



# Unlikely Story

A FINE SELECTION OF UNLIKELY JOURNALS

ISSUE 6 - AUGUST 2013

## THE JOURNAL OF UNLIKELY ARCHITECTURE



With Stories by  
Alma Alexander, Daniel Ausema, Kelly Simmons, Kelly Lagor  
Matthew Timmins, Rose Lemberg, and Mark Rigney

[www.unlikely-story.com](http://www.unlikely-story.com)

Unlikely Story presents  
Issue #6  
The Journal of Unlikely Architecture  
August 2013

Edited by  
Bernie Mojzes and A.C. Wise.

Art Direction and Web Site Design  
Linda Saboe

Proofreader  
Cynthia Baumann

Cover Art  
Amandine van Ray

Unlikely Story © 2013 Unlikely Story, LLC

All Stories copyright their respective authors.  
All Art copyright their respective artists.

# Table of Contents

Editors' Note	4
Go Through by Alma Alexander	5
Three Adventures of Simon Says, the Elder by Daniel Ausema	9
The Huber Breaker by John Welsh	19
The Painted Bones by Kelly Simmons	20
The Dross Record by Matthew Timmins	27
The Tower by Kelly Lagor	32
Geddarien by Rose Lemberg	40
The Latest Incarnation of Secondhand Johnny by Mark Rigney	49
Contributor Bios	56

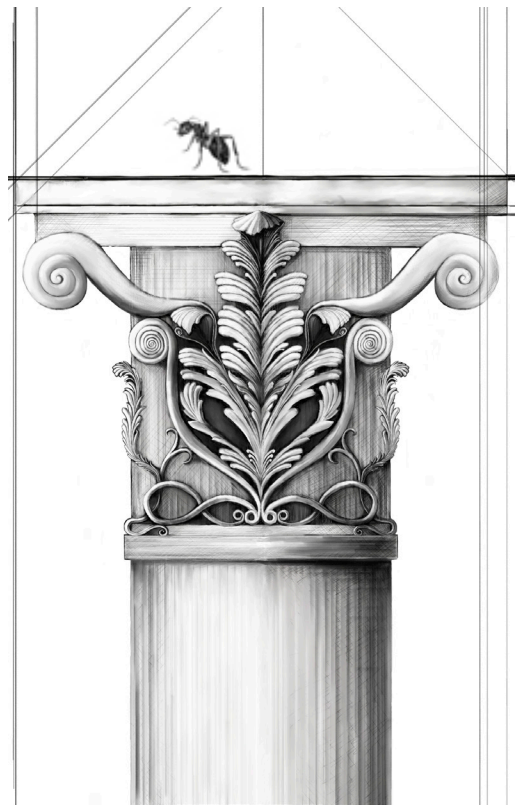
## *Editors' Note*

Welcome, dear readers, to our first non-entomological venture: The Journal of Unlikely Architecture. As you may have noticed, things have changed around here. We've redecorated, adopted a dashing new pseudonym, and grown our Unlikely family with two new additions named Cryptography and To Be Determined. They're charmed to meet you, I'm sure. Never fear though, there are still plenty of bugs lurking in the corners.

Although much has changed — we've rearranged all the furniture, slapped on a new coat of paint — there's no need to be concerned. You're safe as houses here. Although, when you think about it, how safe are houses, really? As you dive into the pixilated pages of this issue, you'll find your answer: not very.

You see, it is beneath the veneer of the familiar that the worst danger often lurks. After all, what better hiding place than the one you take for granted, the place you never look at twice because you know it like the back of your hand?

In this issue, you will find the familiar made strange: the innocence of a playground turned hostile and wild, the quiet melancholy haunting your neighborhood bar, dancing houses, and buried secrets. So come in, close the door, and pull up a chair next to the fire. Never mind that loose floorboard, or the hidden switch under the mantle. Pay no attention to those noises — it's just the wind in the chimney, and the old house settling around you. Comfy? Good. Now let us draw the curtains, dim the lights, and tell you a story...





# Go Through

by Alma Alexander

Illustration by Amandine van Ray



*It's a street. There are houses. They are old, built of brick, mortared, painted; the windows are framed in carved wood. There may be gargoyles on the edges of the roof — I don't know. I don't look up. I never look up.*

*At my feet, the cobbles — uneven, gray, worn. Sometimes wet with a persistent annoying drizzle, or with rain that has already come and gone leaving just puddles in its wake. Sometimes dry, dusty, absorbing sunlight, radiating heat back. I have to keep looking down as I walk because the street looks as though it might once have been a wave of water — a wave rising and falling, a memory of motion now caught and frozen for eternity under the old cobbles. If I don't*

*look where I am going I will turn an ankle, twist a foot, stub a toe. There will be pain.*

*Pain. There is always pain. I think I carry it with me. I brought it here. I wear it. I leave it in the tracks I leave behind on the cobblestones.*

*Right until I fetch up once again at a door that should never have been in front of me.*

*That's the way I live my life. I stumble and stagger in the direction that I am perfectly certain I am supposed to be moving in — and then I find myself yet again in front of the unexpected door, the door I should never have met, never have touched, the door I should never ever ever even consider walking through*

— *because I know where it goes, because I have no idea where it goes, because it is not a door that was meant for me, but here I am and there it is and I open it and step through...*



She doesn't know, when she wakes, where she is. Not quite. The bed — the room — they look vaguely familiar but she can't be sure whether it's because she's seen this particular room or slept in this particular bed before or because she's seen a thousand rooms just like this one.

Beside her on the other pillow, he sleeps. He snores. There is the shadow of a beard on his face. She tries to hunt through her mind for his name, but fails. It's a man. That's all she knows.

She gets up, slowly, carefully, disturbing as little of the bed as she can. She lays one long-fingered hand on the dusty curtain, brings her face up close and inhales the musty scent of fabric which hasn't been washed for years, puts her eye to the crack where the two wings of the curtains have been pulled together, peers outside.

Nothing is quite familiar. Nothing is completely strange. She almost thinks she recognises the place. She is not sure enough to swear to it. If she walked down this street and turned a corner she is almost-but-not-quite-completely certain that she would see an open square, with a tree whose outlines she has known for years, with certain shops lining the square, with a worn path through the grass where people persist in taking shortcuts. But perhaps none of this is real. Perhaps she has just dreamed it all, there in that bed which is still warm with the memory of her presence — perhaps she has put together that square in her mind from dozens of mental snapshots of places she has known but it has never existed, in the shape or form that she now visualises it, outside the confines of her imagination.

She glances back to the bed. He is still asleep. She suddenly knows that she could not bear it if he woke, if he looked up and frowned as if he couldn't remember her face at all, or worse, if he woke up and smiled and called her by name or called her his darling. She can't face any of it. She's alone, here, now, in a cold room with the grey light of early morning gathering outside and the first shadowy

shapes of scurrying people hugging the houses, scuttling along the sidewalks with their heads down and their shoulders hunched, their hands gloved and their collars raised. That tree in that square which may or may not exist no longer has its leaves, she knows this for a certainty — it's autumn, late autumn, sliding into winter, the light tells her so.

She dresses in silence. There is a run in her pantihose, draped across the back of the chair. No help for that. She slides her feet into the stockings, smooths them over her legs. Pulls on a nondescript dark skirt, a sweater. There is a battered handbag lying by the door; she pads towards it in stocking feet, carrying a pair of sensible shoes in her left hand, picks up the handbag with the fingertips of her right hand — there is no other woman here, the bag must belong to her, after all. Somewhere, soon — not here, not now — perhaps over a cup of coffee in a cheap diner nearby — she's going to open the bag and rummage inside it, for identity, for something to tell her who she is, what she is doing here.

She hesitates at the door, shoes in one hand, bag in the other. It is not a door she remembers seeing before. But she remembers the fact that she has often hesitated before strange doors. That doors never quite lead where she expects them to. That she quite probably never meant to be in this unknown room in this unknown house on this unknown street with this unknown man in the bed — she was never meant to be here at all.

She doesn't know if she can leave — if she is able to leave. If, when she walks through the door, it will mean leaving life behind. But she knows nothing about what's on the other side of this door, just as she knows nothing at all about the things which she can see on this side of it, hesitating before it. She knows nothing at all. Nothing. So — stay or go — it matters very little.

She reaches out, with the edge of the hand holding the shoes. She pushes down the handle. The door opens, just a crack, silently. She doesn't look back as she slips through, into shadow. Behind her, the room sinks back into shadow, too.



*It's a road. A dirt road. I've been on it forever, or perhaps I've only stepped on it moments ago. I*

*don't know. I don't remember. Time is elastic, after all, bulging and distending, sometimes worn very thin, thin enough to lift up to your eye and look through and be able to glimpse other things on the far side as though you were looking through a fine chiffon scarf. But this... this is a road. It's dusty. There's nothing on either side of it but fields, empty ones. No cows. No horses. Not even hay bales. Just windblown fields, in between stands of trees. There are wire fences between the fields and the road — I'm not sure if they're to keep me off the fields or to keep the things that don't exist in those fields from stepping onto the road and gobbling me up.*

*There's a crossroads. It's just a place where four roads meet, in the shape of a geometric cross, a gigantic plus sign drawn on the landscape. There's a signpost, right there in the middle — it has signs, pointing in the four directions — but the signs have either worn down into illegibility or else they're in a different language altogether. I don't understand them.*

*Beside the signpost, there's a door. Just a door. A doorframe, with a closed door within. There's even a key in the lock — but it's just a door, and I can walk right around it, and it's a door from either side, leading absolutely nowhere at all. I am certain, utterly certain, that those travellers for whom the signpost is intelligible will never see this door at all — but for me, for those like me, there's always a door. A strange door which leads nowhere. A door that is an alternative to directions that are unknowable, and unknown — a part of the signpost, just as mysterious as all the rest. Every door opens into something. There are just too many doors that I should never even have seen, let alone passed through. Too many doors that lead from darkness into shadow, or into light too blinding to see. Doors that make me stumble. Doors that never allow me to pass them by, once I've seen them. Once seen, never unseen. Always there. A door ignored will return — again and again and again — until I reach for that key, for that handle, and crack it open. A door that should never have been in my path; a door without which my path would not exist.*



She gets out of the car, slowly, her movements hinting at fatigue. She isn't sure how long she's been driving. She isn't sure where she started from, not any more. There is a large black and battered duffle bag

in the back seat — as far as she knows, it's her only luggage. She has, in the moment she thinks of the bag, no idea as to what it contains — what items she had thought essential enough to carry, to bring with her, instead of leaving them behind... wherever it was that she had come from. Her toothbrush? Her childhood teddy bear? Her Bible? Her shotgun...?

Around her, darkness is beginning to rise, to seep into the sky from the black shadows underneath the trees ringing the parking lot — empty, except for her. There's a house looming just in front of her, a house with a sign illuminated by a single dim light, a sign that proclaims it to be an inn. It's a haven. A refuge. A place to rest for the night.

There's a light behind the drawn curtains of windows facing out to the parking lot. Somebody's home. But there's a door. And the door is closed.

She hesitates, before she knocks. The house feels like a stage set — a two-dimensional thing, no more, behind which lies the chaos of backstage — fake potted plants, and a cracked coffee cup, and a ratty moth-eaten sofa with the doilies from last year's production of *Arsenic and Old Lace* still draped on it, and a typewriter with no ribbon in it, and a bunch of dusty silk roses, and a stuffed dog, and half-painted wooden cutouts of trees and of people and of a fireplace with a painted fire which gives no warmth at all. If she passes through this door she might simply be stepping into all that fakery, living a life in which nothing is real at all. Or she might be stepping from that fake life into something warm and real and waiting — a world where that fireplace is real, and so is the fire, and she can curl up in the corner of the sofa with a real dog curled up at her feet and real coffee in the cup. All just waiting for her. Maybe the bag in the back of the car is empty — just a stage prop; maybe the car doesn't run at all. Maybe everything at her back — the gathering twilight, the vehicle whose keys even now dangle from her fingers (ah, but are they real keys or fake...?) the mysterious piece of luggage supposedly belonging to her — all of that — perhaps all of it would simply vanish if she stepped through this door, as though none if it had ever been.

What a strange dream she's been having. Of lying, and running, and hiding, and looking for sanctuary.

She should never have come here. Never have



been on this empty and isolated road so late in the day. Never have known this inn existed. Never hesitated in front of its door.

She should never have seen this door in her life.

If she passes through, she will be a different person. She knows this. It frightens her.

It makes her happy.

She reaches for the door handle — if it opens to her touch, she decides, arbitrarily, on the spot, then she will walk through. If not, if it's locked and she has to ring or knock to ask for admittance, she will not stop here. She will drive on. Into the night.

Into the doorless night.

The door gives under her hand. Swings inwards. There's a light, somewhere, within.

Just as well. She knows, without knowing, that she would have come up against this door again, if she didn't choose it this time around. That's the way things are.

She steps through. She has already forgotten about the bag on the back seat of the car. Nothing it contains has anything to do with her, not any more. The future is behind a curtain; the past is a long-lost foreign country, almost forgotten.



*It's a gate made of wrought iron.*

*It's a coal hatch.*

*It's an airlock.*

*It's a gaping hole in the ground, only darkness within and beyond.*

*There are many doors.*

*They lead from memory into oblivion, from darkness to light, from warmth into icy cold, from dream into wakeful reality, from life into death and then back again. I've seen many. Too many. So have you. We'll see more. They're portals, they're gates; they are inevitable, and they are everywhere, and there are some which you should never have seen or passed through at all... but you go where the waters of life wash you up, flotsam and jetsam, lapping at the steps leading from the sea up to the threshold of a door you don't recognise and yet always knew would be there. Doors are choices. They are wishes. They are sacrifices (oh yes, they are — look down at the old blood stains at your feet, traces of those who came here before you...).*

*They are passages.*

*I wear a key on a string around my neck. It fits any lock. You carry one too. We all do. We are latchkey kids, the grown-ups are away, we're home alone and must do the best we can. A door can lead home, or into frightening alien places you cannot ever hope to understand.*

*They are doors. Even the ones you should never have seen, never touched, never listened with your ear against the grain of the wood for the faint sounds of what might be stirring beyond — even those, even the ones you don't know, don't recognise, don't understand — especially those — they're yours. They're meant for you.*

*It's a street. It's a road. It's a sidewalk. It's an alley. It's a path between the stars.*

*Stop, and look. There's a door.*

*You'll never recognise it. You might.*

*Go through.*





# Three Adventures of Simon Says, The Elder

by Daniel Ausema

Illustration by John Welsh



When the first balloon fell, Simon was climbing a piece of asphalt that jugged up from the ground. He scrambled over and dropped into the lee of the jumbled ruin as the balloons fell harder. Some splashed acid as they popped, some turned into a rain of razor-sharp jacks, but most floated down intact. One last look and he still couldn't see a way across to his home before the rain of balloons came too thick for visibility. Simon Says the Elder hunkered down in the shelter of the broken asphalt and waited for the nightly rain of balloons to end.

Simon Says, to most people these days, is the name of that great early philosopher who first began the tentative theories to explain the world,

After Playground. Every school child knows of his meditations on the catastrophe and on the world that gave birth to our own. That, however, is Simon Says the Younger. The philosopher's uncle was a less contemplative man, and at the moment all he thought of was shelter and just how far away from home he was, how little he'd earned in barter on this dangerous trip. So little of the lands of the Playground were understood in those days, and as his bartered goods failed to earn him enough, he'd found himself far beyond his usual routes.

The balloons rolled down the slopes past his shelter. Their fall let up while some sunlight remained, and Simon Says the Elder made his way through the

streams of balloons rolling along the ground. The clear air revealed the tarnished metal of an immense structure just beyond the broken asphalt. The Slide. He'd never intended to come this far, but he'd heard of it, knew something of the people who lived nearby.

The slope of metal cut through the balloons. Jagged edges popped those that struck them while rolling down from the Slide's top. Simon Says waded through a depression filled with the damp carcasses of old balloons — and perhaps other carcasses as well. Simon didn't look closely. At the Slide bottom, he rapped on the edge of the lip. A young boy stuck his head out.

"What do you want?" The boy had the wild hair typical of clans on this edge of the Playground, as if here the parents didn't concern themselves with their children's grooming.

Simon leaned forward so his eyes met the boy's and gestured at the bag on his back. "Is this the Tag clan?"

The boy nodded. "Down here it is." He gestured for Simon to follow. "You're a trader? You'll have to meet with our leader before you bring out your goods."

Simon followed, glancing up at the heights of the Slide against the darkening sky and wondering, before it disappeared from sight, what other clans lived up there in the colossal metal structure.

Soon he was seated before a middle-aged woman with a ceremonial sash across her chest. A threadbare ceiling hid the metal overhead, dampening the sounds from outside.

"I don't see much here that we'd need." The woman, who called herself Spider in the Web, dismissed the contents of Simon's pack.

"Tell me what you do need, then. Next time I come around, I can bring it." If he ever bothered coming so far again, which seemed unlikely.

Spider in the Web stroked her cheek with the back of one finger. "There isn't much we need you to bring. But we do need someone to get rid of something for us. An exterminator. We'll pay you well." She poured a handful of marbles from one hand to the other.

Simon Says wasn't sure he wanted to know what would be burrowing under the Slide, but he'd done

much he wouldn't have expected on this trip and was prepared to do anything to get himself home.

"I can help you there." He gathered up the items in his pack to give his hands something to do. "For payment... jacks and marbles get pretty heavy for someone like me. Story is, though, your clan has a map." If he could see the map, he might at least figure out how to get out of this pea-gravel swamp, get home with what little he'd managed to earn.

Spider in the Web let his statement linger for a moment before giving a brief nod. "A map of the Playground-that-was, yes."

"A precious relic, that. I'd like to see it, have a chance to copy what I can onto my own paper."

Early the next morning, having slept in the common room with the Tag clan, he was deep into their burrowed cellars, crouched beneath the bare metal of the Slide's lip. He held a small metal box in one hand with half a dozen more over his back. They should be easy to catch, Spider in the Web had told him. The Tag clan had done so many times, but hadn't been able to rid themselves of the pests. Simon tapped on the Slide and saw a scuttle of movement. He snatched at it and felt the segmented leg pulling away from his fingers. Quietly clicking his tongue, Simon examined the dark corners of the cellar.

He squeezed himself to the side, brought the cage forward, then tapped the Slide again. A robot scuttled from the shadows, and he scooped it into the cage. The robots were an ancient pest, dating from the pre-cataclysmic Playground, and this one showed that age. Its shell, or whatever the word was, was dented. Probably from the Tags trying to destroy it last time they caught the thing. Simon carefully latched the cover and took out another cage.

The sun was not yet halfway to noon when Simon Says emerged with rattling traps full. He stopped at the edge of the cellar and poked inside one of the traps. He'd learned a few things about these old robots, after spending time with the Ring Rosie clan. To the right people, they were far more than pests to be disposed of. He might make a nice profit on this trip after all.

First he needed to find his way home.

Spider in the Web, it seemed, had second

thoughts about their deal. She met him with a muscular member of the Tag clan at her back, as if afraid he might turn on their matriarch.

“Those are nice robots. Bet you can sell them for a good price someplace.”

“Maybe.” He kept his voice noncommittal.

“Then take them as your payment. No need to bother getting out our old map.”

“Robots won’t do me much good if I can’t find my way from here.”

“Is that all you want?” Spider in the Web laughed. “I can send someone to guide you, at least far enough that you’ll know where to go.”

*Then why so concerned about the map?* he wondered, but instead he said, “I would certainly be grateful, and yet we made a deal. I follow a strict code when it comes to dealings, and I have your pests to prove my end.” He rattled the cages that hung from his shoulder.

“Be careful with those,” she said, gesturing with her lips. “They always seem to find a way out eventually.” She turned to whisper something to the man behind her. It went on so long that Simon grew increasingly aware of how awkward the traps felt. Might the robots work their way out now, cut through metal — and if so, through cloth and skin as well?

Spider in the Web gave him a slow smile, as if the discomfort was intended, and said, “This is It.” She gestured at the man. “He’ll show you the map and how to get on your way.”

It frowned by way of greeting and walked away. Simon scrambled after. They climbed through the Tag clan’s chambers, keeping close to the roof of metal. The steps from one room to the next were haphazard, at times only two or three and other times a complete flight. Rooms branched off just as unpredictably. These rooms ranged from rickety things that seemed on the verge of falling, to ponderous rooms of great age, as if the mysterious Slide above had been added after the structures that hung from it.

It led Simon Says up a narrow stairway onto the Slide itself. “This is high enough,” It said, and pointed at the land around them.

The broken asphalt Simon had come through

was off to the right and back. He panned across the broken Playground for any sight of his home. The twisting line of pea gravel that had repeatedly halted his progress surrounded much of the Slide. The pyramid that made one side of the Swings was visible far to the left, the other side lost in mists. Cement tunnels dotted the landscape, home to coyotes and feral humans. The rust-frozen Merry-Go-Round dominated the view straight ahead, across a stretch of pea gravel. No sight of his Jungle Gym home, but at least what was visible gave him some bearings. Most vitally, he could see where a gap in the pea gravel would allow him through and away from here.

“Thank you,” Simon Says said to It, looking away from the distant views. “Now, this ancient map...”

“Right. The map’s here.” Without warning, It swung his fist into Simon’s side. Simon doubled up, but not before It landed two more painful jabs. Simon fell to the landing, which tilted in his vision, threatened to spill him down the steep Slide.

“I wish you hadn’t squirmed so much. That messes up the pattern.” It’s voice could have been that of a friend, gently regretting a minor bad habit. “If I still landed them right, the bruises should form a fair map. If not... well, you’ll just have to hope it’s close enough that it doesn’t lead you into a mud hole.”

It climbed down the stairs and paused at the bottom. “I’m sure you’ll understand,” he said, his voice now with a more mocking undertone, “when I say that the door back inside is shut. Wouldn’t want you snooping around for treasure. But don’t worry, the easy way down is obvious.”

Simon Says the Elder crawled to the edge and looked down. Debris had formed into jams here and there along the chute, but still the prospect wasn’t encouraging. *Should’ve taken the directions and been on my way*, he told himself silently. *Curiosity isn’t rewarded in the Playground*. He scrambled around for the traps — all still intact. At least that was something, a small sigh of relief. He picked out a pile of debris on the opposite side of the Slide, colored by many old, broken balloons, and began his descent. The nightly balloon shower began just as he reached the bottom edge.

We’ll leave Simon there, huddled out of the balloons but still far too close to the Tag clan for

his liking. And if the balloons don't pop in the coyote's ears and scare him into howling, waking up the napping children, then I'll tell you next how Simon Says met the greatest of all guides to the wilds of the Playground, Mother May I.



Simon Says's side still ached the next morning. Once the balloons had stopped, he'd made some progress away from the Slide and camped beside a pea gravel pool. Now he held his side as he walked along the route he'd seen from up high, skirting the western edge of the pool where a path led through a break in the pea gravel.

A smell of rot rose from the small stones. Perhaps the putrefying bodies of people who had decided to cross directly now hid beneath their deceptive surface. Simon hurried toward the distant Monkey Bars, their heights hidden by factory smoke.

He'd scarcely left the pea gravel behind, moving into a region of broken chain-link fences and tall grass, when he heard frantic voices. Still hidden by grass in case the noise turned out to involve anyone from the Tag clan, Simon looked out at a scene of confused running and pointing. He couldn't make out exactly how many people there were because of their constant movement, but the scene had its focal point on a knot of them, leaning over one spot on the ground, pointing and gesturing and shouting at each other.

These were certainly not Tags. Simon had a code of how to approach strangers. Some he avoided completely, some he greeted openly as he passed by, and some he stopped so they could share what news and knowledge they had. These people fell into a fourth category, those who needed help. And who might return the favor in the future. He pushed his way out to meet them.

"Quiet down," he shouted. "You want to attract a terror bird?"

That quieted those who heard him, and they hushed the rest, looking over the grass for any hint of the giant stalking birds.

"What's the chaos? You lose something?"

A young-looking man nodded. "Medicine." His voice was ragged from shouting. "We've been to see

Doctor Doctor, and she gave us the medicine." He pointed downwards.

Simon came closer and saw that a large piece of chain-link lay across the ground. A wiry plant of some sort grew in the gaps and anchored the metal. He gave it a tug, but it might as well have been welded to the ground. Looking where the man pointed, he found the packet of medicine, fallen through the chain links and into a depression in the ground, too deep to reach.

"You've tried cutting in?" Simon asked, tugging again at the links.

"With what we have. We were just debating sending half our clan on, to come back with cutters from home." The young man pointed through the factory smoke. "A day each way, if we're lucky."

"And coyotes and terror birds for those who stay behind, I imagine. Maybe I can help." Simon tapped his chin and studied the fence.

"The medicine, it's for..."

"No," Simon interrupted. "Pity will win you nothing. It has no place on the Playground." He got down on his hands and knees and examined the metal.

"We're the Keepaways," the man said. "Just, well, thought you should know our names. If you're going to help us." He crouched beside Simon. "Which... you are helping us, right?"

"If I can. Now keep quiet a moment." He might have decided to help them, but that didn't mean he had to be patient with their foolishness.

The Keepaways held their tongues, and Simon Says pulled out one of his traps with the robot inside. His time with the Ring Rosies had taught him a bit about controlling these robots. Not much, not enough to let them free and trust they'd do what he wanted. But he should be able to get one robot to do a simple task and scoop it up before it did anything unexpected.

Simon flipped a robot onto its back. The ancients must have had better eyes and finer tools to program the robots as they did. But already some generations prior to Simon's, enterprising clans like the Ring Rosies had discovered ways to force a limited set of instructions with nothing more than a screwdriver. Simon applied that knowledge to the robot, twisting and tapping things he couldn't quite see, things whose



existence he could only accept on faith. He set it upright and let go.

At first, the robot did nothing. Then it turned in circles, and Simon feared he might have lamed the thing. But it recovered, and crawled to the chain link fence near the medicine.

A shrill whine sounded, and sparks jumped from beneath the robot. After a moment it stopped, and the robot moved to another metal link.

“Don’t touch it!” Simon said, as one of the Keepaways reached toward the severed metal. “It’s still very hot.” The woman jumped back and waited in a line with the rest of her clan.

The robot kept at its cutting. He watched closely to make sure it didn’t veer away from him. After a dozen cuts, he snatched the robot up, careful to avoid its spinning blade. Then, using the screwdriver, he stilled it and stuffed it back into the cage.

“Now,” he said, nodding to the line of Keepaways. “You can pull the fence back carefully and get the medicine.”

“Thank you, thank you so much,” their spokesman said a moment later, bobbing his head toward Simon as if only a crumbling sense of decorum kept him from bowing outright. “What can we, I mean how shall we repay you?”

“No need now,” said Simon. “Remember my name and greet it kindly when I visit your clan in trade.” Then Simon Says took his leave, continuing on his way through the ruins of the wild, aiming for the distant, towering Teeter-Totter.

It’s been said that this promise and others like it from these travels did much in later years to advance his nephew, Simon Says the Younger, in the early days of his quest for understanding. Whether or not he ever saw the fabled map of the Tag clan, he certainly was shown other maps and told many things that the clans had previously hoarded to themselves: The way to cross pea gravel with wide shoes, the hidden places that opened beneath the hedges, the path through the stinking mud surrounding the Swings, the way to tame a pitcher plant so it would guard you in your sleep. Much that he learned that fed into his eventual philosophies about the ways of the Playground and the world that had come before it, came from the secrets

of tribes not his own, perhaps because those people remembered his uncle’s name fondly.

Simon Says the Elder neared the Teeter-Totter. That giant, precarious structure had been visible from his home. It felt good to see it coming closer day after day. Before he could reach it — and pass by, into the maze of plants and strange cylinders of cement — he came to a vast space of sand.

He’d crossed a Sandbox before, and thinking this the same one, he set out without bothering to scout a way around. Vultures haunted sandy parts of the Playground, so it was no surprise to see them circling. He dug himself into the sand when the balloons fell and pressed on to another makeshift bunker by nightfall.

In the morning, though, Simon found he’d lost his bearings. The Teeter-Totter and all other landmarks had disappeared, even from the highest ridges. A haze, perhaps created from the factory smoke of that distant and unknown hulk beyond the edge of the Playground, reflected and magnified the sunlight, stripping the distance of reliable signposts. Simon walked, as best he could, in the direction he’d been going, but the Sandbox never changed. Whether it was a different sandbox than the one he’d passed through before or simply a different angle across it, he couldn’t find an edge.

Ridge bled into ridge, and the evening balloon shower forced him to dig another shallow shelter. After the balloons, he had a glimmer of hope that he could follow them down whatever path they took and find a way out. The balloons rolled downhill, and he ran with them, desperate to not be left behind. Streams of balloons came from all sides, forming an ever-widening river. He must surely be near an edge now.

But the balloons sped up as they rolled down a steep incline, and by the time Simon stumbled out of an arroyo into a barren flat of sand, the last balloons had disappeared, except for a few caught here and there against debris. He picked one up and let it go, hoping it would follow the rest, but having lost momentum, it bounced without direction.

Simon scrambled across the sand flat, his steps slowing. Night was falling when he saw the sand castle. He approached cautiously, but no clan could live out there in the sand. The walls had a melted

quality, as if wet sand had dribbled down on them after they were made. He circled around the front, staring up at the towers. A smoothed-out rectangle of sand marked the open drawbridge, across a dry moat.

Simon walked up to it and stopped. The ground was solid — it wasn't a real drawbridge, though the illusion was strong. The gate was open and appeared to lead into real rooms and hallways. Before he went in, Simon knelt at the edge of the bridge to look into the moat. It was deep, and the sides very steep. Even without water it would make a formidable barrier for anyone trying to enter. Or leave.

He hesitated.

"You don't want to go in there."

Simon jumped at the voice. Standing behind him on the sand flat was a woman. Not young, but old didn't seem the right word either. Aged by the sand, perhaps, or by the Playground in general. Her clothes were the sturdy green fabric favored by travelers, and her skin a brown that was one of many shades common across clans. Any other details were lost in the dusk.

"Don't I?" Simon answered and took an exaggerated step toward the castle, but the truth was that he didn't. Not that the woman struck him as safe either.

She ignored his question. "I can lead you to safety."

"Out of the Sandbox?"

She nodded and lit a small lamp that hung from her waist. The light drew his attention to the solid walking stick in her left arm and the lines that scored it, up and down. They had the look of a coded map.

Simon took a step toward her, hoping to see the marks better, but they meant nothing to him in that light. "Well, that would be welcome."

"It is my work," she said, holding out her hand in the peculiar greeting of the clans who lived near the Swings. "I am Mother May I, a guide."

A guide. He'd heard of them, not a clan exactly, but an association or guild. Women for the most part, they claimed to know the Playground better than anyone, and likely it was true. They had an honest reputation, though some notoriety for their bargaining, especially with travelers they found stranded.

"I'm Simon Says. I... don't have much to offer. A few jacks, maybe, if I scrounge around in my pack a bit."

"You have robots," she said, as if it were common knowledge. He glanced back to see if the cages were so obvious. "I'll take one as payment."

"I, ummm, how..." Simon stuttered, trying to find an answer. The robot was worth a lot, assuming the guides knew where to bring them, but he was losing faith in his ability to get himself free from the Sandbox. "Guide me, not just out but set me on my path home, and it's a deal."

"And your home is?"

Home. The strong hands of his husband, the steady strength of his wife, the quick wits of his nieces and nephews. "Jungle Gym, the big one out beyond the Mud Pits."

Mother May I closed her eyes a moment, as if picturing a map to that part of the Playground. Her hand slid along the lines on her walking stick, and Simon could see her tongue moving back and forth. "As far as the Mud Pits. The near edge of them. I assume you can find your way from there?"

Simon nodded.

"Then I can do that. I'd like the same one you used for the Keepaway clan. I know that one works."

Simon reached behind his shoulder for the cage, but Mother May I stopped him. "Once we're out of the Sandbox we'll have time. I want to get away from here before it's full dark."

Simon Says looked back once as she led him across the sand flat. Something moved in a tower window. It had the look of a spider, but the legs must have been as long as he was tall. He shuddered and sped up to keep pace with Mother May I.

And if the terror bird trips over my jingle wire, waking me up so I can escape before it has a chance to turn me into its midnight snack, then I'll tell you next how Simon Says out-dueled the Jump-Rope Rhymer and made his way home at last.



Mother May I was true to her word. Once they'd left the Sandbox — through a slot canyon Simon

never would have thought to enter, leading to a tunnel under the Sandbox's thick wooden frame — she led him through many hidden paths, skirting the edges of cement tunnels and cylinders. He jumped at any sound that might be a coyote sneaking out to give chase, but she seemed to know the right way to pass without attracting their notice.

When she led him straight to a tunnel, though, he balked. “Not in there,” he said, peering into the darkness for coyote eyes or signs of rough camps. This wasn't as tall as some of the scattered cement structures, only half again his own height — many were taller than that, even when half of their circumference was buried — but it was also much longer. The other side, wherever it came out, wasn't visible.

“Don't worry,” Mother May I said, “there are no coyotes here, and no camps of wild people.”

“I'm not sure I'm comforted by that.” The image of the spider's legs sticking out from the sand castle's tower flashed through his mind. “What keeps them out?”

“Me. Would that make you feel better?”

“I...” Unsure whether she meant it seriously, Simon didn't know what to answer.

Before he could think of anything, she gestured for him to follow and scrambled up the side of the cement. At first Simon slid back down, but then he got used to finding purchase on the well-pocked cement, and climbing became easy. From the top Simon saw that the tube sloped downward, entering a muddy bank some fifty skips ahead. Beyond that bank was a swamp.

“It's an extra day's walking to get around this and back toward the Mud Pits. You want that, you can give me two robots.” She pointed out the meandering line of water they'd have to circumvent and then back to the dry land straight across from them, covered in something like thick moss. “Or you follow me through here, and you'll be home that much sooner.”

Simon tapped the cement with his foot. To be under there, and not for a short distance, either... “You'll have light?”

“A torch,” said Mother May I.

“Lead on, then.”

Even with the decision made, he hesitated at the tunnel mouth. Mother May I's torch lit up such a small space. Even if it didn't reveal gleaming eyes or reflect off a monstrous insect's carapace, what might be further in? He swallowed twice and forced himself in. It was supposed to get easier. A single plunge, and then he could follow without thinking. Instead, the second step needed to be forced also, and the fifth was worse than the first.

The tunnel grew colder as they left the entrance. They came across a few leaves blown in and other small debris, but he saw no sign that animals made it a home. Gradually, his steps came without such effort, even though his shoulders remained tense. The light behind them shrunk into a point and vanished when the tunnel sloped downward.

“We're going under the water here, then?” Simon asked.

“Somewhere around here. I'd guess we already went under a bit already, but you can't really tell without taking exact measurements.”

Simon touched the tunnel overhead, but it felt no different. No dripping leaks, and the cement had already felt damp as soon as they'd entered.

“It's really quite an ingenious tunnel,” Mother May I went on. “So perfectly placed. Any steeper, and it'd be a one-way tunnel we'd have to slide down. Move it a hop and a jump either way, and you run into rocky ground or deeper water.”

Mother May I struck the wall affectionately. Simon cringed at the muffled sound, ready for it to crack beneath her blow, but nothing happened.

“Shows you that for all the chaos of the Playground, here and there are hints of order, bringing it all into a strange unity.”

Simon Says the Younger would have disagreed with Mother May I on this. The chaos above, the more he explored and explained, was too great, the order too easily dismissed as fluke. To him, the tunnel was proof of one of two things. Either earlier clans had possessed the knowledge and skills to build it just there, or the Playground was big enough that simple chance dictated a tunnel just like that one. The words “strange unity” certainly never appeared in his writings.

Simon Says the Elder, though, was unconcerned

with such deep questions. He trudged behind Mother May I and longed for the sunlight ahead that would announce their escape from the ground.

At last they came out on the far side of the swamp, and judging by the sun, the day's balloon shower hadn't yet arrived.

"This can be a tricky part," Mother May I said, pointing at the plants ahead. Moss it had appeared from a distance, but Simon hadn't realized that moss could be so thick, its leafy stems reaching his shoulders and beyond. "Through here are the Mud Pits."

They were in the middle of the moss field when the balloons fell. Simon dropped down for what protection he could find within the thick moss, but Mother May I stayed standing and calmly popped falling balloons with the sharp tip of her walking stick.

"What are you doing? Get into shelter."

Mother May I casually pushed one balloon away from herself and said, "I avoid the yellow ones. Most of those are safe too, but just in case." She popped another dozen, studiously guiding the yellow ones away from them. "We're too frightened of things in the Playground. How will we understand what we can do and where we can go if we're always ducking our heads and letting things happen?"

She didn't say anything else or force Simon to come out, and once the balloons had stopped falling, they continued walking. Their path was a dry streambed, so the balloons piled around their legs, flowing back to the swamp behind them.

"Here we reach the end of our path together," Mother May I said as the moss opened up to bubbling mud and large, leafy plants.

Simon Says the Elder thanked her and took the robot he'd promised her from his back, handing it to her. "I could never have come so far so fast without your expertise. Your sisterhood truly earns its reputation. If you've ever need of anything, come and ask me."

Here, as they parted, was another request that would come into play in the life work of Simon's nephew. The many collaborations and rivalries between the philosopher and Mother May I — whether the same one or a successor by the same name

is unknown — could be said to have begun at this moment. Certainly, the guild of guides suffered no harm from either its association or its arguments with Simon Says the Younger.

Simon Says the Elder made his way along the Mud Pits. The stink of them made it an unpleasant journey, but there was little danger, as long as he didn't leave the established path. The sweet smell of pitcher plants might tempt unwary travelers, but Simon knew the smell and avoided their large flowers.

As the path twisted through tight gaps between mud pits, Simon did have to watch his step. The mud's colors shifted from dark to light and back, with hints of yellow here, red there. The bice green of the leaves that hung over the path seemed the primary constant over the hours it took him, that evening and the following morning, to cross.

When he did look up, as the mud became dry ground, he was surprised to see how close the Jungle Gym had become. Not even the blowing smoke could hide its great height. Only a wide stretch of grass separated him from the familiar metal bars and the grape-vine covered sides of the Jungle Gym. Strange things were said of that lawn of grass. He'd always avoided it in the past, skirting wide around though it added ten thousand steps to his journey. The closeness now, after so long away, taunted him.

Five hundred skips. A thousand hops. He could be there in an hour, answering the guards' shibboleth to let him enter, climbing to the parts his clan claimed, walking the metal beam to his family's nest-like home. So close.

What was it Mother May I had said? We're too frightened. Perhaps she was right.

Simon stepped onto the grass, cringing in expectation of an attack. Nothing happened. It was just grass after all. Very short grass, for someplace wild. His steps slowed. How did it keep so short? He'd already begun, so he might as well continue. He sped up but was still looking down at the grass when he stepped over the first line of chalk.

Grass poked through the loose chalk, where it hadn't been laid thick enough, but the line as a whole was clear, running straight as far as Simon could see. It was another border, he supposed, another line already crossed, too late to un-cross.



The next chalk line made a circle, seven hops across. Simon skirted it. The lines followed in rapid succession, diagonals and parabolas, squares and hatch marks and running lanes that petered out after a few strides.

Simon Says had just reached a chalked hopscotch court, the lines solid at the earth-side and fading into nothing before it reached heaven, when he heard a shriek. It was a noise from childhood stories, a noise all those in the Playground learned to fear. Shrill and loud.

Simon ran. He didn't look at the lines he crossed. He stepped on chalk somewhere in that first flight, and he knew he was leaving a trail of chalk-prints. But what did that matter to a terror bird? The giant, flightless birds were hunters, not trackers.

He spared a glance back and saw it, its legs pumping, its long neck strained forward, its sharp beak reflecting sunlight. It opened that beak and gave another shriek, and Simon stopped looking back so he could focus on running. He crossed chalked warning lines, swinging his arms as fast as he could. The terror bird's footsteps sounded loud, even on grass.

An earthwork lay across his path, and Simon dived over it, sprawling down the other side, which was steeper and longer than he'd expected. He lay there, momentarily stunned, and braced himself for the terror bird's beak.

Instead he heard a voice.

"Simple Simon." The voice was deep, but not threatening. A man leaned down toward Simon. He wore a floppy hat with a brim so wide it hid his eyes. His clothes were of patchwork.

"That's not my name."

"Oh ho, be careful telling strangers what your name isn't. A thousand more times, and I might narrow it down."

Simon's lips flapped like a fish's, but he couldn't find any words to give them. Finally he simply asked, "Who are you?"

"No names, not here." He helped Simon to his feet. "What matters is you're safe from that bird. We can stay behind this wall all the way across the field."

From this angle, a single strut filled the mouth

of the pathway, and the rest of the Jungle Gym rose above it, only its base hidden by the mounds on either side of the path.

"At last." Tired as he was, he started running toward his home.

The strange man pulled out a jump rope and skipped beside him, but after a moment he sped in front of Simon and stopped. Simon crashed into him, but the man kept them both upright.

"I forgot," he said, as if they hadn't just collided, "there is the toll to use my path."

Still catching his breath, Simon said, "I don't have..."

"Otherwise, you could go back over the mound, negotiate a price with the birdy."

There went another of his robots, he supposed, but instead the man said, "Give me a rhyme. A rhyme I've never heard before, and this path is free to you, now and always."

"A rhyme, oh. All right." Simon was silent, thinking of what rhymes he knew. The stranger indicated he should walk as he thought, so Simon was in no hurry to come up with something.

"How about 'Miss Susie had a sand-boat...'"

A sharp pain in his shin made Simon stop both talking and walking. He hopped on the other foot. It took him a moment to notice the stranger pulling his jump-rope back to himself and recognize the pain for the sting of a whip.

"A rhyme I *don't* know yet. For each one I already know, I whip you once."

The terror bird shrieked from the other side of the mound. "Again, you could choose to speak with the bird. Chances are she knows fewer rhymes."

Simon blew out his cheeks but didn't respond, except to continue limping along the path. After a moment of silence, the rhymer said, "You will have to try again. I can wrap my whip around you and sling you off the path as a gift to the terror birds, if you test my patience."

"Of course." Simon threw out a strange one he'd heard in his travels, but halfway through, the rhymer whipped him again, and Simon collapsed.

"I thought it might be new until you got to that point," the rhymers said while Simon climbed back to his feet. "Then I realized it was just a slight variation in the opening. The rest is old."

"The opening is new, then. That should count as payment."

The rhymers shook their heads. "Not enough. Try again."

Rhyme followed rhyme, and whip followed whip, and Simon's progress slowed, became of trudge of pain. Perhaps he might have over-powered the man when he'd first come onto his path. Simon doubted it, but the possibility didn't matter now. He was far too weak from whipping.

"Flea," he said at last, a dim memory of a nonsense chant bubbling into his mind.

"Flea?"

"Flea, fly."

Simon got halfway through, and the rhymers made him repeat it so he could get the jump-rope rhythm

and the words just right. When he continued with the rhyme, speeding through the bewildering syllables of the chant's central section, he realized how close they'd come to the end.

The rhymers repeated slowly, "With a bee-billy..." and Simon Says ran.

The jump rope cut the air behind him, snapping with a loud crack, but sore as he was, he'd caught the rhymers by enough of a surprise that it missed his back.

"Hey! You haven't finished telling me the rest!" But Simon could see his home, and nothing could hold him back.

And if the sun keeps heating the Slide so we can cook our meals right on its surface and still run before the Tag clan can catch us, then we'll leave Simon Says there for a time, enjoying a welcome rest. We'll save the tales of his long-enduring rivalry with the Jump-Rope Rhymers, his travels to the distant Monkey Bars, and even the time he spent a captive of the coyotes for another time.







Built in 1939 atop the bones of the earlier Maxwell Breaker (1895-1938), the Huber Breaker in Ashley, PA is the largest and last of its kind. A breaker, simply put, is a giant machine built to look like a building, that smashes large chunks of coal into smaller, usable chunks of coal. The Huber Breaker closed in 1976, and was abandoned in 1978.



Since the '90s, a small group of dedicated citizens have been fighting to preserve the breaker, and the long history it embodies. Our crew decided to tell their story. After a year of shooting stills and video documentary, we have come to a deeper understanding of culture, preservation, and public memory, of labor and sacrifice, and what was once progress and prosperity.

My first glimpse of the breaker and the treacherous climb through it left me with thoughts of roaming an industrial cathedral, albeit a dark and dangerous one with plenty of memories stored in its shadows.

Now it seems we have come full circle. Although the breaker was due to be bequeathed to the preservation society, bankruptcy has thrown it to the auction house, where it was sold on August 22nd, 2013. Today I'm filming what may be one of the last unsanctioned glimpses of the Huber Breaker. I'll be back tonight, if I'm not dead, or in jail.

John Welsh  
August 25, 2013

[www.ashleysbreaker.org](http://www.ashleysbreaker.org)







# The Painted Bones

by Kelly Simmons

Illustration by Louise Boyd

## *Prologue. Entrance. Façade.*

Is there anything more beautiful than a house the week before it's sold? That's what Lily Watson sighed to her husband, Roger, before she fell asleep. They'd been discussing another house he'd just listed, the Durham's on Black Rock Road — a modern redwood, all shaded angles, not her taste at all — but she was, in fact, thinking about her own, a dwelling she referred to as a “bungalow” but which was, she knew damn well, a big-ass ordinary Cape Cod. Lily and Roger's house, *perfectly situated on a wooded acre in the charming walking town of Wayne, Pennsylvania*, would go back on the market the following year, when their daughter Jamie left for Georgetown. This way, she reasoned, there would be no empty nest, because there would be no nest.

She was trying to outsmart herself. She knew real estate was a business; she was trained to stay detached. But sometimes you couldn't help yourself: you didn't want to say goodbye. After all, you spend years attending to the house like a lover, finding it a wardrobe, shoring up its confidence. You buy things with ugly names, things you'll hide in the shed: grout, latex, mulch. Horrible and twisted, the instruments of beauty, the pruning arms and shovels, steel and iron you don't want to admit you need, like eyelash curlers and curling irons. But by listing day, loveliness is magically attained, on display, ready for another, its glossy green shutters as welcoming as a wink, its apricot door (*so unusual! Such a bold choice! You can always say, we're the house with the orange door!*) like a dot of lip gloss. Another family arrives, comes to live in your painted bones, to be all that you thought you were.

And you walk away, right? Believing your careful ministrations, your granite this and grasscloth

that, your focus on scale, color, line, has allowed it all to happen. One family buys into another family's wallpapered dream, and so on and so on. The economy ran on this dreamy logic, why shouldn't Lily? That was Lily Watson's firmest belief: that if you paid enough attention, everything would turn out perfectly for all parties. That you could construct a façade strong enough to be both magnet and shield with materials obtained from the Martha Stewart collection at Home Depot. All it took was *complete focus*.

Focus like earning top grades, choosing a thoughtful, handsome husband, and then fussing over every cottage-with-good-bones and ranch-with-a-nice-fenced-in-yard that Roger and she bought and prepared to flip, all, while watching over her only daughter Jamie like a hawk, making sure she had the right clothes, the right neighborhood, the right school district to make her life as ideal as the changing seasonal floral display on her slate steps (which was currently ornamental cabbages and pumpkins spilling out of antique wooden bushels she'd purchased on eBay for a song).

As Jamie is no longer speaking to Lily, she is currently considering switching strategies. But not this Wednesday. No, not quite yet.

## *Of course it really began in the bedroom.*

There are some mothers who might not have known their daughter was having sex with a boy they despised until that boy snuck up to their house in the middle of the night. After all, does anything except sex propel one at 2 am? Lily being Lily, she knew months before, when she'd found condoms while cleaning under Jamie's bed. She realized afterward, though

— after chasing Tyler off and telling him to *get his goddamn white trash truck out of her driveway* and that if he *was going to defile her daughter he could damn well do it somewhere else and not in her house on Jamie's Tempur-pedic bed!* — that she had known much, much earlier.

Roger was oblivious, but she had known the spring before, when Lily came downstairs to make everyone a nice hot breakfast wearing new jeans that were pre-ruined, with a small hole in the knee, threadbare at one hip. The salesgirl at the store had encouraged Lily, telling her she “totally rocked” the look, and that not everyone could wear them. “They don’t even ship a size above 27,” she’d confided. Jamie came down and stood at the refrigerator, drinking orange juice out of the carton and surveyed her mother’s pants with barely contained horror.

“Really, Mom? Really?” Jamie said.

“What?” Lily replied. But she knew damn well what. Someone’s mother, regardless of how fit and how young she was at forty-two, regardless of how current her shaggy hairstyle was, wasn’t allowed to show her *knee*, let alone her cleavage, or god forbid the crack of her ass. When a girl became sexual, she recognized it in another immediately, certain as pheromones. The tables had turned; the roles had made their shift. Jamie was the slutty beast in the house now, not Lily. When she tried to explain this later, to Roger, he simply nodded his head distractedly. “Maybe it’s like the college photos of my bong, Lily,” he sighed. “It’s time for you to hide your *thongs*.”

But Lily hadn’t wanted to believe her daughter would sleep with a boy who wasn’t from a good Main Line family — who hadn’t learned table manners, ballroom dancing, and how to button up his khakis high enough to cover his boxers. It was abundantly clear, from his low-hanging pants to his gleaming gold crucifix, that the only Mayflower Tyler Tronnes could be descended from was a Mayflower Moving & Storage Truck. So Lily ignored him, imagining he would go away.

Lily’s friends claimed Lily had chosen to live in Wayne because she wanted her daughter to date boys with trust funds; but this was not true. Lily thought slightly smaller; she just wanted Jamie to date boys with monogrammed hankies. On movie dates, she wanted her to nestle her head up against a Polo logo.

Was that so wrong? When Lily had driven through her neighborhood for the first time, she could practically hear the lacrosse sticks clattering on the front porches. She only wanted what was there in front of her! Did any mother, who, upon issuing an invitation to a casual dinner, expect a trucker hat and unlaced Vans? No. Any mother in Lily’s neighborhood knew casual meant ‘blue blazer.’

Before the doorbell chimed, Lily woke to a low growl from her poodle. Ever alert, the dog might have been named “Tripwire,” but instead was the ironically dubbed Walker, since he didn’t particularly like to walk, run, or move.

“Sssh,” Lily whispered. Without her reading glasses, she couldn’t see the clock, but guessed from her grogginess that it was the middle of the night. Roger had been working overtime on four contiguous spec houses on the old Carrington estate in St. David’s, and she was not going to wake him unless she needed to. He slept heavily, soundly she believed, because he always needed sleep, was always catching up.

Walker settled briefly, then the doorbell rang and he barked once, sharply. Lily’s first thought was how weak the bell sounded, especially compared to the rumble of her dog’s throat, and wondered if the chiming mechanism needed to be fixed. Roger snored lightly through his half-open mouth, still handsome, Lily noted, even when he looked ridiculous, and when she nudged him and whispered his name, he didn’t wake to help her, but simply rolled over onto his stomach to halt his snoring. Better conditioned, better trained than the dog.

She sighed, put on her blue chenille robe and walked tentatively to the dormered window. If a visitor stood at the edge of the cupola sheltering the front door, she could glimpse them from this angle. How many times had she waved to the UPS man? Instead, she saw rain funneling down one side of the enclosure’s slate roof, and the small verdigris weather vane atop it spinning in the wind. Nothing else. No feet, no legs. Like a ghost was ringing her doorbell. When it rang again, it seemed louder.

Descending the stairs, her first thought was police. Arrest. There was no squad car on the street, yet she envisioned a police-busted party at Brooke’s house, where Jamie was allegedly spending the night, and a massive lock-up of Tyler and his friends. The

way they looked, they should be arrested for *littering*. For disturbing the visual peace. Even Jamie was guilty of that. Her childhood hair — that delicious, tawny color halfway between blonde and redhead — was now dimestore-dyed a muddy, animal brown, to match her kohl-lined eyes. When it was cold these October nights, and Jamie stretched her sweatshirt sleeves down to her fingertips, Lily thought she resembled a raccoon.

Her friends had warned Lily: They all want to dye their hair. They all want to wear too much makeup. Let them. It's artistic. They want to swirl colors together, to paint, to blend. But unfortunately this meant they also wanted to spin things in a blender: pineapple and coconut and orange juice and rum and vodka. Smoothie culture.

The police had been to Lily's door twice in the last year, bringing news of a) public drunkenness; and b) a car accident involving a girl who carried Jamie's fake I.D. Roger and she got all the way to Bryn Mawr hospital before realizing the brunette with the broken leg was not Jamie, but Ashley, a girl she knew from ice skating. They went to bed that night grateful, thanking God, that their daughter was a generous, *thoughtful forger*.

As Lily approached, she kicked herself for choosing a solid wood door with a transom window above. Unless there was a giant outside, the damn transom was no help. If they'd gone with a traditional divided light half door, which Roger had argued was too cottage-y for a home of 3200 square feet, and not particularly safe, she'd know exactly who she was about to deal with, if not what.

She peeked through the eyepiece. The person standing next to her array of tumbled French pumpkins did not have on a navy blue uniform, but enormous navy track pants with blue and white checked boxers peeking from underneath. He held more clothes under one arm, as if he planned to spend the night. She felt relief, annoyance, and then, suddenly, radiant heated Italian tile floors aside, cold fear. *Why was he here alone?*

If Tyler was shivering, if his teeth were chattering against the onset of fall weather, Lily wasn't aware as she opened the door. He made no sound. Then rain, which had flattened his stubborn curls, turning his eyelashes into twin stars that Jamie had wished upon

— and even Lily could see the beauty of — even the rain poured down quietly around him, sluicing off the portico, creating a vaporous cushion around whatever was about to happen, whatever either of them was about to say.

The porch light shone on the bundle he carried. They weren't his clothes, but Jamie's: Pencil leg, zippered at the calf, jeans. Bunched up. Smaller. Stained.

Lily opened her mouth to speak, to cry out, but that thick cylinder of silence traveling with Tyler momentarily stopped her.

Everything about him said please don't say anything. Please, *please*, don't tell.

Lily opened the door slowly.

"Mrs. Watson," he said, his voice catching on the tangle of consonants, "I'm sorry but—"

The jeans glistened, wet in his hands. From the rain? From the Schuylkill River where Jamie rowed?

"Oh my god, what's happened? What the hell have you done?"

When he didn't answer, she crept back, hand outstretched for the phone on the captain's table in the foyer. He stepped forward as if she'd invited him in.

"Where's my daughter?!" Lily screamed.

He opened his arms as an answer. Inside the nest of jeans, Lily expected a clue, a weapon. Not a child. Not a tiny, blue-lipped baby girl, naked and slick with mucus and blood. Their eyes met briefly above her. Tyler's grown even larger with fright, Lily's widened in surprise. She grabbed the swaddled baby and ran into the kitchen. She laid a dishtowel on the granite counter, cursing its coldness, wishing she'd chosen wood or slate, and started the water in the sink. She instructed Tyler to wipe the baby down with a warm dishcloth while she grabbed the bulb syringe in the powder room medicine chest.

When she came back, he was doing exactly as she'd told him, tenderly, gently. He had always done what she'd told him to do, but it was usually "*Don't leave your condoms on my goddamn floor!*" or "*Have her home by 1 am or I'll call the police.*"

"I don't suppose there's any possibility this is a

child you had with another girl.”

“No.”

Lily nodded grimly. How on earth had she missed this? She hadn’t seen much of Jamie lately, but she saw her for dinner at least a couple nights a week. Yes, she was usually in a baggy sweatshirt and spandex pants, her standard crew outfit and one that could certainly stretch, but still. And yes, Jamie did tend to bulk up during training, her arms and leg muscles reforming from their summer sloth, but she didn’t seem that much bigger to Lily. Jamie’s face was full, yes, but it had always been full, she had been all cheeks and cheekbones since the day she was born.

And morning sickness, what about morning sickness? Lily was often gone in the morning, off to stage another one of Roger’s listed houses, or to help make decorating decisions on the spec houses, but not every morning. Hadn’t Jamie gulped orange juice and toast nearly every single morning Lily could recall?

“Please tell me Jamie is in a hospital. Or on her way,” Lily said as she pressed the syringe into the tiny nostrils, clearing the mucus. She counted down the nearby hospitals, trauma centers, doc-in-the-boxes, clinics. Where would her daughter go?

Tyler licked his lips, priming them for the truth or a lie.

“No, but, um, Brooke is with her,” he answered finally.

“Oh, that’s encouraging,” Lily gritted her teeth. The blonde leading the stupid. “Call 911 and get a goddamned ambulance to Brooke’s house.”

“No, she’s fine, she’s not at the house, and she—”

“Tyler,” Lily said firmly, “call 911 and tell them where she is! Even if you won’t tell me, tell *them*.”

Lily leaned down to breathe into the tiny mouth, and suddenly it squeaked. More mew than cry. Color came into her face and the air moved in and out of her nostrils, creating the slightest breeze on Lily’s face. The two of them stood above her for a moment, watching as her eyes opened. It was like a moment in one of those spectacular nature specials, when the trees and flowers bloomed in time lapse. Blue, they were. Startling and enormous. Like Tyler’s. Lily stepped away, not ready for the baby to be alive. Not ready

to look at her, to know her. Not prepared for this, suddenly, at all.

Tyler wrapped the dishtowel around the baby and cradled her head with his palm. Lily bundled Jamie’s jeans in a garbage bag and put them at the bottom of the trash.

“Do you maybe have . . . a diaper?” He asked.

Roger’s younger brother, on his second marriage, had two small children in quick succession, and because of this Lily kept a bib, a few diapers size 2 and 4 and a box of wipes tucked away in the hall closet. In the pantry she also had a sippy cup, a tiny spoon, a bottle, and one small can of concentrated formula. For them. For her nephews. For known children, not for babies who fell from the sky.

“Where is Jamie?” she repeated.

“I can’t tell you, I, I— promised.”

“Tell me now, or I’ll, I’ll call the police, I’ll—”

“Mrs. Watson,” he said softly, “I don’t think you want to do that.”

Lily let out the breath she had been holding. Of course, he was right. This boy, who was flunking English and Spanish and Math because he had, according to Jamie, “learning differences,” had just dug deeply enough into his reservoir of psychology, deduction, cause and effect . . . to call Lily’s bluff. A half-dead baby? A surprise pregnancy? The middle of the night? No, she didn’t want this on any police blotter.

They stood together in Lily’s carefully constructed kitchen, with its pale toasted ash and its swirling umber granite, every surface enveloping another, and all the machinery and gear — the stainless steel appliances, the grinding mixer, the angry food processor, hidden by cabinetry — and discussed the cold results of a fresh experiment. They were compiling the data. They were lab partners now.

Lily breathed deeply again, changing course.

“But if you took the baby away for help, surely Jamie realizes that someone will—”

“She doesn’t know I brought her here.”

“Well, obviously, but — if you took the baby to the ER, the first thing someone would ask is where—”



"Mrs. Watson, she doesn't think I took her to, um, the hospital."

She blinked twice, hard. "Oh, Safe Cradle, right? You were taking it to Safe Cradle, like they told you in school."

Tyler said nothing, his eyes on the baby.

"But then you couldn't."

"Right," he said softly.

"Because she was turning blue."

The baby yawned, then turned rosy, blinking, as if she'd just noticed where she was. Lily put one hand over her mouth, in wonder. With the other hand she gripped the edge of the countertop by the sink, momentarily warmed by the steaming dishwasher to her left, aware suddenly, sickeningly, of the garbage disposal near her elbow.

The baby's arms and legs were impossibly thin; her hands struck Lily as something out of a sci-fi film. Jamie had been a plump baby, over eight pounds. Not this one. Only her facial features, miniature and perfect, not scrunched from pushing like a larger baby's would have been, looked wholly real. A few moments ago, she seemed fetal. Now she looked . . . *actual*. Was she premature, perhaps? Or just small? Undernourished? But that hair. All that pale hair. It reminded Lily of an older baby, not a newborn, all that fluff, and cowlicks pressing it outward. This baby, with all that hair, was not premature. Pangs of guilt found Lily, lancing her for the way she allowed her daughter to eat, the fast food, the candy. How she'd stopped monitoring her vegetable and fruit intake a couple years ago in exasperation, in the spirit of picking her battles.

Tyler ran his finger along the baby's knuckles. "I couldn't do it," he said. "I couldn't."

Lily swallowed hard and willed herself to stay calm. She had to do what she had to do. "Of course not," she said slowly. "Of course you couldn't."

"Don't tell her," he sniffed. "You can't tell Jamie. She'll hate me, she'll ha—"

His eyes brimmed with tears, and they only grew clearer and brighter. As if they'd been washed, showing their true, original color. He looked right at Lily, completely unashamed. It was as if, she realized

later, she was seeing him for the first time.

"All right," she said, blinking, "I won't."

"Really?"

Lily walked into the hallway and retrieved the diaper, the bottle, and the can of formula, then came back to the kitchen.

"If you tell me where Jamie is right now, I won't tell her what you did. We'll just stick to the original plan. You can bring the baby to Safe Cradle now. She's fine."

He blinked, then nodded.

"Do you need a ride? You can borrow my car."

He was momentarily stunned, and she knew why. Had she ever offered anything to him in the last year? Had Lily Watson held out anything for him to take since the very beginning, those first awkward meals when he'd picked up the piece of buttermilk fried chicken too quickly, before he realized the napkins were made of linen, and everyone else at the table was cutting into theirs?

He shook his head. "My truck's around the corner."

"Well? Is she at Brooke's? Where?"

"She's out back," he said, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

"Out back? In the — in the woods?"

"In the playhouse."

Lily's heart dropped. Her baby had had a baby in the same spot where she used to play house, play mommy and daddy and baby with her little friends? She thought of the wooden oven and refrigerator that once stood in the corner, the miniature ironing board, washing machine. She knew she should be relieved by the proximity, but first she was dumbstruck by the irony.

"Okay," she said, gathering herself. "Okay."

"You won't tell her? You can like, find her by accident or something?"

"No," she said, reaching for her coat. "No, I won't tell her. But you will."

He shook his head.

“Yes, you will.”

They walked to the front door and at the last minute Lily grabbed a pale turquoise throw off the linen chair in the living room and tucked it around the dishtowel, winding the bottom beneath his arms. She felt the tiny feet beneath the bundle of cloth. Baby feet. Was there anything in the world more miraculous than baby feet?

“Why? Why do you think I’d do that to my own girlfriend?”

“You’ve already done the right thing once today,” Lily replied. “I have a feeling you’ll do it again.”

### *In the playhouse. And the dog house.*

Lily unhooked the red leash hanging on the coat tree and whistled for Walker. She would take him for a quick walk — straight back to the playhouse. She snapped the leash on his collar and carried him out the front door.

Like the other homes on Maple Lane, the Watsons’ property was all back yard, no front. Their house sat proudly close to the street, its emerald shutters and apricot door and ivy-and-mum-filled window boxes combining to form a friendly, jack-o’-lantern face. But out back, the property beyond the patio stretched into a tangle of trees then sloped sharply, down to a small stream that separated them from a stand of woods and the next group of houses. Until the trees were completely spent, opened wide to a winter moon, it was pitch black in Lily’s backyard. Dark and wet.

As they strode across the lawn, curving toward the back yard, Lily turned and looked back at Tyler making his way to the corner. She’d often shooed him away, but had she ever truly watched him go? He looked different from behind; gently hunched over, cradling his cargo, torso trying to stretch into

sanctuary. Lily’s whole body tingled as if she was ovulating, lactating. That familiar longing, the body wanting what even the heart doesn’t know it lacked.

She froze suddenly, remembering his words, and the baby’s blue face. *She doesn’t think I’m taking her to a hospital.* What did her daughter think? How tightly had they wrapped that baby in those pants, covering her tiny face?

Walker yanked on his leash, his nose leading him down the hill, toward the odd buried smells: pinecones, earthworms, mulch, frogs. And a layer below that, something sour. Was it life? Was it death? Or was it fear?

As she walked, she mentally scanned the shelves in her medicine chest, wondering what her daughter might need. Percocet from Roger’s bad back. Advil, Benadryl, and yes, Plan B. She’d bought it when she discovered that first condom, advised by friends she should keep it in the cupboard. *It’s the new syrup of Ipecac!* Fat lot of good it had done her now. Add it to the birth control pills Jamie probably couldn’t remember to take and the condoms no one remembered to carry and they had themselves a full-circle pharmacy fail.

She paused outside the playhouse door, aware of the shapes behind the smeared glass. She breathed deeply, gathering herself. There was so much to be done. There was another baby, her baby, who needed to be wrapped and carried out. There were lies that needed to be untangled. There was a floor that would surely need to be repainted. She would strip it all, down to the studs, if necessary, to remove everything that had been done.

She stepped forward and opened the door with the tiny autumn wreath, watching the scenes unfold in her mind.

*I will save her. I will soothe her. And then . . . I will ground her.*

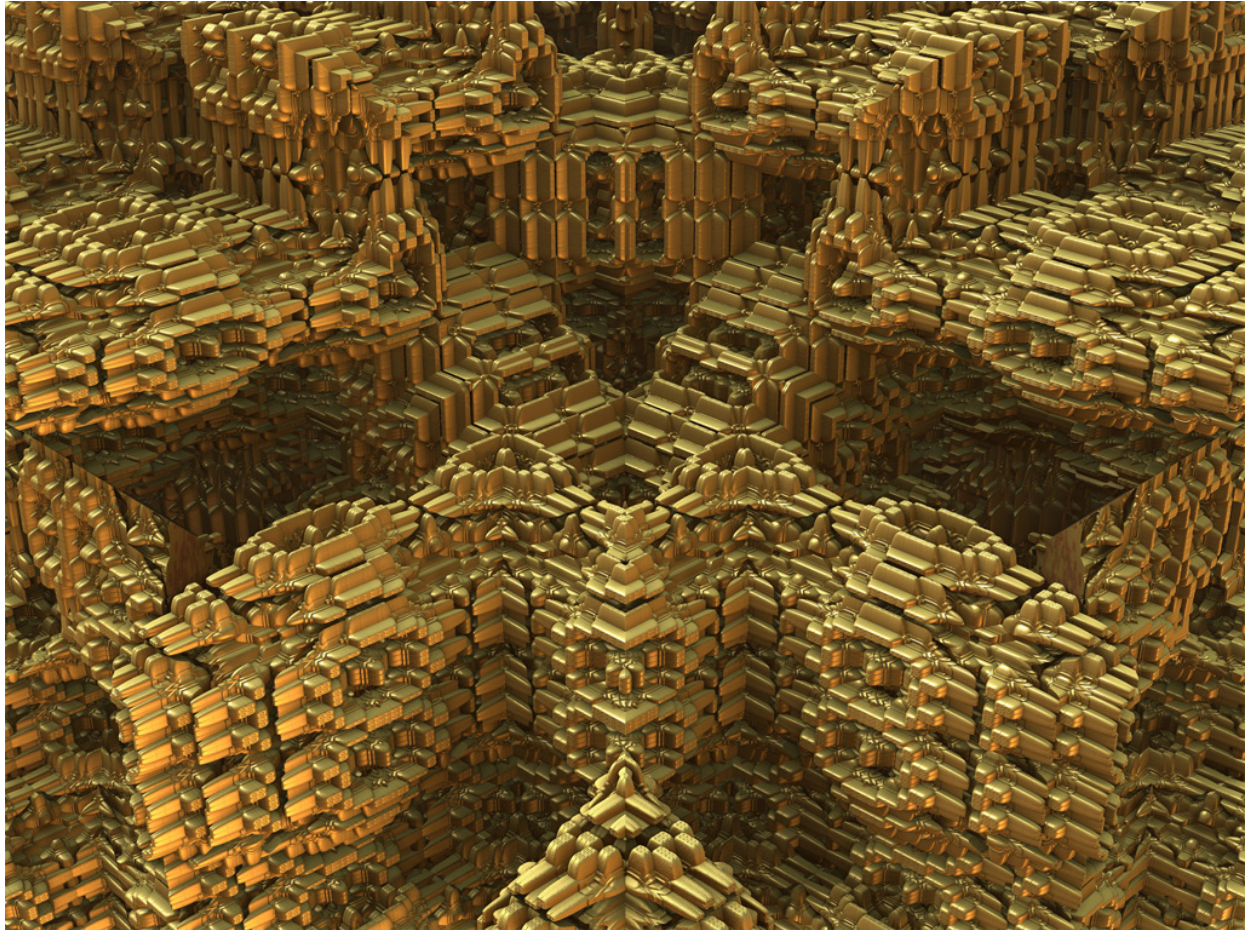




# The Dross Record

by Matthew Timmins

Illustration by Mark Brady



The elevator ride had been long and uncomfortable and the scribe had fallen into a fitful sleep. When the soft alarm rang to signal his approaching stop, he jolted to his feet with a cry, sending the message disk he had been reading flying off his lap to shatter on the floor. As the elevator slowed its descent and finally came to a rest, he stared in horror at the broken memento before gathering up his briefcase and darting out of the opening elevator doors.

Pausing to refit his composure, he cast irritated looks at the corridor around him. Though set with electric lights, the hallways, stairs, and rooms of the Archival Block had been left largely in their natural state: close-fitted blocks of grey stone, bare floor, and random purposeless steps, passages, and archways. He

frowned at the bas-reliefs that wound about the walls in the so-called “leaf” pattern that geoarchitects and theomystics got so excited about. He may have been assigned to the Historical Ministry, but the scribe was a thoroughly modern man who preferred his world clean and white, with video screens, escalators, and doors. Great fires! they had even left the holes in the walls — random, circular shafts, some as big as his hand, that disappeared into the darkness and led who-knows-where. He felt a boy again, dragged on a school trip into the dark wilderness to stare in fascinated horror at a waste-hole, where people too primitive or superstitious to find other solutions had dumped their trash, their offal, even their dead, into a “bottomless” pit.

His mood did not improve when he reached the Principal Archive and was greeted by a smiling archivist in a long robe of dull greenish-brown. She verified his credentials, while he sneered in disgust at her coarse garment and her sandaled feet. It was not just that he found her attire pathetically archaic and affected or that he imagined that he could smell the stink of the riverweed fibers, but her entire attitude seemed to betray a deference to the primitive past.

The archives themselves were a strange mix of ancient and modern: the main rooms were gigantic open spaces hardly ever encountered in nature, but the floor, ceiling, and walls that were present were all original stonework; a water channel had been left in its natural angular course, but metal footbridges crossed it at regular intervals; will-o-moss grew on the walls in patches, but the electric chandeliers completely obscured its pale illumination.

The archivist led him to a study alcove, then disappeared. He barely had time to seat himself and switch on the lamp before she returned carrying a long metal box identical to hundreds of others save for a serial number. He turned on his slate and pulled on his thin gloves as she prattled on about policies and regulations. Finally, after some simpering pleasantries she left him to work. Annoyed before his work had even begun, the scribe opened the box.

Silently cursing his career assessment officer, the scribe lifted an object wrapped in a silvery cloth from the box and placed it on the table. He had never wanted this room. His direction was . . . but what did it matter? An aptitude for cyphers and languages had sent him down this corridor long ago and now here he was.

Opening the cloth revealed an ancient hipbone. This was the Dross Record, an artifact of mysterious origins. The miraculously preserved bone was covered with small, precise carvings in neat vertical rows and columns. It had been discovered on its own in an empty chamber, miles from any dwelling.

What the ministry hoped to learn from this relic, he couldn't guess. Artifacts like this had been ignored for decades (the last mention of the Dross Record was over eighty years ago!). Probably some minister was taking advantage of the regime's newfound interest in history to secure a little more funding. Still, the scribe mused as he opened the relevant files on his slate and

readied his stylus, "stairs that go nowhere can still be climbed."

He began his preliminary notes: "hipbone: female (see medical file H.A.10428) — Age: unknown (circa -232) — Language: L-S-03, dense logogram, related to other extinct sphere-settlement languages of Mossater volume (see ESS-Moss-02, ESS-Moss-05, ESS-Moss-06). Original translator: MynFelHem (see Archive P.H.3733) placed Dross settlement in Mossater, despite Record being found hundreds of miles away in Jorsot volume."

Pausing for a drink of water before the real work of translating, the scribe thought longingly of his own comfortable chambers hundreds of levels above him. Then he began his translation:

/ Daughter / [of] / Lun-Yun / teacher-ruler-guardian / [of] / divine flame [*natural gas jet?* — see "*Fire Worship*" Archive R.A.019] / called / Dross [*Note atypical name — pseudonym? Title?*] / writes[:] / world / is stone / fitted-decorated / [with] / divine skill[.] / Eternity / [of] / corridors, chambers, stairs, shafts / branching in all directions[.] / Town-sphere / sits at center [of] / world[.] [*see "centralism" Archive P.P.265*] /

The scribe stopped to flex his fingers and roll his eyes. Centralism. Primitives. Every dirty mob huddled around a gas jet considered themselves the center of the universe just because all halls go nowhere in the dark. Even the great Guhner Complex, that grew 3000 miles deep and 1000 wide and absorbed hundreds of civilizations, styled itself the "Holy Pivot" before its collapse. Blind as fish, the lot of them. He picked up his stylus and continued:

/ Star-chamber [*see "Sacred Rooms" Archive R.A.022*] / sits at center [of] / town-sphere[.] / Divine flame / sits at center [of] / star-chamber [q.v.][.] / Its heat-light / diffused [through] / town-sphere / [via] / heat-light channels[.] [*likely natural crystal-lined light tubes*] / River / enters from above / town-sphere / flows [through] a deep channel / leaves down / large shaft[.] / Fish / swim [in] / river / plants / grow [in] / river[.] / Good air / swims [in] [*accompanies?*] / river / [and] / blows / [from] / outward corridors / [and] [through] / holes /



above [and] below[.] / Thus-so[?] / Architect  
*[Creator-worship? see Archive R.A.012]*  
 / has provided-provides / town-sphere /  
 [with] / heat-light / water / food / good air  
 / clothing[.] / Thus-so[?] / scripture-room  
 [q.v.] / [and] / wisdom-reason / tells / us[.] /

Why, he wondered vaguely, was Dross recording all this? Surely this was all common knowledge in the “town-sphere.” The use of such scarce resources to record general knowledge would almost certainly have been viewed as criminally, possibly even sinfully, wasteful. Could the author have been recording this for people not of her own settlement? Maybe she wasn’t so blind after all, the scribe thought with a little smile.

/ Fortunate / live / near / star-chamber [q.v.]  
 / near/ divine flame[‘s] / heat-light[.] /  
 Unfortunate / live / far / [from] / star-  
 chamber [q.v.] / [where] / heat-light / is  
 weak[.] / Dross / [was?] / young girl / Dross  
 / [was?] / fortunate[.] / Mother / [was?] /  
 teacher-ruler-guardian/ [of] / divine flame  
 / one of-among / teacher-rulers-guardians  
 / [of] / town-sphere[.] / Mother / [was] /  
 pious-good / Mother / wisdom-reason *[had  
 studied?]* / scripture-room [q.v.] / [and] /  
 divine flame[.] / Mother / wisdom-reason  
*[predicted? Foresaw?]* / divine flame[‘s?]  
 / end-death[.] / Mother / wisdom-reason  
*[prediction? Warning?]* /

The scribe put down his stylus and rubbed his nose. His timer told him that he had been working for over six hours. He was annoyed and, he realized with surprise, a little disappointed; he had been able to improve slightly on the original translation, but the text had not yielded any great insights. The Dross town-sphere was clearly a solitary natural light-based settlement, what professor PorJenTin had called “lone stars”: isolated settlements huddled around gas jets, lava pools, or fire spurts, with no communication or even inkling of life beyond their own dark outer corridors. The fortunate/unfortunate divide was another feature of such societies, with not only light but heat well above the universal temperature being a sign of power and prosperity, indeed in some such societies perspiration without work was a great status symbol.

That the Dross town-sphere practiced a form of creator worship was also clear and again common in such settlements. It was also likely that they had considered the “corridors, chambers, stairs, shafts” of the universe to be of supernatural rather than natural origins and thus sacrosanct, (misled, no doubt, by the Anthropological Fallacy which states that the dimensions, ambient temperature, and even “decorations” of the universe are all adapted for human life, and not the reverse) a belief which stifles growth and precludes improvements to the environment. The mention of the possible demise of the “divine flame” was intriguing and promised insight into the death of such settlements. Alas, he had known before coming that the Dross Record was incomplete.

Finishing the last of his notes and triple-checking his unique translations, the scribe prepared to go. He should have buzzed for the archivist, but the thought of her obsequious courtesy made his jaw hurt. Instead, he carefully lifted the ancient bone with its protective cloth. But before he reached the artifact box, the silvery fabric slipped to the floor and he caught, for the first time, the reflection of the bone’s reverse in the table’s glass surface. With a small cry, he turned the bone over and stared dumbfounded at the writing on the back of the bone. No one had ever suggested that the Dross Record was double-sided. MynFelHem had certainly never mentioned it.

Trembling, he turned the bone over and began to translate the new words:

[was] / blasphemy-bad[.] / Mother / [and]  
 / family / [were] / darkened-made dark[.]  
*[exiled? Renounced? Blinded? See “Crime  
 & Punishment in Primitive Societies”  
 Archives L.A. 153]* / Town-sphere *[people  
 of?]* / attacked-fought / robbed / family /  
 brother / lost-killed / father / lost-killed[.] /  
 Mother [and] Dross / lived / outside / town-  
 sphere[.] / Mother [and] Dross / grew[?] /  
 plants-fungus / stole / water / [and] / fish[.] /  
 Mother / gave birth[.] / Sister / [was] ended-  
 dead *[stillborn?]*[.] / No priest[?] / mother  
 / performed rituals[.] / Mother [and] Dross  
 / ate / flesh-body[.] / Mother [and] Dross /  
 used / flesh-body[.] / Mother [and] Dross  
 / thanked / sister-spirit[.] / Time went[.] /  
 Mother / ended-died[.] / No priest[?] / Dross  
 / performed rituals[.] / Dross / ate / flesh-

body[.] / Dross / used / flesh-body[.] / Dross  
/ thanked / mother-spirit[.]

The scribe stopped. Here, at least, was a possible explanation for MynFelHem's silence regarding the other half of the Dross Record: body reclamation — the use of human bodies for food, tools, fuel, cloth, etc. — was taboo, precisely because it was so useful. The Dross settlement seemed to have enshrined the practice in ritual — a particularly useful piece of religious adaptation — but the practice was still strictly forbidden in MynFelHem's era.

Even acknowledging the possibility of recycling the dead was seen as dangerous. Obviously, the very existence of the Dross Record spoke to some body reclamation, but the scribe had assumed — without reason he now realized — that the bone had been old and anonymous at the time of the writing. That it had been the author's mother and that she had been literally cannibalized along with her stillborn child sickened him.

He continued:

/ Dross / lived / alone / [in] cold-dark[.]  
/ Use[ing] / sister-skull-lamp / [and] /  
mother-candle / Dross / went-new [*explored?*] / cold-dark / corridors, chambers,  
stairs, shafts[.] / Teacher-ruler-guardian [of]  
/ weaving / came[.] / Teacher-ruler-guardian  
/ said / divine flame / ending-dying / town-  
sphere / ending-dying[.] / Teacher-ruler-  
guardian / sought / mother['s] / wisdom-  
reason[.] / Dross / promised / help[.] /

So Lun-Yun has been correct in her "wisdom-reason"; the flame had died or was dying. And in their fear, the rulers of the settlement had come to the very women they had exiled. And because her mother was dead, Dross agreed to help her tormentors. Why? What power did the "guardian of weaving" have over her? Or had she offered help of her own free will? What kind of woman was this "Dross"?

Unbidden, an image of her came to him: a middle-age woman with the pale skin and large eyes of light-famine and a tiny frame malnourished by niche fungus and ceiling beetles. She wore the same riverweed dress as the archivist, not out of affectation but out of a necessity that lent it a strange beauty. Certainly it was more beautiful than Dross

herself, whom he imagined as ugly, with features worn down like well-travelled steps. He imagined her in a small room, its walls covered with precise carvings in neat vertical rows and columns that she read by the wan light of a lamp that she held aloft by a hair rope. As if she heard the scratch of his stylus, she turned to him and by the light of a small grinning lamp he saw her smile and heard her speak. In her eyes and her voice, he fancied there was patience, understanding, sorrow, and forgiveness.

With a startled shake, he dislodged the vision. Chiding himself for his foolishness, he continued his work:

/ Mother / sought / never-place [*impossible?*] / outside / eternity/ [of] / corridors,  
chambers, stairs, shafts / infinite-room /  
full [of] / good air / water / heat-light / no-  
walls[?] / Architect['s] [q.v.] / dwelling[.]  
/ Blasphemy-bad[.] / Teacher-ruler-guard-  
ian [and] Dross / seek / infinite-room[.] /  
Teacher-ruler-guardian / [and] / Dross /  
follow / mother['s] / wisdom-reason[.] /  
Water / falls / down / things / fall / down  
/ fire / burns / down[.] / Down / divine-  
direction[.] / Teacher-ruler-guardian / [and] /  
Dross / go / down[.]

The scribe put down his stylus and read what he had written. If he had translated it correctly — and he was certain that he had — he had found the earliest example of the External Hypothesis, the philosophical belief in a space outside the universe, an empty dimension, that — in most versions of the theory — extended infinitely in at least two dimensions. He shivered and unconsciously made the warding square.

At university he had encountered the "Infinite Room," a discarded philosophical oddity like square circles and angels on pinheads. But now, reading the idea on an ancient bone, in a half-forgotten language, in the stilted words of an exile, made it seem somehow less ridiculous. Dross's "wisdom-reason" was surprisingly modern in one respect: down was indeed the fundamental direction and had formed the basis of coordinate-navigation for hundreds of years.

He had once visited the Great Reservoir with a tourist group. As their guide was doling out his facts ("The Great Reservoir is the largest room in the known universe.") one of the other men in the group

had burst into tears. “The walls,” he had cried, “where are the walls!” As the group was comforting the man, the scribe had stared across the flat surface of the water stretching away into the darkness and had felt, as he never had before, the unimaginable weight of the universe above him.

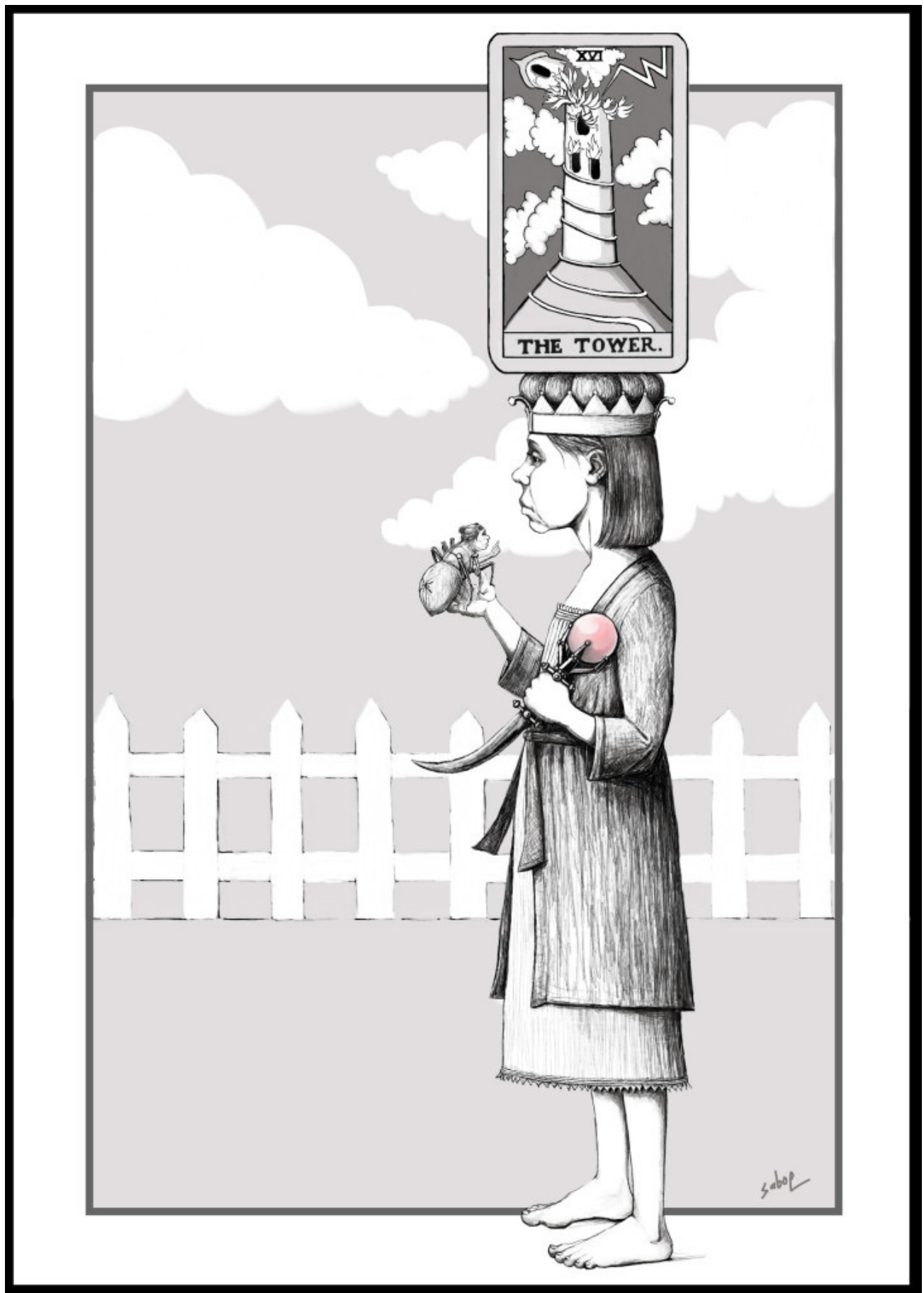
Was it possible there was such a place, an “infinite-room,” beyond the furthest corridors? Down some secret stair, beyond the footsteps of men? Could a room exist without a ceiling? Or a floor? Or even walls? What would such a place look like? What would it mean to fall forever towards a floor that did not exist? Could air fill such an infinite volume or would it grow thin as water did in too large a bowl? If air could

not fill the space, what would? Could it be truly empty, an infinite vacuum? Was such a thing possible? Could it even be said to exist, being literally nothing?

Perhaps this “Infinite Room” was the answer to the mystery of gravity; if there was an eternal emptiness below the universe then would not matter rush towards it? Perhaps the whole universe was rushing into the void, falling forever into the emptiness. The empty dimension of God.

There in the study alcove, seated in an ergonomic chair, the scribe dropped his stylus onto the solid stone beneath his feet and felt suddenly dizzy.







# The Tower

by Kelly Lagor

Illustration by Linda Saboe

Dana looked up at the polished black tower before her, which stretched heavenward through the emerald canopy of the Enchanted Forest. Its apex had finally breached the cloud. She scanned the surface for imperfections to repair and was startled by a small black spider trailing silk behind it on the wall in front of her. She flung her hammer at the creature and the tower shook from the impact.

As the shudder rippled through the stone, Dana glimpsed the tower as it was — a five-foot tall pile of scrap wood she'd inexpertly nailed together in the small clearing in the oleander bushes that separated her family's back yard from the field beyond. It didn't look like something an accomplished hero would build. Instead, it looked like something the ten-year-old Dana would build.

The spider slipped between two warped boards and vanished.

She sat down on the grass, lightheaded. The throbbing in the space where her pinky had been had become sharper in the hour since her father had left. It was sharp enough now to bleed through the waning effects of the last of the painkillers. She wanted to stop. To go back to bed. But heroes didn't falter.

She remembered, a week ago, how her mom had looked after the giant, black monster had slammed into their car as they'd pulled out of their driveway. She remembered how the cracks had spider-webbed through the windshield. She remembered the red eyes reflected in the fractured glass. How Dana had tried to reach out for her, but Dana's left hand was pinned between her seat and the center console. She remembered the smoke. How her mother's head and limbs had hung awkwardly behind her as the

monster pulled her from the car. Dana had tried to save her anyway, grabbing only the smoke between them. She could only watch as the smoke climbed into the sky and became the cloud that still hung above her house. The cloud where the monster had imprisoned her mother.

Her mother had always told her stories about the Realm she had adventured in as a little girl: how princesses were just as good as princes; that anyone could be a hero if they were brave and clever enough; that one day, Dana would meet her prince, and he would be her equal. She had told Dana that when she could finally see the Realm for herself, they would be able to rule there until Dana's own children were old enough to inherit it.

Her mother wouldn't have let the monster take Dana, so Dana wasn't going to let the monster get away with taking her mother.

She took a deep breath to steady herself, drawing in the scent of the grass beneath her, the soil. She looked down at the bandage covering her hand. A large red spot had spider-webbed through the fabric and there were smudges on her white nightdress. She'd probably ripped her stitches again.

She flexed her left hand; her finger still thought it was there, but the pain made the sky tilt above her. She lay down, shut her eyes and focused on the stillness of the forest. The waning sunlight filtering through the branches warmed the sudden cold sweat on her brow.

As she waited out the dizziness, she worried. She had never been able to see the Realm outside of her imagination before. It could only mean her mother was calling to her.

When she opened her eyes, there was only the blank suburban sky framed on one side by the sweet-smelling green and white oleander, and on the other, the fading black tower. Her heart pounded, aggravating the steady ache in her head, but the cloud was still there, an unnaturally round disc, stained pink by the sunset. She felt relief. Her mother was Dana's connection to the Realm, so as long as her mother was alive, the Realm would be real.

The ache in her head lessened with each deep breath. She shook away the thoughts and sat up. Carefully, she picked up the hammer and stood.

A car door slammed behind her and she turned. Her dad was back from the drug store. He ran across the lawn, his face red.

"What are you doing out of bed? I told you not to work on this thing when I wasn't here to watch you."

"The tower's done."

He squeezed through the gap in the bushes and took the hammer from Dana's hand. She saw his eyes flit to her bandage, her nightdress. "Dammit, Dana. Did you rip your stitches again?"

"Heroes can't be stopped by trivial wounds. Now we can save her."

His face softened, the red in his eyes from something other than anger. He took Dana gently by her good hand and led her through the back door into the kitchen. He sat her down at the table and began to unravel the bandage. Dana closed her eyes.

"It's not too bad," her dad said. "I don't think we need to take you back to the hospital again. Stay right here."

Dana kept her eyes shut, and a few long moments later she heard him set things down on the table. There was a sting as he smeared antibiotic cream on her hand, then welcome pressure as he applied a fresh bandage. The pressure confused her missing finger, masked the ache. She opened her eyes. When he was finished, he looked at her for another long moment. His eyes were puffy and red.

"It was stupid to let you build that thing," he finally said. "I thought it would give you something else to think about, give you a little time, but this has gone too far. I'm tearing it down in the morning."

Dana felt her stomach fall to her toes. He couldn't give up now. The cloud was still there. Her mom was still trapped. Her father was a coward. The realization shocked her. Angered her.

"We're her only hope!"

"Stop it!" Dad's voice cracked. "She's gone! You know she's gone!"

"She's not! She's right above us! Calling to us! You're just a coward!"

They both fell into silence; numbness, similar to the one spreading through Dana's hand, spread to her heart. She followed her dad upstairs and let him wash her face and smear more of the ointment on some of the still healing abrasions on her forehead and left cheek. She let him change the butterfly bandage on the bridge of her still-tender and swollen nose. She took the pills he offered her and let him tuck her in.

He hesitated over her as he fiddled with the covers, like he wanted to say something, but Dana looked away toward the bay window and didn't see him leave.

Dana's eyes traced familiar lines over the windowpanes. She remembered, five years ago now, watching her mother's steady hand as she drew the outlines on the glass of men and women in their finery. She remembered the warmth of her mother's voice as she described the ballroom of mirrors and stars as she had drawn it, the room where she had wed Dana's father, where Dana would wed her own prince. She remembered as she colored the figures in with marker, how her mom told her how the magic would always provide them with what they needed to overcome anything, if only they were clever enough to figure how the pieces fit together, and brave enough to see their adventures through. The colors were faded now, bled of their vibrancy by the sun, her mother's careful outlines all that remained. Dana had to save her mother, even if her dad wouldn't help. They were connected, a thread extended between their hearts beckoning Dana into the clouds. And if her dad was going to tear the tower down in the morning, she would have to save her tonight.



Dana fought against sleep until midnight, listening as her father shuffled around the house before

finally going to bed. After a few moments of willing her heart to stillness, she was satisfied it was safe to leave her bedroom. From her mother's stories, she knew she wouldn't have much time before the sun rose. Time passed more quickly in the Realm.

She pressed her hands into the mattress to sit up, then braced herself for the pain she expected in her injured hand, but there was none. She held her hands before her and saw she once again had all ten of her fingers. She stretched her hand. Her pinky bent as it should. It must have returned for a reason, she decided, grateful for the reprieve from the pain of its phantom. She slipped on her white robe and opened her bedroom door.

The house was dark and she moved through it on silent feet until she reached the door to the yard. She held her breath and closed her eyes, afraid that she would see only the night and a doomed pile of wood. That her mother was gone for good.

She exhaled as a warm breeze rustled the branches of the Enchanted Forest across the field from the house. Just beyond the tree line the tower still stood, its pinnacle still obscured by the cloud. But something was wrong. The tower should have been a black streak against the night. Instead, it shone like it was wrapped in starlight, with shimmering silver cascades spreading outwards to encompass the forest around it.

As Dana approached, she could make out long strands of something that spilled from the highest window that twisted and braided around one another. When she reached the mouth of the trail that would take her to the tower, she could see what the material was: spider silk. The trailhead was clogged with a web so thick it looked like human skin.

She walked up and down the tree line, but for as far as she could see the forest was clogged with it. She could smell it, sour and dry, with a hint of decay. There had to be a way through. Webs broke easily enough; she touched the webbing lightly with her hand to test its strength. A shudder rippled outwards, through the canopy, up the tower, rumbling stone against stone.

When the ripple reached the cloud, it expanded outward suddenly and silently, like it had taken an inward breath. For a moment, the world froze, until the cloud contracted as quickly and quietly as it had

expanded, sending a gust of wind that whipped the canopy in return. Dana staggered back as something fell free of the forest onto the grass beside her. And as quickly as it had begun, the world around her stilled.

She picked up what had fallen from the trees. It was a dagger with a handle of woven black horsehair, with a single red orb set in its pommel. The short, curved blade was as white as starlight.

Dana felt a tension she hadn't known she was carrying melt from her shoulders. Even though she could see the Realm, she was relieved to know she could still interact with and touch it, too. She had worried that something had broken — that the rules her mother had spelled out had changed in her absence; that Dana's quest was hopeless; that her father was right and her mother couldn't be saved. Her mother's influence was still all around her. Everything was going to be okay.

She slashed at the web, but the dagger could not cut it. She tested the tip it on her finger and flinched as a drop of blood welled up, sticking to the blade. The red gem glowed dully before fading. She stabbed at the web again, and it ripped and stretched and popped as it fled from the blade. She pressed the dagger more deeply into the web, but the glow had completely faded from the orb. She looked at the tip. It was clean.

She tried to squeeze a few more drops from her finger, but the wound had closed. She tried to wipe some of the dried blood onto the blade, but the orb remained dark. She looked at her left pinky and at the path to the tower. It was at least fifty yards, and already the opening had begun to reknit itself. She worried if she were to cut the phantom away she would never be whole again, that the phantom would haunt her forever.

She laid her left hand in the grass and levered the knife.

The pain was brilliant, as bright as the sun. Her blood was black on the grass, her phantom finger crumbling to ash beside it. Dana gingerly wrapped her injured hand around the knife's handle and the orb flared to life. The blade remained untarnished as it drank deep. Dana thrust it into the web again and a massive pulse pulled and snapped the tangle of silk away from her. The trees around her shuddered and sent out a ripple that rattled the tower once more. In



spite of herself, Dana stuck her tongue out at the cloud.

She cut and sliced and stabbed. The sound was tremendous as the trees around her and the world shook and trembled.

She slashed at one last curtain of silk to reveal the clearing. Before her stood the tower. The sheet of spider silk overhead turned the night sky gray.

Dana used the dagger to rip the hem of her nightgown off and wrapped the strip of cloth tightly around her injured hand, welcoming the familiar ache and pressure, then stowed the blade in her robe's sash.

Dana went to the wooden door at the base of the tower and put her ear to it. Silence.

She pulled the door open.



Lights flared up from all sides.

"Princess Dana has arrived!"

Where there should have just been stairs, a lavishly decorated ballroom stretched out before her, filled with men and women dressed in white and silver gowns and waistcoats embroidered with reflective thread. The room was illuminated by points of candlelight that stretched out forever, an ocean of shivering stars. The ceiling was lost in darkness beyond the reach of the light. When Dana took a step into the room, she saw from the way the lights shifted that the room wasn't endless, but had walls of mirrors. It was the ballroom from her mother's stories, the one they had drawn on her window together. It was just as breathtaking as Dana had imagined.

The crowd around her quieted, and the stillness spread in waves across the rest of the ballroom. The room smelled of perfume and flowers, and she breathed deeply of it. But as she did, she caught a lingering bitterness, something sour and wrong, like the webs in the forest. And for a moment the beauty of the ballroom quivered. Dana wrapped her arms around herself, her stained white nightgown and ripped white robe.

Someone stepped out from the crowd. It was her mother, draped in a quicksilver gown. Dana ran for her, arms outstretched, and hugged her mother around her waist.

"I found you." Tears streamed down Dana's face. "I found you."

Dana wanted to lose herself in the moment, to pretend her mother had never gone, that her hand was still intact, that everything was going to be all right. But something was wrong. Her mother's arms were stiff and her body felt cold. Dana stepped away. Her mother's smile looked as though the corners of her mouth were pulled up by hooks. Her eyes dead, the only spark there from reflected candlelight. Her skin was the color of ash.

"I didn't mean to worry you. I wanted it to be a surprise."

Her mother's voice felt like a hollow vibration, stripped of its warmth. Her mother offered Dana her elbow and the crowd before them parted to let them through. Her mother looked down at her, the unnatural smile still stretched her lips.

"I came to ready things for your marriage to the prince. Now I can keep my promise, and we can stay here together. Forever."

Dana wanted to believe her. But the ache in her finger told her her mother's words were a lie.

The crowd parted and she saw him. He reminded her of the promise of summer in deep winter. Of the miracle of the spring and the heartache of the fall. Dana couldn't breathe.

"My lady." The prince's voice was a deep rumble. Dana could feel it through her mother's arm.

Dana took a step away, but the prince's smile didn't falter. She turned to her mother. "We need to leave. Now." She tried to pull her mother with her, but her mother didn't budge, as if something else pulled her in the opposite direction.

"But this is what you wanted," her mother said.

Dana thought of her father. His red, puffy eyes. Waking up alone. Forever.

The prince bent down on one knee and produced a pair of slippers made of mirrors. More light reflected off of them. Dana had a vision of herself in them, dancing through the clouds with the rest of the starlight.

"No." Dana pulled against her mother again. "I

don't want your shoes. I just want to go home."

"Dana, be polite."

The prince beckoned her again with the shoes.

"No!" Dana screamed and pushed the prince's hand away with her injured hand. A shock of pain arced through her from her missing finger. A stripe of fresh blood was absorbed into the prince's hand, which began to unravel, sending a cascade of spider silk to the floor. He looked up at her, his eyes as dead as her mother's. Reflected candlelight.

"What have you done?" he said.

Dana backed away into the crowd, her arms and legs sticking to whomever she touched. The people around her screamed, a high-pitched buzzing, and pulled themselves away. Dana lost sight of her mother in the mayhem.

The prince's arm unraveled up to his shoulder. He was hollow. The last strand pulled free and tugged at the leg of the woman standing beside him. She began to unravel too. In a few moments, all of the guests had come undone, leaving Dana alone in the ballroom with a field of false stars.



Dana caught a glimpse of something shining out of the corner of her eye. Her mother lay on the ground. The light danced on her dress. Dana approached her, careful to step between the pools of silk. She knelt down beside her. Her mother's eyes were open, lifeless.

"Mom?"

Dana reached forward to touch her and saw the strands of silk affixed to her arms, legs, neck, face, chest; every inch of her. The strands went taut, dragging her mother across the room. The pools of silk on the floor snatched at her gown, twisting it around her body in awkward angles. Dana ran after her, and slashed at the threads with her dagger.

Her mother's arm went limp and dragged beneath her, as did her head, which jerked unnaturally as her hair and skin caught on the silk. Dana freed each of her mother's limbs on her slow trek across the ballroom, even her mother's mouth, which went slack and hung open. But still her mother was pulled along by an

unbreakable strand affixed to her chest, her arms and legs dragging on the floor behind her.

Dana had to step aside as her mother was pulled through a door on the far side of the room. Dana stepped over a line of thick white braids and chased after.

She was in the tower proper. A black spiral staircase hugged the black walls around the hollow space in the middle, which was filled with a quivering cascade of silk. Her mother was already ten feet above Dana and rising, her arms, head and legs dangling beneath her.

Dana ran up the stairs, and as she passed the windows set into the walls, she glimpsed the pale light of morning begin to pour over the horizon. She was running out of time. And though her legs burned, Dana willed herself to run faster.

When she reached the final landing and the final window, the cloud enveloping the top of the tower obscured the pale morning. The light on the landing looked gray and uncertain. There was a single door made of ashen gray wood, sitting ajar. Dana pushed it the rest of the way open.

The room was empty save for a four-poster canopy bed made of the same ashen wood. The silk ran up to the foot of the bed, then wove around the posters, disappearing atop the canopy. Her mom lay beneath gray covers on the bed.

Dana ran up and grabbed her mom's hand. "Mom, wake up. We have to go."

Her mother's chest neither rose nor fell, and her eyes were still beneath their lids. Her hand was cold. Dana tucked her arm beneath the covers to warm it, but there was no warmth to be found there either.

"You can't wake her," a high-pitched voice said from above the bed. Dana looked up and saw a long, thin leg descend gracefully to the floor, followed by another, and another until a spider as tall as she was settled down on the opposite side of the bed.

It was as black as the space between stars, the two eyes she could see in profile were the same color red as the orb set into her dagger. The tip of its pincer was brilliant white, as sharp as her knife. Its two forelegs were smaller than the others and ended in delicate hands. It turned to face Dana. The

spider was missing its other pincer and one of its four eyes. A thick cable of silk issued from the back of its abdomen.

Dana drew her dagger. "Release her."

The spider sighed, a hollow vibration from its abdomen. She could feel the hum of it through the floor. The silk strands around the bed and on the floor quivered. "I can't. Even if I could, she won't wake up."

Dana looked back to her mother. She looked so empty — as empty as the room around her and the people in the ballroom, and the heart of the tower itself. Dana reached out and traced a lock of her mother's hair with her injured hand. Her missing finger ached. The hair came away in her hand. She dropped it on the bed and stepped away. If her mom was under a spell, Dana would have to carry her out, and already the sun was rising. She would have more time to figure things out once they were free of the tower. It would be okay. The magic always provided for them when they were together. She would find a way to defeat this monster. She brandished her dagger at the spider.

"Let her go right now or I'll kill you."

The spider sighed again. "I would if I could. Believe me."

"Liar!" She lunged across the bed at the spider and plunged the dagger into the creature's abdomen. She jumped back across the bed, the dagger stuck in the wound.

But the dagger slipped free and fell to the floor. The wound stitched itself shut.

"You can't harm me." It lifted the dagger from the floor, pulled the red orb from the pommel and placed it gently into its empty eye socket. It held the dagger against its mouth, and the skin knitted itself into place.

It flexed its restored pincer.

Dana shrank away from the thing. "You sent the knife."

The spider folded its small hands in front of it and settled its abdomen on the floor.

Dana shook her head. "But why put up a barrier if you meant for me to get through it?"

"Why do you think you're here?" the spider

asked. It didn't look as menacing, just tired. Like her father. Dana wanted the monster to menace her. She wanted to fight and scream and kick and push away the growing horror in her belly.

Anger flared through Dana. "You kidnapped my mother."

"Your mother died in a car accident, Dana." The spider's voice was kind. As kind as her mother's had been. "You know this."

"Then why is she here?" Dana wanted to spit.

"All living beings are connected to me by the silk. I cannot claim a living being so long as their life exerts an opposing force. When that life wanes, I draw them to me and take them the rest of the way. I was drawing your mother to me when you trapped us in this cloud. The tower closed in around us. I beckoned you here so you could release us both."

"You're lying!" Dana screamed at the creature. But she didn't move to strike it. She just wrapped her arms around herself.

Dana felt a small tug at her heart. She looked down. In the growing dawn, ripples of light reflected off of a fine line of silk that extended from her chest. She reached for the strand, but her hand passed through it. It couldn't be telling the truth. It was a monster. She was a hero.

"I could trap you here forever, you know," Dana said. She couldn't look the spider in the eye. "I'll let my dad tear down the tower and you'll be stuck in this cloud forever. You won't be able to take anyone else. No one would ever die again."

"That's not how it works," the spider said. "If I can't do my work, the souls of the dead would be trapped forever in their decaying shells."

"Well, why don't I let you go. I'll stay here with her so I can see her whenever I want."

"I have already taken her life. You are the one holding onto her shell." The spider held out one of its hands to lift a strand of silk connected to her mother's chest. "You have the power here. It's your choice."

"But why put up the obstacles? The forest? The ballroom?"

The spider didn't answer. Dana already knew



why. It had given her what she always thought she wanted so she would come to the Realm. But Dana just wanted her mom, to bring her home so she could tuck Dana in and tell her stories where none of the pain was real and everything had a happy ending. To tell Dana if she was clever enough, she would always win because life was fair and heroes were rewarded in kind. But she knew now that wasn't true. She thought of her lost finger, how the ache of its phantom had faded since the forest, how she was still whole without it.

"But I'll never see her again."

"It takes more courage sometimes to let go than it does to fight," the spider said.

Dana looked down at her mother, then leaned down and kissed her mother on her temple. She felt a tingle on her lips, like the part she had been holding onto had returned to her.

"I love you," Dana whispered as tears welled in her eyes. She wiped them away on her tattered sleeve.

"The sun is nearly up," the spider said.

"Go," Dana said. The bed, and her mother, crumbled to ash.



As Dana flung the last bit of wood into the pile, her dad called out to her across the back yard.

The sun was just starting to rise over the roof of the house and his shadow cooled the air around her. He crawled through the gap in the bushes and sat down beside her. They sat for a while watching the sky lighten.

A small thing moved across a piece of wood. She caught sight of a black spider just before it disappeared into the grass.

When the sun had finished rising, her dad helped her crawl through the gap in the bushes and offered his hand. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up. I'll make us both some breakfast."

Dana slipped her good hand into his and turned with him back toward the house. As she had torn the tower down, the pain in her missing finger had gone. Her hand would heal. She was whole. She took one more look back toward the sky. The cloud was gone.









# Geddarien

by Rose Lemberg  
Illustration by Lauren Rogers

Zelig's grandfather liked to smoke with his window half open, even though winter's breath melted on the old parquet. When the snow on the streets turned as porous and yellow as a matzo ball, a pigeon flew into the room. It hid under the chaise, there to await compliments or perhaps breadcrumbs.

Zelig asked, "Do you think the pigeon would like some cake?"

Grandfather examined the offering from the lofty height of his chaise: a piece of honey cake on Zelig's outstretched palm. "A good one like that, he will want."

The boy clambered onto the chaise and wormed his way under the blanket, close to the old man's legs. Grandfather smelled comfortably of chicken soup, hand-rolled *papirosn*, violin rosin. Outside the window the abandoned cathedral still sputtered pigeons into the darkening square, and a neighboring house obstructed the rest of the view.

Grandfather said, "Do you know what Geddarien is?"

Zelig flattened a piece of cake and dropped it into a crack between the chaise and the wall. Moments later, he heard hesitant crooning from below. "No, Grandfather. What's Geddarien?"

The old man closed his heavy eyelids. "These cities like ours, my boy, they have a life of their own. And sometimes, you should know," he whispered, "the city dances." Grandfather's eyes opened again: watery gray with a thin grid of red, like railroad tracks across a thawing country. "Could you bring it to me? My *fiddele*?"

"Grandmother says it will only make you upset." But he threw the rest of his cake under the chaise and jumped off. In the small polished wardrobe, the battered black case was buried under an avalanche of hats. Not so long ago Grandfather used to go out, dandy like a pigeon in his gray pinstriped suit and a fedora; but these days he could not even properly hold the instrument. His grumpy nephew Yankel now came to give Zelig music lessons.

Grandfather opened the creaky case, and inside it the old violin glowed, waiting for touch. "Your *fiddele*, now," the old man said, "is only a quarter-fiddle, and newly made. But soon you will graduate to one-half, and then to full." He stroked the large fiddle's neck with his fingers. "To this one. My father played it, and his grandfather, too." He took up the cake of rosin from the case, moved it slowly along the horse-hairs in the bow.

Zelig felt the sounds this movement created, a music of honey sap upon wind, melting the heart into



his bones. “Grandfather, what of Geddarien?”

“Ah. Geddarien, there’s a story.” The old man smiled sadly. “The houses in this city, they do not meet. They are fixed in their places. But once in a hundred years they come all together, the living houses, and they dance.” He put the bow back into the case and took up the violin; his fingers shook. “And they need music then, so they call us, the musicians. My father played at Geddarien once, and I was there as well, you see, with my quarter-fiddle, and my big sister Bronya with her trombone. And my father had this violin in its case and I held onto the handle right here,” Grandfather put Zelig’s hand on the worn leather, “and he took Bronya’s hand, and off we went. Oh, Zelig, the music was nothing I have ever heard. The houses, my *yingle*... I have seen Sankta Maria spread her gray marble hands and dance, and the old Blackstone house, and this little library I used to go to, and the Town Hall — very fond of waltzing, they all seemed.”

Grandmother entered the room from the kitchen, carrying a steaming cup of cocoa on a tray. “You are not telling that old tale again, are you, Grandfather?” She shook her head and placed the tray in the old man’s lap.

“And what’s the harm in it, Grandmother?” The old man blew the thin film of milk off the top of his cocoa, closed one eye and took a cautious sip.

“There are things going on in the world more important than old stories. The war will come here... Yankel’s wife says they are going to move away.”

“Oh, the war,” Grandfather said, not impressed. “It’s going to be just like the last time. They won’t harm us. Our languages, they are almost the same, yes?” The old man took another gulp, and boasted, “I played my *fiddele* to the generals of three different armies!” He paused, contemplative. A soft crooning voice came from under the bed, and Grandmother tilted her head in suspicion. “Yankel isn’t going to leave this city if you paid him. He too is waiting for Geddarien. Missed the last one... What are you doing? No, no...”

Grandmother bent laboriously, and looked under the chaise. “*Oy vey ‘z mir!* An airborne rat in my house! Are you out of your mind?” She brought the broom from the kitchen and waged war on the poor

bird.



A cube of sugar sat upon the kitchen table, a small shining king adored by three musicians, two old and one young. This summer the war had reached the city of Luriberg. “This war’s nothing at all like the last time,” Yankel grumbled; but grandfather shook his head and smiled, sipping his unsweetened tea. “You see, Zelig, war is like this, that you drink your tea looking at the *tsuker*. It feels as sweet, melting in your mouth, but it doesn’t go anywhere.” He winked, and Zelig smiled back, his hands busy sewing a blue star onto the old man’s second-best jacket.

Yankel fidgeted in his chair. “You’re a *mishige*, old man. Haven’t you seen the loons marching in their uniforms and their eyes all steely, not caring, not seeing...”

“What are they, not people?” Grandfather shrugged. “They’ll take off their uniforms and they will have parties. They’ll want music. Just like the last time. I don’t remember his name, that big guy who married. And a *groiser bandit* he was... remember?”

“They all were *banditn*.” Yankel stared at his hands.

Grandfather turned to Zelig. “Yankel and I had played them the wedding music, the *freilakhs*, so jolly they gave us a big piece of lard to eat.” The old man fingered the sugar cube and looked plaintively at Grandmother, busy at the stove.

“Stolen from some peasants, no doubt.” Yankel murmured.

“You weren’t supposed to eat it, old man.” Grandmother peered into a bubbling blue pot. Potato steam rose above it, reminding Zelig of the times when he had a stuffy nose and she made him lean over this very pot, and covered his head with a towel, and told him to breathe in, deep, deep, my Zelig, *neshumele*, my little soul.

“What did you want, for us to starve? We were hungry. We ate it all night.”

“It was good lard,” Yankel sighed, “with plenty of garlic.”

Grandmother fished out a potato and banged

the plate down onto the table in front of her husband. "Well, here. No lard. No butter. We're lucky to have the *kartof'l*."

The potato broke on the plate, yellow and mealy, puffing out sweet healing steam. Grandfather dug into the salt-cellar. He rubbed the salt between his fingers, and it made a secret sound, like a door opening in the night, like the smallest movement of bow against strings. Zelig looked up, and his grandfather said, "Do you hear it?"

"Yes," Zelig whispered.

Yankel said, "Hear what?"

"How can anyone be upset," Grandfather said, "when the whole world makes music?"

Grandmother slammed the lid and sat down heavily. Before the war, her blue pot was magic; it cooked 'pigeon rolls', cabbage with filling of meat and rice; and twice a year, *gefilte fish*...

Yankel said, "I will tell you how. Yesterday they made some *yidn* kneel by the Opera theatre, in the street, just like that, and the passers-by pointed fingers and laughed. That's what those blue stars mean. Now I am asking you, is that right?"

"What did the Opera theatre have to say?" Grandfather's eyes sparkled in the dim light.

"Nothing. What could she say?"

"That's not right," said Grandfather.



When the snow curdled again on the ledge of Grandfather's window, they came to make all the *yidn* move to the ghetto. Grandmother did not want to go. She did not want to leave her blue pot. You can take the pot, they said. She said in the other room there was a big cardboard box of her old theatre dresses, smelling of must and love letters and music sheets. You cannot take the box, they said. You don't understand, she said, I played the oldest daughter of Tevye the Milkman...

They shot her in the belly.



In the ghetto they lived in a single room: Zelig and Grandfather, Yankel and his wife. The windows

had no curtains. Steely wind wailed outside, and the horse-chestnut scraped its frozen fingers on the glass. The neighbors came to whisper of all the old people who had disappeared; a woman with bruises for eyes said they had all the grandparents shot on Peltewna street because they couldn't work, and please hide your grandpa, it's a miracle he's still alive. She brought them a blanket that smelled of heart medicine and cinnamon, an old woman's smell.

There were only two beds; Zelig and Grandfather huddled in one, and sometimes in the night they'd pretend not to hear each other cry. In the evenings Grandfather made Zelig take out the old violin and play *doinas*. The *fiddele* wept in his hands, in an old man's voice, in a boy's voice, in its own voice; it sang of a *shtetl*, the girl with the loud voice betrothed to a rich man, that girl who fell for a fiddler, and how one night they ran away on a bumpy road in an old cart drawn by a horse that loved to eat sugar. Some evenings Yankel would play second fiddle, his fingers stiff from working in the construction sites in the cold.

When snow started turning to sleet on its way to the ground, Zelig's *doinas* became livelier. Yankel listened, frowning. "Soon you will want to play wedding *freilakhs*, boy, shame on my gray hairs. Have you been to any weddings of late?" No, even funerals now were haphazard affairs, and hushed.

The winter exhaled the last snowy breath and died. The horse chestnut plastered its newly hatched leaves on the window outside, and the neighboring house sent pigeons to clap their wings when the fiddling was done. Yankel's wife brought out her stash of tea to celebrate the spring, but there was no table to sit around, and the magical sugar cube was lost.



One late afternoon Yankel's wife did not come home. There was a party at one of the uniformed big shots' place and you can play waltzes, they said to Yankel. They turned to Zelig too, but Yankel said, quickly, "This boy is my student. He's good for nothing, something horrible."

The door closed.

"Grandfather," Zelig asked, "Why didn't he want me to go?"

The old man spoke with eyes closed. "Some things, my Zeligel, your eyes are too young to see."

Darkness fell, but neither Yankel nor his wife returned, and the neighbors came by to whisper, whisper, whisper, until it was past time for bed.



"Wake up!" Grandfather was shaking him.

Zelig murmured, "Is Yankel back yet?" Thin music waved in the air, an outmoded waltz melody that made his feet want to move. "Is it Yankel?"

"No, give a look!" The old man pointed. Lights flickered through the dark chestnut leaves outside the window. He put his feet down. The floor shook slightly, as if invisible dancers were whirling on the unpolished parquet. "Another bombing..."

"No, silly. It is Geddarien!" Joy melted in Grandfather's voice like raspberry syrup in tea. "Now, quick, you must help me dress." Grandfather looked alive, for the first time in months, as if miracles bubbled right under the surface of his wrinkled face. Zelig swallowed a lump in his throat. They would have to brave the dark streets, chasing... looking for something that wasn't quite there. He grimaced when he thought of returning, and Grandfather's face parched and empty like the bruised-eye woman's. Better not to think about it.

He helped the old man pull the pants over his white *kaltsones*, and then the shirt, the suspenders, the jacket... "Hurry, Zeligel, please, take the violin." Grandfather slid from the bed into Zelig's waiting arms; "how good that you've grown so tall," but in truth it was Grandfather who had become little, little and white like the sugar. They were almost to the door when Grandfather slapped his forehead. "My hat! The city will not approve otherwise." Zelig topped the old man's white head with the fedora, and arm in arm they made slow progress down the stairs. Nobody was awake. Outside the front door, the drain pipe dripped with the memory of rain, and an echo of music beckoned them further into the empty streets. There was no electricity in the ghetto at night, and yet the lanterns gave off flickering blue warmth. "Gas," the old man said, "Just like in the old days. We must find us a living house..."

Zelig soon understood what this meant when a

three-storied gray building stepped out of the street's row. It stomped and pranced on the cobblestones, as if impatient to be gone. Zelig rubbed his eyes with the back of the hand that held the case; it swung awkwardly in front of his nose. Grandfather took off his hat and bowed.

"Good evening, Mendel's house!"

The dark double doors swung open, and Zelig, still disbelieving, helped Grandfather in. The hallway was covered with murals, and the boy's young eyes made out pale figures, a bride with a rooster for a crown and two leaping sheep. The stairway shook and danced. Grandfather urged Zelig up to the roof, where parasite maples grew through rain-painted tiles. "Play, Zeligel," Grandfather said, and the boy took the warm fiddle out of its case. He adjusted the pegs and lowered his chin to the chinrest. The polished blackness of it creaked gently under his face, and with his ear so close, he heard the sound of the still strings waiting for music. Mendel's house moved, and the bow flew up in his hands, and lured the melody out of the night into the polished planes of the fiddle. The house jumped over the ghetto's border, broke into a gallop on the sleeping streets, leaving behind it a trail of plaster.

They found the city's Geddarien in the Market square. The arrangement of streets had been discarded, and houses large and small whirled round, embracing their dancing partners with hands of stone and glass. And there, by the dried-up fountain, two human musicians sent silver and feathered honey into the night: a young cellist whom Zelig did not recognize, and Grandfather's friend Velvl with his clarinet. "Finally!" Velvl cried, "We need violins..." Zelig sat Grandfather down on the fountain's edge. He smiled and swung his bow, and the waltz poured from under his fingers.

All round them the bright Market Square kept unfolding, a dance-floor for hundreds of houses, for churches and bakeries, palaces, libraries, humble graystones with their windows a-flapping, revealing inside sleeping figures tucked into their beds. The stone dancers moved *one two three, one two three, one two three*, and they whirled and they turned, swinging trees from the rooftops, and pigeons kept balance pretending to sleep, but they secretly flapped *one two three, one two three*, and in Zelig's hands music was



magic.

The golden spiral of the waltz died down, and through the wild thumping of blood in his ears Zelig heard Grandfather speaking to someone. "It is too soon, my city, my Luriberg. I know. I counted. I wasn't supposed to live long enough to see another Ged-darien."

"I am afraid..." someone said, making words into old-fashioned shapes, "that soon there won't be any musicians left, and what kind of Geddarien is it without music?" The speaker was a warm glow wrapped around the Council Tower, and its face was the shining face of an ancient clock. "When Zbigniew rode up this hill to lay my first stone, Reb Lurie was riding behind him with a fiddle in his hands." The city itself was speaking through the tower, Zelig felt; Luriberg's face wavered, as if concealing tears. "I wanted a dance, one last dance from my *yidn* musicians before they're all gone."

Other houses came closer now. Good riddance, one said, and another one added, the *yidn* people are pigeons, thieving and dirty, and the Opera theatre said no, the music is too fine to die, but a sharp-roofed one said, there'll be music without them. Other houses wanted more waltzing and why did you stop, we don't care what kind of people they are for as long as the dancing continues.

Grandfather said, "Where is my Yankel?"

"He is not well enough to play here," said the city, "but if you want, I can invite him."

Grandfather said. "Please... He waited all of his life."

A black building approached, its stones finely chiseled; it was crowned by a lion that stepped on a book. Zelig inclined his head to the famous Blackstone house, and he thought that it nodded back at him, but the building did not speak. The Council Tower that was the city swung its doors wide, and the musicians waited in silence. The houses shuffled their feet.

Then a voice cried out on the tower's doorstep. Yankel's face was a *doina* that stopped in mid-wail. He could not walk properly. His left hand that used to hug the fiddle's neck so tenderly now hung useless at his side, and his good right hand was empty.

"Yankele, what's with you?" Grandfather pushed Zelig gently in the ribs, and the boy ran up to Yankel and helped him wobble over and sit by the old man.

"You want to know? Then I will tell you. They took all these people to kill..." He took a gurgling breath and leaned over, put his face in his hands. "They made me play *Hava Nagila*."

Grandfather pulled him close. "Your wife?"

It was some time before Yankel whispered, "Yes."

The cellist crouched and took Yankel's good hand. "Have you seen my girl there? My Gita?" No, the fiddler whispered. She might still be all right.

Luriberg's light dimmed. "Can we please have the last of the music?"

"Everything's gone." Yankel said. "We need to run. There's nowhere to run."

The Blackstone House edged closer; its lion spoke. "I can guide you to a place of safety."

"I know what you have in mind," the city said, "But they must not go yet. I have waited for eighty years."

The cellist said, "Well, I am not going, not without my *libe*. Later we'll try to escape together."

The clarinet-Velvl said, "I also will stay. Whatever happens, happens."

Grandfather said, "I will stay if you let my Zelig go."

"You're too old to play," the city replied, "and what kind of dancing is it without the fiddle?"

"You'll see."

The boy knelt by the old man and put his hands on Grandfather's cheeks. "How can I ever leave you?" It seemed that the old man was melting under his hands, his wrinkled warm skin insubstantial like a memory.

"You must go," Grandfather said. "This *fiddle* wants to meet your grandchildren."

"Come with us then. Yankel's going, and you..."

"I cannot."

"Please. I will help you..." But Zelig wasn't sure he knew how. Grandfather seemed translucent, and his shadow merged with the fountain's water that

spilled over to become a modest river that ran through the Market Square. Strange, Zelig thought that the fountain was dry before.

Grandfather's eyes crinkled. "It's all right. I want to play again, here in my shining gray city."

The doors of the Blackstone house wavered. Yankel hauled himself up somehow and grabbed Zelig by the hand. "Come on, come on, come on."

Zelig got up, then leaned over and kissed Grandfather's wet cheek. "But how will you play without an instrument?"

The old man's lips turned up. "Oh, like this." He brought his palms sharply together, and announced, "*Patsch Tants!*"

The doors of the Blackstone House swung gently behind them. Outside, the clarinet swirled into the lantern-lit night, and the houses stomped their stones in tune with the music of Grandfather's soft white hands.



Blackstone house was a respectable building once, a palace of commerce; he had traveled wide between Luriberg and other free living cities. In his rooms he kept shells and dark wooden commodes inlaid with mother-of-pearl; mermaids looked coquettishly out of aged oil paintings. Blackstone opened all doors wide, and swung his stairs down. "Underneath me," he said, "there are roadways of old wood and brick that lead south and west to the land by the sea. Always take right turns until a living city speaks to you from above. If you do not hear her voice, do not go up."

"Thank you, Blackstone," Zelig bowed, but Yankel was strangely docile, not complaining, not even frowning. Slowly they descended the stairs. The catacombs under Blackstone were dry and warm, and the brick floor felt reassuring beneath their feet; the walls sported a dark-red paint splashed with little gold dots. After three right turns the brick began to lose shape and the paint on the walls to chip; there were other hours and turns, and clean water that seeped through the ancient floor-slabs and pooled in the cracks as they walked. "Enough of this," Yankel suddenly said, and Zelig made him sit on the drier stones by the wall. The fiddler was out of breath, if not

out of words.

"I was wrong to drag us down here. There's no point in walking further. There's nothing here. We're as good as dead. Everybody's dead."

Zelig sighed. "Well, Grandfather is still in Geddarien..."

Yankel looked at him strangely. "He is gone, my boy. There never was a Geddarien. I came back to the room and found you both... He died of starvation. White and empty."

"No, Geddarien really happened." Grandmother had died, but Grandfather was still there, where the houses whirled in the last waltz; Zelig could hear them inside his violin case if he brought it close to his ear. Like a shell that caught the whole ocean inside it, the violin caught the city, and if he were to play it again, the houses would spill from under his fingers and dance. "Geddarien is here, Yankel. All here inside."

The fiddler petted him on the head. "You are delirious with hunger. Perhaps tomorrow we'll have some *mazl* and find us a *bisele* to eat." He bent his legs awkwardly, as if they were soft and filled with rags. "I don't know where this tunnel leads," he whispered, "I do not remember how we got here..."

"I do," Zelig said. He put a hand on Yankel's forehead. It felt furnace-red, but still real. "You should try to sleep."

He curled on the cold tiles himself, but rest did not come. He cradled the violin case and listened to Yankel's kettle-thin snores, and after a while it seemed to him that he heard music come from inside the black case, a slow and sweet melody that covered his back in Grandfather's gray pinstriped jacket, and Grandmother's face leaned over and whispered to him, *shluf, mayn kind*, and he sank into the goose-down of sleep.

In the morning, Yankel was cold to the touch and did not wake, no matter how much Zelig shook him. He just sat there with his face all sharp and his mouth open, revealing teeth. Zelig put both hands on the wet wall just above Yankel's head, and brought himself up somehow, fearful to touch the cold flesh. Zelig's feet came to life then and carried him away, away, further down the tunnel.

A rat darted between his legs and tripped him,

and he fell face first into the dirt. He lay there for a while, empty of feelings, empty of himself. ‘*He died of starvation. White and empty*’. He should have at least covered Yankel’s face and said *shma*. But he could not go back. Yankel was... no longer human. And what if he lost his way? No, no... but he hugged the black fiddle-case tightly and backed out into a crawl, then clambered to his feet. The water still seeped on the floor, and he traced it back, hoping that back was back, hoping that he had not taken turns.

A tiny drumming sound grew alongside him, like chubby old fingers on glass, like rain on a coffin. He would here die, too, somewhere underneath living cities too large and important to bow down and take a look. He heard tiny squeaks now; and suddenly Yankel swam back into view, still propped against the wall, but now his half-solid form was surrounded by diners. Rats. Dozens of them, hundreds, with naked pink tails and shifting, beady eyes. Zelig could not even muster a scream; the horrors boiled over in his heart. He opened his case. The fiddle was cold under his cheek. It played nameless dances, the music of might-have-beens. It licked sounds from the semi-transparent red candy of childhood, it scraped on the residue of loss; it vibrated along the frosted windows of winters, tip-toed over rooftops to glide the bow over the moon.

The rats were gone. Zelig’s soul poured viscous and heavy, back into his hollow clothes. The boy put the fiddle back home and said *shma* for Yankel, but his voice rang inhuman after the fiddle’s.

The corridor stretched before the boy again; endless, lightless. He put his right hand on the damp wall and walked where it guided.



Days later — or was it weeks? months? — he heard a voice, a gentle voice from above. *Caro mio, não percas a esperança*. A woman was speaking. Was that the city? Her voice of stone mingled with salt water in his eyes, and Zelig walked on blinded, trailing fingers over the wall. Light blinked uncertainly; he dragged his eyelids open. A square of sunlight spread its promise on the floor by his feet.

“Here you are!”

Zelig tilted his head up. The movement made him suddenly dizzy. A girl’s face peered through the

grating. “The city sent me to look for you.” Zelig sheltered his eyes against unfamiliar sun, but he could not make out her features. The girl shouted to someone, “Boruch! Borya! Come here quick!” He heard the long scrape of the grate being moved. He wanted to say something, anything, but could not draw a breath. The world tilted.



When he came to, he was sitting on a small piece of cloth under a white awning, overlooking the ocean. Everything was full of sound; in the harbor, ships spoke to each other in a language of metal and rope, and the breeze played a lazy melody tilting small boats in the water. Gulls and pigeons strutted on the pier, waiting for pieces of bread, pieces such as he held in his hand. He bit into his bread hastily, afraid that the world was unstable yet; but it was real enough.

“And a good day to you.” The girl that had found him now sat by his side. She was older, maybe sixteen, seventeen; she had a nose like a potato, and laughing brown eyes. The most beautiful girl in the world, he thought, but said nothing, his mouth full of bread. “I am Reyzi, and this is my brother Borya.” The youth beside her had the same face, only sadder and thinner somehow. “Is that your fiddle?”

“Yes,” he said. “I am Zelig. From Luriberg. Where are you from?”

“Oh. Malin.” Into Zelig’s confused eyes she added, “It’s a small town near the border. We’ve never been to Luriberg, but we heard...”

“How did you escape?” Zelig asked, a bit more harshly than he intended.

“Malin’s *kosciol* sheltered us. Her name is Sankta Elzbeta.”

Zelig gulped. “A church saved you?”

“Yes, us and some others. We hid in the basement. Malin is a small town, you see. Only four living buildings. Luriberg, now, Luriberg must be so big. I heard that once every hundred years there is a thing called Geddarien...”

Zelig interrupted, his mouth dry. “How many *yidn* survived in Malin?”

“More than half, I think. Two hundred are here



now, waiting to sail to America.”

The serious boy spoke up for the first time. “How many survived in Luriberg?”

“I... I don’t know about anyone else.”

Reyzl frowned fiercely, and said, “Well, you’re coming with us, of course. I play the clarinet, by the way, and my brother is a fiddler like you.”

Borya said. “I lost my fiddle...”

“Maybe it’s for the best,” Reyzl said, “It’s not good for you to play. He gets too excited, you see, and he has a bad heart,” she explained to Zelig.

“... but I can sew pants.”

“Our grandfather went to America once,” Reyzl said, “he came back, said it was a poor country. He brought back a sewing machine and he taught us.”

“I will work hard and buy me a new fiddle.”

Reyzl sighed. “But who knows if they even need musicians there...”

“What are they, not people?” Zelig shrugged. “Everybody wants music.” Even the people who kill do, he thought, yes, even the stone-clad cities.

“Everybody wants pants,” Borya said. “That’s for sure.”

“Would you like to play a bit now?”

Zelig nodded. “Of course! Anything but *Hava Nagila*.” When he saw Borya’s haunted expression he added quickly, “I can show you this melody. *Patsch Tants* for clarinet and hands.”

He took Borya’s palms between his own to teach him his grandfather’s music.



# The Latest Incarnation of Secondhand Johnny

by Michelle Mark Rigney  
Illustration by Fotografía 1606



## I. Johnny

The county-wide no-smoking ordinance had not been expected to pass, but in the end the vote was six to three in favor. No surprise, then, that the evening atmosphere at Susan Kesper's Red Lion Tavern was dismal even by local standards. Shoulders slumped, chins tucked down, and the collective train of thought added up to "There goes the neighborhood, tavern included."

With her elbows propped on the bar and the newspaper spread before her, Susan's first worry was for Johnny. Secondhand Johnny, everybody called him, although no one had any idea if this was his real name — or if he even had an official given name.

Secondhand Johnny was name enough, and he answered to it as needed.

"It'll kill him," said Susan, voicing what was on everyone's mind. "It'll flat dead kill 'im."

The saying of it nearly (but not quite) convinced her that Johnny really was in mortal danger, but since mortal he most certainly was not, well. The idea of something actually killing Johnny sounded, at best, off-kilter.

Johnny had formed on a crowded Friday night, and had done so with such subtle craft and diaphanous grace that at first no one had taken any notice. One minute, the haze of cigarette smoke had been airborne, curling toward the ceiling fan and the

pressed tin above, and the next...well, the next anyone knew, Johnny had sprawled across the top of a chair-backed stool halfway between Ben Frasier and Skunk Schwegmann, for all the world as if he'd occupied that chair from time out of mind.

He smoked, of course, and he looked like hell. He wore a frayed and rumpled smoke-gray suit over a pale, gray-skinned body, and he went so far in his affectation as to leave a battered pork-pie hat perched at all times atop his head. Imagine an early image of Frank Sinatra, not so young as to be fresh, and not so old as to have put on weight, then pile on several centuries of hard times and awful experience. To fashion the image further, let the devil take the hindmost — and then the foremost, too. Let ten worlds of cares droop the shoulders and sink the cheeks, let murky thoughts linger where happiness might otherwise have grown, then push on the entire frame from above with a force of gravity far beyond standard for the earth, such that every move, even blinking, becomes a titanic effort, a sigh. Take all these traits together and there will be Secondhand Johnny, the Red Lion's ultimate denizen: Amusing, yes, but wry and morose. Experienced, sure, and possibly even wise, but a phantom nonetheless, or so theorized the regulars: a phantom born from a fog-bound world of hurt and melancholy.

That this world might be their own — and of their own devising — was not a proposition with which the regulars bothered themselves. It was both too awful and too obvious to require mention.

Everybody liked Johnny. He could talk, he could order a drink — although where the liquid went once he'd consumed it, no one could say — and he knew more stories than anyone alive, with fresh yarns delivered every night. He always had a smile for Susan and a tip of his hat for the rest. Dependable as clockwork, it took only a few lit cigarettes on any given night to coax him out of the ether and into a seat, and once there, he could regale the assemblage for hours with tales of hobos and wine, broken hearts and crossed lovers, coal mine disasters and endless voyages on bottle-green seas. When he spoke of Pharaoh's army, glorious in their finery, marching at a quick martial trot in pursuit of the Israelites, he sounded as if he'd been there himself, embodied perhaps in the pitchy smoke of ceremonial torches. When he explained the grisly details of

bubonic plague, how the boils could swell a child to twice its normal size, every listener in earshot felt that he'd been transported directly to the tallow-lit shacks of Europe's Middle Ages. He could speak and speak well on all subjects, all periods, and all manner of people. He could hold forth for as long as anyone cared to hear, which was, on most nights, right up 'til "Last call!" and beyond.

Or, on nights when silence ruled his companions, he could dive deep into the monastic devotions of alcohol and reflection. He knew for a certainty, as only a pure barfly can, that the deepest of thoughts do sometimes reside in the bottom of an emptied glass.

## II. Smoking

All the Red Lion regulars smoked. It was very nearly a requirement, like a secret password without which entrance would be denied. Ben Frasier smoked, and had since the age of twelve; he'd been a welder with Alcoa, a union man through and through. Skunk Schwegmann, the crew chief, smoked, including on the job, where he stood surrounded by Number Two pine studs, tinder-dry, their eight-foot lengths standing straight to the sky and ready for either a layer of rigid insulation or incineration by way of a stray spark. Lloyd Fentress smoked, typically in spurts; he'd been in the process of quitting for fifteen years. Even Josh Fuller, the youngest of the daily barflies, smoked: generics, menthols, half-finished stubs found carpeting the floor or abandoned in the ashtray. Josh was easily the most addicted of them all.

Susan smoked, of course. It was an occupational hazard, part and parcel of long-term tavern ownership.

Ben craned his beefy neck up and around to better see the newspaper article. "When's it take effect?" he asked. "How long we got?"

"Three weeks," said Susan. "Takes effect first of July."

As she spoke, the narrow metal hands of the bar's ancient Falstaff wall clock slid toward five thirty in the afternoon. Unpretentious and dark, awash in the pungent smells of barely tapped sorrow, spilled American beers, and the ever-present fog of enveloping smoke, the Red Lion had been open since one, and so far the only warm bodies present were



Susan herself, her four regulars, and two unknown women sipping gin fizzies at a distant booth. The ice machine clanked and hummed in an agony of despair, the neon Old Style and Budweiser signs glowed with witchcraft colors in the curtained front window, and outside, the dripping June rain fell like bad, unending news.

Three weeks. This notion presented itself as vague to Susan — indeed, to all those gathered around the newspaper that evening — for the simple reason that her particular stock in trade involved negating, as much as possible, any sense of time. The perpetual twilight of a good bar swallows time and serves as a plausible denial of the passage of the sun, the orbit of the moon, or the need to do anything more ambitious than order up another drink. The announcement of any event that might thwart that effort amounts to a declaration of war.

Those encountering Susan for the first time, especially, but not exclusively, men, considered her to be tough, in part because of her height and broad build — the sweep of her high, flat forehead — but also because of her stoic, silent demeanor. She had never fit the bill of the traditional affable barkeep. Indeed, entire days sidled past without Susan uttering any more syllables than were absolutely required to fill an order or make change.

Ultimately, neither her quietude nor her imposing size told much about the guarded Susan kept within, the one who still mused, in a vague manner, on the time when she would be swept away by some dashing Prince Charming, if not on a steed then at least in a pickup, to be abruptly carried off to a new life not entirely of her choosing, but one which would nonetheless allow her to adopt new styles, new routines and new friends. Whether she wound up in the tumbleweed desert, a fairy-tale castle or the stink of a Greenland fishery, it was all the same to her; what mattered was the impending rescue. A Romantic agent of change would one day come and, on seeing her, recognize her as his sole object and purpose in life. It would be a simple matter to follow such a one to the ends of the earth.

That notions of rescue (and by a man) were old fashioned and backward bothered Susan not at all. She knew considerably less of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem than they did of her, perhaps because she

belonged body and soul to a different, now all but inadmissible age. While her external days were matter-of-fact and bottom-line, both her pulse rate and her heart carried the stamp of Gothic Romance: pure, heightened, and always deferred.

### III. Plans

“We need a plan,” mused Skunk Schwegmann, whose job it was to always have plans. “We need a plan, and we got three weeks to come up with it.”

Ben, retired for five years but only just pushing sixty, shook his head. “Let’s not rush off too quick. Let’s ask Johnny what he thinks.”

All the men drew deeply on their cigarettes, and when they exhaled, the plumes of bluish smoke rose above their heads and twined there, vines of mist rolling one atop the next until soon, there was a presence, a sense of shape. The men, and Susan, lit fresh cigarettes and took fresh breaths. They rarely called Johnny with any intentionality, but they knew he would come if the need was great, if the air became sufficiently heavy, and so they kept at their poisonous work until Secondhand Johnny alit in the corner seat at the bar, in good view of everyone, and said, as he usually did on first arriving, “*Compadres*, what’s the good word?”

Ben Frasier, lips pursed, his heavy, jowly skull rocking back and forth as if on a pivot, simply said, “Not a good word anyplace. Tonight, Johnny, it’s bad. All bad.”

They explained, and Johnny nodded with his usual pensiveness, no more, no less. “That could do for me,” he said after a time. “Yes, sir. That could just about do me in.”

“No,” Susan said, surprised at her own insistence, at the sharp antagonism with which she launched her rebuttal. “We’re going to think of something. I promise. I swear.”

Secondhand Johnny smiled like a drunk suddenly in possession of a vast and wonderful secret. “Howzabout the usual, darling? I think this definitely calls for a drink.”

Three weeks. Three short weeks shot through with awkward, half-made plans, outlandish solutions

kicking like newborns and far less gainly, and more than a few raised tempers. The barfly regulars became more regular still, so intent on the saving of their insubstantial friend that they hardly graced their homes except to sleep and rise once more for work. Ben, well versed in the flexibilities of retirement, began spending nights in the stockroom in back, a dingy space already outfitted with a cot, since Susan had learned long ago that a certain class of alcoholic does better sleeping it off in the company of friends (or friendly strangers) than in the cold-comfort confines of the local jail.

Planning, however, turned out not to be the group's strong suit. True, ideas sprouted like weeds — despite Johnny's endless tale-spinning interruptions, which ranged from the pyres of Aztec sacrifices to the wildfires of Yellowstone — but what the combined forces of the barflies could not muster in effective originality, they most certainly managed in the realm of the critique. No sooner had a potential solution been proposed than it was shot down by the nearest available neighbor.

The heart of the trouble, said Skunk, was no one knew precisely what Johnny was; without that essential information, there wasn't anything else to consider.

"So what about it?" Skunk demanded of Secondhand Johnny. "I mean, what the hell are you anyway?"

Johnny cocked one eye at the ceiling and considered the matter. "One supposes," he said eventually, "that I'm a sort of haunt. But I don't feel real tied down — not to this place, anyway. I'm pretty sure I could up and walk out that door there anytime... I just don't have the hankering to do so. And besides, if I were a normal ghost or whatnot, I'd have a history, yeah? Some wrong to right, a mission or quest. And frankly, in that department, I haven't got a pot to piss in. My first memory, gents, is of being right here with you, elbows on this fine oak bar, and Ms. Susan asking what I might like to have."

This was more or less true. On first sighting Johnny, Susan had in fact sat down hard on the floor, her legs too wobbly to support her. Her initial query about a drink had been spoken entirely out of habit, and had been uttered from a seated position on the rubber floor mat, out of sight behind the bar.

Johnny's reply had become the stuff of local legend: "I'll have what she's having."

No one minded that he'd cribbed the line from a movie — a movie he claimed not to have ever seen — for what mattered was that he'd made them laugh out loud before they'd even had a chance to ask where on earth he'd come from. Before, even, they'd had a chance to be frightened.

Since then, most newcomers had mistaken Secondhand Johnny's semi-solid appearance as a trick of too much drink and the Red Lion's erratic, poorly designed lighting. He'd regaled perfect strangers with international escapades, political opinions, and even dubious theology, sometimes for hours, and they always left none the wiser, convinced that Johnny, like themselves, had a life outside the bar and would, like everyone else, return to it soon enough.

Now Josh Fuller spoke up, puzzled. "You say you don't have no memories. But you do, you got to, 'cos you tell all these stories. You got more stories than anyone I ever knew."

"Sure," said Secondhand Johnny, lighting up a smoke, "but as you might've noticed, not one of 'em's mine. You don't hear me saying 'I' in a single one."

"Well, how the hell —"

"Don't ask me. I just know things. It don't mean they ever happened to me. Sure, I think that once upon a time, I had a mother, a father. I got born, grew up, died. But maybe then something went wrong. Being dead didn't work out for me like it did for others, so now? Now, all I got is what you see. Smoke."

## IV. Life

Two weeks ticked by, and most of another. Out in the world beyond, the fireflies rose in clouds from the fields, the June-bugs batted against the mesh of reluctant screen doors, and the fireworks vendors did gangbuster business in preparation for the nation's latest birthday. Inside, the atmosphere went from gloomy to bleak. Everything had been suggested and then refuted: Storing or otherwise containing Johnny in a large glass beaker and only taking him out for special occasions; Releasing him high atop the smoke stack at Ben's old Alcoa haunts; Risking jail in direct

defiance of the upcoming law; Somehow solidifying Johnny's endless tiny particulates and preserving him as a statue; Calling the ACLU; And taking up arms in a blaze of First Amendment glory and gunning down anyone who refused to enter and light up on Johnny's behalf.

"Last call," said Susan on the Red Lion's final night of legal smoking.

"Hell," murmured Lloyd. "This time, I am quitting for sure. Swear to God on high."

"You do that," smiled Secondhand Johnny. "These things'll earn ya' a one-way ticket to the morgue, that's a fact."

One by one, they shook hands, embraced, and exited with the shuffling embarrassment of mourners at a poorly attended funeral. To try and ease their passage, Secondhand Johnny gave them a cheery, perfunctory wave.

"Don't worry about me," he said. "Don't you worry 'bout a thing."

The heavy black door whispered shut. Susan turned the deadbolt and latched the chain. She jabbed at the switch that controlled the neons in the window and meandered back to the bar where Johnny sat, the fingers of his ashen right hand absently stroking the rim of a whiskey sour.

"It's funny," said Johnny, after they'd lingered in silence for a time, with Susan pulling on a Winston and Johnny continuing to ignore his drink. "Funny to think there's a law been passed against me. Like it's personal or something, y'know? I tell you what, the government starts doin' that kinda thing with normal folks, it'd be quite a precedent."

"I love you," said Susan.

After a thoughtful moment, Johnny asked, "Why?"

Susan stubbed out the last of her cigarette in an ashtray stolen years ago from a competing bar over on Sixth Street. "Too big a question."

"Sorry," said Johnny.

She took his hand, felt it give beneath her fingers. His skin radiated no heat, he was the exact temperature of the surrounding air, neither more nor

less. It was the first time they'd ever touched.

"I don't fall in love too easy," she said.

"Most don't."

"And I never know why."

Secondhand Johnny nodded as if nothing could be plainer or more natural. "A fella couldn't do any better," he said at last.

"I'm too tall," Susan said. "Too big."

"Wouldn't want to get into a shoving match with you, that's for sure," Johnny agreed.

"Got a mind of my own."

"I like your mind just fine," said Johnny. "What I want to know is, how about your lungs?"

The question hung in the air exactly like the soft breath of smoke that had produced it. After a moment, Secondhand Johnny reached across the bar and caressed Susan's cheek with the back of one languid hand. Cat-like, Susan leaned into the touch, eyes half-closed. Johnny traced the bone of her cheek with his knuckles, angling down until his fingers brushed her lips.

"Now," said Johnny, "breathe."

Susan inhaled, her lips just parted as if to hold a precious, freshly lit cigarette. With the soft intake of air, the edges of Johnny's fingertips turned to vapor, losing both form and solidity, and rushed inside the silent portal of Susan's waiting mouth.

"Again," said Johnny, and his eyes met hers, gray gazing at blue, death peering at life. "Again."

She took hold of his arm, one hand clamping onto either side of his unresisting elbow, and she planted her mouth on what remained of the back of Johnny's monochromatic hand. This time, the inrush of breath was hungry, deliberately fierce, and Johnny sighed in turn; his eyes slipped shut in an ecstasy of quiet delight.

"Again," he murmured. "Again..."

With Johnny's hand and lower arm already gone, Susan leaned down and kissed the folds of his sleeve, suckling the fabric and pulling it inside with greedy, insistent force. Johnny rose to meet her, he stood up on his chair and clambered onto the top of the bar,

their mouths met in a frenzied, heat-absent kiss — but only for an instant, and after that, Susan's mouth bored into Johnny's head, into the formless dim tangle of skull, hair, and gray matter. Teardrops splashed the wood, but even as her hands trembled in rebellious panic, Susan continued, eyes squeezed shut now so that she would not have to see the ruin of her lover, the headless, armless torso, the legs beneath still kicking to stand higher on the stool top, guided by who knew what. Lower, lower, lower still, she worked her way down and down, absorbing him breath by breath, right to the soles of his weary, smoke-shod shoes.

She paused, she gasped for air. She let out a delicate, involuntary cough.

The ice machine clanked to life. The Falstaff clock advanced in stolid silence: another timeless minute gone. Outside, a repair truck trundled by, its reluctant gears shifting in tandem with the Doppler effect, and then the roar receded quickly into an unseen, night-black distance.

Susan pushed herself up and away from the bar.

"Johnny?" she called. Her voice cracked, rasping like bark; it sounded suddenly as if she'd been a triple-pack-a-day-smoker for life. "Johnny?"

She had not expected an answer. She did not receive one. Even when she breathed out as hard as she could, pushing with every ounce of strength her diaphragm afforded, nothing came. Secondhand Johnny was gone.

## V. A Hobo's Lullaby

The next evening, with Ben, Skunk, Lloyd and Josh all at the bar, all drinking, all fingering their packs of unlit brand-name cigarettes, Susan told them a lie.

"Walked out the door," she said. "Walked out, tipped his hat, and that was the last I saw him."

She coughed sharply, and shook her head to clear it. "He said to wish all y'all the best."

Ben drained his glass with a slurp, and Skunk stared at his cuticles. Josh flicked on his lighter and set a coaster on fire; as it charred toward his hand, he dropped the remains into his pint glass of beer. An angry cloud of steam rose up, a puff of visible air

disappearing even as it fled the confines of the glass.

Lloyd looked around at his companions. "A law oughtn't chase a man away," he said. "A law oughtn't not do that, not to anyone."

"They start takin' any more of my freedoms," Ben said, "and I'm gonna start carryin' my gun, you know what I'm sayin'?"

Skunk laughed. "Yeah, sure."

"What's that s'posed to mean?"

"Threatening to carry a gun. You're a real big man."

"Hey, now," Ben began, half-rising from his seat. "We got a problem here?"

"No, we don't," Susan said, and she shoved a broom handle between the two men. "We don't have a problem and we're not going to. Got it?"

"Skunk, I got a question," said Lloyd, as if being chipper could calm any storm. "All these years and I don't really know — is Skunk your real name?"

Skunk swiveled away from Ben to scowl at Lloyd. "No," he said, and he picked up his drink and slouched his way to a deserted, distant booth.

After that, the four men rarely sat together, and Josh, who could hardly sit still for five minutes without a lit cigarette even in peaceful circumstances, ceased coming to the Red Lion altogether. Susan worried briefly that the smoking ban really would kill off business, but over the next month, an entirely new set of regulars appeared, trickling in here, settling in there, learning the contours of their newly adopted favorite seats one gentle hour at a time. They were younger, more fastidious, apt to order mixed drinks over a beer, and vocally willing to trade the succor of nicotine for the seeping charm of alcohol. They smiled when they ordered; they left generous tips. When Susan tallied her receipts at the end of the second full month following the no-smoking edict, she was pleased and surprised to discover that the county government had inadvertently given her a seven-percent raise.

She also worried — for a time — that Second-hand Johnny's parting gift would be lung cancer: a fatal tumor, or at the very least the endless rattling cough of permanent congestion and lifelong emphysema. Instead, the cough she'd suffered in



the days and weeks after imbibing the smoke-man dissipated, eased and finally vanished altogether. She found it startlingly easy to quit smoking, cold turkey. In a rare visit to her doctor, she was given a clean bill of health, and when she tested her lung capacity at a county fair health kiosk the following summer, she placed in the eighty-fifth percentile for adult women of similar age, athletes included.

What replaced the cough was a sudden volubility, an impetuous tendency to launch into esoteric stories, stories that often left her gasping; the twists and turns of the narratives had the capacity to surprise everyone, including herself. More than one of her “new” regulars told her she was the funniest, most entertaining bartender they’d ever encountered, and that she was at least half the reason the Red Lion had become their watering hole of choice.

Try as she might, she could not stay still. The seemingly congenital lack of ambition that had led her to bartending in the first place eroded steadily, replaced by a feeling of lightness, light-footedness, a burning, urgent wanderlust that grew more intense with every passing day. She dreamed by nights not of places, but of people, of stories yet to be encountered, of tales of her own that willing ears the world over might want to hear. Eighteen months to the day from the passage of the no-smoking ordinance, Susan sold the Red Lion to a neighbor, donated her furniture to Goodwill,

vacated her apartment, and lugged a newly purchased backpack, stuffed full with clothes and travel supplies, to the local Greyhound station.

“Where to?” said the man behind the ticket counter.

“Pharaoh’s army,” said Susan. “That, or just about anyplace not here.”

The ticket seller pursed his lips and frowned; he preferred exact destinations, ones he’d heard of. Still, he liked this customer’s grey, storm-cloud eyes, and the smoky timbre of her voice gave him unexpected chills. He had an odd idea that he wanted to sit down with her, tell her all his life’s history, every last scrap, not in hopes that she’d understand or offer some sort of ministerial forgiveness, but with the sole desire that she’d carry his story with her, that she might somehow swallow it up and absorb it, like fast-flowing water licking silt off a muddy bank.

He almost gave in — almost — but he was on the clock, anchored to duty and work. He checked himself, and then he checked his schedule.

“Right-o,” he said. “That’ll be forty-three dollars. Departing in, let’s see...twenty-five minutes. One way to Pharaoh’s army, and may the road rise up to meet you.”

## Contributors

**Alma Alexander's** life so far has prepared her very well for her chosen career. She was born in a country which no longer exists on the maps, has lived and worked in seven countries on four continents (and in cyberspace!), has climbed mountains, dived in coral reefs, flown small planes, swum with dolphins, touched two-thousand-year-old tiles in a gate out of Babylon. She is a novelist, anthologist and short story writer who currently shares her life between the Pacific Northwest of the USA (where she lives with her husband and two cats) and the wonderful fantasy worlds of her own imagination. You can find out more about Alma on her website ([www.AlmaAlexander.org](http://www.AlmaAlexander.org)), her Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/pages/Alma-Alexander/67938071280](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Alma-Alexander/67938071280)) or her blog ([anghara.livejournal.com](http://anghara.livejournal.com)).



**Daniel Ausema** has a background in experiential education and journalism and is now a stay-at-home dad. His fiction and poetry have appeared and are forthcoming in numerous publications, including *Daily Science Fiction*, *Electric Velocipede*, and *Penumbra*. He lives in Colorado, where May blizzards and summer wildfires wage an eternal war.

**Louise Boyd** hails from a small town on the east coast of Scotland. She has an unhealthy liking for tea, revels in midnight reading and takes her inspiration from the darker side of suburban living. You can find more of her work at <http://emptyorchestra.deviantart.com>.



**Mark Brady** grew up and lives on Long Island, New York, where he is a software developer at a financial lending company. He fell in love with fractal art many years ago, and has been creating his own for about seven years. These days, he primarily uses Mandelbulb3d to create his images, but also uses Ultrafractal and Incendia on occasion. You can see more of his work at <http://aureliuscat.deviantart.com>.

**Fotografía 1606** is **Eduardo Hernández** and **Sara Méndez**. They became friends in middle school in Monterrey, México, and became reacquainted ten years later, on their birthday. Now a young couple, they realized that they shared more than a common birthday. As freelance photographers, they found they worked best as a team, and formed their photography business, Fotografía 1606, in 2011. For more of their work, look them up on Tumblr and Flickr, find them on Facebook, or check out their blog at [www.fotografia1606.blogspot.mx/](http://www.fotografia1606.blogspot.mx/).



**Kelly Lagor** lives in San Diego where she writes, watches old movies, and plays banjo and ukulele in a band. She is a Submissions Editor at *Apex Magazine*, and a graduate of the Viable Paradise Workshop. She blogs over at [www.lagoraphobia.com](http://www.lagoraphobia.com).



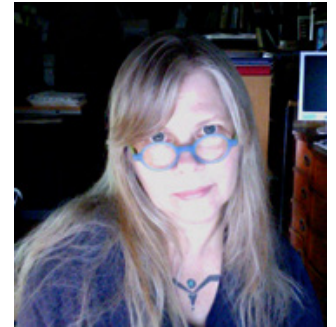
**Rose Lemberg** lived in Ukraine, subarctic Russia, and Israel before immigrating to the US, where she works as a professor of Nostalgic and Marginal Studies. Her prose and poetry appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Apex*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and other venues. She edits *Stone Telling* with Shweta Narayan, and has edited *The Moment of Change*, an anthology of feminist speculative poetry, for Aqueduct Press (2012). Rose can be found at <http://roselemborg.net> and her Livejournal blog, [http://rose\\_lemborg.livejournal.com](http://rose_lemborg.livejournal.com).



**Mark Rigney** is the author of numerous plays, including *Ten Red Kings* and *Acts of God* (both from Playscripts, Inc.), as well as *Bears*, winner of the 2012 Panowski Playwriting Competition (during its off Broadway run, Theatre Mania called *Bears* “the best play of the year”). His short fiction appears in *Witness*, *Ascent*, *Black Gate*, *The Best of the Bellevue Literary Review*, *The Long Story*, *Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet*, and *Black Static*, among many others. “The Skates,” a comic (and ghostly) novella, is now

available as an ebook from Samhain Publishing. In non-fiction, *Deaf Side Story: Deaf Sharks*, *Hearing Jets* and *a Classic American Musical* (Gallaudet University Press) remains happily in print one decade on. Two collections of his stories are available through Amazon, *Flights of Fantasy*, and *Reality Checks*. His website is [www.markrigney.net](http://www.markrigney.net).

**Linda Saboe** is an artist, grassroots herbalist and nature-lover. When she is not making colorful messes with paints and clay, she volunteers her time feeding and caring for baby and/or injured raccoons, skunks, squirrels and other critters. Although she rarely feeds insects, she does like them and encourages them in all their endeavors. She resides in the suburbs of Philadelphia with her husband, Bernie Mojzes, and their dog, parrot, iguana, and a couple of cats that suddenly appeared and have decided to stay. To see more of Linda’s work, please visit [www.lindasaboe.com](http://www.lindasaboe.com).



**Kelly Simmons** is a former journalist and advertising creative director who specializes in marketing to women. She started writing fiction over a dozen years ago, after studying at Temple University and The University of Pennsylvania. Her first novel, *Standing Still*, was published by Simon & Schuster in February 2008, and hailed by Publishers Weekly as “an exhilarating debut.” Her second novel, *The Bird House*, received a starred review from Kirkus, and they are really, really picky.



**Amandine van Ray** is a digital artist from Tallinn, Estonia. Her work has appeared in *Certitudinea* and *The Lascaux Review*. To see more of her work, visit her at [amandinevanray.deviantart.com](http://amandinevanray.deviantart.com) and <http://www.photodom.com/member/amandinevanray>.

**Matthew Timmins** lives in northern Massachusetts with a loving wife and a clingy cat. When not faithfully obeying these two mistresses, he enjoys roleplaying games, English literature, Formula 1, and writing about himself in the third person.



**John Welsh** is a photographer and filmmaker from Philadelphia. Early on he discovered the possibilities of creating art within fashion but he eventually found a more natural fit working for newspapers as a storyteller (plus the fashion business was “too cool” for him). His refugee status is still current after surviving and fleeing the journalistic collapse and he’s finding his way using all sorts of new media to tell stories that matter.







[WWW.UNLIKELY-STORY.COM](http://WWW.UNLIKELY-STORY.COM)