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A Dream of Africa

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Crete, Greece

Evening was drawing in, and the sky was a flickering mixture of red, orange and blue. The girl sat alone listening to the sounds of the bush, and despite the closeness of the wild animals, she felt calm and unafraid. A hyena yelled before letting out a blood-curdling laugh, and in the distance she heard the desolate sound of a screaming solitary rhino. Knowing that the rhinoceros had come close to extinction, it thrilled her to hear one call out. She was going on a game drive the following morning and hoped she would have the chance to see one of these extraordinary creatures. Looking around, she couldn't imagine being anywhere as perfect as this. Close to where she was sitting, two giraffes moved between the trees, and she admired their grace and elegance. Then the girl's eyes turned towards the water hole. Watching the antelopes and impalas make way for the ferocious and heavy buffalo herd, she thought how impressive and magnificent nature was.

The girl was lost in her own private dreams and didn't need other people to keep her company. Sitting by herself with the sounds and smells of the bush, she felt a wave of peace enfold her, making everything she had left behind in England seem distant and remote. However, sudden laughter startled her and she looked around. She resented being taken away from her own world so abruptly, but immediately felt guilty. She was on vacation in Tanzania and there were only five other people on the safari. Her companions weren't overbearing or demanding, and there weren't crowds of people suffocating her. She knew the others were keen to gain new experiences on their first trip to Africa, and she had no right to feel annoyed, knowing that they should be able to enjoy themselves in the way they wanted. However, the girl believed she was different to them. She had only visited the continent once before, but she felt as if she was returning home. Her first visit to Africa had been both a spectacular journey and also a profound experience that had changed her whole outlook on life.

The girl looked at the people who had come onto the veranda. The group had been travelling all day to get to the lodge and had arrived feeling tired and dirty. They had gone to their rooms to shower and rest, but the girl hadn't wanted to waste time indoors. She had freshened up quickly and then gone outside to sit alone. Getting a glass of wine from the bar, she sipped it slowly, letting the African wilderness envelop her and enter her soul.

"A gin and tonic, that's what I need after today," a loud voice called out.

The girl looked up as the man came and sat next to her. She knew she was being selfish wanting to be alone and decided to put her dreams aside for the evening.

"Yes, it's been a tiring day. The roads were very bumpy, weren't they?" the girl said. "I'm sure it'll be worth it though. Just think of all the animals we'll see tomorrow."

"I hope it'll be worthwhile. It's been disappointing so far," the man continued.

The group had flown into Nairobi and had visited a game reserve in Kenya before moving on to Tanzania. They were all anxious to watch elephants, lions and rhino interact in the wild, but unfortunately they hadn't seen many of the big game in Kenya. Despite this, there had still been

much to admire, and the girl wished that the man were able to immerse himself in the atmosphere of the bush. Africa was a dramatic place, and she found it hard to understand how anyone couldn't be swept away by the power and beauty of the land.

The man, John Carter, was in his late forties, and was travelling with his wife, Jo, and their daughter, Sarah. He was burly and noisy and wore enormous khaki shorts, but despite his overbearing appearance, the girl felt he would never willingly hurt anyone. He would occasionally make jokes at the expense of his wife, but Jo would take them in her stride and would often match him in his humour. The girl could see that underneath this ribaldry, John and Jo cared deeply for each other. Like her husband, Jo was also large and cheerful. Both had dreamt of an African holiday for many years, but had not been able to afford it until now. However, as much as Jo had wanted to visit Africa, it wasn't the ideal holiday destination for her. She was terrified of snakes and asked her husband to search their room each time they went in. Before coming on vacation, she had been determined to put these anxieties aside and to revel in the experience. There was so much she wanted to see in Africa, but now she was finding that her fears were taking over.

John and Jo's eighteen-year old daughter, Sarah, was quite different to her parents. She was petite and timid, and although she was finding Africa exciting, she was also overwhelmed. It was her first holiday abroad, and while she had been looking forward to seeing the wild animals, she sensed danger everywhere and felt on edge. The girl saw Sarah glancing at Dave, another member of the safari group. He was in his early twenties and was handsome, kind and quiet. His older sister, Kate, was travelling with him. She was also attractive, but was more extrovert than her brother. The girl could see that Dave and Sarah were drawn to each other, but both were afraid to make the first move. Dave had first been mesmerized by Sarah's deep brown eyes, which seemed to hide so many secrets. He wanted to discover what lay beneath that distant exterior of hers, but he looked at her shyly, not knowing whether to talk or not. A few days had gone by since they had started their holiday, but they had said very little to each other. Time was running out for them, but the girl hoped that their African romance would blossom and turn out better than hers had.

The girl took another sip of wine and thought about her visit to Nairobi two years previously. She had believed herself to be passionately in love, but now she shivered in fear as she remembered that time. In the bar of her hotel, she had met an Englishman who lived in Kenya. It was uncharacteristic of the girl to talk to strangers, but from the moment she saw the man, she felt a deep connection with him. The two days they spent together in Africa had been a magical experience. Trembling each time he looked into her eyes, she believed that he understood her completely, never before having felt that anyone was able to truly sympathize with her. At the end of their first evening together, he had taken her in his arms and kissed her, first slowly, and then with increasing passion. They had gone to her room and made love with an intensity that she had never before experienced. She gave herself to him completely and without question, and when she had to leave him to return to England, she believed that her world had been taken away from her. Feeling that she was nothing without him, she hadn't wanted to go, but she knew she would be unable to cope with the guilt of leaving her widowed father on his own in England. As she left for the airport, the man promised to phone her and said that they would be together again. Although he did contact her, the calls then stopped abruptly and she thought he had forgotten her. She couldn't understand how such a passion could cease to exist, but as time went

on, her life started to return to normal. Still, she couldn't completely put him out of her mind, and when he came to England six months later to find her, she had to go and see him. Despite the pain he had caused her, memories of their time together in Africa flooded back. Although his excuses for not contacting her were poor, he courted her with such intense emotion and force that she felt unable to resist. However, it wasn't long before she realized the mistake she had made. When they had been together in Africa, he had made her feel like the most important person in the world. However, now she saw that he was possessive and jealous. He wouldn't let her have any freedom and was like a python, winding himself around her body and squeezing the life out of her. She ended their relationship, but he wouldn't give up and continued to pursue her, going away for weeks and then reappearing to frighten her. Sometimes she would look out of her window and see him lurking in the shadows. Then the phone would ring, but there would be nobody there. Walking down the street, she sensed there was somebody following her, but she didn't see anyone. Eventually the phone calls stopped, but it took many months for her to feel safe, and until recently, she thought that she could never trust anyone again.

"Hey, come on, it's time for dinner," a voice boomed in her ear, taking her away from her thoughts. "Looks like a good spread tonight."

The girl attempted to smile and then reluctantly got up. She had been comfortable sitting outside being absorbed in her own dreams and feelings, but she knew she'd been thinking too much again. She went into the dining room and sat with the others. She imagined they thought she was strange travelling on her own, but it didn't worry her what people thought, nor did she mind being on her own. Her mother had died when she was thirteen, and from then on she had looked after herself. Her father had done his best and had tried to relate to her, but she had been born late in his life and they were worlds apart. Now she was in her early thirties and had never been married or even lived with anyone, but because of her childhood, she didn't fear loneliness. Over the years she had got used to it, and was probably more afraid of settling down and making a commitment. Because she had been alone for so long, taking that step filled her with apprehension. When she had been with the man in Nairobi, she had thought for the first time that she was ready to spend her life with someone else. However, when he came to England, she realized that he had fooled her. Now she didn't know if she would be able to dedicate herself completely to another person and was afraid that she was incapable of giving up her freedom.

"Have some bread; it's really fresh," Sarah said.

The girl smiled again and wished that her mind would stop wandering away from the present. She felt that she needed to relax and enjoy the company of others for a change. They were all kind and genuine people, and it wouldn't do her any harm to experience normality. She ordered another glass of wine and tried to stop thinking. Attempting to pull herself together, she joined in the conversation.

"I hear there are tree climbing lions in Lake Manyara National Park," she said. "It's so unusual for lions to climb trees. It would be wonderful if we could see them."

"Yes," Jo said, "It would be great. I just hope we don't see any snakes!"

They all laughed. Jo was still stressed about meeting snakes, but luckily she hadn't encountered any yet.

Everybody continued to talk about the animals they wanted to see the next morning. They had so many hopes for the following day, and the girl was carried along by their enthusiasm. It felt unusual and strange to her to be part of a group, but she was starting to like it. The other people accepted her for who she was and this felt unusual and fresh.

As the evening drew to a close, the girl looked towards Dave and Sarah. They were talking quietly together and seemed locked in their own private world. The girl was pleased that their relationship had started to move forward, and she hoped that everything would turn out well for them. Then she remembered the man in Nairobi. For a moment she felt isolated, but because she wasn't afraid of being alone, this feeling soon disappeared. Then she started to think of the man she had met recently. He was a warm and compassionate person, and although she was nervous, she finally had hope for the future. Thoughts of her previous lover began to fade.

They all got up at five the following morning for the game drive. They had enjoyed the previous evening and had gone to bed late, but the girl had still been unable to sleep. She had been too excited to close her eyes and thoughts had kept running through her mind. Although she was filled with anticipation, she was also scared. She had been worried that since she had last visited Africa, she had built up an imaginary picture of it. She had thought about her previous trip many times in the last two years, particularly when she was unhappy. It had been her escape from reality, and it didn't matter that her romance had turned out badly. She loved Africa and the freedom and mysticism of the land. This trip was turning out to be very different to her last one, but she was relieved that she hadn't yet been disappointed by her return.

The girl felt herself tremble as they got into the jeep and started to drive through the park. She hoped that the others wouldn't be disappointed and would see everything they wanted. She had been lucky on her first trip to Africa, and although she wanted to see the animals again, she was content just being there.

At first they just saw zebra and antelope, but then a cheetah appeared. It stared at them and was suddenly gone. The girl thought that this was how it should be, and remembered her trip to Java the previous year. She had visited a zoo, and although she didn't like to see animals in cages, the tour guide had been persuasive. As it had been many years since she had been to a zoo, her curiosity had been aroused. She had wanted to see how the animals coped with their captivity, but she was shocked by what she saw and a deep sadness had overwhelmed her. The elephants had chains around their feet and were unable to walk properly. She had stood looking at a leopard in a cage, and neither she nor the big cat could take their eyes off each other. People stared as she talked to him, but she didn't care. Trying to apologize to him for what the human race had done, she wondered what good it would do. He was imprisoned in that cage for the rest of his life, a life of what seemed to be unhappiness and suffering, a living death. The girl sometimes felt that she too was in a cage, and her thoughts drifted towards her father. Even though she was an adult, he still tried to stop her from doing what she wanted. She loved him, but he treated her as a child. Although she knew that he worried about her, she felt suffocated, and there were many times when she felt like exploding. She wanted to be free, and although at this moment she was, the prison still waited for her. She knew that she would never do to anyone what her father or her ex-lover from Kenya had tried to do to her. Now she was in love again, but she was afraid. She thought that her new lover might also have the same fears as she did, and she didn't want him to feel trapped. How could she make him believe that she would never put him in a cage and that she didn't want to stop him from pursuing his dreams or ambitions? She

trusted him implicitly and knew there was no need for them to be together all the time. She also had her friends and her own interests, and she needed time alone. She loved the man, but she didn't want to change him, knowing that if she tried, he wouldn't be the person she had fallen in love with. She wanted to understand him, but she was unsure of what was going through his mind.

"Look at the lion in the tree. It's an amazing sight," Sarah suddenly said, bringing the girl back to reality.

The girl gazed at the lion, feeling privileged to see this regal creature sitting comfortably in an unusual setting. The uniqueness of the tree-climbing lions thrilled her, and she felt lucky that she had the opportunity to have this experience. She wished the rest of the group would be quieter, but they were all setting up their cameras. The girl knew that she should also take a photograph, but she was reluctant. The lion was a proud animal and she felt she was invading its' privacy. Then she smiled as she thought of her friends and work colleagues back home. They all thought she was a little quirky and strange because she believed that animals were as important as people. At work she would be humoured as she walked around with petitions to stop ivory poaching and whale hunting. However, she didn't really mind what people thought. She had her passions and they didn't harm anyone.

Having taken photographs, they continued their game drive and were privileged to see elephants and giraffes. As they returned to the lodge, the girl felt elated by what she had witnessed. She wished that the elusive rhinoceros had been there, but she wasn't disappointed. There was still time, and even if she didn't see one, she was content just being back in Africa.

That afternoon they drove to the rolling ocean grasslands of the Serengeti plains. Her dream was to see the great migration of the wildebeest, but she would only be there for two nights, and this could happen at any time in the next couple of months, if at all. The rains had been heavy this year and there might not be any need for the animals to leave.

The journey to the Serengeti had been long, but this time the girl did rest when they arrived at the lodge. She was tired and drifted into a deep dreamless sleep, waking up just in time to go for dinner. Walking into the lounge, she heard a crescendo of deep rolling grunts and knew that there was a lion in the distance. Looking around the room, she saw Dave and Sarah sitting together holding hands. Their African romance seemed to be working out, but for a second she felt a sense of isolation. She was happy for them, but she also wished that her new lover were there with her. She suddenly missed him and realized that sometimes you could be alone too much.

John and Jo hadn't come into the lounge yet. The girl got herself a drink and went to sit on the veranda, wondering if Kate minded that Dave was spending so much time with Sarah. Then she looked around and saw Kate chatting and laughing with a few people from a different safari group. Watching them, the girl thought that Kate would never have problems finding companionship, and for a brief moment she envied her. Closing her eyes, she saw the lion in the tree again and she smiled to herself. However, she was soon disturbed from her dreams by a loud scream.

"There's a snake in my room. I know there is. I saw it," Jo said as she rushed into the lounge.

John came in a few seconds later and put his arms around his wife.

“Come on Jo, it’s just your imagination. I didn’t see anything,” he said quietly.

Jo was trembling and looked drained. There was nothing that her husband could say to calm her down.

“I know what I saw. I’m not going back into that room.”

“You can’t stay out here all night,” replied John. “It’s just as dangerous. Snakes can get in here as well, and goodness knows what else comes in when we’ve all gone to bed.”

“Oh my God, I just want to go home,” Jo said, sobbing.

John looked at his wife and felt at a loss as to how to help her. She was generally a strong and self-sufficient woman, and he felt unable to deal with her weaknesses.

The girl was concerned for Jo, knowing that it was difficult to overcome your fears, so she brought her a large brandy in the hope of calming her down.

“Here, drink this,” she said. “It’ll do you good. I know it’s hard, but try not to worry. The snake was probably just as scared of you as you were of it. Try to focus on something else. Think about the other things that happened today. I could see how much you were enjoying the game drive this morning. The lion in the tree was an unbelievable sight wasn’t it? And those baby elephants were gorgeous.”

Jo tried to smile. The girl might be a little unusual, but her voice was soothing and she always seemed serene and calm.

“We’ll all go and search your room before you go to bed tonight. I’m sure that if there’s anything there, we’ll find it,” the girl said, gently smiling.

Jo felt slightly better. The girl was on her own, yet she seemed so unafraid of anything in this strange country. She wished she could be like her. Africa was extraordinary, but she felt out of place and apprehensive. She sipped her brandy, and as the warm liquid entered her body, she relaxed and put all thoughts of the snake to the back of her mind. The girl had assured her that they would check the room before she went to bed and she trusted her.

Later that evening, the girl lay in bed thinking. As promised, she had helped to search John and Jo’s room, but they had found nothing. Jo had become calmer, but she had made sure that all the windows were shut before she went to bed. John knew it would be hot with the windows closed, but that was preferable to his wife sitting up all night. The girl could hear John snoring in the next room, the heat not having affected him as he thought it might, and she wondered if Jo had managed to fall asleep yet. She started to think about the man back home and imagined him touching her, moving his hands softly over her body and then kissing her passionately. She realized then that she loved him, and even if she didn’t see him again, her feelings wouldn’t change. She knew that he had problems, that he had an ex-wife who was making his life difficult, but she was prepared to wait for him until he had sorted everything out. There was no rush. She didn’t need to be with anyone else and was fine on her own until he was ready to be with her completely.

With these thoughts, the girl drifted into a restless sleep. Unlike when she had slept earlier in the day, her mind was now filled with confusing dreams. She was sitting in a cage with a lion and was feeling tense and uneasy, but it wasn't the lion she was scared of. He was old and injured, and she sensed he was also afraid of something. She felt that the animal was no longer able to hold a place in his pride and that he knew his life would soon be over. Sitting huddled with him in a corner of the cage, the girl then looked outside and saw her father laughing. He had finally managed to entrap her and she could see no way of escaping. Suddenly, the cage disappeared, together with the lion and her father, and she was now sitting out in the bush while a snake crept stealthily over her body. She tried to scream, but no sound would come out. She had never feared these creatures before, but as the snake's hold got tighter, she started to tremble. The snake then began to speak and she realized it had the voice of her African ex-lover.

"I have you now. You thought you'd escaped, but you'll never get away from me," he laughed. "You will belong to me until the end of time. Never forget it."

Then she saw the man she now loved. He was calling to her and she started walking towards him. The snake had disappeared and she momentarily felt relieved. However, although she kept walking towards her new lover, he became more and more distant. She started running, but was unable to get any closer to him. He still called to her, but his voice became fainter, and soon she couldn't see him at all.

Waking at four, the girl felt as if she hadn't slept. She went and sat in a chair by her window and breathed in the warm African air. She knew it was too dangerous to go out of her room while everybody was in bed, knowing it was easy for the animals to come into the lodge when it was quiet. She started to feel calm again, but then it dawned on her that she only had a couple more days in Tanzania. Soon she would have to return to England, but although she didn't want to leave, she knew it was impossible to stay in Africa.

The girl stood at the airport waiting to go home. The rest of her holiday had gone too quickly, but her dream of seeing a rhinoceros in the wild had become a reality. It had been the highlight of the trip for everybody and they couldn't stop talking about it.

Looking at the other people in her group, the girl felt sad. They had become close in the last few days, but she knew she would probably never see any of them again, despite exchanging addresses. She glanced at John and Jo and thought they seemed content. After the girl had helped to calm her down a couple of nights previously, Jo had become more relaxed. Despite her anxieties, she hadn't seen a snake, and had realized that there was little point living in fear. She had managed to enjoy the rest of her holiday and was going home with some spectacular memories. Dave and Sarah were sitting together holding hands, and the girl had a feeling that their romance would continue when they returned to England. She saw Kate chatting to the other safari group, and was a little jealous of their relaxed friendship.

The girl felt a tear roll down her cheek, but although she didn't want to leave Africa, she was anxious to know what was waiting for her at home. She knew she had to stand up for herself and couldn't allow anyone to put her back in a cage. Despite loving her father, it was time for him to let her go. She still had fears that her ex-lover would come looking for her, but her return to Africa had made her strong enough to face him and to tell him to leave her alone. She didn't know if the man she loved would be waiting for her at the airport, but she hoped he would be

there. He was the man she wanted to be with for the rest of her life, but if he couldn't be, she would survive on her own. She always had before and believed that she could do so again. If he did still want her, she was determined to prove to him that she loved him unselfishly, and she would show him that she was prepared to wait for him until he was ready. She had no idea what would happen in the future. The only thing the girl was certain of was that she would return to Africa. It would always be there for her and would take her in with open arms whenever she needed it, even if it was only in her dreams.

The Criterion

THE GIRL WHO WENT AWAY TO FAIRYLAND

Frederick Hilary

Euboea, Greece

Daniel Potts had once been a young poet of promise. His lyrics had brought him early fame, before the last embers of Romanticism were doused by the Moderns. The problem with Potts, his friends and fellow poets knew, was that he could not grow out of his dreams, nor lay his wishful desires aside, as the rest of the literary scene had done. He was left behind, and grew old and grey with years, and became scarce remembered, except by those who hankered after nostalgia, or those with an unfashionable taste for supernaturalism.

He certainly looked the part of the poet. He had waves of silver hair, and a frail pair of tortoiseshell glasses always sat upon the edge of his nose. His expression was implacably wistful, and his eyes seemed to be misted with some fair away Celtic twilight. He travelled often, in the world and out of it, and wrote his poems, which no longer brought him any real money. He might have taken his place amongst the Moderns, but he was too honest, and in any case he could never have felt at home there: his allegiances had not changed since childhood, and the romantic in him had never put away his blade and foolish dreams.

What had attracted the most notoriety, just as the new wave of poetry was sweeping the literary landscape, was his lengthy study of the folklore and supernatural beliefs of his native Ireland, and in particular the peasant belief in fairies. He had travelled throughout the countryside himself to gather the tales; but he had not stopped at being a mere chronicler and folklorist, for it was not his nature. Potts had gone where the anthropologists feared to go: he had sought fairies in the deep green woods and isolated spaces; he had seen them himself, and followed them out of the world for a time, and returned back; and the verse he had concocted afterwards had attracted its fair share of ridicule, for it spoke of impossible things, and tried to contain in image and rhyme what could not be expressed in human language in the first place.

In his autumn years there was the odd trickle of money from the patronage of the rich, but most of his income came from visiting the stately homes of people whose literary taste would have been, by others at least, considered dubious and sentimental. He would read from his early works, and a small selection from his later ones (which differed only in that they were less well known), and over dinner he would talk of his beliefs and literary philosophy, and if his hosts were so inclined, his experiences of the supernatural realm. That way he managed to keep his hearth from growing cold, in the bare walled country house he had made his occasional home when not travelling, and also to pay for clothes that were fine enough to give the impression of a refined taste with some vague air, though he loathed the word, of celebrity.

The visions of fairyland he had beheld, though, were all in the past. He had not been able to find a crossing place for several years, and wondered whether he ever would again. If tales and verse were all he had left, he would have to make do with those.

One morning in early Spring he had an invitation to visit a house in Wales; it was an unusual one, for as a rule such invites came with a long preliminary letter, in which the rich patron in question went on at great length about his love of Potts' early verse. This time, however, the

letter offered not a hint of flattery, nor any explanation at all, other than that he come at his earliest convenience to a house in the heart of the Welsh hills, to meet with a lawyer who would pay “the poet and supernaturalist” (these were the words used) on arrival. Long ago, perhaps, Potts might have been more selective in his appointments, but no more.

The house where the meeting was to take place was surrounded by gloomy deciduous woodland. The driver did not take him up to the house itself: he had to disembark and make his way on foot along a winding path through the trees, for there were other paying passengers who had pressing business further along the route. He pulled his collar tightly about him, for it was cold, and there was the threat of rain in the air. It was a cinder drive that he followed, well kept enough, doubtless belonging to a sizeable mansion house.

After about ten minutes’ walk, he glimpsed the house itself: built of Victorian red brick. Not a single window in the house was lighted, even though it was a murky afternoon, the sky low and thick with clouds, and a dolorous mood hung over the scene that, perhaps in an earlier time, might have inspired him towards creation of some lines of verse.

The man who came out to meet him wore a long brown greatcoat, and though not dressed in black, he somehow gave the impression of one in mourning. Potts studied the man’s face, and in particular his eyes, and saw no great sorrow there, unless it were masked in some way.

“They haven’t lit any of the fires in the house,” said the greatcoated man, who introduced himself as Standish, a lawyer. “Not for days now. Not since the happening about which I’ll tell you as soon as we’re inside. The weather’s turned again. It’s cold, even for March. There was sunshine on the lawns a few days ago.”

Leading Potts through the heavy oak door, he added: “Appropriate really. As if they have some power over the elements.”

“They?” Potts asked delicately. He was aware, in the wide, dimly-lit entrance hall, of the echo that followed the tap of their footsteps, and amplified even the sound of their breathing.

“It sounds a bit mysterious, doesn’t it,” the man said, not taking his greatcoat off, nor offering to take Potts’s travelling cloak. “I had better begin at the beginning. Let us find some suitable office and get down to business.”

Standish led him through a maze of rooms, all of which seemed empty of any living soul, despite the expensive furniture, until they arrived in a spacious study in one of the house wings. “This will do well enough.” The lawyer pointed to the grey ashes in the hearth. “If you blow on them, or comb them with your fingers, you might feel some heat.”

“Yes, it is wintry indeed,” said Potts, nevertheless taking off his travelling coat and putting it over the back of the chair he lowered himself in.

“Right then, no more dalliance.” Standish seated himself opposite, in the chair nearest the unlit fire, and drawing his greatcoat tighter about him said, in spite of his suggestion that

business should be conducted promptly, “one dare not ask the servants to light even a cooking fire. Baron and Baroness Hensham have forbidden it. They eat their meat cold, and take no tea at all, and wander about the woods in all weathers looking for the young Miss.”

“Looking for their daughter? The young lady of the house has disappeared?”

The lawyer rubbed his hands and lent forward. “Oh yes. The young Miss Hensham.”

“How old is the girl?”

“Ten years old last November.”

“She went missing while out to play in the woods or the gardens, I take it? This is a police case, as I see it. Mr Standish. If you will forgive me getting straight to the point, I was brought here under the auspices that my particular gifts would be required. I do not see how my crafting of verses, nor indeed my insight into certain sensitive matters that are beyond the ken of today’s rational mindsets, can be brought to bear in the search for a missing child. Even if you have some reason for suspicion of psychical intervention, I am not your man, for I am not a psychic in any conventional sense of the word. The police should be your first call. You do know something about me, I take it?”

“I am aware you are not a psychic. You are a poet and mystic. You wrote a long compendium of encounters with fairies, and are famous for your first-hand encounters with the supernatural. It is not the sort of thing a lawyer should look kindly on; though I must confess I am a rationalist by profession, not by belief. But of course what matters is what Lord and Lady Hensham want, and I am their humble servant in that regard.”

As he spoke, his breath came out in thin white clouds. “So you see,” he continued, “I know exactly who I have brought to the case. You shall know the facts, then, since you suspect I am wasting your time. You see the young Miss Hensham was in the habit of conversing, even sporting, with beings about which you doubtless have had some dealings.”

Rising quickly, and thrusting his hands in the drawer of a desk near the window, Standish produced a wad of photographs and handed them to Potts.

Potts looked them over without speaking. After inspecting every one, he brought one particular photograph to the top of the wad and let his finger rest on the figure that was captured there, next to the pretty, smiling girl on the lawn.

“I can’t corroborate this. I don’t deal in cases of authenticity, or in rooting out fakes.”

“I don’t expect that of you, Mr Potts. But you have seen with your own eyes...”

“A fairy? No. Not English fairies. The Fey, in some form or other, I have glimpsed, yes. The Sidhe of Ireland: I was fortunate enough, in my younger years, to encounter their kind. But in all

the years I have criss-crossed England and Wales as a speaker on the longevai in poetry and folk tales I have not seen a single example of the English breed.”

He studied the photograph as he spoke. There was a tiny figure, hatted, with long dark boots, skipping on the grass in the foreground of the picture, while the Hensham girl, delighted, looked on.

“At least it’s not a winged dryad, or some flower cup fairy. They are the kind that the forgers usually go in for. Who took this photograph?”

“Lord Hensham. All last summer he berated the little girl for telling tales about the little people, the Lilliputians at the edge of the lawns. But then, out hunting, he saw one with his own eyes. And he followed the young miss, and crawled behind the topiary, and took this set of pictures.”

“And he didn’t startle the creatures?”

“Evidently not. They continued their play, and young Emily there, as you can see, is delighted to be playing with the little folk. That was the end of it, though. After this day, they came for her, and drew her towards the woods.”

“So they led her away? Did anyone witness it?”

“The Lord and Lady heard the music. Even the servants heard it. Far off, they said it was, coming perhaps from the edge of the woods, yet seeming even more remote than that. The most beautiful music they’d ever heard. All of them agreed on that. Lord and Lady Hensham went out, and the servants were out on the lawns already, and they caught a glimpse of the little lass, skipping towards the line of beeches at the far end there, following the music. Then the woods closed over her, the gloom and the shadows seemed to swallow her up, and the music ceased, just like an air one hears in a dream.

“Of course, they searched the woods right away. They even had the police here. She’s gone, Mr Potts. Away with the fairies, it is. That’s the only explanation of the case the Lord and Lady will entertain. They all heard this beautiful, otherworldly music, played on heaven knows what instrument – no one can agree whether it was wind or brass or string – the tune of which none can remember. They called her away, just like in all the old stories. Away from the world, isn’t it? Away from trouble and responsibility, yes, but away from everything living and growing too. Lord Hensham wants you to bring her back.”

“Why doesn’t he talk to me himself?”

“Because the both of them are inconsolable. Because this is to be a matter of business, and right now I am the only clear-headed one in the whole house. The servants, too, loved the little girl. They’ve been combing the woodlands day and night, and not a thing to show for it. Lord and Lady Hensham will give you whatever you ask. Do what you must to bring Miss Hensham back. I am at your service, if you need me.”

“Mr Standish, we have a problem here. You see, the fairies themselves planned to take the girl, and it was their power which opened the gates between our world and theirs. But anyway, let’s say I know a way in. It is perilous, even more perilous than you might imagine, for Faerie is a mapless wilderness, and a pathless one too. Few come back from such a place. And of those who do come back, few are untouched.”

Here Potts paused, and his eyes glinted, as if lit by pale flecks of fire.

“It is a place beyond time and generations. The beauty one sees there, the beauties of our world cannot stand comparison against. I will need to protect my mind if I agree to go in.”

“Whatever is necessary, Mr Potts. You will notice that, even though I am a legal man, a man of business, and of the city, I do not doubt for a minute the veracity of the whole of this, nor do I question the work you must do. Tell me how I can help you, tell me what you desire, and I will do it.”

“Very well, then,” said Potts, rising. He put on his travelling coat, and headed straight for the door. “I’ll go walking in the woods, then. Alone, if you do not mind.”

Potts had cold lunch brought to him, and cold tea, and finally cold supper. He stayed away from the house, and spent all his time in the woods, among the oaks and ashes and beeches, and looked for signs of fairy intervention. There were a few fairy rings in the green swards in the clearings in the wood, and these he noted, and thought that his purpose might be achieved, with a little good luck. He asked Standish to bring him some beeswax, that his ears might be shut to the music, should the fairies wish to ensnare him too; grown men, as well as innocents, were sometimes their prize, for among dreamers there is no end to play. As to the beauties that would assault his eyes, it was easier done, for he could always use his lids, or cover them with his hands, and he would need to measure the space he looked with some other marker than time’s, for though time did not flow in Faerie as it did in the world, the illusion of mortal time was carried by those who slipped beyond its borders, and because of this they could sometimes be deceived, so that a hundred years were recorded by the mind as the space between one heartbeat and the next.

He knew how perilous Faerie was, for all the longing it inspired. He might not have agreed to the charge, but then again the girl was gone – an innocent soul. Was it worth it, though? She would, after all, be carried away towards delight and happiness, towards the undying. He supposed that he was doing it for those left behind, for her family. They would be left with grief. And anyway, he told himself, Faerie is not heaven – it does not come as light at the end of a life of toil and darkness. It is an endless twilight, filled with the ceaseless enchantments of beauty, without trouble, without tears, and yet perhaps without the greater, more sublime joys. As he

tramped onwards through the woods, and the pale light led to evening, he realised that, for all his verse and tale gathering, he did not quite understand, just like every other mortal thinker had failed to quite understand, the nature of Faerie. It was beyond logic. Its promises and delights, so strange and alien to those in the world, were perhaps not the same to all people. It might be said that for some it was to be more desired than anything at all in the world, yet for others it might be a place of entrapment, of madness and slavery to the play of shadows upon the senses. As he had grown older, and despite his adherence to Romanticism, he did not know where he himself stood. All he knew was that he would have to go in, for as brief a time as possible, and get the girl out. And even if he did not delay, there was no assurance that she could be brought back in her right mind, or even brought back at all.

Twilight came to the woods, and then darkness, and the night sky cleared, so that through the gaps in the treetops he could see the half penny of moon shining down on all the earth, on the human world and Faerie both. Most of the servants had gone in doors, and there were only a few rustlings and shakings of branches to tell him he was not alone in the woods. Lord and Lady Hensham he caught no sight of, but he supposed that they too were keeping the night's vigil. It was enough of a madness, this, looking always for the doorway in, and seeking the one who has been charmed away.

They will not carry us forth with music, not a second time, Potts thought. They have their prize. But when inside, he would need to plug his ears in case it drew him into inescapable woods. In his pocket he had a long yarn of thread, supplied by Standish, a string with which to be able to return via, like Ariadne's in the labyrinth. He was lucky tonight – all was clear in the moonlight. He had studied all day the course of the land, the undulations, and gone from one edge of the wood to the other, and noticed every line and silhouette of every tree and branch. He was looking for slight variations, anomalies, subtle, hardly perceptible threadings and unthreadings of nature, where the woven tapestry, in its parts and in its whole effect, was out of harmony with the rest. That would be the sign, that would be the marker. A leaf not belonging on the tree that bore it. A greensward too bright for moonlight. Something that did not sit right with the rest.

The night drew on. It got colder. He was sensitive to temperature, for it too could be the sign he was looking for. But here in the low space of the valley, not too far from the murmurings of the river, it was bound to be cold anyway, and nothing about the lingering chill seemed out of keeping with the environment.

After waiting a time, he made his way towards the river, which flowed near the far edge of the woodland, away from the house. Stooping down when he reached the thin course of moonlit water, he studied the course of its flow: here smooth, glistening with moonlight, there quickening just a little, swollen like the slippery back of a fish; tension held in balance.

He listened to the air and the night sounds too. There was a harmony, an overarching balance, he expected to hear in all, even though, like the spaces of quick flowing water amongst the smooth, there was tension; the point was that the tension was brought to bear, was controlled, by the general order of the whole. He was looking for something that did not conform to this wider, vital order.

To know and recognise supernature, one has to study nature meticulously. Nature is the element man exists in, Potts knew. In another element, he will know himself transported at once. But in order to find the way through, to cross over, it was necessary to discern where one system overlapped with another. He found it, soon enough, before half the space of night was gone, a little further down the river. There was a place where the river narrowed, the banks cut deeper into the earth, and passed under a knotty bridge of bushes and briars. Drawn to the dark space under the natural bridge, he knew: there was gloom there that was illuminating as light, and silence as loud as a shout, a sense of danger that enticed as much as a safe harbouring place. He knew that was his door. It would involve getting wet. There was no getting around it. The river looked deep at this spot. He thought about calling back to the house for a pair of galoshes, but thought better of it, for his knowledge told him the doors between worlds were not always open for long, and this one might shut unexpectedly. So he sat down on the bank, dangled his legs into the water, just so that he got a feel for how cold it was (it certainly was bitterly cold), and then lowered himself in.

The water came up to his waist. It was hard to keep balance, for as it neared the bridge of bushes it sped up considerably, and for a moment he wobbled there, uncertainly, wondering if the current would take him and sweep him under, if this would be the last of the poet. Then he realised, with half a smile, that this was the only way: he needed to go under that bridge. He needed to cross into the dark. So he simply sloshed forward, and gave up thinking about losing his footing, for that would only quicken matters. He stooped under the thorny archway and crossed into Faerie as soon as his head entered the gloom.

There was no river on the other side. His senses, at once, were tricked. One second he had been aware of his waterlogged boots, the freezing grip of the water on his skin, the next he was quite dry, and his skin was warmed as if by the light of a woodfire. He looked down. He was in a clearing, standing, as it seemed, in a long sliver of moonlight. It flickered, dissolved and reformed for a minute, so that briefly it seemed to be water rather than light, and so too the sensation from his toetips up to his waist teetered and played between utter cold and delightful warmth. Then he was sure. He was quite dry. The river was gone. The moonlight, instead, formed a winding path that he could follow across the clearing and out of it. The March moon – if this were precisely the same March moon – did not cast a cold light but a warm, illuminating light that was even more pleasant than sunlight on a warm Spring day.

He cast his eye about him, and instinctively blinked a few times so as not to look too long. Trees grew in a close rank on the edges of the clearing. Grass whispered and breathed beneath his feet. It was all like, and yet wholly unlike, the nature he knew. For the grass seemed like the hair of his old grandfather, which he used to twine about his fingers when he was a child in the old man's lap. The branches of the trees drooped like the tails of cats, and their bark was not coarse but like soft velvet, of a colour he could not place, but somehow knew to exist. The air itself did not invigorate or refresh, rather it intoxicated like wine: it was like the air of dreams, playing all its tricks upon the mind.

Potts fought for mastery of himself. He heard his own heart beating. That was the thing. No sense of time could be a marker here. The heart beats according to the law of its own nature, without obeying the rising of sun or moon; the heart does not know the seasons, even though it

moves as they do in its own cycle from the first beat of life, in its mother's womb, aligned to her heartbeat, to the last, when the spirit goes out of a man. Potts had prepared himself well. Internalize your thoughts. Keep them rooted in the music of your own heartbeat. So he counted his own pulse, never faltering in his measure, and, drawing out the ball of string, set off along the stream of moonlight that led out of the clearing.

He found himself deep in the midst of fairy woods. He closed his eyes regularly, and felt with his hands and his fingertips. The branches of the trees that touched him were like soft cotton. Nothing seemed barbed in this place, or came to a hard point or edge. It was all so enticingly soft, it made him want to lie down and go to sleep on the softest grass – for such was the stuff beneath his boots, amongst tree roots that were like a nurse's fingers as they brushed against him. But he resisted. He concentrated on his heartbeat, and kept count of the pulse. Not beats per minute, for in the restarting he might lose his count to the external clock of supernature. He had counted, so far, 542, and kept at it. Keep your feet moving, he told himself. On through the woods, deeper and deeper, one set of fingers on his pulse, the others leading out the thread so that I can go back.

There was no path of moonlight through the deeper woods. There was only the labyrinth of trees, but glancing back at the trail of string told him he was going ever forward – for moving in circles was to be feared as much as anything else. The Fey, the longevai of Faerie, held more dearly than anything else the cyclical nature of things. Their dances were circular dances, and when they played it was always in the round, in wheeling jigs. So mortals would be ensnared, if they entered the realm, by moving always in a circular space, never leaving the same circle, though thinking, for the trees and the landscape were in on the game, that they were moving every farther afield. And thus, thinking themselves afoot on a single night, their heart would wear down, their body would wither according to nature's laws (to which it was bound as soon as it emerged from Faerie), and if they were released at all it would be to stumble out into the mortal lands again, long-bearded and weary of limb.

The music started before Potts knew it. He caught himself listening for a brief space, unconscious while he had been doing so, and thus forgot to count the pulse he had so been dutifully recording. A few spaces had gone by – he guessed that the beats he had missed were between the number 943 and 948 – before he resumed his count again. The music had done it. Far off, delicious, feasting music, music that spoke of a great banquet, that delighted the senses and whose notes invited the listener to savour them like delicious cherries or ripe peaches.

He caught himself and fished out his beeswax. Plugging his ears at once, he went on with the count of his heartbeat, and with all his will tried not to be enticed by the music, which nevertheless lingered ghostly in the background, and moved to its own time, interfering with his measure of the beating of his heart.

Yet follow it he must. There, in that place where the music was coming from, he would find the girl. Count, he told himself, 1001, 1002, 1003, 1004, step, step, step, step, move closer to the music, but shut off your mind, and your heart, and all your senses to its beauty, imagine it is not beautiful at all but the ugliest sound, the drumming of tails of beasts against the ground, against

the trees, there, a little further, is the winding string still behind – yes – now I can see light, the glow of a fire perhaps, the fairies will be there.

He came out into the clear wide space. It was a white sward of green, in the very centre of which there was a fire, though a fire unlike any he had seen. It was not made up of flame at all, as far as he could tell. It would be more accurate to say that it looked like a fountain of water, whooshing up from the ground and cascading back down again. But it was no more water than it was the first element – Potts recognised it as moonlight, as flickering and dancing silvery tongues of the moonlight itself. He knew this because it was made up of the same properties as the moonlight he had all his life glimpsed things by, yet somehow with even greater potency.

Near the dancing flames of moonlight there were figures, small figures, even smaller than tiny children in size, though not with child's proportions. They were, of course, the fairy folk. Some were reclining, basking in the glow of the moon's heat, with blades of grass for their beds or flowers for their pillows; others were weaving circular dances about the place; yet more were playing music with instruments unlike any Potts had seen: some resembled shells, through whose hollow chambers the fairies blew as if they were horns or tubas. Others looked to be holding spider's webs. But when their hands passed across the glistening silver strands the most delicate and melodic notes were plucked out. There was even a fairy who was striking out a drumming pattern on the shiny back of a black beetle. Instead of drumsticks, he was using two nimble twigs topped with bright red berries.

The sight of the fairy orchestra was absurd. When he looked, from out of the cover of his palm, Potts almost laughed to see the little folk holding such ridiculous things in place of instruments. But at the same time, and in spite of the beeswax in his ears, Potts could not mistake the beauty of the music, close up this time, perilously close. It was for the most part playful, even flippant in its melodies, inconsequential as rain patter or the breezes that pass through stalks of hay in a summer meadow. But then it would take a sudden, fleeting turn, with a few dark, sombre notes that tore at the heartstrings, or contrariwise, with high, sounding, joyful notes that brought forth tears of happiness. And no sooner had the emotion come into the music than it was gone again, and all was seen to be as light and inconsequential as before.

Potts, even while he noticed these things about the music and the fairy folk, kept counting the beat of his heart. He had gone up to two thousand now. What was two thousand divided by sixty? How many minutes had he been here? But no time for that now, and not just because it might mean he would lose count. There was the object of his search: the girl, Emily.

Emily was seated at one end of the clearing, at the edge furthest from the fire, her back to a tree. She was garlanding flowers, while all around her little folk did the same, weaving circlets of daisies and buttercups to place in her ringlet curls. She was already festooned with flowers, and the fairies were bringing her ever more, woven not just as garlands for her hair, or as bracelets for her wrists and ankles, and necklaces, but also into delightful ornament shapes, one in the form of a puppy that she laid chucklingly at her feet, another as a basket made of flowers, into which flowers could be placed; one, the largest of all, was made of white flowers, peonies it seemed, and was shaped into a magnificent white unicorn. All the time the girl was smiling, and

would break suddenly into laughter, and her eyes would widen in delight at each new gift and trinket.

She, and it seemed the fairies too, had not noticed Potts enter the clearing. For a few beats of his heart longer he stood watching. It seemed unlikely that the fairies did not know he had come. They were extremely sensitive to mortals entering their realm, and would doubtless try to stop him from taking the girl. But how, if they were so diminutive? What magic could they use, other than the magic of enchantment, against which he was holding all the will of his being, and, as it seemed, succeeding?

He took a first step, and then another, towards the girl. The music did not cease, nor did the fire go out, nor was there a single break or pause in the merriment. The fairies went on garlanding the captive girl, and her eyes never lifted up once to the man who was approaching her, leading a long white yarn behind him. He was half covering his eyes, and reaching out a hand now to clutch hers. He felt the contact of skin, felt his heart skip a beat as he held on tightly to her thin, pale wrist. She looked up, and from her pendulous lids he saw her misty grey eyes meet his.

They were filled with sadness, and filled with longing.

She was singing a song. For a few minutes, that was all he was aware of.

“Buttercups and daisies,

Oh the pretty flowers,

Coming ere the springtime

To tell of sunny hours.”

He lifted her to her feet. In the corner of his sight, there was a flash of silver and white and green, the milling movement of a thousand tiny bodies, the fairies, either in a panic or in some wild dance of abandon.

He threaded the string between his fingers. He had not thought what he would do, now that he had to lead the girl. He could no longer keep count of his pulse. But his mind quickened to the answer: he would trust his breath, and count the inhalations and exhalations, for just as the heart keeps its own clock, so the lungs do too. He did not lose count, not for a minute. He led the girl by the hand, and with the other hand threaded the string through his fingers.

Two thousand and fifty-one. Two thousand and fifty-two. He led the girl out of the clearing, unresisting, yet dazed and in a dream, still singing her little song of spring.

“While the trees are leafless,
While the fields are bare,

Buttercups and daisies
Spring up here and there.”

They were moving back through the trees. Without the ball of string, he would have been hopelessly lost, for the trees now closed in all around, and each was alike to the next, and the air had a thick, heavy quality, as of spices or opium. Potts tugged at the girl's hand, which now, unexpectedly, had become heavier. He turned towards her, and surmised that at first she had let him lead her from the instinct to dance, but now, away from the music, she was resisting at last. Her hand felt heavy, and was pulling away from him. The weight of her, of everything in fact, even the string, made it hard for Potts to keep from falling to the ground. The only thing that kept him going was the certain knowledge of what that would mean: fall, even for a second, and she would be imprisoned in the realm forever, and he along with her. He would give in to sleep, and wake up after a hundred years had passed. He would be old and grey, his body withered, yet he could live on, and never know, just as long as he kept to the immortal realm. Here, no record of the body's withering could be seen.

All of this kept him going. He counted on, two thousand, one hundred and forty five, two thousand, one hundred and forty six, two thousand, one hundred and forty-seven. On and on through the trees, looking for the end of the string, winding it back to the reel, with only the slightest pressure, so that he was sure it was not be pulled taut and its starting place lost. The girl, with a strength that did not match her tender years, had almost to be dragged behind him, never giving up her song.

“ Little hardy flowers
Like to children poor,
Playing in their sturdy health
By their mother's door
Purple with the north wind,
Yet alert and bold;
Fearing not and caring not,
Though they be a-cold.”

At last they reached the first clearing, with the stream of silver moonlight. There was the string's end, on the ground. Nearly up to two thousand three hundred now, his breathing more laboured than ever, but kept regular. Pick up the string, a last tug on the maiden's hand, and to the place where the door had lain, the widening pool of moonlight.

He plunged into the silvery pool, yanking the girl behind him, and in a moment there was that teetering, that uncertainty, when warm could be cold, and cold warm, when light could be water, or water light. And then he was plunged back into the cold of the spring night in that Welsh river, spluttering and spitting and wheezing from the cold, plunging up from the water like a big old landed fish. The girl, the flowers in her hair matted and dripping wet, her dress ringing, came behind him. His grip was as tight on her flesh as he could manage without breaking the small bones of her wrist. He had brought her out, he had rescued her from the immortals, and now together they landed on the bank, numb from the cold, he breathing in gasps, she no better, yet still, in the thinnest, hardly breathing voice, managing to continue her song.

“What to them is weather!
What are stormy showers!
Buttercups and daisies
Are these human flowers!”

He bent over her, brushed her matted black hair back from her fine, wet forehead. Her grey eyes were misty, as before. Lost, still, in the dreaming of that place.

“Who are you?” said Potts, with a heaviness of tone.

The girl seemed to look through him. She could see, he knew without even having to ask, the fires in the clearing far away. The flowers of fairyland, that even now withered on her wrists and around her neck, which had turned to the withering violets and peonies of the material realm, having been translated. The music of the fairy orchestra, played on the coned shells of snails and on half-invisible spider webs. All of these were the objects of her mind. So he had failed.

He had brought her out, yes. In that he had succeeded, he thought as he lay back down on the bank. But how much time had passed between his entering Faerie and now? He had resolutely counted his heartbeat, and later his breath. The whole time, from first emerging into Faerie until the pool of silver moonlight, and the end of the ball of string had been found again. All except that once. He remembered himself counting, the exact moment when it had happened. The beats he had missed between counting, between 943 and 948. How long could have elapsed? He might have missed only heartbeats. But across the wood, in the direction of the house, there was no sound at all, no sounds of the brush being beaten, or of the servants’ voices calling Emily home.

He led the girl to the house at last. She no longer resisted, and they crossed the woodland quickly. They came into the house, at the butler’s answering the door, and were led by the man, whose face was a mask of shock, into the parlour where Lord and Lady Hensham were sitting. It was the first time Potts had seen the Lord and Lady, but he would remember them to the end of his days rising from their sofa, with open mouths, looking at their daughter as if she had returned from the dead.

“How long has it been?” Potts said, and the Lord, with tears in his eyes, answered, “A year to the day. A year she has been gone, and you also, and no explanation and not a single shred of hope. Until today. Oh, my good man, you have brought her back to us. We have suffered and gone to hell this past year. But it is all right now. She has come back. You are both wet through. You must rest at once. We are forever indebted to you. Our Emily has come back.”

Yes, rest was what he desired most, but he would not take it. He accepted only a change of clothes, and once he had been given some that fit, he made his way straight from the house, passing the woods without hardly a glance, and on towards the town and the train. What had happened in a whole year, he dared not speculate. There would be all sorts of affairs to untangle. Perhaps even scandals to which he could give no satisfactory explanation. But the sooner it was all begun, the better.

He remembered the name Hensham when he saw the card. He knew that it was Emily, and was not greatly surprised that she had sought him out. After all, Lord and Lady Hensham would not have thought anything untoward in the girl going to thank her rescuer. Not even, perhaps, if another seven years had passed since her reappearance, as they had.

He saw a young woman whose beauty was rare and refined. She was still recognisable as the girl who had lain on the bank next to him, garlanded with flowers, or who had sat amongst the fairies in the glade. In some ways, at least. But her face was troubled, and her eyes, when he looked into their depths, were as misty and as far away as ever.

“Why have you come to see me, Miss Hensham?”

She looked at him from the other side of the desk, and looked away. “Can’t you suspect?”

“I suppose it is not just to thank me. Your father and mother did that already. They have sent me Christmas hampers ever since, for which I am genuinely grateful.”

“It is not that,” said Emily, her voice becoming grave. “No, not that at all.”

“I thought as much,” said Potts. “Yours is not the first such case, though it is the first in which I have been so directly involved.”

“What do you think I want, then?”

“I suppose, Miss Hensham, that you are unhappy. That your parents urge you to marry. To look for some suitable match among the landed gentry. I suppose that you do not want this. That your heart is not in any such future. Nor is it in books, or in music, or in any of the various pursuits that might engage and distract a bright and curious mind like your own.”

“You have great understanding of the case, I see.”

Potts sighed wearily, and lit a pipe. “What would you ask me for?”

“What only you can give,” the young woman went on in earnest. “The way back. The way into Faerie. They hired you, eight years ago, to find a way in and bring me back with you. You did it. That can only mean that you know how to find the fairy paths amongst the woods. Don’t you see, Mr Potts? You never should have brought me back. It was never my fate to grow into this woman, to wither, to gather dust in drawing rooms, to wilt from the spring flower I was. The music led me, yes. But it was not just enchantment. It was desire, it came from inside me. I wanted to be enchanted. Didn’t you see that, when you found me? Didn’t you understand?”

Potts was looking out the window, drawing his pipe. “What do you expect me to say, Miss Hensham? That I knew and yet acted nonetheless? What about your parents, who would have grieved for you?”

“Many parents grieve. It is the way of things, Mr Potts. Some are fated to leave the world young, and I truly think it is a bad thing to interfere. But you can make amends. I will pay you, twice as much as my father did in the first place, if you can lead me to the door.”

Potts was looking out onto his garden. At length, he said, “how long do you think you’d have to spend out in the woods before some way, some sign, revealed itself? Where there are the comings and goings of the little folk, there might be more tears in the fabric dividing our world and theirs. But unless they are seen, one could spend a lifetime looking for a way into their realm.”

Emily lent forward in her chair. “That won’t do, Mr Potts. I can’t wait a lifetime. I can’t even wait a single day, in this mood of mine.”

“It’s nearly February,” Potts said, half to himself. “Winter’s almost over. The flowers will be out soon. Very well, I will leave it in your hands. I don’t want money, you know. And you must find some way of leading your parents away from the trail. I don’t want them coming here ready to sue me because their girl has disappeared once again. You do not have a child of your own, Miss Hensham. But do you have another in the family? Ideally a female, though males may do equally as well. Preferably close to the age of puberty. An innocent, for of course not all children are innocent as by rights they should be.”

“There is my cousin’s child. She is ten, I believe.”

“Then invite her to your house. Let her play on the lawns, down by the woodland’s edge. Make a spring of it, and if nothing happens, invite her the next spring, and if she grows up and marries, find another child. Watch them, and wait, and one spring day they’ll come, and garland her with flowers, just as they did you, and you’ll see the strange, delicately woven bracelets and anklets and wonder at how her little fingers did all that fine work. And you’ll know the fairies have come. And if they take her, be waiting, and offer yourself in exchange, for the fairies know how to bargain as well as humans do. Do not let the child go as well, but go in her place, because though now you have made your choice, and think yourself grown up enough to do so, the child cannot do so. And remember, if you hear the music, follow it, always moving in circles, never in a straight line. You’ll reach a spot in the woods where sound becomes scent, where water turns to moonlight, and all seems to turn back again. That will be your door. Take it, and I only hope it will be better for you. If you truly believe it to be your fate, who am I to argue?”

He had hardly finished the last sentence when he heard the door click shut. The young woman was gone. Sighing, feeling old, Daniel Potts looked out the window of his office, at the rain driving against the February lawn, and thought that he should wait there, in that very chair, counting his heartbeat, until the spring came.

In the Woods without an Anything

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The job at the post office was a means to an end, and that end was art. Although my passion was painting, it was by choice I had abdicated my social and economic status – at least in my parents' eyes – to the drudgery of civil servitude.

As usual, they were right: it was drudgery. But I chose it and maybe because of that I didn't mind sorting, carrying, delivering, just minding the mail in general. I felt as if I was contributing to something much larger than myself; I provided a service humanity found useful, a species defined by its gregarious, voyeuristic and avaricious compulsions, a formula that keeps on giving like the golden goose.

I kept my head down, the wheels greased, and didn't complain. I liked the flow and the orderliness, the undulating, rhythmic currents. The decision to work at the post office had been made in the interest of establishing a reliable income while I painted great works of art. That was supposed to be the consolation prize that took the drudgery from it.

Regardless of my reasoning, my parents were convinced I had gone down with the Titanic, despite the occasional artistic recognition: no less than *The New York Times* trumpeted a show of my paintings in one resounding sentence: "Thomas Beckersfield embodies the disembodiable; he captures the aggregate vision of womanhood with confident, surrealistic yellows, oranges, and reds; his masterful flourishes of bold, lusty strokes are a tribute to feminine timelessness, courage, beauty and, of course, libido."

Of course.

I have yet to understand the half of it.

I sold a few paintings because of the publicity, but when things settled down, as they inevitably did, I was back at square one.

Ironically and seemingly in tacit complicity with my parents who compulsively felt they had to be right all the time, my job at the post office faded. The post office itself assumed an ominous, translucent glow, a jaundiced patina of decay and under-use.

The handwriting was on the wall, sallow and still, unable to compete with the backlit parcels of colorful light shot directly into the eyes. The new wall had metamorphasized into Facebook, dubbed itself a proper pronoun and then decreed:

To all friends, family, co-workers and selected acquaintances: I am here to stay. To follow you only need sign onto me, The Wall. Post your heart out. Dare to share all. Cast your judgments here. Dream your dreams, have your say. There is no lapse, no time delay. Write conveniently on The Wall all day, every day, 24/7, round-the-clock, except maybe when you're in the shower, asleep or feeding the dog. We will possibly grow to love you, maybe hate you, because you are so goddamn endlessly fascinating.

The golden goose stopped laying her eggs. How could a whispered letter with a delicately inscribed address compete with the endless shout of news from even a single day spent at the frontiers of a person's life? How The Wall promised and then delivered delicious micro-adventures, continuous soap-operas and dramas, moanings and pleadings, the celebrations and perpetually-spinning P.R. wheels that clatter out the message of how enthralling you are *now!* *Instantly! In Real Time!* I wondered for a moment if there was a place for me in that world and

knew the answer was no before I finished asking the question. The earth had parted beneath my feet and I fell through the rabbit hole.

What a shock to discover it was me who had been living in Fantasy Time! The tectonic plate labeled 'technology' had crashed headlong into my sense of security; I was India ink bowing to the ball point pen, a Dodo bird heading down the chute labeled extinct.

Ladies and gentlemen, on the left we have a dull, workaday Joe delivering mail, mostly bills, credit card offers and legal requests, sometimes dodging growling, biting dogs. On the right, we have an artist working nights and weekends, praying for the day his ship will come in!

As the steady river of letters choked to a crawl, it left the slimy stench of snail-mail suspended in fluorescent, flickering, pale light – overwhelming and stomach-grippingly fetid. The sanctuary I had sought was gone forever. The Great Recession and the Digital Revolution sang a harmonious dirge: *you're washed up and as abandoned as a wind-up watch*. I felt old.

Day after day inside the sullen and heat-swollen walls of sorting machinery we chugged on, sweating and cursing under constant threat of losing our jobs. We teased each other with gallows humor about touting a shotgun. Jarvey, my best friend, said it was better than going numb and sinking into oblivion.

Jarvey's goal was similar to mine: work at the post office while he would write the Great American Novel. And so he wrote feverishly and obsessively in the style of Hysterical Realism, a Post-Modern hiccup consisting of multiple universes colliding in an orgiastic dance of discovery, thwarted dreams, conspiracies and unrequited love. Frequently he was lost in thought and I had to repeat myself before his eyes registered my presence.

He liked to joke around. "You and me, we're artifacts," he said. "We are Untouchables. I sincerely hope you can paint nostalgia."

Despite our attempts to ward off the inevitable, depression set in like a fast-creeping vine, penetrating tissue and sapping our strength.

We took lots of coffee breaks. We yammered and laughed and wondered if now would be a good time to go postal. We felt neglected and hurt, as if a loyal friend had deserted us – no less than the citizens of the United States of America. We felt a class action kind of kinship that despised the faces we saw bent feverishly over their devices on busses, in cars, and passing us on the street. They were the Guilty. We were The Unrecognized, The Martyred. And for what? Uncle Sam himself had responded by situating his spreading ass over a park bench, removing his tall hat, and setting his long, slender fingers ablaze texting pink slips.

My parents worried about me. I accepted the loss of credibility: a civil servant is considerably lower than the bar they'd set for me. My father's contracting and building business was interesting, but not fascinating. Few were building during the Great Recession. He had too much time to sit on his hands and contradict my decisions. "I'm not getting any younger," he said. He was in his seventies.

I felt angry when Jarvey committed suicide. I knew I couldn't blame him and I shouldn't blame myself for failing to prevent it. I didn't see it coming. I thought we were in the same sinking boat and had each other to guarantee our survival. I was adrift, alone and frustrated. We were the dying dinosaurs after a digital blast had obliterated our world.

The week after Jarvey died I received the pink slip along with 7,499 post office employees.

The shock of losing one's job, I heard, is equivalent to the stress of the marriage ceremony, divorce proceedings, or moving from one town to another. The waters were rising and

I determined to keep my head above it. I had no savings to speak of. I would have to move and find a cheaper place. And forget painting, at least for a while. I could also forget about getting a dog. I had to worry about myself. Food and Shelter, the very bottom of Maslow's hierarchy.

The night I lost my job I strolled along the long, narrow, desolate strip that divided the highway from the sandy beach by the ocean. The wind blew my hair into a corkscrew haystack. It felt wonderful. I had been unable to sleep, my mind racing.

There is a curious thing that occurs when one walks out a problem. The motion of the body, the sensation of cool air rippling against your skin; the gentle, seductive, arias sung by lapping waves, combine into a glorious contemplative cocktail, free from hangover, free of cost, and free, at least temporarily, from whatever mountain you're climbing.

The world would have to wait for my masterpiece. I saw myself going from painting art to painting walls: the family business would always take me in. They'd be delighted I'd finally come around. They'd no longer be ashamed of me. I would have to console myself with being grateful I had a safety net until I could get back on my feet.

The Post Office hired some kind of Employment Consultant to cheer us on. She came dressed to the nines and offered this bit of information: "It is not uncommon that it could take a year or two before you find a job." She delivered this with a smile. I wanted to punch her in the kisser. The bitch had a job. How about giving us some news we could dress up for?

But I knew she was right; for every job there were hundreds of applicants, and my feeble business skills were far from unique.

The only splash I was going to make was the narrow stream of piddle I aimed into the ocean. I looked up. The night sky was a velvety, saturated black with pinpricks of dazzling white light woven like silk strands into mysterious, unknowable patterns.

A cloud drifted across the incandescent waxing moon, temporarily obscuring it. Simultaneously, a cool breeze blew across my shoulders and I shivered, the little hairs on my arms standing at attention like prairie dogs.

What time was it? I glanced at my watch. Just past one in the morning. The road was empty of cars and the beach empty of people. I felt very alone.

I was thinking about something Jarvey had said. I hadn't fully understood it until now: "We're headed for a constellation of trouble," he said, as expressionless and poker-faced as a platypus, "Fasten your seatbelt, cowboy."

I looked up in time to see laser-like headlights slicing toward me. The car had bounded off the road and over a hill at high speed and silently zigzagged toward me. I realized with sickening certainty I was out of their line of sight; they hadn't seen me and they weren't slowing down.

Adrenaline screamed through my body issuing lightning-fast Paul Revere warnings, SOS's, and neon fireworks. Time slowed. The car floated lazily toward me in a liquid, molten-graceful palm-waving arc, surrealistically slow but then unimaginably fast as the headlights bore down. "Oh, shit," I said and turned to run.

The last thought I had was of a bowling pin struck with cracking force as the car knocked my legs out from under and flipped me into a backwards somersault that propelled me head-first and upside down through the windshield. Fade to black.

Jamie Salerno was aware that she was the by far the prettiest, sexiest girl in the club. She was Queen of the Club, Star of the Show. She was used to thinking that way. She was aware, too, that the way she dressed, moved and spoke, the way her hips moved – came naturally and

effortlessly. She never had to work too hard to get a guy or even the guy she wanted. That, she reckoned, was what separated her from the hoards of girls that surrounded her at the club and on campus of the community college she attended.

The downside, of course, was the Legions of Losers. They came in droves. She had learned the hard way to be selective: she had trusted, loved and lost in a dizzying and devastating series of relationship and one abortion.

She was through with losers and positive thinking. She felt the weight of the false turns heavy in her belly; as if she had spent too much of her vitality, as if something delicate and birdlike had flown from her for good.

Jamie and her girlfriend Hannah, a trim, tall brunette with shoulder-length hair, were giggling in the bathroom of Club Vanquish. The club was a trendy newcomer with loud music and several floors – or shelves, Jamie had said, because it reminded her of a chicken coop. Great big, noisy, busy shelves of guys and gals mixing it up.

“You think I should let him under the bigtop?” Jamie asked giddily.

Hannah faced her foursquare and probed into her eyes. Jamie’s eyes were malachite green, a deep forest of splintered fire. “You still talking that bigtop nonsense?” she asked.

As neighbors they had grown up together, often spending sleepovers not sleeping but playing circus, setting up an elaborate two-ring tent stitched from an old sheet by Jamie’s mother into the semblance of a circus bigtop tent. The wooden dowels that served as posts were happily donated by Hannah’s father from his basement workshop.

Jamie was Master of Ceremonies. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” she drawled into her portable Karaoke microphone, her voice blooming and fragrant as it permeated the house, commanding and hypnotizing. “Welcome to Jamhan’s Bigtop!” Her mother smiled from the kitchen as she washed the dishes. The intended audience was their accumulated American Girl Dolls – Samantha, Kirsten, Molly, Felicity, Josefina, Elizabeth, Emily, Ivy and Rebecca, who sat patient as stones, but attentive.

They had fought about the name of the circus. Hannah wanted Hanjam’s, putting her name first. And why not? Hadn’t her father help build it?

Jamie resolved the problem by ignoring it. If she was going to be Master of Ceremonies, by gosh, she would call it whatever she wanted. And so she did, wordlessly squashing Hannah, who burned under the injustice.

Now that they were older, the bigtop had mutated into something else: the warmth of the receptive boudoir, the inner sanctum of her heart, the depth of her body’s hunger, the feel of her lover’s arms, the one who would fulfill her dreams and make her life turn out right. Her notions were the stuff of packaged, processed media; she had been reared on the glass teat of TV, the world explained by movies, music, advertising and the Internet. She accepted these messages as effortlessly as Sponge Bob absorbed sea water.

Above all the bigtop meant sanctuary, a private and safe place where she could withdraw and stop worrying what would become of her.

“If he’s another loser I’ll kill myself,” Jamie said.

The guy she had met earlier that evening had possibilities. He was tall, blue-eyed, clean-shaven. That was a plus. He drove a recent-year BMW. That, too, was a plus. He seemed different from the rest because of some indefinable mysteriousness, as if he was showing only the tip of something much larger. What, she couldn’t say. But she wanted to find out. He was attentive. She knew he had come from money; of that she was sure. He was well-spoken and had success written over him as if it was ordained from On High. The pluses added up.

"He's gay," Hannah said.

"What?" Jamie swayed in her seat. "You think so? You really think so?"

Hannah took her time replying.

"I'll kill myself if he is," Jamie said.

Hannah shrugged. She had a different philosophy about men. She was sure it was a better plan than Jamie's, which obviously wasn't working. Hannah believed that when the time was right her man would pop up like candy from a Pez dispenser. They would instantly know they were each other's soul-mates and it would be right and forever — holistic, organic, and especially — without drama.

"He's probably not," Hannah finally said, "he's probably just one of those metrosexuals."

Before Jamie could reply, her phone bleated *eh eh eh eh*. She remembered she had wanted to change the ringtone, purchased in honor of her Latest Loser, the infamous Kurt McCray, boy wonder, who introduced her to poker, beer and TV sports. She hadn't minded the beer or the poker. What bothered her was his addiction to sports TV. She tried unsuccessfully to lure him away. Either her wiles were not enough or the pull of sweaty athletes was too strong. She guessed he would end up selling insurance or Google ads for a living.

He had called her so many times after she broke it off that she installed an audio clip of Lady Gaga's notorious telephone kiss-off:

eh eh eh eh

K-kinda busy

K-kinda busy

Sorry, I cannot hear you, I'm kinda busy.

"It's him!" Jamie squealed.

"Who?"

"The guy-who's-not-gay, else why would be calling?" Jamie said.

"Don't answer. Text him!" Hannah said. "Keep him hanging. Don't make it easy. That was your problem last time, remember? You made it too easy. In fact, we should go. Let's go. I've had enough of this chicken coop for tonight and I know you have."

Jamie didn't care for beer but she loved vodka in all its incarnations. Hannah loved margaritas. The floor was lolling under them as they left the bathroom stalls, washed their hands, and combed their hair in the mirror one last time. Jamie oscillated as if she was standing on the deck of a ship in a storm. "I think I'm getting a zit," she said. She wrinkled her nose. "Right here," she pointed, moving in close to the mirror. She tried to touch the tip of her nose and missed by an inch. "Like a witch with a wart."

Hannah was used to such comments. "Your shkin is perfect, dear," she said.

Jamie giggled. "Did you say 'shkin'?"

They broke into gales of laughter and made their way to the car, arm in arm, flushed and exhilarated in the cool night air, the drugs they'd taken earlier kicking in.

Inside the car Jamie received a text message from the boy: why do u think I'm gay?

"Because u said u had to pwder yur nose."

"That's me exuberant."

"I didn't mean to offend, but if I'm gonna let u in, you gotta come clean."

"I'm clean."

"What do you think he means by 'I'm clean'?" Jamie asked Hannah.

Hannah had reclined her seat, snuggled her back down as if she was settling into a lounge chair, and crossed her long legs. “No AIDS,” she said.

And then, sitting up, “Is that what he said? That he has no AIDS? Well! Let the buyer beware,” she said, and lay down again.

“What do you mean?” Jamie asked as she corrected the steering wheel.

“Ask him if he’s been tested.”

“Hannah!”

“No, I’m serious. Ask him.”

“Yeah sure, like you’re going to ask Mr. Right the moment he pops up on your doorstep.”

“Bet I will.”

“Easy for you to say,” Jamie said. She decided to ask anyway.

Thumbing the mini-chicklit-sized keys of her cell phone as she drove, she was about to add the final question mark when she looked up and gasped. The road was gone. For an instant she expected the car to splash into the ocean. That changed when she saw a suddenly-illuminated figure running directly in front of the car. He was on the narrow beach that followed the coast down to the Atlantic.

The car struck the man with a blasphemous crackling roar that swept his legs out from under. He somersaulted backwards as his legs jackknifed over his head. His head penetrated the windshield facing up, inches from Hannah’s face, and lodged there, his arms pinned to his hips, his legs useless and limp on the roof of the car.

The horrifying thing — in addition to his head having gone through the windshield — was that he was upside down; the back of his head was suspended inches from Hannah’s face. Fortunately she had been reclined, and was now screaming heartily at the head that dangled before her eyes.

Jamie slammed the brakes and the car skidded to a stop. She was too dazed to speak. Hannah loosed a long, deep-throated sonic blast, a howl of raw, naked shock until she sputtered and gulped for air like a misfiring engine, her eyes fastened on the intruding head.

His eyes fluttered open and his lips quavered. This brought the girls to attention as if their butts had been electrified. They sat erect and opened their eyes wide. A gurgling issued from his throat. They strained to hear. They glanced at each other and then back at him.

“Help me,” he croaked, “I can’t move my arms. Everything’s upside down.” He spoke slowly, his voice slurring. It took him thirty seconds to say it.

“You’re the one who’s upside down. You’re stuck in the windshield,” Jamie said.

He thought he detected an accusatory quiver in her voice. Had it been his fault? He passed out.

Hannah drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Shouldn’t we call somebody?”

Jamie fired back without hesitation. “Who? My mother? I don’t think so. The cops? No way. I’ll figure something out.”

“He’s in the windshield!” Hannah cried.

“I can see that,” Jamie said, starting the car.

“What’re you doing? Shouldn’t we wait for a cop? Maybe we should call the hospital. Is that what you’re doing? Driving to the hospital?”

Jamie flashed an opaque look. The car scrambled onto the road, the body rocking but firmly wedged. It wasn’t going anywhere.

Hannah pressed her back down into the reclined car seat, still in her seatbelt, her hands clasped over her mouth, arms akimbo, eyes white as ping pong balls and almost as large. She squirmed to avoid the head which bobbed gently as Jamie drove.

"His eyes are open again!" Hannah shouted. Jamie glanced. She was carefully reading and obeying each sign. If she paid attention now she might be able to make it home without getting stopped. "Listen, I'll figure something out. Hannah, help me figure something out," she said. *I have to stay calm*, she thought. *I have to stay above the horror*, she told herself.

"The hell you say!" Hannah said.

"Calm down, Hannah," Jamie said in a reasonable voice, "Keep your head."

"Keep my head!" Hannah cried, "Look at *his* head!"

"Calm down. We'll be home soon," Jamie said, "It'll be all right. We'll figure something out if we just stay calm."

"You're taking him to your house? Now I know you're crazy. Can't you see he's gonna die if we don't help him now!"

A slow-rising mournful wail, imperceptible at first, rose from the man's throat until it filled the compartment of the car like a marshy odor that threatened to shatter the windows.

"Where the fuck did he come from?" Jamie asked Hannah. "Did you see him?"

"What the fuck does it matter? He's in the windshield!"

"But what was he doing in the dark?" Jamie asked. Then she turned to the man and repeated the question. He was limp, his ghostly head still.

Hannah whispered, "It was *you* who weren't on the road. You were texting gay guy. . ."

And then, inexplicably, the man's head animated and he began to laugh. He laughed as hard as his position allowed. Low choking tremors exploded into salvos of blood-spewing hiccupping coughs.

"He's delirious," Hannah said, "He's in shock. He's gonna choke to death. We need to get him straight to a hospital."

"A postman," the man said, "Post. Man." His voice was raspy yet the words were deliberate and clear.

"He's babbling," Jamie said.

"A postman," the man repeated, and then, clarifying, "a carrier."

"You see," Jamie said. "He talks. He's not so bad. We'll fix him up at home."

"Not me. You," Hannah barked.

"Am I going to die?" the man asked. He began to cry. "Oh Sweet Jesus, I'm going to die. Fifty-one years old and I'm going to die."

Jamie didn't feel drunk now. All her senses were set to maximum. She saw he had a deep gash in his forehead from contact with the windshield. Bright red blood pulsed slowly from it, sending tributaries into the thickets of his hair that dripped slowly from the back of his head. Blood pooled onto her upholstery. For a moment she wondered how the hell she was going to get the stains out.

The house was empty. Her mother was visiting Jamie's grandmother in Florida. Jamie pulled the car into the garage and closed the door with a push of a button. She glanced at the dash clock before shutting the car off. 1:30 am. They hadn't passed anyone; they hadn't been seen by a soul.

Hannah swung her door open and wiggled herself out of her seat to avoid even minimum contact with the jogging head, whose eyes were, for the moment, blessedly closed. "I'm outta

here," she said, sounding half-way out there already, "he's your problem! He popped up in your life, not mine! You should call the police. That's my advice, call the police, I'm done!"

"You know, Hannah, you're a real bitch," Jamie called after her.

"I may be a bitch," Hannah shouted, "but look what you got under the big top!" And then she was gone.

Half an hour passes. He is saying something now, so low Jamie cannot hear. She places her ear beside his mouth. "Water," he whispers, "bring me water."

Wordlessly, she goes to the kitchen through the garage side-door, fills a glass and brings it to the man.

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Water," he replies.

Since he is upside down she is forced to dribble the water from the glass into the roof of his mouth. He drinks what he can. The water that spills out is pink with blood.

"Tom," he says.

"I'm so sorry I hit you with my car, Tom," Jamie says tearfully.

"Can you get me out?" he asks.

"Are you in pain?"

He doesn't reply. *Of course he's in pain, you ninny*, Jamie reprimands herself.

"Can you get me out?" he mumbles.

She hesitates but then goes into the house and comes out after a few minutes with a hammer. "I think I can crack the glass with this," she says.

"I can't feel my arms," he says, and then his eyes roll up and he's out again.

Jamie takes the hammer back to the kitchen and returns to the car empty-handed.

He's awake again. His head swims as he speaks. "You're not going to get me out, are you?" he asks. "I'm bleeding to death. I must have a dozen cracked bones. What's wrong with you? My body feels like shredded wheat." He delivers this in a harsh, raspy voice laboring to pronounce each syllable, his breath rapid and shallow, each word measured and carefully delivered.

Jamie slides into the driver's seat and cries. "Why were you there? Do you realize you've ruined my life? I'm only twenty-three and my life is over." She cries into a pink handkerchief almost the color of blood.

eh eh eh eh her telephone interrupts.

"Hello?" She doesn't recognize the caller ID.

"It's me, your gay-but-not-really-gay-friend from last night."

She had almost forgotten about him.

Jamie looks at her watch. 2:15 am. "It's a little late," she says.

"I know," he says. "Look, I really think I like you. I don't want you to think I'm calling just because I'm drunk."

"Are you drunk?"

"Well, yeah, maybe a little. I'm calling because I like you and want to see you."

Maybe he's the one.

"I can't see you now. I'm busy."

"Oh? Are you with someone?"

She is about to say, "Sort of," but changes her mind.

"Just busy," she says. "Besides, it's late and I need to get my beauty sleep."

"You don't need to sleep to be beautiful."

"Are you sure you're not gay?"

And then she looks up and sees Tom's head. It is shaking and dripping blood. Bubbles are issuing from his mouth.

"Call me later," Jamie says, and disconnects.

She is drifting, and after a while she speaks. "Behind bars. That's where I'll end up. Maybe it's the best thing. Maybe I need the rest, maybe there's a silver lining," she says. She hadn't intended to speak out loud, but the words escape her lips softly, like a ribbon, and flutter to the floor. His breathing slows. His eyes open and she is sure he heard her.

"I haven't eaten in two days. AARP says eating less extends your life," he says.

She can't tell if he is serious, crazy, or just plain stupid. He simply says the words, offering them up like cough drops. "Do you think I could get some water?" he croaks. He seems more awake. His voice is still raspy, like a thousand bees are caught in it, but she understands him and quickly brings a glass of water. He spits blood and water that leaves tiny pink droplets on her skin.

"Jesus!" she screams.

He can't turn his head to look at her. It feels stiff or wedged, he can't tell which. "Can you try to get me out?" he pleads.

"I already did," she says. "I tried pushing and pulling but you're wedged tight. You woke up a few times but then passed out again. Don't you remember?"

He shakes his head.

"You want to spend the rest of your life behind bars?" he asks. "Are you nuts? Get me out of here!"

He corkscrews his head in a vain attempt to meet her eyes. It is too painful to turn. She makes no effort to move into his line of sight. "Can you hear me? Are you there?" he cries.

"I'm here," she says, sitting back, letting her head relax against the padding. She watches him. "You wouldn't understand," she says.

"Do I look like I'm in a position to not understand?" he asks. "If you don't get help I'll bleed to death. I'm already so weak I can barely stay conscious."

She turns her head away from him and begins to speak. "Maybe I am better off behind bars. It's horrible to wake up and realize I'm the only one who can stand my company. All those techniques to find guys, what clothes to wear, rules to follow, what to say and what not to say, the waiting and the guessing. It used to be fun, but I'm out of fun, I'm not having fun anymore. I'm tired of keeping up. I'm already in prison," she says miserably. She opens her hand and her phone slides to the floor.

"You want sympathy? Are you joking?" he asks, and then nods off, muttering about how it's too soon for him to die. She strains to hear all of his words. His eyes are slits; his breathing regular. She wonders if she should call Kurt McCray. Even if he is a jerk, at least he'd come running as eager as a jack rabbit. The challenge of extricating the body from the windshield would give him a chance to show what a man he is.

"Ah," Tom says. He springs awake and is speaking feverishly in a supplicating, plaintive voice. "Jarvey, can you hear me?" His eyes dart as he repeats the question three times, each time more desperately. *He's delirious*, Jamie thinks.

The dam breaks and a raft of words wash downstream. "Jesus fucking Christ, Jarvey, wake up! Hello, Emergency? My friend's passed out. He's got a bunch of empty pill containers.

He won't wake up. I'm not sure if he's breathing." Tom pauses to gasp for air. Then he continues, more annoyed than angry, more mystified than confused.

"Where are the letters? The letters are gone, you stupid sunnavabitch, they've gone to e-mail, every one. Do you think you can stop technology? It's a fucking tsunami, is what it is. It uses you, not the other way 'round. You held out for a backlash, Jarvey. *The Letter Renaissance*, you called it. You wanted to start the Church of Letter Day Renaissance. Jarvey, you dumb sunnavabitch, you held your breath longer than anyone I know can hold his breath. You made it look so natural no one suspected how much pain you were in. It must have felt good to finally let go." Tom shakes his head violently. "Fucking pink slip," he mutters and is out again.

The pills Jamie had taken in the kitchen go to work. She blinks her eyes rapidly and then closes them, allowing herself to sink into a pleasurable well, a sugarcoated endorphin-rush spreading from her abdomen outwards to her limbs, *almost like a star*, she thinks dreamily. Her eyes glaze and she raises one hand to trace the cobwebby spider cracks that's transformed her windshield into an intricate mosaic. "Octopus star," she says, feeling the tentacles invade every corner of her being.

She reclines beside him in the driver's seat and lets the movie behind her eyes unfold. She is in the woods. There are trees everywhere, dozens of intense shades of green towering against an absurdly deep-blue sky. The air is fragrant with intoxicating aromas; a symphony of flora embraces her. She is happy. She feels peaceful. It's an alien sensation, but exactly as she imagined. So this is what everyone is talking about!

But it wasn't to last. The path turns wet and mushy and she sinks down. It isn't summer any more, it is fall, and the earth pulls at her feet. "If the mud is thick enough it will suck the boots off any one, no matter how proud," she says. She squats to examine a log. "The crumbling trunk is teeming with ants," she announces to the trees. Her eyes follow insects with fascination.

"Where are you?" Tom asks. He can see her face in a corner of the rear view mirror. She is older than he first thought. Nice looking, not too badly put together. He's surprised when she answers. "In the woods without an iAnything," she says.

There is a moment of silence and then Tom is bucking as if he's riding a bull. "You were texting when you hit me," he says. "That's why you drove off the road." He issues a single bark of pain or laughter, as jagged and sharp as a broken tooth, before passing out again.

She wakes at 4:30 am. She's been out forty-five minutes. He looks worse. There is dark foam erupting from his mouth. His eyes are open and bloodshot. Although she feels she must act quickly if she is to save him, she knows he is already gone. But really, she thinks, I should call Kurt McCray. He'll have the guy popped out like a champagne cork in no time. But she doesn't move: she cannot move. She feels as if shackles are on her wrists. Some internal guidance system has ordered her to stand down. She can't believe the events of the last few hours are real. Maybe she's hallucinating? She realizes Tom is awake and watching her.

"Just maybe," he says mournfully, "this is better than death by slowly falling apart." With a great effort he turns a little from her toward the passenger window. His eyeballs swivel upwards. "Can you hear me Jarvey? You did it your way and I did it hers! What's the difference? We're both done in by e-mail. The whole damn country left us to die on the vine."

His head jerks from side to side like a fish on a hook. "Maybe you did me a favor, girl. I haven't been honest. My parents were right: I would never make it as an artist. My time has come and gone. I'm just another post-office-old-man ready to die."

Jamie stares at him. She attempts to wipe his oozing mouth with a napkin left over from MacDonald's. He turns away, but the river of words keep flowing. "Yeah, that's right, my

skeleton is breaking down, turning into cottage cheese. ‘Degenerative bone disease’ is what the muthufuckas calls it. Don’t bother beating yourself up, you did me a favor.”

“You’re acting nuts,” she tells him.

He ignores her and begins to sing.

*I sing the body breakdown!
I’m turning into Walter Matthau
the grumpiest of old men
—confound the vowels in his name!*

*My bowels are never excreted enough
My hemorrhoids are itching insane
My prostate is enlarged but the rest of me is shrinking!
And now my body’s smashed to smithereens*

“It’s the chorus,” he yells, “join in!”

*To smithereens, to smithereens
To smithereens, to smithereens
And now my body’s smashed to smithereens*

He quivers and wilts again, his eyes closing. She blinks several times rapidly and wonders if he’s dangerous. Maybe he’s one of those homeless people that can be found by highway ramps and intersections holding signs begging for money or work?

She cries. It is a soft and sobbing cry, a cry of helplessness and despair.

“My side hurt,” he says, his eyes still closed.

She jumps. “Stop doing that! Every time I think you’re out you wake up.”

“I can’t feel my legs,” he says, opening his eyes.

“I guess you’re dying,” she says. She looks through the window at the side of the garage where her mother keeps white-wire shelving stacked with garden tools.

“No, I mean it. What’s your name? Jamie? Jamie, it’s been downhill since I hit forty. I didn’t see it coming just like you didn’t see me.” He’s wheezing now but she can’t tell from anxiety or his broken body. “Prison doesn’t scare you?” he asks.

She swallows her last oxy and stares at the hand claw on the shelf. If only she could bring the claw into her dream. She would claw the earth into order. She closes her eyes.

He wonders if she’s asleep, but then she begins to speak, her voice barely audible. “I am exhausted wood pulp . . . silver curling birch . . . sitting by the cut logs there’s always an empty red plastic gasoline jug, hollow and useless. . .” She jerks into an upright position, her back straight, her eyes open.

“What?” he asks.

“There must be a way to get you out and fix you up besides calling my dumbass ex-boyfriend. But I can’t do it myself. I thought I could count on Hannah but she’s so jealous of me she can’t see straight.”

Then she slumps, deflated. “I bet she called the cops.” She flashes a graveyard grin. He slides into pain. “It’s getting darker,” he says.

They drift off.

She is no longer in the forest. “My boots are walking though elephant shit,” she says. “Look at the beautiful arched backs of the trapeze artists! They dangle like Christmas ornaments under the bigtop! I want to fly.”

He is moaning now.

“The whip and chair is all you need for lions,” she says. “All eyes are on me. How did I get on this tightrope? I can’t remember climbing. Everyone is holding their breath. Will I fall? Will I hurt myself? Half the crowd is afraid I will and the other half hopes I will. I can’t decide who to please!” She curls into a fetal position and whimpers.

Now he is talking, his voice quiet and steady, his eyes fluttering. “At lunch I like to sit in my car, turn on the AC and read the paper while I eat. One day I notice an old lady, she’s anywhere from seventy-five to eight-five, with cotton-candy white hair, bent of neck and walking purposely like a cruising locomotive. She wears a loose pink sweater and chugs right by my window without noticing me and then she extends her right hand and attempts to pry a shopping cart from between the pipe-like rails it had been rammed into. Because she is pushing it backwards, it bucks and stubbornly checks her forward momentum. She is annoyed she has to stop, if only for a moment. But rather than go around and into the narrow path between the rails where she could easily back up the shopping cart with two hands, she chooses instead to strong-arm the cart with one hand as she doggedly walks on. The cart rears and struggles to tear itself away from her grasp until, fed up with pulling, she gives a furious yank. There is frustration and defeat in that yank, but it does the trick and the cart scuttles into compliance.

I think a lot about that woman. I don’t think we’re that different. I’ve been trying to force the cart backwards my whole life. Maybe the pink slip was the yank I needed to return to compliance. It would have been much easier had I worked for my father.”

Jamie says nothing. She is mute, vacant, an empty vessel.

“I’m dying,” he says quietly. His eyes roll to half-mast as he rests from the exertion of talking.

After a minute Jamie speaks, shyly at first. “I’ve never been better than mediocre at school. I relied on my looks. People are willing to bend over backwards for a pretty girl.”

“Shit,” he mutters.

She is not surprised he is awake. But she hates the unexpected fright of it. They drift in and out, unspeaking.

The overhead light in the garage winks out. Jamie is instantly awake. “It’s on a timer,” she says absently. They sit in the dark for a few minutes before Jamie speaks.

“I’m getting older too. Maybe I’m not as fresh and pretty as I used to be. I suppose I could become a cosmetologist. A hair stylist. Or maybe I’ll stay home and do medical billing. I hear third-party billing is all the rage. But who could bear being stuck indoors all day, every day?”

He coughs and keeps on coughing. Occasionally he comes up for air. Once he chokes out, “Maybe you should buy a broom.”

Jamie isn’t sure she heard right with all that choking.

“So you can sweep yourself off your own feet,” he says.

Her voice becomes little-girl like, sweeter. “I have this dream that I’m walking in the woods. It’s always the same: it’s rainy and green and the air smells beautiful, if beautiful is a smell. But when I look at my feet they’re stuck in mud. Suddenly I’m in a tent, a huge tent, a bigtop circus tent and I’m walking in poop, not mud.”

She pauses and looks at his injured head. “Don’t you think that’s strange? What do you think that means? I’ve never told anyone, not even Hannah.”

“What kind of poop?” he asks.

She shrugs. “I don’t know. Elephant. What’s the difference?”

She slumps into the seat. “Now look at me! The bigtop has shrunk to the size of a Ford Fiesta. I’ve got a human cannonball lodged in my windshield. I’m pouring out my life’s troubles to a stranger. The police are probably outside right now. All I wanted was somebody to love. Like the song. *I just want somebody to love*. I admit it. I was texting this guy from the club when I hit you. I don’t even really like him. He’s probably gay anyway. I’m really, really sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too.” It is the last thing he says. His head relaxes lower than she’d seen it before, the coil released, weightlessly dangling like fruit until it comes to rest on the passenger seat, his neck bare and vulnerable.

Jamie holds a compact mirror to his nose and mouth. It does not fog. She steels herself and thrusts her hand onto his chest. No heartbeat. She recoils and stares disbelievingly, occasionally burying her face in her hands. She finds she can’t tear her eyes from his inert body.

eh eh eh eh her cell phone rings. She jerks it open. *What the fuck, who’s texting at 5:00 am? Hannah. It’s Hannah. Maybe she changed her mind and wants to help.*

Jamie, I’ve always been a good girl I don’t want to spoil my future. Accessory to murder! Hit and run! Leaving scene! Etc. Sorry I called the cops.

A hard rapping sound startles Jamie. Someone is pounding something heavy on her garage door. A rough male voice calls out. “Jamie? Jamie Miller? Open up, Jamie. We know you’re in there.”

She looks around the small cabin of the Ford Fiesta, realizing these are the last few seconds of freedom she will ever have. *From here on out, things will be different, and not for the better.* She leans forward and kisses the postman’s lifeless lips, still warm, and whispers, not for the last time, how very, very sorry she is. Even if she isn’t feeling sorry for him just yet, she is certain she will be in the very, very near future.

An Ordered Life

Megs Gillespie
Illinois, USA

In the place of “I Do” two shots rang through the church.

The Bride watched her fiancé slam against the front of the kneeler before falling away, unmoving.

Silence echoed.

At an unknown signal, everyone began whispering and yelling into phones as the bride shook her fiancé’s arm with no response. She did not understand. He was supposed to answer her; he always answered her when she cried his name.

She was confused by the sirens coming down the streets, because they sounded vaguely like the blaring of an alarm clock.

Blinking, Ari stared in horror at the red 7:00 numbers thinking there was blood on her hands as she searched for the snooze button.

Pulling back her hand, she searched it in confusion, her dream fading away. Why on earth had she dreamed she was marrying her boss? Groaning, she buried her face back into her pillow waiting for the snooze to go off that meant she had to run to get to work on time.

“Bloody Hell!”

“Do you want to get fired?”

“Grmph- you’d be using much stronger words if you had to deal with a desk that ate papers and a laptop that has a taste for hiding documents.” Ari growled at her co-worker.

“Which is why you have that desk, because I know I can trust you to keep a civil tongue in your head,” a new voice interjected.

Biting said civil tongue, Ari smiled at her employer, showing more teeth than necessary in polite conversation. “Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Kazmir.”

He waved a miniature composition notebook in front of her nose. “I need you to run these errands. I would suggest paying particular attention to every detail.”

Scrambling to catch the dropped notebook, she said in a creepily happy tone. “My pleasure! Would you like these done before or after I re-type those letters to the corporate heads of the company? I also need new file folders. The ones from last week seem to have... run away.”

His grin matched her peppy tone “Oh, I should think that the errands should be done before nightfall. Laptops generally don’t have a taste for human blood.”

Ari’s smile froze as Mr. Kazmir closed himself in his office once more. Still being particularly conscious of not allowing the paper notebook she had been given to touch her desk that was devoid of all papers, she let her head bang down with a groan.

The skinny pen drawer seemed to have a broken spring because it sprung open with no warning, brushing against her chest. Squeaking, she stood, tripping over her chair as she clutched tightly at her notebook. She landed painfully in an open drawer, which attempted to close, squeezing her now bruised rear-end. Muttering curses, she stood and rammed her chair against the still open pen drawer, not feeling much satisfaction as the drawer rattled shut.

Gathering her white purse, white down coat, and a warm, fuzzy, red scarf from the racks just

beyond reaching distance from her desk, she bid her co-workers farewell, heading out into the bright, cool afternoon to gather the items on her shopping list.

Lunch break was just ending as she headed towards the forest preserve by the office.

Following the main path till about half ways in, she rounded a bush and, with a great deal more difficulty, followed an animal trail.

“Smug- irritating- jealous- overbearing- horse-rimmed nikampoof... Don’t even know why he needs a *personal* secretary; everyone in the office is pretty much his secretary as it is.” Ari muttered under her breath as she trekked through patchy snow. It was cold and her breath left water-droplets on the edge of her fuzzy scarf and the bright sunlight did nothing beneath the thick canopy of tree branches. She decided it would be a good time to start a new tirade.

“Needy bastard- eek!”

“You forget how good my ears are.” Kazmir mentioned off-hand as he fell in next to her, still making no sounds as Ari’s feet crunched chilled leaves and broke twigs, ringing through the forest. “This is the part where I remind you I am your boss, and you should be trying to keep me happy.”

“You have four hooves! How do you move so damn silently! Make some noise,” she growled, thrusting the bag at him. “And why the hell did you need a girl’s swimsuit anyways?”

“I distinctly remember writing ‘your swimsuit,’” he commented searching through the bag for the bulls-eye candy he had also asked her to bring.

“Well- I assumed you meant one in my size...” She began to take a couple steps back towards the way she came. “I suppose it’s none of my business, since you are my boss and all. I’ll just be heading back to finish those letters now.”

“Ari,” Kazmir said, chewing on one of his favorite candies. “Did you look at the list while at your desk? You know it’s illegal to write items from across the boundary in human ink.”

She stared at him in horror, before frantically digging through her many pockets attempting to find the thrice-cursed cow paper pad, quickly flipping to the page with the tab.

There were three new items on the list. “What- I have to go back there again?” She squeaked, reading the new list revealed because of the proximity to the crossing. She looked up in horror, “Do you not remember what happened the last time I went there!”

He simply motioned for her to follow him as he led the way to a stream that moved too fast to be frozen and the caves that lay beyond. “Kaz!”

Her world knowledge had been flooded with strange creatures. Centaurs, fauns, nymphs, distant cousins of the immortal legends. And then there were creatures like Kazmir a distant cousin of the centaur race, which she had never heard of in human legends. Apparently because they were usually mistaken for centaurs, they were not in human folklore. The only real difference is they had a more human-like nature, and their hair turned into a mane, travelling down the length of most of their human back.

The last time Ari had been to Kazmir’s home world, she had come in contact with a real centaur. That had been a terrifying experience, especially since she apparently had wide enough hips to birth to a foal. She had escaped with her life.

“You’re alive and still sane, aren’t you?” He called in reply. “Move it.”

Fear welled up in her chest and she reluctantly raced after the horse’s ass in front of her, “But- I thought you said you’d give me fair warning next time. You’re dumping this on me again! Those- ” she searched for a word that would describe the strange sexless creatures that

inhabited a mountain courtyard with wings for arms. “Those bird creatures threatened to kill me if I ever showed my “un-educated, insulting face” in their land again. And don’t even try to tell me they aren’t allowed to do that. I won’t believe you.”

“Fine. And I did give you fair warning,” he replied, unwrapping yet another bulls-eye candy. “You have that desk for a reason. You know you can’t read the Ink unless you’re within a certain radius of a crossing or in direct contact with one of us Creatures.”

“Giving that desk to me is sexual harassment,” she pouted, knowing full well that she was the one who screwed up this time. “You knew it was in love with me when you brought it to the office. I have to double the paperwork, cause he wants me to search through his damn drawers all the time... He groped me earlier today!”

“Speaking of which, that last batch of folders I gave you should’ve lasted till the end of the month.” Kazmir said.

“Did you forget the part where a sentient being is attached to my desk and is not only able to feel the emotion of love, or rather lust, and can learn? Isn’t he the whole reason I had to meet the bird-creatures?” Ari stumbled across a tree root. Readjusting, the bag on her shoulder, she continued lecturing her boss. “He’s been dismantling them a day faster for the past few months. He must’ve cracked some code, cause it’s only been two weeks this time around- Oi. Get back here. My boots are so not waterproof and it’s way too cold to go barefoot!”

Kazmir dutifully leapt back over the small stream and helped Ari clamber up on his back. “I really need to get permission to teach you how to properly ride a horse...” He winced as she slipped, digging her heels into his flanks as she pulled at his mane that went about half way down his back.

“Sorry,” she muttered, slinking down, and wrapping her arms tightly about his chest from behind. He walked through the water this time, carefully so as not to create a reason to dislodge her. Once on the other side, he climbed the short slope to the cave. “Watch your arms and legs,” he commented as he began entering the narrow crevice in the rocks. She jostled about on his back pulling her knees up onto his back so that she would fit inside the crevice as well.

They travelled for about five feet before they emerged into a summer fantasy land. Off-balance and without the crevice walls to secure her, she tumbled off the broad mahogany horse’s back and groaned. Kazmir merely shook his head, “Horse-back riding lessons. Most definitely.”

“You could at least help me up,” she snapped, but he had already offered his hand and she took it with a huff.

“Read the list again?”

She draped her coat and scarf over his back, enjoying the change in climate in the fantasy land she had come to learn about a year ago. “Paper, new charms, and extra-chairs- more special chairs?” She hated the special chairs, they had the tendency to move around and one of her many jobs was to look after them and apologize and explain that the chair was ‘broken’ when humans with normal back-ends try to sit on them. They were meant for creatures with tails and strange lower halves. At Kazmir’s simple nod, she remembered. “Oh- and more file folders. I refuse to keep the paperwork on my shelves, like all the rest of my office supplies and personal possessions.”

“If he keeps that up, the head honchos are going to have a talk with him. They need a human with me to help with the human world business, and they refuse to give up any of their workers that have dealings with both sides. Drink?”

Kazmir tossed her a water bottle. Ari dutifully took a sip, almost choking on the water before handing back the water bottle. She decided to ignore Kazmir in preference of enjoying

the walk to wherever they were going. As much as she hated crossing over, she did love the climate and the landscape of the strange world. She often felt as if she were walking through the pages of a story book with the springy grass beneath her feet and the trees that stretched high into the sky, well-known and unfamiliar animals peeking out of branches and holes in the ground. It was too hot to truly be perfectly picturesque.

Her good mood was abruptly shattered by the high-pitched voice that cooed, “Kazzy!” Suggestive comments were coded into every word that was heard, “You’re not coming to visit us, are you?”

“Kaz-zy?” She repeated with a strange hesitance.

“It’s good for business,” Kazmir shrugged, but she would have sworn in a court of law that the tan horse-creature was blushing. “You might want to go find a place to put your swimsuit on.”

She glared.

“You’re more than welcome to swim with or without your clothes as well,” he retorted; she noted it was only after he had moved out of her immediate reach.

When she went down the water’s edge, safely changed, she left her clothes in the bag ignoring the Octopus-maids that were presently climbing over her boss who was already in the water. She did not bother paying close enough attention to see if the maid presently kissing Kazmir was sticking her tongue down his throat as well. Sticking her toes into the water, she enjoyed the gentle waves that splashed over her ankles, playing with the white ties on the edge of her swimsuit. She really hated white and sat wondering why she had picked out a white wetsuit. She never had enjoyed the strappy look that the wetsuit was trying to copy.

Wishing for her goggles, she scooted till she was sitting on a rock in the actual water. Ari had never been to a true ocean before, but if it was anything like the expanse of water before her, she would be living on a water-front somewhere. Somehow.

Daydreaming and purposefully ignoring her immediate surroundings meant that she was completely unprepared for the slimy, tentacled hand that grabbed her ankle, pulling her off her rocky perch. Water filled her nostrils and mouth, and she was rudely reminded that coughing also required air.

Squirming desperately, she kicked to reach the surface, despair drowning out the curses she had been placing on her boss. The last thing she expected to feel was cool, scaly lips pressed against hers. A tongue pried open her mouth leaving a vague fishy taste, not unpleasant, that spread throughout her mouth, creeping down her throat in a manner that left her trying to scratch at her neck in an attempt to relieve herself of the tickling feeling...

Released from all holds, she coughed and was able to gather the required air needed for her body to work. Now familiar lips and tongues covered her ears and eyes. She fought against every nerve in her body that screamed to get away from the tickling feeling that crept towards the nerves protected in her ears and made her eyes attempt to turn backwards in their socket because they *itched*.

“-ri. Ari. Ar-“

Apparently octopus-maiden saliva had magical properties. At least Ari thought it was magical, she had been an English major mainly out of love for the subject, but partially just in order to prove that science was evil... and no one ever paid much attention to her explanation regardless.

“Oh shut up, I can hear fine now.” She rubbed her eyes and ears vigorously. “There had to be a better way...”

“Not really, short of having the entire physiology of your body changed.” Kazmir grinned, obviously enjoying her discomfort. “Trust me when I say that this is much better. No uncomfortable bone-resaping.”

“Side effects?” She asked, swimming towards him.

“Nothing of consequence.”

“Kaz!” He swam downwards, leaving her to follow. Looking back towards the surface of the water, she sighed. Somewhere along the line she had gotten hooked on the idea of new adventures. Remembering her childhood dreams of being a nice steady school teacher, she groaned to no one in particular. “This is not the life I ordered!” She quickly swam away from the bubbly giggling of the octopus-maidens.

An hour had passed, the constant swimming made Ari’s muscles ache. She was seriously considering reaching out to grab her boss’s tail and hitch an easy ride.

“We’re here,” Kazmir’s voice interrupted her contemplations.

Looking past the mesmerizing moving tail, she realized that they were at the base of what must be the biggest tree ever. Kicking with renewed energy, she shot past Kazmir to dive head first into the maze of tree roots. “Is this really a tree?”

Kazmir shook his head, a smile twitching at the corner of his lips. “This is why the Feathren assumed you were so rude.”

“Feathren?”

“The bird creatures.”

“Oh them- but there’s no one here. And- just- look! We’re swimming through the roots of a giant tree... these roots are as big as some of the actual trees back in the Forest Preserve!”

She swam to the edge of Kazmir’s sight before exclaiming about little circle-worm creatures that glowed amongst the roots and flowers.

Ari stared curiously at first creature that had appeared before her, raising a hand in a tentative wave. There were 50 more of the twig creatures before she blinked, encircling her inside of a sphere. She tensed, ready to fight, but Kazmir called out a greeting.

The sphere of the webbed wood creatures were gone as fast as they had appeared.

Blinking, she watched as Kazmir grabbed them, tossing them out of his way, the water filled with lighthearted vibrations that she felt throughout her whole body rather than heard.

Kazmir hurled one of the brown bodies at her. Wrapping her arms around it, they traveled back a couple feet, most of the light-hearted vibrations having stopped. She looked down into bright blue eyes that peered curiously up at her. “Hello, there.” She said.

“Hello, there!” the greeting was strange against her eardrums. And then she was bombarded by soft twig bodies, anxious to discover if she was hiding an extra pair of arms or legs.

“What are they?” She question Kazmir.

“Bluebarks,” he replied. “These are the children.

“Obviously,” she snorted as one of the kids found a particularly ticklish part on the back of her neck. “Where are their parents?”

“Here.” Only two of the tiny blue-barks stayed by her side as the rest swam easily through the water. Kicking, she turned herself around and blinked in surprise at the large creatures resembling plank-shaped trunks, eyes just as bright blue as the children, but the adults shimmered blue between the cracks in their bark. Ari doubted she would be able to see the blue glow if she had met them in any form of sunlight. Beneath the large tree, shaded from the open

water by the maze of the roots, she was able to view the glowing creatures that somehow actually walked through the water on the sandy floor of whatever body of water they were in.

“You’ve come for the order of chairs?” Again she could not spot any mouths and felt the words with her entire body. Aside from the brief announcement, the adult bluebarks paid no heed to Ari.

“Yes.” Kazmir beckoned Ari. “My secretary will review the paperwork and receipts, if you please.”

“The child is a secretary?” Ari could not pinpoint a speaker to save her life.

Swimming, she rested her feet best she could against the sand next to Kazmir, “I am his secretary. My childhood years passed long ago.”

“Your kind is even smaller than the Manes.” The Blue-bark said with friendly curiosity, referring to the fact that she was smaller than Kazmir.

“Yes, we are smaller than most people in this land, but our brain matures at a faster rate, because our life span is much shorter. I’m only 24 currently.”

Kazmir’s tail twitched, his head cocking slightly to one side as vibrations buffeted against her. It took her a minute to realize the creatures were chuckling. They handed her a paper as large as her torso, “You are still a child. Younger than even Kazmir the Mane, but we will respect his decision in this. All children must learn through experience.”

Ari nodded respectfully, biting her tongue. She would not give them more cause to baby her by running her tongue. Kazmir helped hold her ground as well as the papers, showing her what she needed to look for amongst yet another new type of receipt. They had ordered and paid for two chairs from the water-tree, because it was the only type of wood that would accommodate creatures of all different sorts of back ends.

Signing the receipts, Kazmir allowed Ari to swim the receipts over where the chairs were waiting for them.

“Do you still require assistance with transportation?”

“Yes,” Ari replied. “We have already paid for it as well.”

“Won’t you stay for dinner?” A dark bluebark extended the invitation.

“It would be much nicer to travel with full digestive tracts,” a decidedly feminine voice said.

“We would be delighted,” Ari accepted delightedly, happily oblivious to Kazmir’s worried look.

Dinner was a strange mix of under-water foliage, served with chewy bark (she could only hope came from the actual tree roots), and some sort of meat that reminded her of sushi. There was a strange pill-like seasoning of some sort on one of the browner foods; she rolled them off, hiding them under one of the casings of oysters’ shells. Dessert consisted of some flavored shake. The children claimed her after the official food course was over, happily sharing their dessert with her.

They popped sponge-textured bites into her mouth, flooding her senses with a sickeningly sweet taste. The children continued to shove the sponges in their own mouths and hers, mindless of the fact that human digestive systems were vastly different from their own. Soon, her taste buds could only tell that the sponges meant a sweet euphoria as she floated weightlessly with the giggling, tickling twigs.

Kazmir found himself only able swear violently when he found her, far above his head, voluntarily gorging on sponge-bites with curious, amused bluebark children.

“She claims she is not a child?” questioned their dinner host.

“She’s apparently young enough,” Kazmir growled in reply.

The bluebarks chuckled.

“Ari!” Kazmir called, beckoning.

Ari stared in horror down at Kazmir; his torso was covered in blood; it bubbled, just a little, from the corner of his mouth. She swam desperately towards him, “Kaz- Kaz!”

“Woah- woah!” Ari struggled against the arms restraining her. “Calm down, calm down, Ari. It’s alright.”

“Let me go!” She yelled, “Let me go! I have to get to Kaz. He’s hurt!”

“She’s way too strong- I need some help!”

“Kaz! Kазzy!” Ari cried. She did not understand why they would not allow her to go help. “Help him! He’s bleeding, can’t you see he’s bleeding!”

“Crud- she’s off. Bring the tranquilizer!”

“Ack- I found her meds. She hid them in the plant.”

“Kазzy!” Ari could no longer see him. Everything was white. She was dressed in white; the bluebarks dressed in brown were a stark contrast against the white. The only contrast. “He’s dying- someone help him!”

“Hurry.” The voices were extremely calm, completely controlled. “She’s agitating the others.” There was a sharp pinch in her thigh, as her hands got caught in the white straps on her wetsuit.

Cursing, she continued to tug, but she could not coordinate enough to free her hands. Kazmir’s hands were helping then, and she looked up at him. “I’m okay.”

With a sigh of relief, she fell asleep.