then the machinery kicked on.

It had not been used in a long time, long enough to let the young girl fall away nearly to bare bones, and it filled the air with dust as thick as whipped cream.

Only dimly did I see the first hook lifting Leah up and away from me, as if she had raised her arms and flown. I stood there dumbly for several minutes, unable to grasp what had happened even as her blood fell upon my face and my out-stretched hands. A high-heeled shoe dropped to the floor in front of me, missing my head by an inch. I did not move. I stared up, up at the swirling clouds of dust up at the figure that hung suspended like an angel in black lace. When the dust cleared, Leah was

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