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## Strange Gods: An Anthology of Short Fantasy and Science Fiction

Robert P. Kruger

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*

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Strange Gods: An Anthology of Short Fantasy and Science Fiction

A THESIS  
The Honors Program  
College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"  
and the Degree Bachelor of Arts  
In the Department of Honors

by  
Robert P. Kruger  
April, 1991

Approval Page

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Special thanks also to Drs. Peter Carlton and Oswald Mayers for agreeing to critique this work and preside at my defense.

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## Preface

My original vision was of a project of about 200 pages in length, and as you can see this manuscript is considerably smaller than that; but not because I didn't do the extra work. I tossed out some fifty pages. Fifty hard-earned pages. And since those pages are not here to represent themselves, I thought I would say something about them in this preface.

Actually, it is not right for me to say that those pages are not here. They are here in spirit. If it weren't for those fifty pages like valiant martyrs coming along, the rest of this project (for better or worse) wouldn't have been completed. Those fifty pages kept me thinking about words and ideas, kept me training my mind, at a time my muse was out to lunch.

While I was writing them, of course, I didn't notice my muse's absence and was enthusiastic about their prospects. If I hadn't thought they were inspired, I would have never completed them. How could anyone but a masochist have worked on (and revised and re-revised) fifty pages of schlock unless he or she thought it was good stuff? I'll give you an example of the kind of self-deception I practiced in regard to those pages. One story I worked on for two hours every day for two whole months because I saw potential in it. When I completed it for the fifth time, the prose was polished to a high shine, the dialogue witty, the

characters well-conceived, and the theme intriguing. And yet somehow, overall, it lacked the dignity even to line a bird cage.

What went wrong? I have many ideas but really I don't know. Maybe I was proud. Pride gets into a manuscript like a bookworm and eats it from the inside out. I wrote fifteen pages of "A Eulogy for Mike" mightily impressed with myself while I was doing so, and those fifteen pages now cry out feebly from some trash can. A little post facto pride for good work is OK, I guess, but it seems to me it's love and not pride that moves even the most moderately good story along during its creation. And love is so much more economical than pride. For every ten pages love completes (substitute Joseph Campbell's "bliss" for "love," if you like) pride finishes one.

The catch is that we humans of so little faith fall out of love so easily. We constantly lose the Way, we stumble along blindly in the dark. We worry about the product instead of concentrate on the joy of production.

I think there's a little love in this project. But just a very little. Certainly not enough for the number of pages you have in your hands. I am--gulp!--just a beginner who is still morbidly insecure about his work and so has a hard time separating the wheat of love from the chaff of pride in it. By the time I were to attain the level of self-honesty to make this mostly wheat, I would be years past my deadline. So what I've got will

have to stand.

There is no ultimate objective standard of art in my opinion. Though--and perhaps you will think this distressingly naive and metaphysical of me to say--I do believe there is an ultimate standard of art. It is the artist's honesty. And as it is hard won, honesty is as much a measure of an artist's effort as of the quality of his or her work. I hope you will find that I at least tried to be honest in these pages.

Under the Aegis of a Badge of Shame  
Introductory Essay

I was asked to begin this anthology with an essay tracing the pedigree of Fantasy and Science Fiction (hereafter "F&SF") back to the genre's "roots in romantic literature." I immediately became indignant at the request, perceiving that the point to such an essay could only be to defend my doing a project on F&SF on the grounds of the genre's association with a "legitimate" kind of literature. The truth is I am writing genre fiction, not "experimental mainstream" or anything else more "acceptable," and I see no reason to apologize for it. F&SF writers have (or should have) a strong interest in defining their genre apart from mainstream literature, just as biologists have an interest in challenging the notion that they are chemists who specialize in organic chemistry. To try to

legitimate F&SF by associating it with some work or works from the canon of mainstream literature--say, Frankenstein--is to devalue its aspects which have no intersection with the mainstream.

F&SF needs to maintain its unique identity to avoid falling prey to the "economic censorship" (a term coined by Ursula Le Guin) of a mainstream editorship prejudiced against certain "low brow" topics. It is just not true that great art "will out" no matter what its subject matter. Editors publish F&SF for the most part because it sells as "fantasy and science fiction"; and if you mainstream F&SF, it may not continue to make the unique contributions to literature it has in the past: the more iconoclastic members of its readership may not be able to exert enough influence through the "dollar vote" to support mainstreamed F&SF in its role as a groundbreaking art form.

My position is not without its detractors. Ursula Le Guin believes F&SF writers should reject the science or fantasy or speculative fiction label on their work. In her guest of honor speech to the 33rd Annual World Science Fiction Convention, she states that "the SF [that is, 'science fiction,' used here as a term inclusive of fantasy as well] label perpetuates a dichotomy that no longer exists between SF and the mainstream. There is a spectrum, now, not a chasm. The SF label is a remnant of the ghetto wall, and I'll be very glad to see it go" (227). But I contend that if



there is a spectrum (and I'm not at all sure there is), then it owes to the existence of a tension between what is called SF and what is called mainstream. Le Guin's appeal for an end to genre labels seems to be founded on the assumption that there is not a set of prescribed norms that defines mainstream fiction, that the mainstream is just an open democratic forum. My position is that these norms are there, but simply unexamined (unexamined almost by definition of the term "mainstream").

The mainstream takes a socially constructed and arbitrary "reality" as its subject matter and so mainstream editors largely devalue fiction that deals with fantastic situations--that is, with what by definition falls outside of "reality." Some science fiction, perhaps, is looked upon more favorably than fantasy on the grounds that it deals with situations that could occur at a certain level of scientific achievement. But, largely, science fiction and fantasy share the same ghetto because science fiction, having some concern for its "literal" (i.e. story) level, treats seriously situations that are impossible under contemporary scientific and/or social circumstances, and therefore, to the pragmatic mind, occupy the same "unpractical," "unenlightened" position that fantasy does.

Science fiction does have its pragmatic supporters, like Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein, who doggedly

defend it as relevant to human affairs on the basis of its scientific inquiry; and these people would take offense at my lumping science fiction in with fantasy, and see science fiction as something entirely different. But they respect a division between science fiction and fantasy that both the mainstream editorship and I do not: the mainstream editorship, because they have, by and large, a more conservative view of what is practical literature; and I, because I on the contrary respect no "infallible" guidelines for deciding a priori what is practical literature.

It is necessary, I suppose, that any society defend discourse on some kinds of literature as practical and disparage discourse on other kinds as impractical: if a society did not prioritize its discourse at all, people would all go their separate ways and nothing would ever get done on a large scale. But if that society is not to be totalitarian, if it is to continue to evolve, it must have a strong margin element that defends unorthodox thinking. Fifty years ago talking about sending men to the moon was extremely unpractical, if not downright absurd; whether the moon landing was felicitous for humanity or not, we owe its realization to those who dared to challenge the bourgeois perception of reality.

F&SF is inherently subversive. It deals with what is not and, if we're honest, what may never be, and so takes psychic energy away from the direct processes of

social survival. If you throw it in with what is "serious" literature, you upset the stability of people's reality, their ability to get the work at hand done, and they will not accept it. But, relegated to the literary margin of genre where it is a lark, a we're-only-fucking-around kind of writing, speculative fiction lets people breathe easier. They may even, pleading temporary insanity if necessary, be moved to take a peek at what those crazy Bohemian "sci-fi" writers are up to.

There are merits, however, to Le Guin's position. It is sadly true that being a "genre," F&SF has become a somewhat closed system filled with a great deal of derivative trash, put out, one would suppose, by writers, editors and publishers who have a concept of some "generic fan." Editors and publishers especially should be taken to task, for in publishing experimental work with trepidation and more often flooding the market with "tried and true" (i.e. hackneyed) material, they tend to reinforce stereotypes about the genre. It is at least as much up to writers and editors and publishers to maintain standards on the production end of the scale as it is up to readers to maintain standards on the reception end through the dollar vote.

But if, as Le Guin would have it, the good F&SF writers call their work mainstream and thereby delegitimate (to an even greater extent) what is called "F&SF," starving it to the point of wraithlike ignominy,

the already minute challenge that reader discourse on F&SF now presents to the tyranny of mass sentiment will be weakened. And this has implications at the foundations of our society. Democracy can only be democracy by virtue of a dynamic tension between the appeal of what are considered low topics of discourse and what are considered dignified; democracy can never stand still. ("When all the world recognizes good as good," says the beginning of the Tao Teh Ching, "this in itself is evil" (Tzu 3).) Capitalism threatens democracy in that it encourages a homogenization of values: art that appeals to everyone survives much better than art that appeals to the few, by virtue of the "dollar vote." The National Endowment for the Arts was formed to help check the mainstream market from defining one standard of art, but it is far from enough--now more than ever insufficient in view of the recent conservative backlash. The genre and the sub-genre, and the sub-, sub-genre, ad infinitum, represent important provincial voices necessary to the integrity of democracy. We need the undervalued, and to say so is not to be in complicity with those who undervalue it, as Le Guin might argue. Furthermore, the undervalued (though potentially great) can only survive by affecting innocuousness: there is always room for the lark, the side-show freak, because the undignified itself is interesting at times; but if the freak clamors too loudly for public recognition, it will be locked up

even more tightly than before.

No doubt Le Guin realizes this. She is speaking from the position of one disgusted by the sight of a genre filled with too much kitsch, a genre that is not subversive enough, and although I see more of what are, in my opinion, fair-to-great books on the shelves than kitsch, I sympathize with her. But it is my position that the writers must push at the borders of the genre, not abandon the genre, because abandoning it will only make the majority voice in our country all that much stronger. Like it or not, F&SF writers must stick together and accept the fact that the economic survival of new great works on the order of (but quite different than) Dune and Gloriana depends on their being tossed in with the rest of the genre trash with which they are seen to be associated. The alternative is to risk having them tossed out altogether.

Now, having completed my attempt to defend my project choice, I will return to the issue of the professor's request that I trace the roots of F&SF back to romantic literature. I might have been wrong in concluding that the professor was trying to get me to buy into an extremely prejudiced idea about what is good art. Perhaps she was trying to get me to academicize a very personal thesis project. Or maybe she had assumed that Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and contemporary works of the kind were the first works of F&SF and therefore was merely requesting I show how F&SF developed emergent

properties setting it apart from the Gothic literature that preceded it. If the latter, if her intention was for me to defend rather than apologize for F&SF, I find her request far less provocative. But even then, her request, from my point of view, would stand on the erroneous assumption that F&SF actually originated with Frankenstein. It did not. Frankenstein makes a great study, though, because it has within it a little of all the major traditions I perceive F&SF is now written in--"hard" fantasy fiction; science fiction; and Gothic, or psychological, fantasy fiction--and I will discuss the book to show, briefly, what those traditions are and where they came from.

The F&SF traditions that Frankenstein partakes of have their roots in the distant past, and so while Frankenstein does present a good quick study of all the themes of current F&SF, it was not the first work in the genre. Frankenstein might be said to be the first science fiction novel, but as it is equally a Gothic and hard fantasy novel, I would place it in relation to science fiction as anthropology's famous "missing link" would stand in relation to humanity.

Frankenstein owes a great deal to "hard" fantasy, fantasy that deals with monsters and heroes and such and which has been around, it can be argued, as long as humanity, as long as myth. Frankenstein is fantastic for two reasons. First, it is a monster story. The monster is not an automaton but a self-willed creature,



created by a dubiously scientific process, who recalls the golem of Hebrew mythology. Second, the science behind the creature's creation has the same function the fantastic does in fantasy novels: it provides a unique context within which to concentrate an inquiry not into science but the human condition (though this is not to say with the pragmatists that the context is only valid in relation to the human condition). Shelley did not speculate too keenly in the novel on the scientific implications of the monster because the scientific issues in the story are peripheral to her human concerns.

Frankenstein is science fictional, though. Shelley's story was inspired in part by rumors of unusual experiments Erasmus Darwin was conducting in galvanic response (Shelley xiii), so it is not a matter of indifference that science is referred to in the story. Most of what we call science fiction today is really Frankenstein-type science fiction in that it doesn't make a detailed inquiry into scientific potential. Some argue that science fiction that is not primarily concerned with science is not real science fiction, and should be called science fantasy; others generally recognize a distinction between "hard" science fiction, which is scientifically oriented, and regular science fiction, which is not. Whatever the term, even the most scientifically meticulous science fiction works must be concerned with their human element if they are

not to be merely essays<sup>1</sup>; and some "literary" science fiction novels like Frankenstein cannot help but make inquiries into the potential of science. Obviously, there cannot be a firm dividing line between "hard" and "regular" science fiction.

To almost the same extent that different subgenres of science fiction blur into each other so fantasy blurs into science fiction. What is called psychological fantasy actually enjoys a somewhat firmer association with the science of psychology than any hard science fiction does with contemporary hard sciences, and so is more "literary." In our society where psychology has been largely legitimized as a "real" science, science fiction and fantasy are more marginal than psychological fantasy, which carries on the tradition of the Gothic novel in giving us an unusual situation that can be fairly easily interpreted as a subjective experience.

Frankenstein, despite having Gothic trappings--dark old houses, and brooding wastes--and being contemporaneous with Gothic literature, has, ironically, less in common with the Gothic than it does with hard fantasy and science fiction because it shows unequivocally that it deals with a fantastic situation. Gothic novels, as far as I have ascertained from my readings, tend not to commit themselves to a clear statement that something fantastic is going on in them; and for this reason Gothic novels tend to lend themselves to the interpretation that they are highly

psychological in focus, that they use the external reality they describe to manifest a psychic process going on either in or between their characters. A ghostly visitation, as in Wuthering Heights, is not distinguishable from a dream (i.e. a communication from the unconscious); in the Gothic American novel Wieland, a person is the victim of an unexplained, spontaneous combustion. And the Scarlet Letter, which I would place with the Gothic tradition, may or may not be fantastic, for the Reverend Dimmesdale may or may not bear a divine mark upon him. My own stories "Eulogy for Mike" and, arguably, "You Are Not God" would fit into this category.

Frankenstein is interesting because almost all F&SF has some relationship to it and so it serves as a kind of unifying principle for the genre. Perhaps this is why it is mistaken as the progenitor of the genre. Yet at the same time, Frankenstein is a kind of black hole lying between genre categories, defined more by absence than presence--"having grown nothing being all," to use the words of W.B. Yeats out of context. It is neither fantasy, nor science fiction, nor Gothic in any definite sense. Perhaps that can give us a clue as to how to resolve the problems inherent in recognizing genre fiction. If all good works could be viewed as in some way partaking of the kind of originality that characterizes Frankenstein, we might recognize an endless array of genres and truly suspend our prejudices

toward art, but until humanity reaches such a stage of evolution, the genre will have to stand as a bulwark against bland homogeneity.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Stanislaw Lem argues that science fiction in its present literary form cannot do justice to scientific speculation, so he and certain other writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges, have experimented with a "fictional essay" form of SF, where a fictional future historian or a parallel earth historian expounds upon some scientific concern of his or her time.

I bring up this thought-experiment SF to qualify my statement that SF must be concerned with human themes. Of course all writing by virtue of its production by human beings concerns humanity, but to say as much would undermine all my categorical statements. And, as I hope I have made clear, human beings aren't ready to do away with categories in literature--nor in anything else, I suspect.

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### Age and Treachery

The bright green pastures, the flawless blue of the sky, and the shining blue-green of the ocean, just glimpsed through a saddle of low grassy hills--all the beauty of Brasdain's settled lands could not coax Dack from his foul mood as he stalked out of the fields away from the village and toward the forest, his threadbare cloak flapping about his heels in the ocean breeze. After three hours of fruitless inquiry, Dack was satisfied that he had exhausted his prospects for information from the villagers. So far it seemed at worst a pedestrian sort of evil that had supposedly settled over this land. Fistfights, petty thefts, runaways--surely this was not what he had been sent to discover. The innkeeper, clearly registering Dack's more than casual interest in bad news, had even wryly offered to make up some for him.

Dack felt bereft of purpose. His master Keery had a way of making everything seem so reasonable, so straightforward. Dack was merely to gather what news he could to explain the disturbing auguries about the northlands Keery was getting through his sorcery. It had sounded so simple. During his entire long journey northward through the Great Forest, Dack had not once questioned the task he was set to, never once thought (as he did now) that there might be nothing to discover here.

Stately cedars and firs held the line for the forest against the encroaching pastureland just a few hundred yards ahead, and Dack turned his gaze back west and up to the sun, scratching at his fortnight's growth of beard. There were still a few hours of daylight left, so it was early yet to set camp. The innkeeper had told him of another village some five miles further north, and he probably had enough time before dark to interrogate it. Which, Dack thought resignedly, I suppose I had best do before the villagers send a militia patrol out to question me. Dack, self-conscious about being young and needing to affect authority to get answers to his questions, had misrepresented himself to the villagers as a member of their lord's militia, and if someone got suspicious and went to the keep to report him . . . . Keery had warned him often to avoid the attentions of nobles and their servants, who would no doubt liberate him of the sword and mail shirt he wore



when he could not give a good account of himself.

What had he gotten into? Now he realized he was as naive as his master often accused him of being. If only his master had some spell to put on human form and come and find his own answers!

Dack turned his feet north and with a sigh set out for the next village.

"A settlement too small to be a hamlet" was Dack's assessment of the small group of buildings at the bottom of a vale, huddled close to the wall of the forest trees. The trek had taken longer than Dack had anticipated and the sun was getting low. Dack, at the top of the southern slope above the vale, was still in sunlight, but the village, some quarter mile away below him to the north, was already in shadow. It would be best, he decided, to make camp under the shelter of the trees and enter the village in the morning.

Dack had walked on only a dozen yards through the tall grass when he heard something. He stopped. A keening wail was going up from the area of the huts below.

Without hesitating, he broke into a sprint, running furiously down the hill. Immediately his sword in its scabbard began to flail his pumping legs and, with a curse, he clamped his left hand around its hilts and went on with an awkward limping gait.

When he had passed the first few hovels, Dack

discovered the source of the outcry and lengthened his stride. Three figures, turned slightly away from him, struggled with a fourth, a young woman with long, black hair, her round face streaked with tears and flushed with exertion. She was straining in the direction of the forest, crying, and now and again shouting incoherently. On the periphery of his view, Dack saw a crowd of people also beginning to run toward the fray.

The three figures, all men as he could now tell, started at his approach; but the woman they contended with was still looking away toward the trees, oblivious of him. "What is this?" he demanded sternly (his tone born less of emotion than of an effort to control his wind). The woman turned in the men's grip and faced him. Her face was blank with surprise for a moment but in the next instant became flooded with anguish.

"My little boy!" she moaned.

One of the men, tall and lank, with deepset eyes, interrupted. "She won't get anywhere but lost out in the forest, sir. Some men are getting dogs."

The woman screamed out in abject despair and snapped her head back twice in frustration, trying to butt the men who held her: "No good!" She fixed Dack with a stare, both searching his face for something hopeful and pleading with her eyes at the same time. "They'll break off the hunt. They won't go where they must. He's gone to the fortress, don't you see?"

"Who?" Dack said, wondering uneasily what noble

owned the fortress she alluded to.

"The man who stole my Hullan. There!" She pointed impatiently at the trees as if he were being obtuse.

Suddenly less distraught, she asked, "Are you from the lord's militia? We've been waiting for you this week long."

"Why were you waiting?" Dack asked.

The man who had spoken before assumed an officious air and said, "We thought you'd got word we tracked a thief to the abandoned fortress, sir. As like as not, he could be with a group of brigands, so of course we didn't dare enter without the permission and aid of the keep."

The woman looked aside, pensive for a moment, and then faced Dack with a wide-eyed expression of horror: "The gods' pity! The Wulfstan boy has been missing for a month!" She grabbed the hem of Dack's cloak and shook it. "Please. Can you get men?"

Dack didn't know what to say. A silence descended, taut with the expectation the people clearly were feeling. Unnoticed until now, a crowd had formed behind him. They came forward and gathered around--quietly, as if infected with the attitude of the small group. There was a horrible earnestness and hope in the woman's expression. Not able to bear it, Dack looked to the men but witnessed the same emotion there.

"I am not with your lord's militia," he said at last.

A general moan and murmuring went up from all those nearby and the woman hung her head and sobbed, sinking to her knees. Dismayed, Dack stared down at her, feeling an urgency to renew her hope, both to relieve her anguish and get some fitting show of respect for himself. Who was in a better position to help than he? Had he not endured painful disciplines and trained long hours with the sword? And had he not (although his master was required to intervene to save him) once even confronted an ogre twice his size?

"I am not with your lord's militia, but I am a warrior," he said, putting a bit of indignation into his tone, "a warrior sent from the southern wood to help you. I have traveled hundreds of leagues living off the land, I have fought ogres, and I am trained in the sword so that no man here on The Great Isle can best me." Dack felt a rush of pride at this good speech, although he knew that really only the part about his traveling a great distance and living off the land was true. Actually, he had not even been sent to help; but he had been sent, and it seemed up to him to help or not.

The woman looked up at him, a new hope and appeal in her face. "Will you go to the black fortress?"

The words "black fortress" struck Dack as important just then: Where have I heard that before?

The woman repeated the question, breaking off his thought. "Will you go?"

Dack said, "Yes, I will go to the fortress."



The woman's eyebrows rose and a crease of tension between them was erased. She sprang to her feet and embraced Dack, taking him by surprise and embarrassing him. He felt his face flush, and he looked away to avoid having his nose covered by her abundant hair. Dack had had little experience with women, and an unfamiliar heady feeling suffused him. He looked past the woman and, noticing one of the men in the crowd glowering at him, drew away.

The woman released him and took a step back, composing herself somewhat. She reached into her blouse, drawing from it a cross of gold, previously concealed, that was strung on a leather thong around her neck. She tilted her head to one side as she wrestled the thong free of her hair and then she thrust the cross out to him.

Dack held up his hands in protest. "No payment."

She snorted. "This is a talisman from one of the Worlds Outside. It may be of use to you. It is the symbol of a god who protects children."

"A god who protects children?" Dack still did not take it.

Her features tensed in a renewed look of desperation, and she reached out and pressed the crucifix into Dack's hand. "The last of those here to worship the god--a Sayaksuh man--spoke of its power. I don't know. But, please. Leave. Hurry!"

Dack cast about until he glimpsed through the crowd

a man who was holding a mastiff by a leash--someone to track for him. He hailed the man with a shout, and, having gained his attention, turned back to the woman for a moment. "I will bring back your child," he said.

As he walked away, he realized what was significant about the mention of a black fortress and fear pierced him low in his guts.

A cold hand from his bowels pulled at Dack's heart as he became certain of where the trail of the child's abductor was leading him. It was night now, and Dack was alone in the forest, the men who accompanied him having just left after refusing to go on in the dark. Uncannily, their dogs had gotten the same idea first, for they had stopped abruptly, pawing the earth and whimpering at a point that was just a few hundred yards behind where Dack now stood.

The men had assured Dack that the fortress was not far.

Great fir trees marched away into the night like a legion of giants. Dack could hear the ocean ahead, rumbling in that peculiar, hollow-voiced way that it does on fall nights like this when the evening winds have died. On the southwestern shores of the continent he had always taken solace in the sound. Here, at Brasdain's northernmost point, the sound was unbearably sinister. His body seemed like a creature apart, threatening to run away with him. I am going to the



Citadel, then. So this is why the village men balked,  
he thought. The stalking wolf runs to the lion's den.  
Keery master, what have I gotten into? I had no idea  
these lands were so close to this place. But hold,  
Dack, you fool. Remember your duty. Remember the boy's  
mother. A vein of heat rushed defiantly through the  
ice in his guts. He was not a mere craven farmer  
untrained in the sword. Recalled to his purpose, Dack  
trode forward, hand on swordhilt.

After he took a few steps he had to glance down to  
find his footing. As if lying in wait for such a lapse  
in his vigilance, the anticipated break in the trees  
reared before him. Dack's breath hitched in his throat.  
Beyond the edge of the trees, a greensward (now a dead  
white under the glow of the full moon) sloped up over a  
long wedge of headland to end in the Citadel. Twin  
towers rose beyond a half-circle of high, crenelated  
wall.

Dack ignored the panic that stabbed at his mind  
until he drew all the way up to the treeline. Now he  
began to consider his course seriously. In his  
twenty-one years Dack had heard many sober-minded  
hunters and veterans speak with horror about this place.  
It was said there was still some evil presence here even  
after the ages since the dark master of the keep  
disappeared, the creature who had turned this from a  
holy shrine to a place of unspeakable dread.

Once the Citadel of the Rift Between Worlds had

been a sacred monument to the Rift, to that tear in the fabric of the world venerated as the wellspring of creation. When the world was void and formless, the Creator rent its fabric to make the Rift, bringing into being light and darkness from which all other opposites sprung. The opposites made the world fertile and prepared it for all the creatures that later crossed through the Rift from the Worlds Outside. When the Rift narrowed and it was thought that nothing more could come through, humanity built the Citadel. But something did come through--something malign.

Dack forced his thoughts from their grim course and found that his hand was still clasping the crucifix that hung from its thong around his neck. Since he left the village hours before he had been so absorbed with tracking that, rather than take time to stow it, he had held it with one hand to keep it from bouncing against his mail shirt.

What did it represent? One of the things that he had definitely managed to gather from Keery--despite his poor grasp of his master's strange tongue--was that very little folk magic was of any consequence. And all the woman had seemed to know was that the crucifix was a religious symbol of some forgotten god who was said to be a protector of children. That, at least, was appropriate to his quest. . . . But, useful or not, he decided, he did not wish to ponder it now. He tucked it under the collar of his mail and then studied the

landscape.

There was no question of making a strategic approach to the keep. The moon was high overhead, and if eyes watched from the battlements, they would be able to mark the progress of a rat as it tackled the slope. He might wait until the moon descended but that would be hours, and the little boy might not have hours. Old Cramon, if your shade still walks these woods, help me. His master's former apprentice would respect his fear. Cramon, mortally wounded by an ogre--the same ogre Dack had made the suicidal gesture of confronting--had spent his last breaths speaking to Dack of a hero's close relationship with fear. The adolescent runaway Dack had been at the time, newly chosen by Keery to succeed the aging Cramon as understudy, marked the paradox well: only those who bore the weight of fear could be truly brave. Dack steeled himself as he stepped forth from the protective cover of the fir trees and ascended the slope.

\* \* \*

Wanholt jerked over the moonlit stones like the heaving shadow of a crooked tree, his whispered curses echoing in the broad hall as he drew over the boy. The child was slumped against the base of the seaward wall of the chamber just out of the shaft of moonlight that descended from the slitlike window high over his head. His eyes were wide open in a blind stare. Wanholt felt the child's mind like a tight, impenetrable ball. It

had closed to him.

Damn that servant bringing him these whelps! They barely had enough strength in them to make him aware he had fed. And the youngest ones, like this, had a peculiar talent for retreating into a kind of paralysis of the mind, where the tendrils of his thought could not reach the sweet energy of their terror. But, Wanholt considered with satisfaction, if he could placate that dupe of a servant with lies and promises until he had brought him a few more children, he would grow strong enough to resist the pull of the Rift. Then he could journey abroad to seek food on his own--had he not already gained the power to move out to the edge of the courtyard?--and then he could reward the man for his presumptuous requests. He would drain him to the marrow, while he kicked and screamed and begged for mercy.

He pinched the child with fingers like willow stalks in a futile attempt to rouse it. Just then he felt a telepathic call from his servant in the courtyard, demanding aid. A warrior was approaching the citadel. This was excellent. With the energy of a full-grown man added to that he had already stored he might be able to make a full vampire, a servant who could make other servants. And then it would be no time at all before he was a general again, commanding legions all across the continent. He danced, swelling his bulk to the limits of the hall, and then flowed out between

the cracks of the great oak doors that led to the courtyard.

Dack paused in the shadow of the barbican that loomed to the left of the open gate. Something passed behind the window of that tower. His senses, heightened by his master's drugs and spells, could make no mistake. The movement was minimal, like the fluttering of a bat, perhaps, but he would not let his guard slip.

Dack drew his sword and edged along the wall up to one side of the arched gateway. A tangled heap of rusted bars beneath the opening was all that remained of the portcullis it once contained. He hesitated at the side of the arch. His master Keery's magicks could not give him scrying powers, but they did seem to impart to him an uncanny instinct for trouble, one that had served him well many times since he began his tutelage. With a deep breath, he moved out in front of the gate, poised for defense.

Nothing challenged except the twin-towered fortress within, set against the black waters of the sea, which divided the horizon beyond. A wide path paved with stones stretched before him across the long courtyard and up to the fortress's steps. Time did not seem to have touched that dark edifice: where the outbuildings beside it remained only as scattered blocks of stone, its walls were smooth and seamless, and its doors bound in iron appeared to hang firmly on their hinges.

The sight of the fortress struck Dack with a spell of morbid reverie. Somehow the hiss of the surf appeared to issue from its walls. Perhaps it was some property of the Rift, contained within, which caused this. . . .

A sound was building beneath the sussuration of the waves, a grating sound. Just in time, Dack dove under the arch of the gate as a great square block, one of the merlons overhead, broke away from the top of the wall. Dack landed on his palms just inside the courtyard, sword extended before him, as more than a ton of stone crunched into the ground behind him. In a maneuver ungoverned by thought, he rolled to his feet and turned.

A figure crouching atop the wall filled the gap where the merlon had been. It appeared to be a man from its height and build, but its features were shaded from the light of the moon. What strength could it have to be able to break away such a section of the wall? he wondered.

"Who are you?" Dack demanded.

The figure shifted, permitting moonlight to fall across one side of a round, deathly pale face. "That is for me to ask," the man said in a tone that mingled petulance and arrogance. He seemed to shake as if under some extreme excitement or agitation. "You intrude here."

Dack ignored the statement. "You have kidnapped a child. Where is he?"

"Where you will be soon."

The man looked up, staring past Dack toward the fortress. Dack turned slightly so his view included the man and the fortress both.

From the direction his back had been turned, something black and formless was sweeping toward him low to the ground, like a cloak blown along in a gale. Dack had only a moment to ready himself as the thing came on. Like a dark cloud boiling up at the head of a storm, it raised itself from the ground, assuming a towering, man-like shape as it closed the remaining yards between them.

Wanholt! Dack cried inwardly. He knew then he was lost. His mind, grown suddenly large with the weight of despair, seemed to shift partway out of his body, making him an observer of himself.

A branchlike limb thrust forward. He parried the move smoothly with his sword. Instead of seeing the weapon take the black hand neatly from the wrist, Dack was stunned to find that with a ringing as of metal on metal, the blade glanced back.

His foe recoiled but seemed unharmed.

Just then there was a loud thump on the ground behind him. Dack made a slight adjustment in his attention, and saw that, impossibly, the man from the wall was recovering from a leap, a leap of over twenty-five feet! Dack just had time to consider the large stone the man clutched to his breast as another

dark limb snaked toward him from the other direction. This time it took all his attention and all the strength in his arm to repel it. I cannot be distracted. Find an opening--when the man makes his move--and then flee.

"You are fast," the black form hissed, taking a step back.

Dack tensed, ready to act. The demon is sucking at your attention, Dack. Let it speak.

"I have only seen one other who could move as you . . ."

The man must be raising the stone. Hold. Not yet. Not yet.

". . . and that was fifty years . . ."

Now! Dack whirled. The man was just hefting the stone overhead. In the trail of Dack's blade, the man's hands, still clutching the stone, dropped to the earth. A look of horror crossed his white face as his two gouging stumps thrust skyward, following through with the movement to lift.

In that instant, a wave of darkness broke over Dack from behind. The demon had him! His whole frame suffered an enormous constriction. He struggled desperately, as one struggles on the point of drowning, feeling a pain building so rapidly that at no instant can pain be reflected upon. And then the crisis went too far and he felt nothing.

Dack had a brief, comfortable dream. He was



sitting opposite Keery at a campfire. Every detail of his master's countenance was clear: his orange-red fur, his bearlike muzzle, his huge, dark eyes as deep as a thousand years. This was the way Dack had come to describe more than one aspect of Keery's nature: as deep as a thousand years. Wells and oceans and the deeps between the stars were nothing to the depth of a being who had lived as long as Keery.

Dack was losing himself in his master's eyes when he realized with a start that his master was angry and was trying emphatically to communicate something to him. Keery's strange tongue was difficult to interpret when he was calm, but doubly so when he was agitated. "What is it?" Dack asked. "What am I neglecting? The child in me? I am a man now, master. I have no child in me."

The image of Keery faded and Dack awoke in a dimly lit chamber to the sound of whimpering and pleading. The whimpering and pleading seemed at first to have one source, but Dack soon realized that the one issued from an infant boy a few feet from him, and the other from a man farther on who was prostrated before a monstrous black form. The two figures were silhouetted against a long finger of soft light, as if a door to a torchlit room were opened a mere crack just beyond them. It took several seconds for Dack to orient himself. Suddenly the full horror of the situation dawned on him.

He was lying in a large cave with an even floor. His sword was gone. The man he thought he had slain was

kneeling at Wanholt's feet in a small pool of dark liquid, arm stumps held out in supplication. He was begging for his life.

"There are those who still respect me as a captain. . . ." the man stammered.

"You have made the mistake of revealing too much to me. I know you were disgraced. Do not even dare to hope. After your audacity--"

"Audacity, lord?" the man whined. "I saved you! It had nearly eaten you!" He pointed a stump in the direction of the source of light.

That is the Rift Between Worlds, Dack thought. The revelation consumed his attention, making it difficult to think. Seconds passed, and then the sounds of the child brought him out of his fascination with the Rift. He looked to the boy moaning in terror several feet away, and seeing that his captor was occupied, resolved to make his way over to him.

Dack waited until Wanholt was berating the man again before starting to move. He planted his hands at his sides and lifted himself carefully backward in a seated position. Even though the demon was nearly shouting, Dack was horribly aware of the sounds of his dragging feet, his breathing, and even the drumming of his heart. He stopped just as he began to lift himself again. There was an ebb in the demon's cursing. Fear rose in his gorge, and he choked it back as if it were vomit.

Tension hung in the air and he feared that the demon's attention was about to turn on him. Then he realized that Wanholt was about to move on the injured man. The man, apparently, realized it, too.

"Take this warrior!" he moaned. "I gave up my arms to distract him for you!"

Fortunately Wanholt was too intent on his game to look to the warrior in question. "Yes, you fool," he said. "I give you strength and speed, and yet you are still too weak to defend yourself against an ordinary man. And now what use can you be to me maimed if I make you immortal?"

"Please. I may yet serve."

"Of course, and your screams shall entertain me as you do."

A long clawlike hand plucked the man off the ground without sign of effort. Wanholt's angular head thrust up to the man's heaving breast as he held him aloft.

The man began to scream.

Dack abandoned his effort to move unobtrusively, and scurried quickly to the child on hands and knees. The infant did not resist as Dack clutched him to his breast, gained his feet, and ran into darkness, pursued by the man's screams.

In a few moments he could see nothing, but he barely slowed. He knew from legend that the Rift was underground, below the citadel. There had to be a way up. This thought was punctuated by the impact of his

shins against stone. He twisted his body to one side as he fell to protect the child.

His shoulder and ribs struck separate steps of a steep stair. Dack jerked himself to his feet and began to ascend. Almost immediately he slipped on a step and fell to his knees. The child held close against him spasmed for an instant, and Dack realized how intimate was this weight he carried. The boy's cheek brushed his, and he felt it wet with tears. The sensation surprised Dack so much that he could not move for an instant. The child whispered: "Mama?" He did not seem to be mistaking Dack for his mother, but rather asking where his mother was. A heat rose in Dack, an indignation toward the child's abductors which brought tears to his eyes. The intensified, almost animal-like screams of the dying man gave him satisfaction. He muttered to himself, "Rot in hell, you bastard." And then aloud to the child: "I'm taking you to your mama. Be still."

Dack now began to ascend quickly and faultlessly. The stair curved, spiraling up through the rock. He could not see the walls on either side of the stair, but he could sense their presence by their acoustic effect on the sounds of his labored breathing and footfalls.

The screams welling up from below stopped. Dack increased his effort to climb. The stairs were so steep that each passing second took him several feet upward. He was just beginning to hope. The child was starting

to weigh on his arms; so Dack asked him to grip his neck, and he did.

Dack saw moonlight directly overhead and his heart leapt. The light grew stronger and stronger until, shortly, he was climbing up to the floor at the corner of a wide hall.

A narrow window high up in the close, left-hand, wall let in both moonlight and the sounds of the sea. Dack decided that the sound of the sea was not as sinister as he had thought earlier. He looked about. Huge oak doors bound in iron were set in the wall across the chamber. Dack had seen those portals from outside. They were the doors to the courtyard! He sprinted toward them.

He was halfway across the hall when a shadow sprung up in front of the doors. He skidded to a stop. Elation was crushed down in Dack's chest as if under the stamp of a boot heel. "How?" he gasped. The child turned his head to look and then started to cry.

"I know a faster way," Wanholt sneered, advancing a step.

Dack glanced about but realized there was no means of egress. Trying to buy time for thought, he asked, "What now?" He was barely audible above the child's sobs.

"Silence that brat!" Wanholt pointed as if he would impale the boy on his long, crooked finger.

Dack turned to one side so he would not touch the

child.

Wanholt laughed. "Why protect the feeble thing?"

"Do not play with me, demon!"

"Very well, treat the stupid creature as you wish. It does not concern me. You do.

"You are a remarkable fighter. I laud both your fighting prowess and your powers of recovery. You nearly escaped, you know. But, if you will open your mind, I think I can make you glad you did not."

"Your humor eludes me," Dack said with irony.

"I intend none."

A chill ran down Dack's spine. What is this? he wondered.

"With Esteban's strength added to mine I could give you something that he lost his life in the attempt to acquire."

A small spark of hope flared in Dack's mind. The demon still needs a servant for some reason. This need might be turned against him.

Wanholt spoke loudly as if to be heard more easily over the child's cries. His tolerance of the noise was not lost on Dack. "I can make you immortal. You are strong now, but I can make you infinitely stronger. And you in turn can bring this strength to those you care for, if you so wish. All you have to do is accept me as your master. Lay bare your soul to me."

"And the child?"

Wanholt laughed a hollow laugh without mirth. "Do

what you wish with it."

"I need time for my decision."

"No! The decision is made. The alternative is death."

"My only master is Keery, and he will avenge my death!" Dack said despite himself. He winced before the echoes of his words had died in the chamber. Wanholt seemed to be given pause.

"Keery? So you are one of Keery's pets. I have met his pets before. Of course, you would prefer to call yourself a servant, or perhaps a vassal? But I, I say you are a pet. Do you know though, fool, that the creature you call your master was once a true pet, a child's animal? Not a servant as yourself, fool, but a pet!"

Dack said nothing. He was only half-attentive, trying desperately to think of a means of escape. He had no idea what the demon was getting at. A pet? It made no sense.

Wanholt continued. "It is true. Your master was a mindless animal on one of the worlds beyond the Rift--the world where I too was born--until he came through with the rest of the creation. It was a strong world your master came from. On that world men had learned to master those emotions that were weak and childish, and because of this talent they were able to discipline their minds and create miraculous things, destructive machines that gave them godlike power.

"I was a dream in the minds of men on that world, a dream of glory and strength. My eyes were the eyes of millions. It was through a pair of them that I saw the child who cared for your master beaten to death by his father. He was a weak, febrile boy, even more sheeplike than most. He considered things with a distressing lack of guile. I know; for even a mind as small as his could not help but contain some of my being. Yes, every mind on that world contributed to my essence, but not until I found the Rift on that world and passed into this one did I come to possess a will and body through which to exercise the dream that created me.

"It is a glorious dream, warrior!"

Dack was stunned. He did not understand most of what was said, but it appeared Wanholt was not trying to deceive him. Something now rang horribly true in the things the demon said about his master. He had long felt that some vengeful sentiment underlay Keery's intolerance for those who abused children. Before Dack took leave of him, Keery repeated with vehemence the byword he had so often spoken, which translated: "Give no quarter to those who harm or corrupt children!"

Dack realized Wanholt was waiting on him. He said, "I see only horror. Is there room for pity in your dream? What can your dream do for a mother whose child has been sacrificed to feed you?"

"Your mind has been polluted by a master unworthy of your service. What does a child do for its mother?



When you grow old, you will realize that there is nothing more insidious than a child. Children come helpless and without knowledge into the world and then feed like parasites off of the wise, trying to rob them of their power even though they have no right to it. A man will suffer through a long life, earning knowledge and power, and a child who knows nothing of his suffering will demand his power of him when he is old and frail. There can be no progress with children in the world. Only when the old never die and the young are no more will knowledge flourish. That is why I eat these creatures!"

"But," Dack protested, "the old and wise were themselves once children."

Wanholt spat with terrible indignation: "I was never a child! And I am a god, older and wiser than all! No god will ever embrace a child's weakness!" He raised fists like lumps of pitch toward the vaulted ceiling and advanced menacingly. "I see you are weak and stupid. Your mind is shut to me; I can feel it. I shall waste no more time with you. You are more audacious than the other fool, and more pitiful for your blindness to opportunity. Since you value your weakness, I will teach you the full meaning of your folly. You will whimper more pathetically than that child before I have finished with you!"

Dack retreated a step. The boy pressed his face to Dack's neck and sobbed. Dack's mind raced, but he could

think of nothing to do. Wanholt advanced one crooked, trunklike limb and reached out his hands slowly and menacingly. It was evident that the demon was in no hurry to finish with him. Dack stepped back, feinted to one side and then rushed to the other toward the opening that presented itself. A branchlike arm interposed itself with the speed of a striking snake, and he had to leap back. The demon's speed was incredible.

Wanholt came on, and Dack had no choice but to retreat. He began to panic. He was being herded backward--back to the stair, back into the earth.

Dack considered the stair. A darkly comforting thought came to him. He could dive down thirty feet or more before hitting a step. The child, at least, would die a merciful death. He craned his neck backward, heart pounding, as he retreated with increased speed, nearing the brink.

Something brought Dack to a halt: the leather thong, forgotten until now, was biting into his neck. The crucifix from the boy's mother. He freed a hand from the boy's waist and drew out the crucifix from the space it occupied between his mail shirt and the quilted gambeson beneath.

Wanholt stopped. "What is this?"

Dack pulled the thong over his head with a jerk, and thrust the cross forward.

Incredibly, Wanholt took a step backward. Dack felt a weight drop away from him, and hope and courage

filled his chest in a hot rush. Rather than feeling the weight of the cross in his hand, Dack fancied that his arm was buoyed up by it. He concentrated his hope into it, as if he could bolster its power through force of will. Stabbing the cross forward, he advanced. The demon retreated again.

"Damn you, what is that you have?"

"Why? Do you fear it?" Dack asked neutrally.

"No!" Wanholt seemed to collect himself as if he would stand his ground.

Dack saw that this would be the true test. If the power of this talisman relied on the steadiness of his purpose, he would not fail. He dared let himself believe in the god who protected children. Dack moved forward and challenged the demon.

Wanholt shook as if with the effort to resist some mighty force and then fell back.

"It seems," Dack said, "there is a god that holds your power in contempt."

"There is no such god!" Wanholt hissed, gathering himself.

Dack strode forward resolutely, forcing the demon back again. Defiance and joy, hot and brilliant like a rising flame, swelled within him. "There are dreams that are larger than the one that created you, demon. And with such a one I defy you!" He gained speed until he was almost chasing the demon across the hall. Wanholt backed through the doors to the courtyard with

such force that they were flung wide. Dack leapt out into the open air, taking the short flight of steps to the courtyard in two bounds.

The demon was nowhere to be seen. The moon was low in the sky, and the fortress and the ruins about cast long shadows on the ground. Dack shot glances to all sides, bewildered.

His bravado cooled in the absence of his foe. Fear began to reassert itself in him. The child he carried whimpered softly--a sound that made him feel small under the weight of the still, tension-filled air. He assumed a defensive stance, holding the cross out like a readied weapon. Where are you, you bastard? He backed away from the fortress, sweeping from side to side as he went to forestall attack from any direction. The ground was black with shadows. His foe could be anywhere. The fortress retreated by painful, slow degrees.

The child was fast becoming an intolerable weight on his arm. Dack could not hold out much longer. He quickened his pace.

The outer wall grew closer, and he was almost out of the shadow of the fortress and into the moonlight. Just then his foot struck against something, and his heart filled his throat as he glanced down. It was his sword. He looked at it dumbly for a moment, overcome with relief and joy. Without a thought, he bent down to pick it up in the hand with the cross.

Just before his fingers could close around its

hilt, an ebon wall rose from the ground before him. He cried out in surprise, bringing up his gaze and thrusting out the cross just in time. The demon seemed to press up against an invisible barrier mere inches away. Dack backpedaled furiously in a panic. His foot caught on a stone and he fell directly under the arch of the gateway, landing just outside the walls of the courtyard. The cross flew from his grasp as he instinctively planted his hand to break his and the child's fall. "No!" he cried. He pushed himself off his back with his free hand, flailing his legs to make purchase on the ground and regain his feet. The demon came on.

Wanholt snarled in rage and stopped at the line of the wall, pounding at the air in the opening of the arch as if it were a pane of impossibly strong glass. Dack looked on amazed. He cannot leave the grounds of the fortress! Tension drained out of him, and involuntarily he released his hold on the child, letting him slip away to one side.

Wanholt snarled. "When I have gathered the strength to leave this place, I shall come for you, warrior. There will not be a haven in this world where you will be able to relax your guard."

"I think not," Dack replied, shaking and tired as he got to his feet. "You will remain here and slowly starve as you deserve, consumed by your hate. You are utterly powerless, even more powerless than a child.

Men will shun this place." Dack shook out his arm to restore strength to it and snatched up the boy again, who had started to cry. He hurriedly retrieved the crucifix from a spot a few feet away, and then backed down the slope.

Wanholt laughed and laughed as Dack turned and broke into a run a hundred yards away. "Never underestimate what men will do for love of power, fool!" Wanholt called out. "I may be hunting you down within a fortnight!"

But Dack did not let the words bother him; his only thought was how feeble they sounded against the background rumble of the ocean as he left them farther and farther behind.

The morning stars were fading and dawn was breaking. Dack had just finished his breathless account of the night's events to a small circle of villagers. The boy's mother looked at Dack with wet eyes as she hugged her son, now asleep in her arms. The rest of the gathering was made up of men whose expressions were less kind, bearing mistrust. No, actually it was less mistrust than a kind of scorn. He had done what they were unwilling to do, and that set him apart. They did not even seem hostile out of envy of his success; rather, he thought he read a kind of moral outrage in their faces, as if he had broken a law they considered noble and, by his speech, were flaunting the fact that

he had gone unpunished for it.

Dack had been fingering the crucifix while he spoke, and now moved to hand it back to the mother. But she waved it off, indicating he should keep it. He nodded his head, turned, and walked out of the village.

The reaction of the men made him indignant. He had a thought that at first seemed to him merely self-ingratiating and defiant, but it soon appeared to bear some truth: All power is false except the power that one wields to overcome oneself. Dack bounced the crucifix in his open palm, reflecting on it for a moment, and then walked out of the village and into the forest, beginning his long trek southward--to home.

### You Are Not God!

David planted his elbows on the bar next to his glass of beer and gripped his hair with both hands. It was no use, he knew. This last bit of self-deception had been his best attempt so far to convince himself he was not God, not the only real and self-aware being in the universe. But the tip-off had been his realizing how he had been responsible for constructing his wife's hair color. His wife had red hair when he awoke that morning and that struck him as wrong; then he remembered when he kissed her goodnight she had been a brunette and the whole ruse, the whole objective world, from subatomic particles in bear shit to the lightsongs of intelligent galaxies, fell apart at all its many seams. He saw everywhere the lie he had created; he could not salvage--not for more than a few minutes at best, anyway--so much as a scrap of belief in any of it.



He climbed over the bar and started serving himself beer because the bartender was busy down at the other end of the bar, making drinks. The people in the bar would ignore David like the automatons they were, now that he was on to himself again.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" the bartender asked when he caught sight of him serving his own beer.

Nice try, David thought. He said, "Give it a rest. I found out. I know I'm God." Of course it was as unnecessary for him to say this as it was for him to do what he did next--hold his leather jacket away from his hip to intimidate the man with his .38 special holstered there--but, like always at these times when his divinity was revealed to him, he wavered between belief and disbelief.

"Oh, sorry," the bartender said, dropping the pretense to consternation.

David ignored him as he attended to the tap. Soon he was drinking beer so fast that he spent more time filling his mug than draining it. He thought about drinking the beer straight from the tap like he would sometimes drink from his kitchen sink, head tilted to one side, but he rejected the idea. He was in public. Even God had his dignity.

When he was good and drunk at last, he began to get full of himself. He thought that this time he could make the creation seem real. Part of his mind nagged

him about the dangers of trying self-deception when he was drunk: he tended to morbid strategies then, conjuring up suffering for himself and others. Suffering could always be counted on for producing an illusion of reality. Suffering was his cleverest invention. Nothing could make people forget they were puppets on the hand of God better than an artful cataclysm (or even a well-placed mosquito). But he was being silly: it wasn't the puppets who forgot, but the puppet master. Damn! There he went reminding himself again, just like he did the other day when he was a little worm-infested Nigerian boy playing with a fish head.

The alcohol was kicking him around but good. Or was it? He had invented alcohol . . . Fuck it. He didn't even want to get into that.

Just then he had an inspiration. What if he were to write down his problems? Just something short. Then he could be the reader. The reader would stand back and say, "Whoa! What a nice little paranoid fantasy! Who would have thought of it?" Then the reader would wonder if he or she were alone; the only real person on earth. The reader would begin to reflect on how there really wasn't anything knowable that existed outside his or her experience: even the thought of something outside his or her experience would be a part of her or his experience. ("Her or his" and "his or her"--he could use syntactical tricks to play with the reader's mind,

making it difficult for the reader to discern what the sex of the author's ideal implied reader might be.) No matter how much the reader approached that one horrible, inescapable conclusion, the objective reality of the story would always pull the reader back. The humor of the story, the cleverness of the author (or perhaps the bad taste of the author), would always assert itself as a barrier to final acceptance.

Damn! That was fine. He was going to do it. He staggered resolutely around the end of the bar, past tables full of motionless people, and out into the street. He flipped off a cop on foot patrol on the way home . . . just for kicks.

### A World View

As she drove past a sign telling her she had fifteen miles to go to get to Pendleton, Rose Carter admitted to herself that she hoped that when she picked up her husband, Matt, from the hospital, he would be in bad enough shape to need taking care of for awhile. Matt had had an accident fighting fire in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, not far from where she now was, and was being treated in Pendleton for minor symptoms of smoke inhalation and heat stress. According to the hospital receptionist, he had been disoriented at first when he was brought in but got over it quickly. She hoped it was a bit worse than it sounded, so that he could be at home for a change. Was that so evil a wish?

Her Volkswagon Rabbit cut through a small cloud of dust, like smoke, lying over the road. She found this somehow ominous and almost regretted her selfish

sentiment. Am I being selfish? she wondered. No. There came a point when a woman had a right to her husband's company. It was just basic self-regard her feeling good about the accident, which was different from selfishness. It was within the tao to avoid contention with yourself every bit as much as it was to avoid contention with other people. This accident was karma, her way out of a lonely situation. There was always a way out, always an answer for those with patience.

And had she been patient! It was now August, which meant she had hardly seen her husband at all for over two months. For the last three summers since their daughter started college, Matt only commuted back home to Salem from the Willamette Forest on weekends. During the week he stayed at the Ranger station bunkhouse in order to get overtime and stay on call for fires.

They did need the extra money Matt made. Normally, as a biology technician, Matt hardly made enough to keep them out of debt, but it was especially bad with their daughter in college. Rose couldn't wait until the financial burden of Kate's schooling was lifted from them. Then no more fires. At fifty, Matt was just too old for that kind of work--swinging a hoe in the heat and smoke out here in the desert.

Rose looked around at the dusty rangeland filled with sagebrush. Everything was so brown and dry east of the Cascades! How did the mountains out here ever get



enough rain? Though, apparently, they didn't, to judge by the regular fires every year. Why were there so many fires? And what had started this one? Rose readjusted the rearview mirror to look into it and frowned to her reflection: probably carelessness . . . or arson. There had been a threat of dry lightning awhile before the fire, but apparently it didn't happen. One of her friends said that it had been a meteorite. Really now! she thought. But then again it was known to happen.

Rose got in to see Matt twenty minutes later. He was in good spirits, although he was pale and the skin of his hand felt cold when she took it up.

"You've never fainted on the line before, Matt," she said. "What's the matter? Have you been working too hard?"

Matt chewed the corner of his graying moustache and locked his gaze on his feet, apparently thinking of something. After a few moments he turned his attention to Rose, who was still holding his hand, and said, "There's something I can't quite remember. Something that happened."

"Were you catching a lot of smoke? Did the wind shift?"

"No, it wasn't that bad really. We were on the sides of the fire and not catching much wind. The fire was up to twenty thousand acres this morning and going strong--too big for line crews to handle--so we were on

standby near camp until they flanked the fire with a cat line. Then they had us just walk the line and catch any spot fires that started across. The fire had settled down quite a bit when I got out there and it was pretty easy-going."

"What happened then?"

"Well, when the fire burned up to the cat line, they put a water bag on me and I was walking right next to the black at that point. I don't know why, but I fainted. Maybe from--wait." He looked at her wide-eyed and whispered, "Something from out of the fire hit me in the neck." He lifted his chin and pointed to an unmarked spot near his Adam's apple.

"Well," Rose said, mocking his whisper, "what's so secret about that? Your neck looks fine now, anyway."

He shook his head in evident dismay. "I was sure something went into my neck."

Becoming concerned, Rose drew close for a second look and then shook her head no. "We'd better get you home, though. You don't look well."

Matt frowned and looked away, a gesture Rose had never seen him make before. Something's not right, she thought. He's had an important mental shift. I knew his karma would catch up to him.

That night back in Salem Matt came down with a fever. Rose awoke when her hand came to rest on her husband's sweat-drenched back. She flicked on the

bedside light and shook him gently. "Matt?"

He sat up in bed, startled. "What!"

"Are you alright? You've got a terrible fever."

Without waiting for an answer she reached over to the nightstand and plucked up the phone from its cradle.

"You need a doctor." She reached forward with her other hand to dial but Matt arrested her arm with a firm hand.

"No," he said, "I'm fine. No need for the doctor."

"But, Matt," she protested, "you're soaked through! You might be having an allergic reaction to the smoke or something."

He shook his head. "It's just a slight fever, but as long as we're up, listen to me, Rose. You know how I'm always knocking your interest in meditation and psychic stuff. Well, I think I had what you might call a religious experience on the fire."

Rose replaced the phone. "Really?" she asked as neutrally as possible, trying to contain her excitement. The detachment would be important: Matt always took her more seriously, it seemed, when she wasn't worked up about things.

"I imagined I saw something dying, a small burnt animal, coming out of the fire, and then I imagined that a thing that looked like a cut rhinestone or diamond shot out of the animal when it died and hit me in the throat. It was so real." He paused. "What would your dream interpretation books say about that?"

Rose felt a transport of glee. The great mysteries



had finally touched him. After all these years of frustration, bemoaning his near-sighted concern with mundane things like fishing and hunting, she was finally rewarded by seeing the unconscious taking vengeance on him.

She reflected, looking into space for awhile, and then said, "It's a common resurrection motif. The fantasy came from a part of your mind that you've neglected. Because that part of your mind couldn't reach you in your head, it had to speak to you as if it were something outside yourself.

"The animal in the fire is you, and it was tortured by the fire of your neglect. The diamond is a representation of your total self that has to be released from the animal. And that means that you are too concerned with the animal in you. The higher person needs expression, Matt, and it can only find expression by identification with the godhead."

Matt winced. "That's a creative answer. Maybe you're right. I'll sleep on it; okay, Rose?" He lay down and turned away from her.

Rose opened her mouth to add something that would help him understand. She was just getting going; there was a lot she wanted to say about this. But she knew that his attitude meant he had had enough to chew on. He could be so damned apathetic! She reached out, flicked off the bedside light, and slumped back with a huff.

After that Matt rolled around and moaned half the night. He felt as hot as a stove. Rose was concerned, but there was nothing she could do. He didn't want the doctor, and if he wasn't sick but struggling with his unconscious--well, that was all for the better.

Rose awoke at first light to see that her husband wasn't in bed. The window, which had been shut the night before, was wide open and the curtains danced under a light breeze. She got up and walked downstairs. The house was uncomfortably silent, so she put some country music in the tape deck on the kitchen counter.

There was no sign that breakfast had been made, and, when she looked out of the kitchen window, she saw that the car was still in the driveway. Nothing was disturbed.

"Matt?" she called out. Suddenly she was worried. There was something heavy about the atmosphere of the house. No, it went beyond the house. The whole world seemed to hold its breath.

Rose called as many of Matt's friends as she could think of, to no avail, and then she even called the ranger station, although it was Sunday and only a receptionist was there to greet the public. Still nothing. She waited several hours and then she went out and looked around the house--twice--and then around the small neighborhood. She found herself looking into

ditches and into bushes, and appreciated how ridiculous that was when a concerned neighbor asked if she had lost a cat or dog. On some level she had been looking for a cat or dog.

She was so distraught that she skipped her afternoon yoga. The thought that Matt had wandered off was unsettling for two reasons: first, she was concerned about his welfare; second, it was so unlike him. Sure she had always wished he were more spontaneous and in sympathy with her interests. But now that she thought she had him figured out, it wasn't fair for him to go changing her expectations.

She decided to wait a day or so before calling the police. She had heard somewhere that a person had to be missing for awhile before they would do anything unless there was evidence of kidnapping or some comparable threat to the person. Besides, even if that wasn't true, she didn't really want to blow this out of proportion. Matt thought she was hysterical enough as it was.

The next morning Rose decided to go to work at the health food store despite her strong desire to wait at home. Work would distract her and keep her sane, she thought. But instead of providing relief from her anxiety, work merely intensified it. She found herself watching the clock and was relieved when the day ended.

The weather was bad that evening. It rained torrentially and lightning flashed at unusually short

intervals. This kept up well into the night. Even had it not, though, she would have been unable to fall asleep. She sat up in bed listening, watching the great arcing blasts of electricity caress the distant mountains.

In the early morning the storm passed with odd swiftness. The silence that ensued was heavy, pregnant; Rose was certain that something was going to happen. Would the phone ring informing her that Matt had been found dead along some highway? Her nerves were so keyed up that she was out of bed and on her feet the instant she heard the front door being unlocked and opened downstairs. "Matt?"

"Yes," came the reply. The sound of his voice made her hackles rise: it was dreamy and distracted, like the voice of a man who wasn't all there, like a man talking in his sleep.

Rose turned on the bedside lamp and stood against the wall opposite the door. Matt's footfalls on the stair were heavy and slow to the point of drama.

"You're scaring me, Matt."

He didn't reply.

When the bedroom door opened at last, Rose suppressed the urge to scream. Matt was framed in the doorway wearing jeans and his Irish fisherman's sweater. And there was something wrong with his face. Something awful. A strange dark cloud like a shadowy nimbus encased his head. It was a perfect sphere two feet in

diameter. His blank white features showed through it like those of a corpse lying just under the surface of murky water. The cloud seemed to emit a low hum, a sound like the buzzing of tiny insects. Intermittently a spark would race through the cloud from the back of Matt's head and then wink out on its perimeter.

"My--my God, Matt," she gasped.

"My God, Rose," he said in an ecstatic tone, his eyes widening and seeming to become more lucid and animated. "The things I've seen!"

"What's happened to you, Matt? Where have you been?"

In a breathy, awed tone, he replied, "Walking." He strode over to the window and pulled it open, and then basked for a moment in the night air before turning around and walking over to the bed to sit down, the cloud following his movements without the smallest distortion. At that moment Rose saw that his clothes were perfectly dry.

She looked him square in the face. "What's around your head?" she whispered.

He shot her a puzzled look that was comfortingly familiar despite the anomalous bulb of darkness that veiled it.

"Well look in the mirror!"

"Oh, I know it's there, Rose, but it just seemed natural somehow."

"Natural?" She raised her voice in alarm.

"It must have to do with my dreams," he said. "My fever was terrible for so long and then I dreamed I was floating out of the valley and into the mountains. When I woke up, I was sitting on a crag out there"--he pointed out the window--"watching the sun rise over the mountains. I felt the hills warm as if they were my own body. You know how level-headed I am, but this idea came to me as I felt the sun rise: 'My roots go into the earth.' Nice, huh?"

"This earth, Rose, is a part of our body somehow. It is more precious than seas of diamonds. It lives and breathes and sings, by God! And then . . ." His face, which had become suffused with joy and, to Rose's relief, even some color, suddenly fell. "I felt the poisons of industry all around me. I felt delicate . . ."--he waved his hand in the air trying to conjure the word--"processes. I felt delicate processes falling apart. Christ, Rose. It's so damned . . . well . . . evil!" His face now wore an expression of mixed frustration and rage, and Rose, upset by such uncharacteristic changes of temper in her husband, stepped back along the wall.

Matt held up his hand in a pacifying gesture. "It's all right, Rose. I know this isn't like me, but, believe me, my head is clear. I haven't changed. I'm just caught up in something new. It's so big!"

"After I awoke this morning--or was it yesterday morning?--I felt like a special receiver had been set up

in my mind enabling me to read the thoughts of mountains and valleys and oceans. Thoughts I can't describe. For several hours I just sat there feeling the sun on me, amazed at what was going on in my head. Then for some reason I drifted off. I dreamed. Scenes from all over the world came to me, but they didn't just come. It seemed to me that someone was showing these scenes to me, someone who did not understand them. Behind each scene there was always this question, an unspoken question: 'Is this right? Is this proper?' I saw a desert city spewing smoke from tall stacks. The air felt wounded. Was this right? I couldn't tell. I saw forests running with deer, felt all kinds of life woven in complicated webs in and around and through the trees, and I passed them over, feeling their rightness. I saw cities and factories, oil spills and burning forests in a confusing mob of pictures: a million places all at once. I didn't know what to do. There was so much ugliness that needed mending, but I let my surprise hold back my feelings.

"And then I saw and felt miles of nets sweeping through the ocean. Dolphins and whales were trapped suffocating in the depths. This was not the most disturbing picture I had experienced but, for some reason, it was the one that lifted me out of my surprise and into anger, finally forcing me to judge: 'This is wrong!' I dreamed that I was screaming from the mountaintop in outrage and that my screams, instead of



growing weaker as they went out from me, gained strength until they were like thunder rolling over the earth. Then my body seemed to be a swarm of ocean creatures moving in a huge tide, twisting and cutting and destroying the nets, and in moments it was done and the dolphins were free. Then I woke up and instead of feeling rested I felt exhausted. It was then I noticed the cloud around my head, and . . .” Matt turned half-way around and brought up his right hand (seemingly unimpeded as it passed through the cloud) to the back of his neck, pointing to a place just below the base of his skull. “I felt this in my neck.”

Rose drew closer to gain a better look at what he was indicating. There, in front of his index finger, was an oblong hole that seemed alternately to inhale and expel the substance of the cloud, creating a small eddy as it did so. A spark leapt out of the hole every so often, but instead of disappearing on the edge of the cloud as she had perceived before, it now seemed to leap back into the hole when it reached the perimeter of the cloud.

She stepped back as Matt faced her once more. “You said in the hospital you were hit in the front of the neck by something.”

“Yes.”

“Could you have been hit in the back of the neck?” He shook his head and she decided to drop it. “How did you get back?” she asked.



He smiled. "When evening came, I called up the storm. I don't know how I did it. I just felt a need for lightning to come and clean the pollution out of the air in the valley--I've heard that lightning could do this--and so the storm came. I felt a need to stay dry to protect the cloud, and as easily as that the rain didn't fall on me. And then after watching the lightning over the valley until late at night I felt the need to be home. Lightning crashed all around me, lifting me off of the crag and setting me down in the valley." He paused. "Do you believe me?"

She nodded, experiencing only a distant feeling of surprise. Somehow this explanation also brought her a bit of comfort. His condition didn't seem to be harming him, and what's more, it was beginning to seem increasingly supernatural, which put Rose on firmer ground. After all, she had spent almost her entire twenty years after junior college making the supernatural natural.

"Why don't we go downstairs and have some coffee?" she said.

He smiled. "That would be fine." Matt got up. Rose hurried to the closet and put on a robe over her nightgown and then followed her husband out of the room and down the stairs.

While the coffee was percolating a few minutes later, Rose turned on the television near the kitchen table and then sat down with her husband. An early

morning news program came on in the middle of some report about scientists studying strange electrical activity in earth's lower atmosphere: ". . . and scientists at Berkeley postulate the existence of a common force behind the activity and the disintegration of literally thousands of miles of Japanese fishing nets throughout the Pacific yesterday morning." Rose did a mental double-take and then stared at her husband seated across from her. His expression beneath his uncanny veil betrayed his surprise as well.

All these years, she thought, could I have been living with an avatar? Another Christ? Another Krishna? She quickly rejected the idea: no, there was no way she could have overlooked such potential in her husband. This was a new development, and one which (she had to concede) probably had a scientific explanation.

Matt's attention was absorbed by the television, and Rose got up and fetched the coffee from the counter. A minute later, with mingled fascination and aversion, Rose watched Matt's coffee mug cross in and out of shadow as he drank.

He left off staring at the television and broke the silence. "I suppose something will have to be done."

She said, "We need to know more about this thing. We have to find doctors who can study it."

Matt made a backhand wave in front of his face as if warding off a bug. "Once I start talking to doctors I'm through. People are afraid of what they don't

understand, and they'll try to keep me locked up until they do, maybe longer. And I've got a feeling that they won't understand this for a long, long time."

"We obviously have to do something. If we go straight to the doctors, we might find out something before the government gets wind of this . . . and then controls what we get to find out."

Matt seemed to consider this thoughtfully as he took a sip of his coffee. "Why couldn't we just take off somewhere . . . into the woods."

"Matt! Listen, I for one need to know what's going on. And you'd better think of people other than yourself for a change. And not just me. There's your daughter to consider, by God! And what about all those people whose lives you're affecting, or going to affect. Those fishermen, for instance--they've got a right to know."

"Who the hell says so! You don't know what I know, Rose. You couldn't even imagine."

"Well, maybe. But that doesn't change things."

"The hell it doesn't! And I'll quote something you said once yourself: 'Morality doesn't change, but moral standards do: when a person reaches a certain level of knowledge, certain old rules don't apply.'"

"I don't remember ever--"

"But you do agree, don't you? I'm not going to bother trying to refresh your memory. That's not the point."

Rose felt herself priming for an argument, but controlled herself. "You're right," she said. "Knowledge does change things. And as far as your new knowledge goes you are the only judge of your actions. But there is still the question of what you don't know, and there's your moral problem. You don't know how this will affect you. You don't know if it's contagious. You don't even know how it happened. And before you go following a higher law, you need to know."

Matt frowned and looked into his cup. At first Rose took this as a comment on what she had said. Then she realized something was wrong. Matt's face contorted as if under the pressure of some great inner struggle, and then he began to shake. The coffee mug fell over as he replaced it on the table with a quivering hand.

"What's wrong?" Rose asked, alarmed.

Matt clapped his hands to his temples and pressed his chin to his chest. Sparks began to leap around his head in a miniature fireworks display. "The coffee," he hissed. "Poison."

As an almost reflexive act, Rose looked into her own cup. Then, as if it were written there, the answer came to her: caffeine.

Matt spoke: "I'm dizzy. The room is shifting around."

The room began to darken suddenly and Rose looked up to the overhead light but saw that the dimming was caused by the gathering of something dark in the air,

and not by a problem with the lighting. The table began to move beneath her hands. At first she thought it was being shaken, but then realized its surface had somehow grown plastic and was beginning to flow and twist. She leapt up from her seat. Utter blackness fell like a wall of water before her eyes. In the next moment, she noticed strange rending sounds emanating from the space before her where the table was, or had been.

The darkness was not merely dark but a substance, one that was growing thicker: at first it weighed on her like a light, silky film; then it began to grow heavy and increasingly sticky. "Matt!" The scream did not seem to travel a foot from her mouth. She backpedaled quickly as it became harder to breathe and found that she could move more easily as she did so, but the darkness still threatened to suffocate her. She turned and began to run.

Suddenly she found herself in the middle of the street outside her home under a clear sky lit by morning stars. She turned. A great spherical mound of blackness sixty feet high stood where her house had been. It heaved ominously.

"Matt! Oh, God, Matt!"

She was seized with impotent panic for one long minute, and then the tension was broken by a tremendous blast of electric blue fire that erupted from the center of the sphere, shooting straight up miles into the sky. It pulled at the blackness, dragging an elastic,

ever-lengthing arm of it as it went. The base of the blackness dwindled in size as the arm reeled out of it, until the entire mass was soaring skyward. It went up, up and out of sight, lost in the spaces between the stars.

There was no sign of Matt. Nothing was left of the house, not even the foundation. Only a broad expanse of bare earth remained. Rose gripped her hair and choked back a movement in her throat that might have erupted as either a sob or a yell. She stumbled forward onto her knees.

Several seconds that seemed like minutes or several minutes that seemed like seconds passed. Neighbors ran toward her, were patting her on the back, were talking about shock and catatonia. Someone, an old man with a deeply furrowed brow and a white, well-trimmed beard, wondered aloud about what had happened. Rose felt a small piece of stability return to her world.

She looked ahead at the big square of dirt where her house and husband had been. She looked up at the sky, at the stars--so many stars, and huge spaces between. She saw Venus on the horizon. She concentrated on that bright point. Got calmer. Her thoughts then began to race, faster and faster, through a million possibilities, but tears filled her eyes and fractured the neat pinpoint of the planet's light. Grief filled her, crushed her.

No good. She could not figure it out.



### A Eulogy For Mike

My life has become a quest for Mike Corey, my friend who saved a person's life after he died. It's been eight years since I first mourned for him during my senior year of high school and tried to move on. But my friendship with Mike was so great and the circumstances before and after his death so significant that I haven't really let go.

A month ago I was driving through Gresham late on a Saturday evening after a workout at a gym I go to on Burnside, and to indulge a spell of nostalgia, I stopped off at the abandoned building that was once a bookstore Mike and I used to frequent. Elysium Books--aptly named after the paradise of Greek mythology: during junior high, we had some wondrous times there playing a fantasy roleplaying game called Chainmail and Arcanum. When the game became popular, the owner opened up the back room

to players, and every Thursday and Friday evening for two wonderful years, a motley assortment of young men, students from grade school to grad school, would spin out sagas there under the dim glow of an oil lamp. No matter that the room was too small for the more than two dozen people sometimes in attendance, or that most had to seat themselves on industrial cable spools, scavenged from a nearby junkyard--the place had been heaven.

When I went back there a month ago, it was a beautiful, July evening, not too hot. The evergreens on the surrounding hills were a vast, proud assembly, reaching upward in homage to space. The sky was clear, just purpling in the east as I drove through town. It was an evening ripe with the possibility of adventure, one of those rare times when special things happen. As Mike would have said, "The time was right."

I had noticed the week before that the fabric store that had occupied the building had closed out, so I knew I could not even expect to get in. I just wanted a look, to try to remember how it had been and what it had meant to my friend and me. A silly, harmless whim. But as I drove into the parking lot of the mall that held the building, I saw I might be daunted even in that.

A man, about thirty, heavy-set and rough-looking, was standing at the dark store front under the fabric sign, smoking a cigarette. He watched me coolly as I drove in, seeming to glower, although that might have just been due to the bags under his eyes. I almost gave



it up, but decided to park near a video store nearby and wait for him to leave.

When he didn't move off after the first few minutes, I resigned myself to a wait and thought about Mike.

It was Chainmail and Arcanum that brought Mike and me together in the first place, back in the sixth grade. If it hadn't been for the game, nothing would have started between us. I wouldn't have given Mike a chance.

Mike Corey was a weak, self-conscious kid in grade school, the kind of kid that made other kids nervous by reminding them of their own insecurities, just a bit too intelligent to be dismissed as harmless and overlooked: Mike was gay, or Mike did it with his mother, or Mike played with himself. While I never participated in slandering Mike, I avoided him as consciously as the rest, being as worried about my reputation as everyone else.

It was Mike, whom I would follow behind ever after, who approached me on my eleventh birthday, the day our friendship began.

I had received the boxed set of rules for Chainmail and Arcanum that morning before school, and I was unpacking it during lunchbreak in the cafeteria. My group of friends had deserted me for a game of basketball upon seeing the game would take more than a few minutes to learn, so I was alone.

The game was imposing: there were two volumes of rules and a set of dice so strange that it required a good deal of study even to figure out how to roll and read them. But I was not put off by the game's complexity. It was what I had expected when I asked my parents for it for my birthday. I had heard that college students played the game, and I was currently fascinated with college and all the secret activities that were supposed to go on there. Also, I was intrigued by an invitation in the magazine advertisements for the game: "Be a hero!" Though respected by my friends, I could always do with more heroism.

When Mike Corey elbowed up beside me, hot food tray in hand, I noted his sticklike arms before glancing up to the butch haircut that was the trademark of his shame. "What've you got, Steve?" he asked. I was surprised he knew my name. He was so candidly curious that I almost replied, "None of your damn business." Instead I was uncharacteristically subtle. I said, "It's a very complicated game, and I'm just about to figure it out. College students play this game."

"Oh yeah, I know," he said in an awed tone. "I was going to buy one myself." His friendly interest would have taken the edge off my annoyance at his presence, except for his remark that he was planning to buy the game. This was conceit: this jerk thought he could aspire to the level of me and "the college students"!

"You're going to buy it, huh?" I replied sarcastically. "Think you could figure it out?"

He didn't take offense, though. He looked at me sheepishly, and said, "Maybe we could figure out the game together; then I could buy mine later."

There was something unguarded and nervous in his attitude, a terrible vulnerability. I suddenly grasped that kids had been downright evil to him. "Well . . . okay," I said.

Mike and I went through the game every lunch for the next few weeks. The rules were a little over our heads but we made steady progress in figuring them out. The game was basically a set of rules which structured a verbal exchange of heroic fantasy make-believe: King-Arthurish exploits with elements from fairy tales and Greek mythology. One person assumed the role of some heroic character and the other mediated the game by providing predetermined background and rolling dice to simulate the occurrence of chance events, such as whether or not a monster appeared at a certain time or an attempt to strike a foe was successful. A wide number of variables affected the meaning of every dice throw--a good many rules had to be memorized--so that it was a full three weeks before we were ready to give the game a trial run, and nearly a year after that before we perfected our playing style.

Knights rode, dragons died, and sagas unfolded between Mike and me. There was a private atmosphere

that enclosed us and bound us together as we played our game. It really wasn't a "game," though. It was daily communication on a ground free of pretense. That may seem ironic, to suggest that fantasy is unpretentious, but it was true then. We were sincere in our game.

We told each other what we saw when we slew dragons; it wasn't at all as if we had "made up" those images. When the dream was gray in places for one of us, the other added his color, and between us the picture became whole. We took each other to places that neither could have reached alone.

We thought then that it was the wonderful game that opened up our special world to us, but that's not entirely correct. The game was played by adults, so we could play without being self-conscious, confident that what we were doing was mature. And because we wanted to be successful players, we went at our game with complete sincerity. We made the game work; there were several times that we cast its rules aside because they hindered our vision of what was taking place. Something magical happened because we opened up to each other; the game was just a good excuse to allow that to happen. It took fantasy, ironically, to make us see each other as we really were. During the course of playing that game--we played regularly until sometime during the eighth grade--Mike became the best friend I ever had, and probably ever will have.

I took renewed interest in the guy in front of the store as he finished his cigarette and stomped it out on the pavement. He ground the butt under the ball of his foot, slowly and reflectively, and then, head only half raised, looked up through his bushy brows as if concerned there might be witnesses to the act. His gaze lit on me and my car but either he didn't notice me looking at him or he didn't care. Then, to my surprise, he approached the empty fabric store, thrusting a hand into a pocket, and producing a key from it as he neared the door. He turned the key in the lock and opened the door in one motion and, with a swiftness incongruent with his bulk, slipped into the shadows inside.

I waited a few seconds for lights to come on in the store. When they didn't, I got out of the car.

My head went light as I crossed the lot. It was the same feeling I had during the year after Mike's death when patterns of meaning began to arrange themselves out of separately insignificant events. It was a feeling of surprise, a kind of happy feeling of being had by God. When you think you're acting according to your own script, suddenly you find you're in somebody else's play, and that somebody is a hell of a lot better writer than you are. I'm not sure what I expected, but it was something more than just the opportunity to see the inside of the building.

Coming up to the window of the bare apartment, and looking in, hands cupped around my eyes so I could see

through my black-haired, T-shirted alter-ego in the glass, I saw far within a faint glow limning the edge of a partly opened door, the door to the back room.

Impulsively, I rapped on the window, and cringed even as I was doing it: what did I want here? The building was obviously deserted. They had even removed the carpet inside. Lines of tape gum criss-crossed the cement floor within like Chinese graffiti.

In a few seconds, a figure moved sideways through the narrow space between the door to the back room and the door's frame, evidently taking care not to open the door any wider. As he came out of the shadows, I could see that he was a much slimmer man than the one that had gone in. I experienced a chill when he came to the front of the store and reached for the door knob: thirteen years had passed but I could still tell that he was one of the players who used to frequent Elysium Books.

The man was tall, slim, and solidly muscled with very thick eyebrows that almost met. His brown hair was long in back and just a bit shaggy, a kind of mane that complemented well his vaguely feline, handsome face. Or perhaps it was not his appearance, but his grace which was catlike. It was a mien that, though hard to describe, was unforgettable: I remembered the college student he had been holding enthralled a group of players, describing a fantastic situation with such impassive frankness that they could not help but

believe.

He opened the door a crack and kept it open just that much with the side of his foot, standing straight and imposing.

"Yes?"

"I know you," I said.

His brow furrowed as he seemed to appraise me. Then, a bit of friendly light suffused his face and he made just a hint of a smile but waited for me to speak.

"Ten or thirteen years ago--I was just a young kid. You ran a campaign here of Chainmail and Arcanum."

"We're having a little ceremony," he said. "If you'd like to sit in, you're welcome."

I hesitated, still recovering from a feeling of surprise and disorientation, and then nodded. "I would." I held out my hand and said, "By the way, I'm Steve Carter."

He shook it. "Greg."

He held the door open for me and I slipped in, following just behind him. He walked slowly, turning toward me in an invitation for me to take up his side.

"Eric Slayton duplicated a key to this place when he did janitor work for the fabric store," he explained. "He just had a smoke--you might have seen him outside a moment ago."

He gained the door and held the edge of it with one hand, ushering me inside with the other.

Seated around a table, six men, their faces ghostly

under the wan light of tea candles, turned to me as I came in. Eric Slayton was directly opposite the door. He had a wider margin of space between himself and those next to him than the others did, making it appear that he was the focal point of the group.

"We've got a visitor," Greg said, standing next to me. "This is Steve Carter. He used to play C and A here." A certain look of suspended hostility in the faces before me was immediately replaced by welcome. "Steve, Eric is coordinating our meeting tonight."

The large man got up and shook my hand over the table. "Nice to meet you," he said.

Greg introduced me to the rest of the men, all of whom were vaguely familiar, and then, following his lead, I sat down, sharing a familiar seat with him--a cable spool. I felt a strong anticipation. There were no books or papers on the table with the candles, so it was evident that the group was not playing a game. Still, I felt certain that this had something to do with Chainmail and Arcanum. The place, the people, the physical arrangement of the group, and the presence of a "coordinator" (substitute the word "gamemaster") all brought me back to Elysium Books. The only thing missing was the game itself.

"Steve," Eric said, "this is a kind of religious ceremony. We usually meet at each other's homes. This is the first time we have met here and will probably be the last, as this building is being sold. This place



has special significance to all of us, and I'm guessing it does to you, too. We're glad to have you.

"What we do is tell each other stories about experiences that have moved us. Anything will do, big or small. It's the custom that newcomers tell a story right away. Then we judge whether you're in the group. If you don't want this, you can leave."

I looked around at the faces watching me intently. My reason exerted a strong pressure on me to politely decline, and then again there seemed to be something fateful about this meeting. Just then, I had a strange revelation that both a decision to leave or a decision to stay might be wrong or correct depending on my attitude. I could make a false move either way, if I decided for any other reason than because it was what I really wanted to do. I thought about Mike until I got calm inside and knew my own mind. "I'll give it a try," I said.

Eric said, "We have a prompt that we say to the person who is going to tell a story. It's the only formal part of the ritual. We ask, 'What is your soul?' So, we'll start.

"What is your soul?"

I gathered my thoughts for a moment and then began to tell the story that I had rehearsed in my mind over and over for the last eight years.

What is my soul? Interesting question. My soul is

a sad story about a dead friend.

I saw my best friend, Mike Corey, for the last time five days before he died. It was the middle of January, 1985. It had been one of those rare weeks we were in touch with each other a lot. Mike and I attended separate high schools after grade school and didn't get to see as much of each other as we would have liked. We were in contact that week because Mike was going through a minor crisis with his parents over his lack of college plans. That school year, our senior year, Mike and I had been agonizing heavily about our college options. We had both done well and our options were wide open, but that did not help our anxiety much. I finished my college board tests early and was half done with my applications by January, but Mike didn't bother to register for his tests at all. He told me he was waiting to see how he felt about college, and I told him he was waiting to screw up his chances of getting into a good school.

Mike was depressed and I was extremely worried about him, which was a little strange because I had helped him through worse depression before. His father had pushed him into swimming, which he hated, for the first three years of high school and instilled in him the belief that his dislike of the sport was a character flaw that he had to work through with more competition. This, of course, made for some hellish ambivalence in him. It wasn't until after his junior year, when he got

seriously ill with depression, that he took my advice and told his dad to go screw himself. But this latter depression he was experiencing was different. Where his struggle with his father had actually brought us closer together--he had confided in me a lot--this depressive episode drew us farther apart. Mike was distant from everyone, including me, and he wouldn't help me to understand why.

Well, that night--I think it was January tenth--we were close again for the first time in months. Mike had a fight with his parents about his sullen demeanor and his college applications. He drove over to my house and we had a talk about it. After it was over, I was convinced there would be a change in him and that our friendship would realize some of its old depth.

I was elated. It was as if Mike had resolved to take on a fight he had suddenly seen some hope of winning.

Just before he left that night, we faced each other under the stars in my driveway. Mike gave me a fierce hug, almost crushing out my wind with his powerful arms. As we separated I had a perverse memory of the weak scarecrow of a kid he had been at our first meeting in the sixth grade. "I love you, Steve," he said.

"Yeah, me too, buddy," I replied a little embarrassed. "You'll make it okay."

My mother called out from the door to the house and we turned to see her there, dressed in a robe and

slippers. "Mike," she said, "tell your mother I'll call her about getting together for lunch soon. I've been just awful about keeping in touch."

He nodded and she disappeared into the house. We laughed for a second, but then grew suddenly serious again. Mike opened his mouth as if to say something but instead shook my hand and turned away.

As he got into his car, he flashed me a wet-eyed glance. Although I immediately took this for a sign of happiness, it might have actually been some premonitory sadness and regret I was seeing in his face.

He called me three days later, in the middle of the week, and told me he had registered for his tests and applied to three schools. His tone of voice assured me that he was finally over his dark mood, and I hung up the phone feeling good about him and our friendship, not knowing, of course, that I had spoken to him for the last time.

I went to bed about ten thirty that Friday night, two days after his call. I spent most of the night watching TV, and then I read a few chapters of a Stephen King novel, falling asleep with the book on my stomach.

The rain started about midnight, a hiss of fine drops invading my nascent dreams, building and building in crescendo. The rain brought me close to awakening and then I drifted back to sleep with an idea repeating

over and over in my head that the rain had come to "cleanse." To cleanse what?

I began to ache. I dreamed a dream without coherent images. My senses were mixed up. I felt harsh sounds. I saw pain. Flashes of pain like light, coming in clock ticks or heart beats. And between the surges of pain, I had the feeling that this pain wasn't mine. It belonged to someone else. A smooth sheet of metal filled my view for an instant, smooth and pleasant to look at, and then it abruptly wrinkled with a screech. Time slowed down and the screech was protracted, waves of sound slowing and slowing. But the rain (oh shit the rain) beat down at its normal rate, immune to the dilation of time. There was sharp metal somewhere and glass somewhere else in shards. And the whole world listened for something in the silence as the rain ceased . . . for a moment . . . and then started up again, with time regaining its normal stride.

I woke up staring at the light in my room: a harsh white scream. The light burned through the tears in my eyes which struggled to diffuse it, to mollify somewhat its brutal statement that I was awake. You are awake now. You have not even begun to realize what that means, but you will. Oh, yes, you will.

I got up and flicked off the light. The rain droned outside, now heavy and sonorous. A gray glow from the distant city of Portland limned the tops of the nearby hills and the borders of my window. As my eyes

adjusted to the darkness, I could see the rain flash before the glass. It calmed me. Whatever the disturbance had been, it was over.

The phone woke me at six o' clock. I waited. The heavy footfalls of my mother or father (whoever had been summoned; the phone in my parents' room had been broken for a week) sent tremors through the walls and I could hear wine glasses rattling on shelves as he or she entered the kitchen. There was an interminable pause, and then the phone rang again, this time being silenced in mid-exclamation as the receiver was lifted. My mother's voice, faint and tired, sounded through the kitchen and the door to my room. "Hello." A long silence. "Oh, God." My mother never swore. "Yes, I'll tell him. When did you hear about it." Another long pause. "I think I'll wait and tell him in a few hours. It's going to be hard on him." The receiver was put down. I heard a chair being pulled away from the kitchen table, and then silence.

There was no doubt in my mind that "him" referred to me. I got out of bed and put on my bathrobe. I was already crying, not knowing why, before I was out of my room, but I managed to dry my eyes before entering the kitchen.

My mother was a wreck. She turned to face me as I approached, her eyes a bright red in contrast to the paleness of her face. Her long brown hair hung limply



at the sides of her neck--I could tell she had been running her hands through it as she sometimes did when she was distraught. She didn't make any pretense about the news she had gotten; she said, "Steven, Mike Corey died last night in a car accident. He was driving home after a party and a truck driver went through a stop and broadsided him."

My first feeling was less of grief than of something like insult: the world did not work this way; there was a horrible unfairness about what had happened. My second feeling was of a terrible pressure in my chest from which a numbness began to creep through my body. I turned away staring at the floor, feeling choked.

When my mother touched me from behind after what seemed more than a minute the grief came like a blow. I cried until I exhausted my tears, and then cried until I had no more strength left at all.

The person I had shared more intimacy with than just about any other was dead. I felt like my life should be over too. The story I'd been making my life into was at an end. My fellow protagonist was gone, and thus there was no more drama possible. I was surrounded by bit players who knew nothing of the unique friendship Mike and I shared, and it was too late in the story to take on another friend like Mike. Anyway, that would cheapen what we had if it were possible, and it was not.

had I didn't eat anything up until the day of the



funeral. The rain that had started on Friday seemed to have come for good, and I awoke that Monday morning to the evil sound of its discordant music on the roof. The funeral was at noon.

When Mike's casket passed before me, rain beading up on its curved surface, I averted my eyes as soon as I glimpsed that it was closed. I felt very ill. I needed to say goodbye face to face, and that casket promised I was too late. I would never have the opportunity.

Across the corridor of lawn walled by people that led up to the grave, Mike's dad was crying unselfconsciously, which came to me as a kind of shock. He seemed to be taking it harder than even Mike's mother, who was evidently too exhausted to cry. I was made to look at him in a new way. I had resented him for the pressure he put on Mike and had come to think of him as unfeeling. But now I considered that he might be as human as anyone else. Maybe his sternness had been, to some extent, an act calculated to make his son a better person. And now, with Mike gone, his act had come to nothing; worse, he could not repent his failure to express his love more directly.

Only a few people had shown up for Mike's funeral. The previous year, a popular guy at my own school had died in a car accident and nearly a hundred students had been at his funeral. But Mike had not been well-recognized socially, and only ten students or so had made the effort to attend. Among them was Ken

Dante, which surprised me. Ken had been in grade school with Mike and me, but neither of us had much contact with him; he had been a disturbed kid. He was in fights a lot, and had been caught smoking a couple of times. And--as I was privileged to discover, for he attended my high school--he got worse. In his junior year he had been rehabilitated for barbituate use through the school drug program, and supposedly he was still heavily into downers and alcohol.

There was however some irony to Ken's situation: although his apathy was astounding, he had gotten into my Advanced English class and stayed there--which seemed to contradict the general supposition that he was failing. And, although a heavy smoker, he had developed a respectable build through exercise, which he made apparent with the tight-fitting T-shirts he wore. Still, I followed the popular perception that he was a loser and this was how I viewed him now.

Ken was standing a few feet to one side of Mike's parents. He didn't have an umbrella with him, unlike everyone else, including me, and he fidgeted in evident discomfort. Rain snaked through the mat of wet blonde curls at his brow and down the sides of his face, to disappear under the collar of his high-necked leather jacket. His left hand was thrust into his jacket pocket, and the other hung limply at his side, a smoldering cigarette dangling between his middle and index fingers. There was sincere grief in his face.

His eyes were red-rimmed, and his usually vacant expression was filled with hurt. He looked like someone who had been awakened by a sharp blow.

He caught sight of me just after the coffin passed and began to walk toward me across the cemetery lawn. As he neared, he raised his cigarette hand palm upward in a gesture that I didn't understand. He touched my arm with his middle finger, almost burning my coat with the cigarette. At that, I turned slightly and faced him straight on, thinking, Fuck off, Ken. He obviously didn't read my expression. He removed his other hand from his pocket and held it out. I shook it reluctantly and then brought my attention back to the coffin.

"You know," he said, "Mike and I used to play together when we were little. My mom liked him."

"Is your mom here?" I asked, trying to turn the conversation in a direction where it couldn't thrive. Ken Dante was the last person I wanted to open up to.

"My mom died two years ago," he said in a bored tone, as if it were something he was tired of repeating.

This immediately struck me as perverse, and I almost laughed despite myself. In my world, people did not just die right and left. Then, I felt very serious as it hit home to me that during the past few years, while I was involved with the trivial business of daily life, Ken the loser had been dealing with the loss of his mother. No wonder he was so screwed up.

"I'm sorry, Ken. I never knew."

"Thanks," he said.

The rain came with renewed force, and as if taking a cue from it, I gave Ken room under the umbrella I was holding. He nodded in appreciation.

We didn't speak to each other any more, but the silence between us wasn't awkward. It was significant. When the funeral was over, he left me still holding onto that silence which was made in deference to Mike. He impressed me by it; it seemed a kind of shared statement of grief between us. I think he felt its importance in the same way I did.

The feeling of unreality I had when Ken told me about his mother's death returned when I met people in school the next day. Everyone carried on as if nothing had happened, which was somehow unnatural. No one acknowledged my loss and that fact lent a strange superficial quality to everything that was said to me.

Ken and I came into English early together at about the same time and sat down next to each other.

"How are you?" he asked with real concern. I merely shrugged.

We were both quiet as the others came in. Two loud girls were momentarily quieted upon seeing us together, but then after whispering something between themselves, they resumed their chatter and turned their attention toward other people in the classroom. Ken flared his nostrils, piqued.

I was gratified by this. To me it was as if Ken and I were the only two feeling human beings there. I was glad for Ken's company now, but I could not help thinking what a thin, gray shadow of a friendship we would share compared with the friendship I had shared with Mike.

The teacher entered class and after a brief preamble, introduced the new story we were to begin in our anthology. It was "The Death of Ivan Ilych."

Ken rolled his eyes and frowned, and I couldn't help but smile, although I resisted it.

In a way, the world Ken and I were in together was as private as the world between Mike and me when we had played Chainmail and Arcanum. But what a sad substitute for that bright, happy place.

The following weekend, Ken gave me a call.

"Steve. I was wondering if you were doing anything tonight."

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, I wondered if you might want to go into Portland, to Powell's Books."

I was surprised that Ken went to Powell's. The store occupied an entire city block and had the best selection of books and magazines in the state. Mike and I had often spent a whole day browsing the classics and science fiction sections; the very mention of the place brought up my mood. But the thought of going with Ken

killed my enthusiasm. We had no real friendship, no history, between us; it would be almost profane to go with him there. "I wouldn't be good company, Ken."

"That's all right."

"Maybe some other time."

"Yeah, okay." He sounded defeated, and I felt bad.

As I hung up the receiver, a bizarre, panicky feeling moved over me, like I was checking the progress of something important that was trying to develop, not so much between Ken and me, but something else. It was crazy, but I felt as if I had stayed the hand of fate from doing something that could improve my life.

I called Ken back, telling him I would appreciate future offers to do things with him, but I was just feeling too low at the moment.

And the feeling went away. It did not merely fade. It vanished, instantly. It was unnatural how fast it went. I recalled the dream I had the night of Mike's death and I was filled with an indefinable emotion, like wonder and foreboding, that I was sure I had never experienced before.

In the middle of the next week I found myself at Mike's house. His mother had called when I got home from school, requesting that I come over and go through his things while she and Mr. Corey were out. She wanted me to take anything I wanted. I had opened my mouth to assure her there was nothing I could want, but the



feeling of interfering with some important, inscrutable plan of fate hit me again before I could say a word. I agreed to come over.

I arrived at Mike's house after dark, around seven o' clock. None of the lights were on, but the front door was open. I entered the house timidly, nudging rather than flicking up the light switch just inside the door. The flourescents blinked once before flaring awake. I closed the door gently and then padded down the main hall and into Mike's room, which was at the end of the hall on the right.

Holding my breath, I turned on the light to his room.

There was nothing very remarkable to be seen--other than the fact that the room had evidently been left untouched. Mike had kept a clean room, but there were still a few books lying on the floor, and a shirt and two pairs of socks were on his dresser against the opposite wall. His bed lay parallel to the left wall, where storm windows gave a view onto a black silhouette of a hill about a mile away that could just be glimpsed in the darkness: Mike's window faced east, away from the lights of Portland, and there were just a few houses on that hill.

There were familiar posters on the wall next to the door: one of a unicorn confronting a dragon, and the famous Mt. Hood Jazz Festival poster depicting a piano standing magically on the misty waters of Trillium Lake



with Hood looming in the background. I wanted the posters, but I couldn't bring myself to take them down. The room was undisturbed, as if Mike were expected back at any moment, and I was reluctant to compromise that quality.

Mike's closet was shut. I stepped toward it but was arrested by the sight of something on his dresser. There, among other books held between two marble bookends, was his copy of the Chainmail and Arcanum rule manual. I removed it from the shelf and admired its familiar cover illustration of a knight in armor on horseback. The book felt good to hold: my hands knew its weight intimately, could almost tell me what playing sessions had made each scratch on its surface. I rested the book in my left hand and gingerly pulled back the cover with my right.

And there on the flyleaf was this note:

Dear Steve,

Important! 3 miles south of last Tolovana Park  
turn off, Cannon Beach. March 5th. Evening trip.  
Bring someone else.

Your Friend,

Mike

I had a moment of vertigo, and the foundations of reality seemed to lurch under my feet. My senses became engaged in a strange way. I felt that I was not so much

reading the letter as hearing it spoken to me. Colors in the room were brighter, contrasts sharper, than they had been; I was now aware of faint smells I had previously ignored. Nothing short of Mike himself walking into the room could have given me such a feeling of unreality.

I brought the book over to Mike's bed and sat down, then immediately got to my feet again. Reality reasserted itself. Of course Mike had written the letter before his death, probably at some sudden, and mundane, inspiration. I paced with the book back and forth between the bed and the dresser, thinking this over and over, and soon felt the cool caress of sympathetic nerves along my spine as I realized I could not convince myself.

Since Mike's death I had become convinced that the universe was indifferent. This letter seemed like a knight striding forward with sword in hand to challenge that evil assertion. There was magic in this directive I had received.

I shut out the light and left the room with the book. I had found what I wanted.

I had been steered toward Ken, I knew that now, and although not excited by the prospect, I decided that he would be the one to accompany me to the beach.

The revelation of the letter was a banal scene. I wanted to show it to Ken under circumstances befitting

its wonder and mystery but no ready opportunity presented itself. Ken had made his attempt to be friendly, and now he was withdrawing into himself again. He turned me down for a trip to Powell's that weekend, and the best I could do was arrange to lift weights with him after school the next week--something I did rather sporadically and, at the time at least, something for which I was not strong enough to act as a good partner for him.

I had secreted the manual in my locker, and after our workout (filled with many cryptic allusions I made to the letter, to which his curiosity was evidently immune) I revealed it to him between showering and dressing. He looked at the letter without interest, but I fought down my annoyance and asked, "Will you go?"

He nodded. "We'll go after school, stay the night." He grew thoughtful for a moment. "We can skip the next day. I'll drive."

And those were nearly the last words spoken between us until March.

After nearly two months of constant rain, the fifth of March was clear and beautiful. As we crested the coastal range in Ken's Nova, Ken smoked his cigarettes athletically, waving them in the air as he chatted, and taking earnest drags on them at regular intervals. He had been in high spirits since he met me in front of the school that afternoon, immediately informing me he had



brought some paper and tinder for a fire and a styrofoam cooler full of food. I had been somewhat deflated at this: he seemed to think of the trip as a beach outing rather than an adventure. But now I was noticing something in his mood that was there since we set out but that I had not grasped before. There was some desperation in it, as if he were priming his emotional pump to allow some deeper, more serious, attitude to come through.

After mentioning something about the transmission in his car in an offhand way, he fell silent. I grew keenly aware of the westering sun shining benevolently through the evergreens on the surrounding hills. We had just begun our descent to the coastal plain.

"Your parents aren't going to follow up your story about staying at my place?" he asked.

"If they do, they do."

"Hope not. My dad might go off on them."

I didn't respond. He seemed to have something else he wanted to say. I was somewhat interested in his dad, though; it was a subject that had never come up.

"Steve, I really hope there's something to Mike's letter. I kind of need there to be."

I smiled at him, and then we were both quiet: our journey had now really begun.

I strained my eyes and thought I could just catch the glint of ocean water far out in the distance beyond the hills. I was very aware that it would be night

before long, and I felt a mingled warmth and cold in my guts, an adventurous feeling: somewhere out there a conflict or mystery was preparing itself like a building storm. You wouldn't give me a bum steer, would you, Mike? I knew he hadn't.

The sun was just heading down over the waves as we began to follow the coastal highway south of Cannon Beach. A spreading gold illuminated the horizon as the thick atmosphere above the waves diffused the light from the lower edge of the sun. This was the edge of the world. If the ocean were a wall stretching upwards to infinity or a drop onto the nothingness of space, it could not appear more insurmountable. I found this strangely comforting. I felt oriented. Being close to the edge of the world somehow helped me put my body and ego in proper relation to the universe.

We had to watch the odometer carefully to decide when we were at the right place. As it turned out, the "right place" was not in easy access to the beach, but at least there was a large shoulder on which to park the car. Acres of Oregon Grape bushes sloped gradually down below the highway for fifty or so yards and then turned upward on a short rise that completely blocked our view of the ocean. A trail of sorts penetrated the brush nearby.

I got out of the car and took deep breaths of the salt air, which felt good after partaking of Ken's



sidestream smoke for so long. A light breeze stirred the leaves of the bushes. Ken procured our food and fire materials from the car, checked that the car doors were locked, and then led the way onto the trail, carrying our provisions on his head like a native jungle guide.

The close corridor of red and green, hollylike leaves extended over our heads, so we marked our progress entirely by the slope of the land. Ken stopped abruptly just ahead of me as we gained the top of the rise we had seen from the road. He was framed in blue sky and obviously had a good view of the ocean, which now droned very loud just beyond him. I came up next to him, anxious to look. "Careful!" he said.

At his feet was a cliff which dropped straight off for a dozen yards or so onto some hard-looking sandstone boulders. Beyond that was a ten-foot clay embankment, and then waves, which seemed to lap hungrily as if anxious to lick up the pieces of the first person to misstep. We looked around. The trail forked off to the left, skirting the cliff.

After a long, steep descent, we came out of a wall of Oregon Grape and into a field of rushes that bordered the beach. The cliff we had broken out on before was a few hundred yards to the north, and at about the same distance to the south other cliffs rose. It was peaceful and private here: we could not see the highway from our present location at all.

The daylight faded very slowly. We started a fire high up on the beach where stray clumps of rushes and grass met the sandy plain, and cooked and ate the polish sausages Ken had brought, watching the color drain out of the sky toward the ocean. As the waves consumed the last red bit of the sun's upper curve, I got up, leaving Ken alone, and took a short walk to the edge of the shore. As I stood there, the waves seemed to communicate some emotion to me that I can only describe as love with sadness. Knowing deep down it was only my own projection, I felt it could be Mike speaking to me. The impression lasted all of two minutes, and then I was left with only the insensible droning of the surf.

I returned to the fire.

As night fell, the fire seemed to draw strength from the darkness and enclose us in a room of light. The night air was cold, but we were comfortable enough. Ken was wearing his ubiquitous leather jacket and I had on a down coat.

Ken opened a new pack of cigarettes. He was just removing the second one from the pack when I interrupted him to ask the time. He looked to his wrist and responded, a little peevishly, that it was eight o'clock.

"Look, Steve," he said in a resigned tone after a long silence, "you know nothing is going to happen."

"Do you want to go?" It didn't matter to me if he



did. I wasn't leaving. But I wanted to see how he was feeling all the same.

"No," he said kicking a little sand into the fire, "I guess not. I suppose you just have to challenge your good sense and do things like this once in awhile. The world's pretty damn predictable. You've got to do what you can to keep God guessing."

"You believe in God?" I asked.

"No," he said contemptuously, "do you?"

"I don't know."

He looked into the fire and scowled, his face assuming an expression of brooding anger. I watched him intently. "What kind of god," he said, "would make a fucked up world like this one?"

I didn't respond. This, it seemed, was what Ken had been working himself up for. He glared at me as if challenging me to answer his question, and then looked down, his hands hanging limply and dejectedly over the ends of his knees, a line of smoke curling upward from between the fingers of his right hand. "The bastard," he whispered.

"Who?" I asked.

"My dad. He just doesn't give a shit anymore about anything. After he gets home from the mill he lies around in the dark like a fuckin' mushroom, soaking up the gloom like a mushroom soaks up shit.

"I finally told him last week to get out and do something. Anything." He lifted the cigarette to his

mouth and took a long drag. Then he looked to the sky as he slowly exhaled from his mouth and nose. "Know what he said? Didn't even raise his goddamn voice, and said, 'Kenny, it's a good thing your mother's not around. I don't think she could take seeing what kind of an asshole you've become.'"

I could tell he was clenching his teeth by the way his jaw turned toward me bulged slightly, in front of his ear. His face radiated cold.

I had the odd sensation of elevated perspective on myself and Ken. I looked at my hands and legs and it was something of a surprise to me that they were mine. I was peculiarly conscious of the moment, overcome by a strange objectivity. There was Ken, staring angrily off into space; there was a warm fire between us and a field of stars overhead. There was the sound of the waves . . .

And another sound . . . a faint sound: a child's crying.

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

"What?"

Ken looked around himself, appearing disoriented as if he had been awakened from an unpleasant dream. I didn't have to answer him. The sound was unmistakable now. Ken gained his feet, tossed his cigarette into the fire with a sharp downward jerk of his hand, and stalked off toward the ocean. He was unhurried at first. I just stood and watched him, straining to hear the crying

above the waves. I couldn't see beyond him, and I was unsure that he was going in the right direction. Suddenly he broke into a run, and I began to follow.

Ken was far ahead of me when he stopped. I could barely discern a gleam from his leather jacket, returned from the wan light of the stars and a quarter moon. He was on the wet sand near the waves, and with him--my stomach tightened as I noticed--was a small figure.

Giddy, my torso seeming to ride on my legs like a separate creature, I loped up to Ken. He was kneeling by a little brown-haired girl about three years old, wearing a man's T-shirt and little blue jeans. She was shivering uncontrollably, and even in the dim light I could see her expression was blank as a skull's.

Ken shot me an earnest, questioning glance as he gently picked the girl up. She was floursack limp; her head lolled on Ken's shoulder. "Why a little girl, Steve?" His lips were pursed tight. He turned without waiting for an answer and headed back toward the fire.

Before attending him, I looked around for any clue as to where the girl might have come from, but I couldn't see very far down the beach or make out her footprints in the wet sand nearby.

When we got her back to the fire, we both had a shock. The firelight revealed that the little girl's arms were bruised and covered with round, raised blisters, some of which had a peculiar concentric pattern like the rings on a tree stump.



"Fuh--" Ken said, "a goddamn car lighter."

"What kind of a fucker would do something like this?" I asked, feeling my gorge throb.

The little girl rolled her eyes and started to cry. Ken removed his jacket and wrapped her in it.

I began to feel sick and the adventurous feeling I had at the beginning of this outing left me cold. I was hollow inside. I said, "We have to get her to a police or fire station."

Ken nodded soberly. I was taken by surprise when he then jerked his head up in alarm. There was movement in the shadows just beyond the firelight, and we both got to our feet.

A man padded out of the darkness, open-handed and conciliatory. "You guys found my niece." We were silent, on our guard. The man didn't look sinister. He was in his late twenties, dark-haired, with a moustache but otherwise clean-shaven, and he carried his lean frame with evident self-confidence and self-respect. His aspect was kind and accommodating, but we were both tense after what we had seen and remained stoic. The man said, "What's wrong?" He came closer, and by his expression, I saw that his confusion was apparently genuine.

Ken's hand nearest me tightened into a fist; blue veins like stalks of ivy flared around it. He was only wearing a T-shirt now that he had given his jacket over to the girl, and I could see his arm flex, his tricep

muscle leap up below his shoulder in a big, crescent-shaped lump.

"Whoa, wait a minute!" the man said as he looked to Ken's face. "I know what you're thinking. But it was my sister did that to Jenny. I just picked her up from Portland a few hours ago, and I'm taking her to my folks in Medford. My sister called me yesterday. The bitch flipped out. Said she couldn't handle a kid around anymore. I think I got there just in time. God knows what she would have done."

Ken relaxed, and so did I.

I knelt down near the girl, who was whimpering with the back of her hand pressed to her mouth. "I think she's in shock," I said neutrally. There was a terrible stasis to the situation at this point: I could not decide what to think about the stranger. The girl's wounds transfixed me, horrified me.

"Yeah?" the man said. "God. I just pulled over for some fresh air 'cause I could tell something was wrong with her. When I turned around, she'd disappeared. Took me damn near ten minutes to get to the beach from the road. All the bushes, you know.

"Here." He stepped forward past Ken, arms extended to the girl. The move was just a bit too fast, betrayed just a hint of anxiety. The girl's eyes opened wide and she screamed. Ken gripped the man's shoulder and spun him around so his back faced me. I heard, rather than saw, Ken's punch land in the man's face.



The man staggered backward. His right hand flailed out as if to correct his balance but landed on the rear pocket of his jeans. Something bulged there. I shot forward, unthinking, as the hand fumbled once and then latched onto its object and pulled it forth. "Knife!" I shouted and grabbed the man's wrist. I didn't manage to hold the arm behind his back but I trapped it at his side. With a "snick" four inches of steel popped out of the switchblade he held, and he worked it at me in short jabs, toward my chest. I struggled desperately to keep his arm down, panicking as I became aware of his superior strength. He was breaking my grip.

Ken was on his other arm in an instant, smashing his fist into the man's stomach. The arm I held went limp and I brought it down over my knee, jarring the knife loose from the man's fingers.

Ken swung the man to the ground, away from me, and straddled him. Ken's blows then rained so fast I couldn't pick out one from the other. The man writhed and swore, trying to fight back at first. But soon his curses turned to pleas. When Ken began to slow in his punching, I saw his fist gleaming red as held it near his neck to aim it. There was a wet sloppy sound as it landed.

I scrabbled forward and caught Ken by the shoulder. "Enough for Christ's sake!" I yelled. Another blow descended. I dragged Ken backward with all my strength and was just able to dislodge him. The man scuttled

away from beneath him like a maimed shore crab.

Ken leaned forward on his knees and screamed at the man with shocking hate: "Goddamnmotherfucker!" I was stunned but I gripped his shoulders tight. His back rippled with tension for a moment as he resisted me, and then went slack.

The stranger was now clutching his side a few yards away and emptying his stomach onto the sand. His nose was broken, but he'd live. It seemed certain, at least, that he wouldn't be doing much for awhile. Nothing happened for several moments after that. The girl began to bawl, and I glanced over and saw her cowering near the fire. When I looked back to the man my heart sank. A cold, rational gleam shone in his eyes, and it struck me that he actually was the girl's torturer . . . and probably much worse.

The man got up and ran off. Neither Ken nor I moved a muscle. He went down the beach a good ways and then up into the brush and out of sight.

When we had recovered our wits, we got to our feet. Ken offered to take the girl if I would carry the cooler. It didn't need to be said between us that we were ready--anxious--to leave. After he had pacified the shivering girl and taken her gently in his arms, he started off toward the trail as I kicked sand over the fire.

Going was rough--we had neglected to bring a flashlight--but there was enough star and moonlight for



us to make steady, slow progress with only an occasional slip. Ken breathed heavily as he went, his smoker's lungs taxing him hard.

After about a hundred yards, he had to set the girl down, and when he did, I thought I heard a scuffling sound behind on the trail. I whispered this to him and we both stood still, listening; but the girl began to whimper. I offered to relieve him and carry her for awhile, but he refused, picking her up and stomping off with renewed effort as if I had made a challenge to him.

He climbed fast and hard. I was even having trouble keeping up with him. The sound of my own labored breathing got so loud that I could barely hear the ocean.

When I came to the top of the cliff, Ken had ~~gone~~ already safely rounded it and moved up the trail toward the road. Suddenly, I had a strange feeling of danger. I looked up and dark wings flapped out of the night toward my face--a bat or a nighthawk. I ducked, dropping the cooler, and felt a crushing weight on the back of my head. I fell as, beside me, with a grunt, the man that had struck me from behind went down too, pulled forward by the large rock he had swung. His shadow loomed against the edge of the cliff, blotting out stars as he gained his knees and I, lying on my side, kicked out desperately, blinking my eyes with the effort.

My foot struck air. The shadow was gone.

"Ken!" I yelled. I was immediately full of adrenalin that had no object for its release. The man had made no sound, no scream, and I couldn't be sure if he had had gone over the cliff or not. It was as if a ghost had quickly attacked and disappeared. I ran my hand over the back of my head, and it came away dark with blood. I felt ill and scared, but I knew I was lucky and had only been grazed, thanks to that winged animal.

"Steve!" Ken called out from a good distance up the trail, concealed by the tall bushes. "Are you all right?"

I recovered the styrofoam cooler, and ran until I caught up with him.

"Shit," he said when I told him what had happened. "Did he go over, you think?"

"He must have."

Ken, just a shadow in the dark under the boughs of Oregon grape, walked away without a reply, and I followed. Shortly, we came out on the highway. Another car, a Ford Malibu, was parked just ahead of the Nova on the shoulder, and we both stopped and regarded it, disturbed. Ken let the girl down and hissed in evident pain as he cradled his spent arms loosely to his chest. In the moonlight, I could see that they were swollen, their veins distended.

"Why did he park here?" I asked, half to myself. "You'd think he'd park where no one would be likely to



come around, if he'd kidnapped the girl."

Ken shrugged, and made his way--out of habit, I guess--around to the driver's side of the car, fishing the car keys out of his pocket. The little girl moaned.

"Ken," I said, halting him before he got past the front of the car. "You're not getting in? We've got to go back and check."

"We'll let the police do that."

"But what if he's dead?"

"All the more reason."

I couldn't wait for that, waiting until the police told me whether or not I'd been party to someone's death. I tried to think of something, some reason to give Ken for going back, as much as it scared me. When Ken got no immediate reply he grunted and went the rest of the way to the driver's side of the car.

And then he stopped, looking down.

"Son of a bitch!" he said.

"What?" Alarmed, I sprinted around the car and joined him.

Someone had tried to jimmy the car door open, and the crowbar that had been used on it was lying on the ground. The door was badly bent where it met the frame.

Ken kicked at the ground. "Fuck!"

I shook my head sympathetically, but was actually relieved that this was all that had happened. Then I ran back to the girl and picked her up, cooing at her to quell the squalling protest she started. She grew

quiet. I stood with her before the door on the passenger side of the car as Ken opened the door on his side with a rasping screech of metal on metal.

I thought about the crowbar as he bent over the seat and unlocked the passenger door. "You know what happened," I said to Ken as I put the girl in ahead of me. "The guy stopped here to break into your car--probably thought there might be money in the glove box--and this girl escaped as he was doing it. He must have realized she got out just as he was working on your door."

Ken grabbed the door handle as if he were going to shut the door but instead just stared ahead through the windshield, apparently considering what I said. "Yeah, I'll bet that's what happened. He probably hit other cars along the coast, too." Ken didn't lose his thoughtful expression.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

He said, "I don't want to leave the girl alone, but I suppose we could lock her in the car and take the crowbar with us for protection. But we're not going unless you're pretty sure he went over."

I touched the back of my head. The blood didn't seem to be flowing now. It had only been a scratch. But my hands were still partly blood-stained and I held them out to Ken under the car's dome light. "Look," I said. "One minute he was trying to kill me, and the next he was gone. I saw him pick up the rock to finish



me; I shut my eyes, and then he wasn't there."

After a minute of silence I added, "Ken, he could be dying right now."

Ken got out of the car, locked his door and shut it as softly as he could. He began to pace outside. I got the girl comfortable on the seat and spoke softly to her for several minutes. She fell asleep quickly. When I shut her in, I handled the car door like it were porcelain I was afraid of chipping.

The beach when we returned to it seemed cold and empty without the fire. Ken, who had been wary on the trail with the crowbar poised in front of him for sudden use, relaxed his guard when we broke out into the open on the sand. Our eyes had adjusted quite well to the dim star and moonlight, and we could see a good distance now over the beach, though still not into the shadows under the cliffs and at the bases of rocks.

The bottom of the cliff was farther oceanward than the place where we had built our fire, and the sand there, as we could see when still a hundred yards away, was hard and wet, abandoned by the retreating tide just hours before. We crossed the boundary between the loose and hardpacked sand, and soon stumbled upon footprints--clear impressions of a left-foot sneaker, and a solid line where the right should be--just barely visible in the moonlight, extending away from the cliff.

A short run brought us both to the place where the

man had evidently landed leaving an impression of a palm and right hip. Ken made a surprised "hmmpf," leaned on the crowbar for a moment, and then glanced back as if stung. I followed his gaze, confused. "Steve," he said, facing me earnestly, and hefting the crowbar, "we must have passed him hiding on the trail!" The horror I felt at this was mirrored in Ken's own face as we both turned and bolted back down the beach.

As we passed the remains of our fire and reached the trail, I slowed, hesitating. Ahead, Ken hardly broke his stride as he yelled, "Come on!" and motioned me forward impatiently, waving the crowbar like a staff. He was right, I thought. We had to risk being surprised by the man on the trail. If he had broken into Ken's car . . . I did my best to keep up with Ken.

Ken was gasping for breath as we crested and passed the top of the cliff together, but he didn't ease his pace. My apprehension made time seem to slow to a pained creep. We were ascending toward the highway, just yards away, when a car engine roared to life above us and wheels squealed on pavement. "No!" Ken yelled, his dark form thrusting itself forward through the boughs with a manic effort. He careened as he went, limbs and leaves on both sides of the trail smacking and whipping him noisily like a gauntlet armed with switches.

When my head cleared the bushes, I saw that the Malibu was gone. Ken was leaning over the Nova,



forehead pressed to its roof as he gasped for breath and sobbed, the crowbar dangling loosely at his side. I sprinted up to him, and, winded myself, looked in the window. Sure enough. The front seat was empty.

I felt a tightness in my gut, but then noticed both doors were closed and the passenger door was still locked. I could not tell if the lock on the driver's side was up or not. At a hunch, I ran around to the back of the car, and looked in.

Relief washed through me. The little girl was there, huddled behind the driver's seat. "Ken!" I called out. "It's all right!"

Moments later, we were sitting down side by side on the ground, backs to the side of the car, recovering our wind and wits. "It was Mike, Ken," I said. "It was really Mike."

He snorted derisively, and said, with just a little sarcasm, "What about God, Steve? Maybe it was God."

I laughed. "Didn't think you believed in God."

He returned my laugh but there was a hint of irony in it.

And we both fell silent. I suddenly realized how cold the night air was.

Ten minutes later in Cannon Beach we got behind a cop and flashed him over to the curb with our highbeams. He took the girl and we followed him into Seaside,



twelve miles north, where we made our statements, leaving out nothing. Our parents were contacted. Ken's dad was furious with him, conspicuously furious over the phone at the police station, but my own folks were surprisingly patient. We were allowed to leave that night.

I made it to school the next day with all of three hours of sleep. I had wanted to go to school after my parents' interrogation.

After the initial upset, things went on pretty much as if nothing had ever happened. And I began to brood about the loss of Mike again. Ken and I never got close.

The experience changed Ken more than it did me. His dark mood lifted, returning only briefly after a few weeks as he struggled with the heroic task of quitting smoking. He married out of high school. Last I heard, his wife had him going to church, and he was attending classes at Mt. Hood Community College.

I ended up at the University of Oregon. My freshman year, I got a call in my dorm room from the little girl's, Jenny's, foster father, who had gotten my number by way of the police and my parents. He had heard about how his new daughter had been found, and he felt obligated to thank me. I told him to direct his thanks to Ken, but he kept on the line and told me in detail what kind of home he was providing for the girl (i.e. a good home). He also told me something more.

The man we had encountered apparently had been breaking into private houses up and down the beach. He had merely occupied some of them illegally, but from others he had stolen a great deal of valuables. A few days after our incident, the Clatsop County police got wind of something strange from authorities in Lincoln County. A man had checked into a county hospital in Newport early in the morning the night after we found the girl. He was in extremely bad shape. He had sustained a dislocated hip, a broken arm, broken ribs, and even a broken nose. Only three days after receiving treatment, he slipped out of the hospital with a bottle of Percodan, got to his car, which had not been impounded, and was never seen again.

\* \* \*

I fell silent after I finished my tale. Eric's gaze met mine. His eyes showed warmth and sympathy as he rubbed his chin contemplatively. The other men had their heads bowed. Were they thoughtful, or were they bored? It felt like something more was expected of me.

"That's my story," I said. "The end."

"No," Eric said with a slight grin. "It's not over. Not quite. If you were done with this story, had put it behind you, you wouldn't have told it to us, not tonight."

"I miss my friend," I said. "What was he trying to tell me that night we found the girl? Nothing like that

has ever happened to me since. Compared to that, life seems meaningless, but . . . I don't know the meaning of that, either."

"Well," Eric said, after a thoughtful pause, "you're in the group, if you want to be. We may not help make life meaningful for you, but we at least sympathize. The reason we're here, the reason we meet, may mean something to you."

"We are trying to break an addiction, an addiction to being in control of our lives. You see, that game Chainmail and Arcanum gave us our first great experience of wonder, but it also trapped us into a narrow way of looking at the world. We were all impressed the way dice rolls in the game take the story-telling out of any single player's hands and begin to create surprisingly rich stories, stories that begin to seem to have beauty and meaning that life doesn't have. People who share that meaning become fast friends, Steve, but they can also become blind, like us. The world is not run by dice. The world means things in huge circles as well as small tight circles of people sitting around a table. We have passed up potential friends, lovers, because they had not experienced meaning in neat little packages, could not relate to it, could not help us package it like we had trained ourselves to package it. And yet the problem is not in the game; the problem is in us, maybe in anyone who begins to relate to the world with a set of rigid preconceptions."



"So, anyway, we meet to talk about things that move us, surprising things. And we talk about things that challenge us, and we try to keep our world large. And when it gets too large and confusing, we play a little Chainmail and Arcanum for glue to keep us together, to hold us to the center, because it is no use trying to escape the center entirely. But we don't do that very often. And these days, less and less."

I nodded. There was a moment of silence, and then Eric extended his hand and I grasped it firmly. One of the men next to me patted me on the back.

"Well," I said, "when do we meet again?"

I have been with the group three times since that night, hearing the others tell stories, some of them as unusual as mine. And now I can feel the book on Mike coming to a close, the death part, anyway. Next week we meet at the ocean, and I will be coordinator.

I think it will be good.