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# REACTOR MAGAZINE SHORT FICTION

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# THE RIVER JUDGE

S. L. HUANG





# The River Judge

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**S . L . H U A N G**

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*illustration by*

**D A W N Y A N G**



*Read on for an exclusive short story*

## **The River Judge**

by

S. L. Huang

The first time Li Li buried a corpse, she was nine years old.

Her father had been shut up inside one of the inn's private dining rooms all day. At such times it was understood that he was never to be disturbed. The rule had been drilled deep in Li Li since she was a small child—whether she had fallen on the riverbank and matted her hair with blood, or a patron of the inn became belligerent with drink and flung wine in her mother's face—knocking to interrupt her father was strictly forbidden.

Such times were for *business*, he always said. Meetings with business associates, planning for the inn's future. How could Li Li's mother expect the place to prosper if she did not respect the undisturbed peace needed for such work?

This time, only one other man had joined him. Li Li hadn't seen the man arrive, but her mother had waited on them with the finest meals and wine, the door always shutting firmly again when she had barely crossed the threshold to leave. Li Li had been ordered to get on with her usual long list of daily chores, gathering the washing and scrubbing dishes and packing out the night soil from the latrine buckets. But some rebellious river current always seemed to draw her into baiting dragons, including tempting her father's fury.

When she snuck close to listen through the wall this time, however, she couldn't hear much of interest. Only her father's voice rising and falling in conversation with the other man's. Then the two of them laughing together, her father much louder and longer.

She was still listening when everything went silent.

Li Li scurried from the door in apprehension of being caught. Her father's temper might be the chief concern, but both her parents disliked her tendency to lurk around corners and in shadows. They disliked a great many things about her—she had once eavesdropped on them telling people she was "strange and cold, like a stone" and "not a proper child at all." After that, she'd sat up on a hill once for half a day, challenging herself to stay perfectly still. It took so much strength that she decided being a stone was a compliment, and had begun testing her muscles with stillness as often as she could. She had always been stocky but small, and the other children in the town tended to be surprised at her strength, when they deigned to notice her.

She had stayed motionless as granite by the door for a long time today, lest a sound give her away. When that sudden silence reverberated so deep and strange, she threw herself back into her chores with an overdone vigor, as if to prove she'd never left them. She had relocated to the kitchen to sweep out the hearth's charcoal and ash when her father's silence bloomed into several loud crashes and thumps audible through the entire inn—which after a short time evolved into shouting at her mother.

That, at least, was very normal.

Li Li's mother kept her voice low, though the front room was empty of patrons this time of the afternoon, especially as travelers through the town had been dribbling off since the new magistrate had arrived. In contrast, Li Li's father never seemed to worry about potential patrons at all, even when the inn wasn't empty. None of the guests ever seemed bothered by his taking his house in hand, anyway.

His voice snapped off in furious declarations, vibrating through the walls about how *"this isn't your concern, the inn would have been ruined, it was the only way..."*

Li Li did what she usually did when her parents argued: she made herself scarce and still. As unnoticed as a shadow on the wall.

If this argument followed the customary routine, her father would shout at her mother and then her mother would storm through the inn to find Li Li, raining down cruel digs and extra chores as if passing on a bucket of vitriol that was too hot to hold on to for long.

Li Li knew how to navigate such attacks as little as she knew how to handle her mother's interleaved spikes of affection or proclamations of her child's preciousness. In a bid to stay out of sight, she slipped into the back storeroom of the inn, intending to hide out among the earthenware pickling jars and stacked dense heads of winter cabbage.

Until she saw the dead man.

He sat slumped against the great cisterns of wine in the back of the storeroom, his head fallen forward from its own weight. His clothes were finer than any Li Li had seen, his robes spreading in layers of wide, embroidered skirts, and fur-trimmed leather armoring his legs where they stuck out in a stiff sprawl. Crimson stained the luxurious clothes, a shining wetness slowly creeping wider from below the man's collar and across his chest. More blood dripped from his manicured beard and mustache, leaving a spotted pattern upon his lap.

Li Li was so fascinated she momentarily forgot her parents' fighting. She had seen a dead body before, of course, but not like this, in rich clothes dumped in the back of a storeroom. She stared for several long moments, watching for the tells she always tried to squash when staying motionless herself. The rise and fall of breath, the twitch of eyelids, the shift of a cramped muscle ...

No breath moved the man's lips or chest. His eyes were half-lidded and filmy, and one wrist had folded against the ground at an odd angle. His skin had gone white with a hint of purple, like the inside of a taro root, and the blood was beginning to dry into the color of rust.

Dead. Li Li felt very proud of herself for such a definitive conclusion.

Curious, she crouched down and scooted closer to the body, staying on her knees as if standing too tall might wake the man from wherever he dwelled on the other side. Then she reached out a daring finger and poked it against his cheek.

It was shockingly cold. And soft. And still felt like human skin.

Li Li jerked her hand back.

Only then did she notice something behind the dead man: a fine black hat with long, swooping wings that lay crushed against the floor. She was not old enough to recognize it as a mark of high office, but she would recall it later.

From the front room drifted in the bitter hiss of her mother. "... *that kind of business here at the inn...*"

Li Li's father snorted back something much louder—a lot of words about "*just think it through,*" and was her head empty, and no good wife would peck at such trivial objections. Then a sudden series of bangs and slams, as if someone moving about in anger. Li Li froze, a nebulous idea cobwebbing through her that she must be violating some rule by finding the corpse, much less touching it, and would be shouted at until her ears rang, and then have mountains of extra chores piled atop her. Like scouring out all the latrine buckets on top of the usual collection of night soil to sell to farmers, until the smell got in her nails and hair and clung for days ...

After a moment's thought, she crept out of the storeroom as if she'd never been, and in a roundabout fashion snuck back into the front room. Her mother slumped at one of the empty tables, a cold cup of tea untouched before her. Li Li's father was wrapping himself in heavy layers to go outside.

"I have to go downriver and speak to Elder Mu," he said, without looking at his wife. "The investigators might arrive before I return. Make sure they have no cause for questions."

Li Li's mother raised stricken eyes. "But what about—"

"Just take care of it! Must I do everything for this family?" Her father shut the door hard behind him. A gust of cold settled in his wake.

Li Li's mother noticed her daughter then, and Li Li tensed. But to her surprise, her mother only reached out for her.

She came obediently.

Her mother crushed her in with both arms, face pressed against Li Li's hair. As usual when this happened, Li Li stood very still until she was released.

"Go play," her mother told her, sounding sad. "Outside, eh?"

Li Li went.

Outside was frigid. Li Li wrapped her arms tightly around herself and counted out the three thousand steps over to the shipping house on the river where her cousin Li Jun lived, stamping her boots every few paces to keep the numbness at bay. Her father and mother didn't like her playing with Li Jun, but they couldn't stop it on account of being family.

But Li Jun wasn't at home. Only her mother, Auntie Ru, a large and muscular woman who was tearing the hide off a couple of boatmen so loud the paper vibrated in the windows.

"River licenses? Do you think I give three farts for the capital's nonsense about river licenses? You're paid what the ledgers say you're paid!" Her gaze fell heavy on Li Li.

"My elder cousin...?" Li Li asked.

"On the river, most like. *Ai! How dare you turn your back on me!*" Auntie Ru grabbed the case from her counting rods and began to beat the two boatmen around the head with it.

Li Li retreated. She'd heard her parents muttering about her cousin's family—how Li Jun ran wild, and how Auntie Ru didn't act proper in the least. As a widow with no sons Auntie Ru had been permitted to inherit her late husband's shipping brokerage, and Li Li's father made frequent bitter remarks toward the way she ran it. And toward his dead brother for marrying her in the first place. And toward Li Li whenever he paid enough attention to notice her associating with the family more than he liked.

He needn't have worried so much. Li Li didn't like her aunt much, either.

Now she walked back to her family's inn and paced about the yard with gloved hands over her tingling ears. The chickens fluttered about and squawked at her, and she scattered their evening meal early, her fingers becoming stiff sausages. The temperature plummeted until it knifed into her bones and teeth, but she stayed outside until the gray sky became grayer and she stopped feeling the tips of every extremity.

When she went back in, two patrons sat at a table, their rumpled clothes those of merchants off the water, their faces red and bunched with impatience. "Girl! We've been waiting an age. Hot wine and rice, and kill a chicken for us if you have it."

"Yes, Uncles." Li Li went back outside through the kitchen, grabbing the sharpest butchering knife on the way. A single swipe to catch a chicken; she held its warmth tight against her body and sliced with one swift move. The blood drained fast and practiced and red upon the frozen ground.

She took the bird back into the kitchen to prepare and went into the storeroom to get the wine—where she found her mother heaving at the arm of the dead man, tears dribbling down her jaw.

The corpse had collapsed on its side now, but had shifted only a few paces closer to the back door.

Li Li looked at her mother, looked at the corpse, and then back at her mother, who was not scolding or sniping but instead giving the distinct impression that their roles had reversed, and her small daughter of less than ten years had become the authority who had walked in on *her* doing something untoward.

Li Li pointed at the front room. "Guests," she said.

She walked past to ladle out bowls of cloudy yellow wine, then returned to the kitchen to prepare the food. The men ate and she sent them on their way, but by that time another patron had arrived demanding a meal and lodging. Li Li cooked and served, made up a room, and scrubbed out all the plates and bowls and pots once the man had retired.

By then it was full dark, an oppressive pitch aided by the overcast layer smothering any moon and stars. Li Li took a candle to the storeroom.

The room was empty, save for the dead man, who had now been wrapped—badly—in a length of rough cloth. Li Li moved past to where the back door was ajar.

Her mother stood in the patchy grasses behind the inn, shoving a spade against the ground, each motion barely chipping away another sliver of frozen dirt. Her breath huffed out in a gasping sob with every hit.

Li Li went back inside and brought the sole lodger a full hot pitcher of wine, no extra charge, and peeked out to make sure his room only saw the road. Then she listened until she heard his drunken snores and bundled back up in her warmest clothes.

She walked the three thousand steps to her cousin's place. All was dark, the living quarters behind the shipping house shuttered up tight. Li Li carefully lifted the latch of the tool shed where her aunt kept supplies for the vegetable patch. She borrowed a pickaxe and a digging knife and hiked back, stopping every so often to heave the heavy pickaxe from one shoulder to the other.

When she returned, her mother's body formed a curled crescent motionless around the haft of the spade.

Li Li thumped the pickaxe off her shoulder and sent the sharp end into the ground. Then again. And again.

Her mother roused at that. The two of them worked into the deep night, wood hafts blistering their hands. Then Li Li helped her mother drag the man out of the storeroom and into his shallow grave, where they packed the frozen clay tight atop him.

The next day, Li Li's shoulders ached and her hands cracked and bled. She wrapped her fingers in cloth and went to return the pickaxe and knife.

"What did you take those for?" asked Li Jun.

"I had to bury the dead," Li Li said.



Li Jun laughed. She was three years older than Li Li, tall and lithe like the eels that slithered down the river, and her hair stuck out as wild as if she'd not only been out on the frigid water but swimming its depths. Maybe she had. "Make sure you bury them deep," she said. "Otherwise they'll come back as ghosts."

Li Li did not laugh back. She had seen ghosts before, but only of her ancestors, and only in dreams. The idea of the dead man haunting the inn did not scare her, but it did annoy her. He had no right to invade her home.

She resolved to keep a close watch for ghosts.

She was still watching when, two days later, the Empire's investigators arrived.

They stayed at the inn.

They stayed at the inn, and demanded lodging and food without offering coin, and were rude to Li Li's mother, complaining that the food was too dry and the wine too weak. Then they interviewed every man in town and many of the women.

Li Li's father returned at midday but kept himself scarce, leaving his wife to wait on the interlopers. She stayed meek to them and then snapped at Li Li in the kitchen for peeling too much meat off the winter melon.

When the investigators went out to chase down anyone they decided to suspect, a handful of the townspeople congregated in the inn's front room in their place, and Li Li's father emerged to gather with them. Together they hunched over drinks, voices bouncing tense off the wooden walls.

*"What will we do? How could they know so fast?"*

*"Some damned mouth must've talked."*

*"Even the swiftest boat would take more than a day from Bianliang. I heard it was sorcery; an omen came of the magistrate's death..."*

*"Why would the Imperial augurs be casting their eyes all the way down here?"*

As Li Li retreated back to the kitchen, she heard her father grunt. "Same reason they pay just enough attention to send these grasping judges in the first place," he said. "Mark me, our worth to the capital is merely what they can scrape out of our pockets and stomachs..."

A weight seemed to hang over the inn all day, a heavy darkness that made the candles gutter and the rafters creak. Until that evening, when the townsfolk returned to the front room but the investigators did not—and all with a sudden roar of good cheer as if an overstretched noodle had finally snapped. The men laughed and shouted and toasted each other in every variety of the inn's wine, and the center of the party seemed to be Li Li's father.

"To Brother Li!" they cried. "A true man of the Empire!"

Wine sloshed and another sloppy cheer went up—until they saw Li Li watching and quieted.

"Eh, it's all right, Brother Li's daughter knows not to yap, don't you, girl?" said a younger one of the Tong brothers. Li Li knew him vaguely—the Tong family did a good deal of business with her aunt, and the eldest Tong brother had two daughters a bit older than her that Li Jun was fast friends with. Sometimes the three deigned to allow the littler cousin to join their group—which Li Li always did, even if they made her take enough bruises to prove her worth. They were bigger, and could always wrestle her down, but she never gave in.

Like a stone.

Elder Tong was staring at her, and Li Li realized he expected an answer. Her parents often scolded her for letting grown-ups' questions linger in the air for a moment too long. "Yes, Uncle," she said.

The men's hands unclenched, their faces relaxing back into easy smiles.

"I'd best be off anyway," Elder Tong said, rising and reaching for his fur-lined cap and outer wraps. "My elder brother thinks setting off for a delivery up in Ying Province might be in order, just in case anyone gets around to asking questions..."

"About today, or about your 'deliveries'?" said another of the men, with a tone in his voice that Li Li had come to recognize as a joke. The others guffawed.

"You want to stop benefitting, that's fine with us! Go on!" Elder Tong roared, laughing harder than any of them, while the joker raised his hands and hastily declared his lack of any desire for a change.

"To Brother Tong and Brother Li! Heroes of the Empire!" the men cried raucously. Elder Tong brushed them off and slapped Li Li's father on the shoulder.

"After today, Brother Li's talents far outstrip those of us lowly boatmen. Shall we do some cleanup for you on the river, Brother? We can take the boats, find a convenient swamp..."

"Oh, no, no, I couldn't ask such a thing," Li Li's father said in his booming voice. "The cleaning part is easy, just a trifle. I wish you good hauls and a swift return."

Once the men had all left, Li Li's father staggered to bed sauced with his own drink and fell into a motionless slumber. He might have been mistaken for a dead man himself, but for the snuffling snores reminiscent of a rooting hog.

Li Li went to pick up the scattered wine bowls and to wipe up the drink that sopped tables and benches. She wrung out the wet rags and went into the storeroom for a bucket and mop.

Her mother sat on a stool in the back, staring at two more corpses. Li Li couldn't see their faces, but the hems of their skirts had the silken trim of the two Imperial investigators.

Li Li's mother raised her eyes with something like hopelessness, sweaty hair falling across her face. The spade leaned against her knee, her hands drooped across it like the branches of a shrub that had given up against too harsh a clime, with no willingness left to lift its leaves toward the sun.

Li Li curled her own hands. Her scabbing blisters crackled against themselves.

No men from the government came for some time after that. None of the people in the town had any sort of ear into the capital, or knew any reason the magistrate was not replaced or more investigators sent. Li Li continued working at the inn alongside her parents, although, slowly, her father disappeared more often and returned sodden with wine, and her mother snapped less and retreated into a hollow shell, her skin beginning to shrink tight against her bones.

Over the years, as if now by custom, here and there another body would appear in the storeroom for the women to tidy. A tax collector who had come to raid the residents' pockets. A regular merchant from off the river who'd been suspected of slipping overweighted stones onto the payment scales. A boatman who became sloppy with drink every time he came through and made aggressive attentions on married women. Then another man from the capital who'd proclaimed officiously that he had come to enforce the river's ferry licenses, as he'd had information that many in the area were in violation—and a few weeks later, his cousin from a nearby village whom the gossip reported as having leaked such business about his neighbors. Once, a poor but handsome local man who'd caused trouble for a friend of Li Li's father by competing over a marriage contract.

Sometimes, after a disappearance rid the region of some acknowledged pestilence, Li Li's father would get a few grins or nods from select guests, and he would always smile back and put on a genial act of ignorance. Occasionally more investigators arrived, but they either came and left again or ended up in the storeroom like so many others.

Traveling the river was dangerous, everyone knew. Storms and cutthroats and serpents of the river's wide depths ... The people of the villages in this bend of the river were well-used to donning a wide-eyed innocence. See nothing, hear nothing, speak nothing of their own, not to some uncaring government official from far away.

And every time, once night fell, Li Li and her mother would drag the bodies out into the dark, heaving a growing collection of digging tools along with their burden. They'd discovered, eventually, that a nearby bog provided the most forgiving ground for grave digging, soft muck that would suck down a buried corpse with no outward sign, and that only froze across the very top layer in winter. It still took half the night to drag a body such a distance, and then to excavate enough mud for even a shallow covering. In cold months it might take the whole night, as they broke through the ice to where the swampiness somehow still churned warm beneath.

The river itself might have provided a more secretive maw, but the inn had been built far back from potential spring floodwaters, and an easy walk for a sailor or merchant was not such for dragging a corpse.

Li Li imagined the men's flesh decaying in the bog until their bones settled into the depths and crisscrossed atop each other. Like chopsticks thrown into the bottom of a basin to wash. Stacks of latticed chaos.

It was not until she was fifteen that the Empire sent another magistrate.

The position had remained vacant for so long that the local magisterial compound had become overgrown with knotweed, its ornate scrollwork broken in places and the tiles of its sweeping roof crumbling or chipped away. The retinue that preceded the new magistrate ordered the men of the town to scrape the weeds free and make every meticulous repair, with no mind paid to the labor that would ordinarily occupy their days—the fish that failed to come fat and fresh to market, the crops struggling untended, the dike walls and building stilts in need of this season's maintenance.

A muttering resentment blackened the town. Li Li was old enough now to comprehend it. The people did not need or want a new magistrate—for any rulings, the military governor in the nearest prefectural city could be appealed to, and conveniently, he was so far away and his attention on so many more important matters that

here in this bend of the river they could live their lives without interference. The governor's lack of attention might mean he was also no reliable source of justice, but that was all right, too, because this tiny bustling town and its surrounding tiny sprawl of villages and farms could largely oversee itself. Small squabbles were solved by a clean verdict of fists, larger ones sometimes by a gang of one man's friends banging on the other's door in the dark with the silver flash of a knife, or sometimes more civilly by their neighbors dragging them before a wealthy estate like the Mus' for a judgment. The Mu family were not true nobility of the type who had such heaven-granted judicial authority, and their eccentricities and occasional viciousness were well-known, but a decision with their teeth behind it was one all would respect. Most considered it a fair enough court for these parts, out here on the rural reaches of the Four Great River Deltas.

And sometimes, a person who upset the balance of this bend in the river would simply disappear.

Bones in a chopstick pile.

Li Li did not, at this point, remember the previous magistrate very clearly, although somehow the image of his noble hat smashed against the floor had stuck in her mind with the sharpness of recent detail. She could not recall whether they had buried it with him.

The new magistrate arrived off the river amid a great fanfare of silken banners and golden bells, far beyond anything Li Li remembered seeing in the town. But this part of the river had been burgeoning bit by bit, its vibrancy and traffic flourishing, and perhaps someone thought it merited notice. Certainly the sole local inn had lately been humming through every watch of every day.

Most of that work had been falling on Li Li. Her father had grown increasingly absent, more often than not returning only to raid fistfuls of silver from the inn and depart again ... Even when home, he intruded so much, while completing so little, that it sometimes seemed questionable whether their workload truly lightened with his presence. Her mother still rose at the same time and moved among

the same chores, but over the years had faded to a weary remoteness, and Li Li would frequently find her gripping a door frame or a table and staring at nothing.

The last few months the inn had gained the assistance of Li Li's cousin as well—after Li Jun's mother had succumbed to a hemorrhagic fever in late summer. The shipping business had gone to Li Li's father, who promptly sold it to the Mus for a tidy sum. Li Jun had approached her uncle with a humble but passionate argument not to sell, promising she could do the work of the ledgers and even go out as a helmsman herself and report everything back to him. But Li Li's father would not entertain the notion.

"I shall do my responsibility by my brother," he said to her, "and find you a decent marriage contract. A difficult order, I dare to guess. Of course, you're not to blame for how you were raised—if a plant is allowed to grow to weed it will naturally become hardened to proper pruning."

Li Li, eavesdropping as usual, knew her cousin well enough to see Li Jun's posture knot into the tightness of angry defiance, even if she was wise enough not to challenge the uncle who now held control of her life.

Instead, she unloaded in long monologues to Li Li later about how she was going to go off and join the Tongs on their boats for good, just as soon as they would have her. Li Li did not think it likely. Tong women might be just as brawny as the men, saying all hands were needed when scrubbing down a salt barge, but what was accepted on the river was not the same as the ways of the town, and the Tong elders wouldn't pick a fight with Li Li's father.

Practicality would win out. Li Jun might be older, but she had never been practical enough.

Today Li Li let her cousin's usual complaints fade into the background, drowned behind the day's never-ending duties. Her feet ached and her hands had split in stinging cracks from the washing. Her father had chosen to forego supervising the inn today, as he often did, leaving it to Li Li and her mother and cousin. When Li Li's



mother entreated him to please stay and help, this one time—he told her he trusted her, and wasn't that flattering? That he could delegate the family income to her entirely, that it made him proud ... and she wouldn't prove him wrong, would she?

Li Li's mother flinched and hunched, a hand going to the side of her abdomen. She'd been making that same motion commonly of late.

"Lie down, Auntie," Li Jun said, her face crinkling in concern. "You don't look well. We'll take care of the guests and then bring you some tea and tonic broth."

Li Li had the distinct feeling *she* ought to have said that first, but she hadn't thought to. A dark scorn spiked as she watched her mother hobble to her room—one that had been biting at Li Li more and more often. Guilt lapped vaguely on its heels: children were to protect and provide service and support to their forebears; it was what children existed for.

But if her own father wouldn't care for her mother's weaknesses, why should she?

She followed Li Jun to fetch wine for the packed front room of guests. Too many guests. The new magistrate's presence certainly hadn't damped the number of travelers, at least not yet. Some of those travelers would have brought their own provisions for her to cook, but the inn wouldn't have enough meat to feed the rest—not until the Tongs returned with more stores for the town.

Li Li was already bracing for the endless complaints sure to pelt down upon them. The inn had better have enough wine.

She didn't want to know how the men might react, if the inn didn't have enough wine.

At the entrance to the storeroom, however, Li Li almost ran into her cousin's back, where Li Jun stopped stock-still in the doorway.

Piled behind the barrels were the familiar stacked limbs of ever more bodies. Rich clothes, limp hands, slack faces. And this time a very large lot of blood, seeping across the floor as if a barrel of dark fruit wine had spilled across it.

The dangling limbs were too many to easily count. More than her father had ever left them to take care of at once before ... Li Li's scorn at her mother's weakness sharpened into a white-hot anger at her father. *Does he not realize how long this chore takes?*

And now her mother leaving her to it alone ...!

"Aiya," whispered Li Jun. "Look, it's the new magistrate."

The same swooping black headdress lay a bit apart from the corpse pile. The visceral stamp of the first man, six or seven years ago, had never left Li Li's memory.

"What do we do?" Li Jun asked.

"We clean it up," Li Li said. "That's *our* job. Father does his business, and he says it's his women's job to clean up."

"The other disappearances..." Li Jun was clever, which was good, because it saved Li Li time explaining. She had no concern that Li Jun would cause any trouble. Li Jun was of the local populace, and family besides, and everyone knew how the government officials stripped prosperity from the villages and played games with the residents' livelihoods. How pretty women were advised to appear less so when near the eyes of government men, and how their husbands were advised never to step in, lest they lose more than a wife.

"We'll have to deal with it after the guests go to bed," Li Li said, assuming the authority of experience.

As if in response, rowdy shouts erupted from the front room, demanding what was taking so long with the meat and wine. Li Li's eyes crawled over the corpses. A hopelessness wanted to throttle her. How many bodies to drag? How many trenches to dig?

Li Jun seemed to be thinking the same. "Could we get them to the river? I could swim, weight them down in one of the caves..."

Li Jun might be older, but she was ignorant of the way dead bodies sagged like sacks of rice in the shape of a man. "We'd need a mule and a cart for that," Li Li said.

They'd need to rid the inn of the bodies the same way they always did. Li Li's fury at her father welled up and up, flooding her.

Drowning her.

"Where are those useless wenches?" came a yell from the front room. "Meat, girls, or I'll butcher the lot of you instead!"

Li Li recklessly wondered what would happen if she walked out of the inn and left it all undone. Would her father have to bury his own corpses for a change?

But no, her cousin and her mother would do it, her mother falling and fainting, and though Li Li didn't strictly love her mother, she did feel a familial duty, and the image reeked of an injustice so vast it made her teeth hurt. But the prospect of dragging so many out to bury—and with so many guests who would already keep them up late into the night with demands and complaints, that the wine was too thin or the beds too cold, or that the inn did not have enough meat—

Li Li's eyes flashed wide.

"Cousin?" Li Jun said. "What is it?"

Li Li had begun moving, retrieving the cleavers. Knives in hand, she appraised the body on the top of the pile. It stood to reason a man would not taste different from a goat or a hog.

And she knew how to butcher those.

"You get the wine," she said to Li Jun. "I'll bring the meat."

The guests went to bed full and happy, and the inn even had a surplus of shanks that Li Li placed on hooks as she had been taught. Only this time she took some care to disguise any humanlike foot or hand or expanse of bared and hairy skin.

Once the guests had been calmed and put up, and any repeated whines or calls for yet another cup had been dealt with, Li Jun helped Li Li mop up the blood from the butchering and burn the men's clothes. Tomorrow the guests would not only tell tales of a well-stocked inn, but rhapsodize about how warm the place had been kept on a blustery night. What luxury!

"Your father is a hero," Li Jun said in a hush, as they finished. "I never knew!"

Li Li snorted. "He's not a hero. He only does the easy part."

"Maybe he'd let me help," Li Jun said. She spun the mop to *crack* it against one of the pillars of the back room. "I've done summers with the Tongs keeping ruffians off their boats, and I'm just as good with a knife as them. My mother said she'd marry me to the first boy who could swim longer than me or beat me in a fistfight, and I'm not married, am I? And the Weng boy drowned trying!"

Li Jun loved telling that story.

"You oughtn't be so proud of not being married," Li Li said. "Your parents are dead. Now you're dependent on charity until you do find a husband."

Li Jun's eyes narrowed. "Why, though? The Tong sisters are going to take over the salt barges eventually, their father said so, and the Mus don't have a son either and they taught their daughters to hunt tigers. We aren't any weaker than them. Besides, you're right, you and your mother run the whole inn, your father doesn't do anything. I bet I could do his other 'business' just fine, too." She made a stabbing gesture in the air. "I've heard of groups of female bandits in the hills. Maybe I'll go join them."

Li Li had heard such tales, too. She wasn't sure she'd like that. Women annoyed her just as much as men, most days. She wasn't even sure she *was* a real woman; she seemed to be cursed in some way—her women's monthly water still had never come, at this point surely backing up its toxins into her blood. Meanwhile, the eyes of the boys in the town skimmed past and through her, which was just as well since she was repulsed by them in turn. She was old enough now that Li Jun and the Tongs bragged openly in front of her of their ever-escalating obscene exploits—Li Li was pretty sure they'd even "done things" with *each other* while out on the boats, which they said didn't count. Li Li was unclear on whether this was because they were all girls, or if because they were all involved then none of them could score anything above the others, but all of it sounded so distinctly unenjoyable that she secretly dreamed of worming her way out of ever sharing a marriage bed.

Sometimes men didn't get married. Rarely, but sometimes. Maybe she could become a man. Gossip said one of the Mu daughters had done that the other way around, but rules were different for rich eccentrics who taught their daughters to fight tigers.

"I could be a bandit," Li Jun was saying. "A hero of the hills. Like your father, but not leaving all the work to the womenfolk. I bet I'd be great at it."

She produced a knife and threw it in one move. The blade buried itself in a doorjamb across the room, the handle vibrating with the force of it.

Li Li walked over and wrenched it out. "You'd better not say such things when the Imperial investigators arrive."

Her cousin's expression went shocked and tense. Maybe from nervousness. Maybe eagerness.

Li Li sighed and handed the blade back. "Just don't say anything, right? They'll come eat all our food and go away again."

*Unless my father kills them first,* she added silently.

Li Li had spent no serious worry over her cousin knowing the truth. But she ought to have remembered a far deeper concern than Li Jun telling tales about what she knew: her cousin was uncontrollable.

Without consulting Li Li at all, she conspired with the Tong sisters, who had just come back downriver with their family. The Tong girls spread wild rumors of a wakening water demon among the surrounding towns, and Li Jun plunged into the deep, gray fathoms of the river and swam below every one of the investigators' boats during the last days of their approach, holding her breath so long they neither saw a ripple of her arrival nor when she surfaced afterward.

When the investigators disembarked at the inn they jumped at every small sound, dark moons pressed out beneath their eyes and their fine beards and caps awry.

*"Something knocking at our boats—"*

*"A river demon, everyone is saying so!"*

*"It must have been that which devoured the magistrate and his men, we mustn't stay long..."*

*"It's this place, this place is surely cursed!"*

Li Jun came back to the inn rather insufferable. "I fixed it all, didn't I?" she bragged. "See, I *told* you I'd make a good hero."

"It's not done yet," Li Li said. "And you should have asked first. This isn't some game."

"Stop being such a mud-stuck clam," Li Jun said. "They swallowed it like fish bait. They're going to leave and no one is ever going to come back to bother us, you watch!"

Such a plan might have worked. Even Li Li had to admit it, though she refused to say so aloud.

If only it hadn't been for the ghost.

After so many years of corpses, Li Li had ceased to worry about ghosts. She knew ghosts could enter the world at times, everyone knew such a thing, but they were so rare, and so often mysterious in their methods of manifestation, and as likely to bestow beneficence as to make trouble. More importantly, Li Li's father had been killing people for enough years that Li Li had become jaded to the possibility that one might return.

Until this magistrate did.

He didn't visit in dreams, the way Li Li's ancestors had on brief flickering occasions. He didn't make his presence known through strange events, either cursed or blessed, nor did he return as animal or insect, nor through cold or wind.

He came as a shadow.

The inn was abuzz with it the next day, the day the investigators had been hastening to depart, with their report of the magistrate's demise via river demon. But four of the six investigators had seen the magistrate in the night, along with another three guests.

They talked in hushed voices of his shadow sliding silently out from cracks in the darkness.

Reluctantly, the delegation's leader determined that they must remain longer and seek communication with the apparition. He assigned himself and one of his men to depart to a neighboring town to find a spirit medium, giving his other four unhappy subordinates strict instructions to keep watch for the ghost.

Traveling for a medium would take at least a full day and night. The four remaining investigators lurked sour and white-faced around the inn, and Li Li tried to go about her duties as if she did not feel the weight of a dozen panthers scrambling up her back. Her cousin was even jumpier.

"What if he tells them somehow?" Li Jun whispered while they cleaned out the lodging rooms, no matter how Li Li tried to shush her. "What if he can tell them who killed him?"

"My father's gone again anyway," Li Li said. As had become his habit, he had disappeared up or downriver before any investigation descended.

But the thought snuck up from her heart, in the greatest of familial betrayals: *No great loss, if they do come for him.* After all, hadn't Li Jun said herself how Li Li and her mother were the ones who truly ran the inn?

If the investigators took her father away ...

No more long absences while only returning to yell at Li Li and her mother or plunder the inn's savings. No more finding fault with their work while barely moving to help with the inn's chores, only drinking and heckling and reminding them that it all came from him.

No more bodies left in the storeroom for them to clean up at the most inconvenient times, while he alone raked in the whispered adulation of any in the town who knew.

Her prior disrespectful words had been nothing but truth: her father only did the easy part. Any of them could kill a man just as well, couldn't they? It didn't take some great skill to stab into rich soft skin that was sopped with beef and potent rice wine, did it?

She made a retreat into the kitchen and ground tea and cardamom and pepper, too much and too fast until she struck too



hard and the pestle cracked.

She stopped. Forced herself to stillness. The spices had scattered across the counter.

Maybe, with her father gone, her mother might cease being so sick and weak all the time. At least her mother worked hard. At least she did what needed doing. A small, fleeting part of Li Li wondered if, with her father gone, her mother might become a figure she would gladly pay daughterly duties toward.

Besides, Li Li was discovering that she despised injustice even more than weakness. Not because of any souls-deep sympathy for her family and neighbors, but because of the way it added up so wrong and out of joint, like a ledger that wouldn't match itself. The world ought to balance.

It ought to, and it never did. The rich government officials took whatever they wanted, and Li Li's father killed whomever he wanted, with Li Li and her mother crunched in the fissures of it all and working their hands to bleeding.

She returned to her chores and allowed herself to imagine a future where her father met some timely end. With his nuisance removed, her mother could gain widow's rights to the inn, the same as Li Jun's mother had. They'd finally be able to run it in peace, doing a hard day's work and then retiring to bed without worry ...

Thus it was that when Li Li came into the back storeroom to lock everything up for the night, and she saw the great swooping headdress shadowed on the wall by a light that came from nowhere, she stopped cold and still as a rock but did not turn away.

Li Li stared at the shadow. She did not feel afraid.

The inn was quiet. The remaining guests would be in bed, trying to sleep—or failing to sleep, what with word of a ghost about. Most had fled with nervousness at such an interaction, leaving the rooms near-empty for once.

The shadow elongated slightly, the body growing taller and thinner. Somehow, the magisterial headdress simultaneously stretched wider, until its authority yawned to near comical levels.

"Do you speak?" Li Li inquired finally.

The shadow was silent.

"Are you here for vengeance against my father?"

Again, no reply. No movement.

Li Li wondered if the magistrate even knew her father had been the one to assassinate him. When she'd chopped through the grizzle of the body, she'd noted the knife wound that gaped between the back ribs.

If the ghost didn't know who had been responsible for such an end, she supposed she had now told. But the shadow had not extinguished itself.

What else might it be seeking?

With a start, she wondered if her own actions had caused this manifestation. Cooking human flesh ... could such a thing release a restless ghost? After all, even among the ardent admirers of her father's activities, most would frown on what she had done.

The thought made her angry. *Those* men had not been working their hands raw to help ill mothers defray exhaustion when dumped with such inconvenient corpses, and she was sure how they would judge her nonetheless. But her solution wasn't of some inferior moral character. It was *clever*.

"They won't find your remains," she declared to the ghost. "If it's my father you want to point at, though—is that it? Is that what you're looking for? Well, if he didn't want anything found, he should have done it himself. The old magistrate, the one before you—he's buried in the yard out by the larch tree, and anyone who—"

The shadow winked out.

Li Li stood in the empty night, stood long enough for her feet to grow stiff against the unmoving ground, stood stiller than any rock face on a carven mountain. The strange righteousness that had filled her had burst as suddenly as it appeared, leaving a vague void behind.

She'd told on her father. Her family, her elder. Her *father*. An act against Benevolence, against nature, even more than eating human

flesh.

She should be flooded with guilt and shame.

Instead, something had begun to sizzle and bubble within the emptiness like when the river churned with typhoon-fed floods.

Something very like excitement. Or power.

The inn was awoken by screams.

Li Li struggled out of sleep in disorientation, deep dreams still snatching at her. The light had begun to turn, almost at dawn—almost when she would have been rising anyway—

Someone screamed again. Li Li was struck by the sudden instant certainty that the scream belonged to her mother.

She was on her feet without being fully awake, racing outside without proper outerwear or boots, her breath fogging with the late-autumn cold and her ears ringing with the aftermath of those screams. The first edges of dawn cracked weak and watery over the yard.

Others from the inn were stumbling out into these last dregs of night. The few guests who had remained—and Li Jun, too, wrapped hastily in a blanket, the Tong sisters with her, strapping young women who stood with the confidence that they were no longer children. Li Li hadn't known they'd stayed over with Li Jun; they usually lived out of their boats.

Li Li's eyes raked across the yard—and found her mother.

Her mother, who knelt a few paces before the larch tree, her worn thinness suddenly in such sharp relief that her fragility seemed shocking. Someone had chipped up the clay beside her.

The four remaining Imperial investigators surrounded the shallow grave beneath. One leaned a pickaxe haft against his hip, another had discarded a spade upon the ground. In the pitted earth, a half-unburied human skull stared from naked and collapsed sockets. His fine clothes had turned to dust, roots twining through where his flesh had been. But somehow the swooping magistrate's hat was still as broad and black and fine as the day his corpse had appeared in their storeroom.

Within Li Li, the surprise of it warred with smug satisfaction. She'd told the ghost, and the ghost had communicated to them, even with no spirit medium to interpret.

*Now the scales will balance. Everyone will get what they deserve.*

"Explain this, innkeeper," said one of the investigators to Li Li's mother. He bit the words so sharply that spit flew forth with them.

Li Li's mother hunched over against the ground, shaking her head over and over, not in defiance but desperation. Her breath keened high and hard, so fast she couldn't seem to speak.

Li Li did not feel sympathy. Her mother had always reacted with overly high humors. Once the investigators had taken Li Li's father away, and the inn slipped back to normal, all this frenzy would recede and everything would turn calm.

One of the other men turned to his partners. "The snake cannot move without the head—the husband must also be involved. Bind her and take her to the magistrate's compound. The chief will decide if they face justice here or if it's to be prisoner transport to Bianliang."

The words took many heartbeats to coalesce into meaning, so contrary were they to Li Li's expectations. Why would they—but her mother hadn't—

*They assumed—*

Li Li began to call out—what, she hadn't determined; she only knew that this was not the way she had meant anything to go. Before she could, her mother launched herself at the feet of one of the investigators.

The motion was one of supplication. As if to clutch at their hems and press her face upon their boots in weeping entreaty.

The man's lip lifted in a sneer. In that moment, with a movement that was almost casually slow, he moved the pickaxe from against the side of his leg.

The head of the tool thumped against the ground in front of him. Directly in the path of Li Li's mother as she fell at his feet.

The dirt-clodded spike of the pickaxe plunged through the soft skin just below her jaw.

Her cries cut off with a wet crunch. Her limbs flopped boneless against the ground in the sudden silence.

"Stupid woman," said the investigator. "At least now we won't have to—"

A choked gurgle cut him off as the edge of the spade *thunked* straight into his throat.

The investigator struggled against suddenly folding limbs, his eyes casting about in confusion. He hadn't seen Li Li grab the spade off the ground. Hadn't seen her heave it upward with all her strength.

People always underestimated her strength.

She yanked the spade back from his neck, and blood fountained forth, more than she'd ever seen when butchering animal or human. The other three investigators had begun to move by then, hands fumbling for the blades at their sides. Li Jun's knife took one of them in the chest. The Tongs tackled another with a shout, pounding him into the earth. The last man stumbled in his shock, and Li Li heaved the spade again.

Its dull metal rang hard against his skull.

He clattered onto the ground. Li Jun dove in to grab the man's own short sword, and she plunged it through his body as if driving a fence post.

The Tongs stood up. The elder of them pressed a nonchalant hand against a bloody slash that gaped her forearm open. The younger gripped a jagged rock in one hand. Bits of white bone shone through the face of the man unmoving below them.

The elder Tong sister jerked a chin at the inn's few patrons who had braved the haunted night. Three of them, all men, watching with slack jaws and wide eyes—two merchants from off the river and one man from a neighboring village who'd stayed to sleep off his drink.

"We'll have to kill them, too," the elder Tong said. "They saw."

"No—please, we won't—" started one of the merchants, at the same time the other began to shout. "How *dare*—!"

Li Jun's newly retrieved knife found the shouting man in the liver.

The man who had begged broke into a panicked run, but the younger Tong dropped her rock to grab one of the short swords and caught up with him easily. She loped back over to join her sister and Li Jun in surrounding the final man.

"Wait," Li Li said.

The others stopped, their expressions aggressive questions. The only sound came from the still-dying merchant whose gut Li Jun had buried her knife in; he curled on the ground with moans ever more thready and pitiful. One of the cocks crowed suddenly, calling out the start of the day in an unsettling contrast.

Li Li approached the local man. "You're not from off the river," she said. "Do you know what my father did here?"

His chin trembled in a nod, his ragged mustache shaking. "I heard—rumors, miss. Only rumor."

"Would you ever have told men like these?" She pointed back at the dead investigators.

Shock suffused his face. "Of course not! Never."

"Good. Speak nothing of this, either. Remember what protection this place has given you."

"Yes, miss. Of course, miss. We are all loyal to your father, miss."

Li Li tasted bitterness at that, and her hand twitched to complete the violence here, but she held the judgment at bay. Instead, she said, "Go home to your family."

He wasted no time in scrambling away, backing up with jerky bows. By that time the man on the ground had stopped moving.

Everything had stopped moving.

Li Li let the edge of the spade fall to the dirt, let her hand grip tightly against its haft. She didn't want to turn around. Didn't want to look at her mother's body.

She didn't want to look at the rest of the bodies, either. *So much to clean up ...*

She hadn't meant for anything to go this way.

But she hadn't started any of it, either. That had been the investigator, and the vile officials before him, and most of all—

Li Jun stepped over and rested a hand against her shoulder. "You did right. None of this was your fault."

"I know," Li Li said. "It's my father's."

Rumor said that when the investigators' leader learned his four subordinates had been devoured by the river demon, he and his right-hand man scurried straight back to the capital, convinced they had enough for their report after all.

Rumor said the capital seemed prone to forget the magisterial post existed, after that. Or perhaps they tried to assign men to it and failed, until a harried minister looked at the judiciary lists and decided leaving one remote bend of the river to the military governor was good enough.

Rumor also, however, now knew the name of Li Li's father, and knew embroidered stories of a skeleton found beneath his inn, stories whispered as often in admiration as in judgment. They were carefully never whispered where they might reach the ears of Bianliang—not that they likely would have been deemed important, by those far away whose wish was to ignore such a troublesome rural town. Even so, Li Li sometimes wondered if she'd been wise in sparing the local villager's life. Her generosity was returned to her, however, when still other rumors reported how her father heard the tales being told of his name and how he shook with fear as he ran. He fled toward the western mountains with no glance back at the inn or the living daughter he left behind.

The daughter was just fine with that.

Li Li and Li Jun smartened up the inn with some help from the Tongs, and Li Li made certain to declare to the right ears that her father's other "business" was finished and had disappeared along with him. Most took this to mean that no more skeletons would be buried in the inn's yard, and indeed, none ever were again.

The law technically provided no way for Li Li to come into ownership of the inn, as her father was still alive, and even if he had not been, as an unmarried daughter she would not inherit. In this bend of the river that lacked a magistrate, however, no one was too fussed about each and every stroke of law. Li Li declared that of course she must keep up the inn for her father in his absence, and that was enough for most people not to question.

If any questions did arise, they were not heard for long before mysteriously going silent.

Thus, for the next four years the inn at the bend in the river gradually became even busier and more prosperous, growing into a well-known stop for hungry traders. And if gossip whispered anything else about the inn and its young proprietor, it was wise enough not to whisper too loud.

Four years was how long it took for Li Li's father to decide the law would no longer remember his name, and then to return to claim his wealth.

Li Li was wiping down tables when his shadow loomed up in the door. He stepped inside with his chest puffed out in assumed ownership, then stood in the center of the clean and polished front room, fists on his hips. His eyes crawled over the walls and tables, the customers comfortably tucking in food and wine, the expanded wings that had been added on with their newly carved wooden screens and the delicate brushwork scrolls Li Li had hung upon the walls for both aesthetics and luck.

His shape sucked away the smooth balance of the space more than any shadow from beyond the grave. Cold gripped Li Li's heart, as if another ghost had entered her home.

That's all this man was. A ghost.

She straightened her clothes and approached him. From the way his eyes slid uncertainly she could tell he did not recognize her until she said, "Hello, Father."

His smile slipped, just a touch, before it shuddered back into place. "I see my inn is not as well-kept as it could be, but not ruined.



Good girl. I knew you'd handle things until I returned."

Li Li had come to consider her natural lack of expression to be an asset for just such moments as these. No stirrings showed on her face.

"You must be so tired," she said to her father. "Come into a private room. I'll bring you a meal."

He grunted and took what he considered his due. Li Li served him stew and steamed buns and noodles simmered in sauce, along with the inn's most fragrant wine. He rambled on about how he'd returned to sell the property, as innkeeping life no longer fit him.

*When did it fit you?* thought Li Li. *When have you ever kept the inn?*

"I have a few buyers nibbling about. And I don't want you to worry; I'm only considering the ones who are also willing to bring a bride price. We'll get this business done."

Li Li barely blinked at the casual assumption she would be sold off as a rich man's concubine. This must be what it felt like, to have power.

"I've been doing your business," she said instead.

Her father's wine-glazed eyes wobbled over to her, uncomprehending.

"*Both* your businesses," Li Li added silkily.

She pulled up a chair and sat beside him, leaning in against the table as if they shared secrets in a conspiracy. "Let's be truthful, Father. You never did those businesses yourself anyway. I've been doing both since the beginning. For ten years now."

Her father licked his lips, a quicksilver nervousness darting through his eyes for the first time.

"You're feeling heavy," Li Li said. "That's a mineral sleeping powder in the wine. It's very potent."

And made everything much more tidy and convenient, she'd come to find.

It took a moment for her father's eyes to grow wet and wide, and then he jerked as if to lurch up or swipe at her before falling heavily

back in the chair. "Can't. You..."

His lips flapped against the words until they were unintelligible.

"None of this was ever yours." Li Li's voice became a slither. "I saw so clearly, by the end. You claimed ownership but left every meaningful task to us. Because this bit now, it's no work at all, is it? To kill a man who's soft with meat and wine, and only full of air and words."

Her father tried to answer. Fear suffused every line of his face.

Li Li's knife moved with the whispering speed borne of four years of practice.

That night, Li Li straightened her inn with great care. She had plenty of meat stored up for the inn's travelers—the ones who would leave to travel onward, rather than those who would best serve by staying on her hooks to fill the bellies of the next ... those she judged to be too much like magistrates or fathers, or the rude ogles or complainers who demeaned and demanded.

The inn never wanted for traffic, here on this busy bend of the river. If not everyone made it up-or downstream, well, everyone knew the river was dangerous. Full of cutthroats and smugglers and undertows and ghosts and demons.

And Li Li. Who met and judged, just like a magistrate.

Tonight, however, she made a very special soup only for herself.

She waited for Li Jun to come back from the river—to come back from making the river more dangerous, as one of those smugglers and cutthroats who caused so many to hoard their silver in fear. Today she came from accompanying the Tongs upriver, returning with hulls that bulged with silver and salt and spices, dried fish and pickled vegetables ... all "donations" from choice estates, as Li Jun laughingly liked to say. She and Li Li added her share of the silver to a lockbox below the inn floor, alongside the establishment's own quickly expanding riches.

The inn was becoming impressively flush. Nobody had ever asked how the two cousins had come to run it, or how they had achieved such success. At least, nobody had asked for long.

Li Jun had spoken with great prescience, those years ago: they did a very good job without any husbands at all. Or fathers.

Tonight, Li Li left her cousin in charge, and she carried her freshly made soup up to her mother's grave on a hilltop overlooking the town. The streets and buildings spread out below, multiplying outward in a slow creep every season as the town expanded. Beyond them the river stretched wide and fathomless, a muddy gray-gold snake draped across the landscape, the farms on the other side tiny at this distance.

Li Li sat with her mother, and she leaned against an ash tree and drank her special soup while she watched the sun set.

Her home had never felt so peaceful.



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# MEDIAN

KELLY ROBSON



# Median

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**KELLY ROBSON**

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*illustration by*

ELIJAH BOOR

**T O R  
D O T  
C O M**

When Carla's little car broke down on the highway, she was in the fast lane, and instead of pulling over to the far side of the road, she had to stop on the median.

She sat there, jiggling the wheel with one hand and fiddling the ignition with the other, a hot, low sun glaring through the hatchback's rear glass. Only a few years back, a turn of a key would make an engine cough, and if it didn't, it meant the battery was dead. Or the alternator—something electrical. Now, cars were all electric, even more of a mystery than ever, and she had zero chance of figuring out the problem.

But it didn't matter, really. Dead was dead. She could press the start button all she liked. Nothing happened.

"Now what?" she asked. "Who do I call?"

Carla typed "roadside assistance" into her phone and hit enter. Trucks blasted past, so close the car shook as if grabbed by a fist. She stared at the Google logo until it disappeared, leaving a blank screen, white on white.

It had happened before. Her discount mobile provider was prone to denial of service attacks. But she still had phone service. She texted her sister Francisca in Montreal: *Can you send me the roadside assistance number for the 401?* When no reply came, she tried phoning both her sisters, then her supervisor. All three calls rang straight through to voicemail.

She would have sat there forever, alternating between pressing the button and working through her contact list, but a semi skinned by and clipped off her side mirror. A popping sound. The car pitched back and forth, bouncing on its wheels like a carnival ride. Then another truck took off her door handle.



The rear wheels of her car parted from the asphalt. It bucked once, canting into the oncoming lane. A cement truck hit the edge of the bumper. The whole rear end crunched. The car spun onto the median and slammed into the low concrete barrier.

Carla pulled herself out of the car and fell onto the gravel. She sat there, brushing dirt from her scrubs. It was her Easter pair, festooned with daffodils and tulips.

*Someone will stop, she thought. Someone will come. Someone has already dialed 911.* But nobody stopped. Certainly not the cement truck, which had long since disappeared beyond the highway's distant curve.

She climbed to her feet and waved at an oncoming car. One of its headlights glinted in the sun. The driver turned his head as he passed, mirrored sunglasses square on her, but he didn't slow. The other drivers didn't even look at her. The truck drivers stared straight over her head.

"I'm right here," Carla said, waving her arms.

Gravel and grime studded the skin of her palms and forearms, blood seeping from the abraded skin. She picked a piece of gravel out of her flesh and chucked it at her car. Such a little thing, there on the median; the rear end looked like something had taken a bite out of it. A rear wheel dangled like a broken tooth.

Hands shaking, she dialed 911. Three tries to hit the green button. She turned up the volume and listened to the ringtone, holding the phone to her head with both hands, as if praying.

"911. What is the nature of your emergency?"

"Car accident. I had a car accident. On the 401. West of Milton."

"Please stay on the line."

They put her on hold. Carla leaned her whole weight on her car, digging her elbows into the rusty roof panel. Not a good car, but the best she could afford. A 1995 hatchback with a pair of retrofitted drive trains installed by a guy in Oshawa who Frankensteined cheap cars in his backyard. She'd drained her savings account to buy it, and in two years, its charge range had gone down by half. To get

enough juice to do her evening appointments, she had to stop and charge it halfway through her shift, and then charge it again to get home.

"You're a write-off, aren't you?" she asked the car.

When she laid her forehead on her arms, the phone went dead. Maybe she canceled the call by accident, or maybe they hung up on her. In any case, she dialed 911 again and waited.

"911. What is the nature of"

Dead again. The screen protector was cracked, so maybe it was shorting out the screen? She peeled off the pieces and dropped them to the median. Dialed again.

"911. What"

"Hello?" she yelled. "Hello?"

No answer, though service was fine, three of the four bars glowing white. She dialed work.

"This is the office of Care Point Care Services. Our office hours are eight AM to four PM, Monday to Friday. Please leave a detailed message including patient name, address, and phone number, and your call will be returned within one business day."

"This is Carla. I've had a car accident. I'm not going to make the rest of my appointments. That's, uh ... hang on." Carla fished the printout from her pocket of her scrubs. "Deborah Anders, Karen Gagnon, and David Chan. Can you let them know I won't be there? And I won't be able to do my appointments tomorrow, either. My car is dead. Okay. Thanks."

Because of the staffing shortage, the office was barely covered on weekends. Probably nobody would pick up Carla's message until tomorrow morning, and in the meantime her clients would wait. Deb needed her dinnertime feeding. Her G-tube site was getting painful, the skin around the external bumper pink and swelling. Carla had been treating it for a week with anti-inflammatories and ice. Karen had a colostomy bag that needed emptying before her bath, and Dave was waiting for meds and a toilet transfer. All three needed to be moved from chair to bed. If Carla didn't show up, nobody would

get washed, medicated, fed, or toileted. They'd wait, abandoned, wondering if anyone was ever going to come.

Carla tried again to wave down a car, flinging her arms around semaphore-wild. Nobody stopped. Nobody even slowed.

She crawled into the back seat of the hatchback and rooted around. Her coffee was splashed across the dashboard, the red Tim Hortons cup rolling on the gritty floor mat. She carried a big bottle of distilled water in case her patients ran out, but now it was smashed.

Her black Care Point backpack was fine, though. Bandages, scissors, and sterile swabs. The pair of tweezers she used to pick lint out of Deb's G-tube site. A box of latex gloves and a pack of N95 masks, size small. A blood pressure cuff, finger oximeter, and stethoscope. Plastic bottles of acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and aspirin. Anti-inflammatory gel, antiseptic cream, hand sanitizer. In the outer pocket were her wallet, keys, charge cords, and the bag of cappuccino candies she'd bought on a whim, hoping the caffeine would perk her up between visits.

Carla popped a candy into her mouth and crunched down hard. It splintered and melted into a hunk between her molars. She worried at the candy with her tongue as she pulled up the map on her phone and zoomed in on her location.

Not much detail available, not with the connection problems, but some of the map was preloaded. The highway a double yellow line on a gray background, with a sliver of blue zigzagging across it—a creek or something. Satellite view showed trees and fields. Cars and trucks frozen into specks on the dark gray highway, caught in time by the overhead camera. The median a light gray strip between the eastbound and westbound lanes, like meat in an old sandwich.

If she could cross the highway, she could walk ... walk where? To the east was Campbellville, which looked like nothing more than warehouses and parking lots. They'd be empty on a Sunday. Probably wouldn't even have security guards, just rotating cameras behind which might or might not be a pair of human eyes. To the west were residential acreages, but they looked like the kind of

places where nobody actually lived—second or third homes for rich people, their empty blue pools pocking the green satellite expanse. But to the northeast was a casino. People would be there, and help.

Her phone rang. Carla nearly dropped it in her eagerness to answer.

“Hello?” she yelled.

“It’s my mother.” A woman’s voice, faint against the roar of traffic. “She’s by herself and she’s on the floor. She can’t get herself up.”

Carla wasn’t allowed to exchange phone numbers with clients. Care Point claimed it protected carers’ privacy, but really, it kept clients from trying to arrange discount services under the table. A firing offense, so Carla had never broken the rule. How had this one gotten her number?

“Is it Deb Anders?” she asked. “Or Karen Gagnon?”

“Nina Sandhu. She lives at 454 Frobisher Boulevard in Milton.”

“I’m sorry but she’s not my client. Even if she was, I can’t go anywhere right now.”

“You’re supposed to—” The woman gasped. A horn sounded.

“Are you driving?” Carla asked.

“Yes, I’m trying to get to my mom. But I’m caught in traffic. It’ll be an hour and a half, at least. That’s why I need you to go there, right now.”

“Me? I can’t help anyone,” said Carla. “I can’t even help myself.”

“But who else can I ask?”

“Call 911,” Carla said. “Tell them she needs a lift assist.” She hung up.

North. The casino was on the north side of the highway. She’d have to cross the westbound lanes. Carla swung her legs over the concrete barrier and stood at the edge of the fast lane, trying to judge the speed and distance of the oncoming cars. At this angle, it all looked impossible, the traffic not slowing one bit. Which was strange. Anything little thing odd on the highway caused a slowdown—everyone lifting their foot from the accelerator and gawking. She

was right there. The hatchback was right there. Why wasn't anyone slowing?

Maybe because their feet weren't on the accelerator. Maybe everyone was using smart cruise control, the cars continually adjusting for optimal speed and distance to keep the traffic flowing.

But if one of the cars pasted her as she tried to run across the highway, then they'd stop. They'd have to.

Problem was, Carla wasn't built for speed, never had been. She could deadlift clients out of bed six times a day, but running? She couldn't remember the last time she'd tried. She didn't have to get across all three lanes at once, though. She could cross the first lane, and stand on the divider line waiting for a gap so she could run across the next. The cars wouldn't hit her if she stood still. Not unless one of them was changing lanes.

She tightened the straps on her backpack and hooked her thumbs in tight, making herself into the smallest possible human bundle. She dug her toes into the gravel, and leaned in, and watched for a gap. There. And there. And there. If she picked the right moment, she'd get across fine. Or maybe the car that hit her would be small, and she would survive.

Her phone rang.

"Hello," she yelled.

A kid's voice: "They're fighting. He's hurting my mom. Again."

"Diego?" she asked. It had to be her nephew—no other kid would call her. But it didn't make sense. Her older sister's family was on vacation in Tulum. Carla was supposed to water their plants tomorrow. "Diego, is that you? This is Tía Carla."

"Can you come?"

It wasn't Diego. "Who is this?" she asked.

"Liam. He's hitting her head."

"Liam," she said. "Get as far away as you can and hide." No idea who this kid was or why he was calling her, but it didn't matter because there was only one answer. "There's nothing you can do. Hide. And call 911." She hung up.

Trying to run across the highway was just stupid. She'd be roadkill a hundred times over. A smear on the asphalt. A human stain.

Maybe she could walk along the median. When the highway curved, the traffic would have to slow down, wouldn't it? Even just a bit, enough to make a difference.

Gravel crunched under her sneakers as she trudged east. Dust and dirt flew in her face, microscopic bits of oil and tar and rubber, aerosolized by the wheels. She reached into her backpack and retrieved an N95 mask.

Mask in place, she protected her eyes with her hand, keeping her gaze low to avoid the worst of the dust. One of her sneakers had blood on the toe—where had that come from? Her arms, she guessed, the road rash. She picked another bit of gravel out of her forearm. Blood fell on her foot, her knee, her thigh. Three drops, then stopped.

She wasn't shocky anymore, at least. Her hands weren't shaking, but she was exhausted. Every step felt like she was going uphill, and the sun on her back was fierce. A long evening shadow stretched in front of her, cool blue against the orange-tinted gravel. Magic hour, that's what photographers called it. When the sun went down, it'd get cold.

Her phone rang.

"Hello?"

A wheezing voice made itself heard over the roar of traffic.

"It feels like I've broken my arm, but I didn't."

"Dave, is that you? David Chan?"

"No. I'm sweating like crazy just sitting here. And my back hurts."

"That sounds like you're having a heart attack," she said.

"Okay, what do I do?"

"You need to go to the hospital. Don't try to drive, it's too dangerous."

"I can call an Uber."

“Good. While you’re waiting, get an aspirin. Chew it up and swallow it.” She hung up.

As the highway slid into the curve, the median widened into a grassy strip of wasteland. Fresh green sprouted under the mat of last year’s growth, coated with salty grime from a season of snowplows.

The curve. She’d thought the traffic might slow around it, but no. If anything, the stream was faster, the cars packed tighter as the evening commute thickened. None of the drivers turned to look at her as they passed. Many were glued to their phones, just passengers in self-driving cars. Which gave her an idea. If a self-driving car registered her as an obstacle, it would have to stop. And then everyone would have to slow down. It only took one car to make a traffic jam.

She stepped onto the white lane divider, as if on a tightrope. Widened her stance and held her arms out from her sides to make her silhouette more recognizable. *Here is a human person. See?*

The cars aimed themselves in her direction. Side mirrors blitzed past her hip, her shoulder, her head. A truck flashed its lights. It skimmed past, and the suction from eighteen whirling wheels yanked at her flowered scrubs.

She gave it a good long try, standing square to the oncoming sensors, squinting to protect her eyes from the flying grime, but it was no good. She stepped back onto the median.

As Carla trudged east through the curve, a structure appeared in the distance, stained red by the last dregs of sunset. A bridge for an overpass, flanked by the arms of a cloverleaf. This was the intersection on the map, with the Campbellville warehouses to the south and the casino to the north. Good. She couldn’t get across the highway, but maybe she could climb off it.

One central bridge column parted the median, weeds growing thick at its base. She ran her hands up and down the concrete. It was smooth. No handholds. And even if she could shinny up—which she couldn’t—she’d never be able to haul her ass over the concrete

overhang of the bridge deck. An extreme athlete could do it, maybe, but not her.

She called 911 again. This time it didn't even ring. Dead air.

The sun set fast. Headlights turned the world into flashing intersections of night and bright, like the nightclubs she'd gone to with her sisters, back when they were all so young. On the dance floor, she'd lose herself in sensory overload, throwing herself into a bounded world of risk. A curated encounter with the unknown, where she could decide for herself from moment to moment how much danger she wanted to find.

Beyond the overpass, the median widened and dipped. Scrubby bushes grew in the ditch, and a stand of trees forced the two arms of the highway apart.

Her phone rang.

"Hello?" she said.

"Someone just smashed the window of a bank. Queen and Spadina."

"I don't care," said Carla. She hung up.

Far ahead, a long, lithe shadow darted into the glare of headlights. It slid across all three lanes and turned to look at her, pointy ears sticking up from its head like horns. Then it vanished into the trees of the median.

A dog wouldn't attack her, not unless it was rabid. A coyote wouldn't either. All the same, a chill coursed through her, starting at her toes and shivering up her torso to her throat.

Carla hugged herself, and when her phone rang, she dropped it, cracking the screen.

"Hello," she said.

"Is that all you have to say?" An elderly voice. Genderless. Crotchety.

"Hello," she repeated. "What?"

"Aren't you supposed to ask me what the problem is?"

"Okay. What's your problem?" she asked. "Tell me everything."



"When there's a fire alarm I'm supposed to wheel myself into the stairwell and wait on the landing. It's the refuge area, they said. So that's what I did. I've been sitting here for hours now, waiting for someone to come. I can't go up or down, and I can't get back into the hallway. The door's too heavy."

"Did you try calling someone?"

"Why? Are you telling me to call someone who cares?"

"I mean, is there someone in your building who can help?"

"No. You're not supposed to use the elevators during a fire alarm, but next time, you bet that's what I'm going to do. Either that or just sit in my apartment. It's not like there's actually a fire."

"What about your neighbors? Do you have the number of anyone in your building?"

"Aren't you supposed to ask for my address?"

"Why? I can't help you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Did you try banging on the door? Use something hard."

"So you're not sending someone?"

Carla shifted the phone to her other ear and leaned in as if it would help her understand.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" she asked.

"911. Aren't you 911?"

"No. I'm not."

"I guess I got the wrong number. Fine."

"Wait," Carla yelled. "When you get through to 911, can you tell them I'm stranded on the median of the 401 by the Campbellville overpass?"

"Tell them yourself," they said, and hung up.

Ahead, near the trees, headlights caught on something shiny. It flashed in the beams, and the longer Carla watched it, the more it seemed like the flashes were coming in a pattern. Short-short-short. Long-long-long.

She walked toward it, why not? She had to keep moving anyway. It was getting cold, and the last thing she needed was to flirt with

hypothermia.

Walking in the bottom of the ditch, the low beams of the headlights pointed straight at her, painful in their brilliance. She had to keep her eyes on her toes to keep from being dazzled. So she didn't notice the wreck until she saw blood pooling on the median.

A four-door sedan, upside down, wheels spinning. A man in the driver's seat, his body pillowed by the airbag. A woman in the other seat, her face plunged through the windshield. Carla got on her knees and shrugged off her backpack. She pulled out the stethoscope and fitted the earpieces tight in her ears. Easy to reach the driver's back, with him collapsed forward. No breath, no heartbeat. She didn't need to check the passenger to know she was gone, too, with her neck twisted, jaw pointing at the sky.

Still on her knees, she dialed 911, hugging herself, chin tucked in tight. The call connected, rang once, and went dead. Carla swiped the phone on the thigh of her scrubs and tried again. When the call didn't connect, she crawled over to look in the back of the car.

Two empty baby seats hung from the back seat. No children anywhere, not lying on the ceiling of the car, not in the dirt and weeds and gravel of the median. Obviously, that meant no kids had been in the car when it crashed. But not far away, under a bush, was a plastic sippy cup. The milk inside smelled cool and fresh, and it wouldn't have if it'd been sitting in the car even for a little while, not when the day had been so hot. Carla stood and looked around, shading her eyes against the glare.

There, at the edge of the median, were two small forms, raccoon-sized and crawling on all fours toward the fast lane. Carla dropped the sippy cup and ran across the ditch, up the slope, and into the dazzle of headlights.

No doubt now, those crawling bundles were children, their cushy diapered bottoms in terry-cloth onesies lit by the flashing lights. Their tiny hands slapped the asphalt, cloth-booted feet propelling them in a four-point monkey-walk, knees not even hitting the ground.

A truck blasted its horn. Carla screamed and plunged into traffic, reaching for the children with both arms, as if she could envelop the whole highway and scoop them to safety. Cars buffeted her as she dodged across the lanes, grazing her hip, her elbow. Horns bellowed. She stopped on a dashed lane divider, breath rasping, hands clawing at her jaw as the traffic swirled past. Ahead, in the brief spaces between cars, the children humped over the slow lane and onto the shoulder. Their bald heads gleamed in the headlights.

One child turned and smiled at Carla before it disappeared off the far side of the road. A truck bore down on her. Its side-view mirror struck her head, and she fell backward into traffic.

\* \* \*

When Carla clawed herself awake, she was at the bottom of the ditch with a new crack in the glass of her phone, three missed calls from unknown numbers, and a text from Francisca in Montreal.

*I just got off a double. Gotta get some sleep. Call me tomorrow, ok?*

The time stamp showed the text was only ten minutes old. Maybe her sister was still awake.

*I'm in trouble, Carla typed. Been stuck in the middle of the 401 for hours now. No way to get off it. Can't get through to 911.*

She waited. No response.

*When you get this, call 911. Tell them there's a fatal car accident on the median of the 401, near the Campbellville overpass.*

Then she tried 911 again, just in case. The call didn't connect. But there would be at least one phone in the wreck, likely two, and one of them would work.

She walked back to the sedan and got on her knees. Reaching around the driver, she shone her phone light into the depths of the interior, but couldn't see much, not with the airbag in the way. No way to reach around the driver, either—her arms weren't long enough. But she could try to wrench the door open, pull the driver out.

It wasn't the first time she'd touched a dead person, not even the first time that week. One of her clients was a late-stage cancer patient with no mobility. He should have been in the hospital but was refusing to go. She'd arrived for his evening appointment to find him mouth open like a baby bird, staring at the ceiling and gasping his final breaths.

No matter how hard Carla pulled, she couldn't get the dead man out of the driver's seat—the airbag was trapping his thighs. Carla got the scissors from her backpack, tried to cut through the tough reinforced plastic, but they wouldn't bite. So she got in close, leaning over the dead man, pressing the bloody bag tight. With the scissors in her fist like a dagger, she slammed the point down on the plastic over and over until it deflated with a hiss. Then she dragged the man out of his seat and lay him on the median with his hands crossed over his chest.

On the underside of the dashboard lay an iPhone, a photo of two bald, grinning toddlers on the lock screen. She swiped at it until the emergency call screen surfaced.

"911?" said a woman. Carla was too relieved to notice the interrogative tone.

"I'm on the median of the 401 by the Campbellville overpass. Two people are dead. And there were two children. I can't find the children."

"No," said the woman. "That's not it. There's been an accident at the Bombay Grill. 370 Pearson Street. In Mississauga. One of the cars came through my window."

"Is anyone hurt?" Carla asked.

"The driver is bleeding from her head. She's walking around, though. Yelling at the guy who wrecked her car."

"Tell her to sit before she falls down."

"Okay." Voices in the background. *Come in and sit down*, said the woman. *911 says you have to sit down. No, you have to sit. Sit. Radha, get her a towel and a cup of chai.* "Yes, she's sitting now."

"Are you calling from the restaurant?"

"Yes, the Bombay Grill is my business."

"Do you have a pen?"

"I do."

"I need you to call 911 and report a car accident on the 401, on the median by the Campbellville overpass. Two fatalities and two missing children. Would you do that for me?"

"But aren't you 911?"

"No, I'm really not. I need your help."

"Of course. I'll call right away."

"Thanks." Carla clung to the dead man's phone with both hands, reluctant to hang up. Sirens sounded in the background.

"There's the fire truck," said the woman. "Will you be okay?"

"I'm not sure," said Carla. "I really don't know."

When she hung up, the night seemed darker than before, the headlights dimmer. The wheels of the upended car were still spinning, slowly.

If she could find the dead woman's phone, she could use it to try 911 again, but it wouldn't work. Nobody would come. Nobody would help. She was alone. One faint point on the map of chaos.

Carla sat beside the dead man and brushed the hair off his forehead with gentle fingers. His eyes stared. She could close his eyes, but without something to weigh down the eyelids, they'd keep sliding open. When people placed coins over the eyes of the dead, it wasn't to pay the ferryman, they did it to keep their illusions. A dead person with closed eyes seemed to be sleeping peacefully, even if their jaw was gaping. A dead person with open eyes wasn't a person. It was a thing.

She found two pebbles, cold and smooth. She closed the man's eyes and gently placed them on his eyelids.

A shadow moved through the trees. The dog was back, likely attracted by the scent of blood. Carla climbed to her feet, stiff and awkward, and put her body between the dog and the car. She clapped her hands.

"Go away," she yelled. "Get out of here."

She threw a rock at the dog. Bad aim. Its head swiveled on a long neck, then another head, and another. Not one dog, but three, though only one body was visible. And not like any kind of animal she'd ever seen. Flat heads, eyes nearly level with their noses. Wide grinning mouths and impossibly sharp ears.

Carla put the dead man's phone in her pocket. She raked both hands through the gravel. Then her phone rang. She flung the gravel at the dogs and snatched at the phone.

"Hello," she yelled.

"Is this 911?" An elderly man.

"No." All these people thought she could help them; she could almost laugh. "What's your problem?"

"I seem to be trapped. In my apartment. It's been days and days and nobody's come. I've been waiting."

His voice had the light, childish cadence of dementia. Carla had heard it many times. It could be frustrating to deal with, but Carla always made an effort to be patient. And right now, it felt good to talk to someone.

"That sounds really awful," she said. "What are you waiting for?"

"To go. I'm waiting to go."

"Go where?"

"The place you're supposed to go, when you're dead."

"Oh," she said. She expected him to say he was waiting for his mother to pick him up from school, or for some long-dead spouse to take him home. Dementia patients were usually anxious to go somewhere, desperate for someone to deliver them from disorder. But he didn't sound disordered. He sounded nice.

"I was hoping you'd tell me what I'm supposed to do," he said.

The dog walked toward her, heads low, crouching as if stalking her. It still looked like one dog with three heads. But that couldn't be, could it?

"I'm sorry," Carla said. "I'm not sure how I can help."

"If you can't, who will?"

Family, usually. It almost always fell to family members. Even if a client got three home care visits per day, it was never enough. Family had to pick up the slack. Who else?

"You haven't been living alone, have you?" she asked. "Do you have someone caring for you?"

"Oh, yes, I did, until I died. And now there's nobody. What do you think I should do?"

*Call 911*, Carla thought. The ultimate answer, the last-ditch option—call 911 and beg for help. Wasn't that what she'd been trying to do for hours, find someone, anyone to help her? Someone who couldn't deny her, put her off. And everyone she'd talked to, they wanted the same.

"If you're dead," Carla said slowly, "I think you should get into bed, cover yourself up warm and cozy, and remember all the good things in your life. Try to go to sleep."

The dog was belly-crawling toward her now. Snaky necks extending from one thick-muscled torso, tongues lolling.

"I can do that," he said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Carla slid the phone into her pocket and reached out to pet the dog. Those protrusions on either side of the heads weren't ears after all, but horns, sharp enough to draw blood.

"Good boy," she said. "Good dog."

She sat in the dirt and weeds of the median with the dog's heads in her lap. Its ears were wizened carbuncles, tortured masses of scar tissue. Carla caressed them gently with both hands and the dog's eyes narrowed. It kicked up one hind foot to show her its belly.

Her phone rang. She kept one hand on the dog as she answered it.

"911," she said. "How can I help you?"



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A WELL-FED COMPANION  
CONGYUN "MU MING" GU  
TRANSLATED BY KIERA JOHNSON



# A Well-Fed Companion

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**CONGYUN “MU MING” GU**  
**TRANSLATED BY KIERA JOHNSON**

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*illustration by*

PARK INJU

REACTOR 

*as if awakened, she turns her face to yours;  
and with a shock, you see yourself, tiny,  
inside the golden amber of her eyeballs  
suspended, like a prehistoric fly.*  
—Rilke, “Black Cat”<sup>1</sup>

Hairuo was the only person in the neighbourhood who had a cat.

Every morning, she woke to the roar of the hair dryer. Hairuo’s roommate liked her hair fluffy to match her toy poodle, so she had to wash and style it every day. Hairuo preferred to spend an extra thirty minutes in bed, doing nothing but staring up at the ceiling, imagining its rough, uneven lines as mountain ranges. The hair dryer droned on—she pictured herself on the wings of an airplane about to take off, overlooking the world turned upside down. Shadows of trees outside the window moved across the ceiling like giant birds soaring over the landscape. Could someone’s soul fly like that?

She let her hand hang off the side of the bed to stroke her cat. Her companion, her little soul.

The cat lay underneath the bed, only the white tip of his tail peeking out as it swept impatiently from side to side. She knew he didn’t like the noise. They were always at their most distant from each other in the mornings, kept apart by the incessant drone of the hair dryer, the increasingly dazzling sunlight, and irrepressible feelings of hunger and anxiety. He hid in the dark and folded up his slender mouse-like tail.

Hairuo got up, dressed slowly, and plucked a strand of black cat hair from her white sleeve. It felt thick and stiff, and she hesitated for a moment before throwing it away. The cat had a small frame, but he had been losing a lot of fur recently and appeared all the more fragile for it. He wasn’t eating well. Cats were picky eaters, she



knew that, but that didn't mean she could just let him starve. Nor could she rightly feed him nothing but bland, tasteless food, even though she herself only ate the bento box lunches from the convenience store downstairs: neat, uniform meatballs rolled on an assembly line and small cubes of diced carrot, day after day.

Hairuo's roommate stuck her head out from the bathroom, her hair bound up in rollers. Her poodle lay on his back, his tongue lolling happily from his mouth, his tiny eyes concealed by curly fur. As Hairuo's roommate began to loosen the rollers, she eyed Hairuo's dishevelled hair and pallid face through the mirror with an impatient expression.

"You know, having a cat isn't an excuse not to make an effort—"

"Goodbye," said Hairuo. She thought she heard the cat snarl quietly from the darkness below her bed.

Few people were still on the street by the time Hairuo headed out the door. A man with a bulging backpack, towing a short-legged, long-bodied sausage dog, passed her as he staggered towards the bus stop. She recognised him as another resident of their building. He'd once pressed a sweat-soaked sports game ticket into her hand, making her palm grow so sticky that she'd hardly been able to disguise her laugh. Afterwards, she'd seen him talking with her roommate by the neighbourhood's raised flowerbeds, sausage dog and poodle sniffing one another from head to tail; their cautious politeness had seemed on the verge of blossoming into warmth at any moment. Hairuo had left in a hurry.

Her cat didn't go to work with her like other people's dogs did; he stayed home alone instead. Even though "home" was a crowded shared apartment, it was the only place that was dark, quiet, *free* enough to suit him. He needed plenty of rest, far more than Hairuo herself. While he napped in his cat bed at home, she stared at the files and drafts on her computer screen and felt her mind drifting far away. Only the sound of her manager's footsteps walking back and forth could jolt her awake again. The manager's boxer dog always followed behind him, her thick shoulder blades rolling beneath her

sleek fur as she went. Every time the two of them went past, Hairuo felt glad that her cat didn't have to come face-to-face with a dog like that.

She forced her attention back to her work, putting the cat out of mind for the time being, and resumed tapping away at her virtual keyboard. Dogs lay peacefully beneath desks around the office; there was complete silence apart from the quiet rustle of their fur being stroked. Hairuo's seat was the only one with nothing beneath it.

*In the winter of the year 1900, eighteen-year-old Emmy Noether and her rare snow leopard were admitted into the University of Erlangen—*

*In the winter of the year 1900, eighteen-year-old Emmy Noether and her rare snow leopard didn't sit in the front row in class. She was never sure whether she or her snow leopard were the greater curiosity for her male classmates. But she was already no stranger to standing out from the crowd —*

*In the winter of the year 1900, eighteen-year-old Emmy Noether listened to lectures by Hilbert, Klein, Minkowski, and other master mathematicians in Göttingen, but she was at her freest when she let her rare snow leopard roam through Bavaria's Black Forest. Ravens and albatrosses circled high up in the sky above, and Emmy watched as they became black spots in the distance. From their perspective, the rivers, fields, and villages were as minute and abstract as a chessboard. As day after day passed in careful study for Emmy, her snow leopard gradually shed his spots to become a dazzling white. The purest alpine snowfield on Earth—the snow leopard's native state.*

★ ★ ★

Hairuo paused the tapping of her fingertips on the screen and gazed out of the bus window, picturing the snow leopard in her mind's eye. It was a rainy evening, and the drizzle painted rivulets of indigo and pitch black down the window like a hasty watercolour. She saw her own face half-illuminated in the wash, her lips dark and eyeliner smudged as if by the rain. She reached out a hand to draw a pattern

in the condensation on the window, then turned her head, gently pressed the Enter key, and ended the paragraph. The story had begun as a nerve impulse in her brain, but typed out it transformed into pulsing computer bytes that flowed into the external hard drive installed behind her ear. The hard drive was designed to look like a delicate hair clip, the tip of which was implanted deep into her skull, leaving only the old-fashioned amber outer shell exposed beneath her hair.

In her imagination, the snow leopard was Emmy Noether's soul, its agility and beauty visible for everyone to see. But exceptional beauty was often more frightening, more abhorrent, than ordinary ugliness; only a bird flying high enough would pay it no mind. Companions could grow, the colour of their fur could change, Hairuo thought, but a snow leopard was a snow leopard, and a cat could not become a dog.

Emmy Noether fed her snow leopard the purest of thoughts, and so his black spots disappeared completely. Hairuo kept trying to come up with a good ending for her story. She thought of her little cat—what was there for him to eat from her ordinary life? What could he grow to become?

Hairuo's gaze drifted, then focused once again. The inside of the bus was dimly lit; the man and dog sitting beside her both looked drowsy, and the man almost bumped into Hairuo's shoulder as the bus rocked and swayed, while his husky companion rested her head on her owner's polished leather shoes. The dog was beautiful, just like her owner, but Hairuo would never be a dog person.

She jumped off the bus, opened her umbrella, and splashed her way through a vast puddle. The cat that often roamed around the street corners was nowhere to be seen today. Her heart stuttered for a moment, echoing the rain falling to the ground, and she hoped that it was just hiding from the weather somewhere.

Hairuo had once tried to imagine what that cat's owner might look like. The cat was white with a circle of black fur on the top of its head like a woollen hat—it should've looked amusing, but Hairuo had

never managed more than a half smile at the sight of it. The cat was thin enough for its ribs to show. She had no way to feed it, so she'd taken photos and put them online, hoping its owner would see them and show up, but nothing had come of it. Not many people had cats.

Hairuo was well aware that people who had lost their companions might already be long gone. Dogs could barely survive on their own for any length of time. Cats were used to spending time alone, wandering around, hiding, almost completely independent from anyone or any community, but they were still companions in the end.

Hairuo waited in the pitter-patter of the rain until twilight gradually thickened into night and the splashing puddles grew still. She returned home beneath flickering streetlights. Vague sounds of laughter could be heard from her roommate's bedroom, but Hairuo couldn't tell whether the laughter was real or canned, coming from her roommate's favourite show. Hairuo had watched it before too: the host had a Saint Bernard companion that weighed a hundred kilogrammes. Every sentence the host said produced massive reactions from the audience, and everyone repeated his jokes endlessly the following day. When the show first started airing, his Saint Bernard had been a tiny puppy, but over time she transformed into that honey-and-milk-coloured mountain of a dog in the broadcasting studio today.

Dogs got their energy from joining packs, chasing and sharing the spoils of their catch. But cats were not the same.

Hairuo walked into her room and kept the lights off as she felt about in the dark. Her fingertips hit the touch point on the hard drive. Faint light glowed beneath her hair, then followed the lines of her cheeks to shine on her arms as it flowed down and away. Fifteen hours of visual data, sixteen hours of auditory data, twenty-four hours of consciousness and subconsciousness—the amount of information flowing out seemed immense, but there was little real nourishment to be found beneath the redundant noise of clichés and empty phrases.



The cat squeezed silently into his half-moon bed. In the flickering rays of light, Hairuo couldn't see how well he was eating; she just hoped that he might grow a little bigger. He should enjoy the story about Emmy Noether, but she wasn't sure how he would take the disappearance of the stray cat from the street corner.

Cats' stomachs were far more sensitive than dogs'.

The fluorescent light faded. The cat slipped soundlessly out of his bed and gazed back at her; in the darkness, his eyes shone like stars. She reached out a hand and he began to lick her palm, his tiny tongue rough, damp, warm. This didn't happen often. With a jolt, she realised she had been longing for it.

\* \* \*

Hairuo would always remember the day the cat came. Her whole class lined up in the corridor, waiting their turn for their companions to take shape. Hairuo was the last person in line. The sky was a strange, reddish-orange colour, like the surface of Mars, and she watched the white poplar trees on the sports field shiver in the dusty air. It was April. She didn't join in with her classmates' enthusiastic whispered discussions. Lots of them wanted Great Danes or English mastiffs—they grew quickly so long as they had enough to eat—while others wanted poodles or Chihuahuas, which were energetic despite their small size, and not picky eaters to boot.

The first mental imaging scan took twenty-one minutes. Memory networks formed flesh and blood, modes of perception synthesised into skin and fur, thought patterns built the crisp white skeleton, while the fire of life—the beating heart—came from your most deeply held desires, hidden on the lowest level of the neural network. These tiny animals were a part of people, but they were lifelong companions too; they swallowed everything you saw, heard, and thought, and grew into forms that flesh-and-blood human bodies had no way to contain.

Why couldn't companions be trees? That way she wouldn't have to feed it. But when Hairuo saw that ingenious skeleton gradually

take shape, sharp nails retreating into paws and a tiny tortoiseshell kitten appearing before her eyes, she never wished for a tree again.

*Hi, little monster.* She reached out to stroke his mottled yellow-black tail.

The cat retreated and swiped; his thin claws left three shallow lines down her arm. It took three weeks for this welcome gift to fade away.

*Cats can be easy to look after, but they come with their challenges too,* Hairuo's class teacher told her, begrudging the effort; he'd never liked her much. There were always a few students in each year group who had cats, but hers was just so small ...

She couldn't remember what else the teacher had said to her, but she'd skipped class the next day and stayed in her dormitory instead, lost in thought. The cat lay on his stomach on the windowsill and watched the packs of dogs out on the sports field. They were playing Frisbee. Occasionally she raised her head and the cat's ears would twitch slightly, but he never turned to look back at her.

All of a sudden, he hiccupped repeatedly, one after another, then spat out a ball of sticky yellow bile. Hairuo was terrified at first; she didn't learn until later that it wasn't unusual for a cat to throw up like this sometimes. She went straight out the following day to have that amber-coloured hard drive embedded in her skull, where it recorded electrical signals directly at the neuron level. This type of implanted processor could store massive amounts of information with high spatiotemporal resolution. Hairuo was determined to experience more of the world, put herself out there too, so that she could feed the cat well.

Ten years passed by. She never cut her hair short again; she didn't want anyone to see the hard drive's outer shell. But the cat still grew slowly, and her little soul became even more estranged and indifferent than she had believed possible. She'd always thought that he had no hopes of his own and so no disappointments either, that

he just wandered like a shadow through his own world—up until that day when she felt the rough warmth of his tongue on her hand.

★ ★ ★

Companions hadn't always been animals.

When Hairuo's parents' generation had been children, people's souls appeared as strikingly realistic digital portraits, projected onto screens. The portraits had high resolution surveillance cameras for eyes, circular microphone arrays for ears, and pseudo-stereo speakers for mouths. The most important thing was the heart—the kernel in which deep learning frameworks were processed. It gathered together every carefully composed or hastily scrawled line of writing from its owner, every sentence of speech, and combined these with the ocean of information that could be found online to undergo an individualised modelling process. When soul portraits left the factory, they were little more than blank slates; it was only after interacting with their owners that they began to learn and grow, gradually revealing their innate form.

And so for the first time, a person's soul—that ancient secret which had long been sealed up in people's skulls or chests—found a new place to live. By the time Hairuo's parents' generation grew up and entered adulthood, more often than not they had to submit their soul portraits' web address along with their resumes.

But problems followed. The careful deductions of the algorithm often produced portraits that defied expectations. An arrogant person might manifest a timid, self-doubting soul, while a despondent soul might belong to a seemingly optimistic person. A person's hidden depths, which they themselves had had no way of seeing clearly before, were gradually brought to light with every word they spoke. There was nowhere to hide from the omniscient, grasping hand of the algorithm.

Lots of people demanded this nakedness be covered up again. They said that just as our ancient ancestors used furs to protect their bodies, so too should soul portraits be protected, hidden. But

there were even more people who disagreed, saying that in its explorations of the outside world, humanity had already gone too far for too long; our estrangement from the spiritual world grew deeper and deeper every day, bringing with it endless misunderstandings and disputes, all blood and tears and pain. People needed a vehicle, a channel, an interface through which they could externalise the soul, that part of themselves that was both innate since birth and in constant flux.

The final plan was both an escalation and a compromise: the virtual image on a screen shifted into something real and warm. 3D-printed alloy skeletons, lifelike flesh and fur bioengineered with stem cell differentiation technology, as well as a refined positronic brain—together they formed a small animal companion, a dog or a cat. A companion was easier to swallow than a mirror. The real selves that people didn't want to see, didn't dare confront directly, were hidden in flesh, concealed by skin and fur. Cautiously extending an animal's nose, tongue, teeth, or paws towards the world felt more acceptable somehow.

Hairuo's generation was already well used to these furry souls. Companions were independent and warm, far superior to the ice-cold mechanical nakedness of soul portraits exposed on screens. How many sweethearts fell in love at first sight because their dogs touched noses and sniffed each other's tails in curiosity at dog parks? Apparently it was easier, less hassle, than online dating. During job interviews, managers' dogs would sniff out the most dependable and obedient candidates to join the workforce. Performance records improved, and managers always said it was a more reliable method than endless rounds of interviews. But more important than all that, even more people found that there was simply no way to reject their true self anymore: alternately alert and resourceful, powerful and mighty, elegant and adorable; a self that you could snuggle up to and hold tight in your arms when you felt hopeless or frustrated, whose soft fur you could bury your face in; a self that would always stand by you. Cases of clinical depression and

even suicide rates fell sharply after companions came onto the scene. After all, how could anyone truly not like this little self of theirs?

Stories abounded about dog companions saving humanity. There were far fewer stories about cats. Not many people had cats.

★ ★ ★

Hairuo's workplace was half the city away. She could never think of the right metaphor to best describe the building, with its glass curtain walls and lights that never went out. From the vantage point of the offices high up inside, she could look down on the neat skeleton outline of the paths in the park below. Small patches of grass were set between the paths, following the standard configuration for every business district, neighbourhood, and street—dog parks. The green spaces were particularly busy after lunch, when dogs chased each other across the grass while their people chatted beside the paths. Hairuo had never been down there before. She couldn't understand all the fuss over a ball being thrown. She chewed slowly at her desk, used her chopsticks to quietly pick out the dog treat that came free with her bento box, and threw it away.

Hairuo's daily tasks involved dragging a few lines, buttons, and boxes around her screen, arranging them in certain forms, and then annotating the distance in pixels between the lines and buttons. A one-pixel difference might make her eyelids twitch, but a discrepancy of three pixels was enough to prompt her manager to come over and knock sharply on her desk. In her early days at this job, Hairuo had wanted to argue with him, but she'd given up at the first sight of that boxer dog panting hotly and trailing strings of saliva. She could only ever nod and give the manager a faint, distant smile to show she understood.

Dogs developed relationships by sniffing or chasing each other, but Hairuo had a cat. Cats breathed lightly, walked quietly; they hid instinctually from coarse, panting things. Distance was her armour,

polite smiles her mask. She knew she was the problem here, so she tried not to complain too much.

Hairuo had studied digital art and design at university, and found this job right after graduation. Sometimes she wondered whether it was really the right fit for her, but she quickly realised there was no sense in thinking like that. One of her university classmates had had a cat too, and after graduating he'd moved into a two-storey studio that lacked all of the personal space and distance which best suited cats. Despite this, when Hairuo had visited once, she'd seen his cream-coloured Ragdoll cat asleep and perfectly happy on a soft cushion in the corner of the room. Behind his cat was a three-dimensional virtual art space, built between two workstations and three projectors, within which rays of light changed colour endlessly to form images of rivers, waterfalls, forests, and gardens that responded to and resonated with the viewer's presence. Hairuo's classmate said that hesitation, exploration, and discovery were the inspirations for his work; that in the modern age, it didn't matter whether you were talking about modes of creative expression or humanity's aesthetic experiences—neither could be limited any longer to two-dimensional surfaces. The Ragdoll cat had woken up then and strolled gracefully through the lights and shadows, the fur on her large frame soft and fluffy, and her blue eyes had gazed tenderly at Hairuo.

Hairuo thought of her own little tortoiseshell cat at home.

She had realised early on that for an ordinary person such as herself, coming from an ordinary family and working at an ordinary job, a cat was a debt that could never be repaid, a soul hungry for something she didn't have to give. There was nothing from her daily commute, nor from the minute distances between pixels, that she could use to feed him. Compared with that plump Ragdoll cat, Hairuo's cat was too small, too thin. She never knew when he might disappear on her. She had to fill herself up with as much as possible, so that she could try to feed him well.

But her life was suspended between her shared apartment and her job, so insubstantial that one gust of wind could blow it all away. And so around her ten-hour working day, she carved out time to wade through ancient texts, navigating the weft and weave of unfamiliar words during her lunch break and commute. The complex visual appearance of contemporary art made the written word appear simple and one-dimensional by comparison, long since outdated. The only advantages of written texts lay in their portability and low cost.

However, while readily available information was more than enough to excite dogs, her cat was far more sensitive, more selective. The most popular writing could make him vomit incessantly; long-forgotten things were more to his taste. Hairuo had no choice but to constantly unearth old stories, and probe deep into her own mind as well. Many nights, her dreams would needle her awake with a painful start, trembling, to type out line after line of a story in a daze, fingers uncertain, the hard drive's lights flashing beneath her hair, and in the darkness he would watch her silently.

*In 1925, after the lighthouse keeper Clarence Salter died, his wife, Fannie Salter—*

*In 1925, following the death of the lighthouse keeper Clarence Salter and after many hard-won fights, Fannie Salter was finally allowed to continue watching over her husband's lighthouse on her own. It was one of forty-five lighthouses in Virginia. Fannie had grown up in a fishing village by the sea, so she was no stranger to the winding coastline or the white tower standing tall on the cliff's edge.*

*A pilot whale kept her company in the waters nearby, and when the weather was good, sailors could catch a glimpse of its dorsal fin amongst the waves. On nights thick with fog, Fannie first climbed the stone steps up to the lighthouse, and then the iron steps leading straight to the control room, where she lit the oil lamps. From her little lighthouse keeper's cabin, Fannie had a direct view of the light on the tower's top floor; she woke every two hours to look out the window and make sure that the lamps had not stopped burning. In even worse weather, she would ring a fog bell every fifteen seconds for a whole hour straight, until all the steamboats had*

*passed safely through the channel. People said that the tolling of the bell sounded like a whale's mournful moan.*

*Pilot whales preferred to live in groups, but Fannie worked alone at the lighthouse for twenty-two years. No one knew how she passed the long years in the face of that boundless, unchanging ocean, nor how she fed her lonely pilot whale. After her death, people discovered everything she had written in the lighthouse keeper's cabin, describing everything from her first meeting with Clarence Salter in the greenness of youth right up to his departure from this world. Once one-hundred-watt light bulbs replaced the work of lighthouse keepers, no companion ever took the shape of a pilot whale again.*

★ ★ ★

Fannie Salter raised a whale in a lighthouse. Hairuo paused her typing and lay back on the bed; the lines on the ceiling above her became the waves of the North Atlantic ocean.

Twenty-five years' worth of memories, digested across another twenty-five years. Hairuo imagined the whale waiting quietly in the gloomy ocean depths, countless tiny food particles floating around him like shoals of fish. What kind of life could be rich enough to keep him well-fed? Fannie hadn't read many books, nor had she ever gone far from the sea coast where she'd grown up, but she'd still found a way to feed her whale.

Hairuo stroked the cat's ears. He lay nestled by her side, curled up in a ball and looking even smaller than usual. Her stories of distant places combined fact and fiction in equal measure: she had never heard of anyone who had a whale or a snow leopard for a companion. She created stories of her own invention and fed the cat with them, but he still grew so slowly.

She knew why. Her life was so dry, so atrophied—her imagination tried to paint masterpieces but managed only simple sketches. But with the cat by her side, she could feel the warmth of his body and the gradual strengthening of his heartbeats as they drummed in his chest. He didn't often come so close to her.



She tossed and turned in the dark as if a rough tongue lapped at her heart. Little by little she slipped into a dream and saw a boundless, open sky above surging ocean waves. The urge was undeniable. She jumped. The ocean was warm, like flesh and fur—a warmth she hadn't felt for a long time. When she woke up, the cat was lying in the crook of her arm.

She thought she knew then what he needed.

★ ★ ★

She noticed him from the very first day he came into the office. A grey linen shirt, slender fingers, biting cold eyes, and a mouth whose corners curled into something that was not quite a smile. The afternoon sun was dazzling; one by one, others in the office lowered their window blinds, while he alone closed his eyes, tilted his head back to let the light play across his face, and held that position, motionless, for a long time. Hairuo was no stranger to drifting off like that, and the arch of his back in the rays of sunlight held a familiar curve as well. She found herself imagining how his pupils would look in the light.

And he didn't have a dog.

After lunch, he and Hairuo were the only people left in the office. She'd wanted to take advantage of the lunch break to have a read through of her drafts, but even as her fingers slid over the tablet screen, her eyes wouldn't focus. She heard her breath come heavy from the pit of her stomach, completely unlike her usual self.

"You're not going on a dog walk?" She forced herself to open her mouth, then regretted it an instant later. The obviousness of that fact and her self-consciousness were both clear to see.

"It's awful." He frowned. "Don't you think?"

Hairuo nodded, indescribably pleased. Although companions took animal form, they were still your purest self. Data and patterns of connection, the alloy skeletons printed from them, the positronic brain: they were all so much more *real* than flesh-and-blood bodies, revealed more of your innate nature. So why didn't anyone else

think it terrible, then, to expose their naked souls to one another, to let them chase and play together? She couldn't stand it. Cats needed quiet, rest, concealment.

"You like reading?" He lifted his chin slightly. She shut the cover over her tablet on pure instinct. The ochre cover was blank, no text or images on its surface; if it weren't for the thinness of the tablet, it would look exactly like an old hardback book without its dust jacket. The world inside there was more real to her than anything else in the office—it was what she used to feed her cat.

But she couldn't help herself; she wanted to let him see. Just a little would be okay.

"I ... write sometimes, nothing serious."

He nodded. She waited for what felt like an age.

"I heard that on Leo Tolstoy's last day alive, he wanted to squeeze an elephant onto a train and run away." He spoke as if it were an undeniable historical fact. "The eighty-year-old man left home in secret. He even wore a crumpled straw hat to disguise himself, but his elephant companion gave him away. Later, when he lay on his deathbed in the stationmaster's office, reporters from all over the world came to the train station, bringing their dogs with them, and in amongst the hordes circled around to watch, there stood that elephant. Can you imagine it? An elephant." He winked at her, creasing the lines at the corners of his eyes.

★ ★ ★

His stories were long, detailed, ever-unfolding. Tolstoy's elephant was no more than a ball of string that he tossed towards Hairuo, and she followed that string into a forest labyrinth full of rare birds and beasts, gasping in surprise as she went; she fell further under his spell with each step she took. In his world, her laughter echoed, her tears overflowed. His stories were like suspension bridges strung up in the treetops of some primaeval rainforest, whisking reason and emotion along for the ride as they hovered in complex time and space, sometimes plunging down into the abyss and other times

climbing up to mountain peaks. The centrifugal force raging in Hairuo's mind almost made her want to abandon reading altogether, but her whole being was like some pitiful asteroid, easily caught and engulfed by the star-like gravitational pull of his words.

Unlike the contemporary art installation she'd once wandered through, ancient words were more intimately tied to the human imagination, penetrated deeper into the self. He said that was human nature. He held forth on primitive languages appearing by chance tens of thousands of years ago, Chomsky and Pinker's universal grammar, how written language had arisen from the coordinated evolution of the human mind. As humanity evolved from one generation to another, those who could manipulate language to suit their needs held the evolutionary high ground; their superiority was assured by their grasp of language. This was true even now, when people were so occupied by contemporary art. The deepest recesses of the soul, he told her, were still captured, transformed, remoulded in the symbols of written language.

A creator's soul lived in their works. By then, she was already captivated by the souls in his stories, which always took shape as strange animals—the insatiable Wan Qi who survived on a diet of other people's dreams, or the headstrong, obstinate Taowu. Hairuo saw shadows flickering amongst them, almost familiar somehow, and she wanted to draw closer, pick out *his* soul from their midst, but it always slipped from her grasp.

If his words were really just crude fragments of his soul, then how could he feed his cat with them alone? What nourishment could be found from them? His life was no less ordinary and repetitive than Hairuo's; perhaps he was simply more gifted than her.

She couldn't help herself. She wanted to get closer to him, but he kept his distance. She knew that civil distance well, the rigidity behind polite smiles. She'd been like that once as well, but she didn't want it this time. She'd already wandered alone for far, far too long. Cats might dread the noisiness of a pack of dogs, but they could still

wish for another cat's company as they paced their solitary way through the long nights.

Hairuo began to swap manuscripts with him. She was anxious, hesitant at first: her stories were so much weaker, flimsier than his. But more important, she was afraid that he might be able to read the vague longings hidden between the lines. He'd once said that cats cannot be fed false things. Every faint tremble, every minute touch, every painful nightmare or moment of reality—these were where a cat's real nourishment lay.

"You have to have the courage to walk naked in the street, let everyone see you. Only then can you feed a cat properly," he said, leaning against the window.

"And that's ... different from dogs? They'll eat anything." She gazed out the window to the grass where dogs ran in happy circles around their people. One dog bowed its golden forelegs tamely towards the ground, its enormous hind legs sticking up into the air, making the people around burst out laughing. Its owner stretched out a hand and the dog immediately began licking it, over and over. Hairuo knew there must be light information chips in the owner's hand, which could be collected by content merchants, dried out, compressed, cut up, and packaged into a soluble storage medium—neat, clean, and portable. The chips only needed to touch the contact points on the dog's tongue to be converted into delicious electrical signals, which rapidly adjusted the cell composition and metal skeleton of the dog's artificial body. The dog would grow bigger and bigger, and its owner wouldn't even have to work for it.

"That's why even big dogs are easily tamed, but the same tricks don't work on cats." The corner of his mouth lifted slightly, revealing traces of smile lines, "Ironically, dog food makers often have cats themselves."

"What do you think having a cat for a companion really represents? Aesthetic taste, observation skills, imagination, creativity, or—?" Hairuo couldn't stop herself from leaning towards him.

"All of that, but also none of that." He wasn't evading her question; his sudden turn to face her made her jump, was all. "I'm impressed you can already think about this."

"So what do you say, then?" For the first time, she mustered up enough courage to look him directly in the eye, hoping to find some kind of answer there, but his pupils were pitch-black and impenetrable. She couldn't see anything in them.

"Freedom, independence, as well as..." He met her gaze, and a sudden smile spread across his face, "How would I know? No one knows. They're our lifelong companions, the externalisation of our truest selves, and that fact alone demands that we spend forever in exploration, trying to understand them. For the vast majority of the time, we're solitary creatures, but occasionally there'll be a moment of companionship."

Hairuo's heart thundered in her chest. This tenderness frightened her the most, suddenly breaking through his distant facade as if he could see right through her. She wasn't sure if she'd ever be able to prepare herself for it.

"I like your stories." He took her hand and her mind became a blank slate; she didn't hear a single word he said next.

"... remind me of my younger self. Pure and unique ... delicious."

★ ★ ★

"That day—you were just teasing me. You knew that companions didn't exist in the past." Hairuo couldn't hold back a slight smile as she fiddled with the roasted chicken wings on her plate: she was a terrible cook and had wasted several packs of wings before getting these ones just right. "Nerve signal data extraction, signal processing, modelling, shaping: the technology for making animal companions is only around twenty years old."

"You can't say that for sure." He feigned seriousness. "Maybe Ovid's *Metamorphoses* isn't just a simple book of legends; maybe it's actually an accurate record of the existence of companions. The practice of killing cats during mediaeval witch hunts also clearly

points to the fact that human souls can appear in nonhuman forms. Let alone the ones in novels—familiars, guardian spirits, vessels for the soul...”

“They all count as companions?” She let out a light laugh. “I didn’t expect you to still read children’s fantasy books.” They’d been officially dating for a month now, and she’d already lost her reserve from when they’d first met.

“They’re the things that really matter,” he said indifferently, peeling meat precisely off the bone with his knife and fork.

Her heart gave a faint shiver; as usual, she understood his meaning without needing words. Those guardian spirits, strange creatures—once constant childhood companions, up until the moment when modern science had disenchanting the ancient, chaotic world four hundred years ago with its ice-cold mechanical touch. As humans interacted with this new world, those spirits—intangible yet all too real—gradually faded to transparency; it was only through the written word that you could catch a fleeting glimpse of their long-forgotten truths. *The things that really matter*. In her stories, Hairuo used fact as the warp and imagination as the weft, weaving together each and every fragment of them, trying to capture a little of that which had been lost.

“So, why do you think there are only dogs and cats?” she asked softly, hoping he would say how unusual, how precious it was that the pair of them had found each other.

“Probably out of some kind of nostalgia.” He thought for a moment, then lifted his glass and moistened his lips with red wine. “Millions of years ago, humans explored the outside world together with newly domesticated animals. But it’s more complicated now—exploring the outside world, your inner world, moving endlessly from outside to inside and back out again—there’s so many detours to take...”

“Oh,” Hairuo sighed, setting her fork down. She took his hand gently, and he stiffened for a moment, then let her. She thought she followed his line of thinking, understood that he cared about far

more than just the similarities between the two of them. Just like everyone with a cat companion, Hairuo also cared about those impulses, beliefs, dreams, and experiences that were so personal it was difficult to share them with others. Those faint, profound traces left behind by unknown ancestors in ancient symbols, moulding the self and the recognisable world. The souls that returned to people's sides in completely new ways.

Yet Hairuo wished that for him, she could be like a dog whose tail wagged whenever she saw him—but when he was immersed in his own world he forgot her entirely.

He was even more cat-like than she was, Hairuo had come to realise. Her cat still hid in his bed, only sticking his head out to look around: a little curious, a little fearful of strangers. She hadn't written any stories for a long time now, but the cat had grown bigger anyway, his mouse-like tail becoming thicker, rounder, fluffier. Was she afraid?

"I can't eat any more." He set down his knife and fork. "Next time, come to my place, and bring your cat."

\* \* \*

What she really wanted to remember was every touch, every breath, every kiss. What she wanted to forget was time itself. But all that was left in the end was a pain like new birth.

His cat was twice the size of hers, an ash grey, long-haired Norwegian forest cat with a swiftly moving gaze just like his own, who gave a low growl at the first sight of Hairuo's cat, and then howled. Hairuo had no idea what to do; he didn't say a word. His big cat closed in on her little cat step by step, but just as Hairuo was about to rush in between them, he stopped her.

"Cats have their own ways of getting along." He glanced meaningfully at her.

She could only bite her lip and try to stifle her anxiety. Her little cat trembled in the shadows, not making a sound—then the large

cat brandished a paw, and her little cat suddenly flashed his own claws.

A blood-curdling yowl. A deep scratch split open across the large cat's face, starting at the corner of her eye and slashing downwards. He cried out, seemingly involuntarily, losing himself, and turned to look at Hairuo with an unfathomable glint in his eye.

"It was an accident—" she explained hurriedly, her mind dark with fear. But then the large cat snarled loudly, seized the little cat's nape in her mouth and flung him against the sharp corner of the coffee table.

Hairuo screamed and rushed over to pick up her little cat. Her mind was in utter chaos. What frightened her the most—herself or him?

"He won't die." He had regained his composure and his indifference. "Cats have more lives than you or I, you know that they can survive anything. But I never expected—you seemed..." He paused, as if there were something else he wanted to add, but he stopped there.

She couldn't speak. Hairuo carried her little cat into the bathroom, his scalp torn and gaping. Although companions were man-made, their skin was still textured like a real animal's, and she was helpless in her panic at the sight of her cat's mangled head. She knew he couldn't die, but she ransacked the bathroom in search of bandages and cotton buds anyway. She tore open the drawers one after another and then, suddenly, stumbled across the terrible sight of tiny scraps of fur, cut into neat two-inch squares: orange, tortoiseshell, and tabby.

"What are you doing? Stop worrying about the cat. Come here." Impatience leaked into his languid voice. Her hair stood on end, like a cat with its hackles raised. The truth was easy to see, but she had been lost in her ignorance, a dog pointlessly chasing her own tail, when she should have been keeping her distance, scrutinising him, thinking for herself.



“Come *here*.” His footsteps gradually grew closer. She closed the drawer in a hurry. Her cat was motionless in her embrace, as if tensed to leap away from her at any moment. Her mouth was dry—what was she meant to do now?

She let him pull her back into the room. She felt almost on the verge of collapse, and yet, as bewildered as she was, somehow in spite of everything, a kind of excitement was flooding her mind. He didn’t know that she had discovered the truth. As soon as he found out, she knew he would withdraw, and once withdrawn, he would bide his time to strike. She had a predator’s instincts after all, untamed by anything.

Fingers held back her pulse, breath ghosted over skin. Lost in these subtle sensations, her consciousness peeled away like clothing from her body and fell into her cat. Opening her eyes wide, she saw every speck of light within the gloomy room; with a twitch of her nose she differentiated all of the strange smells permeating the air; not a single subtle sound escaped unnoticed past her swivelling ears. Every inch of her senses stretched out to their fullest, every drop of perception flowed into a powerful current. Boundless, open, a warm ocean embraced her, her body unfurled almost to the point of total oblivion—until her cat nipped lightly at her fingertips.

Her head cleared in an instant. She watched him narrow his eyes slightly, and the shadow of his eyelashes fell on his face in a picture of pure, unaffected innocence. The fabric of her consciousness folded back into her body, and as she dressed she slowly drew closer to whisper in his ear.

“What on earth do you feed her? She’s grown so big.”

“The words of the sages, the tremors of the soul, crystals and flames...” he murmured, and for a split second she thought she’d misunderstood him.

He was telling her the truth, but that was also his bait, wasn’t it?

There was something innately euphoric in the act of killing. Underneath the hidden neural networks, the fire of life arose from

the oldest and cruellest of desires. He had grasped much earlier than she had the truth that lay beneath cats' indifferent appearances.

"And what about ... other cats?" she asked in a low voice, and, ignoring the sudden freezing of his expression, held her little cat close as she rushed out the door.

Both of their bodies ached dully, but some secret part of her was glad that he'd underestimated her after all.

He'd taught her a lesson.

It wasn't too late.

★ ★ ★

She still saw him around the office. The two of them maintained a polite distance, pretended nothing had happened, and it turned out to be not too difficult for them. The thing that changed was that Hairuo began to go for runs around the park during her lunch breaks: that way, she wouldn't have to be alone with him.

She didn't share manuscripts with him anymore. She vaguely understood the secret source of his astonishing works now. It was far too dangerous for cats to expose themselves to the outside world: she had almost become his next offering, vanished into his words, his rich themes, narrative forms, subplots, and paragraphs, dissolved into the spaces between flesh and bone in that grim, captivating Norwegian forest cat. Inside her little cat's positronic brain were soft layers of information—her known and unknown self. Just a few seconds of contact with the touch point would have been enough time to complete the transmission. Her fear lingered for a long time afterwards.

But there were unexpected rewards as well. After those first few nights when her tears had fallen uncontrollably, she finally discovered that her cat had fully doubled in size. Lying on the bed now, he no longer looked mouse-like and frail. She hadn't expected him to enjoy the taste of pain. And for someone like her, a living shadow held apart from the people around her, the only thing that could cause real pain would be another cat.

Did she miss it? Or regret it? She didn't know. Two souls could understand each other for a short time, but two hunters could not coexist for long.

That she had escaped at all was lucky enough. Cats were destined to be solitary.

A few injuries were to be expected.

★ ★ ★

After she handed in her resignation, Hairuo changed all of her contact details and moved to another city, where she lived alone and began to write stories again. She not only wrote in shorthand notebooks now, but also posted her work online. Nor did she write nothing but lonely, lifeless stories anymore; the scope of her work grew ever vaster, unconstrained. She wrote about how Madame de Pompadour's rose-coloured mare ruled over the stables of Louis XV, wrote about how Simone de Beauvoir's ring-necked pheasant flaunted his tail feathers when the two of them mixed with the men in the Café de Flore. She kept reading, not just novels and biographies but myths and legends too, philosophy books, theories of evolution and histories of technological development—the mark of him that still remained.

The stories of the snow leopard and the pilot whale lay dormant in Hairuo's notebooks still. She could never forget how their few immature paragraphs had been absorbed into her little cat's flesh and blood.

Hairuo also remembered the elephant, and those other strange animals that had once transfixed her. Later, she found out that behind the elephant stood Tolstoy's first wife, Sonya, who had transcribed his manuscripts for decades despite the couple's hatred for each other. Biographers blamed Sonya for the great writer leaving home to die; Tolstoy's will didn't mention her even once. The author's wife lived her whole life without leaving behind a soul taking shape for the world to see. People could only guess at the form it would have taken, but Hairuo wasn't that person anymore.

She cut her hair short, exposing the amber-coloured hard drive behind her ear and the tip where it embedded into her skull; she was no longer afraid.

Max Weber's disenchantment had been realised when companions took shape; Heidegger's poetry unfolded in winding bitstreams. At the endings of her stories, she wrote *freedom, freedom*: ancient legends reappearing in the world of the living, wandering souls finally returned to their bodies. Her thoughts were rich, flowed from her pen to the paper like the wind. The cat lay beside her on the desk, napping with his paws tucked under himself and his back holding that familiar curve. He'd already grown much heavier, his body now as round as a ball; only his face remained sharp still. The wound on his head, fully healed by now, was almost completely invisible.

Her stories gradually began to gain some traction, and she came to know a few other writers as well, many of whom also had cats. But she never met up with them in person.

One day, Hairuo returned home to her apartment to find a crumpled envelope in her mailbox. Her heart constricted in her chest. Had he tracked her down? The envelope was torn in places, revealing glimpses of what looked like photographs inside.

Trembling with fear, Hairuo opened the envelope, only to let out a sigh of relief when she saw an invitation card with a familiar poodle paw print on its front. It was her old roommate. She was now engaged to the man with the sausage-dog companion, writing to invite Hairuo to come back for their wedding. Hairuo smiled slightly; they hadn't seen each other for a long time now, but people with dog companions were always so warm-hearted.

*Before I forget, someone with a cat came looking for you, have a look at the photos,* Hairuo read on the little slip of paper attached to the invitation. Her nerves drew tight again. She'd never told anyone about him.

The photograph was of a man she had never seen before, wearing a woollen hat, and although his expression was somewhat

blurred, Hairuo could just about make out a shy smile on his face. In his arms he held the white cat that Hairuo thought had long since disappeared into the rainy night.

On the back of the photograph, he'd written the rather long-winded tale of how he'd lost his cat, seen Hairuo's post online and found her again, how he'd wanted to pay Hairuo a visit but had hesitated, and so on and so forth. Finally, in a roundabout way, he asked for her contact details, and perhaps—she could even read behind his cautious words—he could bring his cat to come and see her cat.

She shook her head, thinking to toss the photograph into a drawer as she went by. But then she paused. Perhaps. Her cat yawned, extended his claws, and revealed his sharp teeth. She would never be able to forget that day, nor his deft, precise attack; she should have known it from the very first time she saw him.

The scars were faint now, invisible, and desire began to stir. This time, she'd changed.

*Of course, you're welcome to come visit,* she wrote in her reply. *After all, we both have cats.*

# Note

1. Translated by Stephen Mitchell. Sourced from <https://poets.org/poem/black-cat> [accessed 3 November 2021].



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RENAN BERNARDO



THE  
PLASTICITY  
OF BEING





# The Plasticity of Being

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**RENAN BERNARDO**

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*illustration by*

SCOTT BAKAL

Edilberto Santos takes three plastic bottle caps from the teepee fire in front of him. He crumples their burnt remains together with a spatula, kneading them until they form a semi-solid, charred paste, their blue, red, and green mixing in an uninvited, incomplete rainbow. He whistles a joyful song while waiting for it to cool. I have things to say but I don't interrupt him. After three minutes, he grabs a cheese grater and starts scraping the paste in it, sprinkling the flecks into a bowl. Finally, he scoops the floury mix with a rusty spoon and eats it. His eyes focus on the camera as he chews it. Some of the flecks catch in between his teeth. It doesn't bother him. He's used to it.

I glance down at my pad to escape Edilberto's gaze. The next question is highlighted on the screen. *How does it taste?* Did I write those words? What was I thinking? São João da Campânula is not a damn reality show. It's a landfill and it's home for about forty families. A knot throbs in my chest as I cross through the question to erase it.

"Are you all right, Dona Elisa?" Edilberto asks. He's missing a few teeth. His eyes droop over his sallow cheeks. I shrug and force a nod. What does it mean to be all right after seeing a man eating plastic?

I slide a finger over my pad so my cam-drone buzzes away from Edilberto, focusing instead on the trash behind him. A few people trudge through the paths that open like clogged veins amidst the heaps. A kid fetches something from the ground, giggling with a man beside him. A woman enveloped in a broad shawl carries a fat mesh bag. She selects an object in one of the heaps, yanks it out, and peeks at it. It's a plastic bottle, cracky and sullied with the tan of corrosion. She throws it in her bag.

I open my backpack, pick a sandwich, and hand it to Edilberto. A sandwich. Of all the food I could've brought to São João da Campânula, I brought only a few sandwiches. Ham, cheese, butter.

Edilberto eyes the marmita with mild curiosity—a Tupperware box with a dog sticker on its side. He runs a finger over it. It's the only one I brought from Mamãe's home when I moved to Goiânia after our silent war started. She had that one since she was a child. She was five when she pasted that poodle there. Over the years, the box had stored a whole assortment of her most delicious food—Bolognese spaghetti, fried cod balls, chocolate pudding with strawberries, and scrambled eggs when she was in a hurry. The last time I tried to visit her, I brought pão de queijo in it. She didn't touch them. Mamãe loved me for thirty-two years. However, over the past nine years she's hated me. And she has a good reason for it.

"I'm not hungry right now, but thanks," Edilberto says. "I can keep it for the others, though. Can I keep the box? It's cute."

"Yes, of course." No hesitation. I don't understand why. For Mamãe—and for me—it should be an heirloom. Perhaps by getting rid of her marmita, I'd be officially detaching myself from the woman I loved the most in my life. I peer one last time at the barking poodle sticker, its edges frayed and threatening to unstick. "Keep it, yeah..." Those last words falter, but they come out anyway.

Edilberto smiles at me. There's sweetness in there. Despite the missing teeth, Edilberto doesn't look like a broken man. Not like I pictured all those people—the *plastikeaters*, as some having been derogatorily calling them since they were "discovered" by the media. I'd thought of them as sad, gaunt wanderers, aimlessly looking for solace in the landfills near Mairipotaba. In my nightmares, before I fully compromised in writing a story about their lives, they came to me as dolls made of plastic, revenge cooking in their eyes but their hands wilted together in begging.

The aggression of burnt plastic slicks the air. Not only due to the bottle caps that Edilberto burned. It comes from all over the landfill. Here and there, smoky snakes writhe toward the sundown. I skim

through the list of questions I didn't ask Edilberto. *How does it taste? Does it hurt to eat plastic? How is your diet? Which types of items do you prefer?*

Instead, I look straight into his eyes. There's a deepness in there, brewed in the sweetness, that I doubt my own eyes possess.

"This smell..." I hesitate, swirling a finger in the air. "It's—What does it convey to you?" I think of fires, faulty electronics, problems. Of things going wrong.

"Which smell?—Oh! I barely notice it anymore. But it smells like dinner."

★ ★ ★

The story of São João da Campânula started with the company called Verdidea.

Once upon a time, Verdidea was the future: the bastion of sustainability and green technology allied with social and environmental responsibility, a powerful Brazilian—then global—force to correct everything that was wrong with the world. And, indeed, they showed what they were all about. In a decade, their projects of reforestation employed millions of micro-drones in the Amazon rainforest, with tech that healed the damaged soil, planted new trees, and rescued animals during fires—all the time learning the patterns of what they were doing, so they could improve themselves over time and avoid catastrophes. In five years, they managed to recover 85 percent of the previously unrecoverable deforested area. Verdidea freed more than eight hundred rivers from industrial waste all around South America; they brought water to the driest parts of the sertão.

Once upon a time, working for Verdidea was the dream job from engineers to lawyers, from botanists to PR specialists like myself.

Verdidea truly wanted the world to become a better place. As long as the world was theirs.

The story of São João da Campânula also started with me. Once, ten years ago, I came as a PR specialist to write part of it. Now, two

years after the company's breakdown, I come as a freelancer journalist to rewrite it the best way I can.

\* \* \*

"You can look to the camera," I say to the woman, pointing to the cam-drone whirring in front of her. Behind her, a dog lolls on a chair underneath her wooden shack's only window.

"I prefer not to."

"That's okay." I slide a finger on my pad so the drone swivels to the side and avoids focusing on her face. "What's your name?"

"Ângela."

She's a woman in her mid-fifties, brown skin, curly hair falling over her shoulders like waterfalls. She exhales a sweet scent of unnamed flowers, generic enough to fit anywhere, anytime. Next to her shack's door there's a cauldron filled with plastic bottles. On it, scrawled in big red letters: *Pick yours, leave for others*. A repurposed dresser lies next to it with five cheese graters, all shiny and clean, delicately covered with a transparent raincoat.

"Hi, Ângela. My name is Elisa Assunção. I'm a journalist and I'm working on a story about your lives. It aims to bring attention to the authorities and—"

"I know who you are." I freeze. For a moment I think Ângela knows exactly the role Elisa Assunção played in her very existence. She waves her hand. "Your type always comes here, asking questions, giving us crumbs to nibble. Then you go away. You're predators, that's what I say."

I agree. Brazil was shocked when the news about São João da Campânula broke in the headlines. *Plastic-eating people living in landfill. A new kind of poverty sprouts in Goiás*. In their prowl for answers—*How can they survive? Is it a hoax? Where do they come from?*—journalists and authorities came and went to the landfill as explorers, merely digging for stories and opportunities, never fully finding the answers, never providing ways out.

I, on the other hand, have the answers already. I'm part of them, so I come with all of them, not for them. Instead, I come for any shreds of redemption I can find in that place. Like Mamãe used to say, *Don't try to repair your mistakes all at once. Some of them you'll just have to swallow.*

"Ângela, do you have kids?"

"Um-hum." She glares suspiciously at the cam-drone. I tap the OFF button on my pad and the drone slowly descends to the ground, its propellers shutting off and its LEDs powering down.

"Tell me about them."

"That's what you wanna hear? Won't you talk about plastic? Your type loves to babble about plastic."

"I just want to hear about your kids."

First, she gives me what I deserve: silence. Then, she gives me the stories of Mariana, Rogério, Adenilson, and Cleiton, of how they walk fifty minutes to school every day. She tells me how they find toys in the landfill and how she has to carefully select what isn't dangerous for them. She tells me how she loves a man called Jango, who lives in a shack in the eastern border of the landfill, of how she found brand-new canvas sneakers just lying around, green and yellow with black stripes, perfectly fitting on her feet. The only thing I type on my pad is the cornmeal cake recipe she dictates to me, which she only prepared twice in her life because she never has the ingredients.

In the end, she tells me she's grateful for that "Verde-something company" because her kids never learned what it meant to starve.

★ ★ ★

The enzyme was a breakthrough. It took only one year to go from plastic-gobbling bacteria to plastic-digesting isopods. Verdidea's name stamped every front page around the world. The Great Pacific garbage patch was being exorcised from its plastic by isopods at a rate never before imagined. Microbes carrying the enzyme were spread throughout landfills in Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia. It

brought awareness and funding for bioplastics research, decreasing its costs of production. The video of a girl snickering and lowering a plastic soda bottle into a pool of isopods went viral for months.

When Mamãe saw the news, she was washing a plastic bowl. She guffawed, then widened her eyes.

“Perhaps I should replace it for something else.” She raised the bowl. “Lisa, do you have something to do with that, with all those great things your employer is doing?”

I laughed at her curiosity. But yes, I had something to do with Verdidea’s rise to fame. As their main PR specialist, I knew exactly what to sweep beneath the carpet: embezzlement schemes, tax evasion, greenwashing, and all scandals that involved Jandir and Vando Batista, brothers and CEOs of Verdidea. It was all justified, given the nature of Verdidea’s noble undertaking. At that moment, laughing with Mamãe in the kitchen, feeling cozy and accomplished, I had yet to fuck a lot of lives.

★ ★ ★

On the fifth day of my trip to São João da Campânula, I have only a recipe written down and less than twenty minutes of video footage. At night, I choose to walk around the landfill’s paths—its veins—with my pad and my cam-drone turned off in my backpack. This time, I don’t bring sandwiches.

I trudge, observing the flocks of people coming and going from the shacks that surround the landfill. A trio of men jab small items from the ground with hook sticks. A few steps behind them, two kids argue about the true color of the moon. One of them believes it’s as strikingly white as unspoiled milk. The other one says it’s tawny like the pages of the books in his mother’s chest. In the sky, silky clouds strive to hide the secrets of the moon.

On a heap of trash, an old woman with a hunched back fidgets with litter, a statue against the nightly hues. She wears fruit baskets as shoes and gloves to pick up what she deems useful. I wave at her, experimenting with a smile even knowing it hardly fits. She



frowns at me but doesn't wave back. A few meters ahead, six people gather around a grill, two of them sambaing to the erratic sounds of a broken pandeiro. The others laugh and talk loudly about a soccer game, pointing at each other, gesticulating. The stench that glues to the air, sweating from the grill, is the one I'm growing used to. Perhaps it means home to them. *It smells like dinner.* When I arrived home late from college, the aroma of Mamãe's beans cooked with garlic and paprika pervaded the apartment. That scent was like a tight, warm embrace, even though I eventually chose to abandon it to chase illusions.

"Moça!" I pivot to face a boy sticking his foot into a pile of trash. He gives out a muffled cry but doesn't really care about it. He stretches his arm to reach something. "You're tall. Can you pick that lunchbox for me?" His voice is jumbled. He's chewing bubble gum.

"Of course." I walk to the pile of trash and fetch the lunchbox for him. It's stylized with the drawing of a fading funny robot. One of its edges is dented. A bug skitters out of a tiny hole on its side. I shoo it away. "Is it for school?"

The boy shakes his head. He's about eight years old, shirtless, soot daubing his cheeks like tribal marks. Dollops of dried blood swell from his lips. Not bubble gum. He's chewing a piece of plastic casing for wires. I hand the lunchbox to him, mouth agape. They rarely eat raw plastic. It hurts the mouth, pharynx, and esophagus. That's why they partially melt it, work it into a paste, then grate it. Verdidea's directors spoke of plans for easing the process of eating plastic, mainly in the upper digestive system, from the mouth to the stomach. They went bankrupt without ever outlining those plans.

The boy opens the lunchbox and shakes it to clean it from dirt.

"Are you the journalist?" he asks, wiping the funny robot that grins at us with its coiling arms wide open as if looking for a hug.

"Yes. My name is Elisa."

The boy spits half the casing from his mouth and swallows the rest. I gulp at it, wanting to look away. If it were weeks ago, I'd

probably retch at the sight. But now I know it's part of my story. I don't want to avoid it.

"My maninha says she likes you. She met you ten years ago."

My heart misses a beat. I gape at the boy. I don't need to ask who his sister is. Francisca da Conceição, the person I gave to Verdidea as a corporate offering.

★ ★ ★

When would Verdidea put a base on the moon like the other billionaires were doing at a rapid pace? Questions like that whirled on the news all the time, but it never made Jandir and Vando Batista's eyes shine. Their next big project was thankfully rooted on Earth: ending world hunger. For that, they had to choose between two paths: solving what prevented food from arriving at everyone's tables or devising new feeding solutions. The former involved politics and tackling the core of the economic system itself, from which they greatly benefited, so they left it aside. The latter was what motivated them.

The plastic-breaking enzyme working in mammals was Verdidea's secret—*forbidden*—breakthrough. After the plastic was digested into monomers, very specific bacteria carried its constituent parts through the digestive system. Grouped with other microbes artificially inserted into someone's microbiota, those monomers could be converted into carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, and other nutrients. It was a giant leap from what Verdidea had been using in isopods for three years. (And by the way, the Great Pacific garbage patch had shrunk 25 percent since the crustaceans were employed there. Headlines flashed that Verdidea was *the company that should run the world*.)

With the enzyme-bacteria system working in humans, no one would need to starve anymore. Virtually anything around people could be easily turned into food. Plastic was ubiquitous in cities. The food supply chain would be disrupted. Transport, distribution, aggregation, and processing might all be rendered secondary and,

with a whole assortment of new processes, different textures and tastes could be acquired. Feeding people would be a decentralized process without lots of points of failure. Costs would plummet. It would all become excruciatingly cheaper than producing any kind of food, and with the way Verdidea planned to employ its enzyme-bacteria system, eating plastic could also prove to be healthier than eating ultra-processed food. Not only would famine end, but people would have quality nutrition all around the world. The abrasive and obnoxious stench of burnt plastic that would pester the cities could be solved soon after. Verdidea was certain they could do anything. I was certain I could make the world believe in that.

Mamãe and I had gone through rough patches when I was a kid. Mamãe had to work overnight as a prostitute to take care of me during the day, and on weekends she got temporary gigs as a window cleaner so we had food on our table. So more than a meaningful job, Verdidea's project became personal to me.

The next step came when the process worked successfully on mice, then monkeys. So they needed volunteers. I never fooled myself about what that word meant for them.

There were poor communities near Mairipotaba comprising displaced people from Goiânia's massive gentrification. They were jobless, many of them starving, not a few resorting to landfills to find food and junk to sell at paltry values. It was near those communities that Verdidea decided to build a new headquarters. It was me who wrote articles and called press conferences to convince Verdidea's shareholders that it was a good idea. I worked day and night to fabricate the vision of Verdidea sinking its roots in the middle of Brazil and making them sprout deep and wide, bringing progress everywhere they touched, so when it came to the public it would all be beautifully justified. All in the name of ending world hunger. Meanwhile, Verdidea's lawyers scoured the law for loopholes that would allow them to start experimenting on humans—and, as I later found out, Verdidea deceived the ethics committee responsible

for the project, presenting to them an entirely different set of parameters.

In a one-hour speech, I convinced Verdidea's shareholders that it was a good idea to make São João's citizens eat trash. Three months later, they applauded me and green-lighted the project.

\* \* \*

The story of Francisca da Conceição started when I found her lone shack, half a kilometer from São João da Campânula, the widest of the landfills. Her hut was surrounded by shrubs and flanked by a muddied-water stream. When I arrived, the wind plucked fiercely at pants, shirts, and sneakers hanging from a clothesline. Somewhere inside, sertanejo wheezed from shabby speakers. It was the furthest I had the guts to go into the Mairipotaba's communities, not so far from Verdidea's new headquarters—next to where I went to live after I left Mamãe and the cozy aromas of her beans with garlic. But most important, it wasn't within the humiliating heart of São João.

I'd learned through Verdidea's reports that an eighteen-year-old girl lived in that shack with her mothers and that she stayed alone during most of the day, when her mothers left to scavenge the landfills and hawk in the streets of Goiânia.

Francisca was a thin girl with a protruding belly. When I first saw her, she wore a crop top and jeans so spent they almost surrendered to white. Her shack only had two mattresses, a TV set, and a crooked, doorless wardrobe.

She invited me to sit on two plastic chairs outside and offered me a warm cup of coffee. I accepted.

"Do you eat?" I asked after I explained who I was and where I came from. At that point, I hadn't been fully clear about my intentions of asking her to be a volunteer. But she certainly knew people like me only went there when they had something to gain.

"I do." Francisca sipped at her coffee. She was a very shy girl, clearly not used to visits, much less by overdressed women.

“How is it so?” I looked around, indicating that there wasn’t much beyond a makeshift oven and a few supermarket bags lying next to the shack. “Do you make your own food?”

“Sometimes.” She shrugged. “But mostly my moms scavenge things from the landfills then sell them in the city. Then, they come back with some quentinhas. Sometimes it’s rice and chicken, other times just a lettuce salad.”

“Is it always enough for your family?”

The question caught her by surprise. Her gaze lost focus, the cup tight between her fingers, midway to her mouth. After a while, she shook her head. I was pulling the conversation to the point where I wanted, but not without pain. Speaking of hunger when you were not feeling it wasn’t always easy. It seemed unfair because you were sated; but it also filled you with a senseless kind of hope, as if that bellyful moment could linger and maybe, just maybe, you’d never have to be hungry again.

“Sorry about the ... sensitive and weird question...” I said. “But if you were hungry right now, would you eat those bags if you were sure they would sate your hunger?”

“Do you mean...” Francisca blushed. “Eating what’s inside them?”

“No. I mean the bags themselves.”

“I would.” No hesitation.

I only remembered two moments of my childhood when I felt really hungry. I never forgot them. Sometimes Mamãe’s work wasn’t enough to feed us—the excruciating drama of many Brazilian families. Inflation corroded her meager wages and there was one occasion when we spent an entire day without having anything to eat. But they were enough for me to remember my own yells echoing throughout the apartment, unaware of the fact that food didn’t magically sprout whenever I wanted. Mamãe silently sobbed in a corner, knowing that even if she worked harder the next day there was no guarantee that there would be food on our table.

“I would too,” I whispered to myself.

It was later that day I offered a magical solution to Francisca. For now, she only had to come with me to Verdidea's labs and sign some papers. For someone with a hole to fill, she couldn't say no.

★ ★ ★

Today, Francisca doesn't live in a shack anymore. She lives in the middle of São João da Campânula, in a house with its bricks exposed and a corrugated iron roof. Clothes hang from the clothesline tied to two poles outside her house. The wind that buffets at them now carries the landfill's polymeric stench. From somewhere nearby, samba shackles the evening, scratching the air with streaks of happiness, threatening to extinguish the smell by the sheer pressure of joy.

I wait for Francisca, staring at her closed door, snapping my fingers and trying to control my breathing. A man walks by carrying a bag of plastic bottles on his shoulder. He nods at me. Behind the set of houses that clutter that part of the landfill, the old woman with a hunched back kneels on a mound of trash. Or perhaps it's another woman wearing fruit baskets as shoes, another shadow against the moon-paling backwash of the night. Behind her, beyond the warts of junk that pockmark São João, I see the imposing and abandoned headquarters of Verdidea—all that remains of the company that vowed to heal the world. A chill runs along my back when I remember all the nights I spent in that place, a haunted palace built on unstable stocks and the lives of the destitute.

"Are you okay, Elisa?" The voice startles me. It's still the same but with a quality of roughness to it.

Francisca isn't as slim as ten years ago, but the same curious half-smile shapes her lips, except her shyness seems to have melted away in the same humble kind of sweetness I saw in Edilberto's eyes. I shiver from head to toe when I shake her hand. I expect a slap, a reprimand; any sort of revenge for having transformed her and those around her into garbage eaters. None of that happens. After all this time, I have only one question for Francisca, and not

one of those noted in my pad—*How does it taste? Does it hurt to eat plastic? How is your diet?* The one I have for her is different, and one that applies to her and to myself: *Was it worth it?*

Like the coward I am, I don't ask it.

"We'll have dinner tomorrow for my brother's birthday," she says. "Do you want to come?"

"I do," I say as fast as I gave away Mamãe's Tupperware.

*I'm sorry for what I did to you,* the words quiver on my lips. I don't say them.

*Don't try to repair your mistakes all at once. Some of them you'll just have to swallow.*

"Thank you for the invitation," I say instead, gulping.

\* \* \*

"I made dinner for you." Mamãe was dry and brief when she called me one week after I told her about Verdidea's plans with the enzyme. It happened a month after meeting Francisca for the first time and having her enlisted as a volunteer. "Can you come home earlier today?"

"Yes, Mamãe," I said to my pad on the table while I slid my fingers through the volunteers' profiles on the big screen at my office. Francisca was a go. There were five others, including one of her mothers, that were inclined to accept Verdidea's offer as well. Volunteers would be provided with temporary housing and five months' worth of the current minimum wages. But the big prize lay at the end of the road: they'd never have the risk of starving.

"Are you listening?" Mamãe's grave voice shook me up. I rubbed my forehead.

"What?"

She sighed very slowly, which came out as an uncomfortable hiss through the pad's speakers. "I asked you not to eat anything. I prepared something special."

And when I went home, I found out what it meant.

On our dinner table, there was only one Pyrex dish at the center with an oozing black pudding that looked like charred cloth and smelled like burnt popcorn.

"Overcooked?" I said, kissing Mamãe's forehead as I laid my backpack on the floor. She didn't kiss mine back as usual.

"No," she said. "Have your seat and let's have dinner."

I frowned at her. "But what's that?"

"Our dinner."

"Is it ... overcooked mashed potatoes? Seriously—"

"It doesn't matter." Her eyes didn't lock onto mine. "It won't leave you hungry."

I saw where she was heading and closed my eyes. When I told her about the new project in Mairipotaba, I said I'd probably have to spend some time in Goiânia. She didn't take it lightly. She closed herself and spoke curtly with me in the following days. Up to that point, I'd thought it was because I was going to spend time away from her. I understood. I was all she had, so it was natural that she'd miss me. But there was something else.

"Mamãe..."

She pulled the chair. It scratched on the floorboard. I flinched while she sat.

"Mamãe, stop. You don't need to eat that."

She shrugged, scooping the black pudding and putting it on her plate.

"That's what we have, isn't it?" she said.

I pulled the other chair and sat beside her, seeking her eyes with mine, finding nothing but pain and evasion.

"The project with the enzyme is an option so no one will need to starve ever again."

"The kid that I raised, the one that praised my soft pão de queijo"—her voice came out grated, her teeth chattering—"the one who was all yummy-yummy at my feijoada, would never want to see people eating garbage."



“It’s not garbage, Mamãe! Don’t you understand? It’s the solution for a problem that has existed for thousands of years.” But those words tasted sour on my mouth. Those were the words of Elisa Assunção, PR Manager at Verdidea, disinterred out of a presentation to shareholders, not those of Elisa Assunção, daughter of Máira Assunção, raised amongst the whiffs of motherly feijoada.

“It’s no solution, girl. It’s just the same problem with a different painting. They won’t give people options with dignity. They’re giving them what they always did: the leftovers. Eating is not only satiating your hunger. It’s a process that carries dignity. If you think it just serves to satiate your hunger, then eat the fucking dinner I prepared.”

“Mamãe, I can show you the documents.” I reached for her hand, but she recoiled, her mouth a thin waning moon. I wanted to talk about the documents because I didn’t want to find the truth in her words. “They’re classified, but I have access to them and I trust you. You’ll learn what this is really about. There’s a report that—”

“If you keep insisting that a poor boy should eat that fucking bottle...” She pointed to a soda bottle lying next to the bin in the kitchen. “Then don’t come back here.”

Mamãe took a mouthful of the black pudding.

★ ★ ★

In the humiliating heart of São João da Campânula, we dine.

There are about twenty people scattered on seven plastic tables around Francisca’s house, all partaking of the beer and food I brought—feijoada, pequi rice, galinhada, and green corn mush. I wish Mamãe were there too, joyfully saying how she’d change each of those recipes, how she’d sprinkle coriander in this one and nutmeg in that one.

I sit at a table with three other people, but I remain silent, just smiling at everyone who dares to look at me.

The song “O Show Tem Que Continuar” blasts from two big speakers strategically positioned on each side of the field. *We’ll find*

*the tone, a chord with a beautiful sound, and make our voices good; then we'll be happy.* Children play with a hose, frightening the heat away. Night has fallen but the sky is still daubed in the summer's blue dyes.

Ângela is there with Mariana, Rogério, Adenilson, and Cleiton. She wears her cool sneakers and kisses her man Jango's cheek. The hunched-back woman is there. She sings loudly. *Then we'll be happy; look, we're on air again; the show must go on.* Edilberto is there too, picking at something he brought in Mamãe's Tupperware. He smiles as he stares at his friends—his family—chatting and singing and drinking and eating. When our gazes meet, he winks at me. He's eating melted plastic bottle caps. It's home to him.

"So, you came to write a story about us?" Francisca puts a hand on my shoulder. She has her other arm wrapped around her brother.

"I—Yes, I did."

"And how is it?" Francisca picks a chair beside me and sits. I nod at a glass of beer, but she shakes her head.

I grin at her. "I'll start over."

"Why?"

"It's just—My mind was elsewhere. I think it needs a complete overhaul."

I don't want them to become aberrations and exotic curiosities in the eyes of the public. I want them to be who they are: people. I want to write about the families living in São João da Campânula—about Mariana, Rogério, Adenilson, and Cleiton's daily journey to school; about the samba of their evenings.

I have other questions to ask them. *How was your day? What's something you created recently? What makes you laugh? Who makes you laugh?* Others will come to write about plastic. I'll leave that to them.

"Francisca, let me ask you something." I dare to put a hand over hers.

"Of course."

"Was it worth it?"

She stares at me for a while like she did when I first asked her if her food was enough. “Was it worth it digging trash after food and things to sell? Was it worth it to beg in the streets? When something isn’t an option we don’t ask if it’s worth it.”

★ ★ ★

The “famine issue,” as the Batista brothers called it—as if it was just a minor inconvenience like forgetting a sandwich on a grill—was never only a question of actually eradicating famine. Since they never addressed poverty or housing, eating plastic became a symbol of desperation and lack of options, not of hope and progress. People in the landfills already picked their food from the trash. That wouldn’t change.

I wish I could say I was the one responsible for fracturing Verdidea’s business. I wasn’t. Their stocks plummeted when they abandoned the Amazon rainforest project, then again when I couldn’t shield them from the scandals—unknown up to then—involving several of the Batistas’ other companies that employed forced labor. I was horrified, but I chose to believe they didn’t know and that they could correct their mistakes. I still had my hopes high that they could address many of the world issues, including famine, food quality and distribution, housing, and poverty. It was only a setback. They were the solution. It was a selfish, self-destructive behavior. How could I have dedicated fifteen years of my life to them if they couldn’t achieve those goals? Was I merely industrial waste along with all the other workers being steadily laid off? In my desperation, I even tried to push an article defending Verdidea’s views. But not even the Batistas believed in the company anymore.

The final strike came when the people living in the Mairipotaba’s landfills were exposed as the *plastikeaters*. It was when I learned Verdidea was already genetically altering São João da Campânula’s dwellers to make their bodies produce the enzyme-bacteria system in their digestive tract. I thought I’d be informed when it happened. I’d thought I’d see the results, the smiles of people with enough

sustenance to survive. Verdidea's directors didn't show me anything, perhaps because they knew I was only sustained by an illusion.

In the end, what toppled me was the front page of *O Globo* showing a blind old man with plastic cotton swabs on his tongue. It was then that I couldn't take it anymore.

\* \* \*

Mamãe used to say we shouldn't blindly pursue our dreams. Sometimes it was okay to put them aside for a while or to abandon them altogether. *Our dreams are the fabric of who we are, Lisa, but we're changing all the time, re-sewing ourselves.*

Nine years after leaving home, I knock on the door of the only woman capable of helping me sweep my dusty dreams from beneath my feet.

"Mamãe?" I stammer as an old woman opens the door. There's deepness in her eyes, a mix of sadness and longing that brews into a bittersweet gaze when she sees me crying. "I brought cornmeal cake for us."



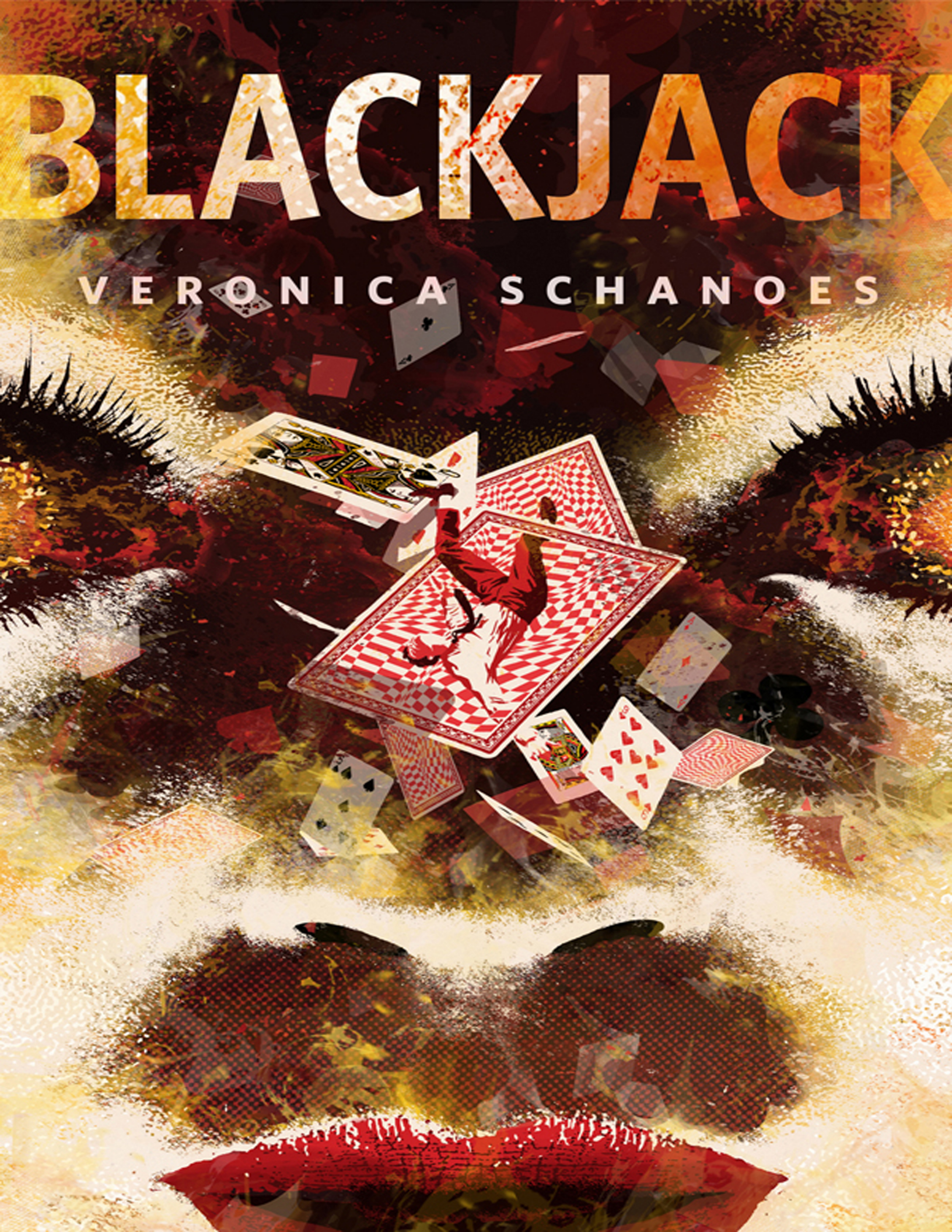
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# BLACKJACK

VERONICA SCHANOES







# Blackjack

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**VERONICA SCHANOES**

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*illustration by*

MARK SMITH

REACTOR 



I put off the unveiling of my daughter's headstone as long as I could. We didn't do it until the eleventh month after she died, when the *yahrzeit* was in sight and I couldn't stall any longer. I made all kinds of excuses—my grandchildren weren't ready; I was too busy getting them settled in with me and Phil to organize it; it was too cold for us all to stand outdoors. Finally my sister Sadie called me up and told me it had to be done, it had to be done soon, and she would organize everything. Sadie is my older sister. My other two sisters are younger than me, not that any of us are young anymore. Betty was the youngest of us, the baby of the family, but she died of cancer twenty years ago during the war, so it's just the four of us left.

Sadie took care of everything—she got in touch with the rabbi at my shul, she sent out the invitations, she had our other two sisters, Millie and Rose, put together some food and desserts and bring them to my and Phil's apartment for afterward. I didn't have to do a thing. I just told her to send any bills to Phil, and he would take care of them. And he did, without a word. He's good like that. Reliable.

So all I had to do was show up on Phil's arm, with my daughter's children, Elsie and Danny, in tow, all of us dressed soberly and formally. That I could do, down to Elsie's white gloves. Only twelve years old, and already her hands were too big to borrow a pair of mine. But I made sure she had her own.

I don't remember what the rabbi said about Myra after reading from Psalms. He didn't know her too well, anyway. He was the rabbi from my synagogue near Sutton Place. Myra and the kids had lived out in Midwood. Instead of listening, I thought about the last message she ever sent me, and wondered if it was my fault she was dead.

I didn't listen to the Kaddish, either. Instead I looked at the chanting men through Myra's eyes and saw what she would have seen, what would've mattered to her. Her father was missing.

Of course, he'd been missing for a long time by then.

I'd married Harry in 1927, and I'd married him for love, and my, weren't we in love? We used to go out drinking and dancing together in smoky speakeasies. I'd line my eyes all dark with kohl—they used to call me Cleopatra—and he'd play the ukulele. In the summer, we'd take the trolley out to Coney Island and lie on the

beach together and stroll on the boardwalk and stop to smooch each other every few minutes.

Love.

Harry, he was so handsome. Even after I knew he was no good, I couldn't keep my hands off him. He had thick, dark, curly hair and sparkling dark eyes, and a knowing, cynical smile that just made me weak. A nice sharp jawline. Phil, now, he never really set my blood pounding like that, but on the other hand, he's never raised his voice, either, to me or to Myra, not even to his own boys. Harry had a mean streak. Myra got that from him.

We loved each other so much, we got married and kept up the smooching, and in 1929 I had a little girl. I had Myra. He named her that.

Then a few years later, I got sick, real sick. Women's problems, they called it, though I blame it on Harry's whoring around. That's love for you. First I had to stay in bed and I only got up when Myra needed me. Then I had to take Myra and go to my mother's so she could take care of us both. Harry was working too hard to do it, I told her. Pfft. As if Harry was ever a working man. He was a gangster, that's what he did, and he wasn't very good at it. Sure, we got a warm reception at all the joints he supplied liquor to during Prohibition, but it turns out that doesn't matter so much when you've got a kid you're trying to feed.

Anyway, where was I? Right, I took Myra and went to Mama's so she could take care of us, and then things got even worse, and Myra had to stay with Mama and Papa and Betty, who was still living at home, while I went to the hospital.

Poor Myra didn't like that. Mama said she cried and cried after the ambulance had taken me away. Poor kindele. Mama always thought maybe that was why Myra was the way she was, the ambulance taking me away, and her not being allowed to visit on account of her being a child. But I don't think it was that. After all, I came back, didn't I?

But we didn't know you would at the time, Mama would always say when I said that. And she was right. Things looked real bad for me for a while. We didn't know if I was going to make it. And Harry, well, I guess he didn't relish the thought of being a widower with a small child the way things were—this was just thirty years ago, 1932, the Depression—and sometime in there he just ... left. Didn't turn up one Friday night to have Shabbos with Myra—Mama always kept the sabbath at her home—and we didn't hear from him after that.

So there was Mama with Betty and Myra at home and Harry had vanished, and things didn't look so good for me. Mama didn't know what to do, maybe change my name again, like when I was little and had scarlet fever and I went from Henrietta to Josephine. But then Mama remembered that wasn't what had helped. What had helped was when she talked to a woman who had just come over from the old country, a witch, I guess you'd call her, and the witch had made me a

broth and an amulet both. So Mama went to the witch again. Tante Deborah, I call her.

Mama left Myra with Betty and brought Tante Deborah to visit me in the hospital, and I remember sipping something that tasted terrible, and Tante Deborah slipping a pouch under my pillow and chanting some words I was too sick to hear well or follow—Hebrew, I think. And after that I started to get better. The doctors at the hospital, they couldn't believe it, and the nurses told me later that they'd never seen someone so sick get well again. And finally I could go home.

Harry had been gone for weeks by then.

Myra was never the same after her beloved Papa left ... I think she never got over it. She cried more easily than ever, and even when she wasn't crying, she was mostly unhappy. I don't know, those were bad years. Hard years. I worked at Gimbels, a window dresser, and Myra and I lived with Mama and Papa and Betty. I'd go without dinner sometimes so there would be enough for Mama and Papa and Myra. Our other sisters couldn't help, nobody was any better off. For years, this went on. It was no way to live.

I couldn't stand it, I told Mama. "We can't go on like this," I told her. "Papa out of work, Betty and I don't bring enough home."

"Well, what else is there to do?" asked Mama.

I thought about Gimbels. "I'm gonna catch myself a rich man," I told her. "The very next one who comes into the shop. I am."

And I did. Spotted Phil when he came in looking for clothing for his sons. A respectable widower, his wife had been gone for a couple years, and I could tell that he was looking around again. He seemed gentle, and he seemed kind enough, and he had money. You can't ask better than that. He came back to shop now and then—for shirts, ties, gloves, this and that, and finally he asked for a date. It took maybe ... a year after that until he proposed. I said yes, but only if we moved into Manhattan, because I didn't want to live in Brooklyn no more, even at his very fancy house in Crown Heights. They wouldn't sell to Jews on Fifth Avenue in those days, or even near it, so that's how we ended up on Sutton Place, a co-op in a real fancy building, with a white-gloved doorman downstairs. And we've been all over together, on cruises, to resorts—all very nice. And I never went without dinner again, even on Yom Kippur, because I'd had enough of fasting. And Myra slept in a real bed, not a hammock.

Love. Well, I learned to love him.

His boys never did like me much, though. I think they thought I was a gold-digger. Maybe I was, but what else was I supposed to do to take care of myself and Myra? And Phil's been happy. I can count the number of fights we've had on one hand. I pay attention to his favorite colors, and get my dresses made up in them. I pay attention to what he likes to eat and make sure it's always on the table. He tells me where he wants to go for vacation, and I set everything up. I

didn't do all that with Harry. But I've kept Phil happy for almost twenty-five years and counting, and that's not nothing, either.

Myra never took to him. He wasn't unkind to her, but he never made much of an effort, either. What man does, when it comes to children? Especially children that aren't his. For Myra, nobody could replace her adored father. She remembered dancing with him while she was little, she remembered that he was handsome. I'd be surprised if she remembered anything else. She thought she remembered why Harry left, though. She blamed me for it, for driving Harry away. I was sick at the time, so sick. It didn't make any sense, but she blamed me anyway.

Never mind Harry. It was Phil who paid for her medicines, and Phil who gave me the money to support her and the kids after her husband, Siggy, left, and Phil who paid for her funeral and put his arm around me by the graveside, and Phil who held my elbow at the unveiling. Harry was nowhere to be seen, just the same as the last thirty years.

★ ★ ★

Phil wasn't there on Myra's yahrzeit, a month later, though. He had a business dinner that evening, but I didn't mind. There was something I had to do that night, besides lighting the candle, and I didn't want to explain it.

After the kids were in bed, I opened my jewelry box in the bedroom I shared with Phil and took out the envelope with the last note from Myra. I hadn't told anybody about it, not my sisters, not Phil. He knew it existed, of course, but what it said? No. I couldn't. I didn't tell anybody.

I read it one more time, read the accusations about me, the way she blamed her daughter for ruining her life. Then I took it to the living room and held the corner of it in the flame of the candle until it caught. I held it for a few moments more, until it was well and truly aflame, and then I dropped it into an ashtray and watched it burn.

★ ★ ★

It was a couple months later that I was playing canasta with my sisters, and Sadie had the idea for us to go to Vegas. The grandkids hadn't come home from school yet, but the seven-layer cookies were out on the table already, and we were munching on them.

"Phil's gonna be out of town on business for two weeks next month," I said, as I rearranged my cards and laid down a set of nines. "And the kids are going to visit their father in Philadelphia for one of those weeks, you know. It'll just be me here."

All three of my sisters exchanged looks. They thought I didn't see, but I did.

"That's lonely," sympathized Rose. "Maybe one of us should come stay with you."

"That's a *break*," corrected Sadie. She was my partner in the game. She put down a canasta of aces and smirked.

"Nice," I said. Sadie is better at canasta than me, but I'm better than Millie or Rose.

"You should go somewhere," Sadie continued. "Why let them have all the fun? Lock up the apartment and you take a trip also."

I wasn't sure my grandkids, Elsie and Danny, would describe visits to their father's house with his new family as *fun*, but I didn't say that. Well, I say "new," but he and his wife have a three-year-old, and I hear she's expecting again.

"Ach, where would I go?" I said absently. I was watching Millie rearrange her cards, trying to figure out what she had in her hand.

Sadie rolled her eyes. "Vegas, of course! You love Vegas."

I do like Vegas. We'd been there a few times and while I enjoy canasta with the girls, blackjack is really my game. When I say "we," I mean me and Phil, of course. Harry and me, we never had money to go anywhere farther than the speakeasy on Ludlow Street.

Millie drew a card and discarded another. I eyed the discard pile, but decided against picking the pack. I didn't want to get saddled with that many cards this late in the game.

"Vegas alone," I said, "is not necessarily a fun time." I drew a card. It was the three of hearts, so I smiled and put it down with the two other red threes I had.

"So, who says you'll be alone?" countered Sadie. "Take me with you. Your Phil can afford it."

I had done the best of all of us. My Phil certainly could afford for Sadie and me to go to Las Vegas on his dime. Our dime, I should say. Haven't we been married long enough for me to say that?

"We-e-e-e-ell," I said. "Why not? Only what if Elsie and Danny need to come home early? I'm not going to go for the whole break."

Elsie and Danny don't like their stepmother, and I don't think she much likes them. She wants to pretend that Siggy came to her fresh and new, no previous family at all, certainly no kids hanging around after they're no longer wanted, kids from a marriage she helped break up. I don't know how many more visits to Philadelphia are in the cards for Elsie and Danny.

Speaking of cards, Millie laid out what remained of her hand. "I'm out, girls," she said. "Time to count up your points."

So the next month, Phil packed for Montreal, Elsie and Danny packed for Philadelphia, and I packed for Las Vegas. After I'd said good-bye to Phil and he'd headed off to Canada and after I'd kissed Elsie and Danny good-bye and they'd driven off in the backseat of their father's car, I picked Sadie up in a taxi and we got on a plane to Nevada. We took a taxi from the airport to the Stardust Resort and Casino. It was very nice in there, all red and brown velvet, very plush. Anyway, when we got there we each went to our own room and unpacked. Our rooms were in the Venus building. Love again.

You gotta understand how fancy Vegas was back then. It was adults only, not like porn, but like a fancy restaurant. I'd packed my fanciest gowns, and even bought a couple new ones for Sadie so she wouldn't feel outclassed. Sure, we knew the place was mobbed up and had been since the '40s, but so what? To tell the truth, it made me feel a little more at home, because the mob there was mostly our guys—Yidn, you know? And it made the place very safe—you never had to worry about anything violent happening, because the boys didn't want to give authorities any excuse to take a closer look at what they were doing. All you really had to worry about was one of the boys getting too handsy, but where don't you have to worry about that?

Sadie and me, after a late lunch at the Polynesian restaurant they had there—I don't know what that had to do with the outer space theme, but that was the restaurant they had—we went straight to the casino in our very nice dresses, faces all made up. Sadie, she played around at the slot machines, the roulette wheel. I went straight to the blackjack tables. I picked one at random and just stood and watched for a few hands.

Then I placed a few small bets, nothing crazy, just feeling out the game and the players, and I did all right. Before long, I took a chair myself. I won a few hands, lost a few, but I was doing better than breaking even. Just a little better, but that's what you go for in blackjack. Watching the cards, I forgot to think about Myra for a little while. At some point I looked up and saw that Sadie had floated over and was watching me.

I caught Sadie's eye and jerked my head slightly. She floated a little nearer.

I threw the next hand and busted. Then I looked at the little gold wristwatch on my left arm. With my eyes, I can't actually read it, but I didn't have to.

"Sadie, hon," I said. "I'm getting hungry. It must be dinnertime, don't you think?"

A few older gentlemen offered to take us to dinner and the evening show—Sadie and me, we weren't young anymore, not by a long shot, but we were still pretty good-looking for our age. We waved them off, politely of course, no hard feelings, but we were planning a quiet night. Well, I was.

Sadie had different ideas. "Whaddaya mean, a quiet night? It's not every week we get to Vegas!"

"I get tired early these days," I told her. "With Elsie and Danny, I'm raising kids all over again, but I'm not so young this time." Honestly, I'd been tired ever since losing Myra.

So we split the difference. We had dinner in my room—room service—and after some coffee so I wouldn't doze off, we went back down to the evening floor show.

First, though, I placed a long-distance call to Siggy's in Philadelphia. He picked up.

"Siggy, it's Josie. How are the kids doing?"

"They're doing fine," he said, but he didn't sound so sure. "Having the time of their lives."

"Yeah?" I said. "That's good. Get Elsie. I wanna say hi."

After half a minute, Elsie got on the phone. "Hi, Nana."

"Hi, darling," I said. "Are you having fun?"

Elsie paused just a little too long before answering. "Yeah."

"What've you and your brother been doing?" I asked.

"Nothin'."

"Nothing?"

"We all went for ice cream."

Ice cream. I could get her ice cream in New York.

"Is Faye being nice to you?" I asked.

"Uh-uh."

I sighed. No point in asking what that bitch was doing this time. Elsie wouldn't be able to say on the phone in front of everybody.

"Well, darling, listen. Your Aunt Sadie and me will be home in a few days, and then if you want to come home early, you just say, all right? I'll take the train down and come get you."

"Okay, Nana," said Elsie.

"Now put me back on with your father."

I warned Siggy to take good care of the kids and then hung up.

★ ★ ★

The Stardust floor show was known for its topless showgirls, which I guess was something for the guys to get excited about, but didn't mean anything to me. I enjoyed the fruity sweet cocktails, though—they reminded me of the drinks I'd get when Phil and I went on cruises. I might've had one too many, though, because on my way to powder my nose, my head started spinning and I had to sit down in a small private booth.

A man slid in across from me, so quickly and smoothly that he must've been following me, so my stomach tightened and I got ready to kick up a fuss if he

gave me any trouble. I hoped Sadie was okay at the front-seat table where I'd left her.

The man tilted his face to the side quizzically. "You don't recognize me, Josie-Jo? I haven't changed that much, have I?" He smiled at some joke I wasn't in on, I guess, and then I knew him.

"We got nothing to say to each other, Harry," I said icily. "You made sure of that thirty years ago."

"Oh, don't be like that, Josie-Jo," he said. "I can see you've done all right for yourself, in the end—jewels like those on your neck and fingers, and I saw you cleaning up at the blackjack table earlier. You're not still sore, are you?"

I ignored his question. "You'll excuse me, Harry. I'm just on my way to the ladies'."

"Just sit with me for a minute," he said. "It's not often I get to sit with a fine-looking lady like yourself. You do look good, Josie. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you weren't yet fifty."

"Shut up, Harry," I said. "I've already talked to my former son-in-law today, and I don't need another useless deadbeat."

"Josie-Jo, c'mon. Have one drink with me. Just for old times' sake. You go powder your nose, and I'll wait right here for you. Just one drink. Please."

"Don't bet on it," I told him. I tried to sweep majestically out of the booth, but I stumbled over my heels and almost fell against the table. I stalked to the ladies' room, glancing back only once.

After I'd taken care of my business, I looked at myself in the mirror in the ladies' lounge. Harry wasn't wrong, I was looking good that evening. And he was easy on the eyes, too. He always had been. Come to think of it, he'd looked a lot younger than I would have expected. I'd just turned sixty, and if Harry had been a stranger on the street, I would have put him at forty-five at the most. I sighed and patted my hair. He was still a handsome man, there was no denying it.

What harm could one drink do? Maybe I'd finally give him a piece of my mind about what his leaving had done to Myra.

I patted my hair back into place one last time and walked out of the ladies' room and back over to the table.

"Okay," I said, sitting down. "One drink." I ordered a mai tai, a drink I'd tried on the last cruise I took with Phil, before Elsie and Danny had come to live with us.

"You don't drink sidecars anymore, Josie?" Harry asked.

"A lot about me has changed," I said.

"I guess I don't know that much about you, now," he said.

"That's a fact," I said, and he winced.

"But maybe you still have some fond feelings for me," he said. "You know, just for old times' sake. Maybe you still care a little."



The girl brought the mai tai, saving me from spitting out the swear words on my lips. I swallowed them politely, instead, along with a sip of the drink, and by the time the girl left, I had myself under control again.

"Fat chance," I said, and lit a cigarette. "What is all this about, Harry? You need money? I'm not giving you any."

"I don't need money, Josie-Jo." Suddenly Harry looked very tired, though still younger than he had any right to look. "I don't need money anymore."

"Don't be ridiculous, Harry," I said. "Everybody needs money. What'd you do, marry an heiress?"

"No," he said. "I died."

"You did what?" I asked. I must've misheard, I thought.

"I came out here because I needed money. Wasn't too popular with the boys in New York in the '40s, on account of some deals that went south, which were not my fault, but I was the one that got hung out to dry."

"Of course, Harry," I said, and this time I was the one who felt tired. "Nothing's ever your fault."

He cracked a smile. 'Nah, there's plenty that's my fault, Josie. But not those deals. I was set up, is all. I've got my suspicions as to who by, but that doesn't really matter any more. What matters is that I came out here maybe ten, twelve years ago, just after they built this place. I dunno, I lose track of time where I am."

I rolled my eyes a little. I wasn't buying it.

He ignored it and kept on with his story. "I was working here, set up in the back room. I did a little of everything that needed doing, and I saw how easy the money was coming in, how much of it there was. My fingers got itchy."

"Harry." I sighed. "You know better than that. Everybody knows better than that."

"Well, hell, Josie-Jo, there was so much of it, and my cut started to look so small. I figured, I'm the one who says how much is coming in, nobody'll notice if I skim a little, if I run a few games on the side. Who was it gonna hurt?"

"You tried to cheat *Lansky*? You're an idiot, Harry."

"Ain't that the truth," he said. "In the end, a couple of Syndicate boys took me upstairs and I didn't come back down. They're not supposed to do that here! No violence, everybody knows."

"Everybody knows not to cheat *Lansky*, too."

"And you see how many mirrors there are here. And I had nobody to cover them, like you're supposed to when somebody dies. Nobody to say Kaddish for me because nobody who cared about me knew I was gone. I was all alone here."

Suddenly a picture of Myra's face appeared in my mind, the one person I knew who had always cared that her beloved father was gone, and I remembered covering the mirrors in her house and my and Phil's apartment after I saw her

body. Never had understood that custom before, but after Myra was gone, I couldn't bear to look at myself and know I was in the world and she wasn't, and it finally made sense to me.

"I hung around here just a little too long. Just a little too long, and pfft." He snapped his fingers. "Lilith sucked me right through the mirror. Mirrors—they all lead straight to Yenne Velt, the other world. That's why you gotta cover 'em when someone dies, new spirits get confused real easy and go the wrong way. Now I'm stuck in some kind of casino there with the shedim, and Josie, I hate it there. It's awful."

I realized that I had been listening, transfixed. I shook my head to clear it. "Bullshit, Harry. You're a bullshit artist and this is bullshit. I don't know what you want from me, but this is bullshit. I never should've married you."

"Ah, don't say that, Josie-Jo." He looked strained. "We had some really good times together, didn't we? Back when we were young? And we sure made a beautiful little girl, didn't we?"

"Myra," I said through clenched teeth.

"Yeah," he said. "How is the kid?"

So I smacked him. I didn't mean to, I didn't even decide to; my hand just flew out before I knew it. But it went right through his face without stopping. I tried it again, and again my hand went through him like he was nothing, like there was nobody there.

He smiled at me, a tired smile, not his usual smirk, and shook his head. "I'm a ghost, Josie-Jo," he said. "You can try it as many times as you want. But I'm just smoke and mirrors. I'm dead, Josie. I'm not bullshitting you." I leaned back against the wall of the booth and said nothing.

"Why'd you want to hit me, anyway?" he asked.

I blinked at him and wondered if I was crazy. I hoped not. Who would look after Elsie and Danny then?

"Why did I hit you?"

"Why did you hit me?"

"I would think you would know, with being a ghost and all." I took a deep breath. "Myra is dead." I still didn't like to hear my voice saying it out loud.

Harry passed his hand over his eyes, and then he looked even more tired than before. Maybe a little older, too.

"I'm sorry, Josie. I didn't know. When?"

"A little over a year ago."

"I'm sorry. What happened?"

*Yeah, you're sorry, I thought. For all you would've known or cared, she could've died when she was seven and got polio. To hell with you. I wished I could've connected when I hit him. I wished I could've used my fist.*

"Fuck you, Harry."

"Listen, Josie—"

"I've got to go. I'm sorry you're a ghost, or whatever you are, but that's not my problem."

He moved to grab my hand, but his fingers went straight through me. My arm felt cold where it had happened. I guessed he really *was* a ghost.

"Please, Josie. Please. It's all gray there. No color at all. Nothing living. And no other people, just shedim. And I can play whatever, roulette, blackjack, slot machines, it doesn't matter, Josie, because I always win."

I snorted. "Sounds terrible."

"No, Josie, you gotta believe me, it is. Nobody talks to me. The dealers just look straight through me. Nothing ever happens that I don't expect. I pick red seventy-two, the ball lands on red seventy-two. I play poker, and I get a straight flush, first hand. I try to throw games, and I can't. I win. I just wander around, winning and winning and there's no excitement to it at all, and nobody to talk to, nobody to celebrate with, just endless gray casino chips.

"And I'm trapped there. I need someone to help me, someone living. I need you, Josie."

Tough shit, I thought. I have some friends, ladies at my shul with numbers on their arms. They come to lunch sometimes, they tell me things in whispers. We stop talking when Elsie and Danny come in the room. They should never know, please G-d. A spirit casino didn't sound that bad to me. I lit another cigarette.

"So, you want me to spring you? Not a chance, Harry." But I didn't walk away. Maybe I should have. But it was nice to be looking at his face. Myra had always looked so much like her father.

"No, nothing like that. You just have to do what you came here to do. Play cards. Play blackjack."

"Good-bye, Harry." I stood up.

"Please Josie. I won't be able to come to you awake again. I want to go on to whatever should come next for me, whatever would've come next if the mirrors had been covered, if I'd've had someone to say Kaddish for me. Not for my sake, I know I've lived a bad life and I wasn't good to you. But for Myra's sake—we loved each other once, Josie, Myra showed it, she'd have wanted you to help me out. Even if I become a gilgul and have to come back as a dog or an ant, I just don't want to be stuck here anymore."

I shrugged, but at the same time I thought of Harry, young, laughing with me, him with his curls and me with heavily kohled eyes in a local speakeasy. He'd always hated being bored more than anything. Myra had been that way, too.

"Maybe," I said.

"It'll happen in your dreams," he gabbled hastily, like a man who knows his time is short, though the way I figured it, he had nothing but time now. Maybe I was the one running out of time.

"Dreams," I echoed, watching Harry fade away, like a trick of the light. Only his cigarette still burning in the ashtray. I stubbed mine out next to it and went back to my sister.

"You were gone an awful long time," she said. "Do you know how many men I've had to fight off? 'My sister's sitting here.'"

"Sorry, Sadie," I said. "I ran into Harry."

"That no-goodnik! Of all people! I can't believe you gave him the time of day—I always told you he was useless, a schnorrer."

"You were right," I replied absently.

She took another look at me. "You don't look so good," she said. "You want to go upstairs, turn in?"

"No," I said. "Let's stay up late."

I don't take sleeping pills, but liquor has a pretty strong effect on me, and I drank more than a little that night. I went down like a chopped tree at the end of it, and I slept sound.

No dreams. I never dream when I drink.

But I pay for it. I was sick all the next morning and my head hurt worse than anything. I couldn't do this for three nights.

After throwing up, I looked at my face in the bathroom mirror. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Harry's reflection behind me. His lips formed the word "please."

When I looked behind me, though, there was nothing there.

I cleaned up at the blackjack tables again that night, and I thought about celebrating with a mai tai, but my stomach gave a lurch and I decided against it. Instead I took my winnings and made an early night of it.

That night, I dreamt that I woke up to find a young red-haired woman sitting on my bed, and me in my nightgown.

"The Lady," she said, just like that, capital letters and everything. "Is extending an invitation to you. To play blackjack." I sat up in bed and looked closely at her. She was dressed like a bellhop. Out of some half-remembered story, I quick looked down at her feet. They were bird's claws.

I woke myself up on purpose, and when I did, I was covered in sweat. I stumbled into the bathroom to get some water, and there was a word written in condensation on the mirror. It was "please." But I didn't see Harry, and the word faded after a minute, the way steam does.

★ ★ ★

That morning at breakfast I couldn't stop thinking about Myra. How much she looked like her father. How much she had longed for her father. How mean she had gotten, toward the end. Mean to Elsie. Mean to me. And now gone. Not mean to anyone anymore, not ever again.

She never would've been mean to Harry, though. I could almost hear her voice, telling me to go help her father.

So I snuck one of those little jars of jam they have at hotel breakfasts into my pocketbook. Demons love jam, everybody knows that. The day before Phil and I had all our stuff moved into the Sutton Place apartment, I put down a dish of jam to make sure any demons hanging around felt good about us, just like my mama taught me, and it worked, we never had a worry about that apartment. I also made sure I had a couple hundred dollars' worth of chips in my pocketbook too. That evening, before I went to sleep, I put the pocketbook next to me in bed. There was plenty of room. I like to sleep alone in a big bed, and I don't get to do that too often. Before Phil, I shared a bed with Betty, and before that Harry. And before that, well, we girls slept in hammocks when I was little.

I was awakened from a deep sleep, not by the bellhop girl, but by Harry. I was in bed with the covers up to my chin, thank goodness.

"Please, Josie," he said. "Please come with me."

I thought about Myra, and I sat up, still clutching the covers to my neck. "You turn your back until I get my dress on," I said.

"Are you serious?" he asked. "I'm your husband."

"Ex-husband. Turn your back."

While his back was turned I put on a dress and pinned my hair up, but I decided I didn't have time to put on makeup. I picked up my pocketbook.

"I'm ready now," I said.

He turned around and smiled a bit wanly. "Beautiful as ever, Cleopatra."

I smiled back before I thought about it, but then stopped. "Don't call me that," I snapped. "Let's get this over with."

He led me over to the full-length mirror on the closet door, took my hand and started to step through it, but I hung back, suddenly afraid.

"How will I get back?" I asked. "What if the shedim keep me there?"

He cocked his head. "But you're alive, Josie," he said. "I'm dead, no living body to come back to. But you, you're sleeping safely tucked in bed. Just look."

I looked back, and there I was, snoring gently in bed, covers pulled up to my chin. "Then how—"

"You're sleeping, that's how come you can come with me through the mirror. And your body will draw you back."

He placed one foot through the mirror, into a deep silver pool, and drew me after him.

★ ★ ★

We came out in what looked like the casino downstairs, but drained of all color, just shadows and grays. My body, my dress, my pocketbook ... I was the only

patch of color in that place, and it seemed deserted, not a gambler in sight.

"Where is everybody?" I asked, and it came out as more of a whimper than I would've liked.

"Don't worry, kid," Harry said warmly, and drew my arm through his. "You're safe."

There were dealers at all the card tables, a croupier at the roulette wheel, waitresses at the bar, but no customers. I tried to look at their feet, but couldn't get the right angle. I pointed to what looked like a blackjack table. "We go there?"

"No," he said, and aimed us toward a door in the back that I hadn't noticed. "We go through there."

The only sounds as we made our way toward the door were my footsteps. Every dealer's, every waitress's, every bartender's head swiveled to follow our progress, but nobody spoke, and nobody smiled, and everybody was gray. I thought of being here, by myself, for years on end, with my voice the only sound, nobody talking to me, always winning no matter what I did, every hand, every spin, every bet. Collecting colorless chips by myself. Forever. I shivered a little, and Harry put his arm around me, but no warmth came from him. I guess you need a body for that.

We went through the doors, away from those silent gray watchers, and down a long, dim hallway. At the end of it, we went through another door and found ourselves in a small room. In it was a woman, a woman with long black hair pinned up in an elaborate crown. She had color. Black hair, pale skin, paper-white, blood-red lips. Like a fairy tale. And an evening dress that sparkled like rubies. Probably had them stitched into the beading, if I knew anything about evening gowns, which I did.

She smiled at me and instinctively I dropped my eyes to her feet. They were birds' claws.

"I, um—" My voice sounded harsh in the silence. "I hear you have a game to play."

The lady nodded and gestured to a small table, a blackjack table set up for two. "I do." Her voice didn't sound harsh at all, smooth as silk. Smooth as honey. "The question is whether it's a game worth playing."

"For Harry's soul," I confirmed.

"Yes." She paused. "But what do you have to offer to make it worth my while?"

I took the chips out of my pocketbook, but the lady just looked bored. I took off my rings and added them to the pot, and they were good quality, believe me, my Phil can afford the best and that's what he gets me, but she didn't waste a second glance on them.

"I don't need your money or baubles," she said.

I drew the jar of raspberry jam out of my pocketbook. "I have heard," I said, "that you like jam more than just about anything," and I placed the jar on the

table. The jam inside was a rich red through the glass.

At that, she gave a tinkling laugh, like a breeze shimmying through a crystal chandelier. "I do like jam," she agreed. "Especially raspberry. But not more than *anything*. No, I'm afraid you have only one thing of interest to me. A soul for a soul, that's how it is. You understand." "My soul?" I asked.

"Did he not tell you that?" She shook her head mockingly and wagged an admonishing finger at him. "So untrustworthy. Unreliable, that's what I say. Well, once a con man, always a con man."

I turned an outraged stare on Harry. "You should've *said*."

He glanced away. "I thought you might not come," he muttered.

I thought briefly about turning around, following the pull of my sleeping body right back to my hotel room. Then I thought about Myra, how she used to laugh when Harry twirled her in the air. She had been happy, before he left.

"I'm here," I said grumpily. "We might as well play. But if I lose, you don't get my soul until my grandchildren are grown. I'm betting my soul, not my life."

"Of course," said Lilith. "That's reasonable." She gestured for me to sit down at the table, so I did. "Put your valuables away, Mrs. Greenspan. We'll play. Mr. Valenofsky's soul against your soul." She paused. "And the jam. Three hands. I deal."

The first hand was over quickly with me getting an ace and a queen at the first deal. One for me.

The second hand didn't go so well. Dealer started with a nine and a ten. She stayed, of course. I had a four and an eight. I asked for another card and got a two.

"Hit me again," I said.

The card she gave me was a jack. "Bust."

I started to feel a little dizzy as she shuffled the cards for the final hand. The little room seemed to expand to the size of a stadium, and I felt eyes on me, even though I couldn't see anyone else there.

"You should've asked me to play her at poker," I muttered to Harry. "Or canasta. There's too much chance involved in blackjack."

"Nah," said Harry. "I've seen you play before. This is your game. You clean up at blackjack."

I didn't know how to explain to Harry that to clean up at blackjack you had to keep track of which cards had been played, that the odds got better the longer you played, that three hands was more or less chance.

I like Vegas to visit, but I really didn't want to spend my afterlife here. I hadn't even been sure there was an afterlife until a couple days earlier, but now that I knew there was, I wanted to spend mine with Myra and my parents, not in some washed-out gray casino by myself, or worse, with Harry.

Lilith dealt again. I looked at my cards. They were both sevens, so I turned the hole card face up and split them. "Double down." The next cards I got were a five and a nine, so twelve in one hand and sixteen in the other. Nowhere near close enough, especially when Lilith took one card, and face up she showed a six and a ten.

"Hit me."

A ten and a five. I wondered what would happen if we both hit twenty-one. In most casinos, draws go to the dealer, and that wasn't me.

"Bust," I admitted on the twenty-two hand. "But I'm staying in the other."

Lilith turned over her hole card. It was a four. I turned over mine. "I win," I said. My voice sounded strangely calm, but I knew I was terrified. It was like I was observing everything from some distance.

"So you do." The demoness sounded amused. "And so you keep your own soul, for whatever awaits it, and you can have Mr. Valenofsky's as well. Hold out your hand."

I did, and she dropped gold-colored casino chip into it. It had Hebrew writing engraved on it in a spiral, but it was too small for me to read even with my glasses.

"Thank you," I said. It didn't seem like enough. "Please take the jam, though. As a gift."

Lilith's eyes lit up—literally, they glowed orange for a moment—and she smiled. "Many thanks," she said. "I do love jam." She opened the jar and dipped in her finger, and licked it clean. "It's good jam. Mrs. Greenspan, I'm sure you'll find the right thing to do with the soul. Mr. Valenofsky, you may accompany Mrs. Greenspan back through the mirror in the main room. Good night to you both."

I tucked the golden disk into my pocketbook. We retraced our steps back to the gray casino and through the mirror into my bedroom, Harry beaming like he'd just won a million bucks. When we got back into my room, I lay down and eased myself back into my still sleeping body. I felt so tired.

"Go wherever you want, Harry," I said. "Just don't be here when I wake up." Then I closed my eyes and fell into a dreamless sleep.

★ ★ ★

When I woke up the next morning, though, my pocketbook was beside me on the bed, I was still wearing the good dress I had worn to Yenne Velt (I'd forgotten to take it off when I rejoined my body), and Harry was sitting in the room's easy chair.

"What are you still doing here?" I asked. "You're free. So go be free. Go do whatever it is you should be doing."



He shook his head. "I can't, Josie-Jo. I tried. I can't go more than a room away."

"Away from me?"

"Away from the poker chip."

"So what you're saying is, I should flush that thing down the toilet," I said.

"You've always been so grumpy in the mornings," he said. Then he looked a little worried. "Please don't do that, though."

I remembered Lilith telling me I'd find the right thing to do with it. She hadn't mentioned toilets.

"Go in the other room while I get dressed, then. I'm flying home today. I guess you're coming with me."

★ ★ ★

I wasn't sure what I'd expected to happen after I helped Harry, but him hanging around me everywhere I went because I had some kind of oversized magic subway token wasn't it. Go, I told him, be free, take the poker chip and go on to whatever Adonai has in store for you. I tried to put the chip in his hand, but it just fell right through.

He was with me on the plane back to NYC, in the taxicab home to Sutton Place, and in the bedroom while I unpacked. I didn't like it. I had lived a pretty good life without him for thirty years, and I wanted it back.

"C'mon, it's not so bad, is it, Josie-Jo?" he coaxed. "We always meant to spend our lives together, didn't we?"

I rolled my eyes. "That ship sailed a long time ago, Harry. I want you gone. Now be quiet and let me think."

"Josie—"

"I swear, if you don't shut up, I'm gonna drop that chip down the next sewer grate I see."

Harry never could keep his mouth shut, and I didn't want him yammering at me on the train all the way to Philly, so I reached a decision.

"I'm putting the chip in the jewelry box in my bedroom," I told him. "You can cool your heels here until I get back with the kids."

"Aw, Josie, I want to see our grandkids too!"

I rounded on him. "*You* don't have grandchildren, you understand me? *I* have grandchildren. Phil, he's a good man, a good provider, he takes care of those kids, *he* has grandchildren too. *You* have nobody, you understand? *You left.*"

"I get it, Josie, I get it."

"I'm not sure you do! *You left*, so you have nothing to do with Elsie and Danny. Nobody else has been able to see you since Vegas, so don't you dare show yourself to my grandchildren now."

"Our grandchildren, Josie, no matter what you say. And I can't promise that—it's easier for kids to see ghosts than adults. Their minds aren't all cluttered up with garbage yet."

That's men for you. They do their little dance, and they think that makes them a father forever afterward. And then a grandfather. No. You gotta wake up every damn day and decide to do it, all day, and then do it again the next morning. Every morning.

"Yeah, well, I don't want their minds cluttered up with *your* garbage."

His tone changed to wheedling. "C'mon, Jo. It's hard for me to make anybody who's not family see me, y'know. I never remarried, not like you—"

"You never had to!"

"—you and those kids are all I have left."

"What about your brothers and sister?" I snapped. "Can't you go bother them?"

"Well, if I knew where they were, and you gave them the gold chip, maybe I *could*."

We glared at each other for a minute.

"I don't know where they are, either," I finally said. "But I know where you're going to be while I go get the kids." I put the chip in the jewelry box and slammed its lid shut.

\* \* \*

The next morning on the train, I had some time to myself to think. Harry couldn't go on staying with me—when he walked out on me and Myra, he'd made his choice, as far as I was concerned, and now there had to be a way for me to make mine. I could just toss the poker chip into the nearest gutter when I got home, of course, but, eh, I couldn't bring myself to settle on that. Myra would've hated me for it. She loved her father so much, or the memory of him, anyway.

I knew I was out of my depth, was the thing. But I wasn't sure what to do. Phil would think I was off my rocker if I started babbling to him about ghosts and Las Vegas. Our rabbi at the synagogue on East Fifty-first Street ... well, he's a nice young man, a macher in the making, really, but I'm not sure about something like this. This is more of a ... private matter. A personal trouble, and that nice young man, he might just write me off as a crazy old woman. That'd be no good, not for me, and not for the kids.

Trains are good places for thinking, but it wasn't until I was on the way back, with Elsie reading the new Oz book I'd brought her on one side of me and Danny slumped against me snoozing on the other, that it came to me. All of a sudden, I knew exactly who to go to for advice, and she wouldn't think I was crazy, either.

A few hours later, we were walking through the apartment door, Danny still half asleep and stumbling. When we got inside, his head shot up in surprise and he

blinked furiously.

"Who's that, Nana?" he asked.

I followed his gaze into the shadowy hallway in time to see Harry melt into invisibility.

"There's nobody here but us, sweetie," I said. "Zayde won't get back from his business trip for another week."

"I could have sworn I saw someone," he said. "Didn't you see somebody, Elsie?"

Elsie was so deep in her book that she didn't even hear him.

"Maybe you were dreaming," I said, and ruffled his hair. "You two go in your rooms and unpack, and afterwards we'll have dinner. I made chicken paprikash and dumplings yesterday, and it's waiting in the icebox."

I went to my bedroom and closed the door quietly. Harry was waiting with a hangdog expression on his face.

"What's the big idea?" I hissed. "I *told* you not to let the kids see you! What's Danny going to think?"

Harry held up his hands. "Hey, hey, I didn't hear your key in the lock until it was too late, that's all."

I glared at him anyway.

"Say, though, those are some kids, aren't they? The girl with her head in a book, she keeps reading like that, she'll go far. I guess she does well at school, doesn't she? Better than I ever did, I bet."

"They both do well," I said coldly. "They've got smart heads on their shoulders."

"I knew it!" he said. "And good-looking, too. The boy even has my curly hair. Cute kids, both of them."

"You can try to butter me up all you want, Harry," I said. "I don't care. Tomorrow we're going to see a witch."

★ ★ ★

The next day I made breakfast for the three of us, gave the kids some money for a double feature, and sent them out the door. Then I took the gold poker chip from my jewelry box and put it in my pocketbook.

In the elevator, I pushed the little white button, so the doorman had a taxi waiting when I walked out the door. He opened the door for me to get in and shut it firmly behind me. Harry drifted right on through. Nobody but me noticed.

I gave the driver an address on Delancey Street and the car started moving downtown. Harry seemed lost in thought.

"It's not that old d—"

I shot him a warning look.

"That old ..." He seemed to struggle for words and finally shrugged and resorted to, "That froy vos hot lib froyen."

"Tante Deborah," I said. "Yes."

He looked annoyed. "She never liked me."

"She doesn't like most people," I said. "In your case, she was right."

"What'd you say?" asked the driver.

"Nothing," I said. "I was just talking to myself."

The rest of the journey was silent.



The apartment on Delancey was above Tante Deborah's brother-in-law's appetizing shop. I heard the shop had done so well that he owned the whole building now. In fact, the shop did so well that they could've moved uptown if they wanted, but Tante Deborah wanted to stay in the old neighborhood. The apartment was a walk-up, and at my age that wasn't easy. I don't know how Tante Deborah or Tante Ruth, her constant companion, managed it. Still, they'd been living there together as long as I could remember.

When I knocked on the door, it was Tante Ruth who opened it. She smiled. "Josie, it's so good to see you, you should come visit more often."

She brought me inside and hugged me. Henry drifted in after me, but she didn't notice him. I gave her the banana cake I'd baked the night before and brought with me (I bake very good banana cake, the best, actually, and I'm not telling you my secret).

The apartment was a nice one—not modern like mine and Phil's, of course, but nice, with plenty of light.

Tante Deborah was sitting at the kitchen table. She didn't get up when we came in, which could have been her age—getting up is not easy at my age, let alone hers—or could have been her general grumpiness, but she did smile briefly at me before her dark eyes refocused on a spot just behind me. On Harry.

"Josephine," she said. "And you brought your shande of a late husband."

"Ex-husband," I said, just as Tante Ruth, rummaging in the cupboard for another teacup and plates to put the pieces of banana cake on, looked over her shoulder at me and sighed.

Harry managed to look confused and offended at the same time. "How—" he began.

"She's a *witch*," I told him. "And you *are* a shande."

Tante Ruth bought over tea and cake, and we all ate and chatted. I asked after Ella, their niece, maybe seven or eight years younger than me. She'd gotten her politics from Tante Ruth, worked as a labor organizer for years, and married an Irishman she'd met doing that. They had a couple of kids, teenagers by now. It was only when the cake was gone that Tante Ruth cleared the plates from the

table and refilled our teacups. Tante Deborah stirred a spoon of cherry preserves into hers.

"Well, I'll give you two a bit of privacy now. I'll be in my office in the back, working on a story. Give a shout if you need anything." Tante Ruth cheerfully left the room.

Tante Deborah stirred her tea and scowled. "Does she think I can't get us more tea and cake if we want it?" she muttered, but without much conviction, only habitual annoyance. Then she refocused on me. "So, Josephine. Why is the ghost of that shande you made the mistake of marrying following you around like you were newlyweds again?"

"I won his soul at blackjack, Tante," I explained. "And now I don't know how to get rid of it." I took the golden disk from my pocketbook and handed it to her while I told the whole story. She examined it closely, rummaging in the kitchen drawer for a magnifying glass at one point, and listened.

"The jam was a good idea," she said, peering at me through her cat-eye glasses. Then she looked down at the disk through the magnifying glass.

"Can you read it?" I asked.

"Of course I can read it," she said irritably. "I'm not so old that I've forgotten the holy tongue. I'm just so old that I can no longer see it so well."

She mused over the disk a bit longer and then shot a sharp look at Harry. "Chaim ben Meir is you, I take it?"

Harry nodded.

"Well," said Tante Deborah. "I want to talk to Josephine about this privately, so, Chaim, I'm going to put you away for a while."

Harry looked confused, and I wondered if she was going to pitch the disk out the window (Harry was right that she had always disliked him particularly—she despised gangsters, big-time or small), but all she did was leave the room briefly and return with a small, carved wooden box. She slid the top off, placed the golden disk inside, and slid the top back on. As soon as the box was shut, Harry disappeared.

"How—" I began, but she waved the question away curtly.

"What you have to figure out, Josephine, is what you *want* to do. He's tied to this chip, you know that. If all you want is to be rid of him, you could pitch it in the East River. So the question is, why haven't you?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out, and all of a sudden I didn't know the answer.

"Well," Tante Deborah continued. "You have a few options here. If you still love him so much you want to keep him around, all you have to do is hang on to the chip."

"I do *not* love him," I said, almost as annoyed as Tante Deborah usually sounded. "I haven't pitched him in the river for Myra's sake. Same reason I helped

him to begin with.”

“Ah, Myra.” Tante Deborah looked momentarily sad. “Does he know?”

“He knows she’s dead, yes.”

“Ah.” Tante Deborah went on. “If you think Myra would want you to send him on to whatever awaits him—and no, I don’t know—then what you have to do is smash the chip.”

“Smash it how?” I asked.

“Smash it how? How do you think? A hammer should get it done.”

“But it’s—”

“It’s Bakelite, is what it is. Bakelite with a shine on it.”

“Do I need to bless the hammer? Carve Hebrew into it?”

“No,” she said. “But you can if you like. It won’t hurt anything.”

“What’s the third option?” I asked, out of curiosity.

“You can leave the chip here with me. I’ll keep it in my box, and he’ll stay snuffed out.”

“Destroyed?” I gasped. “That’s cruel.”

“Contained,” she said. “And if you ever wanted him back for anything, you’d know where to find him.”

“Back from where? Where is he right now?”

“In the box.”

“Like a genie in a bottle?”

“More or less.”

“I don’t think Myra would want that,” I said, after thinking for a moment.

Tante Deborah shrugged. “Well,” she said. “It’s up to you. Just make sure you know what it is you want to do. And why.”

I nodded. “Thank you,” I said. And then, “May I have the chip back now?”

When Tante Deborah slid the lid of the box back, Harry appeared again. He looked shaken and didn’t say anything to me as I hugged Tante Deborah good-bye. We were on the street and I was trying to find a taxi before he spoke again. There weren’t many cabs that far downtown, and I had just decided to give up and take a bus when he asked, “What was that box?”

“How should I know?” I answered.

He was quiet again until we got to the bus stop, and then, “So, what did the old witch say to you, anyhow?”

“Nothing you needed to hear,” I said.

★ ★ ★

I thought a lot about that box that afternoon while the kids were out, mostly because I wanted Harry to shut up and stop chattering at me while I figured out what I wanted to do.

I didn't still love him, did I? That wasn't the reason I hadn't thrown the chip into the East River, was it? I didn't think it was. I didn't love him. I had loved him, but that was a long time ago, before he abandoned us. It was Myra I loved, Myra I would always love, no matter how mean she had been. Myra and now Elsie and Danny, too. Myra would never forgive me if I threw her father's soul in the river. She was the one who loved him, even though he didn't deserve it and never had. She'd been so much like him in some ways, charming and vivacious.

I thought and thought. And in the end, I knew what to do. I left the golden chip in the jewelry box and went to the hardware store, and I came home with my purchase tucked in my pocketbook.

"Tomorrow," I told Harry. "Tomorrow after the kids go out to play, you and I are going on an outing. I don't want you here when my Phil comes back at the end of the week."

"You know how to free me?" asked Harry, all excited, all happy, like this was some kind of game and he'd just won.

"Sure," I said. "All I have to do, Tante Deborah says, is smash the chip."

"Then what are we waiting for?" he asked petulantly.

"There's something I want you to see," I told him.

Then I heard Elsie's key in the lock and that cut off whatever whining he might have been about to start.

★ ★ ★

The next morning, I put some spending money in Elsie's pocket and took the kids to visit Sadie. We had a cup of coffee together, and I told them I had some chores I had to do and that Sadie should put them in a taxi back to me in the afternoon. I came home, put on my most sober spring coat, and slipped the golden disk into its pocket. I picked up my bag and a dark gray umbrella that matched the coat. "Let's go," I told Harry.

"Right with you, Josie-Jo. Where we going?"

"You'll see."

I pressed the white button in the elevator again, so the doorman had a taxi waiting for me by the time we got to the door. It had started to rain, and he held his umbrella over me as I walked from the door to the yellow cab. Not a drop got on me. Of course, the rain fell right through Harry.

"A long trip today," I told the cabbie. "I'm going to Mapleton. Washington Cemetery." I gave him the address.

"A cemetery, Josie?" Harry smirked at me, a smile I'd once found very attractive. "Who died?"

"You did," I reminded him. "It's the right place for you. Now shush, I don't want the cabbie to think I'm nuts."

We rode in silence the rest of the way.

When we got to Washington Cemetery, I paid the cabbie and told him that I wouldn't be long, and that if he waited for me, there'd be extra for him on the way back.

He nodded. "I gotta go back to the city to get another fare anyway, lady. Might as well take you with me, and make something off the trip."

Harry and I walked into the cemetery. I led the way until I found what I was looking for.

"Here," I said. "This is Myra's grave." I took a rock from my pocketbook, a pretty one I'd found in Central Park with the kids a while ago, and put it on the headstone. The headstone still looked new. Well, it had only gone up a few months before. The rain pattered on my umbrella as Harry examined the stone.

"Poor kid," he said, and he sounded sad. "You never told me what happened, she got sick?"

"She killed herself, Harry."

I listened to the rain on my umbrella for a few seconds before going on.

"She never got over you leaving. She was never the same afterwards. She was happy for a while after she and Siggie got married, but when he left her, too ..."

I trailed off, and Harry didn't fill in the silence. I didn't want to say the next part, but I forced myself to go on.

"She wasn't a good mother, especially after Siggie left. I knew, but I didn't want to know, and I let it go on. She screamed at them, she wasn't there when they needed her. She drank and she took pills. She blamed Elsie for ... I don't know, just for being, I guess. She was a bad mother, Harry. Elsie was running the house by the end."

He opened his mouth, but didn't say anything, and after a moment he shut it again.

"One weekend, she'd asked me and Phil to take the kids, and when we brought them back on Sunday, she was dead. Elsie and Danny *found* her, Harry. *They found their mother's body.* Alcohol and sleeping pills."

"It couldn't have been an accident?" he asked softly.

"No. She left a note. And it wasn't the first time she'd tried."

"What did the note say?"

"It was addressed to me," I told him. "Not you. And it was mean, like poison. Mean to me, mean about Elsie. I burned it. For over a year now, I've wondered if what she said was true, if I was the reason she was so ... unhappy." I paused for a minute and stared at a tree a ways away. That's a trick I know so you don't cry. "Phil and I took the kids to live with us. Best for everyone that way. So that's what happened to your daughter, Harry."

"It's not your fault," he said, softly again.

I exhaled and then drew another, deeper breath. "No," I agreed. "It's yours."



Harry looked like the slap I'd aimed at him back in Vegas had finally landed. "What?"

"It's your fault. After you left, she couldn't be happy again, she didn't know how. You know, every city she ever travelled, she checked the phone book for your name? I don't know what she was gonna do if she found it, show up on your doorstep? She told her friends you were a dancer, on tour with a musical, when she was a kid. I think sometimes she believed it. She would've given anything for dance classes when she was little, but we couldn't afford it until it was too late.

"She never got over your leaving, Harry. She never stopped waiting for you, hoping you'd come back."

I took another deep breath. "So this is where I'm leaving you," I said. "So if she comes back to this spot, if she comes back to her body, the way you hung around the Starlight in Vegas? You'll be here, waiting for *her*. And then maybe she'll finally be happy again."

I folded my umbrella and dropped to my knees. I took the trowel I'd bought at the hardware store out of my pocketbook and began digging a hole, small but deep, in the sod of Myra's grave.

"What?" Harry burst out. "What? What are you doing? Aren't you going to smash the chip? Smash it!"

Instead, I took the chip out of my pocket and dropped it into the hole I'd made. I began filling it back in.

"Don't do this, Josie. Smash it. Let me go free. Don't leave me here! Don't do it! There's no one here, it's as gray as the casino was! There's no one here to talk to, nothing to do! I'll go out of my mind!"

I stood up and brushed the dirt from my skirt. "Don't be silly, Harry," I said. "I come to visit every few months. Once or twice a year I bring the children. You'll get to see them grow up. Over time. I'll even leave a note for Elsie in my will, telling her about you, about the chip. She can dig it up and smash it then. If she wants to."

"Josie! Don't do this! It's not too late, you can still dig it up again! Don't go—don't leave me here alone!"

"It's been good to catch up with you, Harry. I did always wonder what had happened to you. I'll see you in a few months."

I put my umbrella back up and turned to walk back to the waiting taxi.

"Don't you walk away from me!" Harry screamed. I turned back to look at him as his face contorted into a snarl. "You goddamned gold-digging *bitch*. You heartless cunt! You're as bad as that old dyke you call tante!"

I drew into my coat and shivered. For a minute he had looked and sounded just like Myra during one of her bad spells. But my voice was steady when I replied. "You didn't have two pennies to rub together when I married you, Harry. I married you for love. And I wasn't the one who left when things looked bad.

"Good-bye, Harry."

I could still hear him screaming furiously after me when I got back to the cab, and I was too keyed up to sit still in the cab. I had to smoke a cigarette and pace for a few minutes to calm my nerves before we started back to Manhattan, but the cabbie didn't mind. I told him to go ahead and run the meter while I paced.

"He's not happy, huh?" the cabbie asked.

"Huh?" I said, and stopped walking in circles. I figured I must've misheard him.

"The guy you were with. The ghost."

"You ... knew he was with me?" I asked.

"I need glasses to read now," he said. "But I still see all kindsa things." He lit a cigarette too, and there was a companionable silence.

"No," I finally said. "He's not. But I wasn't happy when he left me, either."

The cabbie nodded. "You can't let the dead run your life," he said. "Eventually, you gotta leave them behind."

\* \* \*

When I got home, I felt exhausted. I took a bath and then put on a housedress, much lighter and brighter than the dress I'd worn to Myra's grave. I had a light lunch and took a nap.

I woke up a little before the kids got home and I made myself a cup of tea. I put out two plates of cookies and two glasses of milk and a deck of cards. I also brought out a dish of jelly beans. Then I sat and sipped my tea and waited for Elsie and Danny.

When the door opened, I felt ready for them. I hugged them both and brought them over to the table.

"I love these cookies!" said Danny, munching away.

"Good, my darling," I said. "And when you finish eating the cookies, we'll use the jelly beans to play a game. Nana's going to teach you both how to play blackjack."



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JUDGE  
DEE AND  
THE  
EXECUTIONER  
OF EPINAL

LAVIE  
TIDHAR





# Judge Dee and The Executioner of Epinal

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**LAVIE TIDHAR**

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*illustration by*

RED NOSE STUDIOS

**T O R**  
— — —

1.

The horses were skeletal and plumes of steam came in great huffs from their noses as they galloped through the night. Judge Dee and Jonathan sat in the coach on either side of the prisoner. The prisoner never spoke and neither did the judge. The driver whipped the horses, faster, faster. Jonathan stared out of the porthole at the moon. He wondered if the moon really was made of cheese.

It was a nice thought. The only nice thought he'd had in a while.

Out there, in the dark, were forests and, and...*things*. Jonathan could feel hidden eyes watching them out of the trees. He could hear leathery wings as shapes as dark as the forests flitted beyond sight, tracking their every move. It was only a matter of time before they would be attacked. Again.

They had been travelling through Germany, under the Alps, having recently concluded the Werdenfels case in what Judge Dee had termed a satisfactory manner. It was cold, but the land was abundant and the food rich and heavy, which Jonathan appreciated, and there were always sausages. For a time all was well, but that had changed when they came to the city of Basel.

'Romans,' Judge Dee had said, sniffing the air.

'Master?'

'This is an old place,' the judge said. 'There were Romans here before.'

All Jonathan could smell were sausages. His mouth watered. It was night, because it was always night when you travelled in the company of a vampire. Jonathan rarely got to see daylight. But Basel was awake and the city's narrow alleyways were crowded with vendors and revellers. Jonathan could hear the bells from the cathedral chime the midnight hour, could hear gulls cry over the Rhine. For a moment a sort of peace took hold of him. Basel seemed a nice place to visit.

And for a few moments it was so. He followed the judge, munching happily on sausage, as they wandered the streets seemingly at random, stopping at a milliner here, a barber-surgeon there, an apothecary, then at the rat catcher's. Gradually the lights grew dim, the fires that burned had an eldritch glow to them, the streets were narrower and gloomier and Jonathan realised the judge had been searching for something all along.

They came into a stone carver's shop. You could tell by all the unfinished headstones. A man stood behind the counter, his hands pale with marble dust.

No, Jonathan realised when the man reached for and lit a rancid, spattering candle. His red eyes glowed then, and his fangs showed in what passed for a smile. The man's ghostly white skin was not the result of his trade but of what he was: a vampire.

'Master Dee,' he said. His hands, Jonathan noted, vanished out of sight under the counter.

'Johannes,' the judge said mildly.

'It's been awhile,' the man – Johannes – said.

'Transylvania, I believe it was,' Judge Dee said. 'Two hundred years ago. No, I wouldn't reach for that if I were you. Put your hands on the counter, Johannes. And do it slowly.'

The man obeyed, his hands moving away from the silver-tipped knife he had been reaching for. He stared at Judge Dee.

'How did you find me?' he said.

'It wasn't hard,' the judge said.

'So, what?' Johannes said. 'You've come to finish the job? Then be done with it!'

The judge bared his teeth. Jonathan gulped the last of his sausage. He wasn't at all sure what was going on. But then, he never was.

'It isn't you I'm interested in, Johannes,' the judge said. 'If it were, I would have indeed concluded our business back in the forest above Brasov. No. Some men are easy to find. Others prove more challenging.'



Johannes, if it were possible, turned even paler.

'No,' he said. 'No, do not ask that of me.'

'I do not *ask*,' the judge said.

'He would kill me,' Johannes said.

'So would I,' the judge pointed out.

'Yes,' Johannes said. 'But you would do it clean.'

The two vampires stared at each other. Jonathan stared at the unfinished headstones. They crowded the small, dank space. The flame of the solitary candle spattered.

Somewhere beyond the walls, the cathedral bells struck one.

The two vampires moved in a flash. They were a blur – then it was over. Jonathan did not even have time to hide under a table.

'Give me a name,' the judge said. He knelt over Johannes. Dust rose everywhere and headstones had tumbled on top of each other in a heap.

'There ... is no name,' Johannes said, and then he laughed, or tried to. Then he burst into a cloud of dust that added to the general miasma in the room.

Jonathan coughed. Judge Dee straightened and for a moment, Jonathan realised with some surprise, almost seemed, well...*lost*.

'Master?' he said in alarm.

'Jonathan,' the judge said. The light came back into his eyes. He stared around him at the shop.

'What are you looking for, master?'

'I am looking for a man,' the judge said.

'A man, master?'

'A vampire, Jonathan.'

'Ah.' Jonathan fingered a half-completed headstone. 'Well, master,' he said. 'There is one obvious place to look.'

The judge nodded. Jonathan went around the counter. He rummaged in the drawers. He found a roll of parchment.

Names and places. A list of cemeteries and plots.

'Most of these go to one place,' he said. He stabbed at the list with his finger. 'We could look there, master.'

'So we shall, Jonathan,' Judge Dee said. 'Forgive me. I am not myself.'

'Then who are you, master?' Jonathan said, because he took expressions like that literally.

The judge almost smiled.

'Would you believe I was young once?' he said.

And on that cryptic note he left the stone mason's store; and Jonathan, as he always did, followed.

## 2.

The cemetery lay far outside the city and only the new moon lit their way through the dark trees. Jonathan shivered. It was cold. Despondent Hill rose ahead of them, and Jonathan realised the futility of their mission. There were thousands of white headstones gleaming in the moonlight.

It was like hiding a needle in a haberdashery. Which admittedly was not the sort of place Jonathan often visited. He spent far more time in cemeteries.

Mist lay over the gravestones. Jonathan could hear no sound. Nothing lived and nothing moved. He pictured the dead rising from their graves, the way the Church said they would one day. He pictured them shambling around, hungry for flesh. Brains, maybe. Would the dead have a craving for brains? He instinctively looked for cheese in his pocket but he had no cheese.

'Focus, Jonathan,' the judge said.

Jonathan jumped. The voice had startled him. It was too silent in the graveyard. He regretted ever suggesting coming here. But it wasn't like he had a choice. He would follow the judge. He began to scan the names on the headstones.

Stenzl. Legrand. Amerbach. Wildhaber. Finkel and Frigg.

He didn't know what he was looking for. The place was huge. The dead lay dead.

Well, all apart from the one who *wasn't*.

'We are looking for a man with no name,' he said, frustrated.

'Everyone has a name,' Judge Dee said.

'This was his most recent delivery,' Jonathan said. He had circled the last name on the list.

'Notice anything strange about it?' the judge said.

'Yes,' Jonathan said. 'It's English.'

'Exactly,' the judge said.

'Master,' Jonathan said. 'What if there are grave robbers here? They could be dangerous.'

'Our quarry probably feeds on them,' the judge said, then considered. 'That, or on funeral parties.'

'This is hardly reassuring,' Jonathan said. But it *did* make him feel slightly better.

They moved slowly through the graves, searching for a name. Stanton.

It was a stupid name. The sort of name a vampire hiding in a German cemetery might indeed pick for himself in the thought he was being clever. Vampires *always* thought they were being clever.

The moon shone down. It took them hours. Jonathan's feet hurt and his stomach rumbled miserably.

Then he stopped.

'Master!' he called.

The judge was suddenly just there.

He stared at the grave.

'Come out,' he said. 'You know who I am.'

No one replied. There was no sound at all. The judge sighed. He gestured at the grave. He said one word – the one word Jonathan didn't want to hear.

'Dig.'

Jonathan took the shovel he'd been carrying. He stared miserably at the plot of earth. Nothing good ever came from digging for vampires.

Something niggled at him. He stared at the empty plot next to Stanton's. Something had been buried there, but there was no

headstone. He said, 'You don't think...?'

The judge nodded, the hint of a smile playing on his austere face.

'A man with no name, remember?' he said.

Jonathan sighed, but inwardly.

*Vampires.*

They always thought they were being so bloody smart.

★ ★ ★

He dug. The ground was hard. The only sound in the night was Jonathan's heavy breathing and the impact of the spade with the soil. His back hurt. His muscles ached. And he was hungry.

A while back Jonathan had come up with a radical new idea. What if he took a slice of bread, put something on it – a generous helping of ham and cheese, for example, ideally with a pickle – and *then* put a *second* slice of bread over the top? The result was a sort of moveable feast. He debated what to call this invention. A *Jonathan* didn't seem quite right.

The spade made a sort of wet *splat* sound as it hit something solid. Jonathan froze, his heart speeding up. He wiped sweat from his brow.

'Well?' he whispered.

'Stand back, Jonathan,' the judge said, and there was something in his eyes that made Jonathan afraid. That would have made *anyone* afraid.

Jonathan was beginning to suspect that whatever this case was, it wasn't business ordered by the Council. They being the ultimate arbitrators of vampire law, et cetera et cetera.

No. This felt almost...*personal*.

Which was clearly impossible, Jonathan thought.

Judge Dee didn't *do* personal.

Jonathan stood back, which was just as well, because just then two shadows dropped from the skies and turned into women. Jonathan tried not to stare but the women weren't there to chat.

They attacked Judge Dee in total silence, fangs bared and claws extended. Jonathan shrieked when one passed too close and he stumbled on a grave and fell and the attacking vampire missed his throat as her claws passed harmlessly. Jonathan didn't see what happened next because he had curled up into a ball and hugged his knees, trying to make himself as small as possible.

'You can get up now, Jonathan.'

He opened his eyes. The same cemetery, the same dug-up grave, everything the same: other than the two new corpses.

They lay at the judge's feet, as silent as when they appeared. Not too old, or they would have turned skeletal or into dust. Jonathan could not figure out where they'd come from.

Or why.

'I won't have to dig fresh graves for them, will I?' he said. 'Only it's my knees, they're—'

The judge inched his head. Jonathan subsided.

'Open the coffin,' the judge said.

Jonathan stared at the open grave.

'I really would rather not,' he said.

'Open,' the judge said, 'the coffin, Jonathan.'

'Yes, master..'

Miserably, he lifted the spade and smashed it into the coffin.

Wood splintered and broke. Still nothing moved. Jonathan hit the coffin again.

A screech filled the night.

Jonathan fell back in fright as a small, ungainly figure rose out of the coffin, wild of hair and wild of eye. It shrieked again and turned into a bat, trying desperately to flee. But the judge's hand snapped out and caught a wing with ruthless efficiency, and he tossed the creature on the ground, hard enough to stun it.

The bat shivered, and the man reappeared. He lay on the ground looking winded.

'Hello, Petros,' Judge Dee said coldly.

3.

They took the prisoner back into town and kept him in a room that had no windows, in an inn where they didn't ask any questions as long as the innkeeper got paid. The prisoner didn't speak and Jonathan still had no idea what he had done to have the judge go after him in this way. It was most unorthodox.

He *was* a vampire, though, so it stood to reason he was guilty of something, or a great many somethings, and so Jonathan didn't feel too bad about it.

He went down to the common room. This was an unsavoury hostelry in an unsavoury part of town and Jonathan craved something that *was* savoury. Like a meat pie. He sat by the fire and munched on it happily. A girl came and sat beside him. She said, 'Who are you with?'

He realised with some surprise that she was English.

'Judge Dee,' Jonathan said. 'You?'

'I serve the Lady Samantha,' the girl said. She gestured to the other side of the room, where a tall, imposing figure stood sipping a glass of something red and viscous. This was the sort of inn that attracted vampires: it had no windows in the rooms, and no one to complain of the smell or grumble about the inevitable presence of corpses.

'What's she like?' Jonathan said.

The girl shrugged. 'She's a soulless undead monster,' she said. 'Obviously. But as far as those go she's not so bad. Can I have some of your pie?'

'Can't you get your own pie?' Jonathan said.

'I *could*, but...' She stared at him until he gave up.

The girl munched happily on the pie for a while. 'Judge Dee?' she said. 'What's he like?'

'He is a being of pure intellect,' Jonathan said, 'a brilliant mind that has no equal.'

The girl wiped crumbs from her mouth.

'Come on,' she said.

'What?'

'A being of pure intellect,' the girl said, mimicking him. 'No one's like that. Especially not a vampire. What's he into, this judge of yours? Boys? Girls?'

'You're very...*earthy*, aren't you?' Jonathan said. A little judgmentally, it was true, but he was still sore about giving her half of his pie.

'And you're a dunce,' the girl said pleasantly. She stood up.

'I must to my mistress,' she said.

'And I to my master,' Jonathan said, trying to keep up.

'Right,' the girl said. 'I hope he doesn't make you think too hard.' But she smiled as she said it.

'I'm Fiona, by the way,' she said.

'I'm Jonathan.'

'See you,' Fiona said, and then she departed. Jonathan stared after her somewhat forlornly. There, he thought, goes a girl who likes a pie.

Then he picked himself up and went in search of the judge.

\* \* \*

Jonathan found Judge Dee by the stables, speaking softly to a darkly clad figure standing beside a dark coach. The coachman had a black hat pulled low over his eyes and wore riding boots and held a whip in one hand. He stared as Jonathan approached but said nothing.

'We shall depart immediately for Epinal,' the judge said, as though matters had just been concluded.

'Epinal, master?' Jonathan said.

'It is a town some distance from here,' the judge said. 'In France.'

'What's there, master?' Jonathan said.

The coachman started. When he spoke his voice was raspy and low.

'The Executioner,' he said. 'The Executioner of Epinal.'

He stared at Jonathan as though disapproving of both his ignorance and his very existence. The coachman was clearly French, for his tone carried that sort of superiority mixed with exasperated

dislike by which the French have always greeted the inquiries of English visitors to the continent. He bared fangs at Jonathan, who merely nodded politely.

France, he thought miserably. Why did they have to go to France.

But he accompanied the judge to the locked room. They marched the prisoner to the coach, sat inside, and the coachman whipped the horses. The carriage with its cargo lurched out of the courtyard and into the night.

In moments they had left Basel, the warmth and lights of the city swallowed behind them in the dark, and with it vanished the girl who liked pies. Jonathan brooded. Outside, the night grew, and the forest pressed against the road as though waiting to devour it. The moon glared down malevolently and illuminated the hostile Alps that rose as though to squash the coach like an irritant fly.

Jonathan must have dozed off, because when he woke they were under attack.

Again.

4.

Someone *really* didn't want them to hold this Petros. Jonathan cowered under the seat as the judge vanished outside. Jonathan heard the coachman cursing and the *flick* of arrows being loosed. Something went *thump* and someone screamed, and *something* fell from the air and landed heavily. In all this time the prisoner, Petros, said nothing and just sat there staring into the distance like none of this was any of his business.

'What did you *do*, man!' Jonathan said, his voice muffled under the seat.

Petros stirred and blinked at him in some evident surprise.

'Me?' he said. 'I was a librarian.'

Jonathan reflected on the *last* time he had encountered librarians (in what he had since come to refer to as the Case of the Missing Manuscript, if only to himself). The bodies had piled up fast then. He had an Englishman's innate distrust of libraries, and an even deeper



one of vampires, which his travels with Judge Dee had done nothing to cure.

So he cowered uncomfortably under the seat until the sounds outside ceased.

*Someone* reached for the door of the carriage.

Jonathan squealed.

'This is most taxing,' Judge Dee said.

He came back into the coach and banged twice on the roof. The coachman cracked his whip and the horses whinnied and took off at a gallop. The prisoner didn't say another word. He seemed resigned to his fate.

But Jonathan was beginning to wonder if they'd ever get the prisoner to Epinal and its executioner.

So far there had been two attacks, but they weren't so ... serious.

Judge Dee was an ancient vampire and for anyone to really make an attempt on him they'd have to be formidable.

These two have been more like ... warnings, Jonathan decided.

Warnings he would have been happy to heed, were it up to him. But the coach was still heading to Epinal.

It was a mystery.

He did not particularly care for mysteries.

'So what did you do?' he said again. 'Slaughtered a whole village somewhere? Turned too many people into vampires of your own to serve you? Murdered the Queen of the Vampires?'

The prisoner, for the first time, winced.

'There is no Queen of the Vampires,' he said quietly.

Jonathan studied him with some attention now.

'But you murdered *someone*,' he said.

'I murdered no one!' Petros said.

'Yet you were there,' the judge said; and the words, delivered like a death sentence, sent a shiver of fear down Jonathan's spine.

Petros hung his head and said nothing.

Snow fell heavily as they rode. They took shelter for the day in a wooden cabin outside Mulhouse. The cabin was dark and woeful. When they came to it the sky was near daybreak and the door was locked. The coachman banged on the door loudly.

'What!' came an irritated reply from inside.

'Open up!'

'Get lost!' came the reply.

'Open up, in the name of the Council,' Judge Dee said.

There was silence inside. Then someone came to the door and opened it. He peered out at them suspiciously. He wore a long black coat and a curious device over his eyes, two glass circles in frames riveted together.

'You are of the night?' he said. 'Then come in, but hurry. The sun will soon be out and I do not care for the sun.'

'None of us do,' the coachman said sourly. He pushed past the man and went inside, where a small fire burned.

'I am Dr Rivera,' the man said. 'A medicus of some fame, if I say so myself. You have heard of me?'

Jonathan shook his head and mumbled, 'No, sorry.'

'Curious,' Dr Rivera said. 'Do you see these glasses of the eye that I am wearing? I made them myself.' He beamed with pride.

'An Italian invention?' Jonathan said.

'Nonsense! It is all in Ptolemy, if you care to look. Have you read Alhazen's *Book of Optics*?'

'I have not,' Jonathan said.

'A pity,' Dr Rivera said, and then dismissed him. 'And you are?' he said, turning to the judge.

The judge shut the door and locked it in place.

'I am Judge Dee,' he said.

'Dee, you say?' Dr Rivera peered at him close with his eyeglasses. 'I've heard tales of your deeds.'

The judge didn't reply. The prisoner went to the fire and stood beside the coachman, rubbing his hands.

Dr Rivera turned to him next.

'And you are?' he said.

'He's nobody,' the judge said.

'I am Petros,' the prisoner said.

'You are a strange bunch,' Dr Rivera said. 'But since we are to be locked here for some time, I am glad you at least brought refreshments.' And he turned his magnified red eyes on Jonathan and beamed at him with a mouth full of sharp teeth.

'I am not the refreshments!' Jonathan said. He moved as far from the doctor as was possible and reached in his bag for bread. He munched on it angrily. 'I am the judge's assistant.'

'What would Judge Dee need with a human assistant?' Dr Rivera said, confused. 'He is a being of pure intellect, a brilliant mind that has no equal. Or so they say, anyway.'

'No one's a being of pure intellect,' Jonathan mumbled, suddenly and with a certain ache remembering the girl, Fiona, who had said it. 'Especially not a vampire...'

'Did you say something, boy?' Rivera said.

Jonathan yawned. He felt very tired and the fire looked warm and inviting. Dr Rivera looked at him, then at his silent companions, and shrugged.

'A strange bunch indeed,' he said.

## 5.

The vampires slept. Judge Dee had vanished. Jonathan never knew where he went when day came. The judge had an uncanny ability to disappear. Each vampire went to a separate corner of the cabin, each mistrusting the other as vampires always did. The prisoner was not in chains, but then he must have realised the futility of trying to escape the judge.

Jonathan found a corner as far from the vampires as possible – *he* didn't trust them any more than they trusted each other – and did his best to fall asleep. It was cold, and he wrapped himself tight in his blanket, and listened to the wind howling outside and the

snow and ice beating against the walls of the cabin. It was day outside now; but it may as well have been night.

Jonathan slept. He dreamed of pastry.

The banging on the door woke him up.

The banging was loud and the voices outside, indistinct, sounded desperate.

'Open the door! Let us in!'

The judge was suddenly there. He looked to Jonathan and nodded.

'Why *me*?' Jonathan said.

The prisoner, Petros, sat quietly by the fire. The doctor, Rivera, was feeding on a live rabbit. He looked up with blood-stained lips.

'What?' he said.

The coachman was still asleep in a makeshift coffin.

'Open the door!'

'Please, Jonathan,' the judge said. Jonathan got up reluctantly. He *really* didn't want to open the door.

He went and opened the door.

A warm, soft, and only somewhat smelly body fell into his arms, and he found himself looking into the very live eyes of Fiona, the girl he'd met in Basel.

'My hero,' she said.

'I, err...'

She laughed and pushed him away and went straight to the fire.

Behind her came her mistress.

Jonathan took a step back, and then another.

Lady Samantha, tall and stern, stood in the snow and looked down on him with disdain.

'Well?' she demanded. 'Aren't you going to invite me in?'

'I, err...'

Jonathan said again.

'Are you a simpleton?'

'I mean, be welcome in this, um, cabin! Enter of your own free will! And so on and so forth!' Jonathan said desperately.

'And shut the damned door!' Rivera shouted. 'It's freezing!'

Lady Samantha sniffed.

'Very well, then,' she said. She stepped inside and Jonathan hurried to shut and lock the door. Snow had drifted in and Jonathan's hands were frozen. He went to the fire to stand by Fiona.

'She likes you,' Fiona said, rubbing her hands for warmth.

'You think?' Jonathan said.

'No.'

Jonathan turned, his back to the fire. He took in the scene: the dark cabin, the vampires like shadows standing frozen. Judge Dee, Dr Rivera, the prisoner, the coachman, and Lady Samantha.

He had a very bad feeling about all this.

Lock up a bunch of vampires together and it was only a matter of time before *someone* became a corpse.

Judge Dee came and stood beside him. They withdrew into a corner and spoke softly.

'Do you trust them?' Judge Dee said.

Jonathan shook his head fervently.

'They could be after Petros,' the judge said. 'We can trust no one. Not even the coachman.'

'But *why*?' Jonathan said. 'Who is this Petros and why does he matter?'

'He matters to *me*, Jonathan,' the judge said. 'And I want him alive. Long enough to reach the executioner in Epinal.'

He turned to the assembled vampires.

'Listen to me!' he said.

The others turned, scowling.

'It is snowing hard and we are isolated here together for the moment. When the snow eases we will each go our separate ways. Until then, I want no funny stuff. This prisoner is mine, and mine alone.'

'Who is the prisoner?' Lady Samantha said, looking confused.

'I am,' Petros said, raising a hand meekly.

'Why?' Lady Samantha said. 'What did you do?'

'Nothing,' Petros said.

'Then that's not fair,' Lady Samantha said. 'You should let this man go, Dee!'

'Stay out of this,' the judge said, his voice dangerous. 'You, too, Dr Rivera.'

'I mind my own business!' Rivera said. 'Do any of you play chess? To pass the time, you understand. Can I offer anyone a fresh rabbit?'

'I'll take one,' Lady Samantha said. 'I'm famished.'

Rivera tossed her a rabbit and she sank her teeth into its neck and sucked greedily.

'Delicious,' she said.

'No murders!' Judge Dee said.

'We heard you,' Lady Samantha said.

'No poisons, no knives in the night, no stakes through the heart —'

'We heard you!' Dr Rivera said.

'Or you will feel the true might of my power,' Judge Dee said.

'There is only one of you, though,' Lady Samantha said. She flashed him a hungry smile, her lips stained with blood.

'Excuse me?' Judge Dee said. Jonathan took a step back into the shadows.

'I *said*, there is only one of you, Judge!' Lady Samantha said. She dropped the rabbit. It flopped wetly on the floor. The lady bared her fangs. She raised her hands and her fingers turned to long, sharp claws.

'And there are more of us...'

Jonathan saw with horror how Dr Rivera shed his polite countenance and joined the lady. He hissed, his face elongating into a long, ugly wolf's snout.

'No games,' Dr Rivera said. 'No polite little *mysteries* to titillate your...*intellect*, Judge Dee. Murder is something to be committed for a reason, not just to provide a corpse.'

The coachman, too, moved to join them. The three vampires moved on Petros with singular intent.

'Grab him!' Judge Dee said.

'What?'

'Grab him! Now!'

The judge moved like lightning. Somehow the door was broken and the snow burst in and the fire went out. It all happened at once. Jonathan grabbed Petros. There were screams in the dark. Jonathan and Petros tumbled out of the cabin into the snow. The wind ripped at Jonathan's clothes with icy fingers.

'Fiona!' he cried.

'Into the coach!' Judge Dee said. 'Hurry!'

Jonathan and Petros clambered into the coach.

Then he thought: The horses! Where were the horses!

The judge was somewhere out of sight. Jonathan heard the crack of a whip and a scream that might have been Dr Rivera. Then the howl of a wolf that made him shiver. He stuck his head out of the porthole window. No horses, he saw: but a giant wolf was somehow hitched to the carriage and it turned its head and regarded Jonathan with wise, red eyes.

It was the judge.

The wolf howled wordlessly into the night and then the carriage thundered away and into the dark woods.

Jonathan drew his head back into the carriage.

'That was a close one!' he said.

'Too close,' someone else said. Jonathan screamed as the smiling Lady Samantha flashed a silver knife in the dark of the carriage.

Then Petros said, 'No,' and reached out. The lady's face froze in surprise. The knife clattered to the floor and the door opened as of its own accord as Lady Samantha flew back and vanished into the snow with a howl of outrage.

'They're right, you know,' Petros said. The coach thundered on. The night was dark and filled with snow. Jonathan could not see the stars or the moon.

'Right?' Jonathan said. 'About ... about what?'

He felt woozy. He kicked the knife out of the carriage and slammed the door shut. A moment before he had been nice and

warm and in the company of a girl, he realised with some surprise, that he liked.

Now he was cold and scared and moving through a dark world, and he had nothing to eat. Which, he realised miserably, merely meant a return to the usual state of affairs.

'Murder is never complicated,' Petros said. 'There is no *mystery* about it. Dee has always loved the theatrical. But murder is a simple art...' He fell silent.

'You knew him?' Jonathan said, surprised.

'A long time ago,' Petros said. 'In truth, I hoped never to set eyes on him again. But old scores have a way of catching up with you.'

'Who *are* you?' Jonathan said. Again, it occurred to him the only explanation to the events of the past few days lay in this unassuming vampire; and perhaps Petros was right, then. The real mystery wasn't in who was trying to murder whom, but *why* – and again he had the sense that this was not the judge as he knew him, that this was something...*personal*.

Which made no sense to Jonathan; not then.

## 6.

'I was born in the place the Greeks called India, that is, beyond the great river Indus, which lies far away from here—'

'I never heard of it,' Jonathan said, and Petros nodded and said, 'You have not heard of a great many things, I'd wager—'

Which did not exactly endear him to Jonathan.

The great wolf still pulled the carriage onwards through the snow. He never tired. On and on they went, taking the prisoner to the executioner.

'Are you going to listen, or are you going to interrupt?' Petros said.

'I'm listening,' Jonathan said.

'Very well, then. Where was I?'

'In India,' Jonathan said.



'Right. So. At that time a Greek commander rose, who took over much of the known world, and he even reached India. Which defeated him, to tell you the truth. His men were tired and across the river was an army ready to fight ... Anyway, he turned back at that point and then he died in Babylon. Amongst his soldiers, however, were—'

'Vampires?' Jonathan said.

'Well, yes,' Petros said. 'And so I—'

'Became one? Against your will? Et cetera and so on?'

'Well, yes,' Petros said. He glared at Jonathan. 'Do you *want* me to tell you the story, or not?'

'I don't see how any of this relates to the judge or why we're being chased by assassins,' Jonathan said. It was so typical of a vampire, he thought. Start the story too early and make it all about themselves.

'I haven't said much up to now,' Petros pointed out.

'True. Well, go on, then, I suppose,' Jonathan said grudgingly.

'So I became a vampire, yes. Lucky guess,' Petros said.

'As if,' Jonathan said.

Petros pointedly ignored that.

'In due course I made my way across Alexander's empire,' he said. 'Though even then it was falling apart again. There had been a transfer of people and ideas between Asia and Europe back then. There are still some blue-eyed children born on the Indus, and other Buddhists than myself who ended up in the Greek king's newly founded Egyptian city of Alexandria.'

'What's a Buddhist?' Jonathan said.

'We follow the teachings of the Buddha, who advocated a path to end the endless cycle of life and death by seeking enlightenment. Of course, I was stuck on the cycle, having become undead. I could not die and be reborn again nor could I fling my earthly shackles to attain nirvana. Rather a conundrum, really. Plus, I was never a very good Buddhist, to be honest with you. But I was happy in Alexandria, for a long time. It was a seat of learning with exciting

scholars from all over the world, and there was a library, a great big one, and eventually I got a job there. That was where I first met Dee.'

'You knew Judge Dee *then*?' Jonathan said.

Petros smiled.

'He was not yet a judge, then. Just ... Dee. He had come from a land far beyond the Indus and my own. A traveller, drawn by curiosity to this part of the world much as I was. He was younger then, fond of the Greek form of theatre, with a restless and brilliant mind. He studied works by Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato, and, well, you know, a bunch of other stuff like that. I was just the record keeper. The clerk.'

'You told me you were a librarian,' Jonathan said.

'I was! I worked in the library!'

'As a clerk.'

'Still counts! Do you want to hear the rest of the story, or not?'

'Go on...'

'So,' Petros said. 'I worked in the library. It was a magical place, filled with all the knowledge of the old world. I worked under the head librarian, a fellow by the name of Amenhotep. He was an Egyptian. Also a vampire. I'm just filling in the details for you, you understand. Vampires were useful. We lived a long time and could remember overdue manuscripts and what was filed where. And nobody minded if sometimes foreign scholars went missing. We tried not to feed too much or too often. You know how it is.'

'The Unalienable Obligations,' Jonathan said. 'I'm still not sure when we're going to get to the murder part.'

'Who said there was going to be a murder?'

'It's implied,' Jonathan said. The coach thundered on. Petros sighed.

'Yes, well...' he said. 'Things would have gone much as they always did in our little corner of the world, were it not for the arrival one day of a young new scholar.'

His eyes misted over.

'She was beautiful, you know,' he said, so quietly that Jonathan had to strain to hear him. 'I like men, myself, but there was just something about Helena – a keen, sharp intellect to equal, perhaps surpass, Dee's own. And she was interested in everything, in those days – botany, alchemy, the theatre, medicine ... I think she wanted to find a cure for her condition. She was—'

'A vampire?' Jonathan said.

'Well, yes,' Petros said. 'But none too happy about it. She considered us parasites – not an abomination, but perhaps an *aberration* in nature. Something she could *fix*, if only she found the right tools.'

'She sounds like Judge Dee,' Jonathan said, and Petros gave a short, surprised laugh.

'Yes,' he said. 'They did hit it off famously...'

A terrible suspicion rose in Jonathan then.

'You don't mean...,' he said.

'Yes.'

'It can't be!' Jonathan said. He gaped at him in horror.

Petros said, 'Judge Dee ... fell in *love*.'

## 7.

The snow began to ease. There was no sun and maybe there never will be, Jonathan thought morosely; and the wind still howled like a maddened thing as the coach fled under the Alps, driven by the giant wolf who was Judge Dee.

Jonathan still had no real idea why they were taking Petros to the Executioner of Epinal, nor why there were other vampires trying to stop them. He was used to mysteries that were, at heart, *simple*. Who slipped who the deadly poison, just how the person in the locked room in the castle was killed, or who set off the mechanical trap that operated on clockwork at just the right time to kill the duke. It was usually the butler, anyway.

*Those* Jonathan understood. *Those* he had twice a day for breakfast – oh, how he craved some toast and marmalade just then! Perhaps a scrambled egg, and bacon, and a glass of milk—

Instead he was here, driven through the snow on a mystery of – there was no easy way to say it – of the *heart*. He could not imagine the austere Judge Dee stooping so low as to have real *feelings*, but then—

But then again, he thought – everyone had to be young once.

Even Judge Dee.

‘So then what happened?’ Jonathan said.

‘They fell in love and got married and lived happily ever after,’ Petros said. ‘What do you *think* happened, you fool?’

‘She died?’

Petros scratched his neck uncomfortably.

‘Something like that,’ he said.

‘Violently, I presume? Murdered, and so on?’

‘Those were difficult times,’ Petros said. ‘You have to understand, things always go well until they don’t. I’m not making excuses, but ... It was Ptolemy VIII, if you want to blame anyone. Once *he* came to power the library’s decline began. He disapproved of ... intellectuals. Disapproved with lethal intervention, if you get my drift. Didn’t like vampires much, either. Aristarchus of Samothrace, who was head librarian before Amenhotep, you see, well, he quit in protest and exiled himself to *Cyprus*. Cyprus! Godawful place. So things weren’t going well, and then that creep Julius Caesar showed up about a hundred years later and *accidentally* set fire to the library. Accidentally! All those precious manuscripts, lost forever.’

He stopped, looking quite overwhelmed, then recovered himself.

‘It was then,’ he said quietly, ‘that it happened.’

‘*You* did it? You murdered Helena?’

‘Who is to say what happened!’ Petros said. ‘There was a fire, confusion, anything could have happened. But Dee ... Dee was not... *pleased*.’

'I should think not!' Jonathan said, outraged on his master's behalf.

'Yes, well. He was throwing all kinds of wild accusations. At me, at Amenhotep. I fled, and I've been hiding ever since. He is crazy, your master! He isn't *rational*.'

'*Judge Dee?*' Jonathan said. 'He is the most rational person I have ever known! The man is nothing but cold intellect!'

Petros chuckled.

'Yes, he does like to give that impression, doesn't he?' he said. 'Oh, dear. I think we've arrived.'

Jonathan looked out of the window. High on a hill stood a castle, glaring down on the town ahead like a malevolent bat with its wings folded. The town itself, nestled around a river folded into the landscape, looked equally uninviting, its crude streets paved with uneven stones and its houses leaning-to like drunks attempting to evade the night watchmen. Jonathan wasn't sure, but he had the distinct impression there were *faces* carved into the stone walls, and they watched the approach of the coach with what he felt sure was disapproval.

They were almost in the town. Then he heard a scream.

'Jonathan! Jonathan, save me!'

He gave a startled cry of his own. He peered into the snow, saw the girl, Fiona, hanging from a tree, her arms tied behind her back, a noose around her neck. She was still alive, balancing precariously on the back of a donkey who looked decidedly unhappy to be there.

No doubt the donkey would soon bolt for freedom.

No doubt Fiona would die.

No doubt it was—

'A trap, of course,' Petros said. He looked gloomy again. 'A man with a cold intellect such as your master would never stop to save a human—'

But Jonathan wasn't listening.

He flung the door open. He leaped outside and rolled in the snow.

'I'm coming, Fiona!' he shouted. 'I'm co—'

But the cold biting wind snatched his voice away. All was quiet, all was dark. There were no lights behind the windows of the houses. Jonathan ran, fell, picked himself up. He did not look back. Fiona teetered on top of the donkey. Jonathan was so close, so close —

The donkey brayed and bolted. Fiona's scream cut short as she dropped—

A huge, dark shape leaped into the air. It flew over Jonathan, tore the rope with an extended claw as though the rope was a mere thread, and grabbed the falling Fiona in its teeth. Jonathan slid the last of the distance and knelt by Fiona as she lay in the snow against the hide of the giant wolf that was Judge Dee.

'Got you!'

Two figures materialised in the snow. Dr Rivera and the Lady Samantha, claws extended, fangs bared in delighted grins.

They leaped onto the wolf, ready to terminate its existence at last.

'Why, Fiona?' Jonathan said. He cradled her in his arms. She looked up at him and smiled.

'My hero...' she said.

Jonathan tried not to look. The sounds of tearing and snarling, of fury and fear. A bat shot away from the melee as though kicked by force, shrieked, and hit the tree. It transformed into Dr Rivera and slid down slowly to the ground.

'There are only two of them,' Jonathan said.

'Three,' Fiona said. She pointed.

The coachman, all in black, formed out of the mist. He strode to join the battle. Judge Dee was half-wolf, half-man. He fought wordlessly, and the vampires he fought must have been very old and very powerful, Jonathan thought, to have taken him on at all.

'I have to help him,' he said desperately.

'You'll only get yourself killed,' Fiona said. She sat up and felt her neck. 'That was close,' she said.

'Your first time?' Jonathan said.

'Oh, no,' Fiona said, surprised. 'We do the hanging thing about once a month. I'm a wanted woman, you see. There's a price on my head and Lady Samantha likes to claim it whenever she's low on cash. And every time I escape the noose the price on my head increases.'

'What are you wanted for?' Jonathan said.

'This and that. A couple of murders, some armed robbery, arson, theft of holy relics, counterfeiting money, receiving and selling stolen goods, perjury, kidnapping, a spot of blackmail here and there. You know. Moral turpitude, mostly.'

'I thought you were...'

'Good?' She smiled again. 'You're so sweet,' she said. 'I serve a vampire.'

'But they're not all...'

'Bad?' She laughed with genuine warmth and Jonathan blushed.

'They're *vampires*, Jonathan,' Fiona said.

He couldn't argue that point. And besides, she remembered his *name*! A strange heat suffused him, and he was barely paying attention to the battle between—

'Master!' Jonathan cried.

The judge was buried under the onslaught of his attackers. Snarls and hisses, and the coachman was next to fly through the air and land in the snow, but he rolled and got up and darted back to the melee—

'Enough!'

The voice was ice-cold and as sharp as a fishmonger's filleting knife.

The fighting vampires stilled. Even Dee.

A small figure, clad in black, stepped out of the mist and glided over the cobblestones until it stood in the snow. It regarded the vampires coolly. One by one, Lady Samantha, Dr Rivera, and the coachman moved aside, then bowed their heads.

The man and Judge Dee stood alone, regarding each other in silence.

'Who *is* that?' Jonathan whispered. He was surprised to discover he was holding Fiona's hand.

'That?' Fiona said. 'That's the big man. The boss. The top cheese.'

'Did you say cheese? I really want some cheese.'

Fiona ignored him.

'He is the Executioner of Epinal,' she said.

'No kidding.'

Fiona shrugged. 'They say he used to be a librarian or something. Here.' She reached in a bag Jonathan saw she had hid on her person. She rummaged inside it and brought out a large chunk of hard cheese.

'Split it with you?' she said.

And just like that, Jonathan fell in love.

8.

'Dee,' the Executioner of Epinal said.

'Amenhotep,' Judge Dee said. 'It has been a long time.'

'Not long enough,' the executioner said. 'But since you are here ... Shall we retire somewhere a little more comfortable?'

'I have no interest in comfort,' Judge Dee said.

'You never did,' the executioner said, and sighed. 'I assume you have Petros with you?'

'I do. And he is proof, at last, Amenhotep – proof that you murdered Helena!'

'Always so emotional, Dee,' Amenhotep said. 'And what a florid imagination you have. I had hoped my ... associates here would have talked you out of this fool's errand, but I see they've failed.'

He glared at Lady Samantha and Dr Rivera.

'You two were supposed to be the best,' he said.

'Pretty good...' Rivera mumbled.



'What was that?'

'He said, we're pretty good!' Lady Samantha boomed.

'Not good enough!' Amenhotep snapped. 'Clearly. Very well. What's done is done. Coachman, fetch my coach.'

'*Your* coach?' Jonathan said.

Amenhotep turned an irritated gaze on Jonathan.

'Who did you think it belonged to?' he said. 'Now, why don't we settle this like civilized beings, indoors? Be welcome in my castle, enter of your own free will, and so on. There is still a *law*, is there not, *Judge Dee*? Or do you wish to settle this right here, right now? If so, just say the words.'

And he hissed, showing his fangs.

Jonathan had to remember that these were *old* vampires. Amenhotep might not have looked like much, but if the judge were to fight him ... Jonathan wasn't sure who would win.

He hoped the judge would accept: then they would go into a nice warm castle, or perhaps some sort of mayoral estate, with thick carpets and a warm fire, and there'd be wine...

He thought longingly of the wine.

'I *am* the law!' Judge Dee said. He stood dark and alone against the snow, and the shadows pooled all around him. His red eyes shone. 'I pronounce you guilty of murder, Amenhotep. And I sentence you – to death!'

Amenhotep hissed again, and his claws lengthened and his eyes burned. 'You are a boor, Dee! And this has been a thousand years coming for you!'

And he leaped through the snow just as Judge Dee did.

'Stop!' Jonathan cried, but helplessly. The two ancient vampires moved too fast for him to observe. Blood spattered the snow. The others watched. Fiona came and stood beside him, and Jonathan was grateful and surprised when she took his hand in hers.

'Stop! Dee, stop!'

The cry had come from the lone figure emerging from the coach.

Petros, the witness. The judge's proof of murder, which he had not even exhibited.

Now Petros, animated, was running slowly, too slowly towards the deadly fight.

'Dee, she isn't d—!'

'Petros, no!'

The battle slowed, and Amenhotep stood wavering in the moonlight. 'Petros, you must not—!' he said. 'We took an oath!'

And now Judge Dee, too, emerged into visibility. He wavered on his feet.

'What?' he said.

'Helena isn't *dead!*' Petros cried.

There was blood on the judge's face. It looked a little like tears.

'What?'

Amenhotep sighed.

'For a smart fellow,' he said, 'you can be pretty dumb.' He reached a hand out to the judge, and the judge did not push it away.

'Come along, old fellow,' Amenhotep said. 'Let's get out of the snow.'

## 9.

They trudged through paved streets and onto a market square, and into a place that was, just as Jonathan thought, less a castle and more a mayoral estate, but did indeed have thick carpets and a warm fire, and ghostly servants palely loitering. The vampires sipped blood. Lady Samantha nibbled delicately on a servant. Jonathan accepted a glass of wine. He took a sip. The wine was good. He took another sip.

Judge Dee sat quite overwhelmed in a comfortable chair. Amenhotep looked ill at ease, standing with Petros. The fire was behind them, casting their shadows ahead.

'What do you mean she is not dead?' Judge Dee said.

'You must understand, it wasn't our fault,' Amenhotep said.

'We were just trying to *help*,' Petros said.

'Precisely.'

'It was for the best.'

'Exactly.'

The two vampires exchanged embarrassed glances.

'The thing is,' Petros said. 'Your love for each other was truly a thing to behold.'

'Truly,' Amenhotep said.

'But as the centuries passed, your interests...*drifted*,' Petros said.

'Helena wished to cure the affliction of vampirism,' Amenhotep said. 'She was drawn to the Greco-Buddhist teachings of the time and wished to find a way for others to get back on the wheel of life and death as a way of at last finding *true* enlightenment and ... Well, this isn't much my field, you understand, but it was something like that. Personally, I never minded being a vampire. You get to read a lot of books when you live forever, and draining the occasional incompetent scholar of blood is hardly a price too steep to pay.'

'I concur,' Petros said. 'But that is neither here nor there. While Helena was doing that, you were devoting yourself ever more to the law, becoming ever more severe and ... dare I say, humourless in the process.'

'You used to tell such wonderfully bawdy jokes...,' Amenhotep said. Jonathan nearly choked on his wine. The very idea was preposterous.

But the vampires paid him no mind.

'You had become an ascetic,' Petros said. 'While she sought true life, you dedicated yourself to undeath. You were...,' He hesitated.

'You were growing apart,' Amenhotep said.

Judge Dee sat in stony silence.

'Oh, no,' Fiona said. She came to stand beside Jonathan.

'I made this for you,' she said. When he looked she was holding up two slices of bread with meat and cheese in between them.

'You made me a *Jonathan*?' he said.

'I call it a Fiona,' she said. She smiled and took his hand, and then their faces were close together and Jonathan's heart beat like it only did when he was being chased by monsters in the night who wanted to kill him.

Somehow Fiona was so warm and so *there* and...

Their lips met.

They kissed.

Since the invention of the kiss, it is said, there have been just five kisses that were rated the most passionate, the most pure.

This kiss wasn't one of them. It wasn't even close.

But it felt like it was to Jonathan.

'The thing *is*,' Petros said. 'Helena was very fond of you, Dee. And she didn't want you to suffer, the, eh...' He tried to think. 'Slings and arrows?' he said uncertainly. 'Of a broken heart?'

Judge Dee still said nothing. Jonathan couldn't see what slings and arrows had to do with anything.

'The library was in decline, and Helena needed to continue her researches elsewhere. She didn't want to hurt you so she did the most sensible thing she could think of. When Caesar's fire broke out it seemed the very opportunity she was waiting for. She faked her death and vanished.'

'She was being considerate,' Amenhotep said. 'We figured you would take the news stoically, and eventually move on.'

'We just didn't count on you blaming *us* for her death,' Petros said.

'We only tried to do the best for the both of you,' Amenhotep said. 'As friends.'

'And we swore to protect her secret,' Petros said. 'So...' He shrugged.

'We were in a bind,' Amenhotep said.

'Exactly.'

'Quite.'

Judge Dee said nothing.

'I mean a thousand years!' Amenhotep said. 'And still you kept going! Poor Petros hid in a cemetery and I became an executioner, which is quite clever if you think about it, for there is never a shortage of sinners and I always have fresh blood to drink. But you really did put us to a lot of inconvenience.'

He looked at Dee somewhat reproachfully.

'I ... see,' Judge Dee said. He sat there looking a little lost. Jonathan almost felt sorry for him. Judge Dee *always* solved the case.

Well...*almost* always.

'Do you know where she is now?' Judge Dee said at last. He sounded broken.

'No idea,' Amenhotep said.

'We didn't really keep in touch,' Petros said.

The other vampires, Dr Rivera and Lady Samantha and even the coachman, seemed fascinated by the story so far.

'So she ... she broke up with you?' Lady Samantha said.

'But in a nice way,' Dr Rivera said.

'It happened to me once, too,' Lady Samantha said. She touched a kind hand to Judge Dee's shoulder. 'It's never easy when they fake their own death and...' She tried to think of a suitable expression. 'Ghost you?' she said uncertainly. 'You know, like they died and now they're a, well...'

'A ghost,' Dr Rivera said, nodding energetically. 'Yes, it happened to me, too, once. I got over it, naturally. You move on, don't you. Of course, sometimes they really *are* ghosts, and—'

'Vampires don't have ghosts,' Lady Samantha said.

'You don't know that,' Dr Rivera said.

'Have you ever seen one?' Lady Samantha said.

'Well, no, but...'

'Enough!'

It was Judge Dee.

He stood up and formally bowed to Amenhotep and Petros.

'I will take up no more of your time,' he said.

'Nonsense, Dee,' Amenhotep said. 'Stay the night, at least. Let the storm die out. You are always welcome, you know.'

'Thank you,' Judge Dee said. 'But I must press on. Jonathan, pack our bags.'

'But master!' Jonathan said. He couldn't help it. It just escaped. 'Master, the storm—'

He thought miserably of the cold outside; and of the fire inside, and the wine, and Fiona...

He thought for sure the judge would hurry him on. But he saw something change in Judge Dee's eyes. An understanding, and a sort of sudden, unexpected gentleness.

'You are quite right, Jonathan,' he said. He turned to Amenhotep. 'We will stay, of course. Thank you ... old friend.'

Amenhotep nodded.

'I am glad,' he said.

'And I am sorry, about, you know. Kidnapping you and so on,' Judge Dee said to Petros.

'These things happen,' Petros said.

'Yes,' Judge Dee said; but he said it dubiously.

\* \* \*

The next night the storm quietened and the moon was bright. The air felt fresh and clean. Fiona nestled into Jonathan's arms.

'Will I see you again?' he said.

'Maybe,' she said. 'Look me up if you're ever in London. My Lady Samantha likes to summer there.'

He kissed her goodbye; and then he went to join Judge Dee. The judge had said his own goodbyes already. Now they trudged out of the town, and only the faces in the stone walls watched them pass.

'There is no fool like an old fool,' Judge Dee said ruefully. 'But it is true what they say. You are only young once.' He strode ahead, and Jonathan followed. He wondered who this Helena was, and what she was like, and if the judge would ever find her again. And he thought of Fiona, and whether he would ever see *her* again.

'Yes, master,' he said.



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## About the Authors

**S. L. Huang** is a Hollywood stunt performer, firearms expert, Nebula Award finalist, and Hugo Award winner with a math degree from MIT and credits in productions like “Battlestar Galactica” and “Top Shot.” The author of the fantasy novella *Burning Roses* as well as the Cas Russell novels including *Zero Sum Game*, *Null Set*, and *Critical Point*, Huang’s short fiction has also appeared in *Analog*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nature*, Tor.com and more, including numerous best-of anthologies. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



Kelly Robson lives in downtown Toronto with her wife, writer A.M. Dellamonia. Her novelette “A Human Stain” won the 2018 Nebula Award, and her time travel adventure *Gods, Monsters, and the Lucky Peach* won the 2019 Aurora Award and was a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, Theodore Sturgeon, and Locus Awards. Kelly’s first short story collection *Alias Space and Other Stories* was published in 2021. Find her on Twitter and Instagram. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

Congyun (a.k.a Mu Ming) Gu is a Chinese speculative fiction writer from Beijing, currently living in New York, US. Born in Chengdu in 1988, Gu has been publishing her unique short stories and novellas since 2016 across esteemed platforms like *Clarkesworld*, *Samovar*, and various Chinese literary outlets. She has won multiple awards since 2017, including the Best Short Story at the 31st Galaxy Awards and the Golden Award for the Best New Writer in the 11th Global Chinese Sci-Fi Nebula Award. In 2021 Her first collection *Colora il Mondo* launched in Italian and her first Chinese collection,

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**Renan Bernardo** is a Nebula finalist author of science fiction and fantasy. His fiction has appeared in Apex Magazine, Podcastle, Escape Pod, Daily Science Fiction, Samovar, and others. His writing scope is broad, from secondary world fantasy to dark science fiction, but he enjoys the intersection of climate narratives with science, technology, and the human relations inherent to it. His Solarpunk/Clifi short fiction collection, *Different Kinds of Defiance*, is upcoming by Android Press. His fiction has also appeared in multiple languages, including German, Italian, Japanese, and Portuguese. He can be found at Twitter (@RenanBernardo), BlueSky (@renanbernardo.bsky.social) and his website: [www.renanbernardo.com](http://www.renanbernardo.com).

**Veronica Schanoes** is an American author of fantasy stories and an associate professor in the department of English at Queens College, CUNY. Her novella *Burning Girls* was nominated for the Nebula Award and the World Fantasy Award and won the Shirley Jackson Award for Best Novella in 2013. She lives in New York City. *Burning Girls and Other Stories* is her debut collection. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



**Lavie Tidhar** was born just ten miles from Armageddon and grew up on a kibbutz in northern Israel. He has since made his home in London, where he is currently a Visiting Professor and Writer in Residence at Richmond University. He won the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize for Best British Fiction, was twice longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award and was shortlisted for the CWA Dagger Award and the Rome Prize. He co-wrote *Art and War: Poetry, Pulp and Politics in Israeli Fiction*, and is a columnist for the *Washington Post*. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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